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## EDITORIAL

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# Editorial: Questions and affirmations

What are readers looking for in the pages of a journal? Wisdom? Answers? Some kind of truth – or maybe truths – rather than lies, at least? Statements and stories tested and approved by the authority of the peer review system? Knowledge that is trustworthy? It probably depends on what journal they are consulting, and in which field. If they are in a scientific field – especially one of the applied ones such as engineering or pharmacy – they will certainly be expecting answers to the questions in their field: knowledge that is tested, authoritative and trustworthy, supported by the literature, verified in the research itself and ratified by the leading expert peer reviewers. Lives could depend on the accuracy of the equations and conclusions in those journal pages. However, like us, they might also seek other kinds of truth.

In applied theatre, as this edition vividly demonstrates, truth is something else: not often equations or verifiable conclusions, but something much less easy to grasp, more impermanent ... and often much less reassuring. A different kind of wisdom is needed, and as these pages also testify, lives (and quality of life) can depend on that too. It is not a new kind of wisdom, and it even has a name: Socratic, from the old Greek who sat in the market place exasperating his colleagues and the authorities by asking very hard questions and, when his audiences had found him answers, asking some more. For Socrates, as for us, the old knowledge (the literature) was a good place

to start to investigate the key question; the quality of the thinking and action (the research) was vital in addressing and wrestling with it; but the answer (the findings), when it came, always posed new questions, which often took us back to what caused us to ask the question in the first place, and what our motives were in asking it – the premises with which we had started. And often those questions were quite discomfiting. So don't look for comfort in this edition of *Applied Theatre Research* – though there is much that is affirming, emotionally affecting, inspiring and gladdening. We hope it will leave you with more questions than you had when you started out.

The pre-text (to use one of our field's most valuable coinages) that inspired the reflection above is our first article, and it provides the keynote for the whole edition. In one way, that is in itself remarkable – and it has surprised us. As editors, we deal with whatever comes to us through the ether during the collection period. Therefore, the range of submissions often means that an edition has to be a miscellany, though usually we can find a few key themes or ideas that connect one article to another or even to a couple of others – after all, at any point in time there are common concerns, trends and vogues in applied theatre and drama education. To get around that and encourage coherent dialogue, editors sometimes declare special themed editions (oh, and by the way, we shall start doing that too occasionally – so stand by). We did not need to do that here, though: those common concerns have gelled spontaneously, and what follows is a rich, exciting and even confronting conversation that even includes our book reviews.

Our keynote article, by James Thompson, is unusual for an academic journal, even in its form. Much more like a good conference keynote speech, it contains virtually no references, no formal research and certainly no findings or precepts; it is the product of this scholar/practitioner's long experience, the sustained and multiple dialogues in which he has engaged and deep thought. It is thoroughly Socratic, raising questions of immense import in applied theatre that are often overlooked. His article is based on three compelling stories of powerful applied theatre practice in war zones or former war zones, in disparate nations on two continents. He neither gives the programmes a tick, nor delivers judgement on them; instead, he interrogates them in their context and reveals that each is seeking to achieve something that is problematic, and that might be ineffectual or highly dangerous if applied in a different and inappropriate context. One vivid insight that emerges is about two of applied theatre's most cherished tenets: giving voice and creating dialogue. The implied question is whether those two are compatible in all cases. Another insight is how important it is to know your starting point, and to shape your understanding accordingly. That can be applied to this journal too, since when you have read this article, Thompson's questions will accompany and even haunt you, so you might want to read some of the other articles first. For a couple of the articles in particular, you will get a different reading experience.

The rest of the articles are all about giving voice, and about dialogue – sometimes the two are in sync, sometimes distinctly not. They arrange themselves contextually – two set in adult applied theatre settings and two in schools, with a bridging article about young people who just describe themselves as the 'Young Mob'. The first of the adult contexts is Ben Rivers' account of using playback theatre in Palestine to give a voice to and restore the identity of some of the country's most oppressed citizens. The story is both inspiring and harrowing, and banishes any suggestion that theatre is just entertainment, socially insignificant and a trouble-free way of passing

the time. Here it is none of those things, a factor clearly recognized by its powerful – even deadly – opponents. This is another context of war, different again from Thompson's examples; it throws up challenges to his questions, and in turn is deeply challenged by them.

The next article is also about giving voice and confidence to people with extreme disadvantage: to women living with HIV and AIDS in the theatrically unpromising setting of a shipping container in a South African squatter township. Tendai Mtukwa found herself having to ask honest questions about her own practice in applied theatre before she could even get the programme off the ground, not least because metaphorical voice and dialogue both have to be manifested literally. She couldn't even get the women to talk, let alone engage in dialogue, because she had started from what she knew of applied theatre techniques and what she knew those could achieve, instead of first asking other all-important questions – about where the participants are coming from and what they think they want. The article tells how she found part of the answer in play, and in providing permission to play.

Like a play within a play, the 'Young Mob' project, which Anderson and O'Connor describe in vivid detail, aimed to give voice and create dialogue on two levels. Ostensibly, it was a process drama quite explicitly about Australian Indigenous teenagers claiming a voice and demonstrating expertise about themselves and their environment within a fictional frame. The researchers' deeper, elegantly parallel research purpose was to explore opportunities for the participants of research (often revealingly described as the 'subjects') to participate democratically in the research and receive some benefit from it themselves.

Creating effective dialogue in school settings is hardly a new concept, and drama's efforts to dismantle the monological structures of formal education are already well documented. Nonetheless, real dialogic learning is often still honoured more in the breach than the observance, especially in areas where the learners are seen to be particularly 'vulnerable' – and nowhere more so than in sex and sexual health education. Trish Wells outlines the struggles of one travelling theatre-in-education project to move from the transmission of facts and moral precepts to a more genuinely empowering dialogue, under the very nervous eyes and patronage of a health authority still wedded to the belief that the safety and protection of young people reside in telling them what they need to know and do.

We have chosen to bookend this collection with Julie Dunn's humble, gutsy and rigorous critique of her own past practice, in a classroom of Australian children learning about the Aztecs and Mayans, because it provides herself and us with another Socratic challenge, refractively mirroring Thompson's reflective musings. Again, there are no answers, but a great deal more of the wisdom of experience, creating the conditions for more and better questions to be asked.

If, like us, you find your appetite for understanding whetted rather than sated by all these questions, you'll find some more in our book reviews, highlighting two new exciting additions to the Socratic discourse of discomfort.

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*Note:* In the editorial to the first edition of our new *Applied Theatre Research* journal, when noting its continuing connections with its predecessor, the Griffith University-based *Applied Theatre Researcher*, we omitted to acknowledge the founder and first editor (from 2000–02) of that journal, Philip Taylor,

who is now Associate Professor of Educational Theatre at the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development at New York University. We regret the omission.

John O'Toole and Penny Bundy have asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.