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## EDITORIAL

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# Caution with the caskets

It is part of the nature of theatre to be alluring, and promise visions of unimagined riches and brave new worlds where old rules are suspended. That's why children naturally play through drama: to learn what their world has to offer, to experiment with how it works and to find out what it might be if it wasn't what it is. Theatre draws the attention, engaging and captivating the audience and participants alike. As the world of conventional schooling cries out for teaching strategies that offer engagement, dialogue and agency for students, drama's charm is the lure that drama educators use to try to create brave new worlds in those too-well-imagined contexts called classrooms. That's also the allure that beckons to adult and community theatre workers in fearful old worlds across the globe, enticing us to try to apply our play and our art to create new visions that will *actually* change the rules. For almost half a century now, many community workers, teachers, social and political activists, therapists and charitable donors worldwide have followed theatre's beckoning finger, turning to drama to change society, overcome oppression, halt the spread of HIV AIDS, improve sanitation or make people better.

Too often, we have not paused long enough to recall Shakespeare's cautions in *The Merchant of Venice*, where Portia's three suitors are engaged in a self-absorbed quest for a new future for themselves. Applied theatre workers, sponsors and donors have sometimes started with much the same well-meaning intentions – a new future, for their clients anyway (never for

themselves, of course ...). The seriousness and the danger of the quest are underlined in the warning on the uninviting leaden casket:

Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath.

Many of us, beguiled by the gilded romance of our own craft, ignore this as we leap too quickly to choose the golden casket enticingly labelled:

Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire.

That one just proved with a death's head mask that:

All that glisters is not gold ... fare you well, your suit is cold.

The gleaming silver casket, promising:

Who chooseth me shall have as much as he deserves.

sent its suitor packing with a fool's head mask and the rebuke that all theatre workers should hearken to:

Some there be that shadows kiss ... such have but a shadow's bliss.

It was of course the *meagre lead* casket,

Whose plainness moves me more than eloquence

that held the key to transforming the successful chooser's life and those of his allies, and then indirectly to saving the life of his friend and mentor, in a moment of pure theatrical fiction-made-real that turned the law on its head. That's what we are looking for when we embark on our applied theatre projects, aren't we? But even here, Shakespeare reminds us, there was a loser – Shylock the Jew:

Give me leave to go from hence – I am not well.

Reduced by Portia's *coup de théâtre* from a hateful oppressor into a lonely and destitute old outsider, he had no caskets on the table and no applied theatre team to pick him up and empower him again.

This edition of *Applied Theatre Research* is full of lead caskets. Many of the writers take an explicitly cautionary tone in exposing the limitations and constraints that applied theatre inevitably entails, and in particular the unseen gaps, omissions and weaknesses that only reveal themselves in practice or in retrospect. The writers do this – as applied theatre itself should – by asking awkward and puzzling questions, rather than making judgemental statements. There are inspiring and affirming examples throughout the articles, but a sense runs through of the achievements and victories being hard won, hazardous and never obvious, and that there is still much to do in applied theatre to find the key that unlocks the casket – particularly as each context and each key is different.

The edition is not solemn, however; nor is it packed with humourless gravitas. Instead, it is full of play and metaphor. As one of our authors, Roger

Wooster, eloquently notes, 'play is a humanizing force and a human-defining trait', and play runs as a theme through several of the articles. To be playful is to ask awkward questions and flirt with the rules and assumptions that drive and control us, and indeed we must both 'give and hazard' – playfully, seriously – with the recognition that what we get back may not be at all what we expect. Another strong theme recognizes how closely the phrases 'well-meaning', 'egotistic' and 'ulterior' are to each other in our work; as Jane Plastow acerbically notes of the motives behind some applied theatre, then and now, 'This is surely neo-colonialism. Instead of proxy wars we now have proxy social engineering.'

We are starting this edition with Jane Plastow's article. 'Domestication or transformation? The ideology of Theatre for Development in Africa', as it provides a valuable historical overview of one of the earliest, most fertile and most heavily ploughed regions of the applied theatre movement known as Theatre for Development, and weaves into that a pungent critique of some of its more ineffective, mistaken and even delusional practices – from the point of view of an informed insider, not just an observer. There is a strong complementarity between this article and the next – based on more than the fact that they are both concerned with Africa. Herbert Mushangwe and Nehemiah Chivandikwa also analyse and critique community participation in Theatre for Development by shining a strong spotlight on a single protest theatre project in a Zimbabwean university, which provides a vivid microcosm of the issues and problems highlighted in the previous article. In the third article, Roger Wooster takes an equally unsentimental perspective when he looks at a different but just as widespread form of applied theatre, Playback Theatre. He asks a lot of very tough questions about the role of play in the prismatic illumination of the self, about whose 'self' is depicted, about power and responsibility, and about the real effects on the 'participants'.

In 'Promoting critical thinking within the drama: Using theory to guide practice', Helen Cahill broadens the critical argument into a philosophical discussion, encased in an elegant metaphor and still grounded in practice, to remind us of the complexity of the relationship between practice and theory in applied theatre work, to warn against any simplistic or linear interpretation of it, and to provide some contemporary philosophical guidelines.

Our last two articles again form a complementary pair. In quite different settings and apparently representing almost opposite strategies, they share one important feature: object-theatre, or the symbolism of projecting dramatic events through three-dimensional objects. Beth Osnes and Angela Hunt span ancient and modern in 'Solar-powered shadow-puppetry in a high school science classroom 'illuminates' a Navajo student energy forum'. They apply the ancient theatrical form of puppetry and objects come-to-life to an entirely contemporary purpose, helping young indigenous students in an energy forum to understand the demands and competing interests – traditional and modern – of the stakeholders vying for use of their precious natural resources. In the case of Marcia Pompeo-Nogueira, Reonaldo Manoel Gonçalves and Tim Prentki, the object is an ancient and traditional Boi de Mamão folk-theatre figure of a bull, already a symbol of death and resurrection. This is reimagined within the kind of forum with which we are familiar in applied theatre: Boalian forum theatre, in a refreshingly novel application. 'Between popular traditions and forum theatre: Playing on the borders of Theatre of the Oppressed' emphasizes the importance of theatre

in reimagining symbols, and also of the trickster who is central to the playful nature of theatre itself.

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