

## CHAPTER 8

## The Usefulness of Mess: Artistry, Improvisation and Decomposition in the Practice of Research in Applied Theatre

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In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground where practitioners can make effective use of research-based theory and technique, and there is a swampy lowland where situations are confusing 'messes' incapable of technical solution . . . in the swamp are the areas of greatest human concern. (Schön 1983: 42)

The frequently traversed and often indistinct boundary between 'research' and 'practice' in applied theatre provides a useful site for an examination of research methods in theatre studies. Researchers and practitioners involved in 'applied theatre' (and we explore some of the issues raised by this term below) are responsive to invitations to research and practice in complex, diverse and unpredictable contexts. In common with other disciplinary areas of theatre and performance, the prominence of practice as research in applied theatre complicates any attempt to clearly categorise 'research method' as distinct from or outside of practice. However, the ways in which applied theatre practice also constructs relationships across professional contexts with varying policy, value and practice imperatives means that the methods of research and practice itself are also subject to multiple pressures. In addition, commitments to mobilising an emancipatory politics of practice often means that participants of projects are integrated into the research in applied theatre. This participatory ethos challenges practitioners and researchers to implement reflexive and critical research methods as part of addressing wider issues of social justice and equity. The diverse contexts and intentions of applied theatre practice have meant that multiple methods have been drawn upon in applied theatre research, sometimes, but not always, used in combination with each other. The field incorporates, for example, externally commissioned research drawing on social science methods, participatory and action research,

and discursive and non-discursive forms of reflective practice, as well as modes of theoretically informed scholarly research and creative practice as research familiar to theatre studies as an academic discipline.

In this chapter, we explore three examples of applied theatre practice which exhibit contrasting relationships between context, creative intention and research perspective. An example of practice is contributed by each of the three authors, and the overall argument is informed by separate and detailed conversations between Jenny Hughes and Jenny Kidd and Catherine McNamara respectively. The first is Kidd's account of *This Accursed Thing*, a performance that explored new interpretations of Manchester Museum's collections in response to the transatlantic slave trade and abolition movement. This project was an outcome of 'Performance, Learning and Heritage' (2005–8), a research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council exploring theatre and performance in museums and heritage sites. The second is McNamara's discussion of the Sci:identity Project, an arts initiative with young transsexual and transgendered people that explored the science of sex and gender through film, live performance and visual art, carried out by an arts team connected to the Central School of Speech and Drama and funded by The Wellcome Trust (2006–7). The final example is Hughes' account of *A Letter from Home*, a musical performance devised with refugees and asylum seekers living in Manchester and originally from Central Africa and the Great Lakes region, taking place as part of 'In Place of War', a research project also funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (2004–7). *This Accursed Thing* was a piece of action research that also drew on qualitative social science methods to explore the impact of the performance on learning. The Sci:identity project was a piece of practice that was at the same time a research process led by young people, drawing on performance and visual arts to interrogate the science of sex and gender in collaboration with scientists, medical professionals and artists. *A Letter from Home* was an example of practice as research that explored a specific question, in this case the relationship between identity, displacement and participation in performance.

The case studies generated research findings that challenged knowledge discourses concomitant with their contexts: models of learning in museums and other institutions of learning, biologically determined constructions of sex and gender, and exclusionary constructions of national identity respectively. The analysis presented in this chapter aims to draw out some of the reciprocal and ethical knowledge practices that can be identified in these research processes. What was critically investigated in each project was the relationship between performance, site and, respectively, an atrocious heritage, alienating constructions of sex and gender and the lack of political rights for refugees. The three examples also repeatedly showed how applied theatre researchers are challenged by direct engagements with practice. We argue that these challenges

provide a site from which to conceptualise a research method that privileges notions of *practice*. This way of working challenges notions of method and methodology as epistemologically secure, finite, discrete sets of procedures fit for the purpose of discovering certain, measurable findings about the impact of applied theatre practice (such findings are often expected by funders of commissioned research). Instead, the chapter promotes responsive and practised methods that support the creative, social and political aims of projects.

We propose a method and methodology configured by three dynamic and overlapping principles of practice, each of which places complex demands on the researcher: *artistry*, *improvisation* and *decomposition*. The term 'artistry' refers to a crafted process of research that occurs as part of or alongside creative practice. 'Improvisation' refers to actions that take place during a research process that are spontaneous responses to unpredictable events and venture beyond the confines of predetermined design. 'Decomposition' refers to moments when designed and improvised research processes deteriorate in confrontation with experiences that confound expectations of an orderly, rule-bound, habitable universe. The term evokes moments of practice and research which disintegrate or are unmade as part of an encounter with exceptional experience, and positions these moments as a troubling and potentially enriching part of a research process. This notion is rather expansive and will be explored in more detail below; however, it is important to note that the term 'decomposition' connotes processes of regeneration in which the research may be carried forward in new and unexpected directions. Importantly, these regenerations do not compensate for or counteract any loss or absence of meaning: the intention here is to recognise the importance of difficult moments of not knowing, and deterioration of meaning, in any research endeavour. Drawing on the three principles of artistry, improvisation and decomposition, we also propose the notion of *practised method* as a fruitful way of conceiving research in applied theatre, that might usefully complement the 'practice as research' and 'research into practice' categorisations configuring recent discussions of research method in our disciplinary area.

#### TRAVERSING THE SWAMP: THE PRACTICE-RESEARCH-PRACTICE RELATIONSHIP IN APPLIED THEATRE

[T]he questions of where knowledge is situated, what forms of knowledge are valued, and how knowledge is shared, remain a major preoccupation in the range of practices which constitute applied drama. (Nicholson 2005: 38)

'Applied theatre' is broadly related to traditions of socially committed community, educational and political theatre that emerged as part of and as

alternatives to the professional theatre sector in the western hemisphere during the course of the twentieth century. Nicholson identifies 'applied drama' as an umbrella term that brought these traditions together during the period of change following the end of the Cold War in the 1990s (Nicholson 2005: 11). This period coincided with the neo-liberal prioritisation of the free market, and in the UK, concomitant cuts in arts funding. The emergence of 'applied theatre' at this time, at least in part, responded to the need to ensure the ongoing practice and research of socially and politically committed theatre practice in academic contexts. Applied theatre occupies an ambivalent position, helping to protect the ongoing research, study and practice of socially and politically committed theatre and also securing and marketing new study programmes and publications inside academic contexts. Of course, these contexts are also increasingly subject to the imperatives of a free market economy that, in turn, potentially threaten critical theatre practices by reductively shaping the times and spaces by which teaching and research take place. This ambivalent position is reflected in the challenge of conceptualising research methods for applied theatre. Not least, the economic imperatives attaching to the wider field have led to engagement with the discourses of evidence-based practice, including research into the impact of theatre for policy-related audiences interested in social, personal, behavioural and attitudinal changes that are difficult to measure or securely attribute to participation in theatre, and may also have very little relevance for understanding the complexities of creative practice.

The term 'applied theatre' has been contested (Chamberlain et al. 2006). It carries an instrumental intent and claims 'usefulness' but lacks clear signification – who is applying what to whom and for what purpose? (For critical discussions of the term see Thompson 2003: 13–21; Nicholson 2005: 2–8.) However, the term has also stimulated discussions of a set of questions about the value of theatre that are arguably more expansive and diverse than the narrow categorisations of socially committed theatre practice historically debated by the political Left. The field of applied theatre has renewed and developed debates about the ethics and aesthetics of theatre practice, the performance of citizenship, the relationship between theatre and learning, and access and inclusion in the arts. (For examples, see Thompson 2009, and themed editions of *RIDE: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* on ethics and citizenship respectively – 10 (2) and 12 (3).) This engagement with a diverse range of cultural, social and political issues is partly what makes a discussion of research methods in applied theatre important and timely. Research methods facilitate investigations of the processes, aesthetic and ethical complexities and social functions of theatre, often with unexpected and confounding results. However, as the multi-disciplinary debates about the importance of 'reflexivity' in research have stressed, the value-laden, context-dependent

nature of language-based interpretative regimes mean that research methods themselves construct assumptions about what questions, knowledge and outcomes of practice are deemed significant, as much as support the development of knowledge about practice (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000: 1). The methods by which applied theatre practices are researched therefore construct particular claims for the value of theatre that reflect the ambivalent position of the wider field of practice and are worthy of further deconstruction.

Raymond Williams' definition of 'art' provides a critical perspective of significance for further explicating the problems and possibilities of applied theatre research and its associated methods and methodologies. He notes that 'the arts' emerged inside academic contexts in the nineteenth century as a result of a 'defensive specialisation of certain skills and purposes', that is a separation of skills and purposes whose 'use value' could not be reduced to 'exchange value'. The 'arts' constructed an area of scholarship within which skills and purposes not immediately related to the 'exchange value' of commodities could be 'conceptually abstracted' (Williams 1976: 34). The field of applied theatre deliberately and creatively disrupts the binary of 'use value' and 'exchange value' identified by Williams and to a certain extent renders these terms obsolete, as it adopts an approach to theatre practice that exhibits use value and exists within the productive regimes of the social and cultural economy, broadly conceived, as well as carries the abstract value attributed to 'pure' arts. Applied theatre research is concerned with exploring the experiences that materialise at exactly this challenging point of crossover between the use, exchange and abstract values of both theatre and society. Those that commission or otherwise support applied theatre practice and research are often themselves preoccupied with the possibilities and problems for action and understanding that emerge at this border. In terms of the projects below, this can be seen in the interest in learning as it might be conceptualised beyond the domains of formal education, experiences of gender that challenge biological binaries of male and female, and the narratives of refugees who stimulate revisions of categorisations of political citizenship. This has led to a hybrid methodological domain for applied theatre research and a complex context for practice, the processes of which might sometimes challenge hegemonic, ideological understandings of value, but (perhaps) more often exhibit a precarious balance between reproduction and disruption of those values, reflecting the ambivalent position of applied theatre signalled by the overall argument here. Applied theatre research has been preoccupied with responding to a requirement to provide evidence of the 'effect', 'impact' and 'outcome' of practice in ways that conform to the agendas of non-arts audiences and this has sometimes led to an uncritical acceptance of positivist social science research methods (see Hughes and Ruding, in Prentki and Preston 2009, for a discussion). However, the examples below also highlight the subtleties by which applied theatre

practice and research accommodates as well as disrupts rigidly predetermined notions of value. The analyses here explore how the practice of research facilitates a diversification of the use, exchange and abstract values of theatre practice in ways that may have broader significance for understanding theatre and performance practice in the contemporary world.

The complex relationship between research and the 'value' of theatre materialised within applied theatre contexts demands a precise, supported and dynamic approach to conceptualising method and methodology. We pursue this in the analyses of practice that follow, and find a more precisely articulated approach in the often unexpected interweaving of creative practice and research method – for example, when the responses of spectators in *This Accursed Thing* confounded the discourses of learning within which the research method was constructed, and in the messy and fruitful cross-fertilisations within the practice-research-practice relationship mobilised by the Sci:identity project. What this chapter promotes is a *practised* methodology whereby different methods of research and practice combine to develop and strengthen ongoing critical revisions of the value of applying theatre in complex and unpredictable contexts. This notion of *practised* method also argues for the usefulness of that which might be defined as the negative, confounding, discarded or ignored moments of practice that do not readily 'fit' into a preconceived, intentional schema of research.

According to Schön, the 'reflective practitioner' has a capacity for creative, tacit and improvised responses to the 'confusing messes' and 'swampy lowland' of the unpredictable contexts of practice that challenge applications of designed 'method' (Schön 1983: 42). Schön emphasises the 'artistry' of knowledge-making in complex contexts, and his formulations have profound resonances with the challenges of applied theatre research. The practice of applied theatre is itself defined as a reflexive knowledge-making practice that works to materialise, investigate and remake social experience, narratives, histories and contexts (Nicholson 2005: 166; Thompson 2003: 172; Taylor 2003: 110). The combined importance of reflective practice and non-arts discourses and practices in applied theatre research supports a conceptualisation of research methods in applied theatre as constituted by various combinations and negotiations between non-discursive processes aligned to reflective practitioner methodologies and embodied, participatory knowledge practice and 'designed' research studies with qualitative and quantitative discursive research methods distinct from creative processes, applied before, during and after the 'practice'. The ambivalent position of applied theatre has generated a diverse range of research projects, many of which combine these methodological approaches and also have multiple 'uses'. These include: embodied, intuitive, embedded processes that might not lead to any discursive outputs (as suggested by Conquergood 2002, to whom we return below); 'reflective

conversations' and private journals of the reflective practitioner (Schön 1983; Taylor 1996: 25–58); creative, visual and discursive methods of participatory research and action research that engage groups in investigations of their immediate experiences (see Kerr, and Thornton, in Prentki and Preston 2009 and Thompson 2003: 147–72); and interview- and observation-based methodologies of qualitative social science (Hughes and Wilson 2004) and survey and experimental method (Fleming et al. 2004) that lead to reports for non-arts audiences. Reflective practitioner methodologies and modes of research associated with the interpretative or 'soft' social sciences, that is qualitative, participatory and action research methodologies, are more prevalent as the expertise required to implement these approaches is closely aligned to the skill bases of applied theatre practitioners, and these methods are easily adapted to unpredictable contexts.

It may be useful to briefly note some recognised strengths and weaknesses of these different methodologies. Qualitative social science and associated methods work with the interpretations of researchers, practitioners and participants of experiences and can yield rich and complex understandings of practice in context. However, qualitative data are often used without rigorous analysis: participants' statements can be uncritically taken to correspond to reality, and research often blurs the boundary between research and advocacy. Weaknesses of reflective practitioner and interpretative social science approaches include difficulty generalising from findings and their subsequent lack of credibility for policy-making audiences. Experimental and survey research, including use of control groups (classically with one group 'exposed' to practice and results measured against a control group), struggles to establish reliable measures for sensate, unpredictable and participatory processes, with resulting issues for internal and external validity. For practitioners, developing research that has relevance across professional and disciplinary contexts can divert time away from supporting artistic exploration. Reflective practitioner methods are privileged by practitioners because they can be embedded in creative practice, but their non-discursive outcomes make them less useful for contributing to discussions of value across the different audiences that have a vested interest in practice.

Before moving on to consider the specific methodological compositions of the three case studies, it is important to explore the conceptualisation of research method as *practice* a little further. Williams usefully deconstructs the 'complex linguistic cluster' around the terms 'practice' and 'theory', that is the relationship between things done, things observed and things explained (Williams 1976: 201). As part of this discussion, he notes the emergence of the term 'praxis', also used by Nicholson in reference to applied theatre (Nicholson 2005: 38–59), to describe a uniting of theory with practice as action, where the distinction between theory, method and practice is made in analysis but not

observable in practice. The notion of praxis resists a compartmentalising of theoretical and methodological endeavour as outside of, imposed upon or superior to practice. Situations of practice are inherently unstable, messy, interconnected, conflictual, uncertain, complex, and there is a need for usable knowledge practices, including Schön's 'artistry' and tacit knowledge, which have the capacity to respond to the unpredictable situations of practice: the world is no longer a readily controllable, predictable, mappable place, if it ever was. As such, theory-led 'modes' of research might be usefully reconceptualised as *part of* a broad practice-based methodology that privileges practice as a means of generating theoretical knowledge, and theoretical endeavour as a practised form of knowledge that has critical and affective force when brought into relation with practice. *Practised* methods, following the discussion that has unfolded here and evidenced by the projects below, might be defined as methods that combine overlapping tacit, embodied, discursive and theoretical processes. The degree to which a discrete research method is articulated as part of this will depend on the specific imperatives of context and the usefulness of specific research methods in each moment of practice.

Two important contributions to thinking about the relationship between theory and practice, from two scholars from philosophy and performance studies respectively, support the trajectory of this argument. Gumbrecht (2004) has explored how the arts and humanities inside universities have suffered as a result of privileging interpretation over experience in research and teaching. He proposes instating 'moments of intensity' that remind students of the 'epiphany value' of aesthetic experience in processes of learning and understanding: 'rather than having to think, always and endlessly, what else there could be, we sometimes seem to connect with a layer in our existence that simply wants the things of the world close to our skin' (Gumbrecht 2004: 106). Taking up a similar point in relation to performance studies, Conquergood resists the visual, verbal and textual forms of representation predominant in western epistemology and associated with colonial forms of control, and explores the improvisational performance politics of the singing of enslaved people as a non-verbal, non-text-based knowledge practice. Drawing on the writing of Frederick Douglass, Conquergood asserts the need for a research methodology that incorporates 'experiential, participatory epistemology... an ethnography of the ears and heart' and 'a hermeneutics of experience, relocation, copresence, humility, and vulnerability: *listening to and being touched by*' (Conquergood 2002: 149 – italics original).

Gumbrecht and Conquergood's propositions implicitly unsettle any hierarchical separation of theory and practice. Their conceptualisations are suggestive of a research methodology that exceeds cognitive and discursive control without wholly rejecting the potential of discourse and text as producers of knowledge. The reflective process implicit in applied theatre produces and

uses 'knowledge' in the everyday motion of practice, and may or may not necessarily be identifiable by research methods that are discursively constructed (it is possible, for example, to research practice without ever writing anything down). A clear implication of this argument is that theoretical endeavour, research activity and creative practice do not exist outside of each other but are each part of practice: research methods of all kinds of shapes and sizes can be productively used to understand practice but they, like practice, produce a 'remainder'. Each of the case studies explored here highlight moments where knowledge was generated not from the discrete application of research method to practice, but from a research method that was itself part of the practice and *practised*. The significance of the practised messiness of methodological endeavours to knowledge about applied theatre is repeatedly evidenced, from the challenge to the singular knowledge archive of the museum and predetermined research design that took place as part of *This Accursed Thing*, to the display of 'not-knowing' that was central to the Sci:identity project's research activity as well as the research process of *A Letter from Home*. These moments suggest that the most useful knowledge about the value of theatre resides in tracing the processes of artistry, improvisation and decomposition implicit in the practice of research. They suggest a methodology that is intimately embedded in creative practice and that, rather than posing answers to clearly defined questions, develops articulations of experience that may not be accounted for by habitual and institutionally bound framings of those experiences. This interrelationship between the practice of method and method of practice reappear across each the three case studies as distinct methodological challenges.

### Case study 1: Unsettling absences: *This Accursed Thing*

Jenny Kidd

*This Accursed Thing* was a promenade performance that took place in the Manchester Museum and explored connections between the transatlantic slave trade and the collection of the museum. The performance was timed to commemorate the two hundredth anniversary year of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in Britain and was part of the 'Revealing Histories: Remembering Slavery' initiative, encouraging reinterpretations of collections to explore the largely hidden history, impact and legacy of the slave trade on cultural institutions in Manchester. *This Accursed Thing* was a challenging, multi-vocal, interactive historical performance adaptable for school groups and independent visitors, in which two actors played six characters: a modern-day curator, Thomas Clarkson (a key abolitionist), an African slave trader, a British slave trader, James Watkins (a freed slave and abolitionist) and a cotton mill worker

from Manchester. The narratives portrayed also cast the city of Manchester as a key player in the performance, highlighting the importance of slavery to the economic boom of the Industrial Revolution as well as the positive role the city played in the abolition movement.

This production was the final of four projects which explored the impact of performance as a learning medium across different museum and heritage sites. Research at the Manchester Museum and the previous three sites included the use of focus groups, qualitative interviews, questionnaires, participant-observation, creative exercises and video recordings of visits to track visitor engagement. The qualitative methodology favoured intensive, in-depth collection of narratives of specific performance moments explored in the context of wider narratives of an overall visit. Immediate reports were compared to responses during follow-up telephone interviews that took place three weeks and nine months after the visit. During the initial run of *This Accursed Thing*, the research team received feedback from more than two hundred audience members, including independent visitors and school audiences via post-performance questionnaires, focus groups and interviews. The qualitative methods – focus groups and semi-structured follow-up interviews – were more useful than questionnaires in that they yielded complex and intricate narratives about the performance from diverse audiences. The longitudinal research also provided an opportunity to garner responses that both compared and extended those narratives, allowing the team to begin to understand how the impact of the performance was shaped and articulated over a period of up to a year after the encounter. Such longitudinal studies are not common in the arts due to their time and resource implications, but here they proved to be invaluable in gaining a nuanced and more reliable account of 'impact'.

Research findings showed that individuals relate to and interpret performances in museum and heritage sites and the wider 'performance' of the site itself in ways that are unique, improvised and complex. The analysis of qualitative data from the initial three projects generated a series of emerging research findings, and these were applied and further explored by *This Accursed Thing*. The research of the latter therefore built on the qualitative methodology developed by the wider research of which it was a part but also involved the commission of a new performance and a range of research activities to explore its impact. The commission was taken up by Andrew Ashmore and Associates, specialists in museums and heritage performance, who devised a performance to a specific brief generated by the emerging research findings. For example, the importance of 'framing' performed narratives in order to facilitate understanding, including the use of improvised and interactive devices and out-of-character moments, had been highlighted by the previous research. This action research project aimed to critically explore such findings by means of practice as well as research into that practice. In this sense,

the relationship between the practice and our research was ongoing, dialogic and continually negotiated. Of particular interest were audiences' diverse responses to interactive and improvised performance moments, their reactions to moments of discomfort and 'unsettlement', and the impact of multiple, challenging and complex narratives on institutions built upon the singularity of a knowing archive. These responses and moments, some of which are explored further below, demonstrate the renegotiation of theoretical and practical knowledge that occurs during a research process that therefore might be configured as *practice* and *practised*.

Throughout the performance the actors, both in and out of character, showed the audience samples from the Museum's collections: the hidden narratives of these artefacts creating a series of increasingly provocative connections between the museum's history, Manchester's cotton wealth and the abolition movement. Different architectural spaces around the Museum were imaginatively interpreted. For example, the Natural History gallery became the hold of a slave ship and then a nineteenth-century meeting hall in central Manchester addressed by James Watkins, a freed US slave and active abolitionist, a performance move that cast the audience first as potential slave traders and then as supporters of abolition. The reframing of the gallery space revealed the city of Manchester and its citizens, past and present, as intimately related to a heritage of slavery. At the abolitionist meeting Watkins proclaims, 'slavery only existed in the South, because cotton was required at Manchester . . . Every single bale of this cotton is produced by a system that true English hearts abhor', to which the cotton mill worker from Manchester, suddenly arriving in the middle of the audience, responds, 'Have you wandered around here? Around our great nasty manufacturing town? . . . Have you seen the white slaves, who work and drink a short life out, and reel before you from fatigue or drunkenness? . . . A working man in Salford has a life expectancy of seventeen years from when he starts labouring, did you know that?'

The qualitative data gathered as part of the research process showed that the deliberate interconnecting of here and there and past and present performed by means of sudden interruptions of character entrances, frequent reframing of spaces, and audience movement around the museum, created moments of surprise which provided ways into the story but also unsettled and disturbed audiences. The theme of 'unsettlement', which became central to the findings of the overall research project, was developed to capture a particular quality in the descriptions that audiences gave during interviews and focus groups. This term describes experiences of overturned expectations, challenged assumptions, unexpected emotion, a sense of intense 'reality' of the performance and discomfort arising from improvised interaction with performers (Jackson and Kidd 2008). A range of unsettling moments were commented upon by audiences, highlighting the disturbance created by the revealed narratives and their

interconnections and the intimacy of the 'learning' experience: 'it made what I thought was a straightforward campaign into an interesting and complicated journey'; 'the objects that were passed around – I felt quite a connection . . . in a very sad way'. The previous research had highlighted the need to 'frame' these moments and in *This Accursed Thing* this led to the inclusion of 'out-of-character' encounters at the start and the end of the performance which provided audiences with an opportunity to explore links between historical narratives and contemporary realities. These framing devices were intended to support the learning of audiences, provide a space to explore responses and answer questions, and help manage the discomfort that such evocative journeys can engender. They also helped audiences process the multi-vocal and contradictory representations of past events in the performance itself.

It is interesting that the artefacts used in the production lacked a meaningful frame beyond the performance itself. For example, the stuffed bird from the United States belonging to Henry Dresser (a Manchester businessman) shown by the modern-day curator towards the end of the performance meant little without his narration of Dresser's attempts to get cotton harvested by slaves through the Northern blockade of slave goods created during the American Civil War. The unsettlement here was caused by the significance of absent, undocumented lives inherent in the narratives of each artefact, and this unsettling absence reinforced the disturbance of the performance's resymbolisation of space and the audience's constant movement around the museum. The performance evoked ghostly presences rather than recuperated lost human lives through the provision of detailed, factual evidence of the exploitation and destruction of life – and was deeply emotive as a result. The sensitive subject matter and its connections to contemporary institutional racism also evoked strong emotional responses: 'it actually took me on a journey that I didn't want to connect with because it was a connection of thinking this was what my ancestors went through'; 'even the chiefs of Africa were involved in it . . . he was giving away his own people, the black slaves, that made me feel upset'; 'there were one or two moments when I wanted to weep at the fact that human beings could do that'; 'it wasn't that it just touched you emotionally, it did actually move you physically, I could feel revulsion'. These kinds of responses, triggered in interviews and focus groups after the performance, did not alter in their tone or emotional resonance over time – and were often reiterated many months after the performance. The improvised interactions, debrief session and research activities were used by many to work through these responses to the performance, rather than to give a coherent or rational account of 'learning'. Importantly for the argument developing here, these emotive reactions therefore confounded the research team's expectations of findings relating to the importance of framing to support learning. It is not that framing was not important, but that the emotive impact of the performance challenged the

research team to further develop their articulation of how 'learning' as part of an interactive performance environment might be described. These responses, together with the moments of interactivity built into the performance, challenged both performers and researchers to respond spontaneously and improvise different kinds of reactions to capture the complex and sometimes contradictory interpretations of audiences.

Any anticipation that the action research would affirm a standard set of guidelines for ongoing practice quickly dissipated therefore. Instead of the practice confirming research findings from the other case studies, it was a powerful provocation for further exploration. The emotive engagements of the audience – the moments of disruption, disagreement, vested interest, outburst and other responses – surprised the performers and research team. In the interests of not predetermining interview responses, interview questions were carefully worded to avoid introducing learning discourses within which respondents could easily frame their experiences. Rather than asking if participants 'learnt anything', we asked them about moments of surprise, understanding, engagement and interaction. There was a concerted effort to hear experiences in the 'own words' of the participants and work interpretively with those descriptions. Results were revealing: participation in the performance did not necessarily provide any direct learning that could easily fit within the frame of one learning theory or another. The research team had no desire to discredit experiences that for participants felt in no way educative, or to discount experiences that could more easily be described as emotional, empathetic or even therapeutic. The qualitative methods – focus groups and interviews – provided access to layers of experience that unsettled the discourses by which the research was designed (that people are able to describe their learning in a readily accessible or readable way, for example). Most significantly, it was the surprises and unsettlements that generated the most useful and useable knowledge for our understanding of the impact of the performance.

Some audiences for the research, including museum, education and theatre-related audiences, have asked for recommendations for 'best practice' for museum theatre that would work across different sites. However, the more meaningful outcomes of the research have been the series of external and internal dialogues about the relationship of performance and learning that were improvised at the time and continue to be shared in encounters that exceed the boundaries of the original research project (including this chapter). The research methods in this case did not produce findings that proved or measured effect. Rather they were a significant participant in the artistry, improvisation and decompositions of practice that we posit here as an important feature of applied theatre research. Rather than producing a set of findings that supports the replication of models of 'museum theatre' that would work across different sites therefore, the research findings emphasised the value

of research *and* practice as a series of interlinking and carefully improvised methods that illuminate the complexities of practice. In this case, the artistry and improvisation of the practice and research unsettled preconceptions and widened languages of what 'learning' might mean in the context of applied theatre. 'Moments of intense engagement' or 'boom' moments of learning are descriptive phrases that emerged from the analysis of interview data rather than any evidence of a clear knowledge of slavery that could be narrated weeks or months after participation. These findings suggest a relationship between performance and learning – and practice and research – that is best facilitated by carefully designed engagements with complex subjects and that remain open to the improvised encounters and mutual unsettlements caused by their dynamic and symbiotic relationship.

### Case study 2: Searching performatives: the Sci:identity project

*Catherine McNamara*

The Sci:identity project was an arts-led interdisciplinary project that worked with a group of eighteen young transsexual and transgendered people over a twelve-month period to explore the science of sex and gender, in particular the relationship between lived experiences of gendered identity and scientific and medical discourses of sex and gender. 'Transsexual' is a term that refers to people who identify as a gender different from that assigned at birth; 'transgender' refers to people who feel that the gender assigned to them at birth is not a correct or complete description of their gender identity. The project drew on performance, film-making and visual arts to facilitate young people's reflexive and creative exploration of scientific knowledge. The first phase began with a series of weekend arts workshops and culminated in a public exhibition of installation art, sculpture, live performance and a short film made by participants. The second phase developed creative outreach activities which engaged wider audiences of trans and non-trans young people in discussions of the science of sex and gender. Finally, there was a public screening of a documentary that presented the experiences of the group as they explored how the science of sex and gender impacts (or does not impact) on their lives as young trans individuals. The film incorporated images created by the participants, interviews they carried out with medical professionals and older members of the trans community, as well as footage recorded as part of the documentation of the workshops. The project was funded by The Wellcome Trust, an independent medical research-funding charity committed to engaging the public in debates about the social and ethical implications of biomedical science. This public engagement activity has produced work that is innovative artistically,

supporting performers known for their ground-breaking artistry, such as Bobby Baker and Peggy Shaw, as well as an innovative range of arts projects with young people (for examples see Levinson et al. 2008; Hughes 2006).

The Sci:identity project can be characterised as an artistic exploration of the value-laden nature of knowledge, in this case the biological binaries of 'male' and 'female', oppositions that do not sustain their meaning when brought into contact with the lived experiences of trans young people. The process included the use of contemporary art and media images to open up conversations about knowledge, representation and gender, for example through the creation of life-size three-dimensional models sporting deliberately distorted, gendered clothing and an arts installation which reinvented the space of a public toilet using recorded sound and personal narratives plastered over the walls. Knowledge, in this context, was situated within and generated from personal experience brought into productive relationship with an artistic process and scientific and medical discourses of sex and gender. This knowledge was always and at once gendered, bodily, social, creative and collaborative – and was realised as a series of moments inside and outside of the creative practice and research process rather than as a mappable and coherent set of findings. Here, it was often not possible to identify distinctions between methods of creative practice and research: the central question driving the project ('what is the science of sex and gender?') was explored through young people's artistry and the findings of the research were works of art which directly engaged members of the public. The 'research' elements of the project occasionally stood outside of the creative practice. An evaluator was employed to identify the impact of the project on the young people involved, for example, and the methods used for this included qualitative interviews, focus groups, observation, participant logbooks, analysis of video documentation and weblogs. However, even these aspects of the process became embedded in the creative practice, with findings from the research being used as part of artistic explorations and the researcher training the young people in question design and interview techniques in preparation for their interactions with science and medical professionals. This project can be most accurately conceived as an overlapping and interweaving process of research and creative practice, therefore, rather than 'practice as research' or 'research into practice', and is a further example of the practised method which we posit as useful for understanding the practice and research relationship in applied theatre.

The processes of creative practice and research were configured by a series of encounters across the different times and spaces of the project, between scientific and medical discourses of sex and gender and the lived and performed experience of the young people engaged in the project. These encounters, one of which is explored below, produced explorations of identity across varying settings and relationships – arts workshops, public performance, science

seminars and interviews with medical professionals. These critical interventions into participants' and spectators' understandings of identity constituted a performative re-searching of discourses and practices of identity permitted within and constructed by those settings. The example below shows how the participatory ethos of the overall methodology privileged the agency of the young person to creatively explore and critique the performatives encountered in different settings by exploring their resonances (or lack of) with autobiographical experience. If the conventional sense of 'performative' broadly denotes those statements and actions that bring about social and material effects, then the combination of creative practice and research activity here manifested what might be called a 'searching performative'. This was supported by improvisation with methods of creative practice and research, and in ways that created spaces for the felt experiences of the young people to be articulated and become effective.

A particularly powerful example of this searching performative emerges from one participants' weblog of the project, which starts with a description of a visit to the doctor:

I talked to him about things and he immediately turned away from me and listened to me, but pretended to fiddle about on his computer and stuff, and then he eventually wrote this: 'this 22 year old asked me to refer her as she has not been feeling fully female, as felt more male gender in her physical and mental activities. Her menarche started late 14, and her sexual organs showed reasonable development. She denies any hirsutism (note: a medical term to describe hair growth on women's bodies deemed unusual by medical professionals), would you kindly see her for further investigations.'

The participant goes on to describe a proposal for a short film which would creatively reconfigure this experience and the assumptions about sex and gender that are contained within it:

I'm gonna read (the letter) out and change it and change it and change it until it's completely relevant to who I am, not to how my doctor with his ignorance had to write it. I'm going to adapt it and change it 3 or 4 times, each time changing it a bit more to suit . . . (McNamara, in Levinson et al. 2008: 190–1; also see Rooke and Gooch 2007: 19)

Importantly, the proposal was made on the weblogs set up for the evaluation and is thus an example of the overlapping research process and creative practice described here. The performative imperative of the creative practice and research method is evident: the participant repeatedly cites the pathologising

discourses of the medical consultation, with each repetition inflected by an imagined transition from, in the participants' words, 'what's not acceptable/not real, to a better place' (McNamara, in Levinson et al. 2008: 190). The power of this searching performative, repeated across the performance of the final exhibition, was evidenced in the participants' and non-trans young people's reports of attending the public exhibition, watching the documentary film and participating in outreach workshops: 'performers laid themselves bare with experiences it hurt to imagine, sending us away still thinking and talking about what we'd seen long into the next week' (audience member); 'I am more interested in gender politics, I read about it more . . . I like to talk to friends about it at school' (school pupil); 'it gave my mum a bridge into my world without me having to verbalise everything . . . it helped her understand me and trans issues' (participant); 'it has brought me some peace of mind regarding his future' (parent); 'its been a positive experience for us all and it was a great show' (parent – for original references see Rooke 2007; Rooke and Gooch 2007).

The participatory research methods fused with the artistry and improvisation of the research and creative practice provided successive points of engagement between autobiographical experience, scientific knowledge and medical expertise: a process of undoing and redoing knowledge via the performance of personal experience realised in emotional, interactive and reciprocal encounters with other young people, medical professionals and audiences engaged in the project. As noted above, the evaluator helped to prepare young people for conducting interviews with medical professionals. During one interview a prominent endocrinologist openly reflected on the lack of secure knowledge relating to sex and gender, an acknowledgement of the limits of science that occurred in the context of a warm and humorous encounter with an 'expert' and that had an empowering impact on the interviewers and became a key part of the documentary at the end of the project. In common with the participatory principles of the methodology, this moment reversed the relationship of questioner and pathologised 'subject' common to encounters of trans young people with medical professionals. It led to an articulation of the provisional knowledge and reciprocal subjectivity of the medical professional and young trans-person in context, with a concomitant shift from 'interview' to 'informed and reflective conversation'.

The participatory methodology that combined creative and discursive research methods in the Sci:identity project manifested a searching performative that disrupted binary constructions of sex and gender and exemplified a hopeful kind of knowledge practice. This incorporated provisional, embodied as well as discursive, inter-disciplinary and democratic methods of knowing. Young people's experience was the 'body of knowledge' respected here and the arts were employed to explore those experiences and disseminate the

results of the investigative process. Like the first case study, Sci:identity responded productively to the blurring of boundaries between practice and research, challenging any clear articulation of research findings relating to its central research question. The model of knowledge practice that emerges here was energised by artistry and improvisation, producing new possibilities for ongoing research and creative practice as well as in the everyday lives of the young people and others engaged in the project.

### Case study 3: Powers of decomposition: *A Letter from Home*

*Jenny Hughes*

*A Letter from Home* was a three-month project with communities in Manchester affected by war, namely refugees and asylum seekers from the Central African and Great Lakes region, especially the Democratic Republic of Congo (hereafter DRC). The project explored the relationship of participatory performance to remaking identity after war and displacement, for example, investigating questions of whether and how participation in theatre facilitates integration into 'host' cultures. It was a collaboration between 'In Place of War' and 'Britannia Rumba', a band made up of refugees and asylum seekers from the DRC that offers a unique fusion of Congolese rumba and British popular music. The performance incorporated narrative, testimony, dance and live music. A researcher took part in each rehearsal and the final performance and completed semi-structured interviews with participants during and after the project, generating a qualitative snapshot of the project at different moments of the process. In particular, interviews aimed to explore the relationship between experiences of participating in the project and the everyday lives of participants. However, struggles in the process of relating personal narratives as part of the practice, and inconsistencies between participants' 'performances' in rehearsals, the performance and research activities, troubled any linear progression from gathering and analysing 'evidence' to making knowledge claims about the relationship between theatre, identity and displacement. An exploration of some of these difficulties exhibits the limits of discursive research – and of narrative performance – when faced with the experiences of those for whom relating stories may be risky or difficult to articulate. In addition, it highlights the importance of recognising when not to ask questions and of appreciating the complex interactions between 'real' and 'fictional' realms in the performance of practice and research. The discussion here centres on moments of practice where the predetermined research design and its planned methods deteriorate and argues that these moments of decomposition – halts in the process, stuttering progress, changes of direction – highlight the limits

of method in ways that are significant for understanding the potentially powerful social effects of research and creative practice.

The idea for the project came from the lead singer of Britannia Rumba, Jean, who wanted to tell his own story of fleeing the Congo as a fifteen-year-old and settling in Manchester. Early in the process other participants also said that they wanted to relate their actual experiences during the performance. The rehearsal that explored this was difficult. Some participants explained that they felt their experiences were 'a page in history' or 'a closed book'. Jean, whose experience had inspired the project, said that he could not rehearse the telling of his story as it was too precious to be repeated: he would only do it once, in the moment of the performance. After some discussion, the group decided not to include personal experiences in the play and instead to rely on the fictional character called Wana, who flees the DRC and comes to Manchester, to portray what they wanted to say. Wana's story was a formulaic narrative of victimisation, flight, arrival and struggles with the asylum system in the UK, which in many ways flattened out and obscured the more nuanced experiences of participants that were articulated during the rehearsal process. The performance excluded aspects of experiences germane to the research question, therefore, because the group decided to present a particular narrative. The need to respect this decision means that it remains impossible to recount the contradictions between experience and its representation in this chapter, which itself is a public outcome of the research.

In the same rehearsal the younger members of the group were asked to devise a scene based on what they say about Africa when the adults are not present. They improvised a scene of playing a computer game, while talking about the way the adults get worked up about 'Africa':

BENJAMIN: I don't believe in Africa

LIAM: I don't believe in Africa, of course I don't believe in Africa, because I don't know Africa

UNCLE SEDOPHE: You do! You were born there

BENJAMIN: I haven't even seen Africa . . . can we stop talking about Africa? We don't want Africa.

The message of the play – the importance of 'knowing where we come from' (as represented by the statement in Lingala that the group decided to project onto a screen during the performance: '*soki oyebi epai owuti oko kende tina suka ya molongo*'; 'if you know where you come from, there's no limit to where you can go') – was strongly challenged in this scene improvised by the younger members of the group. For the older members, the play was an opportunity to communicate the importance of knowing where you come from and developing positive images of cultural identity. In this scene, the younger members

of the group identified and expressed contradictions in the 'talk' of the adults about African identity. However, in an interview after the project, two of the young men in the scene confidently asserted the importance of 'knowing where we come from'. Furthermore, it was clear that they had difficulty identifying where they were from, either from ignorance or from fear of saying too much. Their family's case to stay in the country may rest on versions of 'truth' that need to be differently improvised, depending on audience. Knowing the importance of the constructed narrative to performing 'legitimacy' in making claims for asylum, the researcher did not press further.

These moments raise important questions for research and practice about choices relating to telling, including who is listening, what is being told and for what purpose: questions of knowledge and understanding are bound up in relationships of identity, power and memory that have to be carefully negotiated. *A Letter from Home* presented a series of events relevant to the reconstruction of identity following war and displacement. These included moments of cultural dislocation, belonging, celebration, nostalgia, fantasy, loss and hope. This layering, translation and juxtaposition exhibited a playful engagement with the problems of identity and displacement that was perhaps more important than, for the participants, staking a claim to an authentic cultural tradition or, for the researcher, affirming a certain and fixed research finding. Narratives told during the performances, including the public performance and in the research interviews, were some of many possible narratives of experience, including narratives told or withheld by participants in more private exchanges. As such, the practice of research and research of practice here might be described as residing in the multiple stories that have and have not been told. The research process created, maintained and developed the fiction of a performance that excluded complexity in order to constitute and present the participants' desired narratives and obscure some of their anxieties, rather than articulate and analyse layers of experience. The story told here is one way of durably pinning down moments of practice, but it should be clear that there is much of singular significance left unsaid.

This might be read as an example of how the practice of research and research of practice in applied theatre excludes the complexities of experience in order to constitute itself – and as such what is described here is a failure of both creative practice and research method in applied theatre. The first two projects discussed in this chapter highlighted ways in which research and practice can be brought together in distinct but equally useful ways to deepen and broaden understandings of applied theatre. In this third example, the methods of research and practice decomposed when confronted with the need to maintain a fiction to protect the lives of participants, leaving the research question – the relationship of participatory performance processes to remaking identity after war and displacement – unanswered in the practice. The young

men's contested citizenship means that they are not permitted to settle in their everyday environment, including the environments provided by applied theatre practice and research. The absence of an answer to our question, of course, generates alternative responses; however, all of these were inflected with the realisation that 'we cannot know'.

The decomposition of method in the face of some kinds of experience, however, does not mean that method is without its *uses*. After all, decomposition performs important functions connected to the preservation and regeneration of life as well as its deterioration, and these moments are profoundly and provocatively suggestive for researchers and practitioners of applied theatre. The powers of decomposition reside in drawing attention to issues of survivability and provoking reflection about the social and political implications of the creative practices of this project. In addition, perhaps the most important research 'finding' here was that the experience of the rehearsals and performance seemed to be compelling, joyful and invigorating for many participants, and facilitated the expansion of social networks and relationships, even if momentarily. These aspects of experiences of applied theatre projects are often difficult to put into words but are, perhaps, the most compelling 'evidence' that something of significance has occurred.

## SUMMARY

Fontenelle suggested as early as 1699 that artisans' shops sparkle everywhere with an intelligence and a creativity that nevertheless does not attract our attention. Spectators are lacking for these very useful and very ingeniously contrived instruments and practices . . . These 'spectators' become collectors, describers, analysts. But at the same time that they acknowledge in these practices a kind of knowledge preceding that of the scientists, they have to release it from its 'improper' language and invert into a 'proper' discourse the erroneous expression of 'marvels' that are already present in everyday ways of operating. (De Certeau 1984: 67)

If not of the order of 'proper discourse', what kind of methodological imperatives have emerged across all three case studies? They have each, in different ways, shown that the research of applied theatre is a performed and performative process intimately connected to questions of power and identity. They provide useful examples for considering the complexities of researching applied theatre practice, and draw attention to the significance of processes of artistry, improvisation and decomposition to such research. Artistry is evident in planned and designed processes that draw creatively on methods from

the fields of reflective practice, performance practice and social sciences and are insistently reflexive. Improvisation is evident in the application of these designs, particularly in the appreciation of research methods as tools that can support creative processes and conversations about them in ways that may be unplanned. The principle of decomposition has also been evident across all three examples, though mostly in the third: this term has been used to describe moments in practice and research when encounters with the silences, disruptions or contradictions in experiences of participants confound, delay, surprise or obstruct the play of discursive process and creative activity of research. This conceptual framework sees research methods as participating in creative practice rather than as standing outside of practice in a comfortable relation of interpretation, classification, definition and determination. It emphasises the importance of the utility and efficiency of method in practice and – in common with many other disciplines – the provisional, constructed, and practised nature of research.

The methodological approach that has emerged as common and fruitful in each case can be described as a series of creative crossovers and confluences between discursive research methods and creative practices. These are best conceived as ongoing, layered and sometimes unpredictable journeys for participants, artists and audiences rather than a permanent fixing or framing of the multiplicities of practice. The processes of knowledge production implicit in distinct research methods are all mediations of practice, useful at times but inherently limited. Our argument can be summarised as follows: there is 'practice as research' and 'research into practice'; and there are also the interweaving *practises* of research, theory and practice. Stories of practice worked up in applied theatre research – including narratives offered by participants and theorised overviews offered by researchers – always only indicate a temporarily abstracted fragment of the practice. Applied theatre research is a kind of practice that produces discourses and narratives that may (or may not) open up new perspectives and questions of relevance to the people and contexts it works with and in. In our making of something – a performance or research report – we hold the practice still for a moment so that we can look at its parts. But we make a mistake if we assume that those parts added together come to the sum of the whole.

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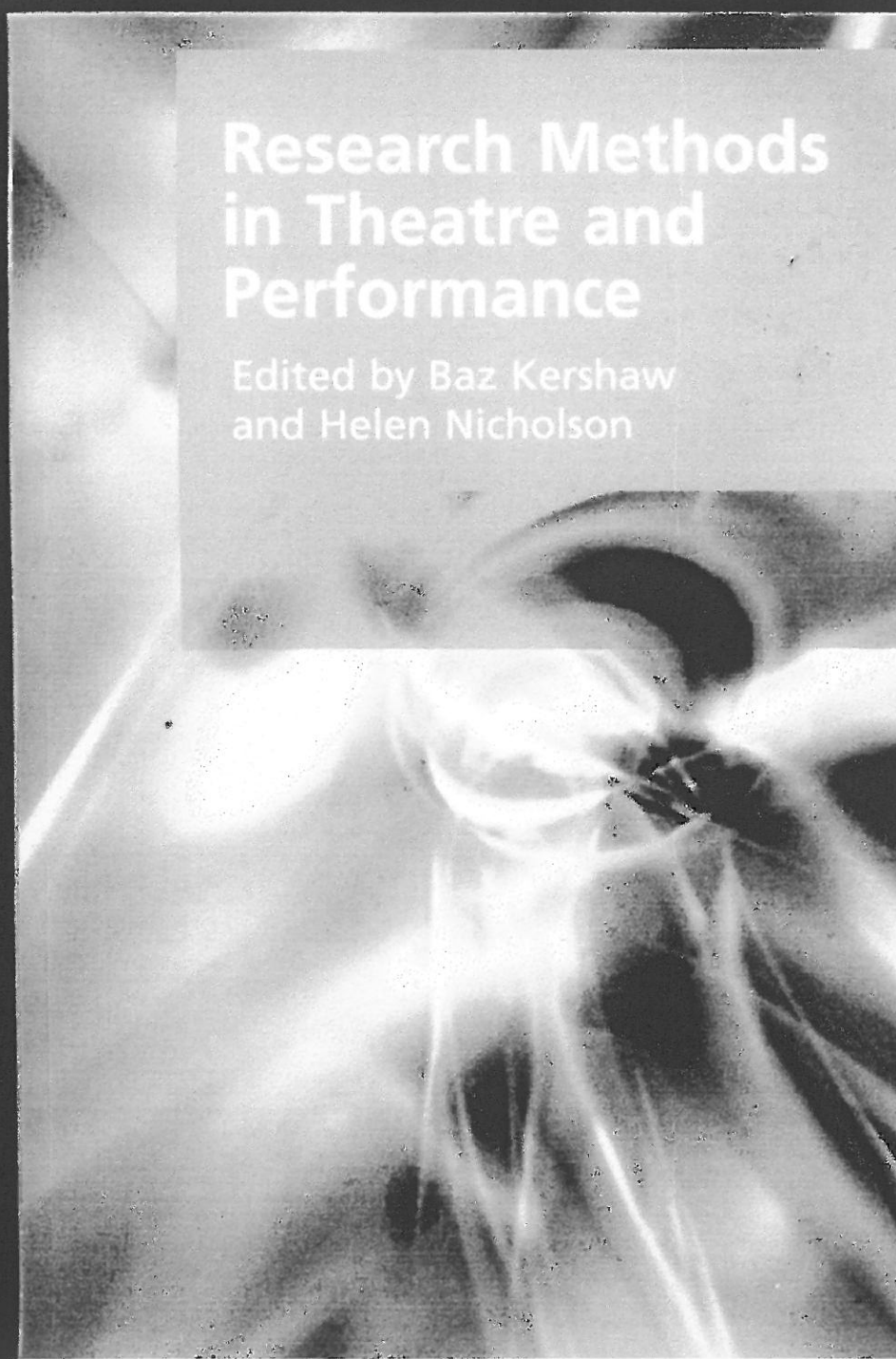
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