

APPLIED THEATRE

RESEARCH

Radical Departures

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Conclusion

Over the last decade researchers in the arts have questioned whether the traditional research methodologies are able to address their particular and distinctive needs. This challenge is not a cry of special pleading; that arts researchers are 'special' and should not, and cannot, be forced to conform to the expectations which other researchers face. Instead, as this chapter has argued, researchers in fields like creative arts and applied theatre are able to meet those challenges but in productive ways which are serviceable for the performatives of their practice. It can be also argued that, rather than being seen as a quirky and marginal set of research approaches, these researchers are making methodological innovations and breakthroughs aligned with governments and funding bodies who expect to see the impact of research clearly communicated to their publics.

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Afterword

Peter O'Connor and Michael Anderson

The series of cases provided in this book point to a new way of considering and realizing research. In considering what they might have to offer, we argue that they separately and collectively describe a radical departure from the notion that research can continue in a business as usual fashion.

We have suggested that the post-normal times we live in demand a different form of research that deliberately and consciously aligns itself with the interests and needs of the marginalized and the silenced. Research can no longer be constricted to merely describing or analysing the world as it is, but it must also provide hope that life might be different and better. Research that attempts to merely synthesize the best evidence for something misses the point. The best evidence we currently have suggests only too clearly that the world is ordered and constructed so as to make radical change impossible. Best evidence suggests we can only learn from what exists already rather than from what we might imagine. We argue that applied theatre provides vital tools for a re-visioning of research centred in critical hope. This vision constructs research as a political activity that resists and challenges the neo-liberal forces that continue to dehumanize and oppress millions at the behest of globalized capitalism.

The cases in this book all represent ways researchers have attempted to work with marginalized and disenfranchised communities, not to transform them, but in ways which provide for the aesthetic expression of possibility and hope. We can see in these examples how applied theatre as research can humanize communities through the telling

and sharing of stories through fictional frames. The separate cases for example show us how elderly people in New Zealand and children living in care in England found ways to explore and make sense of their lives through very different aesthetic processes. In both cases possibilities were opened through the relationships that were fostered as part of the research processes. We should not underestimate how deeply, politically confronting and challenging this form of research is within a post-normal context.

This book also celebrates the power of beauty in research. The deliberately haunting quality of Esther Fitzpatrick's poetry and its engagement with questions of her own and others' identity in a postcolonial nation speaks way beyond the cognitive and affective domains, into a deliberate connection with the spiritual. Although we cannot hear the singing at the end of the *Capturing the Tales* performance, we can, through Jane Luton's colourful writing, imagine its power. Tears welled in our eyes as we read these pages of her chapter for the first time. Tears came too in reading the story of the massacre of Aboriginal people at Myall Creek. There is no pretence in this story of seeking for objective truths, the pain of cavalry-like charges on children and adults chained together so that they can be decapitated, demands a side be taken. Yet Wilkinson takes us beyond the pain and the politics of this history. In sharing the beauty of the theatre made in this sacred place we can hope for a world where such things belong to the past.

We trusted that these cases of Applied Theatre as Research will have moved and disturbed, unsettled and troubled. That they will have created an affective as well as cognitive response in you, the reader. We have imagined that at times that response will be embodied. We believe that accounts of research should make us at various times angry, curious, happy, sad, fearful, outraged or bemused. They should force us out of our seats and make us engage in debate with our partners, our children, our friends and colleagues. The power of the beauty in these cases should not act in a cathartic way to purge us of our emotional engagement with the issues at hand, but should act as a spur to action, as a challenge to the passivity of the traditional detached academic worldview.

The case studies also clearly remind us that practice does not always match the rhetoric of the claims that researchers and applied theatre practitioners make for their work. Life is far too messy, far too ambiguous and murky for straight lines. In each of the cases we can recognize missteps, chances and opportunities not taken, an unwilling and unconscious falling back into the old ways of doing research. The principles that underpin Applied Theatre as Research are ethically demanding in ways far beyond the constraints of ethic committees in universities. Living up to principles is always a difficult and demanding task. It requires a deep and personal commitment to the ideals of democratic and decolonizing forms of research, recognizing that this is not an exact science, but rather something to move hesitantly towards. One danger in principled action is to decry the work done by others based on their different principles. We recognize that the history of research has been marked by work which has seriously and negatively impacted on the lives of those who have been the victims of that research. In particular, it has reinforced and recolonized Indigenous groups in a way that has caused immeasurable damage. However, we are also pragmatic enough to understand that the quality of our lives has been immeasurably enhanced by the work of, for example, science and technology researchers who understand research in completely different terms. In the social sciences however, we recognize the grievous harm that research has caused and the need for careful and hopeful decolonizing methods to inform applied theatre research.

This book also moves beyond the dichotomy of quantitative and qualitative methodologies in research. We argue for a third paradigm, that builds on the pioneering work of arts-based research, Participatory Action Research and Community-based research that has re-conceptualized the way research can be undertaken. We argue that applied theatre can synthesize an approach where the generation of story, its analysis, representation and presentation can be done through the participation of researchers and co-researchers in theatre making. This is about more than using the arts piece-meal, or using aspects of arts approaches in the presentation of findings. Applied Theatre as Research is an umbrella

term that defines a politicized and principled approach to research that has at its heart the making of theatre with non-actors in non-traditional theatre spaces so as to re-imagine the world.

The University Research Committees we talked about at the beginning of this book cannot morally continue to base their funding and decisions on the value and merit of research for the enhancement of career prospects of the researcher. Such an approach perpetuates a neo-liberal discourse that further marginalizes and disempowers the communities universities might be expected to serve. It is way past time to leave these self-serving notions of research behind. Applied Theatre as Research is offered as the much needed radical departure point.

Endnotes

Chapter 1

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*For our friend and mentor,
Professor John Carroll*

