

CHAPTER 1

A DIFFERENT STAGE: FROM PLAY THINKING TO RESEARCH THINKING

By Juliet Jenkin

INTRODUCTION

After more than a decade of working as an actor, writer and director in South African theatre, I began my postgraduate studies with the intention of finding a new relationship to the theatrical form. For my MA, I wrote and directed a choral satire on middle-class South Africa through which I investigated using pattern as a creative and interpretive approach to play-making, defining pattern as a repeated aesthetic system that enacted regularity, strategy, transformation and mimesis through its recursive form. This investigation integrated my heretofore discrete conception of pattern in social and theatrical performance, enabling me to comprehend the performance of pattern as a mutually mimetic social and artistic phenomenon. It was from this conceptual point that I developed the methodological thesis of my doctoral research – proposing performance as a mode and method of social design.

My initial approach to PaR was to simply pursue my theatre-making practice the way I had done in my professional career but with the added vague and inconsistent perception that because the work I was doing was in an academic context it was a different form of practice. While I appreciated the motivating logic of PaR, it initially seemed to me to be a kind of academic wishful thinking that I was unable to institute as part of my theatre practice. Having previously only made theatre for theatre's sake, I was resistant to the notion that an artistic form could be anything other than what it was, not least of all because I viewed arts practice as produced by a complex web of collective and personal unconscious drives that could not explicitly be made conscious or extrapolated as academic products. What took me some time to understand was that these unconscious motives would always be present in a creative process regardless of whether they were aesthetically exploited for the cause of an artwork. In framing my theatre practice outside of artistic motives, its embodied, relational actions were revealed as a way of thinking that I already used in my artistic practice but had not recognised as such.

THE MA PROCESS

At the outset of my MA I did not have a clearly defined research question and could only gesture towards a research impression that had something to do with pattern in performance. Despite my idea being methodological in focus, when I started the process of using theatre-making as research, I felt unable to consciously practice or even parse my methods. I was clearly engaging in techniques, approaches and tactics I had learned and

developed over my career, but they were, if not unclear to me, then so deeply connected to one another and to the totality of what I perceived as 'the theatre-making process', that I struggled to distinguish them during the process of the practice itself. At this stage, I was only able to access a conscious PaR approach through reflecting on my practice after completing a practice process. In the University of Cape Town's Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies (CTDPS) coursework MA programme, this reflective method took the form of critical essays and discussions that engendered a 'methodological review' type of thinking, through which I deliberated on what I had done. During this stage, I consciously thought about my practice rather than consciously used my practice as a mode of thinking, but this purely reflective mode was a necessary and revelatory step in moving towards a conscious mode of thinking-through-practice. The simple feedback loop of practice and reflection allowed me to clarify my research question and began to bridge the gap between my theoretical and methodological grasp of PaR. For example, I recognised that even though my play-making process was fundamentally the practice that led or constituted my research, my play could not passively exist as research in and of itself, and I needed to consciously identify and actively practice the elements of theatre-making in order to undertake practice-based research.

From hereon I began a process of shifting my perception of my practice from theatre-art to theatre-research. The primary theatre-making practice I used as a research method during this time was blocking or choreography. In my habitual artistic process, I would simply block the play according to my own aesthetic sense of the performance and what I took to be its spatial requirements. This process would be largely unconscious, unplanned, and would occur as a responsive reaction to the participation and proposals of the actors.¹ Moreover, assessing the effectiveness of the play's blocking was a responsive, affective, aesthetic experience that I would access through a conscious and unconscious sense of how the play 'felt'. In the PaR iteration of this process, I used blocking as a way to practically investigate my research question. This meant consciously considering the relationship between the staging of embodied patterns in performance and the linguistic patterns of (*inter alia*) rhythm, line and meter in the script. While I generally did not pre-plan these sessions, and while they still involved the responsive participation of the actors, they were (if not theoretical) far more conscious, cerebral and formally discursive than my artistic blocking approach. This new PaR blocking process mirrored the practice and reflection feedback loop I just described but with the significant distinction that the reflection phase took place as a part of the action of the practice rather than outside of the practice as a discussion or an essay.

Thinking about blocking as a site of research made my approach to it far more considered and experimental and the collective action of 'working out' the blocking seemed to uncover the question of the research: asking what blocking could do, what it could mean and how I could use it. In this shifted application, blocking not only fulfilled

¹ In some instances, I would have a sense of a shape or moment I wanted to create and would map it out beforehand.

its traditional function of shaping the play but began to reveal more clearly its potential function as an embodied practice of relational and social interpretation. In the staged production of the play when the social patterns of middle-class South Africa (and the affects of those patterns) were performed through dramatised patterns, my blocking investigation appeared (at least from my perspective) to practically demonstrate the theoretical position of my thesis through the embodied, relational, ephemeral, agonistic action of performance, i.e., the practice enacted the theory in real time as an affective, collective experience.

The process of shifting my perspective on my artistic practice was the underlying scholarship of my MA. It took the process of researching through practice for me to understand *through practice* the possibility of PaR and to gradually gain research consciousness within the presentness of performance practice and the relational workings of the rehearsal process.



Figure 1.1: Performing *Woolworths*. Photograph by Peter Bruyns.

INTO PHD PROCESS

At the outset of my PhD research, my MA play was in production,² and after several cast changes I had begun a series of rehearsal processes that included re-staging parts of the play. During this time I was still trying to refine and clearly conceptualise the details of my doctoral research question. Like the initial stages of my MA, my PhD hypothesis was locked inside an imaginative, aesthetic, affective understanding that I was only partly conscious of, and could not coherently extrapolate through mental and linguistic logic. My doctoral idea seemed to be a submerged and unformed thing, but my MA play was a beacon of clarity, a living, breathing object lesson that revealed new insights with each rehearsal.

Frustrated with my PhD and absorbed in the product of my MA, I resolved to use the play to think through my doctoral research. I did not do this in a planned or systematic manner, but simply resolved to observe the process and think of it as a viable way into reasoning through my doctoral research question. Through this framing, the play became a methodological case study that allowed me to understand my PhD as a methodological thesis in and of itself. Having this outlook made me feel like I was making progress with my thinking without getting too tangled up in endless spirals of cerebral logic. Whether I was rehearsing, waiting for a rehearsal, driving to a show, or speaking to the lighting operator, I was observing and participating in a case study. Through this observational method, my play became the foundational plan or blueprint for my PhD. Every aspect of the practice (from warm-up sessions, social interactions, rehearsal struggles, audience encounters and lighting cues to ticket price discussions) was revealed as part of an intricate structural, creative, participative experience. This experience, centred on a social collective that created and participated in the social structures of their environment, led directly to the methodological logic of my PhD where I theorised performance as a mode of design.

During this case study, I isolated two methodological performance practices that influenced my thinking and that I instituted into the design projects³ of my doctoral research. The first was centred on the participatory social web that actors generate as an inter-personal response to the experience of rehearsing and performing the play together. This cohesive action created the cast's collective identity and was developed through the shared work of the process combined with the repetitive exposure of the actors to one another and the play itself. As a result of this repetitive familiarity, the group generated an emergent, creative relationality that resulted from the play but existed outside of (as well as encompassed) it. In other words, the cast began producing another form of the play that was borne out of the participatory experience of performing the play together. This social web (and its cohesive action) was not strictly speaking a method I could actively practise myself but was rather an emergent methodological outcome that resulted from my performance practice. To apply it, I could try to generate the conditions that enabled

2 As the play's producer, director and stage manager, I was involved in every aspect of the production.

3 The practical research projects of my PhD investigated using performance as a method and mode of design. They aimed to address a collective, relational problem and use performance-as-design to investigate that problem.

it to occur and interpret and shape its occurrence as a generative aspect of the project.

The second significant methodological approach I identified was the directorial practice of giving notes and feedback during a rehearsal or after a performance. Getting seven performers to execute (often very challenging) blocking and dialogue in unison and achieve rhythmic and tonal congruence was a difficult process that involved considerable critical discussion between myself and the cast. This discursive space was often agonistic and the cast frequently struggled to grasp what I was asking of them and literally struggled with one another as they tried to perform the blocking together, often with opposing views of how it should work. This agonistic space, though often frustrating, was (as Chantal Mouffe⁴ proposes) negotiatively productive and produced in me an ‘explanation struggle’ through which I tried to get the group to apprehend my comments and criticisms in a clear, efficient and embodied way. Through this agonistic explanation feedback loop, I developed my directorial feedback into a symbolic, associative shorthand that I would describe as conjuring a brief, non-literal and immediately accessible image through language. This feedback mode often referenced shared inter-personal, cultural and pop cultural references that I communicated in a ‘verbal meme’ form to the cast. Examples of these were recalled to me by one of the actors who showed me some of the directorial notes she had taken down in her script, a selection of which read: “Horror aquarium!”, “You are a dead fish”, “Sex dogs, go!” and “Michelle, can you handle this?” The last note, referring to the opening lyrics of the Destiny’s Child song and music video *Bootylicious* (2002) was an immediately accessible marker that expressed a dense visual, affective, and choreographic landscape about hyper-feminised women playfully and competitively dressing up and asserting their sexiness and/or sexual dominance over one another. I was able to express that density of meaning through one simple phrase that (because of our shared popular culture reference points) the cast immediately understood and could begin improvising around.

SYMBOLIC SHORTHAND

A simple evocative phrase invoking shared interpersonal, cultural and pop-cultural references that is immediately comprehensible to a cast on an embodied level, allowing them to improvise around this shared understanding. For example, Juliet describes using “Michelle, can you handle this?” from the opening lyrics of the Destiny’s Child song and music video *Bootylicious* (2002) as an immediately accessible reference that expressed a dense visual, affective, and choreographic landscape about hyper-feminised women playfully and competitively dressing up and asserting their sexiness and/or sexual dominance over one another.

4 Mouffe’s concept of the agonistic struggle of democracy reasons that it is through adversarial exchange that negotiative democracy emerges: “...the task for democratic theorists and politicians should be to envisage the creation of a vibrant ‘agonistic’ public sphere of contestation where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted” (Mouffe, 2005:3).

Developing my directorial communication through the agonistic discursive environment of these feedback sessions progressively clarified my intentions for the play, because even though I had developed the work over the two years of my MA, my aesthetic and theoretical motives were often only made coherent to me through the act of discussion. I took these discursive methods into the design projects of my PhD by using agonistic discussion and explanation as a way of understanding, developing and imagining the scope of the design projects, and I applied 'symbolic shorthand' as a way of leading improvisations that connected the theoretical aims of the projects to their practice. For example, in one of the projects (that I conducted with a group of 2nd year acting students) the theoretical aim of the project centred on the notion of consent and physical intimacy in theatre practice at UCT's CTDPS. I wanted to incorporate these theoretical aims into the practical explorations without overburdening the process with an academic or linguistically conceptual approach. During our discussion, one of the participants spoke about what you feel you are 'inside' versus how you are perceived 'outside' and I took this inside/ outside icon as a generative symbol to guide and frame the explorations of the project.

I applied these discursive and symbolic methodological approaches to my primary method of group improvisation. Moreover, I used interrogative questions (based on Keith Johnstone's "What comes next?" improvisational technique) and stated motives (for example: in this improvisation we will investigate the space between the door and the window, we will not be using our feet to move around) to shape, frame and develop the process. Improvisation enabled me and the participating group to investigate, generate and reflect on the aims and themes of my hypothesis and these variously framed improvisations not only embodied and enacted my theoretical position but produced, reproduced, reflected on and critically demonstrated my theoretical position as an action of practice.

KEITH JOHNSTONE'S "WHAT COMES NEXT?"

An interrogative dramaturgical technique described by Keith Johnstone in *Impro for storytellers* (1999). The director/facilitator keeps asking the participants, "What comes next?" The question focuses the participants on the logical development of narrative action and "allows one action to lead into another." (Johnstone, 1999: 134-142)

In attempting to demonstrate performance practice as a justifiable mode of design practice, I necessarily used the actions and methods of performance to support my argument. In this way, the methodological argument of my thesis was directly related to the theory of practice and did not reason out an argument of a theoretical research question entirely detached from the logic of practice. That said, in my experience, using PaR and practice-based methods generated a mode of thinking that centred practice not only as the method of investigation, but as the theoretical position of the research.

CONCLUSION

My post-graduate experience of PaR was one of reorientating my artistic practice both in my motives for its outcomes and in the potential for its methodological function. The condition of performance as a practice of the present (Phelan, 2003) meant that using performance as a PaR method required practising this presentness as an action of research. This was not an easy or immediate process, but over the course of my studies, I became more able to practice the performance present as a research mode, and by the end of my PhD, my mind entered the form very differently from the way it had when I only practiced theatre as an art form. More than simply using performance methods as a mode of research, my experience of PaR involved coming to a conscious and deeply detailed understanding of my practice and using that understanding to reconsider my practice from inside it. Through this process, I did not simply identify general performance methods and apply them to my research but rather identified the details, motives and techniques of my artistic practice and attempted to re-imagine their application as a tool of interpretive and generative research. The methods and methodological approaches I describe here (directing a play, observing collaborative cast dynamics, blocking, directorial feedback, and symbolic note-giving) are familiar to theatre and performance practitioners and not significant to PaR in and of themselves. Like the myriad methodological actions of performance, the approaches are made significant through being questioned and extrapolated in a different way, a way which does not merely accept the set motives and applications of theatre as an arts practice, but rather asks: what else can theatre do?

REFERENCES/ RESOURCES

- Borgdorff, H. 2012. *The conflict of the faculties: perspectives on artistic research and academia*. Amsterdam: Leiden University Press.
- Ingold, T. 2013. *Making: anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Johnstone, K. 1999. *Impro for storytellers*. London: Routledge.
- Mouffe, C. 2005. *On the political*. London: Routledge.
- Phelan, P. 2003. *Unmarked: the politics of performance*. London: Routledge.