Applied theatre and practice as research: polyphonic conversations.

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Abstract

Applied theatre practice as research might be perceived as a curious conflation. Not greatly foregrounded in the literature on applied theatre or performance practice as research, this article engages with the particularities of such a pairing. Beginning with identifying why a consideration is timely, 'the practice as research' and 'social' turns are invoked and analysed as relevant contexts to consider applied theatre practice as research. Two projects are offered, providing specific examples for discussion. Revealed by increased scrutiny, some broader epistemological questions emerge concerning power, hierarchy of knowledge and research 'authoring'. A metaphor of polyphonic conversations is offered as an amplification of the applied theatre practical research methodological terrain. Encouraging the basis of many sets of voices contributing to research and potentially negotiating concerns about power hierarchies and knowledge production, the metaphor provokes a fluidity of epistemology, including expanding on the now familiar debates around theory and practice particularly relevant for socially engaged performance-related practical research.

As an academic researcher, teacher and practitioner broadly in the field of applied theatre, I have long felt comfortable with practice as research (PaR) as a way of finding, creating, uncovering, acquiring, expanding and even disseminating knowledge. Since 1996, in each UK research assessment audit (measurements of quality research with subsequent government funding allocated accordingly), I have entered at least one PaR project. An exhilarating and dynamic form of research, in PaR your practice is the crucible for creating and challenging knowledge. It is this that has made it such a rewarding methodology: the meshing of creativity and experiment in live practice is deeply attractive for many of us who have been, and are, practitioners working in participant contexts. Its ontological and epistemological unpredictability is exciting; as Kershaw *et al* said, 'a profound principle of practice as research in theatre and performance [is] that its methods always involve the dislocation of knowledge itself'. (2011: 84) Content with those twenty years of background experience, nonetheless, a number of recent events have prompted me to revisit and reconsider this methodology.

I cite nine 'recent events'. First, a range of PaR critical texts have been published in the last ten years (Freeman, 2009; Smith and Dean, 2009; Rose Riley and Hunter, 2009; Barrett and Bolt, 2010 [2007]; Kershaw et al, 2011; Borgdoff, 2012; Nelson, 2013; Schwab and Borgdoff, 2014) which have little reference to the work of applied theatre, probably understandably because most authors do not have a background in the field. This suggests a gap, however. Second, this period has coincided with my working on three community-based, PaR projects funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) which have proved complex in their research methodology. In one of the few attempts at articulating practical research and applied theatre, Jenny Hughes, Catherine McNamara and Jenny Kidd (2011) charged us to mobilise 'an emancipatory politics of practice' (186). In the light of my funded PaR projects, I feel charged to explore this further; it is timely to rehearse some debates. Third, the emergence of the 'social turn' in the visual arts and its academic literature has some implications for applied theatre practical research which I expand upon below. Fourth, with the increase of doctoral level applied theatre candidates together with the increase in PaR doctorates, a number of applied theatre practical research PhDs have emerged recently, with a concomitant wrangling over philosophy and methods (see, for example, Salih, 2014: Ch 2). Fifth, Nicholas Till's provocative account of PaR in the UK's major higher education weekly newspaper, *THES* (2013), and the subsequent discussion on a university distribution list (SCUDD) foregrounded contentions in PaR. This was at a critical period for the UK's research audit, the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF) with its internal gathering of work that took place in most UK universities.

Sixth, an interesting moment took place for my own work just prior to that audit. I offered a PaR project as one of four pieces of work submitted to the REF assessment exercise, 2014, externally manifest mainly through a research website, which was internally assessed within my institution before the final audit. After examination, our Research Office asked me to be more explicit about what I actually *did* as practical researcher. A perfectly fair question, in fact, and I returned to my website and more carefully positioned my role as a researcher. It was a useful exercise that has remained with me since that moment. I find myself questioning my role as a practical researcher in community, applied theatre contexts repeatedly. Seventh, there were many good examples of arts PaR submitted to the REF. Within its section on Practice as Research, 'There was some extremely high quality applied work in music therapy, education, audio engineering, sound recording and social theatre' praising innovation, collaboration and its international reputation. (REF, 2015: 99) The REF report also stated, however, 'there are too many instances where the sector still has difficulty distinguishing excellent professional practice with a clear research dimension' (100). Praise, but also a call to arms? Eighth, the Applied and Social working group of the UK's Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA) held an event in March 2016, '" A Place at the Table": a discussion of the relationship of practice to research in Applied and Social Theatre', signifying an increased interest from our field. Ninth, there has been an interesting and swift move to using 'practice research' as an umbrella term rather than practice as/in/of research (and more) which may shift our thinking in this area and chimes with the 'Second Wave' of PaR that Rachel Hann identifies (2015). A second wave indicates a less defensive position, Hann suggests, and therefore potentially additional expansion of practical research in performance-related disciplines, further eroding any resistance where it remains. (Sharon Rose Riley offers a comprehensive explanation of such resistance in the United States, for example. (2013))

These various events have caused me to reconsider the elision of PaR and applied theatre, nearly twenty years after my first forays. In general, I am more interested in writing about

what is uncovered, distilled, understood, learnt about 'new knowledge' as a *result* of the research; I have been less interested in asking extensive questions about the research methodology itself. With all the prompts outlined above, however, pursuing some arguments that help identify applied theatre practice as research is probably timely. Speaking at a UK symposium on 'The Future of Practice Research' (4.6.15, Goldsmiths College, University of London) confirmed this, with new scholar practitioners starting afresh with PaR debates. There is something of a lacuna in the literature in the public domain on applied theatre and practice as research; I wish to contribute to that gap. Our field has particular nuances and emphases which can, I believe, add to current debates about PaR. In addition to identifying some of these, in turn, this article articulates, privileges, advocates and validates this mode of research for applied theatre.

Divided into two main parts, I focus on the 'practice as research' and 'social' turns in part one as a selected meta-analysis of aspects key to any consideration of applied theatre PaR. In the second part, I reference relevant practical applied theatre projects, *Challenging Place* and *Performing Abergavenny* which both provoked my desire to interrogate applied theatre PaR in more detail but also act as useful exemplars in articulating a metaphor of 'polyphonic conversations' to embrace the particularities of applied theatre practical research. These projects have had outcomes that engage specifically with their findings (e.g. Ames, 2015; Mackey, 2016; Studdert and Walkerdine, 2017); *this* article uses the projects as a resource for thinking about methodology.

A practice (as research) turn

The imperative and pleasure of practice as research is in a research enquiry that must be addressed through practice and practice that the researcher undertakes. Hughes *et al* (2011) offer the useful expression 'practised methods' that reconfigures some of this for applied theatre. There is a recent move to use 'practice research' in the UK as a more flexible term, as noted above. In acknowledgement of this recent move, in this piece I use the term practical research interchangeably with PaR. 'Practice as research' – and, in this article, 'practical research' - insists that practice is the core method of engaging with one's research hunches or questions: it would not be possible to engage in the research unless you undertake practice. The practice is designed to investigate, respond to or directly address research questions, or experiment with hunches. To understand whether performing places can shift people's sense of locating as I have been asking in my own research field, for example, performance place *practices* must be immanent in an enquiry. Such practice will be theoretically informed, of course; to lead a research enquiry into performing places clearly presupposes a theoretical understanding of place, for example. It is the practice that is the source of new knowledge, however.

This form of research can be understood as part of the 'practice turn' that Theodore Schatzki identified (2001). He referenced a range of disciplines and theorists who had contributed to this 20th century development such as: philosophy and Ludwig Wittgenstein; social theory and Pierre Bourdieu; cultural theory and Michel Foucault (10). Whilst acknowledging many differences in approach, he suggests that most recognise 'practices are arrays of human activities' (11) – sometimes incorporating the non-human. Baz Kershaw, too, speaks of the turn to practice, describing it as a 'mash up' world that has resulted from postmodernism and paradigm shifts where the 19th century 'scholar-poet re-emerged as the "practitioner-researcher", and fresh methods of melding art and scholarship were invented.' (2011: 63)

He suggests that this turn is characterised 'by post-binary commitment to activity (rather than structure), process (rather than fixity), action (rather than representation), collectiveness (rather than individualism), reflexivity (rather than self-consciousness), and more.' (63-64) The mashing-up of scholar and practitioner suggests a less constricted, more fluid *research* methodology, then, and one around process, action, collectiveness and reflexivity. More prosaically, Brad Haseman identifies a dissatisfaction with the restrictions of qualitative research methods and scholarly emphases on written outcomes as significant factors in the growth of practice as research for arts scholars. (2006: 101)

Debates have been extended in the 2010s articulating and affirming the place of practice as research in the academy as knowledge-producing, theoretically persuasive and conceptually rigorous. I would identify contemporary themes as the collapsing binary of theory and practice (e.g. Freeman, 2010: 263; Nelson, 2013: 58), modes of documentation (e.g. Ledger, Ellis and Wright, 2011, and many others), reflexivity (e.g. Nelson, 2013; Kershaw and Nicholson, 2011: 6) and ways of knowing (e.g.Rose-Riley and Hunter, 2009).

I select this last recurring theme, ways of knowing, for particular attention in considering applied theatre PaR and its potential contribution to 'second wave' practical research discussions. In many of the texts cited above, subjective knowledge production is claimed for PaR. Researchers are often the vulnerable practitioners *and* knowledge creators. They are the subjects of the research as well as the authors of its ideas: researcher and the researched, the insider, the practitioner researcher, the researcher as *auteur*. This self-positioning focus is evidenced in much writing (or related forms of documentation) about PaR. Indeed, it is noticeable that most practice as research texts are *edited* collections, some with unusually large numbers of contributors (e.g. Rose-Riley and Hunter, 2009) perhaps reinforcing the abundance of self/selves in the writing. More, many collections include several voices of *artists* (Freeman, 2009; Barrett and Bolt, 2010) with the artist's voice as researcher-practitioner within his, her or their work. This may well be as a result of artists moving into the academy and finding ways to articulate their thinking-through-practice. Indeed, Kim Vincs specifically notes the migration of 'mid-career dance artists' into higher education performance departments (2010: 99). PhD work is noticeable in recent texts also (Freeman, 2010; Borgdoff, 2012) and self-reflexivity is a strong component in PaR PhDs. As befits the nature of such work, 'the self' is threaded through PaR PhD written documents. Famously in the UK, this was extended to two selves, even, in *Partly Cloudy, Chance of Rain* where Joanne 'Bob' Whalley and Lee Miller recreated their marriage ceremony in Sandbach Service Station on the M6, UK, as their joint-PhD practice (2010; Kershaw *et al*, 2011). This focus on the self is not symptomatic of all performance PaR. A number of practical research projects in performance are focused on external objects or practices. (A colleague of mine is in the process of inventing a new form of lighting, for example.) Nonetheless, the presence, reflection and profiling of the role of the artistic self within research, or 'self-portraiture' (Freeman, 2010: 177), is particularly prominent in much PaR writing.

If the artist-academic is the embodied focus of much practice as research, the applied theatre practice-as-researcher is often quite different. S/he is frequently the facilitator of other people; *they* are the focus of the research rather than the facilitator-researcher. A different embodied focus is in play. In my performing place work, for example, I have wanted to understand if participant perceptions of place

have shifted through performance practices in everyday contexts. I have not been the performer of place at the heart of the research: others have. Our own practice – or artistry – is most likely to be as facilitator-researcher but we rarely expect our art, our facilitation skills to be the focus of our PaR. It is the 'matter' of the research project that is the focus. It is this following through the 'creative, social and political aims of the project' as Hughes *et al* identify (2011: 188) that makes PaR such an absorbing research methodology for applied theatre. This is the grist and substance of the research. Whilst recognising facilitation methods are immanent to such work, the facilitator as practice as researcher is likely to be more interested in privileging the substantive matter rather than his or her own facilitation skillset. My own 'substantive matter' has been how performance and performative activities might shift people's perception of place. In contrast to much performance practical research, the focus for much applied and social theatre PaR is other people.

So, most applied theatre PaR starts from the position that the matter of the research is something about the people, the microcosm of society that the participants comprise. One aspect of applied theatre PaR that can add to the amplitudes and variants of PaR discussions, therefore, is in its different approach to subjectivity of practical research, knowledge production and 'ways of knowing'. I will return to this in the second part of this article but, for now, it suggests a methodological opportunity, where applied theatre PaR can amplify our understandings of practical research in theatre.

A social turn

Readers of this journal will be familiar with the field of applied theatre, debated over the last two decades, and will recognise our preoccupation with people, their identity, their communities and their politics (Ackroyd, 2000; Nicholson, 2014). For this article, I draw particular attention to the field's altruistic and facilitative focus; our field is in the area of socially engaged performance.

The recent 'social turn' (Bishop, 2012; Jackson, 2011; Harvie, 2013) has made us think hard about some of the terminology and positioning of applied theatre, I suggest, and how we talk about altruism and art. The social turn and its recent interrogation of 'socially-engaged' art is rooted in (although also challenges) Bourriaud's eponymous relational aesthetics (2002) where art is, effectively, co-produced, with spectators partaking in the artistic product to create meaning. Critical debate around Bourriaud's ideas focus on the idea that moments of sociality or micro-utopias created during the art experience are meaningful and will translate to social benefits outside the performance space. Many of us will now have taken part in immersive, one-to-one or similar performance styles and will recognise the core of this debate: to what extent does the shared participation of the art lead to experiencing a micro utopia and does this impact upon thoughts, operations and social behaviours *outside* the performance experience? Of particular importance in this social turn is that art work is 'socially engaged': audiences are invited to take part and interact. At times, 'participants' contribute to the making when artists work with communities as part of the gestation period of ideas. Where work is created as a result of such community engagement in the making process, there remains 'the artist' and 'the community' in the final art work in many instances (see, for example, Jackson, 2011: 44) despite its intention of dialogical aesthetics (Kester, 2004).

Applied, social or community theatre is not prominent in these debates around socially-engaged arts, probably because the seminal authors cited are not applied theatre academics; nor do they claim to be, of course. Claire Bishop (2012) includes the UK's community arts movement of the 1960s and 1970s in her historical and ideological tracking of the arts and the social turn, describing that movement as 'an international push … to democratise and facilitate lay creativity' (163). Most of her examples are not facilitation-based however and she offers a partial perspective on community arts in time and location. Whilst recognising that all boundaries are porous, Jen Harvie (2013) differentiates between socially-engaged, participatory performance and applied theatre (or applied performance) saying: '[T]he primary aim of applied projects is to collaborate artistically and socially with a particular (often socially marginalized) group of people. Applied projects tend to emphasize socially meaningful (and usually 'positive') processes, sometimes more than artistic outcomes' (20). Harvie admits this is a crude distinction and does not to include applied work within her excellent text on participatory performance and its contextual politics.

Applied and social theatre work is not as present in the socially-engaged, participatory arts 'movement' – the social turn – as it might be. This movement emanated from visual arts, of course, yet 'socially engaged' is a term that has been part of applied theatre languages as well from its early debates (e.g. Thompson, 2003: 14). There is another lacuna here (in addition to the one noted within the 'practice as research turn) which we might usefully contribute to. In expanding understandings of the 'social turn', we could usefully reference extensive examples of applied theatre research in socially-engaged contexts with facilitator-led projects: PaR. Just as the theoretical debates of Kester, Bishop, Jackson, Harvie and others have contributed to the development of thinking for those of us in applied theatre fields, our practical research can offer a vibrant contribution to current 'social' thinking and literature in return.

Context: performing diverse places

The social and practice turns hold some interesting provocations for applied theatre practice as research and, in turn, further publicising and debates around our practical, socially-engaged research can amplify these field. Such work can extend thinking about socially-engaged practical research in its current debates and potential second wave futures. I will use specific examples to expand on this. Recently, I led three practice as research projects within two AHRC-funded research awards: one in *Performing Abergavenny: creating a connected community beyond divisions of class, locality and history* (*Performing Abergavenny*, 2013-14) and two projects within *Challenging concepts of 'liquid' place through performing practices in community contexts* (*Challenging Place*, 2011-14). *Performing Abergavenny* was led by social theorist Valerie Walkerdine and my role as co-investigator was to provoke community reconnections through a range of different performance practices, simultaneously asking to what extent arts practices *can* connect communities. As principal investigator on *Challenging Place*, I asked how performance practices re/engage people with their locations and questioned the everyday lived experience of place and mobilities. I led the research in two of the three projects within *Challenging Place*; Margaret Ames with Mike Pearson from Aberystwyth University (Wales) led the third. For the purposes of this article, as I explained in the introduction, I am addressing research methodological issues for applied theatre PaR arising from these projects

rather than the specific knowledge findings of the projects which are reported elsewhere, as stated above (Ames, 2015; Mackey, 2016; Studdert and Walkerdine, 2017).

Performing Abergavenny comprised a number of practical outcomes in and with the residents of Abergavenny, South Wales. Walkerdine and research fellow David Studdert from Cardiff University had identified a sense of division in the town, predominantly based on class and the ramifications of 'slum' clearances, moving people into estates outside the town centre in the 1950s and 1960s.[i] One of the research aims was to ask to what extent performance practices might encourage 'connectedness' through a focus on the physical place and landscape of the town. As the performance researcher on the project, I initiated various forms of work to be performed at the local theatre including a verbatim performance based on elders' memories, a physical piece from 'excluded' youngsters and a scripted performance representing the views of those who worked at night. The final piece of work I initiated was an inclusive, performative 'celebration' on the filled-in site of the old open-air swimming pool, remembered by many as an icon of communality in Abergavenny in the second half of the twentieth century. All these performance projects were PaR. I was particularly interested in how small acts of performance – or framed performativities – would affect people's response to their town.

The overall research questions for *Challenging Place* were: what can practical intervention tell us about how abstract concepts such as place, community, dislocation and belonging, as theorised by contemporary scholars, map onto the 'real life' experiences of vulnerable social groups? Can one or more models of performance practices help ease feelings of 'dislocation' among community participants, where such feelings exist? How might such models be evaluated, disseminated and made fully accessible to community theatre organisations? In addition to articles, websites and a symposium, outputs from this AHRC-funded research project included three practice as research projects constructed within the field of applied theatre. The two *Challenging Place* projects I was most involved with took place in community theatre organisations, Half Moon in Limehouse, London, UK, and Oldham Theatre Workshop (OTW) near Manchester, UK. Each organisation engaged a group from the local community to undertake place practices. I worked with staff from Half Moon and OTW as the principal investigator or lead researcher which included several intensive sessions exploring how research would be undertaken and discussing the larger questions around place that exist today. Aged between 13 and 17, Half Moon's senior youth group participated in a term's worth of weekly drama sessions, producing a final short performance piece, *Place*, for audiences. OTW created a new weekly drop-in drama session for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, finishing the 6-month Place project with a week's intensive workshops. (For examples of these projects, and that of Cyrff Ystwyth led by Margaret Ames, see www.performingplaces.org).

Deeply socially-engaged, I was leading practical research projects where, it was to be hoped, other people's response to places through performance practices would be re-experienced and re-envisioned. These research projects were complex, many-headed, external (outside the academy, situated in the territories of others, frequently outdoors) and challenging. They provoked many questions about the research process.

Processes of the practitioner-researcher

It is the role of the practitioner-researcher in applied theatre that I am particularly focussing on and the concomitant research process together with ensuing

epistemological questions concerning power, hierarchy of knowledge and knowledge production and research 'authoring'.

In *Challenging Place*, I worked closely with industry partners at Oldham Theatre Workshop and Half Moon. Input into the practical research projects from these partners was important; there is little point in working with industry partners unless clear, mutually appreciated, reciprocity exists and I was fortunate enough to be working with high quality practitioners whose work I knew and admired. These practitioners had close knowledge of the geographical context and the communities they work with, far greater than mine, and would bring useful contextual knowledge into the project. I am aware, too, that in some settings, I no longer have the immediate practitioner skills that I might have once claimed. Many of us in applied theatre or drama education at university level once worked in schools or community settings but, even so, many are now more adept at working with university students. I am older, too, than when I consistently worked with youth and don't necessarily have the languages or presence that will draw out the most productive work - from young people in particular. It was entirely appropriate that the organisations' practitioners would lead the facilitation, therefore.

In the case of *Challenging Place* and many other applied theatre practice as research projects, the distancing between researcher and inhabited artistic practice is *increased* because more closely attuned practitioners facilitated the projects with the community groups. I was, perhaps, a researcher-facilitator of the facilitators. This was an interesting power relationship, of course, impacting upon considerations of hierarchies and forms of knowledge. On the one hand, it is possible to interpret my more distanced role as 'holding a researcher power' with the theoretical, conceptual and practical knowledge of place to be distributed to others at intervals and where appropriate: a form of ontological repository. On the other, such people-positioning might be interpreted as respecting different knowledges and skills and a proactive construction of balance and equity.

A move towards co-participation in research projects has been much in evidence in recent years in the UK, vaunted by the AHRC itself, for example. Doubtless, this is partly because of the 'impact' agenda implicit in global research now, where research should not just be disseminated into non-academic contexts but be seen to have impact. *Performing Abergavenny* was, for example, a 'Community Co-creation and Co-design Research Development Project', responding to an AHRC Connected Communities funding award which specifically asked academics and community representatives 'to develop approaches to community engagement in the co-creation and co-design of research' (AHRC funding guidance, 2012). Led by Walkerdine, the monthly steering group meetings with Abergavenny residents, prolonged conversations with Abergavenny Town Council and Monmouthshire County Council, and a town Facebook site (part of another research project and co-opted into *Performing Abergavenny* for its lifetime) were all part of a determined effort to co-create and co-design a complex research project with community members.

These two different examples of co-participation in research processes (working with drama facilitators in *Challenging Place* and co-creating with community members in Performing *Abergavenny*) weren't unproblematic, however. In responding to my Research Office query, 'Where are *you* in the research' of the *Challenging Place* Half

Moon project, I drew up the utilitarian list, 'Identifying the Researcher' (http://www.challengingplacehalfmoon.org/docs/identifying_researcher.pdf) with a range of researcher roles including conceiving the enquiry, leading training into theoretical ideas of place, documentation, holding regular reflection and planning meetings with the lead facilitator and responding in the moment 'to nuance and shift directions' (Mackey, 2013). The complexity of the practice as researcher role is evidenced in the range of actions that were both singular and collaborative but I was always aware of the delicate journey I was were taking throughout the research project process. In *Performing Abergavenny* (and, indeed, in the whole Co-creation and Co-design model), one issue for the applied theatre practice as researcher was highlighted: whose are the ideas and how do 'co-ideas' actually emerge? How do researcher hunches fit into this model where researchers are expected to facilitate community discussions? Is it, in fact, possible to co-initiate performance practices that offer research opportunities for the applied theatre practice as researcher as well as satisfy the needs of the community - who may simply want a community arts event? I was aware that some of my ideas for 'small acts of participation' through a performative evocation of a town lido did not meet everyone's idea of 'theatre', for example. Both examples suggest an interesting ambiguity and uncertainty of PaR 'ownership' and authorship of knowledge production. Co-creation with multiple others is a major challenge for such community-based practical research and there are very few references to this in the performance/arts related literature on practical research.[ii] We have significant experience to offer here.

A further consideration in these debates is the 'output' from practical research in applied and social theatre. It can differ from the realised artefact or 'practice' that is more commonly an outcome from PaR. In applied theatre it is often the participants and their processes that are researched, with all the accompanying ethical challenges implicit in this, and their responses are often an 'output'. In Canan Salih's PhD for example (2014), she spent four years working with second and third generation London Turkish Cypriot youth on how they perform their identity in public and private spaces. In *Challenging Place* at OTW, we wanted to understand whether – and how – performance practices could shift migrants' attitudes and feelings towards dislocation. In both examples, the participants' views were part of the research focus; the art works were not the main focus. (Of course, this is not always the case and my co-investigator on *Challenging Place*, Margaret Ames, was rightly very clear about the importance of the quality of art work in her part of the project. Indeed, we may focus on people and shifting perceptions and behaviours in applied work, but we profile, too, the experimental and artistic in our work as part of our research. In *Challenging Place* and *Performing Abergavenny*, part of my ambition was to use extended forms of practice more associated with live art, perhaps, than applied theatre as part of testing a performing place 'model'.) With much of our work bound up in encouraging non-professional participants to shift their thinking, research 'ownership' becomes interestingly ambiguous. The researcher 'authors' the research ideas; the participants might not be co-authors, perhaps, but certainly they comprehensively inhabit the research findings. Knowledge production is therefore shared – and complex.

Polyphonic conversations

I have identified some opportunities in, broadly, the field of applied and social theatre to add to practical research discussion:

- Other people, engaged in arts practice, are generally the focus of the research enquiry;
- Research processes are shared with many voices contributing in co-creation processes with concomitant questions around 'authorship';
- With many inputting to the research journeys, there are negotiations of power and hierarchies of knowledge.

I have come to consider applied theatre practical research as a productive, diverse, polyphonic conversation. Such a metaphor offers a productive capaciousness for embracing the complexities of the field. Polyphony suggests a number of different voices participating in the overall project, frequently following their own routes and independent needs, sometimes harmonious and occasionally not. Within this polyphony are moments of homophony, where all voices join together into one clear and combined melodic line. There are also moments of monophony, where singular voices can be heard quite distinctly, as is the case so often in conversations. A conversation has a topic, a focus, matter. In utilising this metaphor, immediately the subject matter of the research is centrally positioned, therefore: the 'conversation' is about the research focus. *Challenging Place* and *Performing Abergavenny* were *about* the performance of place by inhabitants or communities of those locales. This was the matter of the metaphorical 'conversation'. Polyphony, with moments of homophony and monophony, suggest something of the way in which applied theatre research projects might be iterated.

I interpret this metaphor, polyphonic conversation, in two specific ways. First, and more straightforwardly, applied theatre practical research will necessarily be multivocal. Applied theatre PaR projects will concern others whether this is as participants, other involved community members or co-facilitators. Many voices will contribute. As a result, it is a particularly complex process of PaR where single 'authors' or 'owners' are less likely. Multiple voices contribute to applied theatre processes, with responsibilities and authoring shared. Such collaborators in the research may well also be the researched, indeed, or - and this is worth more discussion - may vacillate between roles. Importantly, all will be in conversation and, as such, will be non-hierarchical knowledge producers. I do not see this as reducing or negating the lead researcher role in having the hunches, initiating and leading the research practice or being the container of particular (e.g. 'academic') knowledge. Nor do I see this at odds with leading the research journey. Maintaining a constructive polyphonic conversation is critical however, when working with such multi-voiced practice as research projects.

Performing Abergavenny and *Challenging Place* were by no means flawless in these polyphonic conversations. Indeed, the failures and lacunae in each project have encouraged my further consideration of research relationships with community members. At Abergavenny, I struggled with my position and my role, anxious to bring to the steering group table particular styles of performance practice which was not part of the town's performance 'norm' perhaps. There was a danger that co-design and co-construction might actually suppress research ideas and the work become simply a community arts project rather than creating new subject-related knowledge. In the *Challenging Place* Half Moon project, it became clear very quickly that it was important to share 'place' knowledge with the facilitators and we held a two-day workshop on the ideas that had inspired the research. In addition, I instituted inter-

session lengthy conversations with the excellent lead facilitator, Vishni Velada Bilson (hear telephone conversation recordings on following web page: http://www.challengingplacehalfmoon.org/activities.html) to allow us to return to the research 'questions' at the heart of the work every week. These two stages in the project helped shift the researcher-as-knowledge-holder to a more productive researcher-as-knowledge-sharer as well as recognising the multiple skills of my project colleagues. Nonetheless, there were times in both projects where cacophony dominated rather than polyphonic conversations, perhaps, partly prompting this reflection upon our processes.

Of course, polyphony (with homophony and monophony) could be used to describe any number of theatre projects, research and otherwise. From Alison Oddey (1996) to Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling (2015), over two decades of theorising around the collaborative processes of devised theatre evidences abundant polyphonic processes, for example. There is a second 'set' of polyphonic conversation in applied theatre practical research, however, which are, I suggest, peculiar to the field. This second set comprises a conversation between practice, theory, action and reflection. This is more than the positioning of PaR as a conflation of practice and theory variously expressed in the recent PaR literature. I add 'action' and 'reflection' to theory and practice for applied theatre PaR drawing particularly from Paulo Freire and his interpretation of praxis. Freire's theory/practice discussion is not particularly helpful (e.g. 1996:106), and to some extent has been superseded by the extensive debates in PaR literature recently, but his emphasis on reflection and action *is* useful for applied theatre PaR.

Praxis, he suggests, is coextensive 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it … Action and reflection occur simultaneously' (33, 109). A sacrifice of action would lead to empty verbalism just as a sacrifice of reflection would be mere activism. To be anti-racist, anti-racist behaviours have to be applied, for example (Gibson, 1994). In this dispensation, ideas can only exist if they are applied – a fitting consideration for applied theatre. 'Reflection' implies a thinking back and analysis, a form of reflexivity. For applied theatre PaR, this reflexivity might well be immanent reflection within the practice moment (famously invited by Donald Schön, 1983) or it can imply a distanced, 'rational critique' (Lash in Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994: 113) of the theoretical and practical processes, that then facilitate subsequent action. In incorporating reflection and action firmly into an interpretation of praxis, as Freire does, there is an expectation that ideas formed through practice and theory will be critiqued, and actions (changes) will be immanent: a polyphonic conversation.

This polyphonic conversation implies more than the relay between points on walls as Foucault famously describes the relationship between theory and practice, with practice needed to break through that wall (Foucault and Deleuze, 1977). It is, I suggest, a constant, ongoing, fluid, mobile conversation between practice, theory, reflection and action. The four conceits are interdependent, often simultaneous and non-hierarchical. A polyphonous conversation implies overlapping and concurrent voices. At times, theory and practice become theoretical practices, or reflection and action merge to be reflexive action or practice and reflection may be simultaneous *(pace* Schön, 1983). Moments of monophony suggest distinct periods when only a single 'voice' is heard. So, there may be times when the adrenalin and intensity of practice dominates. There may be other periods for a sole engagement with theory, for

11

example, or a retrospective and distanced self-reflexivity. Such varied conjunctions are entirely appropriate in a process of polyphonic conversation.

My claim here is that applied theatre PaR might be regarded as a polyphonic conversation suggesting an ecumenical pluralism of people and concepts. Such polyphony is not intended to lead to a reductive melange but is intended to offer a productive metaphor for applied theatre PaR. Monophonic single voices will lead at different points in the 'conversation'. Aspects of praxis (theory, practice, reflection and practice) need not be equal at all stages. At other times, all the people involved in the practical research will coalesce into homophony, as the project demands. (This was the case, for example, on the day of the pool party in Abergavenny or the final hours of an early 'Place' session with Co-Is and facilitators in *Challenging Place*.) Conversations are *about* something and the research focus will be at the centre of the conversation. As Nelson (2013: 51) and Haseman (2006: 104) suggest, practice is the principle activity of PaR, although not the only one. Considering applied theatre practice as research as privileging practice (as all PaR does) but also as a polyphonic conversation, recognises the many voices in such community-based work as well as the conflations and individual sway of practice, theory, reflection and action.

In *Challenging Place* and *Performing Abergavenny,* knowledge was produced through such polyphonic conversations even if the process felt ungainly, erratic and distinctly insecure at times. Facilitators, participants, audience members, community 'others' – all contributed to gaining further understanding of how performance practices can shift people's response to place and their environment. There were periods of theoretical musing and sharing, extensive practice, immanent or retrospective reflection and further actions (such as taking this work to other agencies). The metaphor of polyphonic conversations is offered as a way of conceiving the nuances and particularities that can be found in community-based, applied theatre practical research.

To end this piece, I want to ask the question, 'why is this important'? Isn't this just semantics over names and titles? In response, I would suggest that this is about validating serious research with meaningful outcomes from a discipline (or sub-discipline) sometimes confused about the purpose and realisation of its 'practical' research. Practical research in applied theatre has its own emerging body of vibrant examples and has much to offer other disciplinary methodologies as research in the arts develops. It has some specific particulars that contribute to considerations arising from the practice as research and social turns. This article is intended as an encouragement for extending the possibilities of such research and to promote the filling of current lacunae.

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[i] Not all residents in Abergavenny agreed there were divisions. This idea was met with some resistance by some articulate middle-class members of the community.

[ii] See Facer and Enright, 2016, for a fascinating report that is not specifically about arts, primarily, but touches on some of these issues.