# RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at ray@yorksj.ac.uk

# Whose Story Is It Anyway?: Reflections on Authorship and Ownership in Devised Theatre-Making and Ethnodrama with Young People

[ANNA GLARIN](#)

YORK ST. JOHN UNIVERSITY

## ABSTRACT

*A paradigm shift to research 'with' young people as opposed to 'on' young people has led to focus being placed on young people's voices in matters concerning them as they are viewed as the experts on their own lives. This article reflects on authorship and ownership of work created collaboratively with young people and on the devised theatre-making process which lead to the creation of ethnodrama, a script of dramatised narratives. The applied theatre practitioner and researcher devising work and creating ethnodramas with young people (and indeed other community groups) faces additional challenges compared to the traditional playwright; they do not just have to entertain but also convey narratives from and about people. This article argues that while aesthetic judgement can be exercised to some degree in the process of scripting the narratives, there are competing tensions involving power dynamics and ethical considerations that must be carefully negotiated and*

*renegotiated through a collaborative process of (re)creation, (re)presentation and (re)telling of the young people's narratives. The article gives examples of practice which supports the idea when making work with young people it is this collaborative process that is key to the notion of authorship and ownership. It concludes that through this process, the aspiration is that authorship is shared between everyone involved in the process, but that the ownership lies with the young people, from whom the narratives originate.*

## INTRODUCTION

Devising original work with teenagers is exhausting, exhilarating and exciting. They have plenty to say and are keen to say it. Personally I do not subscribe to the notion of 'giving young people a voice', a phrase commonly used in youth settings; in fact, I find it rather condescending. Who are we to say that young people do not have a voice, or that they need it and indeed want it? As a theatre practitioner with over fifteen years' experience of working with young people and currently pursuing a PhD, my firm belief is that young people *have* a voice, but what they often need and want is a platform to help make it heard. My theatre-making practice and research methodology with young people is one of reflection practice (Mirra et al. 2015; Mackey 2016); we create new theatre work which is reflected upon and re-worked in a continuous cycle. This article will reflect on the notion of, and explore the difference between authorship and ownership when devising and creating new work with young people. As a group we create scripts which technically originate from them; the ideas and stories we share are theirs and the words conveying these stories, often verbatim, are theirs. Yet I am the one putting it all together into a workable shape, a script if you like, and therefore, it can be argued, it is I who is the author. So who can rightfully and ethically claim authorship and ownership of the work? The reflections in this article will offer insights into the dynamic writing process with young people and how this affects the authorship and ownership of the text.

## RESEARCHING AND WRITING 'WITH', NOT 'ON' OR 'ABOUT' YOUNG PEOPLE

Research "with" as opposed to "on" young people (Reason 2010; Fielding 2010; Coyne & Carter 2018) aligns with research into the "new sociology of childhood" (Coyne & Carter, 2018, p. 9), which highlights the rights of the child to have a say in matters concerning them (United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child). While my practice has always been centred around young people and their voices, embarking on a PhD has enabled me to also consider young people's vital roles in research. By asserting young people as "experts in their own lives" (Coyne & Carter, 2018, p. 8 ) and placing them at the heart of research agendas they give "voice to the study community" (Taylor et al. 2017, p. 533). As researchers and practitioners we ought to take note of that voice and seek to incorporate it into our research and theatre-making, with young people recognised as competent "beings" (Kallio, 2008; Coyne & Carter 2018). Water (2018), whose research focuses on health care ethics and youth voice, claims that a participatory approach with young people by its very nature suggests an "ethical standpoint" as it values the "agency and right of the children and young people to have a voice in things that matter to them" (p.37). Thus, the approach I adopt is one of research and development (R&D) around specific themes or topics, always selected and steered by the young people. My co-artistic director and I facilitate creative workshops with young people in which improvisations and scenes around their ideas are created. All ideas are recognised and considered through a democratic process of discussion and trying-things-out, a process of "plussing" (Belliveau, 2015, p. 11). Some are rejected immediately, while others are further developed; one young person reflected on this process and noted that "when one person has an idea, everyone tries to improve it" (Waterloo Community Theatre). The young people's responses are captured and I, alongside my co-artistic director and the young people, co-author a script with verbatim text which is shared with an audience. Theatre scholar Saldaña, with a background as a theatre educator, director, playwright and qualitative researcher, refers to this process as ethnotheatre, and the script as ethnodrama (1998; 2005; 2008; 2010). Both are achieved through a collaborative process of generating, scripting and performing material that originates from the young people. While every effort is made to retain the aforementioned ethical standpoint through a

collaborative approach which involves constant dialogue and continuous negotiation and renegotiation, unavoidable power relationships make it a challenging and dynamic process (Hart 1992; Mannay 2016; Water 2018).

Reflecting on a recent project with young people, the challenges of the scripting and playwrighting process came to the fore. We generated a great deal of material and I found myself torn between what to use and what not to use; who is represented and how are they represented – and how do I ensure authenticity? It led me to ponder that it is not how they create, present and tell their stories to the facilitators and each other in our sessions, but rather how we (re)create, (re)present and (re)tell them together, and the importance of not undertaking this process in isolation, but rather in collaboration *with* the young people. As one young person said when asked about what they enjoy about coming to the sessions: "we're kind of in control, I enjoy that we have that control and the adults don't make it that they're only ones in control, if we have an idea, we can actually say it".

## (RE)CREATION, (RE)PRESENTATION AND (RE)TELLING

Young people create, present and tell stories all the time; in school, in youth settings and on social media. The tension, and often the dilemma, is in how we choose to (re)create, (re)present and (re)tell them and as theatre practitioners we use theatre as a medium to do so. O'Toole et al. (2010) likens it to the process of any playwright who researches material for their play, claiming that the "re-creation of researched communities … make sense" (p. 5). It does indeed make sense; it provides a platform for unheard voices. Although, on the contrary to how traditional playwrights might work, playwrights of ethnodramas do not "write" them, we "adapt" them (Saldaña, 2010, p. 4). We generate fieldnotes, footage and quotes and our job is to transform these into performances; we are the 'writer-uppers' of the fieldnotes. Therefore, while I assume a role of playwright in the sense that I write up the fieldnotes, these scripts are not ""play scripts" in the traditional sense, but essentialised fieldwork reformatted in performative data displays" (Saldaña, 2010, p. 5). The process of (re)creation, (re)presentation and (re)telling can therefore be viewed as one of (re)formatting; finding a way to transform—to reformat—fieldnotes into performances. This process of reformatting is multi-layered, it is not only the words and the content

that need to be taken into consideration but also the performative elements; *how* to perform the text to best serve the content. Thus, the result should not only engage and entertain, but also convey the narratives.

There is of course the challenge and the ethical dilemma of maintaining fidelity to the fieldnotes and transcripts. In an attempt to achieve this fidelity, it has become our process to continuously validate the data (Mienczakowski, 1995)—the ethnodrama—with the young people and ask *them*: 'is this what you said?', 'is this what you mean?', 'did I interpret that correctly?', 'do you think this works?' etc. This process starts with a scene that is created by the young people, it is recorded and transcribed. The young people then read the transcription and make edits. This validation is often repeated several times until everyone involved are satisfied, it is negotiated and renegotiated. The final script is read together as a group and a discussion about the tone, the choice of words and the structure takes place and together we decide how to take it forwards. It is a process that while completed in stages is never fully complete until the piece is performed, and even then, changes can still occur. This to-ing and fro-ing is crucial; I have found that in order for my adaptation—my reformatting—to be faithful to the narratives the young people tell us they must be consulted at every stage of the process; they need to have an equal stake in that process, despite the added layer of 'messiness' it undeniably brings (Hughes et al. 2011; Coyne & Carter 2018; Baxter 2019). The constant dialogue is paramount to achieving fidelity. Care must be taken to retain the authenticity of the stories that are being re-told; by being faithful to the original stories. Saldaña (2015) asserts that a playwright of ethnodrama "is not just a storyteller; she is a story-reteller" (p. 20). Despite me being in a position of power and, for all intents and purposes, assuming the role of playwright, this fidelity can only be achieved through collaboration and continuous validation with the young people. It is this process of (re)creating, (re)presenting and (re)telling that impacts ownership and authorship of the text. Be that as it may, in a process that by its very nature involves a group of people, one cannot escape the fact that there is ultimately one person who commits the final words to paper, or more commonly, the final tap of the keyboard, and thus makes a final decision as to what is included and how it is (re)created, (re)presented and (re)told in the text. How and to what degree one exercises that aesthetic judgement must also be considered.

## AESTHETIC JUDGEMENT, AUTHORSHIP AND OWNERSHIP

I recall a recent incident in our R&D process in which the young people were asked to write a monologue on flip-chart paper based on prompts that I provided them with. While typing up the monologues I exercised my aesthetic judgement to omit the things I thought did not work in the context of the monologue and with the wider message and theme of the work, re-shuffled some sentences and highlighted everything that needed clarification. I then brought them back to the young people the following week. They were asked to read through their edited monologues alongside the originals and approve (or disapprove) the changes I had made, as well as clarify words and meanings. One young person had used a lot of acronyms and linguistic features that I was not acquainted with, 'youth-language', for lack of a better term. While explaining the meanings of the words and acronyms to me, they made it clear that while they did not mind the omitted parts, their language and how they chose to present their story to me, was not to be changed; they had strong feelings about how their words were (re)presented. In fact, overall, while the young people did not mind changes such as sentence re-structuring and other logistical changes; changes that in my experience had potential to enhance the performative elements, they wanted their original language to be kept intact. They wanted us to be faithful to what they had said, the words they had used. Thus, the text we ended up with was indeed a combination of their topical knowledge, of which, in this context, they are the experts, and my theatrical/professional knowledge, of which I am the expert. The described incident could suggest a subconscious awareness of this process on behalf of both parties; both knowing and recognising the expertise of the other and be viewed as an example of "respecting different knowledges and skills and a proactive construction of balance and equity" (Mackey, 2016, p. 485).

So long as the focus is on maintaining and not restory-ing the narratives, Saldaña (2005) argues that the playwright can 'creatively and strategically edit the transcripts' (p. 20). I would suggest this is using my aesthetic judgement as the one more experienced in theatre-making. I undoubtedly exercise my aesthetic judgement as playwright in the choices I make but as it is a constant process of writing, editing and re-writing, involving the young people and theatre practitioners in equal measures, we arrive at a final text we have all had equal input into. This eliminates the need to exercise aesthetic judgement to any degree that

would risk upsetting the carefully negotiated balance. Thus, I am not re-storying the narratives but facilitating a democratic process of collaborative playwrighting. Through the constant validation and renegotiation with the participants, playwrighting equilibrium is established and an ethical standpoint maintained.

However, there is no doubt that this is a delicate balance to strike and Saldaña (2010) stresses that it must not "paralyze us from thinking imaginatively about a research study's staging potential" (p. 6). It can be argued that theatre, by its very nature, exists to entertain. The first "archetypal post-performance question" one tends to ask of an audience post-performance is "did you enjoy it?" (Reason, 2004), suggesting the main reason for attending is for enjoyment; to be entertained. Indeed, Saldaña (2005) claims that "one of the playwright's functions is to use an economy of words to tell a story" (p. 20), and therefore the verbatim transcript is minimised to the "juicy stuff" for "dramatic impact" (1998). Of course, as playwrights we want to entertain and enthral an audience, but it is equally paramount that as applied theatre artists we also exercise our aesthetic judgement to ensure the ideas we choose (re)create and stories we (re)tell are authentic and (re)presentative of the community we work with. Therefore, I argue that the notion of ownership is distinctly different from that of authorship.

Youth as a stage of becoming (Tilleczek, 2011) suggests it is a transitional period with multiple changes taking place; for example puberty, moving from primary to secondary school and forming new peer groups. As adults, having already gone through these transitions in life, it is impossible to claim knowledge of what it means to go through them today. Adults can therefore be viewed as 'outsiders' in relation to youth culture and "[o]utsiders cannot produce works that are authentic expressions of a culture they have not lived" (Young, 2008, p. 60). Thus, it can be argued that young people and adults inhabit different cultures and "[y]oung people … are inseparable from their cultures" (Tilleczek, 2011, p. 5). The stories the young people tell us facilitators therefore belong to and are situated in their world, their culture. As illustrated by the young person who claimed ownership of her words in the example above, the stories belong to their culture which adults do not have knowledge or experience of. As the originators of narratives which are produced in a culture far removed from that of adults, they own them; they *are* the stories. They embody the narratives because they *are* the

narratives, the "embodied focus" (Mackey, 2016, p. 482). Once the narratives have been offered to and shared with the facilitators and/or researchers, they have moved from a personal sphere to a space where we re-create and re-tell them together. While the theatre practitioner and/or researcher uses their aesthetic judgement and "'authors' the research ideas; the participants might not be co-authors, perhaps, but certainly they comprehensively inhabit the research findings" (Mackey, 2016, p. 486). Wong (2019) concluded in her article about a participatory community-based playbuilding project that the young people she worked with "thanked me for teaching them how to do drama but reminded me that the stories belonged to them" (p. 36). In other words, if it were not for the young people the stories would not exist. Ownership, therefore, I argue can only be attributed to those who told the stories in the first place, while authorship ought to be attributed to all those who were part of the (re)formatting process as they all have equal stakes in the (re)telling of the stories.

**CONCLUSION**

The devising, writing and research process with young people, or indeed other community groups, is not linear, nor is it straightforward. I concur with Mackey (2016), Professor of Applied Theatre and founder of the first UK undergraduate degree in applied theatre, who muses that in applied theatre situations "research ownership becomes interestingly ambiguous" (p. 486). As demonstrated above, the process involves active input from young people and practitioners/applied theatre artists alike and the finished product may contain words, phrases and ideas from both, hence "[t]he results are a participant's and/or researcher's combination of meaningful life vignettes, significant insights, and epiphanies" (Saldaña, 2005, p. 16). There is no one single correct answer, rather it must be negotiated by the process through which the content is generated, "knowledge production is therefore shared—and complex" (Mackey, 2016, p. 486). Thus, the debate on the "tension between an ethnodramatist's ethical obligation to re-create an authentic representation of reality (thus enhancing fidelity), and the license for artistic interpretation of that reality (thus enhancing the aesthetic possibilities)" will undoubtedly continue (Saldaña, 2005, p. 32). Nonetheless, despite the fact that young people often are perceived as lacking decision-making power and agency simply by virtue of being

young (Hart 1992, Water 2018), I argue that they ought to be in charge of their own narratives, because they own them. Therefore, it is my duty as an ethical theatre-maker to offer a mechanism through which these narratives can be told most effectively and authentically. I suggest that it is in this process; from young people creating, presenting and telling their stories to the theatre practitioners/researchers, to us (re)creating, (re)presenting and (re)telling their stories with them, that the magic happens. But it is also in this process that many questions arise and transparent negotiation and constant renegotiation is key. The ownership of the stories will always be attributed to the young people, after all, they created and shared them and without the young people the stories would not exist. Authorship, however, is shared as a result of a collaborative process of (re)creation, (re)presentation and (re)telling.

## SUGGESTED CITATION

Glarin, A. (2020). Whose story is it anyway?: Reflections on authorship and ownership in devised theatre-making and ethnodrama with young people. *ArtsPraxis, 7* (1), 14-24.

## REFERENCES

Baxter, H. (2019, January 30). *The myths of messiness – A reflection on ethnography based drama practice*. Qualitative Research Symposium, Myths, Methods and Messiness: Insights for Qualitative Research Analysis, University of Bath.

Belliveau, G. (2015). Performing identity through research-based theatre: Brothers. *Journal of Educational Enquiry*, *14* (1), 5-16.

Coyne, I. and Carter, B. (Eds.). (2018). *Being participatory: Researching with children and young people*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.

Fielding, M. (2010). The radical potential of student voice: Creating spaces for restless encounters. *International Journal of Emotional Education*, *2* (1), 61-73.

Hart, R. A. (1992). Children's Participation: From tokenism to citizenship. *Innocenti Essays, 4*, International Child Development Centre, Florence.

Hughes, J., Kidd, J. and McNamara, C. (2011). The usefulness of mess:

Artistry, improvisation and decomposition in the practice of research in applied theatre. In Kershaw, B. and Nicholson, H. (Eds.). *Research methods in theatre and performance*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 186-209.

Kallio, K. P. (2008). The body as a battlefield: Approaching children's politics', *Geografiska Annaler/Human Geography, 90* (3), 285-297.

Mackey, S. (2016). Applied theatre and practice as research: Polyphonic conversations. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance, 21* (4), 478-491.

Mannay, D. (2016) *Visual, narrative and creative research methods: Application, reflection and ethics.* Oxon: Routledge

Mienczakowski, J. (1995). The theater of Ethnography: The reconstruction of ethnography into theater with emancipatory potential. *Qualitative Inquiry, 1* (3), 360-375.

Mirra, N., Garcia. A and Morrell, E. (2015). *Doing youth participatory research: Transforming inquiry with researchers, educators, and students.* London: Routledge.

O'Toole, J. (2014). Introduction. In O'Toole, J. et al. (Ed.). *Young audiences, theatre and the cultural conversation.* Dordrecht; Heidelberg; New York; London: Springer, 1-13.

Reason, M. (2004). [Theatre audiences and perceptions of 'liveness' in performance](). *Participants: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies, 1* (2).

Reason, M. (2010). Asking the audience: Audience research and the experience of theatre. *About Performance*, (10), 15-34.

Saldaña, J. (1998). Ethical issues in an ethnographic performance text: The 'dramatic impact' of 'juicy stuff'. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance, 3* (2), 181-196.

Saldaña, J. (Ed.). (2005). *Ethnodrama: An anthology of reality theatre*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Saldaña, J. (2008). [Ethnodrama and ethnotheatre](). In Knowles, J. and Cole, A. (Eds.). *Handbook of the arts in qualitative research: Perspectives, methodologies, examples, and issues*. [Internet]. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc, 195.

Saldaña, J. (2010). Reflections on an ethnotheatre aesthetic. *ArtsPraxis, 2* (1), 1-14.

Taylor, J., Namey, E., Carrington Johnson, A. and Guest, G. (2017).

Beyond the page: A process review of using ethnodrama to disseminate research findings. *Journal of Health Communication, 22* (6), 532-544.

Tilleczek, K. (2011). *Approaching youth studies: Being, becoming, and belonging*. Canada: Oxford University Press.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). (1989). UNICEF.

Waterloo Community Theatre. (2020, February 15).

Water, T. (2018). Ethical issues in participatory research with children and young people. In Coyne, I. and Carter, B. (Eds.). *Being participatory: Researching with children and young people*. Springer International Publishing, 37-56.

Wong, J. (2019). Importance of the outsider. *ArtsPraxis, 6* (1), 26-38.

Young, James O. (2008). *Cultural appropriation of the arts*. Oxford, Blackwell Publishing.

**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

Anna Glarin is the Founder and Co-Artistic Director of London-based award-winning young people's theatre company Waterloo Community Theatre. She has a background in formal and non-formal education, including eight years of teaching in London schools and several years of managing arts events and creative programmes for all ages for social enterprise Coin Street Community Builders on London's South Bank. She is a PhD student at York St John University and her practice-based research explores the practice and potential of making theatre *with* young people. Anna is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA).