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## APPLIED THEATRE RESEARCH, GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY AND IDEA

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### Article No.6

#### Afterthought: Evaluating Applied Theatre

*Philip Taylor*

##### Abstract:

A number of problematic issues were raised for the Centre for Applied Theatre Research when it was commissioned to design applied theatre on pressing social topics in deprived housing estates. In this afterthought, the outgoing editor of *Applied Theatre Researcher*, Philip Taylor, provides an example of an applied theatre evaluation and he considers some issues which evaluators of applied theatre might usefully consider.

##### Biography

*Philip Taylor is the retiring director of the Centre for Applied Theatre Research, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia. He is well published in applied theatre with his books including Researching Drama and Arts Education, Redcoats and Patriots, The Drama Classroom. He is currently finishing a new manuscript, Applied Theatre.*

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##### Article

With the ever-increasing number of applied theatre projects that are being commissioned a recurring concern about assessment and evaluation comes into play. At the Centre for Applied Theatre Research we are noticing that ongoing funding often depends upon the quality of an evaluation report. Funding agents, such as housing and health bodies, require such reports to present to their own managers to ensure that the effective intent and purposes of applied theatre can be relayed to those who outlay significant annual funds from ever shrinking budgets. While these evaluation reports can be used for advocacy purposes, and for insurance to maintain a fluid commitment to applied theatre, they can be useful safety checks for both the funding agencies and the commissioned artists to ensure that the needs of all the key stakeholders are being met.

Not long ago, the Centre for Applied Theatre Research was involved in a fairly sensitive exercise to problem solve pressing social concerns in deprived housing estates. The Centre was commissioned by a government housing body to generate applied theatre in communities to examine such issues as domestic violence, racial discrimination, teenage crime and ways of combating apathy among residents. During the

course of this work, it became clear that the funding agent was receiving increasing heat from colleagues and workers in other government departments. Because the Centre's work was interrogating issues of a broad nature, which encompassed a range of government departments beyond housing (ie, education and health), it was caught in a difficult situation where conflicting interests were being aired. The challenges posed by this commissioning could potentially undermine the integrity of the work.

Readers of *Applied Theatre Researcher* might be interested in an abridged version of the evaluation report which emerged from this project and note the issues it raises for the artists and the beneficiaries of applied theatre. All references to organisations, people and sites have been disguised, except those of the commissioned agency.

## AN APPLIED THEATRE EVALUATION

### Background

In 2000, the Bandour Department of Housing (known hereafter as DoH) contacted the Centre for Applied Theatre Research, Griffith University (Brisbane) with a request to devise applied theatre within selected Bandour sites for the purposes of supporting the aims of community renewal. The Department was interested particularly in the work of the South American theatre director, Augusto Boal,[1] and asked whether the devised programs could include techniques which gained participation from the audience to problem solve issues faced by the community. The funding agent was keen that the work place the responsibility on the audience (hereafter referred to as participants) to problem solve the situations being presented by the actors.

Further, the funding agent requested that applied theatre be developed within four sites, Tempa, Mandale, Calan and Sweeper, partly because of the cited reasons below:

Tempa:

*Residents do not seem to want to get involved in change.*

Mandale:

*Helping kids express their "realities"*

Calan:

*Exploring conflict resolution issues with students from housing estate*

Sweeper:

*Domestic violence needs to be addressed.*

The Department of Housing emphasised that its recent initiatives in community affairs, known as the Community Renewal Strategy (CRS), must be principles informing the applied theatre projects:

- raising the level of consciousness of community members so that they can begin to discuss freely and openly issues they are experiencing assisting individuals and communities help themselves reach their personal and collective goals

The funding agent referred to the high levels of apathy within the communities. The reluctance of community members to become actively involved in their own affairs was highlighted in an issue of the department's publication *Community Renewal*

*Strategy Newsletter:*

What makes life dreary is want of motive.

Apathy is the state of those people who don't want to get involved in what you are offering. Are they apathetic- or perhaps just not interested in the same issues you are? People have a right to decide their own interests and purpose, and their own level of participation. There is a fine line between creating awareness and telling people what they should have or do. What appears to be apathy may also be anxiety about becoming involved in something new and uncertain.[2]

The Department was concerned that the applied theatre work facilitates group thinking and place participants in situations where they could resolve the dilemmas. The Department identified gatekeepers in the four sites. The Centre for Applied Theatre Research suggested that the gatekeepers would be imperative to providing entree by the actors to the community. The gatekeepers would be crucial partners in

the evolution of the applied theatre work. A preliminary site visit would occur in each of the four "estates". This visit was proposed by CATR as the Centre was concerned that the issues to be focussed upon must be driven by the communities and following consultation with them.

The funding agent, at a briefing with actors and director, emphasised the following issues:

- Community Renewal is about participation and change, enabling people to generate their own change helping people to see their own realities
- Community Renewal is characterised by a "bottom up" process where the department works as a partner with their clients. Active participation should be encouraged where "service enabling" and inclusiveness dominate department approaches.

Notions of participation, inclusivity and the enabling of people to take control over their own lives are central principles of the applied theatre worker. The funding agent emphasised that he did not "want complaints" as a result of this work. Applied theatre was a new strategy for the department and it therefore could meet with considerable resistance.

### **Timelines**

October 2000 Preliminary discussions between CATR and DoH Initial conversations with gatekeepers in the four sites

Agreement between Department of Housing and CATR

November 2000 Preliminary discussions with actors at CATR

12 Feb 2001 Briefing by DoH with CATR actors and director

13-16 Feb 2001 Site visits by actors

Feb- March Projects designed

March 2001 Projects trialed in different sites and redesigned based on feedback

30 March 2001 Final briefing by CATR Director with DoH about the content and implementation of 4 projects

2-11 April Site presentations

April - May 2001 Project Evaluations

30 May 2001 Public presentation by CATR on the project

### **Applied Theatre**

Applied theatre is becoming a more frequent description of theatre work conducted outside of conventional mainstream theatre houses for the purpose of transforming or changing human behaviour. Applied theatre is characterised by its desire to influence human activity, to raise issues, have audience members problem solve those issues. There is a long established history of applied theatre, too detailed to canvass here, nonetheless throughout time there have been many individuals interested in the power of theatre to affect human behaviour. From the Aboriginal dreamtime, to the medieval mystery plays, to the political theatre of today, theatre has often be used as an instrument to teach and to raise issues of cultural interest.[3]

The Centre for Applied Theatre Research was established to design, implement and evaluate projects which aim to facilitate change in a variety of educational, vocational and community contexts. It has been involved in conflict resolution projects in schools, has been commissioned to design programs on teenage suicide, and completed many research projects which investigate the power of theatre as a vehicle for change in people's lives.

Staff at CATR are recognised internationally for their work in applied theatre. Common to most of the programs CATR designs are opportunities for audience participation. This participation in this project was referred to as the process drama component. In process drama, participants assume roles in the action and aim to resolve dilemmas from within the action.

## The Projects

The data which informs this section has been compiled from the actor logbooks which include their observations of the program and evaluations from community members of the projects' value. Other data includes the director's observations from the field presentations, interviews conducted, video and photographic material collected, and evaluative data forwarded to CATR by the DoH. DoH completed its own evaluation of the project.

Following site visits, the Centre for Applied Theatre Research at Griffith University designed and evaluated these four projects:

### 1. Mandale: Face to face: The wrong side of the tracks

The site visit demonstrated that the location of this project was not a housing "estate", as previously thought, but a suburb of Mandale. The presentation would occur in a community centre, a centre that provides services and counselling for Mandale's residents. However, the centre is also a drop-in location for local youth. The site visit suggested that violence, drugs, poverty, racism and anger are major problems

Scenario:

The applied theatre program focuses on identity, or most importantly, the lack of identity. Sarah is 22 years old and has grown up on "the wrong side of the tracks." The audience is presented with a multi-media presentation which depicts Sarah being followed by a "villain" (in classic melodramatic tradition). Sarah is caught and tied to the railway tracks. While attempting to escape, a myriad of images are projected in front of her: hurt, rape, too many drugs, broken glass, physical abuse, no voice. Sarah is eventually rescued by a good samaritan.

Audience participation/process drama:

The audience will be principally youth attending the community centre. They will be enrolled as expert dream therapists who must decode what the dream (the multi-media presentation in the above scenario) means. The therapists will be introduced to Sarah who has not spoken for some time. Their task is to unlock what her dream represents. The participants then create scenes from Sarah's life which suggest why she might be having the dream. One of these scenes is then workshopped for the participants where they problem-solve alternatives Sarah might have to the oppression she is experiencing in the scene.

Evaluation of "Face to Face":

The program was presented on a Saturday morning at the community centre. About fifteen young people of varying ages (3 years-20 years) participated in the program. There was some adult participation from the new DoH Renewal Strategy Manager for Mandale and her partner.

Strengths:

- The multi-media presentation was artfully executed and sustained the group's interest throughout
- Community spirit was strong and it is clear from the photographic and video material that the group's commitment to the work was high
- The participatory activities enabled the group to problem solve the issues faced by the protagonist Sarah. The forum theatre work (dealing with alcoholism and sexuality) was especially gripping. The participants were not bashful about suggesting and enacting positive constructive solutions to Sarah's problems.
- The participants were identifying with the character, Sarah, and talked about their own lives. As the gatekeeper noted, "The audience participation part of the project had a great learning effect on the participants and they enjoyed it greatly."<sup>[4]</sup>
- The artists arranged a BBQ for the participants which was well received. The artists had a particular close connection with the Centre and the youths participating.

- The participants were keen for the artists to return soon. The Mandale Renewal Strategy Manager asked the CATR director how she could weave more of this applied theatre into her program
- The gatekeeper commented, "I can't believe that Drama is so powerful." [5]

*Further development:*

Promotion of the work was poor. The program commenced 45 minutes later than scheduled as the gatekeeper had to go and collect the participants. As one actor commented,

"Despite the fact that we had a group between the ages of 3-45, a group that did not personally put their name down wanting to do it and having kids stoned and coming in and out of the workshop when they felt like it, I think the workshop went really well" [6]

The program was pitched at an adolescent/teenager audience. There were children as young as three initially present.

It was difficult finding a suitable time to communicate with the gatekeeper. One artist commented: ".. the difficulty of co-ordinating the organisational aspect of the project from a far was frustrating.. I would also have done more of the conceptual and developmental work with increased input from community members, again this was not logistically possible."

## **2. Tempa: "Jumping Fences"**

The site visit demonstrated that youth feel alienated from their seniors, vandalism provides something for kids to do, absconding from police by jumping fences is a popular activity, racism seems prevalent. The divide between the adults and kids appeared a prevalent theme. As one actor observed, ".. there is historical and inherent racism in this town... White kids don't understand Koori kids, government departments don't understand Tenants Associations, everybody seems to be either working independently with an acknowledging nod to the others, or else there is a great sense of apathy." [7]

**Scenario:**

The program focuses on a 17 year old girl, Rachel, caught vandalising public property, and arrested by the police. While at the police station Rachel dreams of a better life. She has lived on the estate all her life. Her dad left when she was 12 and she hasn't spoken to him or seen him in five years. She wants to go and live with her boyfriend Jack but he seems uncommitted to her and is more concerned with his own interests. While dreaming of a better life with Jack at the police station, Rachel sees an opportunity to escape from the station. She does so. This concludes the performance presentation.

**Audience participation/process drama:**

The program presents scenes from Rachel's life. The audience are then asked to problem solve what alternatives Rachel has? Where might she go? The audience becomes Rachel's conscience and voice some of the thoughts that go through her mind. They have an opportunity to hotseat Rachel where they experience directly her anger towards her elders, her dislike of school, her hatred of herself. The audience represent the fence that Rachel has constructed for herself. What are the barriers she faces? How will she overcome these barriers? How will she break down the fence?

*Evaluation of "Jumping fences"*

The program was presented in four Tempa sites:

- Outside the Community Cottage
- Next to a tavern
- A local High School
- A Shopping Centre

Numbers of audience were strong in each site although at the shopping centre there was initially more adult whites from outside the estate present. Later, it was discovered that this was because the gatekeeper had encouraged her colleagues to attend this final performance because the previous presentations had been so well received. She thought applied theatre could be something the Housing Department might consider

further.

### *Strengths*

- Good participation from audience and discussion following presentations was strong in most sites
- Scenario relevant to audience
- Process drama challenged the participants to problem solve Rachel's issues and suggest alternatives she might have
- Cottage staff at the park said the program provided them with an insight into the problems and fears faced by teenagers in the community. "One co-ordinator said it re-enforced the options for someone in Rachel's situation and showed she is not alone in her thoughts." [8]

### *Further development*

The scenario might have been longer to allow for more data to be presented to the audience before they participate in problem-solving Rachel's aggression. This issue was especially prominent during the final presentation at the shopping centre and was an issue raised by one of the actors.

Gatekeeper felt that the timelines were rushed and that the community was not sufficiently consulted in the development of the project. This view, communicated via a separate evaluation direct to Department of Housing, seemed to contradict statements the gatekeeper made to artists about the power of the program to challenge participants' perspectives and to present real life issues for them to problem-solve. There was difficulty communicating with this gatekeeper as she was frequently away. It seemed she had difficulty understanding the relevance of applied theatre to community renewal during the preparation phase.

The gatekeeper was concerned that Rachel was vandalising public property with a spray can yet no statement was made to the audience about the illegal defacement of this property. This concern was hard for the artists to reconcile given the scenario had Rachel arrested by police because of this defacement.

More effort could have gone into publicising the event and ensuring a maximum audience presence at the performances

### **3. Sweeper: Changing Directions**

The site visit demonstrated that within certain sections of Sweeper there are high levels of vandalism, nuisance and annoyance issues. There is a high unemployment rate in Sweeper, a large concentration of public housing on the estates. Domestic violence seems a huge problem with key informants highlighting it as "most significant within this community." The funding agent was keen that the program designed focussed on domestic violence and that it be presented as a street theatre for an adult audience.

Scenario:

The audience meet Brenda, the town gossip. She speaks of her life in Sweeper on one of the houses in the estate. She comments on the different racial groups, the street kids, the police presence or lack of presence. She seems a bit of a caricature but nonetheless speaks truth through her naivety. We meet Brenda's neighbours, The tempo changes as we witness an aggressive "man" who controls his "woman." In a stylised presentation the audience become progressively more alarmed as they witness a domestic violence incident.

Audience participation/process drama:

The audience first hotseat Brenda and are provided with opportunities to question her about her life in Sweeper. The facilitator asks whether they, the audience, know of people like Brenda? How would they describe her life? Does she speak of truth within the Sweeper region? Following the man/woman scenario, the audience are asked whether this woman has any other options than to stay with the man. The options are canvassed and one of them selected. For instance, if the audience believe the woman could go speak with a counsellor, then they become the counsellor and offer advice to the woman. The appropriateness of that advice is then interrogated. The process drama concludes with a discussion on whether people like the woman and man exist in Sweeper.

*Evaluation of "Changing Directions":*

The program was meant to be presented as a street theatre in front of a community centre in Sweeper.[9] Community members were initially going to be involved in the performance as actors. When the gatekeeper withdrew from the project it was unclear how an audience would be organised. The funding agent was keen to preserve this project and made contact with other potential gatekeepers. These other gatekeepers, not knowing anything about applied theatre or the history of the project, seemed reticent to become involved, and then, apparently, actively undermined the work. Given the power of the presentation and the work that had been completed in its design, CATR made direct contact with a private college in Sweeper which agreed, at short notice, to view the work.

*Strengths:*

- The simplicity of the theatre work gave the presentation a poetic power
- The college audience sustained their attention throughout the 90 minute performance and actively suggested possibilities for the "woman" in the performance
- The English teacher, college principal, and the school counsellor each commented on the power of the presentation. The English teacher wrote a thank you card to CATR.
- The funding agent asked whether the actors could come back to Sweeper where he would set up further sites for the work to be presented.
- A leader from the Sweeper Child and Family Health unit, who witnessed the performance, has asked whether CATR would design further work for the Unit.

*Further Development:*

The work should have been experienced by an adult group where issues of domestic violence are experienced. This group was whom the work was designed for in the first place. CATR was caught in the middle of a dispute between the Department of Housing and other groups with a vested interest group such as the youth projects association. One group asked whether it was appropriate for a project to be focussed on domestic violence. It was suggested, for instance, that the purchase of "a tap, tables and chairs, BBQ, play equipment and electricity" for a local park could be a better expenditure for the Department than a theatre program based on domestic violence.[10]

There was no effective gatekeeper to broker entree into this community.

**4. Calan: Growing Up in Calan**

The site visit suggested that the youth of Calan feel isolated and there is very little for them to do in the community. "Beef Capital of Australia" it seemed was a major cause for celebration in Calan. Students at Calan High School expressed their concern that there were few resources in the township for themselves and that they had to travel to a nearby township to have a good time. As the program was to include students from the school it was important that their voices should inform the direction of the theatre work.

*Scenario:*

Actors from CATR would work with Calan HS students on day one with the intention of preparing a forum theatre work on day two for an adult audience. The intention being that the forum theatre would present a dilemma or problem experienced by Calan youth which the adult audience would workshop. The students in day one expressed the view that their voices had not been heard by their seniors. They devised a series of scenes where a teenage girl from Calan was experiencing a variety of oppressions: from her friends, her boyfriend, the police, her mother. The audience decide on one oppression which seems dominant and process options the girl has.

*Audience participation/process drama:*

In one scene, the girl's boyfriend decides to move to the nearby town to find work. The girl is dissatisfied with his decision as she is pregnant and needs her boyfriend close by. The audience hotseat the boyfriend and interrogate him on his motives. In another scene, the girl's mother expresses her dismay about the pregnancy and implies she will have little to do with her daughter. The audience hotseat the mother and

daughter and attempts to find a way of reconciling the two of them. In another forum theatre, the audience are enrolled as members of the community who frustrate the youth of Calan, eg, police, community elders, mayor, teachers. A town hall meeting is conducted where the youth of Calan face their frustrations.

### *Evaluating "Growing Up in Calan"*

The program was conducted on a community centre in a Calan housing estate, within walking distance to the Calan High School. There were eight students, including residents of the housing estate, who worked with the CATR actors on day one. The Department of Housing was concerned that there were estate residents represented within the student group. On Day Two there were to be two presentations, at 9.00am and 11.30am. The intention was that there would be residents from the estate participating in the forum theatre at the community centre. At the 9.00am session, one class of year eight students was present; at the 11.30 session, year 11 students participated with three elderly estate residents and two Department representatives.

### *Strengths*

- The student group was a cohesive mix who enjoyed working with the actors on both days. They were able to present their issues in a positive way and felt that they were in control of the material. The students shared their email addresses with the actors and have kept in contact with them.
- The gatekeeper commented after the day two presentations on the importance of the work and how the students gained from the opportunity of working with the CATR
- The student actors presented their issues to the audience on Day Two and were especially vocal during the "town hall" drama in the second session.

### *Further development*

The school actors were disappointed when the estate residents left during the second session given that the intention of the forum theatre work was to explore what more the elders could do for the youth of Calan

There could have been more audience present for the day two presentations. There were no estate residents present at the 9.00 am session, and only three for the 11.30 session. Publicity seems to have been a problem although it was explained to us that on the day of the performance a funeral for a young child was being held. Tragically, the child drowned in a creek on the estate.

The Department of Housing wondered whether there could be more input from CATR actors and less dependence on student performances. The artists felt that this issue was difficult to reconcile given that the brief for the Calan projects was to prepare a presentation in partnership with the high school students.

### **In Closing**

In its own evaluation the Dept of Housing expressed further interest in the power of applied theatre "as part of the 'tool kit' for community capacity building." [11] The Department did yield value for money in that none of the actors were paid a fee for their services. The actors were teaching artists studying applied theatre at Griffith University. All funds were dedicated to travel, living and theatre property costs with a fee being charged by the CATR for administration and leadership.

Distance between the CATR and the four sites was a problematic with the actors hoping that they could have had more time in the sites to prepare and implement their projects in genuine collaborative partnership with the stakeholders. Time constraints, the actor's own studies, and the costs associated with travel/living meant that longer periods of residence were not possible. This was especially the case with two of the sites which were nearly nine and eight hours, respectively, in distance from Centre for Applied Theatre Research, Brisbane. Email/phone messages from the actors to the gatekeepers went frequently unanswered, or at least were responded to late for a variety of reasons.

Nonetheless, it was clear that the projects, four quite different projects, were informed by the initial site visits and these visits became crucial events in the design of the applied theatre. CATR endeavoured to ensure that the applied theatre projects would be designed based on community needs. CATR's "bottom up" approach paid dividends especially during the site visit which was an important fact finding or reconnaissance mission. One gatekeeper noted, "Researching the area as the first part of the project

certainly paid off. The artists had an excellent grasp of the issues facing the kids in (Tempa) and this was reflected very dramatically in the performance." [12] The downfall here though was the costs associated with the site visit which prevented a longer residence during performance

CATR believes this evaluation demonstrates that its work for the Department of Housing reveals a further need for applied theatre to be considered as a critical medium in community renewal.

Note:

The Centre for Applied Theatre Research was established as a formal research centre at Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia, in 1998. Since that time it has been commissioned to implement and evaluate a range of applied theatre projects, in housing estates, educational settings, community centres, nursing and gambling conferences.

[1] Boal is renowned for developing a technique known as forum theatre, or the people's theatre. In this technique, audience members participate in problem solving an issue presented to them by actors. The issue is familiar to the audience and one in which they have an interest in resolving in a positive, constructive manner. For further reading, consult Boal, A (1995) *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy* London: Routledge.

[2] Community Renewal Strategy Newsletter. "Bandour" Department of Housing, Volume 1, Issue `1

[3] See Taylor, P. (2000) *The Drama Classroom: Action, Reflection, Transformation* London, RoutledgeFalmer, for a more comprehensive analysis of the power of applied theatre over time.

[4] Youth Support Worker, ("Mandale"). "Applied Theatre Project". Notes to Department of Housing provided to CATR.

[5] Carolyn Desmarchelier's logbook. Carolyn was an artist working on this project.

[6] Ian Mitchell's logbook. Fran was an artist on the project.

[7] Ross Lowe's logbook, an actor in the Tempa project. Ross interviewed a member of the Koori Youth Network. She informed Ross that the majority of the Koori population live in poverty, average literacy skills are very low, unemployment is near 95%. The Koori kids are considered "wild and uncontrollable", a view, she implied, which does little to combat the racism in Tempa.

[8] Belinda Berrington's logbook, actor in this project.

[9] Beth King's logbook. Beth was an artist working within the Sweeper estate.

[10] Letter to Youth Affairs Network Dept of Housing, 26 March, 2001 (author's identity hidden).

[11] Unpublished Briefing Note by DoH, 9 May 2001.

[12] Coordinator Housing Strategy, Department of Housing. "Evaluation of Griffith Project-Temper." 25 May 2001

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