

**Article 2**

**APPLIED THEATRE AND THE POWER PLAY – AN INTERNATIONAL  
VIEWPOINT**

**By Bjørn Rasmussen (Norway)**

**Abstract**

While celebrating a new Centre of "Applied theatre" education and research, this viewpoint takes on some poststructuralist glasses and discusses the issue of strategical choices and power plays connected to the development of drama or theatre research. In the Western history of arts and cultural development, the institutionalisation of authoritative subjects has created difficulties for cultural phenomena "in between", for instance the "applied" arts-educational-therapeutic practices of drama and theatre. One may question if the cultural criteria or "aesthetics" of this applied field are visible or valued at all. We should ask ourselves how language and the connotations as "applied" may help us to centre the cultural practices we share and their academic scrutinies. The strategy of a new centre must be to centre the marginal. This is not done by identifying a field applied "from the Theatre", however, but by destabilising some old power strategies in the arts and research environment. The article points to certain hierarchical beliefs in Western cultures, and suggests that we should insist on working "horizontally" and not "vertically", also when arts, research and arts-like phenomena are considered "

**Biography**

Professor Bjørn Rasmussen works at Department of Arts and Media Studies, The Norwegian University of Science and Technology. He teaches drama education and has been engaged in the international development of drama research for many years. He has written books and articles, and works currently with drama theory based on post-structuralist ideas of cultural production. Bjørn Rasmussen was a Visiting Fellow at Griffith University in Brisbane in 1999-2000.

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## **APPLIED THEATRE AND THE POWER PLAY – AN INTERNATIONAL VIEWPOINT**

Let me congratulate Griffith University and its excellent theatre staff for launching a Centre for Applied Theatre Education and Research. Although my experience is placed in the northern hemisphere, the Centre's visions and tasks seem familiar to me. After trying to achieve a similar idea of the field in Scandinavia, it gives great inspiration to find those ideas materialized on the other side of the globe. The varied and world-spread practices of cultural and educational drama and theatre deserve to centre themselves and settle as an area of worthwhile academic investigation and training. The new Centre in Brisbane is a significant international effort, and will be recognized by many educators, artists and researchers around the world.

### **Shaping identity from context**

A new academic Centre does not invent new practices, but it does tell the world that we have reached a time for a united approach towards an increasing range of cultural dramatic practices with certain family resemblances. From my experience with influential and protective European Institutions as Art, Education and Science, I will argue that those families and their members still tend to favour their distinctive character. Any phenomena in play, drama or theatre which is seen as seemingly blurred, betwixt and between or cross-over, are regarded with suspicion. The best continental effort seems to pursue a dialogue between fixed counterparts as Education, Art and Science. However, the interest in dialogue, in investigating resemblance, community and differences, the wish to Centre the dramatic/theatrical phenomena as such, all these require an identity or a classification on a higher logical level.

The identified field seems to consist of a large number of different dramatic-aesthetic practices, some utmost vital with a significant cultural status, others with less, even suppressed status. Apart from the common aesthetic theatricality, as found in all autonomous and significant theatre art, the common denominator for applied theatre seems to be a heavy concern with specific cultural contexts. As applied forms, they tend to exist at the fringe of or totally outside the institution of acknowledged art. If we can speak of a not-applied theatre, bearing in mind that we yet invent a new binary set, the not-applied theatre must be the autonomous high-status art form. Only this may explain the considerable nonessential, marginal experience felt in the field of applied theatre in Western societies - an experience also turned around and explained as a position of freedom and power.

Any theatre artist with aesthetic intentions and a wish to communicate with her audience might get annoyed or threatened by this new binary construction. Indeed, the aesthetic autonomy, the intentions, the interaction, even the spontaneity, are present in any good drama or theatre, applied or not. The important differences, I believe, are related to what extent the practice relates to the autonomy of the societal Art Institution, and to what extent the cultural contexts change the aesthetic approaches. On the one end of the continuum you will have the dramatic applications, context-related to such an extent that they have lost their aesthetic power and autonomy. On the other end you will find the high-status theatre art where autonomy is mistaken to mean social detachment, contextual insensibility, elitism, protection of canon and profession, a play of power.

The wish to facilitate drama and theatre as a powerful medium, affecting changes for the attendants, is a family resemblance found by those exercising the practice of applied theatre. Moreover, a typical wish for positive changes recalls a vital, still modern and educational project. No-one wishes to question the power of theatre, but we need to question if the practice of theatre is by nature only 'good'. If we believe in human and cultural changes as a sound dynamic principle, we should also think that the play medium is beyond good or bad. The outcomes are either good or bad according to values external to the aesthetic process. Even a profound and affective learning experience can be experienced as 'bad' or troublesome to children not familiar with learning paradigms other than cognitive absorption and consumption of factual information.

However, these 'changes' could not occur without a deliberate consideration and application to the specific context. This consideration differs from the artist's intention, which inevitably is a part of every aesthetic process. It is the many and interactive intentions and conditions taken all into consideration. Unlike some self-occupied theatre, what the applied practices have in common, is the attention of specific cultural contexts and contextual criteria. This 'empathic' attention guides the application of different and context-specific competencies and processes. Idealistically, the contexts shape the practice into powerful aesthetic procedures. Of course we know, for instance from the history of the role-playing method, that a contextual adaptation process will eventually lead to a loss

of the aesthetic craft and power. An academic centring of the dramatic practice, and not its context (for instance 'in education'), is an important way also to Centre the aesthetic as the core dimension.

If we could see applied drama and theatre as applications to cultural contexts, more than inferior applications from theatre, we should see not one or three Methods, but hundreds of distinctive approaches emerging from a number of sets of complex contexts including leader and participator life and professional experience, age, time, cultural and political settings, events, text, program, curriculum and so forth. When we see traditions arise as 'process drama' or 'TIE', it is because the practice has been successfully tried out and applied to stable and well-known contexts such as the Western classroom and the established link between theatre groups and schools. As I believe some methods are applied from theatre art, a number of methodical approaches in the field of applied theatre are also applied from a play culture. Furthermore, still arguing against the barring notion of 'applied from theatre', I believe that dramaturgy is a dynamic concept in the applied field, always structured and restructured following different and new contexts. This is quite unlike the well-known retroactive effort of devising and analysing all theatre practices according to one or four models of acknowledged theatre dramaturgy.

I have already mentioned the dimension of spontaneity as a vital part of living theatre. In the field of applied theatre, I think spontaneity in the form of improvisation is brought a step further and must be included in the list of family resemblance. I cannot think of any applied and context-interactive drama or theatre approaches not relying on spontaneous processes to an important extent.

Evidently, if your work is intentionally context-related and inter-active, a totally fixed, pre-planned production would wreck such intentions and never display other perspectives other than those planned before the actual interaction here and now. Spontaneity works contradictory to any theatre form shaped either by its context or by art canons. The elusiveness of the practice of applied theatre is one reason, I believe, why the academic societies find it hard to identify and acknowledge the field as such. Furthermore, a research Centre investigating a dynamic culture such as applied theatre should be aware when the research itself, laying down its determined labels, structures and concepts, actually works contradictory to the spontaneous and processing nature of the field itself and thereby impedes the progress of the cultural spontaneous practice.

The power play: Identity, property, institution, hierarchies, class, power, protection. These are interconnected conceptions strongly present in drama and theatre as part of Western culture.

As a drama teacher and scholar, struggling for new educational and academic paradigms, balancing innovation and tradition, trying to frame a concept of cultural dramatics, I have found myself partaking in an exhausting power play. The effort to gain academic and professional interest and status for the applied field has been necessary and draining, since the cultural prejudices, pre-conceptions and institutional thinking are still strong in my region of the world. The lack of a cultural notion of an applied aesthetic field causes almost daily unfortunate tensions and exercises. As for instance, when school authorities arrange further education courses for teachers in the new arts curriculum (after 1994), they are likely to hire renowned actors and dramatists, regrettably often with a slack educational attitude, no competence in dealing with teenagers and with principal strong effort to pass on the inapplicable canons and to protect the image of a detached high-status artist. This attitude seems to be a gratifying ideal for young students already bored to death in the educational context. Or, when some drama teachers would like to apply or 'borrow' new drama conventions from contemporary performance art, they also likely face artists which in return show expressive, almost aggressive opposition to any concept of education. Of course artists also apply work from play leaders, drama teachers and drama therapists, but this interaction seems harder to recognize.

I remember I used the notion of 'applied theatre science' in the mid-eighties, when I was trying to explain and apologize the perhaps unaccountable entry of drama education in an academic tradition of European Theatre Science. At that time, we just had a new department at the University called 'Anvendt Sprogvidenskab' (Applied Language Science), and I thought the parallel was appropriate. However, I never found the expression 'applied' drama or theatre quite sound, because I always found it somewhat downgrading, implying that the applied stuff is second best, not quite as genuine as the essence applied from. I thought the concept of 'applied' amplified a low status position in the power play already practised by Art and Science.

In June this year, the first Nordic conference surprisingly called 'Applied Drama' was held in Helsinki. 'Applied drama' is an odd concept, inasmuch as 'drama' in our region already is established as the applied term. Whereas theatre is never applied theatre, just theatre, of course. The conference was arranged by a Nordic Association for Theatre, an organization serving the interests of amateur and professional actors and directors. This network are not yet associated with the IDEA movement, nor

with the field of drama education in our region. However, the conference must be seen as a new invested interest in the life and market outside the theatre houses, and a sincere wish to adapt a better competence for working in vocational and community settings. Of course, a changing market and funding reasons is one crucial sub-text. Still, we face a substantial interest in approaching people where they live and work, an interest inherited from a strong group theatre movement in the Nordic countries.

I cannot avoid reading such conferences as well as the launching of a new Centre for Applied Theatre Research as strategies to gain attention, recognition, status and power. If my reading is apt, I am still not quite happy with the notion of 'applied' drama or theatre. While the effort to centre these practices is important and plausible, the label seems, at least in my language, to have the smell of the underdog position. So, if we are the supporters of applied theatre research, what do we need to be aware of?

First of all, if we have a free position in the margins, I believe we are able to play with the cultural hierarchies and turn them upside down. It is possible to read the Western European cultural history as a power play in general, power as installed in an inherited belief system from the Greek class culture, infecting all dimensions of society; politics, education and arts. As short viewpoint, this is not the place to explore how deconstructionists as Derrida and Girard argue how Plato and Aristotle use mimesis and dramaturgy as tools for social power and hierarchies. My approach here will be to recall a few hierarchical experiences we all may have had, and to see what happens if we toss them around. And, in order to have a dramatic tension, I have to be excused for exaggerating the perspectives

1. In the experienced cultural hierarchy, we know that drama education, as applied theatre, is applied from theatre art. It means we worship the actors and directors and are grateful that outsiders can borrow or apply their canons and craft. It is useful to have some tricks in the bag in education, therapy or other non-artistic work. You never know, drama teaching can be also useful to the artist, something the artist may fall back on in her retiring days.

2. Theatre as proper art is more genuine, more true than the applied educational drama. Therefore funding authorities tend to spend their money on arts projects, not on the lower applications of artistic activity. The case of TIE is outstanding as an example in Norway.

3. However, art is also to be controlled in the hierarchy. Art is a lower application of nature, which means that empirical nature, as we know from Aristotle and the Western societies after Aristotle, is above art in terms of truth and significance. We recall here Plato's notion of bad mimesis, leaving actors with low cultural status for centuries. Today, as academics, we still experience the difference in power and funding between the humanities and the natural sciences. In my university of 'Science and Technology', the arts are allowed, according to a specific comprehension of the art-technology relation. It is a comprehension of art merely as enjoyable works of art, a cultural capital serving a bourgeois cult, as flower-trimmings on the technological dinner-table. The presence of theatre is here more important than research in theatre.

4. Again, nature is not at the top of the hierarchy, someone has to be responsible for nature, keeping the world in order. Therefore God and the religion is the ultimate ruler, predicting the ideas as beyond the unreliable nature. If anything goes wrong, here is where we always find the real truth.

Now, if we reverse the positions, religion (4) could be placed lowest in this hierarchy, as one example of important human mental creations applied from the specific nature of human beings, for the benefit of making sense of life. If we follow Nietzsche's philosophy, this would not be a shocking perspective. And furthermore, humans as natural beings (3), stand above religion. God does not create human beings; humans create a belief saying nature was created by God. To follow the hierarchy the other way round, above nature stands mimesis and art (2). Art is more essential, more truthful than nature, because the way we understand nature is applied from what art works tell us. Nature is nothing that has not been comprehended by our senses, imaginations and emotions, as in the arts. We find this perspective for certain in the tradition of idealistic aesthetics. Art is more essential as a refined aesthetic culture, a truer reflection of human nature than nature alone can provide. We may also recall Plato's notion of the 'good' mimesis, as the 'harmony' of dance and music.

We still have not placed the field of the applied theatre (1), as would be at the top position of this inverted model. Can we imagine the applied field with that kind of cultural recognition? Well, again following the deconstructive path, arts are applied from a spontaneous aesthetic culture. Beyond the refined culture stands a basic, spontaneous play culture, once understood as a highly significant, high-status and spiritual Dionysian practice of mimesis, now perhaps emerging as 'participatory theatre', 'forum play' or 'drama in education', after being devalued and made safe for centuries.

western cultural belief system

Of course we may not need any more to act according to rigid hierarchies of thought and belief. We may act and think horizontally, as I remember Jonathan Neeland's pointed out in his fine article 'Theatre without walls'. I am sure a Centre for Applied Theatre Research is a good place to think and act horizontally and thereby close the power play in the play culture. However, it is not easy to act horizontally in the field as long as vertical power plays are going on. We should not underestimate how we all in our acting and thinking are infected by power plays and hierarchies, and we just need to be aware of how we deal with this cultural dimension as we welcome the Centres of applied theatre research.

**[EDITOR: We are unable to reprint references from this article owing to platform transcription issues. We apologise for this.]**