# RESEARCH-INFORMED FICTIONAL HISTORIES: DRAMATIZING THE STORIES OF MARGINALIZED WOMEN

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ABSTRACT. This article documents the work of two Research-based Theatre practitioners. The two case studies featured were written in different cultures, for different purposes and audiences. However, both share some common elements. They feature marginalized and largely forgotten women. One tells of the plight of foreign domestic helpers in Singapore and East Asia. The second case documents the achievements of women painters whose contribution to the Australian en plein air movement has been undervalued. In both instances we included in our playwriting what we have come to refer to as *research-informed fiction*. The subject matter, the intended audience, and the real-life women on whom the plays were based necessitated including fictional elements into our respective plays.

HISTOIRES FICTIONNELLES APPUYÉES PAR LA RECHERCHE : DRAMATISER LES RÉCITS DES FEMMES MARGINALISÉES

RÉSUMÉ. Les deux études de cas ici présentées ont été écrites dans des contextes culturels différents, à des fins et pour des publics distincts. Ces études mettent en scène des femmes marginalisées et en grande partie oubliées. L'une raconte le sort des travailleuses domestiques étrangères à Singapour et en Asie de l'Est. La deuxième documente les réalisations de femmes peintres dont la contribution au mouvement australien de la peinture en plein air a été sous-évaluée. Dans les deux cas, nous avons intégré dans notre écriture dramatique ce que nous appelons désormais de la fiction appuyée par la recherche. Le sujet, le public visé, ainsi que les personnes réelles ayant inspiré les pièces ont nécessité l'intégration d'éléments fictifs dans nos créations respectives.

This article emanates from conversation we had as two experienced Research-based Theatre (RbT) practitioners who came together to discuss our work, in particular our shared interest in representing oppressed and disenfranchised women in our writing. Two case studies in which we were


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personally invested are presented in this article: Prue introduces a case study set in the present day and Richard presents an historical case study. What links these two studies is an investigation of the oppression of women in two different time periods. However, as Conquergood (2013) cautions, our aim was neither to feed off the oppression nor to sensationalize it but simply to highlight it. Richard worked with his senior high school drama students to highlight the inequality early female artists in colonial Australia experienced in the art world. Prue wanted to bring to light the oppression of foreign domestic workers with whom she had worked while living in Singapore and Hong Kong, and to find ways to foster empathy and to present their voices in a way that could be heard by those in power and those who had no insight into the lives of migrant workers. Additionally, the case studies in this article discuss our reasons for fictionalizing aspects of our RbT work.

As RbT practitioners we maintain that our outputs are no less effective, affecting, or rigorous because they contain fictional elements. As Leavy (2013) asserts, "the lines between fiction and nonfiction, and writers and researchers, have long been blurred" (p. 25). She goes on to say:

> Although writers creating fiction-based research use many of the same tools as literary writers, they have, at least in part, different goals. With this said, there is always a balance to be struck between artfulness and usefulness (between aesthetics/craft and substantive contribution). It is also worth considering how literary craft or artfulness and usefulness are related to each other, inform each other, and enable each other. (Leavy, 2013, p. 90)

Supporting Leavy's (2013) contention, Paget (1990) states that while her play is based on her scientific analysis of women living with breast cancer and thus faithful to the original report, it is not the report that is being privileged in the performance but the lived experience that is documented within it. Associatively, Wolcott (2002) asserts that when a writer is "too respectful" towards the original data, they can "trap" the character and result in dialogue which sounds verbose and artificial (p. 137). Taking this further, Conrad (2002) claims that her RbT texts "are not, nor could ever claim to be, precise replications of what took place"; they are "not transcriptions [nor] works of fiction, but something in between," recreating a "spirit of, if not always the precise details of what occurred" (p. 10). Goldstein (2001, with reference to Clifford, 1986), an ethnographer who uses theatre to report on her findings, argues that ethnographers write "true fictions" because ethnography is an "interpretative, subjective, value-laden project" (p. 294).

Over the course of our work as RbT practitioners, we have at various times referred to our work as ethnodrama, ethnographic performance, and performance ethnography. However, as the field has developed and the parameters have shifted, now we refer to our work as RbT. Whilst we acknowledge that there are differences between each of those terms, our use of them reflects the language used during the periods in which we were originally writing our scripts. In his text *Ethnodrama: An Anthology of Reality Theatre*, Saldaña (2005) asserts, perhaps provocatively, that "all playwrights are ethnodramatists" because they "employ traditional ethnographic methods to gather informative data for their plays" (p. 4) and thus the writing and staging of RbT performances is not the sole locus of the academy. Those in the profession of theatre can engage in research which forms the basis for their dramatic works. However, as Saldaña (2005) submits, playwrights who work in theatre settings are unlikely to refer to themselves as being "ethnodramatists" (or by inference RbT practitioners) but instead as writers of verbatim theatre or "reality theatre" (p. 5). Rogers et al. (2002) recount how a "dramatic presentation" entitled *Of Trailers and Trenches* by theatre director Paul Frellick, depicting the professional lives of beginning teachers, was based on their research data and an associated published research report. They foreground the dramatist's standpoint when asserting that research "can be an important resource for dramatists" (Rogers et al., 2002, p. 68). Analyzing his artistic and aesthetic choices when scripting the play, Frellick states that he drew on his "artist's instincts" as his "chief resource" whilst ensuring that the choices made by him, and his team of creatives, did not "misrepresent the data" (Rogers et al., 2002, p. 67).

The RbT works discussed below are what we refer to as *research-informed fiction*. We contend that the processes each of us undertook to create the works bore many of the characteristics associated with performances based on academic research projects even though the data were not collected through a conventional university-based inquiry. Notably, both are based on research into disempowered and unappreciated women in two different contexts.

## CASE STUDY 1: EXPLORING THE HISTORY OF MARGINALIZED WOMEN VISUAL ARTISTS

In their article "Delineating a Spectrum of Research-based Theatre," Beck et al. (2011) provide a model of what they refer to as a research continuum. My (Richard) work of research-informed fiction, *The Golden Summers* (Sallis, 2003, 2019, 2022),[1] sits at various points on this RbT continuum, such as: where there are "first-hand accounts"; at a point where there are

to be found first-hand texts on which to base a performance [such as] journals, letters, or autobiographies; further to the right of the continuum where "we might find biographies, newspaper articles, or other less intimate sources of second-hand data"; and at "the far right of the research continuum, [where] the research may only consist of historical 'facts,' allowing the 'story' aspect to be imagined by the playwright" (Beck et al., 2011, pp. 690–691).

*The Golden Summers* (Sallis, 2022) can be included in the cannon of RbT because: (a) a team of investigators was formed to source data for the work; (b) it draws on both primary and secondary sources of data from investigations that were undertaken; (c) I analyzed the data before fashioning it into the play script; (d) with a few exceptions, the characters were based on the lived experiences of real people; (e) the content of the play was recreated from primary and secondary accounts; (f) the play was performed to stakeholders and the general public; and (g) to evaluate the play's effectiveness, I surveyed audience members to gauge their response and further refinements to the script over time were informed by those responses.

As of this writing, the script has gone through four drafts, the latest being in 2022. The main impetus for the different versions has been to suit different purposes and audience types. The first iteration of the script came into being when I was commissioned by a local council in Melbourne, Australia, to write a play about a group of internationally renowned impressionist artists whose careers started in the area. The en plein air painters that the council singled out were Frederick McCubbin, Arthur Streeton, Tom Roberts, Charles Conder, and Louis Abrahams (all men); these painters are recognized as amongst the founders of the Heidelberg School of art dating back to the late 19th century. They began their careers painting on land that, since colonization, has been within the boundaries of the council. I was appointed by the council's arts officers given that I was known for writing and producing theatre for young people / audiences (TYP / TYA). The commission was to write a play about the artists as part of the council's Whispers From the Past festival. The secondary (all-boys) school at which I was teaching drama at the time resided within one of the wards of the council, and so it was determined that my Year 11 (aged 16–17) students would enact the play in our school theatre. The brief was to research the local history of the painters and write a play based on my investigations, which then would be performed by the drama students. Significantly, early in the research phase of the project, the co-researchers (my drama students) and I uncovered accounts of lesser-

known female painters who were contemporaries of the aforementioned artists, and we decided that their stories also needed to be told.

The council's arts officers Steve and Penny (pseudonyms) had access to an array of relevant historical documents — including minutes of council meetings, newspaper clippings, and correspondence pertaining to the Heidelberg School — which they shared with me.[2] Early in the process, my students helped me to sift through the provided resources to find, as I requested, "dramatically interesting incidents and events." Given that the work and private lives of the male painters were well documented, stories quickly began to emerge of their time painting in the bushland close to our school; one of my students was thrilled to discover that one of their painting sites became our school football oval. As tantalizing and educationally rewarding as these discoveries were, I was left feeling uninspired as an educator and as a playwright. I reasoned that stories surrounding these male painters were widespread and ours would just be yet another account. However, when one of my students found an article about the painters' female contemporaries in an early 20th century women's magazine, the project took a more dramatically and socially interesting turn.

The article published in 1938 by *The Australian Women's Weekly* identified three female en plein air artists — Clara Southern, Jane Sutherland, and Jane Price — who were painting in the same locations, and at the same time, as their well-documented male counterparts. Whilst recognizing that the women's contributions to the early days of the Heidelberg School had been largely forgotten, the article described them as "hobbyists." I remember having to explain to my students the distinction that was being made, and we agreed that this was an inaccurate and unfair label.

Inspired, my student-researchers and I turned to these female impressionist painters. However, our enthusiasm was dampened when I reported our intentions to the local council. Arts officer Steve told me that whilst he "appreciated our stance, [for the local council] the men are the drawcard, especially McCubbin … and after all most people have never heard of these [female] artists" (S. Dalton, personal communication, April 2, 2003). This I argued was the point — our play was an opportunity to let people know about their legacy. The position of the councillors was crystal clear, but I could tell the arts officers were potential allies — we eventually agreed that the work of the female painters could be included if we foregrounded that of their male contemporaries (I was aware at the time, as I am now, of this irony).

Uncovering more than cursory references to the female artists at first proved difficult, as this excerpt from an email I received from arts officer Penny illustrates:

> Most of the art books, some of which I have photocopied, only mention the women artists in passing ... when discussing the artists and their work. Sorry I couldn't be more helpful. However, I suggest you might wish to wade through newspapers on microfiche at the State Library.[3] (P. Vickers, personal communication, April 15, 2003)

### *A "fictionalized history"*

I recently found the program for the first performance of the play and discovered that I described it at the time as a "fictionalized history." Years later, I am still comfortable with this description. Whilst we had uncovered some written documentation from which I could quote verbatim when writing the play, I was mostly unable to do so because the featured artists have all long passed. At the time, in 2003, I wrote an instruction to myself:

> Write dialogue consistent with the way you believe the character may have spoken including the recognition of social class, education, gender, and familiarisation with the [other] artists ... Consider how to physicalise the character, including how they might gesture and move.

### *Redressing the gender divide*

Below is an excerpt from the play which illustrates how I depicted the female artists based on the available data and some research-informed guesses I needed to make. Whilst the dialogue is predominantly fictionalized, it is based on findings from the desk-based research (Bassot, 2022) where we delved into their history by accessing secondary sources. Looking back now as a more experienced RbT practitioner, I remain at ease with the writing process undertaken because the intention was to recreate what took place as accurately as possible given the data available. Fortuitously, we uncovered correspondence and diary entries from the painters (both male and female) that conveyed their personalities, views, and attitudes.

The scene that follows is largely based on the writings of Jane Sutherland. Whilst none of the dialogue is quoted verbatim, the account resonates with incidents that took place and the documented sentiments of Sutherland and her female artist contemporaries. For instance, in her diary entries from the late 1800s and early 1900s, Sutherland complains of the Methodist social attitudes of the day in which Australian female artists were afforded "no credibility" and viewed with "suspicion." As the correspondence between them reveals, this scrutiny resulted in the female artists travelling to and from Melbourne each day by train to their en plein

air painting location "lest they brought the [artists'] camp into further ill repute." Additionally, Sutherland bemoans that she "always missed out on the best light" of dusk and dawn, something that the male en plein air artists exploited and were "endlessly discussing." Her diary entries further reveal that Sutherland firmly believed that because of her gender her paintings sold at "a tenth of the price" of her male counterparts. She also asserts that her artistic output was hampered by the "constraints" society placed on female artists at the time.

**Scene 6a: An Address to the Women for Justice League, 1887**

*As the lights come up* JANE SUTHERLAND *is on a rostrum addressing an audience, of mostly female academics, writers, and artists, including* LOUISA LAWSON, *editor of the feminist publication, Dawn: A Journal for Australian Women.*

JANE: So, I say to you again women artists of Melbourne, the time has come for change. I feel I am not alone when I state unequivocally that women in Melbourne, like women in Sydney are losing out in the Australian art movement. We are currently seeing many more Australian women receiving a higher education. Why? Because they see that independence comes from having a paid profession.

ANNE (Moriarty): But what of women artists? In this society it is barely acceptable to be a woman in professions such as teaching, medicine, and even law. But art? No-one it seems has a problem with painting being a *pastime* for us [women], but if we dare suggest making a living from it, at best we are humoured at worst we are derided.

CLARA (Southern): Many of Australia's male artists give us in principal support but we don't need their benevolence, or pity! Instead, we need to take control of our own destiny.

ANNE: Have you seen the way women are depicted in many of the paintings adorning the walls of exhibitions across this city? A romanticised and inaccurate depiction of womanhood if ever there was one.

JANE: Mr Frederick McCubbin, to whom our dear Anne [Moriarty] will one day be wed, I'm sure, is a keen but all too silent supporter of our cause …

ANNE: … (*a little defensive on McCubbin's behalf*) he has publicly stated that his camp in Box Hill is available to the female sex should we wish to attend. And you've no doubt heard that Mr Arthur Streeton, one of the Box Hill artists, is talking of looking for an additional site for the impressionists at Heidelberg …

JANE: True enough Anne, but it is high time we women made a firm in-road into this movement! I propose that we choose a weekend in the very near future, and (*with a sly grin*) in the most polite and tactful of

> ways, travel out to Box Hill, storm the campsite and show these men that en plein air painting is by no means the province of the male sex alone. Are you with me sisters? (*Cheers and clapping can be heard from the women in attendance. The lights dim*).
>
> (Sallis, 2012, 1.6a.141–202)

Whilst most of the material for the script emanated from secondary data, during the playwriting process I was fortunate to interview Kathleen Mangan, the daughter of painters Frederick McCubbin and Anne Moriarty; Kathleen, who was in her 90s at the time, agreed to be interviewed at the invitation of the council's arts officers. This primary (and as it turned out vital) source of data helped to affirm and validate the depiction of the artists as they were beginning to emerge in the play script. Below is an excerpt of Kathleen's words from the interview and subsequently a scene from the play which illustrates how the information obtained was reflected in the script.

> From what I could see they [the male and female artists] got on well at the camp. However, I remember mother telling me that disagreements broke out, especially when the women had to catch the six o'clock train back to Melbourne … in Summer it is still light at that time so they could leave it that late in the day to return, but any time after six, it was considered not appropriate for unmarried women to be out in the bush with men … Even though my father [McCubbin] welcomed the women I think the men thought themselves the superior artists, or should I say my father and Bulldog [Roberts] and Smike [Streeton] thought they were more likely to earn a living from [their] art than the women — that was the feeling back then. (Sallis, 2003, Fieldnotes section)

**Scene 8b: Conflict at the Camp**

*ROBERTS, STREETON and MCCUBBIN enter where the women have been painting all afternoon.*

ROBERTS (*cheekily*): Well ladies, the sun is going down. Time you packed up your things and headed back [to the city] isn't it?

CLARA (*sighing*): We shall be on the 6.05 [train] never fear.

ROBERTS: I'm so glad you ladies were able to come here again this weekend.

JANE: Thank you, Mr Roberts. I must admit we did not meet as much opposition from you men as we expected.

*The artist LOUIS ABRAHAMS enters, smoking a cigar.*[4]

LOUIS: (*referring to JANE*) I like this painting of yours Miss Sutherland, it has an appropriately domesticated look to it.

JANE: The painting is called "Obstruction" Mr Abrahams. Why is it "appropriately domesticated"? Because *I* painted it and because a *woman* modelled for it?

LOUIS (*slightly apologetic*): I didn't mean that at all. What I meant was, the child in the painting is not as threatened as they seem to be in the Prof's [McCubbins'] paintings these days.

ROBERTS: I agree with the Don [Louis Abrahams], it's a very appealing painting.

JANE: Ah, "appealing" but without a statement, is that to what you are inferring? Well, the child is threatened in a way. If she goes over the fence, the bull will surely attack her, hence the title.

LOUIS (*smiling*): I concede defeat on a technicality.

(Sallis, 2012, 1.8b.1–22)

### *Reflections and revelations*

Upon completing the drama education learning sequence, of which the production of the play was a part, I asked my students to write a reflection on the devising and performance processes as an assessment task in the subject. Perhaps because of the significant publicity the play received, including positive reviews in the local press, the students wrote freely about their experiences.[5] Most found the recreation of the historical events to be a highlight as well as what they learnt about the "stories behind the paintings," such as "how the artists each posed for each other, so they ended up in each other's paintings" and "that it [Box Hill artists' camp] took place where our school oval is today, which is awesome." Some however found the inclusion of the female artists to be one of the play's best achievements.

I will simply say that painters should be judged on their talent not their gender.

I do believe the men were arrogant against [*sic*] the women artists and didn't give them enough credit.

I liked how Jane [Sutherland] was a feminist and fought against sexist attitudes.

If we didn't include Jane, Clara, and Anne in the play the audience probably would have thought that we didn't think they were important enough.

At the Box Hill camp, I don't think the men artists [*sic*] really minded the women being their [*sic*], but they had their own reputations to think of because they were starting out as artists too.

Knowing that I had agreed to the council's condition that I write an assessment of the project, I decided to survey the audience members once they had seen the play. A sample of the survey questions follows:

- Why did you come to see the play?
- What did you know of the Box Hill artists' camp before seeing the play?
- Did anything surprise you when you saw the play?
- Which of the artists, if any, had you not known about before seeing the play?
- What were your favourite parts of the play and why?

As I predicted, most people had not previously known of the work of the female en air painters. A significant number of respondents also attested that their inclusion was amongst the play's highlights. A particular sequence in the play based on Image Theatre, an element of Boal's (1979) *Theatre of the Oppressed*, was a highlight for many. Consistent with Image Theatre, the sequence began with a series of frozen images. These were subsequently dynamized, that is, brought to life. The images depicted famous en plein air paintings of the era painted by the male and female artists depicted in the play. In the dynamization sequence the people depicted in the paintings directly spoke to the audience about how the painting was conceived and their role in painting or modelling for it. On opening night when watching this scene, there was an audible gasp from Kathleen Mangan. She later told me that "my father came to life for me" when "he" stepped out of the painting *The Artist's Camp* by Tom Roberts (1886).

## CASE STUDY 2: CLEANING UP THE NARRATIVES ABOUT IMPORTED MAIDS

In this case study I (Prue) discuss two performance-based pieces I developed on foreign domestic workers (FDWs) and consider their positions on Beck et al.'s (2011) RbT continuum. These two dramatic pieces, about women marginalized by the society in which they work and live, are for various reasons heavily fictionalized, yet each draws on facts sourced from primary and secondary data. This fictionalization, as discussed in Richard's case study, enabled me, as playwright, to use my imagination to construct the story (Beck et al., 2011, p. 690) where characters and situations were framed constructs but much of the subject matter was steeply based in ethnographic research. Each of these works was developed to inform and educate its intended audience as well as to

engage and entertain. As I was working through the process of researching and developing dramatic ideas for dramatic works about these women and the issues they experience in their working and personal lives, and as I reflected on them after they were completed, I began to question the boundaries of RbT and debate how they could be pushed, stretched, and broken. I contend that applying fiction in RbT has the potential to reach a broad audience, including non-theatre goers, and that it can touch, inform, and educate audiences without being overly didactic.

My RbT work on FDWs stemmed from two desires: developing my playwriting skills and providing a platform to make visible the emotional and physical hardships experienced by FDWs in Singapore and across Asia. A focus of my early RbT work was to find effective theatre aesthetics to authentically convey my research content. Drawing on fictional devices whilst striving for truthfulness, my co-researchers and I moved beyond verbatim theatre principles to include fictional conventions such as foreshadowing, flashbacks, allegory, metaphor, and symbol to represent data. This has been well discussed in our reflections of *Alice Hoy is Not a Building*, a collaborative RbT piece performed over a 9-year period (most recently in Bird et al., 2020).

Wanting to experiment further with ways theatrical devices could be employed to represent research data, I felt I would be best served by building my playwriting skills. So, whilst working as an academic in Singapore, I undertook a 2-year course in writing for stage and screen through a university in London. This involved writing multiple texts for both stage and film. During the course, I noticed that I was applying similar methods when researching material for my plays as to those I drew on for my academic research, collecting and analyzing the same types of data: interviews, focus group discussions, transcripts, historical documents, reports, policies, media articles, images, and so forth. Moreover, I applied similar writing processes. This was quite possibly because I had undertaken the course with the aim of improving my RbT practice, but nonetheless the similarities were plain to see. This was particularly evident in two of the pieces I developed, one a play, the other a film script (I propose that since film's origins can be traced to theatre, it can be considered a theatrical form, something which I build on later in this article). Both these pieces explored the lives and experiences of FDWs, and both aimed to educate their audiences.

### *Foreign domestic workers: Live-in maids*

Foreign domestic workers (FDWs) in Asia are typically women from the Philippines, Indonesia, and Myanmar who travel to Singapore and Hong

Kong to work with families in order to create better lives for themselves and their families back home. They are essential workers for the smooth running of working Singaporean households, enabling both parents (in traditionally nuclear families) to work full time while the helpers keep the house clean and look after the children. In 2019, there were 261,800 FDWs (Ministry of Manpower, 2025), approximately 4.35% of Singapore's population, with 1 in 5 households employing a "maid" (Tseng, 2022). Having come to feel quite passionately about the ways in which FDWs were perceived and treated, I wanted to inform others of the kinds of oppression these women face on a daily basis, because their voices are marginalized in the communities they work in and back home.

### *A play*

I realized there were multiple slippery ethical, psychological, and social considerations to be made when representing marginalized people in RbT. My "obligations" as a playwright were challenged (Beck et al., 2011, p. 688) as both an academic and a non-academic writing for a general audience. I initially approached my play *Home Truths* (Wales, 2014a) as a piece of verbatim theatre, with the screenplay intended to be a piece of fiction generated from a newspaper report. The two works were written simultaneously. *Home Truths* would be based on interviews conducted with FDWs and supported by other ethnographic data, including newspaper articles, government employment information, and human rights reports. This would make it sit close to the middle of the research continuum that "revisits first-hand experiences for the purposes of theatrical exploration" as well as further right to include "second-hand accounts" (Beck et al., 2011, pp. 690–691). Whilst the interview material richly articulated these women's experiences, drafts of the play lacked tension and a strong through-line (a clear idea, theme, or narrative arc that runs through the play, connecting scenes into a coherent whole). Furthermore, the aesthetic was, to be frank, dull. The vibrancy of these women's lives was slipping away from me.

Questioning my purpose, what I wanted to convey and to whom, I realized I had been writing for an academic audience and myself. My goal had been to tell the women's stories to wider audiences, to inform and educate people around the world about the lived experiences of FDWs, and to encourage Singapore's general public to empathize more deeply with these often invisible and oppressed women who kept their households functioning. I became nervous too that focusing on verbatim text could expose the women's identities. Some stories they had told involved illegal activities that could possibly result in prosecution, jail time, and/or later

deportation. Singapore, although a democracy, is often referred to as a police state, where civil liberties are restricted. I could not in all consciousness jeopardize these women's financial welfare and freedoms. Moreover, while I felt comfortable writing Filipino characters who were victims of power structures, and therefore most likely to be sympathetic characters, I was not comfortable depicting Singaporean employers as oppressive, abusive, or violent — behaviours often reported in the press and in reports (Human Rights Watch, 2005) — which may be construed as racist and a form of racial profiling. While authors like Anne Tyler might feel they "should be allowed" to write from the perspective of people of colour, there are clearly issues doing so (Sethi, 2022, para. 1). Journalist and author Anita Sethi (2022) contends that far too often White authors have written "misinformed, derogatory and downright racist portrayals of them" (para 3). I did not want to fall into that trap. These were issues I needed to navigate.

The Filipino characters in *Home Truths* and the screenplay were victims of some form of oppression and were created to elicit empathy from the audience. I believed that I could avoid racial profiling to a certain extent when writing them by creating vibrant lives that moved beyond the families they worked for and by differentiating the language they spoke when with their employers to that they spoke with each other. While the script is in English, the domestic helpers would converse in Tagalog when speaking amongst themselves. However, when they spoke with their employers, it was a nuanced English that I had picked up from my interviews with FDWs. My concern with writing Singaporean characters came from a number of factors, but the main one was my fear of falling into the trap of racial profiling. What ethnicity should I make the perpetrator of the abuse? Singapore has a socially engineered population that consists of Chinese, Malay, Indian, and what is categorized as "Other," commonly referred to as CMIO, with firmly set ethnic ratios for each race (Frost, 2020). Since the Chinese are the dominant race in Singapore making up 74% of the population (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2020), it is unsurprising that Chinese Singaporeans are more often the perpetrators of maid abuse. However, I did not want to demonize Chinese Singaporeans or any other Singaporean ethnicity. In my conversations with FDWs, we discussed their feelings on working for locals and expatriates from different ethnicities. They informed me of occasions when expatriates abused their FDWs. This, as an expatriate myself, was something I felt I could comfortably work with.

How could I authentically represent the lives of FDWs, capturing the imaginations of a wide audience, while ensuring their safety and wellbeing

and navigating my fears of writing flawed characters from another culture that might be perceived as racist? These were contributing factors for fictionalizing content and context in *Home Truths*. While significant verbatim extracts from interviews were included, a fictional frame bound the narrative which was filled with fictional characters that were often based on second-hand stories. Singaporean characters were conveyed as sympathetic, while the central White expatriate was exploitative and narcissistic, and the two domestic helpers were composite characters based on the numerous FDWs I had interviewed. I only included the types of illegal activities that had been reported multiple times in the media. My writing process for *Home Truths* has been discussed in greater detail elsewhere (Wales, 2016). The resulting play, I believe, captured an authentic depiction of the kind of life FDWs may experience in Singapore, from living conditions to work experience and forms of financial, physical, and emotional abuse. Ultimately, this play sat further right on Beck et al.'s (2011) continuum, beginning with first-hand accounts and drawing on rich secondary data and fictionalizing episodes in a social-historical context (pp. 290–291).

### *A screenplay*

The screenplay (Wales, 2014b) also sought to examine the power dynamics and the experiences of FDWs, but the impetus behind it was completely different, as to a certain extent was my approach. In 2011 the body of an FDW was found in a water tank on the roof of a 15-storey block of flats in Singapore after residents reported something wrong with their water. A national outcry followed, not about the murdered woman but about the contaminated water. News outlet AsiaOne declared, "168 households may have had their drinking water supply affected by the corpse" ("Indonesian maid's body found," 2011, para. 6). Comments posted on social media were mainly discriminatory, racist, and abusive. This event became the stimulus for the screenplay, which I set around the staff accommodation area of a university campus rather than in the local community. My reflections during writing highlight some of my decision-making processes and note many similar concerns to the writing of *Home Truths*:

> I wanted to take the basis of this story and transform it into something else. This built on my initial idea of focusing on the treatment of maids living in Singapore and on campus, which has become a burning social and political issue for me while I have been here, and a theme I also incorporated in a very different way and different story into my thematic play. The news story provided me with the stimulus to develop a gripping story but the tension for me came in how to tell the story. I could have set this in an HDB (housing development board — a form of government

> housing for local Singaporeans) apartment block, I chose not to. I did not want to demonize the attitudes of Singaporeans — appearing in online blogs and in the newspapers that reported the event — positioning myself as somehow superior. As a white woman living in an Asian culture, I need to be sensitive to local feelings and values. In addition, my lack of language and cultural knowledge within the home context made this too difficult for me to navigate. (Wales, 2013)

The screenplay was not intended to be a piece of RbT but as a film for the general public. There were no reports of anyone from those 168 households being hospitalized from drinking the water, but what if there had been? After the discovery of a helper's body in the water tank, this became the premise for the screenplay. Again, I aimed to realistically depict the experiences of FDWs in Singapore and I applied research processes, one of which was closely observing the site in which the screenplay was set and people's movements within it.

These observations fed into the screenplay. In one scene Elsa, an experienced FDW who has been transferred to another expat household because her previous employers have returned to their home country, and her friend Desma, another maid, carry what will be her bed, supplied by well-intentioned neighbours, to her new accommodation.

> **EXT. UNIVERSITY STAFF HOUSING, ROAD. DAY.**
>
> *DESMA and ELSA navigate the bed they are carrying down the footpath of a steep road towards another block of flats.*
>
> *A couple with wet hair, wearing bathers and towels, slowly walk up the hill towards them.*
>
> *DESMA and ELSA manoeuvre themselves and the bed onto the grass verge to let them pass. ELSA looks up at the sky.*
>
> ELSA
>
> It's going to rain.
>
> *DESMA smiles as the couple approach.*
>
> *They ignore her as they walk past.*
>
> (Wales, 2014b, p. 3)

The action in this scene came from watching two helpers struggling to manoeuvre a heavy bed down a steep hill while giving way to expats who were climbing it. The scene demonstrates the kinds of work FDWs are expected to do and highlights their invisibility to some of those living amongst them.

Another scene conveyed the space FDWs work and sleep in as they try to fit the bed into a storage room next to the utilities room, designated to Elsa. The action includes Elsa's daily duties while complaining to Desma. Some of the text in this scene about who makes the best employers was extracted from a focus group discussion I had with three helpers. I was struck by how they viewed and stereotyped different expat nationalities, and the conditions they valued.

**INT. MARSHALL APARTMENT. UTILITY ROOM. DAY.**

*ELSA and DESMA navigate a bed-base just in front of the door that is positioned against a set of sparking double glass doors separating the utility room from the living area.*

*She glances at plastic bags and packing debris scattered over the same dull terracotta tiles and starts to tidy them up.*

ELSA (Tagalog)

She's scared of burglars. Thinks she's still in America. Sir was going to give me a fan but she wants it in living room. Maybe I'll call an agency on Monday and see if I can get a new family.

*As ELSA goes to help, a tinny robotic little tune plays.*

DESMA (Tagalog)

You might end up with a local family?

*ELSA steps over towards the washing machine, pulls out some clothes and throws them into the drier next it. As she straightens her body up she gazes out onto a back path through grilled windows behind the white goods.*

ELSA (Tagalog)

English or Australian only.

*She looks back at DESMA who's stacking the packing debris on top of the ironing board next to a clothes-rack, hanging with ironed clothes. Next to it are flattened cardboard boxes lying flush to the wall.*

*ELSA starts to unpack clothes from plastic bags next to the bed-base and hang them up on a rickety clothes rack next to a washing machine.*

DESMA (Tagalog)

Canada are okay.

*DESMA begins to help by taking an item of clothing out of a bag and handing it to ELSA to hang.*

DESMA cont'd (Tagalog)

Some Americans too. Lily's family gives her her own room. Doesn't even have to sleep with the children.

*Sound of a key in a lock and a door opening.*

*Followed by a clap of thunder.*

SAM (V/O)

For God's sake, we've been over this.

DESMA

Tssk. They're back. Still arguing.

*DESMA smiles and shakes her head knowingly as they build a routine hanging the clothes.*

(Wales, 2014b, pp. 5–6)

My development of the screenplay had included observations, fieldnotes, interview extracts, newspaper articles, reports, and informal stories told to me. The narrative was complete fiction but realistically captured the types of experiences FDWs face every day. Categorizing where it sits on the performance spectrum continuum, it was "further away from direct representation of research data" (Beck et al., 2011, p. 697), although it did draw on the facts and was based on informal first-hand, second-hand, and casual inquiry.

Had the screenplay, a gripping psychological drama I have been told, been made into a film, it had the potential to informally educate a broad audience about the daily lives and experiences of FDWs and the power structures that bind them. As it stands, it has only ever had readings. The cost of producing the screenplay would be prohibitive. But in my opinion film, as a form of RbT, has the potential to target a far broader category of audience who come to attend for aesthetic and entertainment reasons.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this article we have discussed research-based performance projects that examine the voices of women marginalized by the societies in which they work and live. One of those projects investigated women artists from the Heidelberg School in Victoria, Australia, which operated during the late 19th and early 20th centuries; the other examined experiences of servitude by foreign domestic helpers in Singapore and East Asia. While the women represented in our scripts come from different periods in time, different social classes, different races, and different countries, we contend that their experiences had been sidelined, disregarded, and silenced. Our reasons for developing these specific projects stemmed from a need to speak up, to provide visibility and opportunities for these women to have their voices heard (Ladegaard, 2017) by our chosen audiences. Yet, the voices we gave them were not their own verbatim; they were fiction even though they were grounded in authenticity.

We chose to use research-informed fiction in the RbT pieces discussed here for different reasons. There were important research reasons for us to apply these fictions, both practical and ethical. However, we do not deny that there were also aesthetic reasons for our choices. Richard drew on historical fiction that was based on his and his students' rigorous research of newspaper articles, journals, and other secondary data. He could only imagine and construct the voices from the data he had available to him. Prue drew on some verbatim speech from interviews as well as policy documents and significant secondary data; however, she chose to apply fictional dialogue, characters, and frames to (a) ensure the safety of the women with whom she spoke, (b) avoid appearances of exoticism or racism, (c) create scripts that would engage and entertain what she hoped would be an audience beyond academia, and (d) avoid these works appearing to be didactic.

With gaps of knowledge for both of us, we could only write what we knew and what we thought we knew. Coming from privileged White backgrounds, we could only imagine ourselves as minorities, marginalized or otherwise. But had we not imagined these realities, would the stories of these women have ever come to light? There are limited stories told by FDWs, and most of those are told through the newspapers or agencies like Human Rights Watch (2005). Many of the FDWs Prue met only had primary school education and little opportunity to share their stories. Very little has been published or performed about the female painters Richard investigated. Richard saw an opportunity to tell a unique and untold story about these female artists when commissioned by a local council to develop a piece about the Heidelberg School en plein air painters. Had he and his co-researchers focused on the male painters only, the stories of these women might have remained hidden for years.

Richard could only try to envisage and capture what life was like for women painters living in Australia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Even the form of 19th century language was different to the language Australians speak today. In writing for a modern-day audience, he needed to capture a sense of the time period without alienating his viewers with his characters speaking a somewhat antiquated form of English. He chose to create contemporary sounding speech patterns in his characters while dramatically capturing the historical period using fiction. Prue may have been in the "minority" as a White woman living in Singapore, but being a member of a colonizing, dominant race, she was highly conscious of the fact that she had no notion or experience of being a minority, either as a fairly privileged person of colour who employed an FDW or as a female foreigner employed as a domestic helper who was

perceived to be in the lower echelons of society. Nervous of perpetuating stereotypical images of Singaporean employers, which would have called on using the local Singlish dialect, Prue, in an attempt to avoid being seen as racist or exoticizing characters, chose to create problematic White employers. This was done with the knowledge that while there are fewer White employers than locals, it cannot be assumed that White employers are not problematic, even if the characters of Elsa and Desma believed that to be so. Foreign domestic helpers are not limited to Asia but also work and live in the Middle East and European countries (Lagergaard, 2017). Recent events in Texas where educators called for slavery to be called "involuntary relocation" in the history books has shown dominant discourses of White privilege are alive and sadly flourishing (Suliman, 2022, para. 1). So, the character constructs of the employers are perhaps not far-fetched.

Our works, discussed here, sit between the slightly right to the far right of Beck et al.'s (2011) RbT continuum. When writing *Golden Summers*, Richard not only had to fictionalize the dialogue but also consider his audience of mainly young people, their families, and those not familiar with RbT processes and intentions. He employed first- and second-hand accounts and historical facts to guide him. In writing about the domestic helpers, Prue utilized first- and second-hand accounts as well as sourcing informal stories, yet her works all heavily relied on fictional frameworks and characters that weave facts through the pieces. One of her goals was to find wider audiences to consume the work and gain an understanding of and empathy towards a particular marginalized group of women. We do not claim that using fiction is better or lesser than just drawing on systematic research for RbT. However, we do believe that there is a place for greater fiction in RbT work and that fictionalized forms of RbT that seek to entertain and engage people from different cultural, economic, and social backgrounds could have the potential to reach wider audiences. Unlike verbatim theatre forms, fictionalized RbT gives the playwright greater freedom with both the aesthetic and the narrative whilst still being based on the original data. For us, as playwrights and researchers, who have worked in both forms, we find that research-informed fiction enables us to present the voices of those who could not have been captured in a conventional verbatim play for the political and practical reasons discussed in this article.

## NOTES

1. Also known by the longer title of *The Golden Summers: A Tribute to the Early Painters of the Heidelberg School at the Box Hill Artists' Camp*.
2. This was when Internet search engines were in their infancy and were not the natural go-to for sourcing such information.
3. The reference to use of "microfiche" here reminds me how much times have changed when conducting such research these days.
4. This is an oblique reference to Abrahams' cigar business and the 1890 9by5s exhibition where the art works were painted on wooden cigar box lids supplied by the Abrahams family.
5. The students gave permission for me to use their reflections when reporting on their experiences.

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