

## EDITORIAL: POLYPHONY AND LANDSCAPES OF RESEARCH-BASED THEATRE

This special issue brings together seven research articles and five Notes from the Field contributions to showcase the versatility of Research-based Theatre (RbT) as a methodology for engaging in educational research.

In his article, Chris Summers examines a key tension in RbT research: navigating the balance between the artistic demands of the art form and the academic demands of scholarly work. By integrating theatre and academic research, RbT generates unique spaces to explore complex questions and facilitate knowledge exchange across diverse contexts. The contributions within this special issue highlight the broad scope of RbT practices and provide concrete examples for how they are enacted across academic disciplines. Together, these works form a collective whole that illustrates two key concepts that have shaped RbT: polyphony (Bakhtin, 1984) and landscapes (Lea & Belliveau, 2023).

### POLYPHONY IN RBT

Polyphony is well suited to considering RbT projects. Emerging from the work of Bakhtin (1984), polyphony encompasses “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” (p. 6) that are characterized by “independence, internal freedom, unfinalizability, and indeterminacy” (p. 63). A single RbT production may appear to merge voices of many contributors including participants, researchers, playwrights, designers, actors, and of course audiences. However, the overall creation of an RbT project remains polyphonic with many distinct voices contributing to the whole.

This polyphonic perspective informed the development of *Contact!Unload: Military Veterans, Trauma, and Research-based Theatre* (Belliveau & Lea, 2020) which provides an overview of a multi-year project using RbT to explore experiences of military veterans living with stress injuries as they transition back to civilian life. By bringing the playscript into conversation with chapters from authors representing all aspects of the production we

(Graham and George, as co-editors) sought to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the project than we could have created on our own.

This special issue continues this polyphonic approach through articles by authors including Metz, Ganesh, and Hobbs; Kneifel, Rizzotti, and Mosher; and Shigematsu, Göksel, Piazzoli, Belliveau, and Naud. These contributions bring together individualized voices from diverse authors including artistic creators, which provides a polyphonic understanding of the respective projects.

The concept of polyphony extends beyond individual projects to RbT as a whole. As this special issue illustrates, RbT is not defined by a single approach. Rather, each project contributes to a growing polyphony of RbT, with its own unique ways of integrating theatre and academic research. For example, some projects discussed in this special issue incorporate theatre as part of data generation (e.g., Kneifel, Rizzotti, and Mosher; Shigematsu, Göksel, Piazzoli, Belliveau, and Naud). Others position theatre as an analytic approach, using the tools of the actor and director to provide insights into the complexities of their work (e.g., Metz, Ganesh, and Hobbs). Still others draw on RbT as an approach to sharing research results and stimulate conversations (e.g., Vanover; Wales and Sallis; and Medeiros, Stannard, and Salvatore). These approaches are not necessarily discrete; rather, RbT creates spaces for incorporating theatre throughout the research process. The diversity of approaches in this special issue serves as a contribution to the polyphony of work on RbT, providing new insights for the potential and possibilities for the incorporation of theatre and research.

## LANDSCAPES OF RBT

An extension of the polyphonic nature of RbT is that it is and should remain unfinalizable (Bakhtin, 1984; Fenske, 2004). There is no single way to engage in the methodology and it is a methodology that is constantly in evolution. This posed challenges as we began to consider ways of sharing our work and the works of others: How do we avoid ossifying RbT in the approaches of past projects? To address this question, we conceptualize the possibilities of RbT as landscapes illuminated by guideposts created through the sharing of individual projects. These guideposts are not prescriptive, mapping out a singular path of navigation. Rather they seek to a) illuminate key contours of RbT landscapes that practitioners might consider and b) shed light on how others have forged paths through

similar terrain. In doing so, these guideposts seek not to dictate but inspire (Lea & Belliveau, 2023).

For example, Metz, Ganesh, and Hobbs provide guideposts to illuminate possibilities and pitfalls for evaluating RbT projects, while Cook explores the terrain of trans-informed RbT strategies that may provide insight for future projects. As a ghost light on an empty stage leaves much in shadow, no single project can illuminate an entire landscape of RbT. Thus, the continued exchange of diverse approaches remains essential to expanding the landscapes of possibilities of RbT, a goal to which this special issue provides an important contribution.

## OVERVIEW OF CONTRIBUTIONS

Highlighting the importance of the playwright in many RbT projects, Christina Cook begins this special issue with her reflections on writing her autoethnographic work-in-progress epistolary play *Postcards to My Younger Transsexual Self, Ages 0-119*. Excerpts from the script are shared and used to propose a trans-informed RbT process. Three possible strategies are suggested to support playwrights seeking to centre trans ways of knowing: trans time travel, slow performance, and seeking trans joy/rage.

Chris Summers reflects on his play *Being Frank*, a play commissioned by Deaken University's Centre for Health through Action on Social Exclusion to examine experiences of trans and gender-diverse people. A key feature of the project was an advisory group of trans and gender-diverse people who provided input throughout the play's development. Summers discusses how he navigated several challenges, including accounting for the breadth of the experiences within the advisory group, creating a broadly positive and educational representation of trans people and resisting common narrative tropes. He also reflects on the ethics of representation – both in terms of the narratives shared and the people sharing them.

In their article, Prue Wales and Richard Sallis share case studies of two RbT plays dramatizing narratives of marginalized women. The first, developed by Sallis and a secondary school class shares achievements of Australian women painters whose contributions to the en plein air movement were not well recognized. Wales discusses two performance pieces (a theatre script and a film script) that she developed to bring to light the plight of foreign domestic workers in Singapore. Together, the authors reflect on possibilities of engaging in research-informed fictional histories to bring to life stories that may be largely lost to time – stories

with which there is only limited data to draw on, or which raise ethical considerations around potentially identifying participants.

Goldstein, Owis, Salisbury, Reid, and Hicks outline the project *The Love Booth and Six Companion Plays*, developed from archival research on activism and care that challenged cis-heteronormativity and racism in the 1970s and 80s. Accompanying the plays were images and two original songs. Through script excerpts, lyrics, and images, the article demonstrates how the three artforms interwove to provide rich, layered understandings of often-hidden stories of queer and trans Black, Indigenous, and people of colour activism and care in the early LGBT movement.

Seeking to help navigate the complexity of graduate supervisory relationships, the educational resource *Rock the Boat* uses RbT to foster dialogue and enhance perspective-taking. Cox, Smithdeal, and Lee provide a narrative of the three-phase development of *Rock the Boat*: from live theatre workshops to a pivot to online workshops, and the development of an online resource. This resource includes four scenes filmed with professional actors and an accompanying facilitator's guide. The authors share key insights from the transition to an online format, including the need to reconsider the aesthetic for a filmed genre and the need to create accompanying online resources to support discussions when a facilitator would not be present.

Seeking to help develop undergraduate health science students' awareness of implicit bias, a team of researchers from Brock University collaborated with a theatre company to develop a participatory theatre experience. Metz, Ganesh, and Hobbs reflexively discuss the resulting performance, *Haunting our Bias*, from their varied perspectives as D/A/R/Tor (director, actor, researcher teacher), project assessment researcher, and curriculum developer. Together they articulate playbuilding as a sub-genre of RbT that seeks to create interactive theatrical forums for engaging with important social issues.

Charles Vanover discusses the ethnodrama *Chicago Butoh* which examines the experience of a first-year teacher from an urban school in the Chicago Public School system. Developed using an Inquiry Theatre approach, the script is created from verbatim interview text. Vanover describes how incorporating professional artists including an actor and director brought new and varied insights to the work. Through script excerpts, performance photographs, and artist interviews, the article highlights how such performances can generate a space for reflection on educational experiences.

The five Notes from the Field contributions included in this special issue provide examples of RbT works in various stages of development. Shigematsu, Göksel, Piazzoli, Belliveau, and Naud collectively reflect on an RbT-inspired retreat that sought to support the development of an RbT production examining the Acadian expulsion in Canada. In a scripted dialogue, Mosher, Rizzotti, and Kneifel examine how an undergraduate devised theatre project became a model for a decentralized and iterative pedagogy. Prendergast and Pauluth-Penner provide an overview of an arts-based study in which secondary school students were led through an analysis of three Canadian plays focused on youth mental health and then built on that analysis to devise and perform their own production expressing their perspectives on youth mental health. Also working with secondary school students, Medeiros, Stannard, and Salvatore provide discussion and video examples from the development and performance of a verbatim performance reenacting a televised debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden. Finally, Kreindler discusses her research-based musical satirical performance examining and questioning complexities of Emergency Department overcrowding in Canada.

We hope that you enjoy this special issue and its contributions to the polyphony of RbT. May the pieces inspire new possibilities or shed light on challenges you might encounter in your own projects.

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## REFERENCES

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