

5. THREE ARTS BASED RESEARCHERS WALK INTO A FORUM

*A Conversation on the Opportunities and Challenges
in Embodied and Performed Research*

PROLOGUE

It was approximately 5pm on April 20th, 2016. Richard Sallis (RS), Nisha Sajnani (NS), and Joe Salvatore (JS) walked into the White Oak Tavern on Greene and Waverly in Greenwich village, New York. What follows is an artfully edited transcript of a conversation about embodied and performative research that began over drinks, continued after a visit to Joe's Thursday night class on ethnodrama, and culminated in a panel about arts based research presented as part of the 2016 Forum on Educational Theatre at New York University. The panel was moderated by Edie Demas and recorded as part of the forum podcast series. We have decided to present this chapter as a conversation to retain and reflect the nature of the podcast recording and the relational, unfolding quality that is characteristic of artistic, and specifically performative, approaches to discovery. We have taken creative license with it in order to ground our observations in literature and a lineage of practice.

INTRODUCTIONS

- JS: I'm Joe Salvatore and I teach in the Program in Educational Theatre at New York University. One of the courses I teach is called 'Creating Ethnodrama: Theory and Practice'. I studied history as an undergraduate and then dramaturgy and directing in graduate school, where I developed an affinity for new play development.
- RS: I'm Richard Sallis. I lecture in drama education in the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at The University of Melbourne. From a researcher perspective I would describe myself as an ethnographer and ethnodramatist with an interest in both practice-based and practice-led research. I have a background in drama education, playwriting, acting and directing. I did both my Masters and PhD research in the areas of ethnography and ethnographic performance/ethnodrama. My work as an ethnodramatist has been practice-led because I have a particular interest in the processes involved in this form of writing, reportage and

presentation. Through my work as an ethnodramatist I learn more about this practice. In turn this informs my work and, perhaps that of others, when like now, I get to talk about what I have discovered in my work.

- NS: I'm Nisha Sajnani, I direct the Global Interdisciplinary Studies graduate program and coordinate the Drama Therapy program at Lesley University. I also teach a course called 'An Introduction to Arts Based Research' at NYU and lecture on the role of the arts in the context of displacement for the Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma. My graduate training in drama therapy deepened my interest in performative and practice based research involving embodied improvisation (2012a). My PhD examined the ways in which audiences are implicated in ethnotheatre and related performance genres such as verbatim and documentary theatre (2012b). I have drawn on embodied improvisational practices such as Developmental Transformations, Playback Theatre and the Theatre of the Oppressed to facilitate collaborative action research in various phases of the research process such as data collection, analysis, and representation (2011) and have been involved in bringing a critical lens to both embodied and performance based research (2013, 2015).
- JS: As there are lots of different ways of thinking and talking about the work that we do, could we define what we mean by embodied, arts based and performed research within the context of our conversation?

DEFINITIONS

- NS: Arts based and practice-led research constitute a wide array of artistic approaches and methodological practices that are united in their ambition to blur the lines between art and science and art and research. 'Arts based research' may be understood, in the words of Shaun McNiff, as 'the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies' (McNiff, in Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 29). It may also involve the use of the arts in one or more phases of the research process such as data collection, analysis, interpretation, representation, and dissemination. Often, these processes occur simultaneously in arts based research (Leavy, 2009).
- JS: Given that I often refer to my artistic process as my 'practice', what is the distinction between 'arts based research' and 'practice-based research'? Why are those terms not interchangeable?
- NS: 'Practice-based research' involves individual or collaborative reflection and inquiry in an effort to improve upon a particular practice. For