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# Dramatizing Data: A Primer

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*Due to the lack of "how-to" pieces in the methods literature, a theatre artist who later became an ethnographer offers this personal primer in playwriting with qualitative data. Ethnodramatic research representation should be chosen not for its novelty but for its appropriateness as a medium for telling a participant's story credibly, vividly, and persuasively. An overview of such fundamental playwriting principles as plotting, characterization, monologues, dialogue, and staging is given. The author also proposes that collaborative ventures between ethnographers and theatre practitioners should be initiated to heighten the artistic quality of ethnotheatrical presentations.*

**Keywords:** *ethnodrama; ethnotheatre; ethnographic performance; performance; writing*

I'm an opinionated pragmatist, so my stylistic choices for this article are semiformal and "how to" because there is a lack of related methods pieces in the published works I've reviewed. I'm also a 30-year veteran of theatre<sup>1</sup> arts, who has only within the past 7 years immersed myself in qualitative research, including recent explorations into ethnographic performance texts (Saldaña, 1998a, 1998b, 1999; Saldaña & Wolcott, 2001; Wolcott, 2002). As working definitions, ethnotheatre employs traditional craft and artistic techniques of formal theatre production to mount a live performance event of research participants' experiences and/or researchers' interpretations of data for an audience. An ethnodrama, the script, consists of analyzed and dramatized significant selections from interview transcripts, field notes, journal entries, or other written artifacts. Characters in an ethnodrama are generally the research participants portrayed by actors, but the actual researchers and participants themselves may be cast members.

Selected writers in theatre and the social sciences (Conquergood, 1991; Denning, 1996; Denzin, 2001; Geertz, 1983; Goffman, 1959; Goodall, 2000; Kalb, 2001; Landy, 1993; Mienzakowski, 2001; Schechner, 1985; Turner, 1982; Turner & Turner, 1982) have examined and theorized about the disciplines' blurred genres and their implications for interpretation and performance.<sup>2</sup> Ethnotheatre represents a fairly recent movement in qualitative inquiry to

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experiment with artistic modes of research representation (Bagley & Cancienne, 2002; Barone, 1997; Denzin, 1997; Diamond & Mullen, 1999, 2000; Eisner, 1997; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; S. Finley & Knowles, 1995; Jipson & Paley, 1997; Spry, 2001). Most of the ethnodramas I've read have been written by researchers, sometimes in collaboration with their participants. Examples of qualitative and ethnographic work presented in dramatic form include (a) the writing processes of middle schoolers (Donmoyer & Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995), (b) a typical day in teachers' lives at school (Walker, Pick, & MacDonald, 1991), (c) teachers struggling with and reflecting on their practices (Boran, 1999; Rogers, Frellick, & Babinski, 2002; Vanover & Saldaña, 2002), (d) social issues among adolescents (Norris, 2000), (e) the artistic development of an adolescent actor (Saldaña, 1998b), (f) personal stories of jazz musicians (Kotarba, 1998), (g) race relations in a rural community (Pifer, 1999) and in high school settings (Goldstein, 2001, 2002; Rohd, 2001), (h) health issues (Mienczakowski, 1995, 1996, 1997; Mienczakowski, Smith, & Morgan, 2002), (i) homeless youth in New Orleans (S. Finley & Finley, 1998), (j) a couple experiencing the abortion of their child (Ellis & Bochner, 1992), (k) power struggles between school officers (Meyer, 1998), (l) a father's strained relationship with his adult son (Pelias, 2002), (m) the disintegration of a marriage (Foster, 2002), (n) fieldwork from Nigeria (Jones, 2002), (o) incarcerated African American males (Keck, 1996), (p) lesbian physical education teachers (Sykes, Chapman, & Swedberg, 2002), (q) a physician and a cancer patient (Paget, 1995), (r) Matthew Shepherd's murder in *The Laramie Project* (Kaufman & the Members of the Tectonic Theater Project, 2001), and (s) Colin Turnbull and director Peter Brook's collaboration with *The Ik* (Grinker, 2000).<sup>3</sup>

What makes ethnotheatre an appropriate presentational choice for qualitative research? Performance critic Sylvia Drake challenges writers to consider the appropriateness of a story's medium and whether a tale would be best told through live theatre, television, or film. Just as some theatrical and media works are adapted from literary sources (e.g., Wolfe's [1979] *The Right Stuff*; Terkel's [1974] *Working*), selected qualitative reports lend themselves to adaptation for the stage, television/video, or film. Several studies possess exciting possibilities for the intimacy of the stage (e.g., Wolcott's [1994, 2002] "Brad Trilogy"), the documentary flavor of television/video (e.g., Kozol's [1991] *Savage Inequalities*), or the magnitude of film (e.g., Geertz's [1973] "Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight"). A key question to discern the most appropriate mode of representation and presentation for qualitative research is, Will the participant's story be credibly, vividly, and persuasively told for an audience through a traditional written report, video documentary, photographic portfolio, Web site, poetry, dance, music, visual art installation, or ethnodrama? If it's the latter, then a qualitative researcher playwrights with data.

The art of writing for the stage is similar to yet different from creating a dramatic narrative for qualitative reports because ethnotheatre employs the

media and conventions of theatrical production. A researcher's criteria for excellent ethnography in article or book formats don't always harmonize with an artist's criteria for excellent theatre. This may be difficult for some to accept, but theatre's primary goal is neither to "educate" nor to "enlighten." Theatre's primary goal is to entertain—to entertain ideas and to entertain for pleasure. With ethnographic performance, then, comes the responsibility to create an entertainingly informative experience for an audience, one that is aesthetically sound, intellectually rich, and emotionally evocative.

Examples from my own two ventures with ethnotheatre will be used below to illustrate selected playwriting concepts and staging techniques—fundamental "technical skills" critical to the arts (Eisner, 2001, p. 144). These production experiences were influenced by my initial education and subsequent practice as a playwright, director, actor, designer, and instructor of theatre. This type of artistic training generates research perspectives different from colleagues first educated in social sciences who later in their academic careers explore drama as a genre of research representation.

## PLOTTING—THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF ETHNODRAMA

Most writers label the progression of events in a story its plot. But in dramatic literature, plot is the overall structure of the play; story line refers to the progression of events within the plot. Dramatic structures include the number of acts, scenes, and vignettes ("units" to most theatre practitioners); whether the time line of events is chronological or randomly episodic; and whether monologue, dialogue, and/or lyric are the most appropriate narrative forms for its characters. The story line is the sequential arrangement of units within the plot.

These terms are differentiated because plotting and story lining in ethnodrama and conventional plays are initially separate but eventually interwoven processes. For example, in *Transforming Qualitative Data*, Wolcott (1994) separated the three articles of "The Brad Trilogy" under the chapters "Description," "Analysis," and "Interpretation." This organizational arrangement stimulated the plot construction of its ethnodramatic adaptation, *Finding My Place: The Brad Trilogy* (Saldaña & Wolcott, 2001), into three separate scenes, also subtitled "Description," "Analysis," and "Interpretation." The addition of a "Prologue" and "Epilogue" provided a contextual framing and reflection, respectively, about the story. Because another plot choice was chronological linearity, the story line of the play follows a traditional beginning-middle-end design to portray events as they occurred between Harry and Brad during the 1980s (Wolcott, 2002).

Jean Luc Godard is attributed with a plotting maxim: "A story should have a beginning, a middle, and an end—but not necessarily in that order." My first

ethnodrama, *"Maybe Someday, if I'm Famous"* (Saldaña, 1998b), which portrays the artistic development of an adolescent actor over two and a half years, did not follow strict chronological linearity. The initial analysis of this study's data reduced the 150-page corpus to one third its length for core content examination (Seidman, 1991), linked multiple participant data for triangulation (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and used in vivo codes for category development (Strauss, 1987).<sup>4</sup> This process generated eight distinct categories of participant meanings that formed eight separate scenes. The plot was a linear collage loosely sequenced by chronology and progressive reflexivity. The play begins with the actor's past and ends with his projected future. But in-between is a series of scenes that advance from his public performances to his more personal, private thoughts (Saldaña, 1998b).

There's a folk saying among theatre practitioners: "A play is life—with all the boring parts taken out." Comparable advice for those interested in scripting their research is, "An ethnodrama is the data corpus—with all the boring parts taken out." The basic content for ethnodrama is the reduction of field notes, interview transcripts, journal entries, and so forth to salient, foreground issues—the "juicy stuff" for "dramatic impact" (Saldaña, 1998a, pp. 184-185). The results are a participant's and/or researcher's combination of meaningful life vignettes, significant insights, and epiphanies. This process generates the material from which the structure and content—its plot and story line—are constructed.<sup>5</sup>

## PARTICIPANTS AS CHARACTERS IN ETHNODRAMA

The cast of characters for an ethnodrama is composed of the minimum number of participants necessary to serve the story line's progression, and whose stories are potentially engaging for an audience. Characters serve multiple purposes in plays, but each individual should be rendered with dimensionality, regardless of length of time on stage. Most directors and actors approach the analysis of a character by examining (a) what the character says, overtly or covertly, about his or her life or objectives; (b) what the character does to achieve those objectives; (c) what other characters say about him or her and how they support or prevent the character from achieving his or her objectives; (d) what the playwright offers about characters in stage directions or supplementary text; and (e) what dramatic criticism and personal life experience offer about the characters. These conventions can be adapted for data analysis and function as guidelines to promote a three-dimensional portrayal of a participant in ethnodrama: (a) from interviews: what the participant reveals about his or her perceptions or constructed meanings; (b) from field notes, journal entries, or other written artifacts: what the researcher observes, infers, and interprets from the participant in action;

(c) from observations or interviews with other participants connected to the primary case study: perspectives about the primary participant or phenomena; and (d) from research literature: what other scholars offer about the phenomena under investigation.

The majority of traditional plays are told from the protagonist's point of view, which serves as a model for retelling an individual participant's story as a case study. For example, some autoethnographies, such as Tillmann-Healy's (1996) personal struggle with bulimia, suggest a one-person narrative plot. Even though friends, parents, and teachers are present in her story, I can envision one woman on stage portraying Tillmann-Healy and all other roles, similar to Lily Tomlin alternating between more than 20 characters in Jane Wagner's (1986) *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* or the solo performances of Anna Deveare Smith's (2000) interviews with various political figures, writers, and American citizens. Some plays feature two characters in traditional protagonist and antagonist roles or two characters, both flawed, who attempt to resolve their interpersonal conflicts. The interactions between the ethnographer and case study are suggested here, such as Brad and Harry F. Wolcott's relationship in his "Trilogy."

Several newer dramas feature multiple characters in multiple vignettes presenting a series of monologues and/or small group scenes that portray significant moments from their lives—ensemble plays with a spectrum of voices and no leading roles. Pifer's (1999) ethnodrama on race relations features a Ku Klux Klansman in full regalia describing the significance of a burning cross, though the actual "character" was never encountered during fieldwork itself. Nevertheless, his inclusion and brief monologue provide stunning counterpoint to the White participants' attitudes toward Blacks. Small or large group studies with contradictory perspectives from multiple participants suggest an ensemble play, of sorts. Conflicting agendas from students, parents, teachers, and administrators in education studies can be highlighted through juxtaposition (Boran, 1999). S. Finley and Finley's (1998) community of homeless youth in New Orleans is another ensemble. Both the formal research article (S. Finley & Finley, 1999) and its artistic representation through poetry (M. Finley, 2000) are rich material for adolescent actors to adapt and portray onstage.

A problematic choice is the researcher's inclusion as a character in ethnodrama. Does the principal investigator have a role to play, one just as essential as the primary participants? In a fieldwork context, yes. But depending on the purpose of the research, is he or she a major or minor character? To apply some of the most common types of characters in dramatic literature, is the ethnographer (a) a leading character with extensive monologues composed of field notes and journal entries like some Brechtian narrator; (b) the leading character's best friend, a secondary but nevertheless important role because the lead confides his or her innermost secrets to you; (c) a chorus

member (as in Greek tragedy), offering supplemental reflections and insights on human life, suggested by the major characters' dilemmas; (d) an offstage voice, physically absent yet ever present like some omniscient being; (e) a servant whose primary function is to announce the arrival of guests, deliver exposition, and sometimes function as comic relief; (f) an extra who stands with the background crowd, not commenting but merely reacting peripherally to issues detailed by the leads; or (g) an unnecessary character cut from the play all together? To adapt a popular folk saying from the culture of theatre, "there are no small parts, only small ethnographers." Sometimes, the researcher's best "positionality" is off stage.

Most researchers have been taught to never let the data speak for itself, but I question that directive's applicability to ethnodrama. Many participants can speak on their own behalf without interpretive intervention from a fieldworker. Just as an ethnographer asks, "What is this research about?" ethnodramatists must ask, "Whose story is it?" Reflexivity is a common component in qualitative narratives, but in ethnotheatre, the researcher's onstage presence and commentary could detract from rather than add to the principal participants' stories. In "*Maybe Someday, if I'm Famous*" (Saldaña, 1998b), my presence in scenes between the adolescent actor and his classroom theatre teachers was unnecessary. But my field note monologues of his rehearsal and performance processes were critical pieces of evidentiary data for the audience. Wolcott's intimate relationship with Brad requires that the researcher become a leading character in the ethnodrama. But my contribution as the adapter of the script did not, to me, require my presence on stage.

## MONOLOGUES AND DIALOGUE— DRAMATIZING THE DATA

*Monologues.* Monologues are extended passages of text spoken by one character that are (a) addressed to another character listening on stage, (b) addressed directly to the audience, or (c) reveal inner thoughts spoken aloud—a soliloquy—for the audience (see Prendergast, 2001). A playwright in ethnodrama is not just a storyteller, he or she is a story-reteller. You don't compose what your participants tell you in interviews, but you can creatively and strategically edit the transcripts, assuming you wish to maintain rather than "restory" their narratives. Interviews with one participant generate transcript data suitable for transformation into one-person reflections. Smith (2000) encouraged the search for participants' rhythms, passions, and

the very moment that language fails them. In the very moment that they have to be more creative than they would have imagined in order to communicate. It's the very moment that they have to dig deeper than the surface to find words.  
(p. 53)

And because a play is life—with all the boring parts taken out—and one of the playwright's functions is to use an economy of words to tell a story, the verbatim transcript is reduced to the "juicy stuff" for "dramatic impact." Lengthy sentences or extraneous passages within an extended narrative, whose absence will not affect the quality of the data or their intent, could be edited. Below is the original text from a portion of an interview with Barry, a high school actor. He recalls his past theatre viewing and research participant experiences in elementary school and speculates on their influence.

Barry: And I remember going to see the shows. I remember the interviews afterwards, sitting out on the grass, talking about what we thought about the shows, and what we thought about the longitudinal study. I remember always having interns sitting in the back of the class, watching us do drama.

Johnny: What shows do you remember?

Barry: I remember a lot of the Childsplay stuff. [Childsplay is a local professional touring theatre company for young audiences.]

Johnny: Any particular titles or images come to mind?

Barry: I remember *Clarissa's Closet*, which was interesting because I performed that last year. And I was thinking, "You know I've seen this, I've seen this, it was Childsplay came did it." And I also remember one about, I recall an Oriental setting, there were masks, uh, I don't know much about it, like journeying something.

Johnny: Any other images?

Barry: I remember them coming out and taking their bows and then talking to us after the show, and the energy they had, and just the raw energy and everything. They were answering questions and they seemed to be having so much fun just being there, and I think that's when I first decided I wanted to be an actor. So I saw that and it was an amazing feeling, there was just energy, you could see it, it was emanating from them, and just from having done this show. And it was just a show for a bunch of elementary kids, and yet it was still, it was a show, you know? And it was, that was when it first, I first started thinking, "Hm, this is something I want to look into."

Following is the reduction of the data to what I considered essential and salient exposition for a brief monologue in "*Maybe Someday, if I'm Famous*":

Barry: And I remember going to see the shows, a lot of Childsplay stuff. I remember them coming out and taking their bows and then talking to us after the show. And the energy they had! They were answering questions and they seemed to be having so much fun just being there. And I think that's when I first decided I wanted to be an actor. It was an amazing feeling! That was when I first started thinking, "Hm, this is something I want to look into." (Saldaña, 1998b, p. 92)<sup>6</sup>

A monologue showcases a character through a snapshot portrait of his or her life taken from a particular angle. Solo narratives reveal both personal and social insight with carefully selected detail and, if successfully written and successfully performed, generate emotional connection with audiences. The most engaging monologues reveal a discovery or retell an epiphany in a char-



acter's life. In this excerpt from *Finding My Place: The Brad Trilogy*, Brad reflects on the alienation from his family and his sense of isolation. Like the example above, this monologue was assembled from various interview excerpts found in Wolcott's "Trilogy." The in vivo slide titles highlight key phrases from Brad's narrative for the audience. Stage directions note how the two actors interpreted the action in performance:

(SLIDE: "a big difference"; MUSIC softly under: "Drive" [The Cars], followed by "Milkworker" [Bette Midler])

BRAD. I saw a guy a few weeks ago who's the same age as me. He lived in a house behind us when I was in fifth grade. He still lives with his parents in the same place. I think about what he's been doing the last nine years and what I've been doing the last nine years and it's a big difference. He went to high school. Now he works in a gas station, has a motorcycle, and works on his truck. I guess that's all right for him, so long as he's mellow with his parents. (SLIDE: "I've never really held a job") (crosses to HARRY, sits on the lawn chair) I've worked for my dad for a while—helped him wire houses and do light construction. I scraped paint for one company. I worked for a graveyard for about eight months, for a plumber a while, planted trees for a while. Dishwashing. I've never really held a job. I wouldn't want to have to put up with a lot of people on a job that didn't make me much money. Like at a check-out counter—I don't want to be in front of that many people. I don't like a job where everyone sees you do it. (SLIDE: "a loner") I guess that I'm sorta a loner, maybe a hermit. I've had close friends, but I don't have any now. (fighting back tears)

HARRY. (to BRAD) Shall I turn the tape recorder off for a while?

BRAD. (shakes his head "no"; tries to put up a brave front) You've got what you've got. It doesn't make any difference what anybody else has. You can't wish you're somebody else, there's no point in it. Being by myself doesn't make all that much difference. No one knows who I am anyway. (HARRY puts his hand comfortingly on BRAD's knee; BRAD remains still, looks as if he's about to reach for HARRY's hand, then pulls away, gets a wrench and starts working on his bike) (Saldaña & Wolcott, 2001, pp. 19-20)

*Dialogue.* Dialogue occurs when two or more characters exchange thoughts or confront an interpersonal conflict. Dialogue in the data can be found in a transcript's conversational interviews between the researcher and participant, a focus group interview, or participant observation field notes. Artistry enters when dialogue is artificially constructed from several sources of data gathered from different sites, from different participants, and across different time periods (S. Finley & Finley, 1999). Participant voices from two or more data sources can be interwoven to (a) offer triangulation, (b) highlight disconfirming evidence through juxtaposition, (c) exhibit collective story creation through multiple perspectives, and/or (d) condense "real-time" data for purposes of dramatic economy.

In Scene 2 ("I Was Completely Empty") from *Maybe Someday, if I'm Famous*, three participants tell their own versions of the same event in Barry's life. The three voices provide triangulation of data and contribute col-

lectively to the story line. When one participant quotes another, the two voices speak simultaneously. Sandy is his mother; Derek is his high school theatre teacher. Stage directions are omitted from this excerpt for clarity in reading:

BARRY. There was a period during junior high when I had no theatre in my life, didn't have any exposure to it, and I got really heavy into drugs. I was hanging out with the wrong crowd.

SANDY. He was never anti-social, but making the statement—the way he dressed, the way he looked. In fact, some of his junior high teachers would call me and say, "I noticed that he's hanging out with some unsavory characters and I think . . ." you know, that kind of stuff. It was kind of like teaching the dog not to run in the street by getting hit by a car. It was a horrible, painful, awful time. And yet, if it doesn't kill you it'll make you stronger. That's what's happened to Barry.

DEREK. When Barry came to University High School he was on the point of either being a doper or doing something. And I worked really hard with him to get him to stop smoking [pot], to develop a sense of, "Hey, you've got something to work with instead of working against."

BARRY. When I came to University High I saw theatre was something that I knew, something that I was interested in. So I came and I got cast in my first show. I got a lead for my first show which made me think, "Whoa—maybe there's something I'm good at here." And I was in the position where there wasn't anything standing in-between me and theatre because there wasn't anything in my life. Drugs had taken up my whole life. And so as soon as I was ready to get out of that, I mean—theatre helped draw me out of drugs and, in a way, drugs helped draw me into theatre, in that they voided my life of everything else so I was completely empty—completely open towards picking up on theatre.

SANDY. I'll never forget the day Barry said to me,

BARRY AND SANDY. "You know mom, you don't have to buy me all gray and black clothes anymore."

BARRY. I started cleaning up my act, and that had a lot to do with drama because I had something else, and it was almost intoxicating in and of itself. It gave me the strength to get away from that stuff. (Saldaña, 1998b, pp. 92-94)

Dialogue is the playwright's way of showing character *interaction* and *interplay*, terms found regularly in the qualitative research literature. Through dialogue we not only advance the action, we reveal character reaction, the symbolic interactionist's playing field. Actual conversational exchanges are virtually nonexistent in Wolcott's "Brad Trilogy." In the first article of the series, Brad's interview data are assembled into categories. Wolcott relied primarily on narration to share his own perspectives but offered little dialogue spoken directly to Brad. As the adapter (Saldaña & Wolcott, 2001; Wolcott, 2002), I had to fictionalize possible conversations held between the two men and seek Wolcott's approval as a "participant check." Narration to the audience was employed, when necessary, for exposition:

(music up: "Heart of Glass" by Blondie) (HARRY finds a bow saw on the ground, picks it up, looks at it curiously)

HARRY. Literally as well as figuratively, I discovered Brad in my own backyard, unannounced and uninvited. (SLIDE: BRAD's cabin) (BRAD enters, carrying a sapling, stops when he and HARRY see each other; BRAD sets the sapling down, shuts radio music off; they look at each other warily) A 19 year-old had managed to construct a crude but sturdy 10 by 12 foot cabin at a remote corner of my densely wooded, 20-acre home-site, which my partner Norman has shared with me since 1968. He didn't know on whose property he had built his cabin, perhaps hoping he had chosen public land next to mine. (hands BRAD the saw, which he grabs)

BRAD. (defensively, to HARRY) Can I stay? (SLIDE: Early Encounters)

HARRY. (beat, as HARRY looks BRAD over; to audience) I attach great importance to "first impressions." (HARRY stares at BRAD; BRAD starts packing up his tools) At the moment of our first and unexpected meeting, I felt hesitant about allowing him to remain on my land; yet I felt an even greater reluctance in insisting that he leave.

BRAD. (to HARRY) I needed some place to get out of the wind and keep dry. The rent ran out. I knew winter was coming and I'd have to do something.

HARRY. (to audience) He had no money, no job, and no place to go. I couldn't see how I could claim to be any kind of humanitarian and throw him off my property. (SLIDE: Courtesy and Common Sense) (HARRY picks up the sapling and examines it; to BRAD) I guess if you're going to be here, I need to know something about you: Where you're from? What kind of trouble you're in?

BRAD. (takes sapling, saws into it) I'm not in any trouble. I'm not that stupid. I used to live at this end of town; my father still lives here but I never see him. And I've lived in a lot of different places, like California, Portland, out in the country; different places in town, like The Mission—where you had to sing for Jesus before they'd feed you there—a halfway house, reform school.

HARRY. Reform school?

BRAD. (defensively) Yeah, but it wasn't really my fault. (Saldaña & Wolcott, 2001, pp. 8-9)

A playwright must also consider the effects of his or her text on other ethnotheatre collaborators. For the performer, central criteria are whether he or she "feels right" interpreting another's words and finds a flow, logic, or justification for the monologues and dialogue. For the audience, who must be engaged throughout the event, the central criterion is, "Do I care what these characters have to say?" It is difficult to articulate and oversystematize the creative processes employed when constructing monologues and dialogue because playwriting is both a craft and an art. But always remember, the ultimate sin of theatre is to bore, and only a self-indulgent playwright refuses to edit lengthy text from initial and postperformance drafts.

## SCENOGRAPHY<sup>7</sup>—"THINK DISPLAY"

Plays are not meant for reading only; scripts are written specifically for performance in front of an audience. Just as the late Miles and Huberman

coined, "Think display," a popular playwriting adage for ethnodramatists is, "Don't tell it, show it." If the consequent monologue and dialogue consist of people merely talking, then why bother using the visual medium of the stage? Why not convert it to radio drama or reader's theatre—both valid modes but whose focus is on language (e.g., "teacher talk") not action.<sup>8</sup> And because ethnography analyzes participants in action, there are things to show on stage: descriptive replication with subtextual inferences of the way participants facially react, walk, gesture, pose, dress, vocally inflect, and interact with others. These nonverbal cues reveal much about characters—and real people.

Scenography establishes time and place of a play, evokes mood, and serves the required action of characters. This article cannot discuss in depth the potential of costumes (participant clothing), hand properties (artifacts), or scenery, lighting, and sound (the fieldwork environment) to enhance the ethnographic performance. But from my own experience, I offer the classic design adage for guidance: "Less is more." A projected slide of Brad's cabin in Harry's woodlands is easier to create than rebuilding the actual cabin to scale and mounting it onstage (see Figure 1). Though the latter would be ideal for a production with an unlimited budget, the former is sufficient and much less expensive and time consuming—especially for a tour.

I prioritize two scenographic elements in my ethnotheatrical work because they're the most accessible to produce and the most revealing about characters: hand properties and costumes. The artifacts participants handle in the field are rich visual material for transfer onto the stage: Barry's play scripts, his theatre teacher's clipboard, Brad's hand tools and broken bicycle, and Harry's note pad and index cards. All of these items are central to these people's actual ways of working. The artifacts' presence and use by actors portraying the characters provide small-scale visual spectacle yet strong inferences for an audience. Likewise, most audience members have an intuitive "fashion literacy," and we infer personality from the way people dress on stage as well as in everyday life. Barry wore T-shirts and baggy pants to school almost every day, so these became the basic costume elements for the actor. The "look" suggested youth, informality, and unpretentiousness. Brad's "jungle boy" existence in the woods was reinforced through flannel shirts in natural colors, faded blue jeans, and hiking boots. The muscularity and sexuality of the participant were enhanced through tight-fitting clothing and strategic unbuttoning.

## A CALL FOR COLLABORATION AND QUALITY IN ETHNOTHEATRE

Qualitative researchers and theatre artists serve each other through collaborative development and presentation of ethnographic performance texts. Scholars in ethnography have much to contribute to those initially educated



**Figure 1:** Harry (David Vining, left) and Brad's (Charles Banaszewski) first encounter by the cabin in Saldaña and Wolcott's (2001) *Finding My Place: The Brad Trilogy* (premiere performance: February 15, 2001, at Arizona State University)

as artists, and artists well versed in the creative process and products of theatre have much to offer ethnographers. Both disciplines, after all, share a common goal: to create a unique, insightful, and engaging text about the human condition. Elsewhere, I noted how theatre practitioners, through the nature of their training, possess several prerequisite skills for qualitative inquiry and thus ethnodrama and ethnotheatre, including (a) the ability to analyze characters and dramatic texts, which transfers to analyzing interview transcripts and field notes for participant actions and relationships; (b) enhanced emotional sensibility, enabling empathic understanding of participants' perspectives; (c) scenographic literacy, which heightens the visual analysis of field-work settings, space, artifacts, participant dress, and so forth; and (d) an aptitude for storytelling, in its broadest sense, which transfers to the writing of engaging narratives and their presentation in performance (Saldaña, 1999, p. 68).

There have been various ethnographic-based performances at conferences whose scripts, to my knowledge, haven't proceeded into published form.<sup>9</sup> Mary A. Preisinger, Celeste Schroeder, and Karen Scott-Hoy's (2000) interdisciplinary arts performance, *What Makes Me? Stories of Motivation, Morality and Me*, at the 2000 American Educational Research Association Arts-Based Research Conference serves as one example. The three women explored

Scott-Hoy's researcher struggles during her social work with the Aborigines through mounted paintings, monologue, and dance. The event, scheduled as a breakout session in a space smaller than a standard school classroom, was one of the most aesthetically rich and emotionally evocative productions I've ever witnessed. When Mary and Celeste illustrated through dance the tensions between a participant and researcher during an interview, the meanings they suggested through elegant choreography were visually stunning. Karen's narrative on her emotional struggles with participants and herself was performed with riveting, confessional sincerity. This modest interdisciplinary arts production literally led me to tears. Truth and art, in all their magnitude, were captured that day for me without the bulky trappings of scenography or the contemporary dazzle of technology.

The critical factor that made the event so moving was the three women's backgrounds—they were not just researchers; they were artists. Their education in dance, visual art, music, and theatre gave them a performative edge over well-meaning researchers who attempt theatrical presentation but who lack fundamental skills with play production including the actor's expressive tools: the body and voice. Just as no one wants to read mediocre research, no one wants to sit through mediocre theatre. Most playwrights don't enact their own scripts; they rely on collaborative efforts with directors, actors, and designers to realize their visions.<sup>10</sup> Each artist brings his or her own talents and gifts to the mix whose whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In other words, I'm advocating for quality in our arts-based qualitative work and recommend more collaborative efforts between theatre artists and researchers for ethnotheatrical production.

## CONCLUSION

The "reality-based" mounting of human life on stage is a risky enterprise. Unlike the distancing one may experience when reading a journal article in private, the live performance (if well produced) with live actors (if well rehearsed) before a live audience (if well engaged) intensifies the representation (Mieniczakowski, Smith, & Morgan, 2002). The successful reenactment of nonfictional events exposes both the fieldwork experiences and the fieldworker himself or herself to empathetic spectator involvement and value-laden public scrutiny, depending on the content (e.g., abortion, racism, homelessness).<sup>11</sup> Both the researcher and audience gain understandings not possible through conventional qualitative data analysis, writing, and presentation from ethnotheatre's artistic rigor and representational power.

Research literature in qualitative methods has focused on storytelling as a model for writing and reporting. But theatre in the western world has been telling stories for more than 2,500 years and, more often than not, represent-

ing social life on stage—interpreted artistically by playwrights and actors with perceptive insight into the human condition. Playwrights are, and always have been, ethnodramatists. Virtually every subject researched through ethnography has already been examined in a play or documentary for the stage, screen, or television.<sup>12</sup> But there is still a need for more good scripts in both theatre and qualitative inquiry. If all playwrights are ethnodramatists, then all ethnographers have the potential to become playwrights. The best lens for fieldwork views human action “dramatically” (Goodall, 2000, p. 116).

## NOTES

1. Theatre, not theater, is the preferred and “correct” spelling among most practitioners of the art form in the United States. Goldstein’s (2001) article on ethnodrama appeared in print immediately after this submission’s second draft was mailed to the guest editors. Any similarities in concepts and language between our two pieces are purely coincidental.

2. Theory is important and has its place, but critical, theoretical applications possess little utility during the stress-laden process of theatrical production and may even suppress creative impulses for some. This article focuses primarily on practitioners’, not theorists’, contributions.

3. McCall (2000) profiled earlier works plus contemporary ventures into performance art (Gómez-Peña, 2000; Varner, 2000). In this article, I focus on the realistic, naturalistic, and presentational genres of drama for ethnotheatre due to length restrictions. See Paget (1985), Gray, Ivonoffski, and Sinding (2002), and Rogers, Frellick, and Babinski (2002) for pragmatic advice on writing ethnodrama.

4. I recommend in vivo coding for the data analytic process leading to ethnodrama. Because monologue and dialogue are two fundamental components of playwriting, in vivo codes may highlight particular passages from transcripts and field notes worth including in the script.

5. This advice may sound highly prescriptive, but most professional playwrights attest to the necessity of a solid framework, regardless of how the idea for a drama was first inspired.

6. See Glesne (1999, pp. 183-187) for a comparable method, “poetic transcription,” and Ollerenshaw et al. (2001) for “restorying.” Extracting and composing ethnodrama from a data corpus, like qualitative data analysis, are a carefully considered yet highly creative cut and paste operation (Patton, 2002, p. 442).

7. Scenography refers to the total visual and aural conception for theatrical productions and includes the constituent elements of scenery, set and hand properties, costumes, makeup, lighting, sound, and technology.

8. I am concerned with an overreliance on reader’s theatre as a genre for ethnographic performance. Granted, reader’s theatre is more portable and less expensive than a fully mounted theatrical production, particularly at conferences where the venues are breakout rooms of unpredictable size. But the mode presents primarily what we heard in the field, not what we saw.



9. Indeed, ventures into dance and visual art defy textual representation and necessitate technologically appropriate documentation such as CD-ROM, video, or Web site.

10. Recent ventures into one-person, autobiographical performance are the exception (see Note 12 for examples).

11. The February 23, 2001, performance of *Finding My Place: The Brad Trilogy* at the Edmonton, Alberta Advances in Qualitative Methods Conference reinforced how powerfully theatre can provoke diverse and passionate reactions to a study's content and issues. It also reinforced how the playwright's vision and intentions, and selected audience members' responses, may be in total opposition (Ocklander & Östlund, 2001; Schreiber, Rodney, Brown, & Varcoe, 2001; cf. Honeychurch, 1998). Wolcott tells us in the "Prologue" to the ethnodrama, "No two individuals ever get exactly the same message," and in Scene 2, "Some will hear only the story they want to hear" (Saldaña & Wolcott, 2001). What some audience members interpreted as "unethical" behavior between an ethnographer and his case study, others perceived as "a love story" and "a caring relationship" between two consenting adults. When some audience members interpreted the researcher-participant dynamic as an "abuse of power," I sensed in them an inability (or, at worst, a homophobic unwillingness) to understand the gay/bisexual characters' points of view. This feedback motivated postproduction rewrites of the script to clarify and reinforce the playwright's perspectives for future productions (Wolcott, 2002).

12. Playwriting instructors also assign play reading to study exemplars of the art and craft. Literary/commercial play scripts serve as models and stimuli for developing original ethnographic performance texts. I recommend the following titles from dramatic literature but advise you to stay away from their film adaptations. The playwright's original conception and structure of the script may have been altered for the media. For autoethnography models, read Bonney (2000), Hughes and Román (1998), Leguizamo (1997), Martin (1983), and Wagner (1986). For models that examine a principal investigator's relationship with participants, read Medoff (1980), Pielmeier (1982), and Shaffer (1974). For models that incorporate participant interviews into fictionalized assembly, read Bennett, Kirkwood, and Kleban (1995); Nelson (2002); Terkel (1978); and Hoffman (1985). For a model of verbatim interview transcript excerpts as performance pieces, read Smith (1993, 1994). For a model that displays ways of presenting correspondence data, read Gurney (1989). For models that include a narrator as a key figure, read Wilder (1960) and Williams (1976).

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