

17 Participatory theatre

'Creating a source for staging an example' in the USA

Marie Cieri and Robbie McCauley

Introduction

For both of us (Robbie, an African-American theatre artist and academic, and Marie, a white American arts producer turned geographer and academic), the creation and presentation of theatre is a site of Participatory Action Research (PAR). Artists and researchers in collaboration with diverse individuals and groups can produce Participatory Theatre (PT) to explore questions of importance to their communities and to initiate a process of dialogue and interaction that can effect change at a broader scale. In our experience, the means and aesthetic of PT can play a vital role in changing how people think about, and act upon, social and political relationships within their communities.

Our work in PT is typified by the *Primary Sources* series, which took place in three areas of the United States in the 1990s and emanated from a shared impulse to talk about race through theatre. *Primary Sources* took several large, charged and remembered events (the early 1960s voting rights struggle in Mississippi; the mid-1970s school desegregation controversy in Boston; and the 1969 Black Panther Party–Los Angeles Police Department conflict in Los Angeles) and sought to explore the many important but untold stories surrounding them.¹ Collection and discussion of these stories formed the basis of our work in collaboration with residents of various racial and/or ethnic, class, age and educational backgrounds in each location. In previous work, as well as for *Primary Sources*, we developed repeatable processes and guiding principles informed by sustained artistic practice and shared interest in the subject matter (see Boxes 17.1 and 17.2).

Much of what follows, however, is excerpted from our dialogues about PT in Boston in July 2006, mirroring the fact that dialogue forms the basis of our work together as well as with others.

In the beginning

ROBBIE: It was the late 1980s, and I remember being stunned when you said race is something white people don't talk about. I knew, and didn't know, that was true. My prejudice made me think, 'It's something white people *dare* not talk about.' White people, I thought, were still walking around not having dealt

Box 17.1 Typical participatory theatre processes

Origins

- PT is grounded in sustained artistic practice
- PT artist-researchers are dedicated to making theatre informed by material compelling to participants and their community or communities.

Preparation

- Identify research location and topic
- Talk to local theatre people and potential community partners
- Seek funding and in-kind support (actor-collaborators will be paid for their work, affirming the value of their contribution and the community stories they tell)
- Basic tool: audio recorder

Script development

- Recruit actor-collaborators through people you know or locate at local arts, educational and community organisations
- Start PT with repeatable processes:
 - ‘Talk-about’s’ focus on the event and why it was chosen
 - Actor-collaborators and artist/researcher(s) record interviews with local citizens who have stories about the event and its aftermath
 - Hold story circles where collaborators dialogue about the stories collected and add their own material (minimum 12 hours per week for three weeks), all recorded.
 - Scripts are developed from transcriptions and shaped by artist/researcher(s) in collaboration with actors in a narrative collage informed by jazz rhythms.

Rehearsal, performance and purpose

- Rehearsals proceed from talk-about’s (minimum 12 hours per week for two weeks). Music, movement, set design added as budget allows
- Actor-collaborators variously play themselves as well as other characters
- Modes for addressing the audience with subtlety and/or directness are proposed. Goal is to engage audiences theatrically as well as inspire more stories and dialogue about the targeted event and its legacy
- Performance spaces are secured in places where stories resonate
- With the help of actor-collaborators and others in the community, word is spread on the ground and in the media about the performances

Source: Authors’ own experiences

with their internalised sense of supremacy. But I found myself speaking my thoughts out loud, and you were listening intently. I was vulnerable to the questions of class and individuality you were raising. We were two mature black and white people having an intense public conversation about race in a

restaurant. Theatrically for me, the simplicity of what we were doing – the conversational music we were playing – was inspiring.

MARIE: I was at a conference recently where a woman spoke about wanting to create bridges between Muslim and white working-class youth, but not knowing how to approach those two groups as a white academic. I've found it's important to have a partner to connect me to the issues in a way I can't by myself, especially if I'm trying to cross lines of social, political and economic difference and truly participate in a movement towards positive social change. Her dilemma made me think about how you and I started working together. There had been things about racism in my life I had wanted to address, and then I saw one of your performances, and it was both so political and so personal. I knew then that I wanted to work with you if you were willing. And

Box 17.2 Principles that guide us

These are not hard and fast rules, but ones that can inform PAR as practised through theatre. Such repeatable guidelines are needed for the process to do what it will and to release us from focusing on the end product so much.

Commitment and respect

The artist-researchers and the community commit to the process and agree to consider differences and transformation as core values.

Humility and connection

Stories are celebrated as being both personal and bigger than any one individual (i.e., it's not just your story).

Subjectivity and objectivity

Subjective understandings and perspectives are as valuable as apparent objectivity.

Listening and hearing

These strenuous and essential practices heighten the physical, mental and sensory aspects of being present with, and paying attention to, what others are saying. Attention to content and presence with one another make for dynamic dialogue that can crack walls between people. Wilful acts of listening and hearing are transmissible to audiences and can provide an example that can transform behaviour.

Collaboration and exchange

Personal exchanges about charged issues during the making of the work are welcome and must be grounded in respect for differences. Such exchanges provide examples for actor-collaborators, researchers and audiences to continue the conversation beyond the performance space, thereby enhancing possibilities for creative social change.

Source: Authors' own experiences. For more guidance on PT, see Boal 1992; Cieri forthcoming; Clark 2002; McCauley 1996; and Rohd 1998

I think the partnership we developed, without us expressly calling attention to it, became a model for our collaborators. Our ongoing dialogue might have made it easier for them to enter into, and engage with, the issues in parallel ways.

ROBBIE: I think PT has to involve each person's own encounter with the subject matter. Our expertise came not only from our past work as artists and our interest in charged material, but also from participating with everyone else in the process of researching and making theatre (Plate 17.1). You, as the producer, were part of those story circles in Mississippi, and whoever was with us – eventually the light people, the sound people – got connected to the subject matter, and some of their stories found their way into the script.

Dialogue

ROBBIE: Dialogue [like in Box 17.3] helps the actors connect with and know each other. It allows the material collected through interviews and story circles to be shared. Sometimes the dialogue that shows up in the script is a result of placing material together aesthetically, jazz-like. But the staging of dialogue among the actors is an attempt to provide an example for talking about



Plate 17.1 Some Mississippi Freedom actor-collaborators and story sources on a road near Jackson, Mississippi, 1992. Left to right: James Green; Veronica Cooper; Leroy Divinity (story source); Kay King Valente; Deborah Imboden; Sameerah Muhammad (partially hidden); Kent Lambert; Clarie Collins Harvey (story source); Sadat Muhammad; Sheila Richardson (Credit: Marie Cieri 1992)

**Box 17.3 Sample from the script of *TURF: A
Conversational Concert in Black and White***

(Actor-collaborators Paula and John were African-American and Irish-American respectively, and Robbie appeared with them in this scene from the Boston segment of *Primary Sources*.)

PAULA: I'm not talking about it as a moral thing or a we-just-got-to-put-up-with-it thing. I'm talking about it as something that is possible. I mean, people sit down and say, 'the world looks like this, why can't my neighbourhood look like this?'

JOHN: Now I can understand other viewpoints. And I would have no objection to seeing changes. But like you say, there is that fear of having such a radical change that it may have such an effect on an individual, a community. As a white person, you'll feel threatened perhaps if you felt uh... like a lot of people fear that the whole South Boston's gonna be black soon. Roxbury at one time... used to be a white community. And I guess the thing is, uh, everything black people touch... goes bad.

ROBBIE (WITH IRONY): Thank you.

Source: Robbie McCauley

charged social, political and historical material that is often not present in regular discourse. We're creating a source for staging an example.

MARIE: Sometimes there's contestation among the actors, between you and the actors, between actors and possible interviewees, and between potential performance co-presenters and me. But this is not something we want to erase.

ROBBIE: We want the dynamic of dialogue around charged issues. However, we're not looking for winners and losers. We're looking for the textures, the rhythms and the dynamics that the material ignites for theatre. We want the audience to be open to what is said through the beauty of the dynamics.

MARIE: But what happens when some of the actor-collaborators don't want to say something on stage because they think they'll appear politically incorrect, or just wrong? How do we bring that disagreement into the participatory mode of creating the work?

ROBBIE: This mostly came up in Los Angeles, and the challenges were around questions like: Are you 'telling it right'? Who's got the 'right, authentic story'? We work at the tensions around authenticity and appropriation as we develop the performance.

MARIE: But there's no final answer given on stage.

ROBBIE: A colleague once said to me that authenticity is everything and authenticity is nothing. It's really about the engagement, the telling. That's why, in this process, the actor-collaborators have to deal with their own questions about who they are to tell the story. They have to come to terms with the fact

that they are not just actors telling the story; they are who they are, with the actor's craft, telling the story.

MARIE: The point is not to get up and tell a single 'right' story. The point is to put often difficult or challenging aspects of community dialogue on stage, to engage audiences in that dialogue and for it to continue after people leave the theatre through the example of what's been put on stage. Then there's the statement often made to us that 'It's better not to talk about it'. In Los Angeles, especially, some felt that talking about law enforcement and the Black Panthers would be incendiary, and some people didn't want *TURF* to be performed in South Boston because they thought it would result in renewed racial violence there. But remember what the director of the South Boston Boys and Girls Club said? He said the young people who come to the club are living in a community whose population is changing, and they're going to have to deal with that sooner or later anyway, so why not through theatre?

Talkbacks

MARIE: Let's discuss the post-performance talkbacks, how they are part of the PAR, how they circle around to affect the presentation on stage, how they're also part of the stories being told.

ROBBIE: We create ways for the actor-collaborators to be present within the talkbacks that are more than just being there. In fact, I'd like to increase the performance aspect of the talkbacks, so that the actors, once they've finished a shaped script, step into a time of improvisation. Then, as in a sing-along or jazz concert, the audience might be engaged in a way of listening and responding, of saying things that are inspired. That happened in Port Gibson, Mississippi, when a minister in the audience got up and quoted scripture in a way that was particular to *Mississippi Freedom* and to which the actors almost said 'Amen'. So what we're looking for is how the aesthetic of PT allows a community to initiate the retelling of its stories, particularly those associated with pain and grief, struggle and triumph. We haven't measured that. But I would bet that much has resonated from those moments of retelling, because unlike television there's breath in them.

MARIE: Are you ever disappointed that the performances don't have a longer run, don't have more of an ongoing, material presence in the places where we present them?

ROBBIE: I'd actually rather hear someone two generations down say, 'My grandfather told me how influential and positive the work of the Black Panther party was in Los Angeles'. What matters is that people in those places continue to tell the stories.

Possibilities for social change

MARIE: For me, theatre can be both a way to conduct research and a way to communicate that research to a larger public, certainly beyond the limits of the

scholarly journal article [see also Cahill and Torre, Chapter 23 in this volume]. In putting the process and results of research on stage, there's the possibility of participation that you don't necessarily get otherwise. Another thing we experienced with *Primary Sources* was how the media, most likely without intent, contributed to the participatory elements of the series, particularly in Boston. For example, *TURF* was on the front page of *The Boston Globe*, it was the subject of several National Public Radio [NPR] reports, and we were later able to produce an NPR version that was broadcast nationally with live call-ins in certain markets. All that effectively extended the dialogue. A newspaper article said, 'One thing is certain, people are talking'. With a participatory project, that's just what you want. And it's not just the participation of the people who made it.

ROBBIE: It's the participation of people we don't know; the performance provides an example, and it reflects more widely.

MARIE: One thing we're increasingly expected to do in academia is measure the impact of what we do [see also Cameron, Chapter 24 in this volume].

ROBBIE: I would rather think of a different kind of work in the academy, other than what we narrowly call academic. I found a surprising connection to other kinds of work when we were doing research for *Sugar* in Ohio.² As a result of being in story circles, people with diabetes promised to take better care of themselves. We now imagine that in the future we could measure if participants were influenced to be more rigorous about their diabetes management by exchanging stories and dialogue in PT. I am interested in how the commitment to speak stories may be measurable as a healing possibility.

MARIE: We certainly know that for some people with whom we worked, especially the actor-collaborators, participation in *Primary Sources* had long-term effects on their thoughts and actions.

ROBBIE: That's the most important thing. Remember Deborah in Mississippi? In the story circles, she was most resistant to the idea that there's anything more to know or change about race in this country. Then, during the time we were working together, she was in a store and noticed that a black man was being treated differently, and badly. She ended up telling that story in the performance.

MARIE: One of the things I remember is Tom from South Boston, and how the experience of being part of *TURF* and expressing group prejudice on stage was a release for him. It enabled him to come out as a gay man in his neighbourhood after living closeted there for years.

ROBBIE: When actor-collaborators spend time with us, calling up visions from community memories, they are able to generate connections with the wider community about charged subject matters that have been nervously silenced. When audiences see theatre and suspend disbelief for a concentrated period, they are often able to perceive more in 'real' situations.

MARIE: What about fear?

ROBBIE: Sometimes fear is fear! But in acting work, fear is often resistance, and resistance is information, so fear is ... actor material. We talk about it, we tell

stories about it, we name it; we sense it in one another. So the possibility of change is transmitted to audiences through the examples of listening and talking and confronting resistance within the actor-collaborators that they then make visible on stage. That is the hard work.

MARIE: And it has had its effect on people who are interested in speaking across differences within a community. Like at the South Boston performances of *TURF* – an African-American woman from Dorchester said during the talkback that she chose to see the piece there instead of in her neighbourhood because she wanted to take advantage of what she considered a rare opportunity to come to South Boston, to see a performance about race relations there, and then, potentially face-to-face, hear what a white person who had been involved in or had supported anti-bussing activities might have to say. And it seemed to be liberating for everyone.

One more dialogue

ROBBIE: The visions of the work are short- and long-term. We have witnessed responses to the work that are immediately poetic, refreshingly emotional and reflect possibilities for social change.

MARIE: In the course of doing this work, were there some particular surprises that moved it forward?

ROBBIE: The one I think of is Kent telling that story in Jackson, Mississippi, about the 'blue-gum niggers',³ how that became one of the jokes, one of the serious and releasing jokes of Mississippi Freedom, how absolutely excruciating it was for him to tell that story, and how receiving of it all the cast members were, particularly the African-Americans.

MARIE: Yeah, it gives me goose bumps ...

ROBBIE: And who could have made that up? I mean, nobody could have made up the response to it. The story itself was hard enough ...

MARIE: A sigh of relief went up from the audience.

ROBBIE: I think they got it: that transformation could happen to this mature man who had been carrying this racist story around with him all these years, and that the African-American members of the cast had sympathy for him.

MARIE: The self-proclaimed 'Mississippi redneck'.

ROBBIE: Yeah, who was telling the charged and previously unspeakable story of how he was taught to be racist.

Conclusion

Public officials and others often state, 'We don't know how to talk about race'. Yet theatre based in dialogue allows ranges of feelings and thoughts to breathe among different people. We have found that at best talking is healing and at least it can shift views beautifully. Many have asked us if we consider our work political theatre. Of course it is, since we certainly have points of view about the subject matter. Also, we trust that interactions fostered through the work, involving people

from diverse backgrounds in particular places, provide examples for useful discourse around difficult subjects. We like using theatre, while cultivating its aesthetics, to share research and to extend awareness of history and charged social dynamics to a large and targeted public. We have also witnessed its efficacy in continuing difficult conversations and in drawing individuals toward personal change. We continue to be impressed by the effect PT has on interviewees, actor-collaborators and audiences. The relief many have expressed to us is gratifying, whether they wanted their stories used or not, and measurable only in the warmth of the exchange. We remain interested in shaping and framing atmospheres for sharing stories and dialogues and find a PAR approach helpful. When collaborators and audiences can come together and be struck differently by the same charged material, our work is successful. A final stunning example is an on-stage reminiscence by Ona, an actor-collaborator playing herself in *Mississippi Freedom*: 'I travel a lot, and whenever I fly back into Mississippi, I look down and see the trees, the red clay hills, the church steeples, and I think "Oh, how beautiful, how beautiful"... and then I remember the horrors.'

Almost always greeted with silence, then thunderous applause, Ona's statement encapsulates the poetry and the promise that PT offers to those interested in taking up its challenges.

Notes

- 1 *Mississippi Freedom* was performed in six locations in Mississippi and in modified form in Houston, TX, and New York, NY. We presented *TURF: A Conversational Concert in Black and White* in the Boston neighbourhoods of the South End, Charlestown, Dorchester and South Boston; a radio version was aired on dozens of National Public Radio stations across the US with live call-ins in several markets. *The Other Weapon* was performed in the South Central, Inglewood and Westwood sections of Los Angeles as well as in Hollywood.
- 2 Our most recent collaboration is *Sugar*, a work-in-progress dealing with complex issues of life and death surrounding the prevalence of diabetes within communities of colour. We worked on the piece in collaboration with local residents during a residency on the Ohio State University campus and in the surrounding Columbus, OH, area in January 2006.
- 3 As an improvisation, Kent told the story of how he and his friends as teenagers would cruise through town looking for dark-skinned black youth, whom they called 'blue-gummed niggers', to beat up. Kent said light-skinned blacks, or 'red-gummed niggers,' were less frequently their targets.