Theatre and Learning

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Edited by

Art Babayants

and Heather Fitzsimmons Frey

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In Memory of Luella (Lou) Massey
1953-2013

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Part II. Risking

Part III. Re-Imagining

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

CONTRIBUTORS

Mary Elizabeth Anderson is an Assistant Professor of Theatre at Wayne State University in the United States. Her research explores dimensions of popular participation in performance, focusing on placemaking, teaching artistry and reflective practice. She has written essays for journals such as *Research in Drama Education* (*RiDE*), *Teaching Artist Journal*, *International Journal of Education and the Arts* and *Body, Space & Technology.* Her monograph, *Meeting Places: Locating Desert Consciousness in Performance*, is a meditation on place-based performance practices in the Australian Central Desert. With Doug Risner, she co-edited *Hybrid Lives of Teaching Artists in Dance and Theatre Arts: A Critical Reader* (Cambria, 2014).

Art Babayants is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Toronto, Canada. His thesis research looks into the practice of actors learning to perform in their non-dominant language(s). He is also the founder and the artistic director of *The Toronto Laboratory Theatre*, an open creative collective that focuses on the projects that invites combinations, often unorthodox, of theatre practice and theatre research: www.torontolab.org

George Belliveau is Professor of Theatre/Drama Education at the University of British Columbia, Canada. His research interests include research-based theatre, drama and social justice, drama and L2 learning, drama across the curriculum, drama and health research and Canadian theatre. His scholarly and creative writing can found in various arts-based and theatre education journals, along with chapters in edited books. His most recent book *Stepping into Drama: A Midsummer Night's Dream in the Elementary Classroom* is published by Pacific Educational Press (2014).

Antje Budde is an Associate Professor and the current Associate Director (graduate) at the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies (CDTPS) at the University of Toronto. Between 2005 and 2012 she was cross-appointed with the Centre for Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto. Antje studied at Humboldt-University in Berlin and at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing. As both a scholar and artistic practitioner she integrates her research interests in both arenas of knowledge

production based on curiosity, playfulness, collaboration, experimentation and concerns for social justice. Her main interests are cross-cultural experimental theatre, performances of queer feminism, digital culture in and through performance, media politics and cultural communication.

Heather Fitzsimmons Frey is a director, dramaturge, and PhD Candidate at the University of Toronto Centre for Drama, Theatre, and Performance Studies. Her dissertation research examines girlhood identity and re-imagining their possible futures through at-home theatricals in middle-class Victorian England. She has published in *Canadian Theatre Review* and *Youth Theatre Journal* and has a chapter in *Nationalism and Youth in Theatre and Performance* (Routledge, 2014). She is editing an anthology of theatrical performances created for young people in unconventional ways called *Ignite* (Playwrights Canada Press, 2015).

Barry Freeman is an Assistant Professor in Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Toronto Scarborough and the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies. Barry is an Executive Editor of *Theatre Research in Canada,* Associate Editor of *Canadian Theatre Review,* and has two ongoing book projects: *Staging Strangers: Theatre & Global Ethics,* and *Why Theatre Now: On the Virtue and Value of Canadian Theatre in the New Millennium,* a collection co-edited with Kathleen Gallagher.

Kathleen Gallagher is a Professor and Canada Research Chair at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, conducting research in urban schools. Her books include, *Why Theatre Matters: Urban Youth, Engagement, and a Pedagogy of the real* (University of Toronto Press, 2014); *The Theatre of Urban: Youth and Schooling in Dangerous Times* (University of Toronto Press, 2007) *Drama Education in the Lives of Girls: Imagining Possibilities* (University of Toronto Press, 2000). Her edited collections include: *Why Theatre Now: On the virtue and value of Canadian theatre in the new millennium (forthcoming with Barry Freeman)*; *Drama and Theatre in Urban Contexts.* (with Jonothan Neelands, Routledge, 2013); *How Theatre Educates: Convergences and Counterpoints with Artists, Scholars, and Advocates* (with David Booth, University of Toronto, 2003), *The Methodological Dilemma: Creative, Critical and Collaborative Approaches to Qualitative Research* (Routledge, 2008).

James McKinnon is a theatre scholar, director, and educator and is Programme Director of the Victoria University of Wellington Theatre Programme. His research focuses on adaptation, particularly contemporary

appropriations of canonical classics, as well as the pedagogical applications of adaptation-based dramaturgy. His work has appeared in recent issues of *Theatre Research in Canada*, the *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, *Canadian Theatre Review*, *Teaching Learning Inquiry*, and the recent anthology *Adapting Chekhov: The Text and Its Mutations*. At VUW in 2011, he teaches courses in dramaturgy, modern and postmodern drama, and dramatic theory and criticism, and has directed two original theatre productions: *Shit Show* (2012), inspired by Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, and *Mystery Play* (2013), derived from the English liturgical plays and other sources.

Rhona Matheson is the Director of Starcatchers in Scotland. She studied Scottish History and Theatre Studies at the University of Glasgow graduating in 1999. She has worked with 7:84 Theatre Company (Scotland), lookOUT Theatre Company, and Wee Stories, a company specialising in storytelling theatre for children and families. In 2006, Rhona was appointed the Project Manager of the pilot Starcatchers project based at North Edinburgh Arts in Muirhouse, Edinburgh. Since then, she has driven the development of Starcatchers' work, including the facilitation and delivery of 9 residency project based in a range of arts and community settings, producing more than 25 productions which have toured to venues across Scotland, the UK and internationally and working with colleagues to pioneer programmes of Creative Skills Development for Early Years Practitioners. She is regularly invited to speak throughout the UK and internationally about early years theatre and arts.

Helen Nicholson is Professor of Theatre and Performance at Royal Holloway, University of London where she specialises in applied theatre and contemporary performance. Helen is co-editor of *RiDE: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, and the author of several books in applied and educational theatre including *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre* (second edition, 2014) and *Theatre, Education and Performance*, (2011). Helen is currently leading a major research project on Amateur Theatre.

Suzanne Osten is a Swedish, multi-award winning director and writer of theatre and film, for adult and child audiences. Between 1975 and 2014 she was the artistic director of Unga Klara, an innovative theatre company for young people whose controversial works include *Medea's Children* (Medeas Barn), co-authored by Per Lysander, and *Babydrama* with Ann-Sofie Bárámy. Her work has raised the status of theatre for children worldwide. Among her many honours, she received an honorary doctorate

from Lund University (2002), an ASSITEJ medal (2002) and a Swedish government medal (2014).

Mia Perry is the Research Director at the **ecl** foundation and visiting Research Fellow at Trinity College Dublin. Her work is positioned in the intersections of education, the arts, and philosophy. Mia's background ranges from community theatre in rural Ireland, to training and scholarship in Dublin, Moscow, London, and Vancouver, and theatre practice, teaching, and research in varied contexts in Ireland, Canada, and Scotland. Previous to her current position, Mia was an Assistant Professor in applied theatre and arts education at the University of Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada. She has published widely in the areas of post structural research methodologies and drama and theatre education.

Monica Prendergast is Associate Professor of drama/theatre education at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, Canada. Her co-authored and edited books with Juliana Saxton, *Applied Theatre* (2009) and *Applied Drama* (2013), have both received the Distinguished Book Award from the American Alliance for Theatre Education. Her research interests include audience education and spectatorship, performance studies in education, and utopian thinking in drama education and applied theatre. Monica's work has appeared in many key journals, edited collections and research handbooks in her interdisciplinary fields. Monica's current funded research involves co-designing a performance studies curriculum for secondary level students.

Michelle Raquel is a Senior Lecturer at Lingnan University, Hong Kong. She has directed and co-directed numerous theatre productions at both secondary and tertiary levels including *The Tempest* and *Disney's Aladdin Jr.* Publications include "Theatre Production as a Language Learning Environment for Chinese Students" in *Drama and Theatre Education in Asia*, and (with Sivanes Phillipson) "The enhancement of socially constructed concepts of learning in a theatre production" in the *International Journal of Language, Society and Culture.* Her PhD thesis investigated second language learning of HK tertiary students engaged in a theatre production of *Living with Lady Macbeth.*

Rohan Reilly is a landscape photographer based in West Cork, Ireland. Smooth compositions, clean lines, and strong shapes characterise Rohan's work. He works primarily in black and white, a first step away from reality and into an otherworldly atmosphere. His images evoke senses of serenity, solitude, melancholy, hope and wonder, or a combination of these whilst still

retaining an earthy and organic feel. He is widely recognised as one of the best b/w photographers in Ireland and has won many international awards. His work has been published in the Sunday Times, the Irish Independent and numerous magazines, and has been exhibited in Ireland and the UK.

Cassandra Silver is a PhD candidate at the University of Toronto's Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies. Her SSHRC-supported dissertation project explores the application of interactive technologies and video games in live performance. Before undertaking her current program, she completed her undergraduate and Master's degrees at the Universities of Ottawa and Alberta, respectively. She steps away from her writing to teach, recently at the Universities of Toronto and Waterloo, and for creative work, like her latest projects at Toronto's Summerworks and the Ottawa Fringe Festival.

Ralph Upton completed his Honours BA in Theatre Studies at Victoria University of Wellington in 2008. In the same year he formed Binge Culture Collective, who make rough-edged, non-narrative devised work. Their website is www.bingeculture.co.nz. He is a tutor, director and workshop leader in the Victoria University Theatre programme. In 2015, Ralph and Binge Culture will travel to New York to perform at La Mama.

Amanda C. Wager is an Assistant Professor at Lesley University, where she prepares teachers to integrate the arts within TESOL and literacy education. As an educator and researcher she has used drama and theatre while working with diverse populations of children, youth, and adults within formal and informal learning environments. She has presented and published internationally on her research interests, which include feminist pedagogy, applied theatre, drama-in-education, youth studies, civic engagement, and additional language learning. Amanda's passion lies in building safe spaces in which individuals can creatively and critically co-construct pedagogy.

Belarie Zatzman is Associate Professor of Theatre at York University. Zatzman's research focuses on theatre for young audiences; history, memory and drama education; artistic practices and identity; narrative inquiry; and Holocaust education through the fine arts. Publications include: "Canadian Jewish Performance"— the first collection of criticism on Jewish performance in Canada (2013); "Drama Education and Memory" (*Key Concepts in Theatre/Drama Education*, 2011); and "Fifty-one Suitcases: Traces of Hana Brady and the Terezin Children" (*Canadian Theatre Review*, 2009).

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Last but not least, our biggest thank you goes to all our authors for their contributions to this volume and to Caroline Reich for her phenomenal proofreading and editing efforts.

THEATRE AND LEARNING: UNWILLINGLY SEARCHING FOR TENSIONS

AN ALMOST UNNECESSARY INTRODUCTION BY ART BABAYANTS AND HEATHER FITZSIMMONS FREY

Art: When in June 2013 I was visiting my sister's family, residing in Moscow, Russia, I couldn't help but seize the opportunity to see as much theatre as possible. June is the time when the famous Moscow International Chekhov festival is in full bloom and thousands of theatre-goers fill local theatre venues. My sister has two kids, who were 9 and 7 at that point, and I, a theatre scholar and theatre lover, felt it was my utmost responsibility to take them to the theatre. Moscow, one of the theatre centres of the world, has more than 160 professional repertory theatre companies, and most have their own theatre buildings—sometimes two or even three. The number of amateur or semi-professional companies is next to impossible to calculate. The range of theatres that target young audiences is no less impressive: anything from "academic" (which means professional or "of high calibre" in the local theatre lingo) puppet theatres, musical theatres to drama theatres is on the offer. Luckily, late June is the time when theatres tend to conclude their seasons for the summer break, which made my choice far easier. On the very last day of its season, the Gorky Moscow Art Theatre[1] was showing its almost ageless creation: Maeterlinck's *Blue Bird*, one of the original directors of which was none other but Konstantin Stanislavsky himself. What an incredible opportunity it was to see a production originally conceived in the times of early Modernism!

This spectacular, even opulent, two-hour long production of a highly complex Symbolist play turned out to be interesting and engaging, despite the visibly worn-out set and costumes. How does an adult measure engagement? Perhaps, by the amount of labour s/he should put in in order to keep the minors busy. My nephew, who, as I suspect, suffers from a mild form of ADD, was able to keep himself in his seat for two straight hours without causing any major destruction to either the theatre building

or the theatrical process unfolding on stage. He empathized with the characters, he lived through the plot—my cunningly devised comprehension questions that I posed post-show—confirmed his full understanding of the story. My niece wasn't able to take her eyes off the stage either. There was no direct audience interaction, no cheap tricks of forcing the audience to "decide the fate of a character" and no simplistic moralizing at the end of the production. In fact, the Stanislavskian fourth wall couldn't have felt any stronger. The acting was on a par with regular professional Moscow productions oriented toward adults. It was almost impossible to conceive how a show that had hardly changed in a hundred years, when performed in an entirely different sociocultural context, could enthral, engage and entertain adults and children alike. More importantly, it had sufficient teaching-learning potential. Being a theatre scholar, who is supposed to be proverbially bored by most live performance, I also managed to enjoy the production and learn something from it. For instance, I learned through direct experience what Stanislavsky and Sulerzhitsky's first attempts to stage symbolism could have looked like. A unique, nuanced and highly enjoyable lesson in theatre history that one would not be able to receive from any books, courses or conferences!

A few months later, back home in Toronto, I was invited to see another production that was billed as theatre for young audiences (TYA). For the purposes of brevity and ethics, I will omit the name of the company and the title of the show. Suffice it to say, I left the theatre utterly unimpressed. Not only did I learn nothing, I felt incredibly betrayed and annoyed, as I observed the swarms of school kids flocking out of the theatre and discussing things completely unrelated to the stage production they had just witnessed. A lot of them were yawning, too. If there was any learning that happened in that theatre it was that "theatre is boring." This completely unscholarly and possibly superficial observation of mine corresponds well with the question that many of my non-theatre friends pose to me over and over again: "What is it that you find in the theatre that we don't?" Sadly, my friends' childhood and sometimes adult memories of TYA (and not only TYA) are often marred by stupefyingly dull shows which commonly use a condescending tone. After those traumatic theatre experiences, my friends have a right to ask why they should go to the theatre ever again.

It is anguished questions like these that urged us to propose a conference focusing not on the obvious positive connections between theatrical activity (of any kind) and the process of learning, but more on the problems, tensions, ruptures, failures and difficulties that learning through theatre, learning about theatre and learning for theatre may

involve. Instead of hearing how successful this or that show or this or that applied theatre project was, we were more interested in how the actual learning was happening and what stumbling points were encountered by those involved. We wanted to question what "success" meant, especially in the fields of theatre and drama education, applied theatre and TYA.

The conference, officially called Festival of Original Theatre (F.O.O.T.)[2] and thematically centred on the idea of Theatre and Learning, took place in February 2012 at the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Toronto (Ontario, Canada) and attracted about two hundred participants from seven different countries, but mostly theatre educators, scholars and practitioners living and working in Canada. It also included two academic keynote speakers (Kathleen Gallagher and Helen Nicholson) and one artistic keynote speaker (Suzanne Osten), all of whom were kind enough to contribute to this volume, too. The participants enjoyed four days of workshops, conference papers, performances, round table talks, communal lunches and informal conversations. In a way, Heather and I were trying to create a Vygotskian collective zone of proximal development—a space of potentiality where everyone could advance their knowledge or skill level to heights unreachable without the help of peers. They also experienced moments of subversion and instances of uneasiness and tension, some of which, just as we hoped, became potential precursors to learning.

As the conference progressed, more and more tensions emerged: an artist refused to be constrained by the academic genre of paper presentation and turned her presentation into a film demonstration followed by an uneasy and lengthy discussion with the audience. An applied linguist attending the conference confided in me that she had been deeply disappointed by what is generally called research in applied theatre and how it was presented at the conference. Two education professors begrudgingly protested against an attempt by two other professors to restrain a highly diverse web of applied theatre practices to a seemingly neat and highly coherent classification.

As it turned out, we also had some learning to do. It is the F.O.O.T. participants that taught us to be more disruptive and more critical of our own choices. We originally conceived our conference comprised of neat packages that followed many commonly acceptable research themes: TYA, applied theatre practices, learning from performance, learning to perform... And then we discovered that we, the mildly bored theatre scholars, could be as engaged by "babydrama", an artistic practice that our artistic keynote, the Swedish director Suzanne Osten introduced. The very concept of TYA—a theatre that should be age-specific—crumbled before

our own eyes as we observed both six month old babies and their parents transfixed by a screening of a theatrical performance unfolding at Osten's Unga Klara theatre in Stockholm, Sweden.

Later on, the imaginary wall separating applied theatre from "real" theatre came down, too, shattering our hope to find any cohesion in the complex relationship between theatre and learning. As theatre professionals reflected upon their experimental work and the learning that they had to do along with their audiences, it became clear to them and to us that they were also doing "applied" work. We were certainly not the first to share that sentiment. Kathleen Gallagher in her conversation with Canadian theatre artist Ann-Marie MacDonald mentions: "I have never been particularly convinced by theatre education as a genre, divorced from the larger tradition of theatre in general" (247). Why, then, do we need to separate those artificially created but widely acceptable constructs if we can find deeper and more interesting connections that can describe our contributors' work?

Luckily for the reader, this volume does not follow the conventionality of our original thinking. First of all, it isn't even the ubiquitous conference proceedings but rather reflections on the conference and reflections beyond the conference. Some contributors to this book (such as James McKinnon, Ralph Upton, Antje Budde and Michelle Raquel) did not present their papers at F.O.O.T. 2012. However, we felt that their work would add to the variety and complexity of the discussion or, rather, discussions, presented here. Similarly, the two interviews with theatre artists that we added to the volume were not technically part of the original conference, yet, they were a necessary addition in that they offered the artists' perspective on their own learning as well the learning of that their collaborators and audiences had to do. We also tried to challenge the North American and/or Anglophone bias, which is commonly present at North American conferences—and, in all honesty, we have to admit we could have done a better job on that front: an obvious near-failure that we are not afraid to recognize. I would argue that we probably showed better results at achieving some sort of diversity in terms of academic genres presented in this volume: the reader will notice that some contributions tend to lean more to position papers (Helen Nicholson), some to provocation papers (Antje Budde), some to reflection papers (Kathleen Gallagher) and some are more in line with more conventional research reports (Michelle Raquel). This non-uniformity is itself an act of reflection on how one should write about intersections of theatre and learning.

Last but not least, we managed to avoid the suspicious predictability of the research strands that our conference was designed upon, such as

'applied theatre', 'practice-based research' and TYA. Instead, this volume looks into the instances of learning for/through/within theatre through three different themes: *reflection*, *risk* and *reimagining*. It does that without assuming any simplistic connections between learning and theatre, because, as we ourselves learned, learning does not necessarily happen in a theatre and theatre is necessarily conducive to learning.

Heather: We offer "Reflecting" as a lens to think about the first papers in this collection because the definitions evoke the conflicted tensions in thinking about theatre learning. Thinking in a profound way about experiences and ideas is significant, but it is also relevant to note that reflecting can also mean "to embody or represent (something) in a faithful or appropriate way" *and* "to throw back (heat, light or sound) without absorbing" (Oxford). The notion that "reflecting" can mean something akin to "absorbing" but also something like "bouncing back" is an evocative way to address the work the scholars have done in this chapter. Sometimes their work allows readers to see a reflection of theatre practice and learning like a clear image in a mirror, held up for all to see. In other cases the pondering is personal, infused with the scholar's own ideas and reflections about theatre and learning.

Risking is often framed in a negative sense: "the possibility of endangering," "acting in such a way as to bring about an unpleasant or unwelcome event," "incurring the chance of unfortunate consequences by engaging in action" (*Oxford*). Risks that are real may not even have widely agreed upon benefits (jumping out of an airplane without a parachute springs to mind). Yet, researchers, educators and theatre practitioners all encourage risk-taking. Wrestling with the positive potential of risk-taking in terms of theatre and learning, these scholars and artists even consider some negative consequences of risk-taking and try to evaluate those consequences within broader goals related to learning through theatre.

We offer "Re-Imagining" as our final chapter heading. If "imagine" means to form a mental image or a concept of something, then, critically speaking, "*re*-imagine" must mean to re-interpret that image, to find new ways of understanding what we think we already know. In order to "Re-Imagine" scholars and artists may have to follow in the footsteps of Patti Lather and "get lost" or "unknow" what seems to be true. We view this process of "unknowing" as a productive way to re-approach the apparently obvious relationship between theatre and learning, and to acknowledge the inherent tensions between theatre and learning. Jill Dolan's *Utopia in Performance* argues for communal theatre experiences as a way to "inspire moments in which audiences feel themselves allied with each other, and

with a broader, more capacious sense of a public, in which social discourse articulates the possible, rather than the insurmountable obstacles to human potential" (Dolan 164). Some of our authors, in the spirit of Jill Dolan, find "hope in the theatre," but others acknowledge anxiety that cannot be easily soothed.

For millennia, human beings have feared, dreamed about, imagined, and relied upon the potential power of theatre to influence, to educate, to empower, and potentially corrupt. Survey courses of theatre history regularly point to Plato's passionate recommendation that actors and poets be exiled from utopia, but, he concedes "we ought to point out that if the kinds of poetry and representation which are designed merely to give pleasure can come up with a rational argument for their inclusion in a well-governed community, we'd be delighted" (Klosko 179). Plato emphasises the significance of play in learning (d'Angour 294; 307) and the phenomenal power of the spell of poetry. But he feared it too: theatre can incite passion and can be critical of society, and these would be awkward in Plato's rational utopia. While their utopian visions of the future differ radically, both Dolan and Plato suggest that experiences made possible through theatre can have powerful learning potential-the tensions come from what is taught and what is actually learned; and the power dynamics inherent in who is actually teaching and who is learning. By being honest about the highly complex and potentially powerful relationship between theatre and learning, we believe that the writers in this book invite readers to ask themselves difficult questions about their own artistic and/or pedagogical practices, and about their own assumptions regarding binaries such as what theatre can, cannot, should, or should not do; and also about a wide open vista of utopias where reflecting, risking, and re-imagining could make space for theatre and learning "maybes" and "mights."

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Notes

[1] Gorky MHAT (Moskovsky Khudozhestvenny Akademichesky Teatr imeni Gor'kogo) is considered the successor of the original Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) established by Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko. Its repertoire mostly consists of productions that made the original MAT popular and its mandate is stated as a 'return to Stanislavsky'. Gorky MHAT was established in 1987 after a conflict that occurred in the MHAT troupe and eventually led to the division of the MHAT theatre company into two: the Chekhov MHAT and the Gorky MHAT. The latter occupies a new building on Tverskoy Bulevard, while the former performs in the original MAT building on Kamergersky Lane.

[2] The Festival of Original Theatre (F.O.O.T.) is a long-standing tradition at the Centre for Drama, Theatre, Performance Studies at the University of Toronto. The official website of the department's Student Union, which organizes the festival, states: "Started in 1993, F.O.O.T. is an annual, student run conference and arts festival produced in conjunction with the Graduate Centre for the Study of Drama and the Drama Centre Student Union. Its goal is to create a discussion between scholarship and praxis. The structure of the festival varies from year to year. Past programs have combined academic conference papers, panel discussions, readings of plays in progress and original theatre performances". In 2012, Art Babayants and Heather Fitzsimmons Frey became artistic directors of the 20th anniversary edition of F.O.O.T., which took place on 2-5 February at the Robert Gill Theatre, University of Toronto.

PART I.

REFLECTING

INTRODUCTION

TO ENTERTAIN AND SURPRISE: REFLECTIONS ON THEATRE AND LEARNING

GEORGE BELLIVEAU

The impact of theatre often rests on an audience being *entertained* (by ideas) and *surprised* (by the unexpected). Through thoughtful reflections and attention to detail, the authors of the four chapters that follow describe theatre endeavours that both entertain and surprise. Each author guides us inside creative processes, highlighting critical links between theatre and learning. They write about the theatre work in a manner that is very open and honest, fearless of pointing to failures, challenges and surprises within the events, as such resisting heroic narratives. Their reflections on the theatre projects invite pedagogical questions, nudging the reader into the conversation in a dialogic fashion. What could have been done differently? What would I do next time? How might we imagine the future? These questions are continually present in each of the chapters, which offer spaces for the reader to question their own practice and approach to theatre and learning.

The ephemeral nature of theatre poses a challenge for writers to fully describe, in that what is witnessed within a live performance can never be completely re-captured. Traces, glimpses and insights can be offered, but are only shadows of what occurred. The following chapters depict specific theatre spaces and events in Toronto, Hong Kong, and Tasmania, to shed light on particular shadows that continue to linger. Each author takes a unique approach to lead us through the respective theatre events, always keeping the notion of theatre and learning front and centre within their reflective writing. Complex and sensitive content is addressed in the authors' depictions, supporting how and why the arts can be applied (ethically) to engage in conversations about diversity and injustice.

Kathleen Gallagher's theorized chapter "Chasing Change: Drama Education, Applied Theatre and the Ecology of Social Change" provides rich insights on her collaborative projects with researchers, schools,

refugee youth and professional artists in Toronto. She reflects on three performance-based examples (i.e., *The Middle Place*; student monologues responding to *The Middle Place*; devised piece with Roma youth) from her five-year study that closely address her inquiry on what theatre for social change means. She critically reflects upon the possibilities of theatre to make change, in the worlds of the audiences and artist/creators/participants of the theatre pieces. Each project addresses sensitive issues experienced by marginalized populations, and as such Gallagher speaks of an aesthetic distance used by participants and artists to engage with potentially traumatic experiences. Key learning moments emerge in this reflective and aesthetic distance between the real (difficult personal history) and imagined. This theme of imagining the future, which is informed from past knowledge and lived experiences, is clearly foregrounded in Gallagher's piece and resurfaces in different manners in the other three chapters.

In "Difficult Knowledge in Theatre for Young Audiences: Remembering and Representing the Holocaust" Belarie Zatzman invites the reader to reflect upon three plays for young audiences: Hannah Moscovitch's *The Children's Republic;* Emil Sher's *Hana's Suitcase;* Wendy Kesselman's *The Diary of Anne Frank*. She closely reflects on the depth and richness of each text but more importantly on the aesthetic theatricalization offered by the creative artists involved in the respective Toronto productions. She shares her own visceral experiences of witnessing the power of these performances, describing vivid stage moments and highlighting symbolic props and visual images used in the productions. The reflective voices of artists involved in creating the Holocaust plays are represented in the chapter as they share their vision and approaches to the difficult content within the scripts. Through her engaging and heartfelt narrative, Zatzman helps us better understand the possibilities of theatre as a space for learning, remembering past atrocities, and imagining a more informed future.

In "*Moving Mountains*: Becoming a Teaching Artist" Mary Anderson reflects on her one-year artistic journey in Tasmania as she choreographed a theatre piece with diverse community artists. Her personal and reflective narrative describes both the challenges and successes she encountered while learning to be a "guest" teaching artist in a new environment. She describes how the rigid structures and aims of the funding grants are juxtaposed with their objectives, which include trying to meaningfully and sensitively integrate refugee communities inside the Mountain Festival. Anderson's honest and descriptive reflections provide the reader with vivid insights into the complexities of being a teaching artist, an academic and a "guest" inside a diverse community project abroad.

Finally, Michelle Raquel takes the reader to a Hong Kong tertiary classroom in her chapter "A Sociocultural Approach to Theatre Productions in L2 Learning." She shares key learning moments her students experienced during the rehearsal process and staging of *Living with Lady Macbeth*. Using Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development as a theoretical approach to learning, she traces how working towards a formal production, with a scripted text enables learners to scaffold their learning of English as a second language. Her reflections on the systematic study highlight moments of surprise, where unexpected learning occurred for the students during the theatre-making.

The four authors remind us of the possibilities of theatre to stimulate participants and audiences to see the world and learning in new ways. They also illustrate how the art form of theatre can be highly pedagogical without necessarily being didactic or un-engaging. In their own unique approaches, each author speaks to the importance and value of reflecting on the process and productions during or after the event. In many ways the reflective elements become key parts of the work and experience. The theatre events are stimuli that lead to critical reflection, and possible *little* change (Balfour 2009: 347). The artistic endeavour and reflections work hand in hand to engage participants and audiences into the learning and considerations of future possibilities. Another important feature of the four chapters lies in how the respective theatre events honour the art form of theatre. Theatre education (and its many iterations) thrives in various forms, but one of the ways it can reach and touch participants and audiences perhaps more significantly is when equal attention is paid to the craft/art of theatre-making and the pedagogical intents. Anthony Jackson (2005) shares his perspective on the aim of theatre-makers to balance the instrumental and artistic without compromising either (105-106). He suggests that an over-emphasis on the artistic or the pedagogical can limit the potential of theatre for learning (106). The aim to *entertain* ideas and be *surprised* by the unexpected rests in theatre events that honour the art form along with its pedagogical objectives (Prendergast and Belliveau: 206).

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CHAPTER ONE

CHASING CHANGE: DRAMA EDUCATION, APPLIED THEATRE AND THE ECOLOGY OF SOCIAL CHANGE

KATHLEEN GALLAGHER

Canadian feminist philosopher Lorraine Code (2006) describes ecology as:

> [A] study of habitats, both physical and social where people endeavour to live well together; of ways of knowing that foster or thwart such living; and thus of the ethos and habitus enacted in the knowledge and actions, customs, social structures, and creative-regulative principles by which people strive or fail to achieve this multiply realizable end. (27)

In this chapter, I work through some ideas about social change, social and economic justice, and theatre's potential role in that complicated work. To begin, six robust propositions: i) theatre for change is a movement or impetus across several different genres of theatre-making that involves inherent risk, often has ambitious goals, and whose impact should be unapologetically measured on at least three scales: the social, the pedagogical, the artistic; ii) the practices of change-driven theatre should be locally determined and responsive to the ecology of the stories being explored; iii) its practices should also understand that spatial relationships (between audience and actors) always imply broad social relations that are dynamic and open to change; iv) theatre for change creates cultural change, which is the necessary antecedent to public policy change; v) the critical but nebulous role of "the real"—the actual stories of real people—in applied theatre must be considered on pragmatic, ethical and theoretical levels; vi) "the real" of theatre must also be put to work, provoke the imagination, and challenge the artistic and ethical cul-de-sac of the literal.

As sources of illustration for the above-cited propositions, I will draw from my ethnographic research projects and my theatre practice, using