

Don't Eat the Raw Vegetables: Insights into Research-based Theatre as Methodology

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Abstract

Don't Eat the Raw Vegetables is a monologue adapted from the research-based theatre script *Homa Bay Memories* (Lea, 2013). Drawing on journals, photographs, and memories I developed the monologue to explore a moment of intercultural learning while on a teaching practicum in Kenya in 2004. In this article I share the monologue and a critical commentary discussing three insights into research-based theatre as a methodology gained through the process: 1) the impact of physicalizing research, 2) the opportunity to return to an experience armed with new theoretical understandings, and 3) the potential of the methodology to bring to light and express the fluidity of narratives and experiences.

Introduction

In 2004 I took part in the University of Prince Edward Island's Specialization in International Education. As part of the Bachelor of Education program, the specialization is "designed to develop students' sensitivity to cultural diversity and to increase their understanding of global issues, so that their teaching is infused with a global perspective and they are better prepared to teach in other countries or in diverse cultural settings" (University of Prince Edward Island, n.d.). A key component of the program is a teaching practicum in an international setting. Inspired by my mother's stories of living and teaching in Kenya almost 40 years earlier, I travelled to Kihuti, in the central part of the country, for my teaching placement. While working in the Kenyan schools was informative, my most valuable experiences occurred outside the classroom. In the community and home in which I was billeted I began to learn to navigate cultural differences and broaden my awareness of the lives of the people in the rural community.

Don't Eat the Raw Vegetables tells the story of one of these learning experiences. The monologue is adapted from my full length research-based theatre script *Homa Bay Memories*¹ (Lea, 2013). The script forms the physical and metaphorical heart of a larger research project, examining my and my mother's Kenyan teaching experiences. To develop the monologue, I used my journal, photographs, and my memory of events, as well as my experience as a stage manager, actor, playwright, and director to transform the experience into a theatrical form.

Script

¹ The title *Homa Bay Memories* refers to the Kenyan town, Homa Bay, where my mother taught from 1966 – 1970.
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Don't Eat the Raw Vegetables²

GRAHAM

When they tell you, "Don't eat the raw vegetables," don't eat the raw vegetables.

(Picks up plate) Fortunately, cooked food was fine. In fact, it was more than fine; *(inhales)* it was great.

It was during a teaching practicum in Kenya, I home-stayed with a retired school headmistress, Mamma Stef,³ and her aging mother-in-law.

(GRAHAM moves a chair to start creating the room; the mantle with the TV is SR)

As mzungus, foreigners, we were a draw. Neighbours often came to visit in the living and dining room of their clay brick house where we sat on a random assortment of furniture worn with age and heavy use and loosely covered by a mismatch of old blankets and sheets. The cracked yellow paint on the walls was broken up by a few pictures and a large mantle on which sat a small black and white TV that might get some reception, if we were lucky.

In the next room was the kitchen. *(GRAHAM points to areas SL but does not cross centre)*

A gas stove sat cold by a roaring open fire. Whirring in the corner was a refrigerator, THE refrigerator. We had been told about this, a rare find. Rarer still, this one worked! Inside it was filled to brimming with fresh fruit and vegetables. None of which we could eat until well cooked.

That was the job of Paula, a local woman hired as a housekeeper while we were there. The wonders she could do in that kitchen where I wouldn't have been able to fry an egg.

Despite her efforts in the kitchen, Paula didn't eat with us. But, David did. He was a shamba-boy, a farm hand, hired by our host to look after her sprawling seven-acre farm.

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³ Other than GRAHAM, all names are pseudonyms.

(GRAHAM sits and picks up the plate, smells)

The first meal, like all that succeeded it, consisted of a variety of steaming hot Kenyan dishes: Githeri, Ugali, Mukimo, Sukuma Wiki...

(GRAHAM puts plate down and sinks into the chair)

David, I thought tired after a long day in the field, ate quickly and sank into one of the well-worn chairs.

(GRAHAM sits up straight)

Impulsively, wanting to be helpful, I started to clear the dishes. *(Picks up plate and tries to stand)*

But Paula quickly came and whisked everything away. *(Returns plate CS and sits neutrally)* It was clear I was not to go into the kitchen.

Another student teacher, Wendy also had challenges adjusting to life in Kenya, particularly the restrictions on her diet. In North America, she ate raw salad almost exclusively. While she tried to heed the suggested dietary advice, eventually, her body's desire to return to her normal diet became too much ... she had an impulse she could not resist ... *(Picks up plate and begins to eat)*

(Sets plate down CS, becoming visibly ill)

When they tell you, "Don't eat the raw vegetables," don't eat the raw vegetables.

She left early.

(Returns to sitting neutrally)

Back in the well-worn living room, I admit, it was tempting to sit back with David and let someone else do the dirty work. But I couldn't.

I had always been encouraged to help in the kitchen, from failed experiments with Kraft Dinner⁴ and ketchup to learning how to make bread.

⁴ Kraft Dinner, as it is known in Canada, is a boxed dried pasta and cheese mixture. It is also known as Kraft Macaroni and Cheese or Cheesy Pasta.

I was taught as a child to clean up after a meal and whether it was a desire for some sense of normality, the desire to encourage a more equitable role in the home, habit, or something I still don't understand, I simply could not resist the impulse to help Paula clean up -

(GRAHAM stands)
only to be sat back down *(Sits, as if pushed)*.

(GRAHAM, with plate in hand, stands and sits with each line)
Up and down
Up and down
Up and down

All the while, David *(slouches in comfort in the chair)* watched, unmoving from the comfort of his easy chair as I jumped around like a Jack-in-the-box.

(Still in the chair, GRAHAM as David watches the unseen GRAHAM jump up and down. Each time, the interval between each up and down becomes longer)

Slowly

(GRAHAM steps toward SL, getting closer to the kitchen each time) With time, I started making steps toward the kitchen.

A few steps and Paula would grab the dishes..
The next day a few more..

And a few more.

(GRAHAM has now crossed centre for the first time)
Until, by the time I left, I had finally made it to the kitchen.

And most surprisingly, so had David. *(GRAHAM exits SL)*

Commentary

Saldaña (2011) defines research-based theatre/ethnotheatre⁵ as the use of “traditional craft and artistic techniques of theatre or media production to mount for an audience a

⁵ For the purpose of this article, I use research-based theatre as an umbrella term to describe a variety of approaches that use theatre in research, including ethnodrama and ethnotheatre (Lea, 2012).

live or mediated performance event of research participants' experiences and/or the researcher's interpretations of data" (p. 12). He describes his approach as beginning "not as an artistic vision, but as a data analytic process" using research methods common among many qualitative researchers (1999, p. 61). This and similar approaches to research-based theatre position the use of theatre as primarily a method of data dissemination. Norris (2009) expands this view, incorporating theatre through all phases of research including data collection, analysis, and dissemination. In this way, writing, rehearsing, and performing research-based theatre become active sites of inquiry during the research process. While developing *Don't Eat the Raw Vegetables*, I took heed of Norris's suggestion that developing research-based theatre may be an analytic process. In this article I share some of the insights gained as I used research-based theatre methodology as an active site of inquiry while I developed the monologue.

Blocking as a Creative Constraint

In all of my research-based theatre projects, I have been interested in the role of theatrical aesthetics such as blocking (actor movement), lighting and sound in research-based theatre. As I developed *Don't Eat the Raw Vegetables* I incorporated specific blocking through a gestural motif, "a physical hand gesture or body action purposefully chosen to symbolize some aspect of the story" (Saldaña, 2011, p. 78). The motif I included was getting up from and sitting down in a chair, which was intended to help move the work from a storytelling form to a more theatrical presentation.

When I first incorporated gestural motif into the monologue my intent was that when performing the script I would physically stand up and sit down each time. However, as I moved into the rehearsal process, I found this blocking choice to be both physically challenging and potentially distracting for an audience. Performing the movement as I originally intended required standing up and sitting down about 10 times in quick succession. While rehearsing the monologue I found I was unable to perform this movement smoothly. I worried that the prolonged large and awkward movement would focus the audience's attention on the movement itself rather than the story being told. As such, the physicality of getting up and down became a potential constraint on the sharing of the research. However, rather than limiting, this became a creative constraint, creating an opportunity for new understandings of the research to emerge (Lea, 2010).

To overcome the constraint imposed by the physicality of movement, I decided to fully physicalize the up and down movement to establish the motif and then shift to signifying the movement with a head movement:

Still in the chair, GRAHAM as David watches the unseen GRAHAM jump up and down. Each time, the interval between each up and down becomes longer.

As a result of this change, as an actor I had to switch between the two characters: GRAHAM and DAVID.⁶ As I rehearsed these shifts of character I began to discover that this narrative was not just one of my learning to encourage a slight cultural change, nor was it one of David learning to take dishes into the kitchen. This change in blocking created the conditions for me to see that this was a moment of shared learning that could only have occurred through our shared experience in the living room. Such influences of blocking on the research suggest that it should be considered as part of the methodological toolkit of research-based theatre.

Rehearsing into Mimicry

Turner (1982) proposes three stages in his approach to performance ethnography/research-based theatre:

1. Ethnography into playscript
2. Script into performance
3. Performance into meta-ethnography (p. 90)

He posits that engaging in the first and second stages creates an opportunity for researchers to enter the third stage “armed with the understanding that comes from ‘getting inside the skin’ of members of other cultures, rather than merely ‘taking the role of the other’ in one’s own culture” (p. 90). This suggests that in acting out data, researchers create opportunities to move closer to, although never attaining, an insider perspective. This occurred as I developed *Don’t Eat the Raw Vegetables*. During the process I was able to return to my Kenyan experiences armed with the understanding that comes with broadened theoretical understandings and perspectives.

Prior to writing and performing the monologue I considered my experience with David as a gentle modelling of more equitable gender roles within a Kenyan home. However, as I worked on the monologue, I became influenced by Homi Bhabha’s *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse* (1994), which provided me with a new theoretical lens for the experience. Bhabha’s post-colonial critique posits that one of the most effective methods of imposing colonial control is encouraging the colonized to mimic the colonizing power. “Colonial mimicry,” he suggests, “is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (p. 122). The result of this mimicry is what Bhabha describes as a ‘fetishism’ of the colonial culture by the colonized.

The playwriting, rehearsing, and performing processes I engaged in while developing *Don’t Eat the Raw Vegetables* provided an opportunity to examine the experience armed with new theoretical lenses, including that of Bhabha’s mimicry. Through this new lens, my encouraging of David to help take dirty dishes to the kitchen (while it was not my intent) may be seen as an attempt to affix a colonial norm through mimicry while thinking I was encouraging a small positive social change. As I saw this experience

⁶ Names in all capital letters refer to characters in the script while names in mixed case refer to their lived counterparts.

through this lens, I struggled with whether or not I should keep the monologue as written or rewrite it.

Discovering the potential role of mimicry in my experience with David spurred me to re-examine my mother's Kenyan experiences. As I returned to the data to re-examine her stories I uncovered other examples of mimicry (Lea, 2013). With these new discoveries, I decided to retain the monologue, juxtaposing it with the examples of mimicry from my mother's experiences. Sharing these perspectives on mimicry creates an opportunity for audience members to become aware of and to question the methods of interaction and roles of mimicry in the full script of *Homa Bay Memories*. As this awareness of mimicry is not present when the monologue is extracted from the larger script, when performing the monologue independently I explicitly discuss the role of mimicry in the research.

The process of rehearsing *Don't Eat the Raw Vegetables* became not just one of lifting words on the page into performance. The repetition of rehearsal, combined with expanded theoretical perspective, became an opportunity to reflect upon and critique the narratives. As such, rehearsals became an integral and active component of the analysis of the research.

Narrative Fluidity

When I began developing *Don't Eat the Raw Vegetables*, I viewed the narrative of David and I as static. However, engaging in this research and situating my work within Bakhtin's (1986) notion of chains of utterances, I began to see that these narratives are fluid, continually being told and retold, understood and re-understood.

Bakhtin (1986) develops the concept of an utterance as "a unit of speech communication" (p. 71). Instead of being discrete events, each utterance exists within a chain, created both in response to previous utterances and shaped by the anticipated response of their intended addressee. The meaning of an utterance is similarly shaped by not just the utterance itself but also the addressee's preceding chain of utterances as the meaning they interpret for the utterance is shaped by all of the utterances they have previously encountered. *Don't Eat the Raw Vegetables* may be considered a Bakhtinian utterance. The monologue emerged from the utterances I encountered preceding it including those during my Kenyan and theatrical experiences.

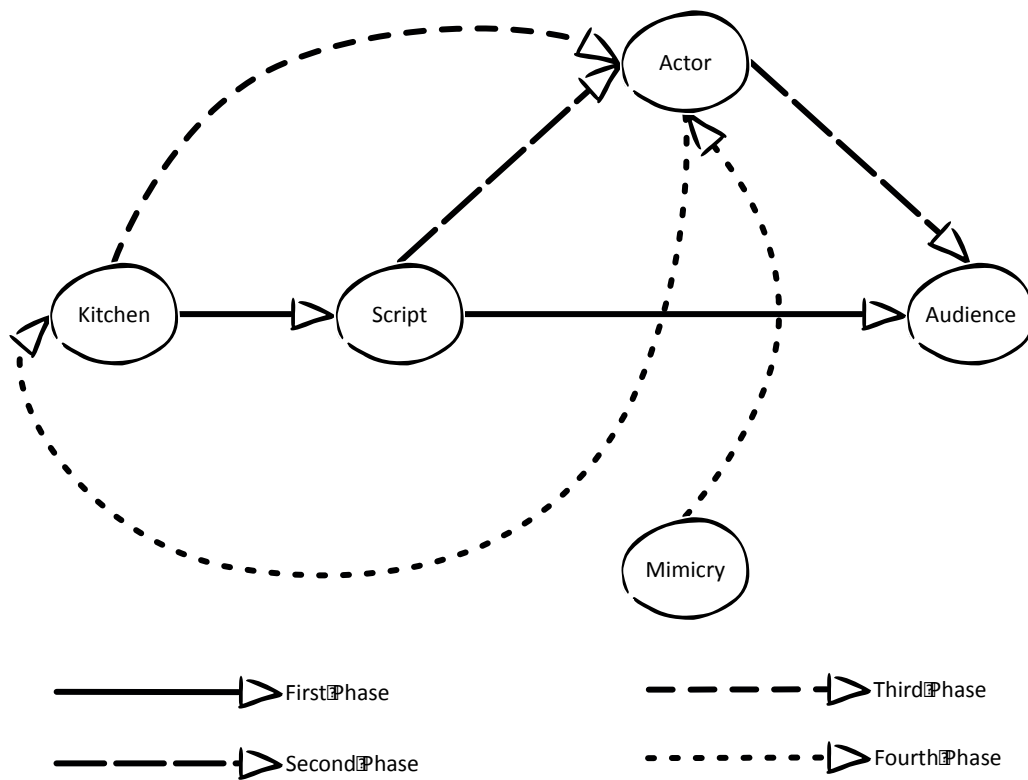


Figure 1. Phases of Understanding

When I first began working on *Don't Eat the Raw Vegetables* I developed the script based on my experiences with David in the kitchen and I had a theatrical audience as my intended addressee (See First Phase of Figure 1). Knowing the intended addressee for the research shaped the creation of the script and the understandings expressed in the research. In this early conceptualization of the process, the chain of utterances was a clear line from experience to authored script to addressee. However, as I shifted from author to performer, I complicated this linear relationship as I realized that as an actor I was also an addressee of the script (Second Phase). Because I as an actor had a direct connection to the time with David, I was able to bring some of that information to my performance of the text (Third Phase). As an actor I was both author and addressee.

As mentioned earlier, through rehearsals, I began incorporating Bhabha's (1994) notion of mimicry. As I did, I added a new chain to my understanding of the experience of David and I (Fourth Phase). In doing so I as an actor became a fluid addressee. I was not the initially intended addressee, I had access to new theories and ideas and as I rehearsed the monologue, I began to see the original experiences in new ways. The authored story written on paper was the same but I no longer read it as a successful cross-cultural encounter and teaching; through this lens it became a possible example of colonial mimicry. Through the recursive process of rehearsals, these new perspectives on the original experience shaped the text and performance, which in turn

shaped new perspectives on the original experience. The narrative of *Don't Eat the Raw Vegetables* is thus not fixed but is continually adapting – it is fluid.

While Bakhtin's discussion of utterances is based in language and novels, Holquist (2002) notes that Bakhtin uses utterances as a metaphor for existence. From this perspective, our existence is shaped by the chains that precede us. My existence has been shaped, both as an actor and person by all of the narratives I have encountered including those with David. As I revisit those narratives they become fluid and so too do I.

The recursive process of rehearsals and performance that is central to research-based theatre provides a mechanism for research to be fluid and continually evolve. Each time the work is shared it is slightly different. However, this complicates the nature of research understandings as rather than static research data and reports, the work becomes fluid, which discourages definitive statements in research-based theatre. This suggests that when working in (re)search methodologies such as research-based theatre the focus of the work should be *a search* rather than *a search for an answer*.

Epilogue

In the summer of 2014, ten years after I first travelled to Kenya, I returned to the country to teach as part of the Borderless Higher Education for Refugees program. After completing my teaching I took the opportunity to return to the community where I did my practice teaching to visit the school and most meaningfully, to return to:

the living and dining room of the clay brick house where we sat on a random assortment of furniture still worn with age and heavy use but now covered over by neatly fitting matching blue cotton slipcovers, each with decorative red embroidery. The cracked yellow paint on the walls was still broken up by a few pictures and a large mantle on which now sat a small colour TV still struggling for reception.

While there I shared a copy of *Homa Bay Memories* with Mamma Stef and shared with her and the guests a few excerpts from the monologue. One of those guests was John, a young man who had recently graduated from the local secondary school. To my surprise, as the dinner came to a close John started to clear the dishes into the kitchen without any prompting.

Seeing this was heartening and caused me to question the monologue, and my perceptions:

- Had the social world changed that significantly in the decade since I had last been there?
- Was David's initial reluctance to go to the kitchen indeed indicative of a larger social norm as we had been told or was it an anomaly?

- Was John raised with different, more progressive values? If so were they consistent or divergent with norms of the community?
- Is my continued telling of this narrative through the monologue spreading a perception of the people in this community that is inaccurate?
- If I continue to tell this narrative should I qualify it with these new insights? And if so is it ethical to include them?

Although the narrative may be static in its written form, it is continuing to evolve through such experiences; it is a living narrative. I have become fluid not just as an addressee but also as an author. Theatre, and by extension research-based theatre, in its ephemeral and constantly changing nature, has an opportunity to integrate this evolution. Now when I perform the monologue, it is informed not just by my experience in a small Kenyan living room in 2004 but my return visit a decade later. Thus, rather than being just a mode of disseminating data, research-based theatre provides engagement in research in a manner that continually revisits the work, each time informed by new chains of utterances including those of theory and new experiences. In this way, the methodology in its performed manifestation produces research that is never fixed and is continually evolving.

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Bio

Graham W. Lea is a SSHRC postdoctoral fellow at the University of Prince Edward Island. He is currently working on a project that uses theatrical methods with pre-service teachers to help them examine narratives of their positioning and privilege. His research has been recognized with awards including the Vanier Canada Doctoral Research Scholarship. He has presented and published widely on research-based theatre, theatre and additional language learning, Prince

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