

**More than we can tell: reflecting on the performing of monologues as a mode of inquiry**

The idea of ineffable knowledge is not an oxymoron.  
(Eisner, 2008, p. 5)

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**Prologue**

*Many years ago now, in my role as a community theatre artist and neophyte researcher, I was engaged in researching, writing and directing a play based on the stories of a regional town in Queensland, Australia. The stories were all focused on the main industry of the town, the local meatworks. I gathered stories from past and present employees, family members and other residents of the town, and trawled historical documents for interesting facts and anecdotes from the meatworks' colourful past.*

*My actors were mostly young, and mostly from the nearby university, and few of the students involved had longstanding connections to the town or the meatworks. In an early play-building rehearsal I presented actors with fragments of verbatim stories from the people I had interviewed. Each actor chose one fragment, and began to build a character. Slowly, I added more fragments from the same storytellers. I asked each of the actors to construct a short monologue for the character they were beginning to inhabit, based on the verbatim text snippets. Around the monologues we constructed 'what if' scenes. What if these two characters met in the pub? for example. What if these three characters saw the ghost of old Lord Vestey, the meatworks' original owner? as another example.*

*One particular young actor, Alex, worked with stories from Len, a retired meatworker. They had never been introduced, and Alex had been given nothing but Len's words and the background data about the meatworks to inform the creation of the character he was to play. Over time, Alex found a physical life for his character, a laconic way of walking and talking, a dry, wry timing in his delivery. He brought in items of costume which he thought his character might wear, experimented with the pitch of his voice and the way he wore his hair. As the time for the performance of the community play approached, I took stock of our preparations, and revisited the original verbatim data. I cast my mind back to the night I had interviewed Len in the annex of the mobile home where he now lived. I recalled the beer he offered me, his dry, wry wit, his ambling gait, the way he wore his hair and the shorts and singlet that were his signature couture. I looked up and saw Alex, who had captured all of these things, without having met Len. It seems he had found Len through his own words, and through the act of creating Len's monologue.*

It's many years since I have thought about the alchemy of that particular moment, when a young university student became an ageing, laconic slaughterman. This collection of articles and poems took me back there and invites me to consider, with access to the considerable scholarship now available to us all across the realms of arts-based research, research-based performance, autoethnographic performance and

other iterations of performed research, how we understand and begin to name the elements which may at first glance seem to defy rational explanation. In other words, how do we come to understand and articulate the ‘ineffable knowledge’ that Eisner (2005, p. 8) alerts us to?

### **Monologue as inquiry**

The performer stands still and alone on the ‘stage’, about to begin her monologue. But she is not alone and the stage, whatever form it takes, is decidedly not still. The performer is researcher and actor, and the monologue is the performance text that has emerged from a complex convergence of elements, both aesthetic and epistemic. The layered weaving of this creative work is about to be revealed through the body in performance, in concert with an audience.

In this special edition, many iterations of monologue as a mode or site of inquiry have been interrogated through the lens of critical reflexivity. It remains to me now, in this concluding essay to offer an outsider’s view. Although I am no stranger to performed research in many guises, having been a collaborator, performer, researcher, educator and critical friend on more than a few projects, I now take up the invitation to reflect on a body of work about bodies at work – in the creation and performance of monologue. The image of the performer alone on stage before a word has been spoken is a powerful one, representing courage, vulnerability and quest. In reflecting on what it takes for a researcher, an educator, or an actor (or someone who is all three) to initiate a dialogue with audience which is both research in action and artistic rendering I am mindful of two abiding principles – that in conducting research we seek to re-search, to find ‘new knowledge’; and that in conducting performative research, we can find that new knowledge in and through the performing body. My reflections on the practices presented here lead me to consider how it is that the researcher/performer’s body in physical and symbolic action, within an aesthetic space, contributes to the production of understanding, through an embodied knowing.

Firstly, I acknowledge the performer and researcher as two facets of the one consciousness, and consider the notion of ‘doubling’, which might more accurately be described in this context as ‘metaxis’ or the state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different autonomous worlds (Linds, 2006). Cast your mind back to Mindy Carter’s *Gallop Apace* – her monologue evokes the contrapuntal rhythms of the teacher’s classroom experience of teaching Shakespeare – the teacher’s beating heart, Juliet’s heartbeat, the exhilaration and despair of the teacher’s winning and losing battle with her students taking place in a single galloping moment, while at the same time Carter, the former actor now researcher experiences the exhilaration and disappointment of her own quest to fully embody the monologue she has been gifted by Amy Clausen for her inquiry into teacher identity. In the sometimes uncomfortable space between these co-existing worlds, the potential for new knowledge exists. And somehow, the researcher performer must find a way to honour and commit to both worlds in order to harvest the fruits of this metaxis. Carter discovers in the experience of inhabiting Amy the teacher of Shakespeare, something previously hidden to her about her own relationship to her acting craft.

The writers in this edition provide many accounts of their double identities, and the moments of metaxis that ensue, often in performance but sometimes in rehearsal.

Graham Lea as researcher in 2014, remembers Lea in Kenya, 2004 and, through the rehearsal process, re-evaluates his understanding of the cultural exchange taking place for Lea, 2004. Monica Prendergast as Cindy Sheehan, invokes her inner researcher/educator to guide her through the Q&A in role, crafting her responses, the semiotics of her 'performance,' not simply to fulfill the experience of being Sheehan, but in pursuit of her research goal. In the space between Sheehan and Prendergast, on stage, it is the purposefulness of the research intent that provides the catalyst for new knowledge. Certainly, discoveries may come unbidden in unexpected moments, in moments of grace achieved by the performer's immersion in the delivery of the monologue, but without the purposeful, systematic framework of the researcher's intent, I suspect that these discoveries would remain ineffable, in the ephemera of the performance space.

In reflecting on the practices described in this journal edition and seeking to identify some of the defining characteristics of this mode of research, I find it useful, if somewhat artificial, to divide the monologue performance as research inquiry into two domains: what comes before that first moment of performance for an audience, and what follows, with the audience.

### **1. What comes before**

Many of the defining characteristics have been canvassed earlier in this journal. Craft knowledge and the challenge of achieving it, is one such characteristic. As the artist/researcher/teacher embarks on the performed research journey with the goal of performing a monologue for a specific purpose and context, they have two sets of decisions to make. Each requires a particular body of knowledge, a set of languages, and expertise; in other words, their craft knowledge, as researchers and performance makers. While these two processes at times work in parallel, at other times, they are in tandem in an intricately woven bricolage. The familiar methodological processes of qualitative research can be applied to the construction of the monologue as a mode of inquiry. Within these stages, the authors in this special edition identify particular moments of tension between artistry and a systematic research process and highlight how this becomes a productive and creative tension in the evolution of their inquiry through performance.

- **Inquiring Through the Construction of Text**  
The researcher generates data – for Sallis this is through an ethnographic process; Belliveau and Ahn generate idiosyncratic forms of autoethnographic memoir, drawing on artefacts of personal memory; and Carter finds her monologue already created by another.
- **Inquiring Through Construction of Performance**  
The researcher begins to take on the mantle of performer. Context and purpose determine many key decisions, not only about data, but about performance venue, audience, and purpose. Sallis's repurposing requires a re-shaping of text, a revisiting of the original data, and a clarification of the foundation of the inquiry. Ahn seeks to understand the nature of friendship betrayed and the deeper question of how to understand and communicate an essential question of her own experience. In each of these cases, analytical insight is generated through the move into the performative mode.

- **Processes of Inquiry – Analysis, Interpretation, Synthesis**  
The decision to develop a monologue or perform a monologue as an act of inquiry forges a bridge between systematic research practices and acts of imagination and artistry, where the theatrical languages of space, time, symbol and gesture are explored and manipulated as mechanisms of analysis and synthesis. Lea discovers in rehearsal that the action of standing up and sitting down again becomes a motif capturing a moment in time when he can no longer remain passive but is constrained from acting. Belliveau replaces the text ‘we hold our breath’ with the action signifying the same and finds a way to penetrate the deeper meanings of the narrative, and communicate them to others. Through these analytical processes, the researcher performer reaches for the craft knowledge which will support and sustain the hybrid practice of performed research. Is this always possible? This is the challenge that Belliveau issues in his article – for the privileging of the craft of both researcher and artist.

## **2. The iterative possibilities of performance**

A number of authors describe how the audience shaped their preparations for performance, or informed their construction of new knowledge, during and after a performance. While performance is an ephemeral mode of research, the capacity for repeated iterations provides an opportunity to continue to review and reconstruct new knowledge not available to text based research forms. When the researcher and the researched are one and the same, and inhabit the performer’s body, the researcher has the opportunity not only to view and reflect on evolving understandings but to experience them, in the body. Belliveau describes the unexpectedly visceral nature of the exploration of his own cultural and professional identity, in performance. He highlights the significance of the aesthetic considerations which impacted on the crafting and delivery of his performance. He engaged in a rehearsal process complete with directorial and dramaturgical input from experienced theatre makers, and he performed in a theatre space, complete with stage lighting and excellent acoustics. Belliveau is not alone when he argues for the importance of privileging both the aesthetic and the research dimensions of performed research as a key condition of this mode of inquiry. Carter struggles with her preconceptions of quality, worrying that she is not able to fully draw on her recently dormant acting skills to do justice to Clausen’s classroom experience. Prendergast draws on her acting training to sustain her decision to remain in role for an hour beyond the end of the performance, and Lea brings his directorial and theatre-making skills to bear as he refines key moments of performance.

Throughout these performances, the languages of the theatre are invoked. Space is no longer ‘conference room’ or ‘lecture theatre’ but a charged aesthetic space where the placement of a chair may signify time, place, status or potential relationship to audience; and an item of costume or artifact may be employed to signify a deeply significant memory, or a range of objects depending on how it is utilized. Time may be ‘real time’ or multiple times, overlapping or simultaneous, as represented by the actor through performance.

Somewhat paradoxically, this reflection focuses on the technicalities of monologue as performed research. It considers *how* the educator or researcher conducts an inquiry through the crafting of research and artistry and *how* they come to co-construct new knowledge with those present as audience. What the authors in this journal all eloquently articulate, however, is the presence of feeling, of how the emotional engagement with challenging stories and ideas fuel the pursuit of deeper understanding, with the performative event as catalyst.

Some scholars have argued strongly in the past that there is no place for the visceral experience or emotional or subjective encounters in research inquiry. On the other hand, for many years now there have been powerful advocates for a contrary point of view, which is more compatible with the pursuit of alternative knowledge claims. Antonio Gramsci for example, called for *engaged knowledge*. He posits:

The intellectual's error consists in believing that one can know without understanding and even more without feeling and being impassioned ... that is, with-out feeling the elementary passions of the people." (1971, p. 418)

Conquergood also argued for the rehabilitation of what he called 'subjugated knowledges' (after Foucault). According to Conquergood:

What gets squeezed out by this epistemic violence is the whole realm of complex, finely nuanced meaning that is embodied, tacit, intoned, gestured, improvised, coexperienced, covert – and all the more deeply meaningful because of its refusal to be spelled out. (2002, p. 146)

### **A final word**

The seminal thinking of Gramsci and Conquergood serves to remind us that the work that is undertaken by researchers and educators through performative modes is done with purposeful intent. There is very often a social justice or change agenda fuelling these projects, and the choice to work performatively is by no means an easy path. It is often intellectually and emotionally demanding, personally confronting, and logistically challenging. Researchers as performers allow themselves to be vulnerable and offer up the difficult truths as well as the palatable ones, in the body. Given these 'conditions' one would be tempted to ask, why? Why do researchers choose to feel deeply in and through the research that they conduct, forge connections to audiences as co-collaborators in the making of new knowledge, and communicate through forms that are *embodied, tacit, intoned, gestured, improvised, coexperienced, covert*? Why indeed?

## **References**

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## **Bio**

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