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A Review of Ethnotheatre: Research from Page to Stage

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Abstract

In *Ethnotheatre: Research from Page to Stage* (2011), Johnny Saldaña establishes ethnotheatre as a research method and art form in qualitative inquiry. Envisioned as an ethnotheatre book, various aspects of arts-based inquiry are intertwined in the six chapters, including ethical issues, artistic performance, adaptations of empirical materials in theatrical plays, monologue and dialogue construction, scriptwriting, theatrical design, production rights, copyright registration, and aesthetic language. Drawing on theatre-based studies, each chapter is grounded in literature and provides step-by-step guidelines to how traditional research and data can be reinterpreted, staged, performed, produced, and disseminated as theatrical play. Both the structure of the book as well as the variety of activities and recommended readings make this book suitable for both teaching and research.

Keywords

Ethnotheatre, Ethnodrama, Qualitative Research Methods, Arts-Based Research

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A Review of *Ethnotheatre: Research from Page to Stage*

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In Ethnotheatre: Research from Page to Stage (2011), Johnny Saldaña establishes ethnotheatre as a research method and art form in qualitative inquiry. Envisioned as an ethnotheatre book, various aspects of arts-based inquiry are intertwined in the six chapters, including ethical issues, artistic performance, adaptations of empirical materials in theatrical plays, monologue and dialogue construction, scriptwriting, theatrical design, production rights, copyright registration, and aesthetic language. Drawing on theatre-based studies, each chapter is grounded in literature and provides step-by-step guidelines to how traditional research and data can be reinterpreted, staged, performed, produced, and disseminated as theatrical play. Both the structure of the book as well as the variety of activities and recommended readings make this book suitable for both teaching and research. Keywords: Ethnotheatre, Ethnodrama, Qualitative Research Methods, Arts-Based Research

In *Ethnotheatre: Research from Page to Stage (2011)*, Johnny Saldaña, Professor Emeritus of Theatre at Arizona State University, establishes ethnotheatre as a research method and art form in qualitative inquiry. Envisioned as an ethnotheatre textbook, various aspects of arts-based inquiry are intertwined in the six chapters, including ethical issues, artistic performance, adaptations of empirical materials in theatrical plays, monologue and dialogue construction, scriptwriting, theatrical design, production rights, copyright registration, and aesthetic language. Drawing on theatre-based studies, each chapter is grounded in literature and provides step-by-step guidelines to how traditional research and data can be reinterpreted, staged, performed, produced, and disseminated as theatrical play. Additionally, each chapter includes a list of recommended readings of annotated playscripts, books, research articles, playwriting script excerpts, online and multimedia resources, playwriting, and storytelling exercises, as well as endnotes. Both the structure of the book and variety of activities and recommended readings make this book suitable for both teaching and research.

In Chapter One, the concepts of ethnotheatre or theatrical performance and ethnodrama or dramatized, written script are introduced within existing literature on performative social research. The author discusses the pedagogical, documentary, social equity, reflexivity, and aesthetic purposes of this arts-based research genre. Drawing from his research and teaching experience, Saldaña justifies that ethnotheatre captures the complexities of the social world in a more nuanced way and allows for alternative representations of empirical data: “if the art form has this ability, this power, to heighten the representation and presentation of social life, and if our research goal with a particular fieldwork project is to capture and document the stark realities of the people we talked to and observed, then the medium of theatre seems the most compatible choice for sharing our findings and insights” (p. 15). Through examples of plays based on social issues, the author illustrates that the goal of ethnodrama is to create a truthful representation of a culture and ongoing dialogue through performance and visual language between participants, researcher, and the wider community about relevant issues. Examples of plays discussed include *Maybe Someday: Voices of HIV-Positive Women* (Sandelowski, Trimble, Woodard, & Barroso, 2006), an adaptation into a script and DVD of lived experiences of HIV-positive women, *Second Chair* (Saldaña, 2008), an autoethnodrama about the evolving

negotiation of ethnic, gender, and social identities in a high school band, or *The Laramie Project*, a play and drama film based on over two hundred interviews related to a hate crime.

Chapter Two recommends a series of ethnodramatic exercises to stimulate improvisation, script writing, character development, and observation skills. The purpose of these activities is to help the reader transform mundane dialogues and events to stage performance for the audience credibility. For example, the goal of conversational dramatism activity based on *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student* (Nathan, 2005) is to enhance observation and storytelling by creating an improvised or scripted scenario with dialogue based on this play and reader experiences. Additional activities promote writing from another person's perspective or developing scenarios, characters, conflicts, or photographs based on existing media stories and local events.

The following two chapters outline how everyday stories can be adapted "into an economic and aesthetic shape" (p. 70), in monologues and dialogues. Specifically, Chapter Three expands on the elements of monologues, including point of view, relationship with audience, the character's objectives, tensions, and strategies, subtexts, and the labovian storyline structure. Drawing on excerpts from *open heart* (Salvatore, 2011) among others, the author illustrates how empirical data predominantly from researcher-participant interviews and participant-created stories and reflections are adapted for ethnodramatic monologic and dialogic narratives in prose or poetic format to blur reality and fiction. The basics of ethnodramatic dialogue construction, storylining, and plotting are contextualized in Chapter Four along with excerpts from *Street Rat* (Saldaña, Finley, & Finley, 2005) as well as a list of annotated recommended readings for playscripts.

Going from micro- to macrostructures in ethnodramas, Chapter Five focuses on theatrical staging and production. The selection of the venue, artifacts, costumes, makeup, media technology, lighting for authenticity or special effects, the roles of actors and director, production and reproduction rights, as well as copyright registration are discussed in great details. This chapter concludes with a complete script of *shots: a love story*, an ethnodrama by John Caswell, Jr.

The final chapter discusses approaches to ethnotheatre as art and research form or ethnotheatrical aesthetics. The author claims that the imagination and creativity, storytelling, writing, and research skills, ethical stance, trustworthiness, and genre awareness of actors and playwright-researcher mold the creation of theatrical play. The book concludes with a section of appendices and bibliography. These further resources include a sample consent form and a selected interdisciplinary bibliography of academic resources in ethnodrama, ethnotheatre, and arts-based research.

Ethnotheatre: Research from Page to Stage is more than a "playwriting textbook for the ethnodramatic genre of literature" (p. 12). Geared toward both novice and experienced researchers from a wide array of studies, the book provides a valuable contribution to qualitative research courses as it presents an in-depth and engaging discussion about the genre of ethnotheatre, by using excerpts from authentic plays and discussing the topic in language accessible for students, novice and seasoned researchers, and instructors. For example, Chapter Three concludes with a detailed description of the data collection and production processes of *open heart*, an ethnodrama by Joe Salvatore, illustrating the collaborative efforts between researcher-playwright and actors. In addition to clear language and reflective stance, the author contextualizes ethnotheatre in the interdisciplinary field of performative social science and provides research examples, as well as exercises, questions, and annotated bibliography. Such aspects contribute to the interactive value of this book and present a noteworthy contribution to the constantly changing field of qualitative inquiry.

Throughout the book, Saldaña presents examples of live or mediated research-based and participatory performances that combine verbatim extracts from interviews, field notes,

documentary video, and other types of data with the researcher, participant, audience, and/or artist interaction, interpretation, imagination, and reflection with performance. Through rich examples of theatre adaptation forms, such as reader's theatre and community-based productions, the author demonstrates how layers of (re)interpretations connect to prose, dance, poetry, music, video footage, and other forms of artistic and visual expressions and representations as well as modalities. Such features invite the community to co-construct, analyze, and internalize the complex lived experiences of a culture and engage in both the research and performance.

In various sections of the book, the author offers valuable guidelines on research ethics including seeking permissions from creators and negotiating ownership rights in performance-based studies. For example, in the introductory chapter, details about informing IRB about the nature of the study and negotiating ownership rights and researcher-participant power relations as well as ethical guidelines for the researcher, participant, and audience are revealed. For novice researchers, these features provide opportunities to immerse in research-based theatre, playwriting, and storytelling, as well as ethical responsibility toward the audience, research participants, and/or actors, as well as copyright, and production rights. Furthermore, chapters allow experienced researchers to be aware of the latest trends in this evolving method and art form. For example, in Chapter Five, Kip Jones' visual ethnography, Ken Davenport's ethnodrama, *My First Time*, based on people's first sexual experiences posted on a website are presented as hybrid, mediated ethnodramas. Finally, the activities, excerpts, and reflective tasks provide evidence of the author's hands on approach to teaching and learning about ethnodrama and ethnotheatre within rigorous standards in qualitative research.

It's writing style and clear organization makes *Ethnotheatre: Research from Page to Stage* accessible for a broader audience. Reflections on the author's teaching and research practices, such as the creative endeavour of adapting research for the stage and awareness on the audience, actors, and research-participants emphasize that theatre-based research is about the process of negotiating data, story, and production among community, research participants, actors, and playwright-researcher, and the product (theatrical play). For instance, reflective descriptions of adapting empirical data to ethnodrama, by changing perspectives from audience to participant and/or actor during the writing and staging processes are inspirational for novice researchers wanting to gain deeper understanding of the process of staging research. In addition to the reflective nature of Saldaña's work, the rigorous research, thorough literature on performance-based research, and practical advice on data representation, documentation, scripting, and ethics, among others provide evidence on the author's expertise. The combination of arts-based literature and research, reflective nature, rich examples of play scripts and visuals of performances, and the author's hands on approach to conducting research and teaching ethnotheatre make this book a valuable and informative reading to those interested in exploring performative, theatre-based research.

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