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Drama as Intercultural Education: An Ethnographic Study of an Intercultural Performance Project in a Secondary School

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Introduction

This is an account of research investigating the role of drama and theatre in the intercultural education of young people. I asked whether and how intercultural performance practices within school-based drama and theatre programs might build cross-cultural engagement, communication, and understanding. I considered how the embodied, symbolic, and aesthetic languages of drama might expand students' cultural horizons.

My two-year ethnographic study of intercultural teaching and learning in the drama and theatre curriculum was undertaken in a multicultural secondary school in Melbourne, Australia. I documented and analyzed the experiences of approximately forty young people who participated in an intercultural drama and performance project that they called "The Gods Project." This project was led by a Kenyan performing artist, "Jean," who was undertaking a two-year residency in the school. She worked with four classes of mixed-ability middle school students with little experience in theatre, as well as six senior students who volunteered to be involved in the project. The young people were ethnically diverse; however, none had an African background. The students were involved in drama and performing arts workshops, attended a creative arts camp, and studied, produced, and performed their interpretation of a play, *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (Rotimi 1971). This play was a reworking of the Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex* by Nigerian playwright Ola Rotimi who transposed the plot into a Yoruba context to draw parallels with the debilitating Biafran civil war. Rotimi's play text incorporates Yoruban rituals, idiom, music, dance, song, and chants as well as contemporary dramaturgical structures. My research report (which was my doctoral thesis) is written as an ethnographic narrative that examines the challenges and tensions of "The Gods Project" within the school community that I called "Eastgrove College." I examined the nature and extent of the diverse young people's engagement with this intercultural drama project and its impact on the broader school community. As a participatory ethnographer, I collaborated with Jean and the students to describe, record, and analyze their experiences throughout The Gods Project and to interpret its educational, social, and aesthetic meanings.

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Central to the research was my lived experience of intercultural exchange — my story of working alongside Jean who became my co-researcher as well as the teaching artist leading the project. Through our reflective dialogues and our interchange of drama pedagogy and theatre practices, we co-constructed an intercultural relationship that was informed by Bharucha's concept of mutual respect for our differences and for the particularities of our personal and professional histories (1993).

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

In undertaking this research, I conceived of drama education, intercultural performance, and ethnography as interconnected fields. I located the study in a theoretical and practical context of international exchange (focusing particularly on my experiences with the International Drama/Theatre and Education Association) and of cultural diversity (focusing on drama teaching within the multicultural context of Melbourne and Australia).

The research was framed by debates about the ethics of intercultural performance and the appropriation and representation of cultural narratives (Bharucha 1993; Pavis 1996; Carlson 1996; Schechner and Appel 1990; Zarrilli 1992). I discussed the contested concept of "interculturalism" and its relationship with education, the arts, and theatre (Brahmachari 1998; Pedelty 2001; Goode and Neelands 1995; Brauer 2002). I examined contemporary theories of cultural pluralism and intercultural pedagogy and their application to arts teaching within schools (Ackroyd and Pilkington 1997; Alfred, Byram, and Fleming 2002; Garcia 1997; Nicholson and Taylor 1998).

Central to the study was the concept of contemporary ethnography as an embodied, participatory practice; I explored its role within drama research and the interdisciplinary field of performance studies (Turner and Turner 1982; Conquergood 1991, 1992, 2002; Denzin 1997; Mienzakowski 1998; Tedlock 1991, 2000). Through analyzing my use of ethnography in this study, I examined the ways in which ethnographic practices can be used within the intercultural drama curriculum both as a form of pedagogy and an approach to educational research (Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Walford and Massey 1998; Wolcott 1995, 1999; Woods 1986, 1996).

Drawing on the anthropological work of Turner (1982, 1986) and his performance collaborations with Schechner (1993, 2002), I interpreted *The Gods Project* as an intersecting social and aesthetic drama. The phases of "social drama" — breach, crisis, redressive action, and reintegration — and of "drama as ritual" (O'Farrell 1996) were used as conceptual frameworks for my data analysis and to structure my narrative account of the project. I applied Turner's concepts of the "liminal/liminoid" and "communitas" to the young people's experiences both at the creative arts camp and in the drama workshop, rehearsal, and performance spaces. Schechner's concept of "dark play" was used to develop my understanding of the spontaneous social and transgressive play of the young people during the project. I identified their subversive and ludic behavior as both a response to the difficult social drama they were involved in and as their means of engaging with the "strangeness" of the cultural material and its "dark" story and themes. My analysis of the data revealed the importance of this "dark play" as it informed the emerging aesthetic drama, as it helped to build an intracultural community of participants, and as it facilitated the intercultural meaning making.

Collaborative Ethnography and Ethical Issues

I argue that ethnography is a research methodology that is particularly appropriate for studying young people's experiences of drama, given that drama is an ephemeral and processual art form. Both fields involve engagement with the socio-cultural world to inter-

pret and make meaning of human experiences, and they involve the communication of particular and positioned understandings within constructed texts, both performed and written. In drama, participants express and transform aspects of lived and imagined experiences into enacted narratives. Ethnographers participate in social contexts to describe, analyze, and represent human experiences through ethnographic narrative texts (Van Maanen 1995). According to Geertz, ethnographic research involves “direct, intimate, and more or less disturbing encounters with the immediate details of contemporary life” (1988, 139). Within a school community, social and cultural events and experiences are described, interpreted, and represented through the processes and products of ethnography.

This study was conducted according to the ethical principles defined by the host university’s human research ethics committee and with their formal approval. I negotiated my research role with Jean, obtained her enthusiastic permission for our professional, artistic, and research partnership to proceed, and then sought formal permission from the school principal to conduct the study as a participant observer at Eastgrove College. In seeking the informed consent of all participants, I explained the nature and purpose of my study and the types of data that I planned to collect, subject to their approval. As the research proceeded, I gained formal permission to extend the period of data collection beyond the life of the performance project.

Prior to the intensive phase of ethnographic data collection during The Gods Project, I undertook fieldwork in the school throughout the first year of “Jean’s” residence as a Kenyan teaching artist. During the project, I collaborated with a group of senior students who volunteered to be my “student co-researchers.” With their assistance, I was able to access the experiences of many of the diverse young people involved in The Gods Project and to interpret its impact for members of the broader school community. Jean’s pedagogy of intercultural story telling within the drama classroom and her role as a “cultural guide” throughout the project also became a focus of the data collection. In addition, I collected and analyzed longitudinal data — the written reflections, discussions, and interviews with Jean and seven young people who met with me during a period of four years after the project had concluded.

As an ethnographic researcher, drama educator, and “assistant director,” I worked alongside Jean and the students as they explored, played with, talked about, resisted, created, adapted, struggled with, subverted, negotiated, and performed intercultural texts. I built into the research design an expectation of regular and ongoing consultations with key stakeholders. I wanted to elicit responses from diverse members of the school community to questions that arose for me during my fieldwork and when I was interpreting the data. By building collaborative research relationships, I was able to seek advice from Jean and the students about whether and how some sensitive data might be represented in my research report. I accepted the views of research participants in all instances.¹

In writing up this research, I constructed narratives that I placed throughout the text. These attempted to illuminate the complexities of the educational setting and the web of relationships I formed within it as a participatory researcher. A number of these narrative vignettes focused on critical incidents, points of tension, significant conversations and moments of realization.

Findings: Intercultural Pedagogy and Learning

Turner’s concept of “performing ethnography” informed my interpretation of data relating to the intercultural pedagogy of The Gods Project. As a performance anthropologist,

¹All names of participants used in this text and my thesis document are pseudonyms.

Turner calls for “global cultural understanding,” seeing theatre as a vital means for “the intercultural transmission” of diverse human experiences. He regards “the enactment and performance of the culturally transmitted experiences of others” as the basis for imaginative understanding and “transcultural” communication (Turner 1982, 18–19). Yet he also understands performances as culturally situated and particular to the dynamic and ephemeral context of their creation, presentation, and reception.

Turner’s theories of intercultural learning through performative experiences resonate with the pedagogical features of *The Gods Project*. For Turner, an effective pedagogy of “performing ethnography” requires the guidance of someone familiar with the culture being enacted. A participant who enacts characters from unfamiliar contexts needs to learn the “cultural rules” and “the deep processes of social life” that underlie the actions of the character she is representing (Turner 1982, 100). As an African teaching artist, Jean functioned as a “cultural guide” for her Australian students within *The Gods Project*. In Turner’s terms, this was a pedagogical model based on “a dialectic between performing and learning;” within drama classes, workshops, and rehearsals, participants were able to “learn(s) through performing then perform(s) the understandings so gained” (1982, 94).

Throughout *The Gods Project*, the students engaged in a process of “intercultural reflexivity,” both through their pedagogical interactions with Jean and as participants in my ethnographic research. In drama classes, workshops, rehearsals, and in forums after the performances, Jean and I encouraged the students to be reflexive about their drama and performance experiences. In discussions with Jean, the students considered the challenges and rewards of playing roles embedded in a socio-cultural world different from their own. As participants and co-researchers in the ethnographic study, they described and analyzed their experiences of interpreting, translating, embodying, and performing an “African” story. They responded to my interpretations of the data and, in so doing, generated further reflective data. In this interpretative and dialogical process of meaning making, I believe that the aims of my ethnographic study and Jean’s aims as an arts educator complemented each other.

The Gods Project — a performing arts project involving multicultural Australian secondary school students in a performance of a Nigerian play adapted from a Greek myth led by a Kenyan teaching artist — is an ethnographic case study of intercultural teaching and learning. With the guidance of Jean, their Kenyan teaching artist, many of the young people within *The Gods Project* engaged with different socio-cultural perspectives, actively explored new cultural performance conventions and art forms, and experienced the complexities of intercultural representation.

In spite of its inherent challenges and the difficulties encountered by many of the participants, my analysis of the data showed the positive personal, social, and aesthetic outcomes of *The Gods Project* for many of the young people involved and demonstrated their significant intercultural learning. The importance of kinesthetic, embodied, playful, and performative experiences for intercultural teaching and learning emerged as a central theme of the study.

The intersecting social and aesthetic domains of *The Gods Project* provided the young people with multilayered intercultural experiences. Their pedagogical relationships with Jean, their Kenyan teacher-artist, and their interactions within the diverse group of participants framed their intercultural and social learning. In the aesthetic domain, the young people engaged with the story, the characters, and the socio-cultural world of Rotimi’s play. They explored African storytelling and theatre conventions as they interpreted, adapted, played with, improvised, and performed the intercultural text. Jean used theatre games, participatory storytelling, chanting, rhythmic movements, and Swahili songs to establish a shared intercultural drama language within the group and to encourage playful participation.

Social Development, Agency, and Meaning

A significant feature of the project was the eventual development of a close intracultural community where inter-year group relationships and trust evolved between the diverse participants, a significant number of whom had begun the project with behavioral and learning difficulties. Jean's drama teaching and theatre practices during the six intensive months of The Gods Project focused on building an interconnected community of participants — across ages, ethnic backgrounds, abilities, experiences, and interest levels. Many of the young people described The Gods Project as “difficult,” and they commented on the persistence and group effort that the production required. An ongoing challenge of the project for Jean was managing the different motivations of young people and the divisions between subgroups and individuals. Although there were transitory and resistant participants, some of whom dropped out, about three-quarters of the students who commenced The Gods Project at the start of the year participated in the production of *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (Rotimi 1971) six months later.

The head of the Middle School spoke to me a year after the project about its impact on individual middle school students. He focused particularly on Daniel, “a very deep and sensitive kid” whose “destructive behaviors and emotional problems had us all pretty alarmed.” He felt that Daniel's involvement in The Gods Project had “a huge pastoral impact.” He acknowledged that The Gods Project did not engage all students. However “the case study of Daniel” was a reminder of the possibilities of good education and why “we need to actually put kids in contexts they've never been in before — so they can go deep and learn in new ways.” He reflected on the challenging nature of The Gods Project as an alternative model of education: “We have to keep on exposing kids to really different experiences and keep the possibilities open, because every now and then, it picks a student up and they'll really fly!”²

For the senior students, their decision to participate in The Gods Project was an act of agency and a way of enhancing their final year at school. After leaving school, Gabriel reflected back on his experience with the project; he said he found the task of taking on the demanding character of King Odewale “the most difficult thing” he had ever attempted. Yet he said he chose to do it because he felt that he needed to challenge himself and to move out of “my comfort zone.” In an interview three months after the project, senior student Viv said: “The Gods Project was deep, and so it really got you involved.” She made the choice to be in this “different sort of production” in her final year at school to “distract me from the stress of exams.” She found that when she was “doing the story,” it provided an emotional release, and “it took me to a different place.” For Sam, a bright but difficult and disengaged student, the experience of The Gods Project was “just something that I'm really proud to have done.” He said it impacted positively on his sense of himself and “opened up new directions for tertiary education.”

Sharon, a shy and introverted girl, saw her experiences with The Gods Project as “a sort of rite of passage.” She explained: “Because of The Gods Project, I feel like I've achieved something in Year 12. I can look back forever on this.” Reflecting on the project three years later as a university student, she saw this experience as having assisted her transition to the world outside school.

It made me feel like I was going out with more of a bang. I hadn't been involved in any of that kind of stuff in my younger years, and I thought it's my

²Quotations from research data derive from transcripts of interviews, field notes, or documentary data.

last year. It will give me something to remember. It made me feel a lot better about leaving school — as if I'd actually achieved something and been involved in something with *meaning*!³

I asked her: “Was it one of the more memorable things that has happened to you?” Her emphatic reply surprised me.

I wouldn't say so much it's *happened* to me — more like one of the more memorable things I've *done*. I've actually put in the effort and done for myself. And I didn't give up!

Miranda, who had been involved in previous school productions, felt that playing the role of Queen Ojuola in *The Gods* performance “gave me the depth I was after.” During the project, she participated in the liminoid dark play with the other young people, but the quality of her engagement during rehearsals and performances suggested the intensity of a liminal experience. She acknowledged that she had a strong emotional investment in *The Gods Project* and that at times she found it “hard to deal with the fact that the production didn't have as much meaning and significance to everyone.” She reflected later that “maybe this show meant a little bit too much to me.”

There were times when I thought maybe I should be a little bit easier on everyone else, because they're not investing this much emotion into it and maybe they don't have to.

Miranda recalled her feelings of satisfaction with the aesthetic elements of the ensemble performance.

When it came together, for me, I could have just cried I was so happy, because it made such a difference. And the thing about *The Gods* is that it has so much substance, you know, the story is so powerful, the music, the drumming, the movement, you know, everything . . .

A Cultural Guide

The students recognized the importance of Jean's role in this intercultural project. A middle school girl reflected on what Jean as a Kenyan teaching artist offered the students.

Jean was really important in letting us know the culture of it. She gave us the confidence as well by just helping me through it in the drama classes. I think everyone got a lot of inspiration from her. (Amy, middle school student)

Drawing on her socio-cultural knowledge and lived experiences of East Africa, Jean assisted the students in building conceptual connections with Rotimi's play. Jean modeled a Kenyan form of oracy and storytelling that the students drew on. With Jean's guidance, the students experimented with the kinesthetic language of the Kenyan storyteller and the interactive roles of the listeners. As a cultural “insider,” Jean assisted the young people to

³All quotes from the data in this text are fully referenced in my thesis document which is available online.

make dramatic meaning of its Yoruba setting and to explore and interpret the characters' actions and words. She guided their process of transforming the play into a new intercultural performance text.

The students drew intensively on Jean's understandings of the cultural references embedded in Rotimi's script. In workshops, classes, rehearsal, and informally around the school, participants often asked Jean about Yoruban cosmology and rituals — particularly when they were confused by the script or intrigued by an aspect of the performance text. For example, three Year 9 students who played the role of the chiefs in the performance seemed fascinated by the ritual elements that Rotimi incorporated into the text, particularly the scene where King Odewale makes a ritualized promise to the gods to hunt for the killer of his father. In performing this scene, Gabriel, as King Odewale, stood alone in the center of the space with his sword raised; accompanied by intensifying drum beats, he made an incantation to the gods, calling out their names in turn. In rehearsals, Davo, James, and Joe (the three chiefs) watched this scene evolve with more interest than they usually displayed in rehearsals. They asked Jean repeatedly about the names and meaning of the Yoruban gods and seemed fascinated by the "powers" of each one. During one rehearsal when Gabriel was struggling to remember the script, the boys produced what they called "Gods flash cards" that they had made. Each card had the name of a god written in bold letters and was accompanied by a cartoon-style symbol depicting the god's powers.

Turner's (1982) notion of socio-cultural learning through a pedagogy of performance seemed to occur in a dynamic and organic way in this intercultural project. Teaching and learning took place during the students' informal interactions with Jean, in their explorations and struggles with the intercultural performance text, and within their social relationships and dramatic play. Jean valued this mode of experiential learning within the project. She observed: "I think there are things you learn on a really deep level, which you cannot learn by just observing or by reading about it."

Symbolic and cultural objects assisted the young people to make aesthetic and intercultural meaning of Rotimi's text. The students built connections with the socio-cultural world of the play through their playful interactions with dolls, colored cloth and cowry shells, as well as with African artifacts. In his play, Rotimi uses cowry shells as a central element of the plot. Within its Yoruba setting, a string of cowries marks the newborn child, signifying his terrible fate and linking this with the spiritual and supernatural realm. Cowry shells became important in an ongoing process of intercultural translation. The cowry was an example of a culturally specific symbol that accumulated meaning for the young people within the logic of the dramatic narrative. Jean encouraged the students to consider how and whether they wanted to use the cowry as a "central symbol" in the play. She explained that "for us in East Africa, the cowry was also used as a currency of exchange before coins, so there are all sorts of associations that we might make with its value." The students chose to retain the cowry in their performance text because, through dramatic exploration, it came to work aesthetically for them, and through their dialogues with Jean, they came to understand its cultural resonances. Jean found it significant that when she asked the middle school students in their drama classes to retell the story as "a guilty secret" within a contemporary context, they chose to include the cowry. She notes: "So I think the translation of some understanding of what the cowries signify had happened!"

Play, Cultural Respect, and "Getting It"

The research suggests that the students' efforts to make sense of and to perform a text embedded in a Yoruban context parallels the task of the ethnographer attempting to understand

and represent socio-cultural experiences. As the young people worked with Jean to interpret the script, they expressed their struggles to “get it,” their frustrations and confusions, and their moments of understanding and revelation. Intercultural insights often emerged from their participation in drama workshops and from their embodied experiences of bringing characters to life or singing the songs or dancing the dances.

In my conversation with senior student Kim, she reflected on how her pedagogic relationship with Jean enabled her to access and explore new cultural perspectives.

There were moments where you’d be so conscious of entering into something different and culturally unfamiliar like in the movements or language or the social attitudes. I’d think, ‘I’m grappling with things that are not familiar to me here. How do I know that I get it — that it isn’t mocking of the culture?’ It was comforting to have Jean there. She would nudge us forward.

Through encouraging open-ended exploration and playful experimentation, Jean assisted the students in finding their own ways to build connections with culturally unfamiliar material. Within the workshops, there was teasing and irreverent banter alongside Jean’s explanations of cultural practices and her demonstrations of the Swahili language, the songs, the dance movements, and the gestures. Miranda reflected on her experiences of exploring cultural differences through Jean’s guidance.

She’d never say, ‘That’s wrong.’ She’d get this smile and say, ‘Let’s try it another way, and I’ll tell you if it works.’ There was recognition from the outset that this is weird for us, like saying ‘Oshogbo’ makes your mouth go in a funny shape. I was aware that this was my voice trying to pronounce the words, and I’d laugh and others would laugh and Jean would laugh with us. No tiptoeing around trying not to step on someone’s cultural toes. It was OK to muck around with the movements — to imagine living in a culture where a big bum is beautiful. It was not at all reverential. We could be irreverent Aussies. Jean herself encouraged this. She was such a playful person. There was a feeling that someone else’s culture is not this sacred untouchable thing — it’s something you can access, and it can be fun!

The intercultural dimensions of the project continued to provoke questions for some students after the production. The senior students discussed with Jean the appropriateness of non-Africans attempting to perform aspects of Kenyan culture. Gabriel asked, “If you’re not African, how can you really know? I mean, how can you sing their songs?” Jean believed that *The Gods Project* involved a reinterpretation of cultural material, not imitation. She explained that for her, “in performing the text, there was never a pretence that we were Nigerian, but we were able to take certain things and enter into them.” Jean discussed with me the “complex question” of intercultural representation and the perceived “dangers” of “mocking the culture.” She told me that she noticed a “super sensitivity” in Australia about non-Aboriginal people performing indigenous music and stories. She compared this to her experiences in post-colonial Kenya.

I kept thinking you come to Kenya, and we’re doing Western stuff all the time. Nobody ever says to me, ‘You’re not from France, you can’t do a French play.’ I mean, nobody’s ever come up with that, but then in Australia, there is this taboo which I find really interesting.

The students often played with and subverted the language, the movements, the songs, and gestures they were rehearsing. However, as *The Gods* production approached, they wanted reassurance from Jean that they were performing the songs, dances, and movements “properly.” Jean noted, “With all the kids there was always that sense of, ‘Are we doing it right? Are you sure we’re not messing around with it?’” The students wanted their representation of this material to be meaningful and respectful to members of the Melbourne African community who Jean had invited to the performance. Jean recalled a key moment backstage on the night of “the last terrible rehearsal” where she was deeply concerned by the lack of commitment of many of the students. She explained:

Later the middle school boys came up to me and said, ‘We will do it properly, we won’t mess up.’ There was always that thing of, ‘Please say we did the dances or the songs or the prostrating right,’ because they knew it would mean something really deep to the Yoruba people in the audience. I think there was never a question about the kids not having the integrity it needed.

Miranda talked retrospectively about her efforts to perform the songs and dances.

It was a process of learning. I wanted to see if I’d learnt them properly in the way I moved and sang, because then they might resonate with someone who understood — who spoke that language. I’m sure I didn’t do them as an African person would. But there were some sort of root elements of that song and those movements, and what drew me to them was that they didn’t come naturally. And my challenge was to get it — to really get the hang of it, not do a silly little imitation. I wanted to get it on a deeper level.

Kinesthetic and Aesthetic Learning

For the young people, their kinesthetic experiences were a memorable component of *The Gods Project*. A month after the performances, many participants talked animatedly about their participation in dancing, singing, chanting, and percussive and rhythmic sound making. They recalled the “special feel” of the African artifacts: “the carved sword,” “the calabash,” “the gourd,” and “the priest’s holy stick.” A year after the project, they confidently demonstrated the act of prostration, and they described the particular ways in which their characters moved and the “different deep rhythms” of the dances. Middle school students recalled the ways their bodies “changed” when they put on the headdresses and their feelings of being physically transformed when wearing the African costumes.

In my costume I walked in a different way with more dignity and better posture! The royal robes were borrowed from African friends of Jean’s. I really liked wearing them because they made me feel different — bigger and more powerful than a Year 9 student!

The young people agreed with a senior student, Sam, who said that the music was a “real highlight” of the performance project. They described their physical experiences of singing the Swahili songs, of moving rhythmically as a group as they chanted, ululated, and called and responded. Sam recalled his experiences of learning the Swahili songs aurally and kinesthetically.

You learnt all the songs just by listening to Jean. She would sing them in this different way, using a different scale, using a different system of music. It was a little bit different every time she'd sing it, so you could only really learn by listening and then feeling the sounds in your throat and your chest as you sang.

In a letter that he wrote to me a year after the project, as a university student, Sam explored his sense of the aesthetic qualities of the performance, focusing particularly on the communication of meaning through sung and spoken sound.

I believe that the addition of the songs in the African language enriched the play immeasurably. When the singing was added to the choreography, the flashes of color, the grave and graceful movements, the low drones and high, breathy melodies worked quite beautifully. When Stefan initiated his chant, the responding male, throaty chorus sounded as if they breathed from under the surface of the earth. When the females broke out their hysterical, charged refrain, it sounded as if a vast flock of birds had taken to flight, whirling around the audience and engulfing them in their expression of joy. These moments formed the core of the play. The response of voice to voice formed the human foundation on which the tragic plot was based. As well as heightening the emotional effect, I felt as if I had experienced something important with my friends. To sing strange words that you don't understand allows you to take away their place as a part of language and take them into yourself. When you are not burdened by connections and associations, you can feel out each sound, lending your feeling and experience to each of the notes.

Cultural and Aesthetic Translation

In *The Gods Project*, the young people performed characters from Rotimi's play that were outside their cultural experiences. To enact these characters, they needed to "re-frame" themselves and to imagine themselves differently, to engage in what Neelands calls "self-other imagining" (2002, 7). Some of the young people analyzed in detail the processes they went through as they interpreted, imagined, explored, and embodied characters.

Miranda discussed her "cultural and personal discoveries" as she embarked on the task of understanding Queen Ojuola. She realized "there were real elements of the Queen's character that didn't stem from the Oedipus myth that obviously belong to a particular culture." She drew on Jean to help her interpret and "translate" the actions and attitudes of an African queen who behaves in a culturally unfamiliar way. She was drawn to Queen Ojuola as a strong female character, but she soon discovered "there are different sorts of strength."

In an English writing assignment, Gabriel chose to focus on his struggles to understand the character of the African king as he engaged with the story and the socio-cultural world of the performance text in *The Gods Project*. He reflected on the process of bringing the character to life, of inhabiting King Odewale within the fictional context of the drama, of transforming himself in performance. He drew on the rhetorical forms and metaphoric language of Rotimi's text to create his own prose poem from the perspective of King Odewale. Earlier, Gabriel commented that he "loved all the earthy metaphors" in the script. In his poem, he represented the king, who was cursed by the gods as both a "lion" and a "beetle gathering sticks for a purpose not yet clear." By the end of his poem the narrator, King Odewale, has changed his point of view about the gods and his fate.

A few days after the final performance, Gabriel returned to the empty hall. He studied the cloth used in the set and recalled his experiences of being the king and performing his story to an audience in this performance space.

The throne has gone, and the pattern on the floor is clearly visible for the first time. It shows a cross, covered with scrawling lines and splashes of a violent red, overwhelming the white base. The silent, enduring blue cloths are the last reminders of an empire broken up in paranoia and famine. I was here not long ago. I took the regal costume and wore it as naturally as I could. And for me, the costume was not just one a boy would wear to look regal. It was a costume that a king would wear to tell others of his position. I found that king amongst my other identities, and I took it out and wore it, made it my life for a few days. At times, it faded and blended with other identities, but each evening it burst through my surface, and I showed the world what the king could do.

Through creating and embodying the character of King Odewale, Gabriel believed that he developed his capacity to understand other people.

I found this king, yet he did not exist before I started looking. That is the single feat I performed that I am most proud of — not the delivery of my decisive orders or my angst when the famine was so pressing, but my ability to procure this whole man, this individual with an identity and feelings. This then is my great learning. I can now better analyze a character and create a persona, and from this, I have become more able to study people, real people. Although I learnt to know other people better, the one person I learnt most about was myself. I will keep *learning* more about myself, and about other people, I am sure, and I believe acting is one of the best ways to do this.

Embodying and performing a character within an intercultural narrative has expanded this young person's sense of himself and of the socio-cultural world.

Building Cross-Cultural Understanding

Intercultural learning was a dialectical process in which knowledge and understandings flowed between Jean and the students and me. For Jean, the heart of The Gods Project was the cultural learning that came from “playing with something different.” As a Kenyan teaching artist, she experienced an evolving understanding of the belief systems and of the experiences and cultural values of Australian teenagers with cultural backgrounds very different from her own. For example, it was a revelation to Jean that many of the students had never handled babies within their family or community context. She chose to work with the students on Oedipus as a “trans-cultural” story that she assumed they would be familiar with; she was surprised to discover that most students did not know any version of the story and that they lacked experience with oral story telling. Through a process of what Pedelty (2001) calls “intersubjective reflection,” she became more aware of her own innate cultural assumptions.

It was a telling moment for Jean when she discovered that her Australian students had no knowledge of the cultural significance of cowry shells.

I thought over some of the things I just took for granted; you assume that people will know things as simple as cowry shells and when a Year 9 student asked,

‘What is a cowry shell?’ it just had never occurred to me. I had just taken it for granted.

Within its school context, there was resistance, even hostility, by some of the teachers to this intercultural performance project. However, The Gods Project did provide an alternative model to the annual traditional musical production. Some teachers said they now realized that a school production could also have “strong links to the curriculum.” Teachers who attended the evening performances talked of the “community benefits” of this event. They were surprised that the production had attracted members of the East African community to the school, and they were impressed with the “generous community spirit” the women showed in providing and serving African tea and food for the audience and cast.

A humanities teacher was moved by the performance and saw the project as a valuable form of cross-cultural learning and exchange.

The power of the African community, coming in to pay almost a tribute to these students for the clarity and the generosity of actually taking the time to get into the material — that is where the handshake starts. You know, they were totally moved by it.

The head of the senior school believed that as a curriculum study, “it was incredibly rigorous.”

For the participating students, in terms of language and the whole conceptual side of it — aside from that the cultural richness, which was another whole dimension — just from an academic point of view, it was far more demanding than anything that students or staff would have anticipated.

A middle school English teacher commented on the project as a form of intercultural education.

It gave them more depth in understanding what it actually means to relate to another culture, and that it is hard work to truly achieve that sense of being a part of the world — which our students are going to be if they’re not already.

The head of the middle school saw the final moments of the performance as the fusing of the social and aesthetic drama.

I saw it as the coming together of them as a team, a collaboration, the way that they could realize the challenging aesthetic whole through the parts. It demonstrated collaboration, communication, community — all aspects of the culture they had been studying.

The head of creative arts emphasized the transformative effects of the cross-cultural learning for many of the young people.

I think it was absolutely fantastic, in terms of the kids’ learning cross-culturally. I think that that was way beyond what I would have expected, considering the kind of bumpy way that it all happened and the kids feeling at odds at times with what they were being asked to do. But the final coming together — I think it shifted those students’ thinking, shifted their whole outlook, in a way that will be a lifelong experience.

Conclusion

In undertaking this research, I asked how drama education and intercultural performance might expand the cultural horizons of young people. I believe that this ethnographic case study demonstrates that drama can be a powerful mode of intercultural education. The data reveal significant personal, social, aesthetic, and cultural learning outcomes for many of the participants.

In *The Gods Project*, intercultural learning experiences for the students occurred within the interconnected social and aesthetic domains of the project. The diverse young people participated in a process of building an “intracultural” community. Mentoring relationships between middle school and senior students supported their intercultural, artistic, and social learning. As members of a multi-age group of “Gods” participants, the middle school students were able to overcome significant difficulties and contribute to a challenging performance; for many, their achievements were beyond their own and their teachers’ expectations. For the senior students, their participation in *The Gods Project* was an act of agency that impacted on their experiences of transition beyond school. They found deep social and aesthetic “meaning” within the performances.

This intercultural performance project provided opportunities for the young people to engage in both liminoid and liminal experiences within the safe and supported space of the drama workshops and performances. Dramatic play functioned as a form of resistance, solidarity, creative critique, and intercultural and aesthetic meaning making. Play helped to build a more cohesive community of diverse participants. Through their “dark play,” the young people subverted the negative responses of members of the school community and began to build connections with the culturally “strange” material and the “dark story” and plot. “Dark play” was a site of risk-taking behavior that occurred (mostly) within the safe liminoid space of the drama workshops and rehearsals. For many participants, subversive and transgressive play, parody, and spontaneous humor preceded their respectful engagement with culturally specific materials and art forms.

This study reveals the importance of experiential and embodied learning within intercultural performance pedagogy. For the young people, their kinesthetic activities and their experience of “*communitas*” at the creative arts camp were critical points of engagement with the intercultural project. The students explored the socio-cultural world of the performance text through physically interacting with symbolic objects and through dramatic action. By enacting characters from Rotimi’s text, students embodied a different way of seeing the world and consequently expanded their sense of themselves.

Within this research, I argue that *The Gods Project* is a pedagogical model of “learning culture” in a dynamic, dialogical, and organic way within a drama and theatre curriculum project. Jean was a “cultural guide” who supported the young people’s exploration and interpretation of culturally “different” characters and stories. Through her pedagogical relationships with the young people, she assisted them in engaging with the socio-cultural world of Rotimi’s play and in experimenting with the kinesthetic language of African storytelling, songs, and dances. The young people drew on her cultural knowledge as they interpreted, adapted, played with, and embodied the evolving intercultural performance text. The study reveals that within an educational community, kinesthetic, playful, embodied, and performative experiences are central to intercultural teaching and learning. However, it also highlights the potential tensions and difficulties of implementing and sustaining challenging intercultural projects within school contexts.

I propose that contemporary approaches to ethnography complement the work of drama educators and school-based researchers. This narrative account of *The Gods Project*

demonstrates that through a process of collaborative “intercultural reflexivity,” ethnography can enhance intercultural drama education. Within The Gods Project, the students engaged in a process of “intercultural reflexivity” both through their pedagogical interactions with Jean and as participants in my research. As participants and “co-researchers” in the ethnographic study, they analyzed their experiences of interpreting, translating, embodying, and performing an “African” story and of playing roles embedded in a socio-cultural world different from their own. In this interpretative and dialogical process of meaning making, my aims as an ethnographer and Jean’s aims as an arts educator intersected with each other.

Drama educators and their students have rich opportunities for intercultural exchange within local and international communities and for “intracultural” interactions within multicultural heterogeneous classrooms. In spite of the difficulties, complexities, and challenges of The Gods Project, the outcomes of this study reveal that intercultural drama programs in schools can expand young people’s cultural horizons and build their capacity to engage more constructively with a contemporary pluralistic world.

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