

# Theatre as Research

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**Abstract:** This paper presents a methodology called Theatre as Research. It argues that using theatre to analyse and present research findings draws on both the creative and intuitive unconscious as well as the logical, cognitive and rational dimensions of the mind. The methodology is presented in a big picture context, showing its philosophical alignment, from the overarching epistemology of Constructionism, which informs the whole approach, right down to the methods used to implement the research process. Within this context, the paper also discusses various theories that support the notion of intuition as a way of knowing. Gebser's (1986) theory of the evolution of consciousness, along with contemporary theories of psychoanalysis and left and right brain functioning, collectively support the contention that Theatre as Research is able to draw on the powerful and creative unconscious to inform the final, cognitive analysis of the data. It is a process through which the unconscious synthesis of data to produce impressions and metaphors can then be clarified and articulated through the mindful scripting and presentation of the play.

**Keywords:** Arts-Based Research Methods, Theatre as Research Methodology, Qualitative research, Performance Text, Ethnodrama.

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## 1. Introduction

How do we make sense of the chaos that shocks our world? How do we know what we think we know? I believe these are some of the first questions we need to ask ourselves as functioning human beings and also as researchers. When researchers ask about this, they refer to ways of knowing as 'epistemologies'. According to Crotty (Crotty, 1996), there are three widely accepted epistemologies, which inform the various research frameworks. Each one comes with its own set of assumptions. The first of these is Objectivism, which assumes that objects exist in one reality, outside of any person's conscious knowledge of them. Secondly, and epistemology of Constructionism assumes that although objects may exist independently, it is each person's individual creation of meaning via these objects, which constructs that person's perspective of reality. Consequently to the constructionist, there are many different realities, not just the one, which may be held as *the material* truth by the Objectivist. And thirdly there is Subjectivism, which assumes that the only reality that is certain is the one that exists in one's own mind. In this paper I maintain that the epistemology that informs the research approach of Theatre a Research is that of Constructionism. I will go on to explain that logically, the theoretical framework of this methodology must be postmodernism, in its broadest sense, and embracing the notion of many perspectives equating to many realities. I will then outline the methods – that is the steps one might take to put this Theatre as Research methodology into practice.

As a qualitative researcher and a creator of community theatre, it became apparent to me that the theatre I was creating from the interview-based, oral history, was not only art, but a kind of research. The oral history was the data, and the rehearsal and playwriting phases were the processes through which the data was analysed. The performances worked as a kind of member-checking process, as participants who watched their stories performed could tell us – the researcher and the performers - if we had authentically portrayed the stories through the performances. This paper will argue that Theatre as Research has a philosophically aligned research framework, which can be followed to create research using theatre. I contend that Theatre as Research differs from theatre that is created solely as Art for Art's sake. The first mandates, I believe, that the researcher can understand and explain the logical, philosophical alignment of the research framework. The artist is under no such obligation. Whereas art can speak for itself, the researcher needs to justify the chosen methods of the inquiry. This paper aims to do so too. It will also trace an example of how theatre for the sake of research has been used to create community awareness of important, social issues. Let us start, then, with the discussion about how we know what we know – that is, with epistemology.

## 2. Epistemology and Gebser's Theory of How we Know what we Know

I believe we are now at a stage in time to appreciate various ways of knowing and doing research. Twentieth century philosopher, Jean Gebser (Gebser, 1986), puts forward a theory to shed light on how humankind's evolution of consciousness has brought us to the cross roads of knowledge, on which we stand today. It

explains our epistemologies, that is, our ways of knowing. Gebser suggests that throughout the ages of our existence, consciousness has evolved. Indeed, it is still growing, but Gebser argues that in relatively recent times, over the past four hundred years of what we sometimes call Western Civilization, it has been acceptable to intellectually malign our ancient, yet ever residual, ways to awareness.

Gebser (Gebser, 1986) contends that in the beginning, consciousness was no more than a vague perception of the surroundings, which he refers to as 'Archaic Consciousness'. This may have been a near consciousness experienced by single celled organisms, perhaps early sea life. Much later (for we are taking in the whole time of life on earth), Magical Consciousness developed. This was the belief in mysterious things that cannot be explained. Today's expression of residual, Magical Consciousness may take the form of religious faith or unexplainable intuition. It is the hunch, second-sight and the feeling of knowing something 'in our bones'. Misunderstood or forgotten after the reign of Science, which followed the European Renaissance, it is yet retained by ancient cultures.

By the time the Greeks came to influence the Western world, Mythical Consciousness was developing in humankind. Through stories and icons, the Greek Gods and such archetypal symbols, allowed us to know our worlds through myth, metaphor and folk tales. The Gods or the archetypes did not actually exist in a worldly way, but they captured reality symbolically, in a way that could be understood; in a way through which one could engage with the storytelling and empathise with the characters. Like Socrates, storytellers passed down wisdom, orally, to the next generations.

Then, Gebser says, a few hundred years ago something rather formidable happened. Science emerged, and Mental Consciousness was born, and with all of its clever hypothesising and empirical enterprise, magical and mythical ways of knowing lost intellectual status. A feature of Mental Consciousness, according to Gebser, is that it will not tolerate any other ways of knowing. Throughout the last century, Science became so popular that for most of it only positivist research into materials that can be measured or weighed or somehow evaluated through quantifiable means, was tolerated. Scientific Method was celebrated as the only respectable approach for doing research. But Gebser had not finished. He tells us that the next phase of our conscious evolution is dawning now. It is that of Integral Consciousness – the stage where humans realise that all ways of knowing still reside in our consciousness – the Archaic, the Magical, the Mythical and the Mental. All ways of knowing are important, and the presence of the earlier forms of awareness in no way diminishes the power of our Mental Consciousness. Enter the intuitive researcher – one who can know things as they emerge from the unconscious, and attempt to explain them using all of the rational logic that has been so well refined throughout this period of dominate mental consciousness.

### 3. The Birth of the Intuitive Researcher

So what does this philosophy offer our examination of Theatre as Research? I suggest that any arts practice draws on Magical and Mythical Consciousness for creativity, and I see this well-spring of innovation residing in what Gebser's contemporary philosophers - the psychoanalysts - would call the *unconscious* or *subconscious* (Jung, 1933), (Freud, 1900/ 2010). Unlike researchers, artists need not attempt to consciously analyse or explain their work. Critics, historians, social researchers and plenty of others will do that for them. But as both an artist and researcher, I suggest that research by its very nature is a logical, thinking-based activity. Consequently, I argue, although the researcher may choose to draw inspiration from arts practice, at some stage this 'data' will need to be analysed and presented as a product of both unconscious, creative synthesis and conscious, critical thinking. I think that if I am presenting research I need to be able to explain it, whereas if I am showing you Art, you can work it out for yourself. Those are the traditionally accepted protocols for each of these circumstances. My question to researchers who present Arts-Based inquiry asks if they are mindful of these protocols or merely confusing the reader by merging Art with research? Theatre as Research uses Art as a *means* to explanation, which is different to just presenting the Art without any explanation at all. Throughout the twentieth century, philosophers danced around the epistemological questions surrounding intuitive knowing and rational logic. According to Nicholson (2012), William James had this perspective on the matter:

William James noted in 1907 that the main argument in philosophy at that time was between 'tough-minded' materialistic atheists and 'tender-minded' believers in God and free will. He attributed the

conflict to differences in temperament, and argued that his philosophy of Pragmatism could mediate between the intellectual demands of the two types of personality. (Nicholson, 2012)

Perhaps then I could understand Theatre as Research as a pragmatic way to mediate between the ‘tender-minded’, artists way of knowing the world and the tough-minded, positivist researchers who demand that everything is comprehensible. Others talk of left-brain and right-brain ways of processing information, and the notion, although not without controversy, has become widely accepted (Cherry, 2013, Nicholson, 2012). So to use this lens of understanding, one might say that the right and left ‘brains’ should work together for authentic, arts-based research. This is the domain of arts-based research, or specifically in this instance, Theatre as Research. Cherry (Cherry, 2013) explains the widely accepted view of psychologists that in order to function well, we need to incorporate the strengths of both the left and right brain. Yet why is there a tendency in research to either assume a positivist, logic-only (Left brain) approach or a Subjective, vaguely impressionistic (Right brain) mode of inquiry? Examples of the latter may be the weaker attempts at research by some who would use otherwise viable methodologies such as Autoethnography (Jones, 2015) (Ellis, 2004), Dance as Research (Dance, 2017), or Poetry for Research (McCulliss). I contend that through Theatre as Research one may draw on both the powerfully intuitive and the powerfully logical functions of the mind to better serve the research question at hand. The clever unconscious offers impressionistic insights, which can be clarified through conscious reasoning.

Cherry states, more eloquently than I, the psychological argument for why humans need both left and right brain functioning. She explains the coalition of brain hemispheres from a developmental perspective. This is a lengthy quotation, but necessarily so, as it gives a comprehensive insight into a still, sometimes-disputed point of view:

Right brain development precedes the development of the left brain. That is, the infant is aware of faces, sounds, colour, and learns to read emotions on parents’ faces, etc., long before being able to but words and logic to its experience. Likewise, intuition and sensing things develops before rationally understanding the world around us. As we develop, however, we are encouraged to think, to be logical, to reason, often at the expense of our feelings or our intuition. In fact, we are often taught that the right brain activity is inferior to left brain activity, thus inappropriately elevating the importance of the left brain to superior status. Furthermore, we are often encouraged to dismiss right brain activities as irrational simply because people are uncomfortable with them.

The truth is that both types of activity are required for fully functioning in the world. In terms of actual brain activity research has indicated that there is a constant interface between the two hemispheres and their various functions. We are constantly picking up cues from our environment. We sense disapproval, we witness body language, we hear intonations in speech, and we often have a visceral experience of something that is going on between ourselves and others. For example, we may have an ominous feeling before entering a dangerous situation. The problem is, however, we often misinterpret what we experience and, since we have prided ourselves on being rational (left brain), we too often will readily dismiss our feelings.

How many times have you thought, “I understand what you are saying, but it doesn’t feel right to me”? Your right brain picked up signals emanating from the other person that left you feeling uncomfortable in some way despite the content of what was being verbally communicated. Rather than dismiss those feelings, I suggest that you pay attention to them. They may signal something important in the communication (Cherry, 2013).

And I suggest that researchers pay attention to them as well, for the same reason. The methodology I am about to summarise in table format, uses this important, intuitive, ‘visceral’ information that comes from the unconscious, right-brain, primeval and subjective way of knowing, and is translated for universal and intersubjective comprehension by the logical left-brain. It is an epistemological marriage for survival that has served humankind throughout evolution, so why should positivist ‘mental consciousness’ persistently refuse to recognise half of the human evolution of knowledge?

The table below presents a concise view of the methodology that I call Theatre as Research. The methods could be adapted to accommodate any other Art form, providing that the art offers up intuitive insights, which may be later able to inform the analysis and rational research outcomes.

**Table 1:** The Theoretical Framework for Theatre as Research Methodology

Epistemology	Constructionism
Theoretical Perspective	Postmodernism
Methodology	Theatre as Research
Methods	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Collect stories</li> <li>2. Roleplay and improvise themes for interpretation and analysis</li> <li>3. Script the play</li> <li>4. Perform the play to the original storytellers</li> <li>5. Member Check through audience discussion after the show</li> <li>6. Rewrite and refine for ongoing performances.</li> </ol>

Let us examine the contents of the table. The epistemology that informs the methodology of Theatre as Research is Constructionism. The researchers take the oral history that is related to them by the storytellers. In line with the language adopted by the pioneers of qualitative inquiry at the end of last century – Norman Denzin, Yvonna Lincoln and Laurel Richardson, for example – these storytellers will also be referred to as the ‘co-researchers’. After they have recorded the story data from the co-researches, the researchers construct an interpretation and synthesis of the situation that becomes their constructed reality. During the rehearsal time, actors improvise and start to identify with the emotions of the characters. In Gebser’s terms, *magical*, creative intuition will be channelled as the actors and writers empathise with the characters and draw on *mythical*, universally human symbols to allow one person’s story to become one to which others can relate. It becomes everyone’s story, as the subjective material is embraced empathetically by the audience, and it thus becomes an *intersubjective* (Husserl, (1964/1929) ) story. It is here that the concepts of Gebser, Husserl, Jung, and others who write about that intuitive way of knowing the world, become essential to arts-based research methods. This is the time when we might advise the researchers to (in the words of Milton Erikson), “Trust your unconscious; it knows more than you do.” (Erikson, 2017).

In Theatre as Research methodology, the researchers start with the improvisations, characterisations and story synthesis, which come from the creative unconscious. Then because this is research, not purely art, they move to the processes involving cognition, as they draw themes from the data to make common sense of it all. They will need to communicate in a logical way, in order to allow the audience to understand the play. This means the intuitive ways of knowing, which are coloring the emotional dialogue, will need to be translated into language, because it is through language that we can understand things cognitively. A play script is developed. It is richer for having been launched through empathy and unconscious synthesis. From here on, the research becomes more like a kind of performance text (Denzin, 2003) or narrative enquiry (Clandinin, 2007), but it has retained the depth of metaphor and synthesis that can only be drawn from unconscious icons given up to consciousness through the creative phase. Whereas the discussions and descriptions of these more common (albeit fledgling) arts-based approaches focus on rational themes and dialogue, the approach I propose unashamedly seeks unconscious starting points, because (to paraphrase (Goleman, 1992), the unconscious is smarter than we are. I think as arts-based researchers, we still feel the pressure to work in Gebser’s Mental Mode of inquiry, and descriptions of methods that are *sub*-logical and *sub*-rational often wear a false disguise of rational rigor in order to be accepted by mainstream modernists. It is time to acknowledge the Integral, some might say ‘postmodern’ realities of magical and mythical ways of knowing (Gebser, 1986), which present a more accurate representation of how we know what we know – now and in the past, throughout the evolution of consciousness.

At this point, the methodology takes on some of the recognizable and now familiar, qualitative approaches. Like Grounded Theory (Urquhart, 2013), for example, it uses a triangulating device, which we call ‘member-checking’. There is no need to create yet another term unnecessarily. It is at this point that the positivists

among us may find relief, for now the methods are familiar and sounding logical. Next, The play is rehearsed and then it is performed. The first audience, however, is comprised of the co-researchers themselves. They view the show and then feedback to the researcher and actors their opinions on whether or not the play was an accurate interpretation of their own experiences and the stories they told. The researcher leads a discussion with the audience and the actors, to ensure that the meaning has been retained through the performance. As part of this member-checking process, the co-researchers may comment and add suggestions for the re-writing of the script. When all are satisfied with how the play may be tweaked and refined to become a true representation of the researched situation, the play is re-worked and then offered to general audiences who may find the content relevant to their own situations.

#### **4. Theatre as Research: An Example**

Here is an example of how I have used Theatre as Research in my own work as a Lecturer in Arts Education at James Cook University, in Australia.

I was teaching a small group of Creative Arts trained, undergraduate students, who were seeking an opportunity to apply their creative skills to an educational situation. Most of the group were actors, with a couple of Musicians and Visual Artists, and one Media Arts student. I arranged to work with a local, school-based, Drama teacher, and his Drama class of Year 8 girls. Initially, the university students visited the Drama class, and asked the girls to relate stories about their lives – funny stories, sad stories – anything they felt like talking about. The stories flowed and everyone seemed to be having an enjoyable time, however when we took the stories back to our workspace, it was apparent that the themes of bullying and fear of humiliation were reoccurring. We used a whiteboard to note key moments in the stories, and then the actors improvised situations, and included elements from the stories, merged with elements of their own lives – that is, they were acting out the storyline but actually reliving moments in their own lives that paralleled the characters' feelings. The actors were empathising with the co-researchers through the stories. (This is what some might call 'method acting', but this kind of 'living the part' it was discussed at length by Stanislavski, in pre-revolutionary Russia, before the Lee Strasberg school in the United States donned 'the method' terminology. Personally, I think actors have to have the ability to empathise if they are to be believable as naturalistic actors. And these actors were believable.)

When we agreed that we had the emotional storyline, we stepped back from it to think about how to put it together as a cohesive story. Clues for a storyline had surfaced during the improvisations, and it became fairly apparent that the play should be set in a school. Part of the creative license available to users of Theatre as Research is to modify the setting or circumstances so that stories from different places and times can meld. What is important with this kind of data representation is not the actual place and time but the essential human phenomena. It is mandatory to present the emotions authentically. We reached the point in the rehearsal room when it was time for one student to take the group's ideas and emerging characters and synthesize them all into a draft script. This was the point at which the intuited themes were passed to the intellect for cognitive analysis. As the characters were developing from the improvised situations, when the script was drafted, the actors naturally took on the parts that they had begun to create.

According to the girls at the school, isolation and shunning was a sad consequence for some, and we needed to handle this mindfully to get the point across. We decided to start with a comedy cliché, and cast a boy to play the unfashionable and nerdy girl who no one liked. The whole play started off as a comedy, and it was safe to laugh at a straight man in drag, playing an awkward teenage girl at this point in the show. Ironically, and because of the intensely sensitive performance by the young male actor, as the story progressed, the audience moved from a position of light-hearted ridicule of a comedy stereotype, to one of genuine empathy and admiration for the character he was playing. We forgot about the gender of the actor and began to relate to the sadness of her situation. This coincided with the growth and change in the other characters in the play, and their ability to rise above their own doubt-driven cruelty and fear of not fitting in. One character says to the victim at the end, "I only did it to you so that it wouldn't happen to me."

Once the Year 8 co-researchers had assured us that the sentiment in the play was authentic to their meaning, we toured the play to a large country town in outback Queensland. There we played to a very enthusiastic and appreciative, mixed-gender, Year 8 audience. The positive audience response may have been because they did not get to see live theatre very often out there, but I like to think that the research had targeted issues that

were relevant to the ages and situations of the new crowd. Like their city counterparts, they too could identify with the issues and themes that had been distilled from the original narratives.

We were surprised at the candid responses of the students in the semi-formal discussion after the show. The characters in the play had been brave in the end, and it seemed that many were inspired to relate more stories along these lines. There was apparently no shame now in coming forward and talking about bullying and what can be done about it. I was glad the teachers were there to hear and take part in the debriefing, and now in retrospect, I am aware that we were walking a fine line of facing awkward situations productively and remaining appropriately within the ethical guidelines for research. At the time, this was not deemed research, just Theatre in Education. I had worked in Theatre as Education for many years before becoming an academic, and since it was just a show, there were no ethical guidelines beyond that which common sense would decree. Since I am now purporting that the practice could be deemed to be research, the ethical implications of it may need some attention – but how far do we go? In the example I have outlined, we were all teachers or preservice teachers holding a permit to work with children in the form of a ‘blue card’. Should teachers seek clearances to discuss feelings with their classes? Perhaps this question is again one for common sense. Fortunately, when we performed the play in schools the students and the teachers were brimming with praise and thought it all to be a positive experience.

## 5. Conclusions for the Intuitive Researcher

I have argued so far, that there are both conscious and unconscious ways of knowing, and that each can contribute to valid research. I have touched on Gebser’s thesis that these types of knowing have evolved along with human evolution, and that still today, we have access to each of these ancient ways of knowing, despite a more recent, modern obligation to Mental Consciousness and rational cognition. I have said that although artist’s relate easily to magical and mythical ways of knowing, researchers too can draw inspiration from these vehicles of innate creativity, as a means to better understanding and explaining a situation, holistically and in a more universally relevant way. But I have also argued that having used the power of intuition (Jung), or the unconscious (Freud) or magical and mythical consciousness (Gebser), or Right-Brain functioning (Cherry) – for I think they are all aspects of the same phenomenon – I think that unlike the artist, the researcher must then offer some kind of analysis and comprehensible, research outcome. I have argued that if one is doing research, by its very nature it implies that there is thinking involved, that is, Mental Consciousness (Gebser).

The last mode of consciousness in Gebser’s evolution of human development is that of Integral Consciousness. The fascinating idiosyncrasy of Integral Consciousness is that in opposition to Mental Consciousness, which will not acknowledge any way of knowing but cognitive, this last stage of our development recognises that all of the various ways of knowing reside within us and are essential and potentially active. Gebser’s notion of Integral Consciousness supports the philosophical underpinning of the methodology I call Theatre as Research, because both acknowledge that our unconscious syntheses of life experiences– through hunches, stories, dream and arts practice, can inform the thinking researcher who is then able to draw together and explain the insights that have been presented through the inquiry.

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