Ethical Exchanges in Translation, Adaptation and Dramaturgy

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CHAPTER 6

The Nomadic Dramaturge: Negotiating Subjectivity, Multicultural Translation, and Dramaturgical Composition

Fiona Graham

Abstract

This paper draws upon my practice research to investigate the ethics of the dramaturge when working upon a multicultural community theatre project in Auckland, New Zealand. Applying philosophical ideas from Levinas and Appiah, I analyse the development process exploring how a dramaturge can facilitate intercultural dialogue and collective ownership. I identify five actions of intervention that provide a framework for the ethical negotiation of subjectivity, translation and dramaturgical composition.

The question of what constitutes an ethical practice in performance development is a challenge for contemporary practitioners employed in ever-more complex multimedia and multicultural environments. According to the director Anna Furse, the conditions for ethical practice necessitate an environment that is simultaneously “receptive, responsible, respectful, generous, independent, gregarious, communicative, public spirited and involved” (49). But how is this environment created? It is a particular problem for the dramaturge, whose role is to mediate the multiple voices, representations, relationships, and competing claims to ownership entailed in a performance development process. As Pauliina Hulkko argues, dramaturgy takes place when the “material” and the ethical meet (9). This essay examines the work of the dramaturge within a multicultural composition process through an extended case study of a community theatre project which was created by a team of artists in New Zealand, during 2008. Our Street was a performance piece devised and written by more than 340 residents from three adjacent, diverse Auckland suburbs that are home to a large number of new immigrant communities. With such a range of ethnicities and community interests, finding a common performance language—and shared ethics—was a major challenge. This council-funded project was a highly ambitious attempt at community building. To echo Emmanuel Levinas, it sought “to create a gathering of humans participating in the
same ideal truths” in which “everyone finds their repose, their place, their seat” (161). In this practice-research I investigate how the dramaturge can develop what I term a nomadic methodology. By this I mean a way of working that is constantly moving as it navigates the collective performance vision, facilitates new relationships, and offers different possibilities for development. It is both an unsettled and unsettling practice where the dramaturge may intervene in a number of different ways depending on what is required in each moment to stimulate new thinking. I propose five actions of dramaturgical transition that may provide a foundation for a more ethical and transparent methodology through: listening, reflecting, questioning, facilitating dialogue and suggestion.

Before introducing the project it is important to examine the cultural values that shaped the ethics of the development process. Philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah observes that “in making our choices we must sometimes start with a vision, however inchoate, of what it is for a human life to go well” (Experiments 1). The values and principles which inspired Our Street were a multicultural ideal where different cultures get along and live together in peace and harmony. Appiah recognises that it is “precisely our recognition that each other person is engaged in the ethical project of making a life that reveals our obligations to them” (Experiments 203). The production Our Street was devised and written by residents from the three suburbs of Wesley, Mount Roskill, and Mount Albert that had come to New Zealand from Australia, Cambodia, China, England, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Rarotonga, Rwanda, Samoa, Somalia, Sri Lanka, and Tonga. In this project a Labour-dominated local council attempted to make marginalised communities visible in order to create an equitable exchange and new relationships. The initiative was driven by a political agenda in a neighbourhood which had been condemned by the National Party leader and future Prime Minister John Key. Patrice Pavis observes that “multicultural exchange is only possible when the political system in place recognises the existence of different cultural communities and encourages their cooperation” (8).

Clare Carmody, the Auckland City Council Arts Officer and producer for Our Street, describes the impetus for the project:

The diversity provided opportunity, possibility and challenges. The community lived with intercultural conflicts. There are gangs in these neighbourhoods and there have been racial tensions between the Pacific Island and Somali young men after a fight between the two groups ended in murder. This combined with a “media beat up” and the fact that the street where some of our participants lived was described by Prime Minister John Key as “New Zealand’s street of shame” in his successful
election campaign. However, the Mayor of Auckland supported the project and Our Street was funded through community arts funding and a special diversity fund. (“Intercultural Performance.”)

This intervention envisaged a radical pluralism where people can respect each other and learn from difference. Accordingly it required an ethical vision to create new networks and collaborations. Alan Read writes that in performance “ethics is articulated through effective operations and it defines a distance between what is and what ought to be. This distance designates a space where we have something to do” (90). In this project the distance was between a contested neighbourhood afraid of difference and a tolerant neighbourhood embracing diversity. The project attempted to build new relationships creating cross-cultural conversations and a sense of neighbourhood belonging. It aimed to break down what Appiah calls the “strangeness of strangers” (“Ethics”).

In contemporary performance writing much has been made of the importance of developing intercultural work that mediates cultural differences. As Homi Bhabha notes, the term “inter" refers to the in-between space that is situated at the cutting edge of translation and negotiation (56). Richard Schechner observes that a translation process is required to perform another culture and this experience can create new connections: “so that ‘them’ and ‘us’ are elided or laid experientially side by side” (“Intercultural Themes” 314). He argues that intercultural performance is vital for human survival beyond the rivalries and boundaries of nationalism. This multicultural community theatre project first created an intracultural dialogue before exploring the possibilities for intercultural performance. That intracultural dialogue attempted to maintain and honour the unique identity of different cultural groups within the project. The artists employed to facilitate the work recognised the ethical position that in a community engagement process, participants need to begin by defining their interests and what each wants from the project. In the first three months the artists established individual group identity and trust before bringing everyone together to explore intercultural relationships. The process of developing the performance then aimed to create connections across different cultures as the various communities became one company sharing a collective performance vision.

The Our Street project challenged a fundamental premise of the identity of Aotearoa/New Zealand as a bi-cultural society, comprising Māori, and Pākehā (New Zealanders of European descent). This bicultural identity is traced back to the country’s foundational document, te Tiriti o Waitangi, the Treaty of Waitangi, which was signed in 1840 by the British Crown and Māori chieftains. Subsequently, the population of Aotearoa has become increasingly diverse as
new immigrants have been settling in New Zealand for over 150 years. The Chinese who came during the gold rush in the 1860s were arguably the first to challenge the bi-cultural identity. There was a significant influx of Pacific Island migrants in the 1960s and 1970s, followed by people from other places, predominantly Asia, in the 1980s. (In New Zealand the term Asian applies to people from South East Asia including China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Korea, rather than from the Indian sub-continent.) In the 1990s migrants also came from Africa and the Middle East, and by 2006 only sixty-seven per cent of people living in New Zealand were of European origin, compared to ninety per cent thirty years earlier (New Zealand Government 13). In recent decades Auckland has been one of the fastest growing regions in Australasia, growing by 12.4 per cent in the decade 1998 to 2008. The city now comprises a wide variety of ethnicities, representing people from over 120 countries. This diversity creates a unique multicultural identity for Auckland when compared to the rest of New Zealand and this is especially visible in the suburbs of Mount Roskill, Wesley, and Mount Albert where state housing provides first homes for new migrants.

In this multicultural community theatre project the dramaturge had an opportunity to translate between different performance languages, cultures, and practitioners “to establish what each element might mean in relation to the whole piece” (Turner and Behrndt 180). According to Brazilian dramaturge André Lepecki this means being an intermediary responsible for collaborative cohesion (Turner and Behrndt 161), and the German dramaturge Henrik Adler says, “you have to be the integrator and the communicator, and you have to mediate between all these parties” (qtd. in Turner and Behrndt 161). This work requires an ethical practice where the dramaturge sustains relationships based on mutual respect and trust so that “everyone finds their repose, their place, their seat” (Levinas 161). The responsibilities of the dramaturge during the development of Our Street included setting up new relationships between artists and participants, creating a safe work environment for collaboration, representing individuals, communities, and neighbourhoods, weaving different stories and art forms, facilitating a collective performance vision and group ownership.

The Development Process

A transcultural team of seven artists were chosen to work on the project through dance, drama, film, music, and visual arts. Carmody had a clear vision which included different communities and art forms:
I wanted not just theatre makers but community artists from all forms. With enough money to be responsive to needs I was able to establish a team of artists to run over 150 workshops in forms as diverse as: creative writing, graphic design and visual art, reggae, Bollywood, traditional Pacific Island and hip hop dance, film making, animation and of course drama. (“Intercultural Performance.”) The team included Samoan theatre director Justine Simei-Barton, Tongan visual artist Terry Koloamatangi Klaves, Fijian musical director Darren Kamali, Samoan choreographers Sefa Enari and Charlene Tedrow, American composer Kirsten Zemke, and myself—a British dramaturge. We are all new New Zealanders. Some were born in another country and others are second-generation migrants. Like the participants in the project we have a living knowledge of migration and what it means to have a foot in two lands.

One of the first objectives for the project was to establish a collaborative shared vision among the team of artists. The project was managed by two Arts Officers from Auckland Council that wanted “everyone to move out of their comfort zones away from traditional roles and toward something new” (Carmody). The artists had never worked together before and the arts officer producers wanted to put them “in the same boat as the participants to give them the shared experience of learning to collaborate with someone new” (Carmody). There was no expert overview and the team of artists had to find ways to value difference and work together. In one of the early team-forming workshops, the arts officer producers asked the artists to draw an image to represent how we would work together. The discussion became dominated by the Samoan choreographer, who drew a fale (Samoan building or house) held up by foundation poles. In Samoa the use and function of the fale is closely linked to the system of Samoan social organisation, especially the Fa'amatai chiefdom system. Those gathered sit in formalised positions so that the middle posts, Matua Tala, are reserved for the leading chiefs and the side posts are occupied by orators. The posts at the back of the house, Talatua, indicate the positions maintained by those serving the gathering. The choreographer explained how in Samoan community meetings everyone sits at a different pole and they hand around a kava bowl. Whoever has the bowl can speak, following a clear structure that everyone understands. He proposed that the artists should work in this way and remain by the pole where they were the expert. This would create a clearly structured cooperative process for interaction and a respect for different ways of working. By concentrating on our separate and different roles we would be able to play to our own strengths. However, although the fale anal-
ogy supported intracultural development, it did not encourage the artists to experiment with new ways of working.

I proposed a more collaborative process which could create new connections across difference. My first intervention was through the question: What if we experiment and move between different poles? I stated that my role as dramaturge was to visit every pole to find different ways to collaborate. After some discussion this way of working was accepted by the artists and I suggested that they might each introduce their individual art form through a practical workshop for the other artists working on the project. In these workshops the artists were able to demonstrate their particular expertise but also step outside their comfort zone by experimenting with new ways of working. For example, the Tongan visual artist introduced his photography practice but also participated in a Samoan dance workshop. This exchange created an inclusive practice where everyone could experience being both the expert and the beginner. The give-it-a-go ethos inside the creative team then provided an excellent model for the participants.

When evaluating the project, Carmody observed that what a dramaturge does is to facilitate “the crossing,” “the testing,” and “the challenging” within the composition process. In this team-forming workshop “the crossing” identified alternative ways of doing and seeing while the “the testing” experimented with new and multiple ways of working (rather than repeating established practice). This experience made each artist vulnerable and “challenged” their thinking, but it also honoured their individual expertise. The exchange facilitated an environment of mutual respect and tolerance of difference. When testing the work a dramaturge can use the questioning process to provoke new ways of knowing and assembling. These questions can serve to probe performance assumptions, clarify the central concepts, offer different perspectives, identify the performance rationale, explore the consequences of each performance decision, and keep the composition process reflexive. Throughout the Our Street development process I used questions to clarify the work of each group and to develop a collective performance vision.

Every workshop responded to the interests of the individual group. Sometimes they were defined by a desire to work through a specific art form: for example, one group of teenagers with different ethnicities worked with the visual artist to create a zine (magazine). Other groups were united by their shared cultural experience, such as: the Pacific Island drama group, with participants from Samoa, Rarotonga, and Fiji; the Indian theatre company Prayas; and another group comprised of Somali mothers and children. The artists wanted to provide multiple access points into the project to engage with the broadest number of people and open up the widest range of possibilities.
At this point my job as dramaturge was to spend time with every group and support their individual projects. Throughout this preliminary work I was very aware of my identity as a joint citizen of Britain and New Zealand and therefore of the legacy of British colonialism which can sometimes create a sense of suspicion in Aotearoa. I decided not to do any writing so that my words were not in the text and I did not presume to speak on behalf of the communities. This ethical response reflected the thinking of Hélène Cixous: “you don't seek to master. To pocket the riches of the world. But rather to transmit: to make things loved by making them known” (57). I discussed the work with the director who then processed the writing of the script and made the final composition decisions.

Facilitating Intracultural Dialogue

As the artists began collaborating with the various cultural groups they recognised a point made by Rosi Braidotti that “the power to impose on people representations of themselves, or of others, on their behalf, is intrinsically oppressive” (13). At the beginning groups worked separately at their own poles so that each could establish its distinctive voice and negotiate a collective identity. I monitored the progress of all the different groups, but my work concentrated on the Indian Theatre Company Prayas and the Somali mothers group. Prayas are an Auckland-based amateur theatre group that has performed Indian plays, such as Habib Tanvir’s Charandas Choir, in English. In this project they would develop their own stories for the first time.

They began by improvising a short, written text, titled Sticky Fingers, informed by their first impressions of Aotearoa and experiences of immigration. My work began through the dramaturgical action of listening. As a dramaturge listens she attempts to hear the artists’ intentions and to understand what they want from the work. Sociologist Les Back argues that listening needs to be trained, and “a form of openness to others needs to be crafted, a listening for the background and the half muted” (Art of Listening 8). This is the ethical practice of closely attending to and interpreting what people say. It is a listening to the words and the space between them. I then used the dramaturgical action of questioning to encourage people’s contributions as many participants were new to the company and had not worked together before: How and why did you come to New Zealand? What were your first impressions? How are you influenced by family, community, and friends? Where is home? These open-ended questions facilitated dialogue and improvisation, enabling them to start developing a shared understanding and group identity.
In improvisation, the writing process emerges from instant negotiation and the continuous spontaneous creation of text between actors. It is a process that involves multiple creators rather than one author. The participants made collective choices, editing and negotiating on their feet, before writing it down as a group. In this practice I acted as a mirror, reflecting back their choices and suggesting other possibilities for development through questions. This dramaturgical action of reflection is very important in the practice of the dramaturge, who seeks to assist other practitioners to clarify their performance assumptions. Gilles Deleuze describes how a mediator (like the dramaturge) catches the artist “legending,” by which he means “to catch the movement of constitution of a people” (125). In performance development the “legending” is shaped by dramaturgical choices of representation and composition. Each performance decision reflects the embodied dispositions of the artists involved. For Deleuze the mediator is required to make this “legending” process explicit and challenge established practice. This happens as the dramaturge reflects back what the work is doing and identifies the collective performance vision. It is important to judge the timing of each intervention so that the group continues to sustain its collaborative process and authentic connection with the work. Prayas was establishing a shared perspective and group understanding of their experience as new New Zealanders through the process of coming together and working with drama.

The other principal focus of my work at this stage of the project was the most recent migrants to the neighbourhood. The director and I began to meet the Somali women and children by spending time attending sewing workshops, nursery sessions, and a wedding celebration. Our facilitator in this process was Fadumo Ahmed, who had worked as a midwife in Somalia and wanted new connections and more understanding for her community. Slowly the women began to trust us and, through Fadumo, shared their stories of escape from Somalia and arrival in New Zealand. The group was not yet ready to integrate within the project and the challenge here was to find an appropriate way to show their journeys. We began by making a short film together and this choice enabled Fadumo, who is a fluent English speaker, to articulate their experience while we filmed them in their nursery and sewing classes. During this process I asked Fadumo questions and the director filmed her responses. According to Fadumo, this proved “a good opportunity for all the women and they hope to get some skills for the future” (Auckland City Council). The film provided a safe medium that the group could control and edit to share their experience with maximum exposure over a short period of time. In this medium the women could manage how they were represented, for example they chose to show only women wearing a veil as Fadumo described their lives and
the value of the sewing programme. The film duly became part of the performance of *Our Street*. Within each dramaturgical intervention the director and dramaturge worked to sustain relationships of mutual trust and to negotiate the most culturally appropriate performance outcome.

**Facilitating Intercultural Performance**

After the three-month development period all the participants came together for an intensive week of intracultural dialogue where they shared their stories variously through writing, dance, visual art, music, and drama. This included the two community drama groups from India and the Pacific Islands, the Polynesian dance group, the music group that had formed a band, and the visual arts group that had made the zine. There were now also individual members from Australia, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Pakistan, Rwanda, and Sri Lanka that had joined the project through drama and writing sessions in schools and at the Wesley Community Centre. The week of workshops celebrated the participants’ different voices and began to experiment with new ways of working as one group together. As dramaturge I spent this time searching for story connections, documenting key lines, reactions, observations, and images. My aim was to find a bridge that could hold all the groups inside the performance vision. This objective continued to honour intracultural difference, but now also involved pursuing intercultural connections. In one school workshop a girl had told a story about the street in which she lived where the neighbours from different countries stayed inside their houses and never talked. Over one summer a man built a fence around his house in the middle of the street. Each day the neighbours would gather beside him and begin to chat as they came home. Ironically, as the fence grew higher and higher the neighbours spent more time together and the girl began to feel that she belonged to a community of the street. Unfortunately, once the fence was finished, everyone went back inside their houses. The girl described her sense of loss and longing for another event that would bring them together again.

Inspired by this story the narrative of *Our Street* focussed on a street where everyone stayed inside their own worlds—an Indian house, a mixed Pacific Island house, a Somali house, and a Chinese house. In the development process each group, without prompting, organically started to share wedding stories. Consequently the function of the fence in the girl’s story became two weddings happening on the same day from the Indian and Pacific Island houses. Across all cultures weddings typically represent both a rite of passage and a celebration of different families and generations. These two weddings enabled
an exploration of cultural tensions and traditions when values change in a new land. As each wedding faced a crisis it was the friendship between two mothers that brought the community together. This turning point was inspired by a story told by the director who also lives in the suburb of Wesley. Two mothers from the Pacific Island and Indian communities had accidentally built a friendship through jogging very early in the morning and meeting to chat on a bridge where their paths crossed. In *Our Street* this relationship was used to create a bridge between the different worlds.

Each group developed its individual cultural story within their separate houses, but on the road they became one community together—this was the *Our Street* of the play’s title. The creative team worked with their different media to develop this concept (and its performance). On one side of the stage was a Samoan-Māori wedding, on the other a wedding between a Punjabi and a South Indian. One reviewer remarked, “there is something uniquely Auckland to see a young Indian girl performing a Polynesian dance; and Pacific Island kids doing Bollywood” (Field). These dance sequences enabled each group to perform another culture and created new connections as they discovered intercultural relationships. Many participants commented on how much they had discovered in common between their different cultures and how much they had been taken “beyond themselves” through the development process (Auckland City Council).

In this project there was a necessary oscillation between proximity and distance for the dramaturge. In the last stages of rehearsal the dramaturge often makes a final crossing from the outside to the inside, and is unable see with fresh eyes. Due to the death of my mother I suddenly had to return to Britain for the last three weeks of rehearsal. This situation resulted in a heightened outside perspective when I returned for the production week. The separation enabled me to see the performance with fresh eyes; however, it was not appropriate to make interventions that would risk de-stabilising the work at this vulnerable moment just before the show opened. At this point I made the ethical choice to respect their choices and ownership of the performance.

**Audience Reception**

*Our Street* opened at the Concert Chamber of Auckland Town Hall, in the heart of the city, to packed and very diverse multicultural houses. Community members from Wesley, Mount Roskill, and Mount Albert came to see the shows in buses provided by Auckland Council. There was a loud and lively party atmosphere as people watched the show while chatting to their friends, calling out
Figure 6.1 The cast of *Our Street*, Concert Chamber, Auckland Town Hall, 2008. Photographer: Clare Carmody.
to the performers and eating food. The project engendered a sense of solidarity and collective identity as people recognised themselves, their stories, and their world on stage. In front of their neighbourhood audience the company embodied their multiple texts and celebrated both their intracultural stories and intercultural connections. The participants’ attachment to “our street” of Wesley, Mount Albert, and Mount Roskill facilitated a sense of community pride—what Back has termed “neighbourhood nationalism” (*New Ethnicities* 49). Audience members were clearly thrilled and excited to see their experience and communities represented. In *Our Street–A Documentary* a Pacific Island woman, who was interviewed immediately after seeing the play, notes how important it is to see and hear the Somali women as the newest members of the neighbourhood.

In this project sometimes marginalised communities (which are often not represented in theatre) came together and found a collective voice with status and visibility at the centre of the city. It was what Schechner terms “believed-in theatre,” where people act out their lives and experience for their own community:

> The stories are theirs, the characters are themselves or people they know, the situations pertain directly to them, the places where they perform are part of their specific communities, the actions that they make are often consequential. In believed-in theatre, real life has invaded theatre. (90)

The *Our Street* production created a polyphony of writers representing their lives in Auckland during 2008 and celebrating a “vibrant multi-ethnic heart” at the centre of the city. The reviewer Michael Field wrote, “It’s about trying to define what our Auckland is, and how it could be in the future.” The hybridity of the project successfully challenged New Zealand’s official bicultural identity and suggested a country in transition. Bhabha observes that “these in-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (2). In this case study the performance vision honoured intracultural difference in the translation and assemblage process, but the work also began to explore what Deleuze would call the rhizomatic potential of interculturalism and “its ability to make multiple connections and disconnections between cultural spaces” (Lo and Gilbert 42). The collaborative process created a space for democritised assemblage so that community representations could be presented back to the local multicultural neighbourhood audience.
Elsewhere I have used the metaphor of the midwife to stress the supportive role of the dramaturge in this project (“Dramaturge as Midwife” 209). However, as my analysis has deepened I have recognised the importance of a nomadic subjectivity which constantly moves through multiple positions within the development process. The dramaturge may intervene as architect, conservationist, navigator, bridge builder, midwife or catalyst—depending on what is required in each moment (Graham, “Catalyst for Change” 15). This nomadic way of working is particularly relevant in cultural translation and the development of intracultural and intercultural performance. The movement between different positions at the edge and in the margins can provide new ways of seeing which question the mainstream and performance assumptions. According to Bhabha this in-between hybrid position is a creative site of discursive resistance and identity renegotiation in which postcolonial migrant cultures “translate” between tradition and modernity, and thereby operate a form of self-critique and reflexivity within dominant social order (189).

Throughout the *Our Street* development process the ethics of dramaturgical intervention were informed by a Levinasian responsibility to Other (the participants, fellow artists and audience), a commitment to the values of multiculturalism and thirty-three years of experience working in community theatre. I have attempted to show how the dramaturge can develop a transparent and reflexive nomadic methodology through listening, reflecting, questioning, facilitating dialogue and suggestion. I suggest that these five actions or principles of dramaturgical transition could provide a useful framework for the ethical negotiation of subjectivity, cultural translation and dramaturgical composition. All practitioners can benefit from this challenge to habitual thinking. As Elizabeth Grosz suggests, when you have a community that is open to its difference and innovation, there seems to be more scope for original thinking (7).

**Works Cited**


