

# Fiction Theatre

Experience as Social & Pedagogical  
Practice

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## **1 Fiction Realisation**

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# 1 Fiction Realisation

## 1.1 Towards Fiction Theatre

In my work as a theatre maker, I articulate my practice as real fiction (Welsh, 2014b). This problematic and paradoxical term is used to describe a form of social construction in which ‘empirical reality’ and fiction are considered conceptual equals. There is a further exploration of this term and its use in the field of documentary theatre by others in Chapter 2, but my claim is that these two concepts of reality and fiction are united by our tendency to talk into existence what John Shotter (1993) calls ‘conversational realities’ (p. 11). What is psychologically and socially ‘real’ (Reiber, 1983, p. 97) becomes contestable, a view held by social constructionists or conversational theorists such as Berger and Calabrese (1975) or Searle (1979) or, a little more recently, and with an emphasis on conversational situations, the work of Shotter. In the context of Shotter’s conversational reality, our understanding of experience is reconstituted and negotiated through the medium of conversation. In conversation, participants’ points of view are conceived by experiencing and speaking subjects, the meaning of words and concepts developed through a process of negotiation between the speaker and listener. Meaning is fluid in the context of conversation.

Berger and Calabrese (1975) or Searle (1979) or, more pertinently and with an emphasis on conversational situations, the work of Shotter, explore the importance of speech exchanges in social construction. In the context of Shotter’s conversational reality, our understanding of experience is reconstituted and negotiated through the medium of conversation. In conversation, participants’ points of view are conceived by experiencing and speaking subjects, the meaning of words and concepts developed through a process of negotiation between the speaker and listener. Meaning is fluid in the context of conversation and, importantly, identity is also constructed in this context.

Therefore, when I speak of real fiction, I am contending that what we tend *to* perceive as reality is, like fiction, constructed and, in the case of theatrical plays, materialises in the realm of conversation. The theatrical play, its dialogues and/or monologues, is no more or less than a conversation, in which we are either speakers or listeners. In the creative process, such a conversation

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takes place in social reality between the writer and the subject of the writing. From this context, both dialogue and monologue are constructed through the observation of ‘speech rhythms.’ The idea of speech rhythms has a considerable relationship with Searle’s (1979) ‘speech acts,’ where speech ‘tokens’ ensure participation in conversation (p. 178). For example, in certain subcultures, explored at length in my practice, the use of slang ‘I done x or y’ rather than ‘I did x or y’ reveals to the listener the information the speaker wishes to disclose. Simultaneously, the speaker reveals himself as ‘us’ and not ‘them.’ The speech token grants him admission into conversational worlds from which he might otherwise be excluded.

According to Searle, speech acts can be ‘carved up’ into various constituent parts that provide a wealth of social and psychological data, including the unique tones and rhythms of a person’s speech (Searle, 1979). The process of monologue writing is explained in considerable detail in this book, which ultimately describes introducing the practice of real fiction drama writing or writing that uses speech rhythms, drawn from social reality, and experience, to a participant group of Year 11 high school drama students, and recording these original student monologues in a play. I will also provide a few more recent examples of the practice, including how I applied it in my role as a teaching academic in introductory pathway education and arts courses (McLaren et al., 2021). In its entirety, the lifelong practice of fiction theatre-making from conversational realities has not only been the process by which artistic work has been generated, but also it has guided my own social and human experience from one social situation to another.

This practice has been applied in social and pedagogical contexts, including a first-year and diploma pathway courses. One of these courses itself is a social and pedagogical practice, by its nature, with its emphasis on personal and social transformation. The students in this pathway programme that is an introduction to university learning have often had different, or ‘less than optimal’ engagements with formal education and through a creative exploration of their own ‘selves,’ the students were imbued with a sense of personal and social agency (McLaren et al., 2021). The students, who aspired to become teachers, were introduced to the performative imperative of teaching through the practice of theatre and the teachers’ roles were to devise means by which this could be achieved. My PhD supervisor, Professor Mary-Rose McLaren, conceived of this course where drama, and creative practice generally, allowed students to ‘tell the stories of their educational journeys’ (McLaren et al., 2021). I utilised the fiction theatre-making process, described in this book, to achieve this end, and versions of this or other interpretations of performance and theatre styles also happened in other teachers’ classes (McLaren & Welsh, 2020). In constructing their educational ‘story,’ students were instructed to write monologues, based on people from their lives. Through this practice, the voices of characters were established. These characters would then interact with each other, the students working in small groups to establish ‘scenes’ that explored life and learning experiences, utilising a kind of collective agency.

Ultimately, these skits were combined to make a group play that had an educational and/or social theme, based on the collective experience of the participating students. This process is described in detail in Chapter 10 of this book and was an ideal application of ‘fiction theatre,’ which, as you will see, was conceived in the Australian slums of Geelong, a regional town in Victoria, and in the inner west of Sydney.

My work, both as a practitioner and researcher, belongs in the category of ethno-drama (Saldaña, 2005) or ‘Reality Theatre’ (Perry, 2010) to which theatre-maker and theorist Johnny Saldaña refers in his work, involving ‘real’ participants in the process of making theatre. Much of Saldaña’s work blurs the line between action-based sociological research and theatre. In the following chapter, I refer extensively to Saldaña’s notion of ethno-drama and consider myself to be working within a similar, though not identical, methodology. It is indeed my hope that the work I undertake as a practitioner and, as an educational theorist, like Saldaña’s, will ‘capture verisimilitude and universality through their primary sources for monologue and dialogue: reality’ (Saldaña, 2005, p. 3).

Since beginning my practice in the 1990s, several global examples described as ‘real fiction’ and connected with theatre practice have emerged, including a collection on ‘Reality Theatre’ and a book titled *Fictional Realities: Real Fictions* in 2009. I explain the relationship and distinction between works such as these and my own, then establish a method based on this practice, and apply it to a school setting. I conceive of the school as a social environment, which is important and raises questions around relationships with authorities and the social construction of power relationships and dynamics within institutions. This is also connected with recent work on ‘public pedagogies’ (Charman & Dixon, 2021) and other educational theories and practices, including the emergence of ‘Educational Studies’ as a field in Higher Education institutions, where I have primarily worked since completing the thesis on which this book is based. The relationship with sociology and the sociology of education is a theme throughout this book, and this is fundamental to the foundations of my version of ‘real fiction,’ what I am calling ‘fiction theatre’ in this chapter, is founded on experience in what might be called by some the Australian underclass.

### 1.1.1 *The Australian Underclass and the Film ‘Mallrats’*

The Australian underclass is a concept that has been politicised and used as a context for the political and ideological expression of class bias, some would say ‘warfare’ in Australia (Bessant, 1995). It’s ‘discovery’ in 1995 would have been nothing new to those living in regional centres in rural Victoria, Australia. The existence of the Australian underclass was certainly plain to me, as a middle-class teenager in a regional Victorian centre. This is addressed in this book in the section on the label of ‘mallrats.’ A 12-minute 2016 film made in Geelong, Victoria, titled *Mallrats* sets out to explore the disruptive

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social phenomenon of the ‘mallrat,’ stigmatising those who conform to the attributes of the label (Maltby, 2016). Ultimately, as the title suggests, the film reinforces the label it seeks to explore.

The film opens with the statement that the ‘City of Greater Geelong has been plagued for generations over the “infamous” “Mel,”’ portrayed in the film as an example of a ‘mallrat.’ This stigmatisation of an individual and the division of the local population into ‘mallrats’ and residents of the city introduce us to the Foucauldian operation of language and power when it comes to informal social labels. The film then proceeds to parade an array of young people, with substance abuse issues, and other deeply problematic experiences, all under the social umbrella of the film’s title, *Mallrats*. The issue I have with the film is that it leads with the label of ‘mallrats,’ collecting and parading the voices of young people in deeply troubling situations,

‘You want a can?’

‘Nah, he’s got school to do, bro, he’s a bachelor kid.’

The film exposes the lack of empathy that exists on both sides of this class and power divide, and positions the viewer as a shocked onlooker, in my view deepening the divide between the ‘mallrat’ subjects portrayed in the film and the assumed respectable, middle-class viewer, who is in danger from the perceived ‘threat’ these young people represent, according to its cinematic ‘world.’ There is a distinctive kind of mockery to the film that in fact reinforces the prejudices and biases that inspire the label. Whilst the film does ask participants how they feel about the term ‘mallrats,’ for example, when one mother says she ‘does not like that name at all,’ there is no further exploration of why this triggers negativity in the participant. The film then raises the question of gender, ‘How do you feel being a female in this area?’ To which she shows momentary bravado, and says, ‘I’m alright. I’m alright.’ Then, there is a distant stare, and this silence tells us what we don’t see. The prevalence of domestic violence and sexual assault in these disempowered and disenfranchised communities is well documented. The ‘Crime Statistics Agency’ reports that, in 2016, the City of Greater Geelong was among the Local Government Areas with the highest number of recorded offences (469) (Crime Statistics Agency, 2016)

There is one humanising moment in the film where a participant is interrupted by her friend and comrade leaving the mall, and she says, ‘Love you, Lynne.’ (Maltby, 2016) This glimpse of the connection and solidarity that is formed among people who share similar experiences and occupy corresponding positionalities in relation to the broad social class structure is full of possibility and a crucial part of the overall purpose of this chapter. It is where the creative practice of ‘fiction theatre’ and the symbolic violence of social labelling in society and education intersect, and it is where the opportunity for arts practice as a means of social change can intervene in situations with empathy and humanity.

There is a character in the documentary film, ‘Mick,’ who claims, ‘The police harass us. They always move us on.’ This is reflective of another area of

interest in my research, particularly homeless people and people with substance abuse issues, or needle fixation and the formation of a hierarchical structure in transgressive drug using communities (Welsh, 2014a). What is observed in the film is a community of people oppressed by the contemporary capitalist system, structuring social groups according to their relationship with the means of production (Marx & Engels, 1848). This group has been labelled ‘mallrats’ in local community discourse and assigned a social and cultural position that is at odds with the status quo. ‘The police harass us.’ Says Mick, ‘They always move us on.’ The relationship with authority and the broader community in general is combative. And yet, most of the participants portrayed in the film seem to own the label, ‘mallrat.’ For example, Mick says, ‘I’m a mallrat, what’s wrong with that?’ When ‘Anton’ is asked what he thinks of the name ‘mallrat’ itself, he says, ‘I reckon it’s excellent. I reckon we make a name for ourselves.’ When the police officer speaks, he distinguishes between ‘members of the public’ and the people in the mall, labelled ‘mallrats.’

Towards the end of the film, one of the participants receives a phone call, saying, ‘They wanna put me in hospital. They wanna put me in hospital for no reason.’ The arbitrary operation of power within the structures that stigmatise certain social groups is apparent, and the language of social labelling is central to this form of insidious oppression. The world of *Mallrats* was the identical social context in which *Barcode 30!!7 307* was created, a play I refer to extensively throughout this book. The distinction I would make between the content of the film and the method in which I created *Barcode* is that I was one of the participants in that play that I wrote. As I show later in this book, I saw the world portrayed in the film as a form of experience, utilised to write plays that seek to challenge deeply embedded and unjust social assumptions. There is a connection between my own process of creating ‘fiction theatre’ and RD Laing and Esterson’s (1964) approach to social constructivism, particularly in his performative intervention as an ‘insider/outsider.’ This is also an approach in education called ‘social pedagogy’ that seeks to be individually and socially transformative and is contextualised in social and youth work (Hämäläinen, 2015). This is important to understanding ‘real fiction’ as a sociological and pedagogical practice.

This book also explores the experience of writing ‘fiction theatre’ plays as a way of life, and this process itself as having pedagogical potential. When I reflect on the experiences contained in this book and the process to which I introduced the students, in the school and in universities, in many ways, I am deeply disturbed. As I mention elsewhere, this is transgressive work, transgressive data, transgressive research, dangerous data. Later in this book, I explore my practice as a form of method acting in real life, of acquiring a character, a version of oneself, to obtain the necessary data and create new characters, to know new stories, to understand new insights into human experience. It is dangerous because the experiences I had in some of the work I describe were of homelessness and criminality, for example, to draw characters and voices from real, emotional and social experience. I completely dropped the mask of

identity, which is as much a protective mechanism, as it is a disguise (Kelley, 2020). We need only to think of the criminologist who works with criminals, or the outreach worker, working with those who are homeless and their clients. These professions require not only a uniform but also a kind of protective skin of identity that keeps us from falling into the dangerous culture with which we are engaging as a 'helping professional' (Siebert & Siebert, 2007). Recently, I have been writing about homelessness as my own lived experience, which is both true and untrue. I was homeless, and the experience was real, but it could be said that it was part of a process of being, as I experienced it, and making this phenomenon into fiction theatre.

I was not separate from the experience, and yet I was never really living it either, or I was, but it was not real experience, rather it was a kind of 'fiction.' And the closest thing I can find to describing this is RD Laing's insider/outsider method, which I refer to extensively in this book. I was asked a few times throughout the process why I have utilised a radical Scottish psychiatrist in this work? In the most recent query around this, Laing was also described as 'contested' in social constructivism. Indeed, Laing has not only been contested but, in some quarters, disgraced, due to 'his craving for fame and need to take the role of guru' (Burston, 1996). There have been continuous questions around Laing's problematic ethical and social positionalities when he engaged in the various radical, strange, weird treatments that he applied, and the way that he and Jules Henry put themselves inside the families' intimate spaces, almost participating in their collective psychoses to 'hear unheard voices.' (Chapman, 2021) I remember when I first read these authors, back in the 90s, on the advice of my Honours' supervisor, and two things immediately occurred to me:

1. This is like a play.  
AND
2. This is how I feel when I write people.

The character of Laing in the drama of imagined schizophrenia, playing out in the institution of the family is like me in the process of making a play, living in the lives and voices of others. In the context of the data collection at the school, described in Chapter 6 of this book, I was a non-teacher in the space of a school, an outsider/insider with access to the educational activities and the social environment of the school. I wasn't a part of their 'family,' but I was there, at the dinner table, eating alongside them. Like Laing, I would get up from the school desk where I sat as a visitor and walk away, having either contributed to the social health of the school or caused havoc. It didn't matter to me. Well, it did, but not to my everyday life. I was bound by an ethics agreement, but nothing more. Whereas the teachers and the students were embedded into the system, they had internalised the broad social values of the school culture that I might influence. Considering this dilemma, that haunted me throughout the research described herein, I think it is perfectly appropriate

to align myself with a ‘contested,’ even disgraced, psychotherapist and social constructivist such as Laing.

This book explores the notion of ‘ethno-drama’ and its relationship with my research for the making of fiction theatre. It entails an assessment of the practice of social labelling in various environments including local and international examples of social and educational institutions. It uses a creative, person-centred and practice-led methodology to contribute to the literature on applied theatre. This illustrates the potential for theatre-making in the classroom and monologue writing to comment on social and conversational practices in the schoolyard and the classroom. These include labelling of students both by teachers in the classroom and within the school system, as well as peer labelling in the adolescent social world (Thomas, 1997).

## 1.2 Ontology

Ontology might best be defined as pertaining to being. Aristotle’s account of the term refers to the notion that I might say ‘I am a man’ and the being of a man is therefore the substance of who or what I am (Jowett, 1885, p. 19). Therefore, from my perspective, when I speak of the ontological position of a piece of research, I am referring to the origins of the narrative voice in experience and in nature, where the author is situated in what the work supposes the author is made of—his substance. Whilst I do not intend to engage in a philosophical argument on the nature of substance, research such as this has many origins and some idea of this work may be useful here to gain an understanding of the type of research contained in this book. I am not a professionally trained schoolteacher. I do not come from the classroom. Nor am I a psychologist. The origins of my work come from practice in the theatre as a writer and performer of experience, sourced from being in the world.

I take the position that the practice of theatre should be borne from experience in the world. Between 1998 and 2000, I found myself reading and contemplating the work of RD Laing in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*. Laing’s writings here are particularly significant to the work in this book and social constructionism as an epistemological phenomenon, a way of seeing and interpreting the world. In 2001, I received a grant from the City of Greater Geelong to complete and present a theatrical script based on an original study of mental illness and the family. The play came from direct conversational experience, which has been critical to the practice of creating ‘fiction theatre’ and, in this instance, I saw Laing’s ideas at work in my own encounters in social reality and everyday life. The result was a play titled ‘There’s a naked man in my lounge-room: An exploration into mental illness and the family’ (Welsh, 2014b). The play was well received by community groups and the local theatre audience who attended, and went on to be performed at Blackbox Theatre, Victorian Arts Centre as part of the 2001 Melbourne Fringe (Welsh, 2014b). The central objective of the play was to explore and provide insights into the issue of mental health and the family. In this sense the theatre audience was

secondary to the social context of the performance, like *The Laramie Project*, a documentary play written in response to a gay bashing in a small American town (Kaufman, 2001). My ontological position, then, is as the experiencing self of a theatre-maker using the creative practice of performance as a means of making social comment through auto/ethnography.

In 2009, I presented at a conference, titled 'Real Fiction Theatre as Creative Research,' where I explored my own version of the practice of 'method writing,' which I believe responds to one of my criticisms of the *Mallrats* film because, 'Working through theatre offers the opportunity for researcher and participant to co-construct knowledge' (Grandi, 2022). A further evolution of this concept allows for the relationship between experience in various social and cultural contexts to be explored and reflected, using theatrical methods.

Between 1998 and 2002, I began living and researching another potential performance using a similar method, referred to quite extensively in publications and presentations, dating from 2009 to 2014. *Barcode 30!!7 307* (Welsh, 2009) took between four and five years to develop and was based on my own experience, conflated to conceal identity, and on various characters I met through my foray into contemporary Australian crime and poverty. The work entailed a way of life I adopted for a period, becoming the character in the play, absorbing as much of his world as I could, ultimately altering myself in the process and recording this alteration in the form of an exploration into domestic violence and criminal behaviour, using theatrical conventions to describe the experience. This altered self, referred to in the play, is also recorded in the collaborative piece 'The No teeth people: The autobiography of Scott Scary Teeth Welsh,' presented on ABC Radio National in 2010 and repeated in 2012 (Dundler & Welsh, 2008).

I claim that theatre and the making of a play is a social and pedagogical experience, and each play I have written has started with a profound experience, a narrative moment in my own life. *The Biography of A Battler* (Welsh, 2012) is an exploration into mental health, a story I witnessed whilst living in public places and a couch in Sydney. It is a second-hand experience of the mental health system in Australia at that time, and a critique on the operation of power in a de-institutionalised context, where the institution is imagined and socially constructed by the participants within it. Then, *The Outcaste Weakly Poet Stage Show* (Welsh, 2012) is a comprehensive autoethnography, in the form of an emotional outpouring of a human subject experiencing homelessness, with subjective observations and reflections on the social surroundings of people excluded by dysfunctional social structures.

The autoethnographic, conversational technique of *The Outcaste Weakly Poet Stage Show* led to another fiction ethno-theatre event, *Serving Coffee @ Sims* (Welsh, 2012). The plot and set were minimal, and it was performed at La Mama Theatre, Melbourne, as well as a broken down theatre at Victoria University, therefore contextualising the work in the community from which it was sourced. The focus of action was simply a collection of real and strange characters from the suburb of Footscray in Melbourne, Australia, a suburb full

of social and cultural diversity. The supermarket was legendary for the fact that people would gather there, and a small coffee cart set the scene for what was represented on stage; it was where I drank coffee every morning and observed a collection of characters with fascinating, yet ordinary life experiences.

This provided some relief from *Charles Manson and the Subtle Art of Radicalisation* (Welsh, 2015), a creatively violent and surreal response to the social exclusion of certain individuals and a response to the ‘moral panic’ over terrorism happening at that time. The idea that we can consider stories from history to comment on our current social surroundings is central, not only to my work, but other theatre practitioners, locally and internationally. Classic examples include Brecht’s *Life of Galileo* and *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*. I utilised this play to connect it with ideas around terrorism and particularly radicalisation, which were quite prevalent at the time. The play was an argument, that when the centre fails to provide for human agents, they look to the fringes, and the potential for manipulation and ideological grooming is rife. In the case of Manson, this was obviously very seductive and personal. However, many of the conversations in rehearsal centred around power and what was going on with terrorist groups seducing disenfranchised young people in countries like Australia and America around that time. Most of this was the director, Vel Subra’s idea, and I crafted the writing to accommodate this statement about current affairs. However, the personal experience of playing Manson, both to develop the story, and as an actor, had a profound effect on the way I saw the world. This and other similar experiences are explored in a later chapter on ‘method acting.’ Utilising the ‘fiction theatre’ method to play Charles Manson made me cynical about the world, but also exemplified the learning that can occur through writing and acting processes.

Then, *Moosh the Hobo Cat* (Welsh et al., 2023) is a reflection on homelessness, the PTSD that occurs in people who have experienced homelessness, and the carceral response of society to homeless people. It revisits my own experiences of homelessness in Australia, anthropomorphising my pet cat Moosh’s stray experiences to construct a social and community reflection on the dehumanisation and criminalisation of homeless populations. In this sense, it was an extension of *The Outcaste Weakly Poet* with a surreal turn, since I was speaking my own experience through that of my cat and some applications of Dr. Elnaz Sheshgelani’s ‘Persian Dramatic Story-telling’ (Welsh et al., 2023). Initially, this play appeared to be autoethnographic, rather than fiction theatre, or ‘real fiction,’ as I once called my practice. Moosh is a representation of myself and my own experiences of homelessness; therefore, it would appear to be an autobiographical monologue, with only one voice. However, as the social exploration progressed and my collaborators (Dr. Elnaz Sheshgelani, Rick McLean and Kerry Davies) observed a multitude of voices, I progressed the script, utilising ‘real fiction’ methods to diversify both characters and narrative voices.

*The Cube*, written in collaboration with a fellow educator, Richard McLean, is a satirical critique of the contemporary neoliberal Higher Education System

through the imagined voices of real characters I encountered in my professional life. Most of the script was written by McLean, and a performance was filmed on zoom during lockdown, to a small online audience. Then, *A Type of Captivity* is an expansion on some of the revelations from *Moosh*, though it deals with a far more complex form of PTSD and is socially and culturally contextualised in the Israel/Palestine conflict. What is apparent from these titles, each representing a period of deep reflection on personal and social experience, is a common theme of identifying with oppressed and subaltern populations through one primary individual voice. The school that is the context for the data collection in this book is, in one sense, a metaphor for any social structure in which the operation of language and power works to arbitrarily exclude and oppress individuals and groups. As an outsider in the school, a social scientist, I view it as a microcosm of society and believe that engaging in fiction theatre can act as an emancipating practice.

As a playwright, I am interested in theatre-making as a social and pedagogical practice because I believe that what we do inside the theatre has relevance outside the theatre, in society. This phenomenon is explored in this book and grounded in negative labelling and labels, their disturbing quality and understanding them from the perspective of students, the ‘labelled,’ all of whom I argue have the potential to be labelled and become ‘the labelled.’ This comes from my own experience on the fringes of society and what has been the subject of much of my creative work. My work is often misunderstood inside the theatre because I do not use the conventional means of creation. My characters seem sometimes to alienate the audience because they are often deliberately sourced from outside the realm of their experience. My presence in the theatre and throughout the process is important so that the represented experience, belonging to the characters whom I have encountered during the process, can be conceived as research and the actors (as well as the characters often invited into the ‘performance’) as ‘research participants.’

In 1974, during an interview with John Willett, Bertolt Brecht declared his objective in making theatre was ‘to educate.’ Partly inspired by Brecht’s statement, in 2014 I contributed a chapter, ‘Real Fiction: Theatre as Creative Research,’ to a book titled *Material Inventions: Applying Creative Arts Research* (Welsh, 2014b), after practising the craft for approximately 20 years. In this chapter, I explain that, as with Willett’s observations of Brecht’s work in his book of writings and interviews, I view my work primarily as ‘education’ (Brecht & Willett, 1974). As a playwright, I have debated with many colleagues about what theatre ought to be doing and that, rather than merely entertaining, it can also seek to invite a community contemplation of the issues a play explores. To this end, Peter Brook’s argument against the form of theatre as a genre, and what he perceives as an over-emphasis on production concerns (Brook, 1972), in favour of the literary tradition of ‘drama,’ plays with and shifts inherent power structures in contemporary theatre practice. In my chapter, ‘Real Fiction as Creative Research’ (Welsh, 2014b), I argue, like Brecht that the purpose of theatre performance should be to educate ‘consciously,’

‘suggestively’ and ‘descriptively’ (Brecht & Willett, 1974, p. 26). An examination of similar literature is provided in Chapter 2 of this book to contextualise it regarding practice as research in drama education.

This claim around practice as education—my own foray into Brecht’s thinking and its connection with my work—led me to the field of theatre as a social and pedagogical practice, where I continue to apply the fiction research method explored throughout this book. This method involves a consideration of a social issue and the use of drama and play creation to comment on society and human experience. Two performed examples of this form of fiction theatre include *The Biography of a Battler* (Welsh, 2012) and *The No Teeth People* (Dundler & Welsh, 2008). Developed from this position, my research explores and criticises ‘labels in education,’ using real fiction theatre-making as an applied education practice.

There have been many previous practice-based and practice-led projects have engaged young people in artistic practice as a way of reflecting on their social surroundings (Betzian, 2007; Freidman & Holzman, 2011). The ‘No Outsiders Project’ (Depalma & Atkinson, 2009), referred to throughout this book, uses drama practice as a way of helping school children understand and accept different forms of family structure, sexual equality and social inclusion in education. My research describes a writing workshop for adolescent students, conducted in a drama classroom at a Victorian state government school. The structure and content of the workshop reflected contemporary drama education practice and my own approach to theatre-making. I believe a play-writing method can form the foundation of a person-centred drama education and theatre practice that interrogates and investigates labels in society and education; and was practised in a school as a part of my research. In this book, I describe how I used this method with a teacher in a drama classroom, firstly to encourage students in an educational setting to create monologues using a particular technique, paying close attention to the voice patterns and rhythms of a real character from the lives of the students. Secondly, the procedure was utilised to reinterpret the material created by students. The outcome of this is a play based on student perceptions of the theory and practice of social labels and labelling in education. The play data was written by me but is based on the creative input of students through their monologues. My book then describes and analyses students’ experience through a research engagement in which data was collected in the form of original monologues by student participants. It also explores my practice in some detail—its origins and its application to a school environment.

Theatre sourced from a consideration of reality as socially constructed in conversation can also be applied in the context of tertiary pedagogy. Since completing the PhD research that constitutes the primary content of this book, I have applied my practice in various tertiary educational settings, where I have worked with colleagues and applied the lessons learned herein to fulfil my role as a teacher and pedagogue, creating communities of practice in Higher Education classroom settings, where students have opportunities to

engage in communication, learning various views, thinking creativity, thinking independently and forming mutual outcomes with the help of their previous knowledge and experience' (Güner & Uygun, 2016). Here, I have guided students through the process of writing monologues based on real encounters in the world, in the formation of the self, to establish character voices through which they may speak their own experiences. Utilising a method based on reflective practice and 'deep empathy,' students established voices for monologues based on the principle that the character monologue is equivalent to an iceberg, and what the students would learn through the writing of extensive monologues, based on voice and social experience would form a depth of knowledge of the character, only a small part of which would be performed as a part of the collaborative play that formed the assessment (Welsh et al., 2024; McLaren et al., 2021). In these environments, where the goal was essentially a form of social pedagogy, or student reflections on their educational experiences (McLaren et al., 2021), the practice was used as a transformative process, to foster students' sense of individual and collective agency in the context of education. The work-shopping here involved a deep reflection on self and others, our interactions, in Heidegger's terms, our 'being in the world' (REF).

In introducing his approach, Boal is critical of the unreal nature of the theatre, how the actor's art became known in ancient Greece as the art of Hypokrites, that is, he who pretends to be what he is not. However, Boal then curiously claims that the actor 'pretended to be by being.' And by being, he is. How could he not be? The distinction between real being and fictional pretending was virtually non-existent, according to this claim. This leads Boal to the conclusion that the 'appearance' has some authenticity too, complete authenticity. For the appearance was, it existed or exists. The appearance is. The appearance is as undisputable as reality.

This is perhaps reminiscent of a child's mind. In reading Boal, I am reminded of a time I was at a party where there was a piñata. It was a monkey, or something, some sort of animal, and everyone began bashing it, as is the nature of the game, the everyday pretending in this ritual, and the child was very distressed that everyone was smashing this colourful monkey hanging from a tree. She was distressed by the way she had imagined the monkey piñata as an entity and could no longer distinguish between the representation and the 'real' monkey character she had created in her imagination.

Boal says of the actor in ancient Greece that even if it is just an appearance, this appearance is, just like the piñata for the child.

There were now two in the actor's art: The Actor, hidden behind the Mask, and the Mask itself. And so the actor's art was called—Hypocrisy. By the by, it is proven here that Theatre and Hypocrisy emerged from the same matrix on the same day. This division of the one into two, this dichotomy between Actor and Character, has since been one of the most captivating themes of Theatre—and of psychology (Boal, 2000, p. xv).

Pretending to be by being is crucial to implementing performance-making processes into learning. My role in education is as an artist and not a teacher.

In this sense, it embodies the description of the ‘actor’ and the mask above. I have often felt like this both on the stage and in the classroom. For me, education, like theatre, is just a conversation, a casual, intimate conversation. In terms of education and the role of the educator, there exists the actor hidden behind the mask, the person of the teacher, and the mask itself, what Goffman (1990) would call the ‘social role’ of the teacher. Like the form of theatre practice described throughout this book as fiction theatre and where I attempted to erode the distinction between ‘real’ social experience and the fictional space of the performance stage, I have also struggled with maintaining professional boundaries in terms of expressing my identity in the classroom. The subject I taught for eight years was founded on the idea that teaching is a performance (McLaren et al., 2021), but performance, for me, was something else. As teachers and actors, we are not on a stage, merely in a space of imaginative conversation.

I am also attracted to those educational theories that explore the social experience of students including those excluded from the system. Due to my position as an ‘outsider’ in education, I am critical of authority and question the necessity and motivation for using labels, such as ‘disturbed’ or even ‘at-risk,’ to describe students. For it seems that the disturbance and/or risks are socially constructed in the relational dynamics between teacher and student or student and student, rather than being identifiable in one individual (Pica-Smith & Veloria, 2012). My ontological position is expanded and elaborated in Chapter 8 of this book, where the personal experience of completing the research as a practitioner in an educational context is explored. The personal and emotional reflections contained in that chapter epitomise this consideration of ontological position. It provides insight into the sensation of being an outsider in education—neither teacher nor student—and articulates this somewhat complicated component of the data collection process. It also offers an additional source of subjective or creative data that works alongside the student monologue data and theatrical play.

This notion of subjective, creative data is an issue in my research and is articulated by theorists such as Hellawell (2006) explored in some detail in what follows, as well as Laing and Esterson (1964) in the field of radical psychiatry, discussed in section 1.5 and St. Pierre (1997) in her exploration of ‘transgressive data,’ explored in section 2.2 of the following chapter. My role in the classroom exists in the tradition of Hellawell’s ‘outsider research,’ which he describes as research ‘where the researcher is not a priori familiar with the setting and people they are researching’ (2006, p. 484). Insider research, however, is where the researcher possesses an intimate knowledge of the community and its members. Hellawell’s theory can also be considered in relation to playwriting practice (mentioned above and throughout this book), whereby participation in deliberate social conversation allows the playwright to observe and record both the characters as subjects of study, in terms of their speech rhythms, and their conversational surroundings. This insider/outsider concept is important, both to the practice that forms the foundation of this

work—fiction theatre research—and classroom engagement with this work; its value to theatre and performance as social and pedagogical practice.

### 1.3 Epistemology

There are several established fields of knowledge that this book could align itself with. For example, this book could be said to belong to the field of drama education, because it involves research in a school and utilises the practice of drama for the purpose of education. However, since such research is undertaken by a theatre practitioner and not a teacher, it could also be said to belong to the epistemological field of practice-based theatre research, or even a contribution to theatre theory or history.

I will argue throughout that this research belongs to the broad, interdisciplinary field of practice-led research and might be construed as practice-based work. I would, however, dispute this latter interpretation, since much of the practical or creative work is done with a view to providing insight and revelation about the outcomes rather than the practice itself. It would therefore seem to belong to the category of ‘practice-led’ rather than ‘practice-based’; that is, the ultimate goal of the book is not to produce a creative piece of work but rather to utilise the various creative processes to store students’ writings and experiences of the workshop, as well as contribute to the more general argument concerning labels.

#### *1.3.1 The Sociological Ontology of Fiction Theatre Making*

This final point deems the practice of fiction theatre making sociological, and this is ultimately where I see it as a practice and a theoretical perspective. The Outcaste Weakly Poet, a self-label that critiques the contemporary and unjust social structure at work in Australia, is a sociological phenomenon, and ultimately led to a teaching role at Victoria University, where I created practice-based learning activities around students’ reflections on their own positionalities and the potential of subject areas such as sociology, for example, to act as emancipatory engagements (Welsh et al., 2023). This comes from the interplay in my own two identities of ‘fiction theatre maker’ and ‘The Outcaste Weakly Poet’ that culminates into one in The Outcaste Weakly Poet Stage Show, and then Moosh the Hobo Cat is a reflection on that experience. Sociologically, in terms of positionality, this is where the experience of homelessness and the stigmatisation of being a part of that group can be and is explored through theatre practice (Phelan et al., 1997). In one piece, this is done through confronting the audience, in the other, through identifying with the audience and communicating the message about injustice.

#### 1.4 Practice-Led Research Methodology

My research explores the potential for the qualitative research practice of ethno-drama to examine social issues in schools, such as labelling, from a

student perspective. I claim that the writing of fiction theatre, which involves observing and recording voices from the author's experience of others, can work in the lives of students to understand and express their social situation. Although a dramatic play is contained in the data, it works as a tool of the research, one among a few approaches, rather than the outcome of the research per se. Using the fiction experience method of creating theatre or ethno-drama and, with similarity to Saldaña (2003), my work raises the following research questions for theatre, writing and education:

- Does represented experience in 'reality theatre' belong to the participants encountered along the way, those represented? The playwright? The actor?
- What does it mean to introduce a group of young drama students to these concepts?

What can be gained by using an educational context to explore the politics of theatre that has been the concern of writers such as Brook and Saldaña? When I consider the notion of drama education, I not only wonder how drama can be taught but also what can be learned through the process of writing experience through the teaching and learning of drama. This practice has been characterised as 'affective theatre,' concerned with using theatre practice to analyse and understand the world around us or comment—politically and socially (Haseman, 2006). This becomes more apparent through the data presented, both in the methodological analysis of the qualitative survey undertaken by student and teacher research participants in this book and in the student monologues, the product of a workshop I devised and conducted in collaboration with the supervising researcher and classroom teacher. The data presented examines labels and labelling in various social contexts and asks how social and pedagogical practice from theatre can reflect and comment on this broad social phenomenon through student participants writing monologues.

### **1.5 Structure of This Book**

In the current chapter, Chapter 1, I consider the use of 'fiction' and experiential practice in an educational context, discussing the aims and scope of the overview of this work, exploring my own ontological and epistemological positioning.

In Chapter 2, I consider background literature on Arts practice in education and various international Arts-based explorations and studies that have been carried out in educational contexts. Chapter 2 also connects the theoretical foundations of the fiction theatre monologue writing process with contemporary practice-based and practice-led programs in education, drawing the connection between the construction of my plays from everyday language and the 'conversational' theories of Wittgenstein, Searle and Shotter (Wittgenstein & Anscombe, 1968; Searle, 1979; Shotter, 1993).

Then, in Chapter 3, I consider the question of what can be gained from introducing this practice to school students. In the social context of an

educational institution, this is articulated both in terms of the Year 11 work requirement of preparing and performing a monologue and in more general terms of life education.

Chapter 4 expands on the phenomenon of social constructionism, using it to present the notion of a practice-led theatre research method based on the practice I call fiction theatre. The idea of the speech act relates to a component of my practice, which I call the analysis and reproduction of a character's 'speech rhythms.' This leads to a discussion of language construction and speech acts in society and education including the problematic social practice of labelling. It includes multidisciplinary literature from law, criminology and psychiatry, particularly the radicals such as RD Laing (Laing & Esterson, 1964) and Jules Henry (1973). I then turn my attention to educational theorists writing in related fields, which includes revisiting literature on 'practice-based' and 'practice-led' research in education. In addition, I address the relationship between my own practice and that from other fields, including documentary theatre, ethno-drama and other relevant forms, such as phenomenological and verbatim theatre.

There have been several recent and historical drama writing programs for school students relevant to this book. For example, a recent after-school and holiday creative writing programme claims to inspire creative approaches to teaching writing (Cohen, 2014). There are some similarities with my work in this program, including writing speech, as opposed to essay format and writing with a view to being performed (Cohen, 2014.). 'The Young Playwrights' is an American organisation that encourages the writing of theatre, conducting an annual monologue writing competition and therefore also emphasising the importance of monologue to the creative process ('Young Voices Monologue Festival,' 2014). However, these examples do not tend to emphasise the critical approach to social issues in schools that my project does. It is also important to note that this is an American organisation practising in American schools. I will include some monologues from my own practice and exploratory articulations of this practice, as well as social and theoretical implications for the work.

Chapter 4 also considers literature on the theory and practice of social labelling in mental health, criminology and education. The purpose of the chapter is to contextualise the monologue data later collected from students on the broad subject of labelling as presenting the students' point of view. Both the student monologues and the play appear in Chapter 8 and represent a creative contribution to this discourse on labels. This chapter concludes by posing the question of how a practice-led, as opposed to practice-based, research project can provide revelations regarding social labelling in education and beyond.

Chapter 5 addresses the complex methodology of this research. Here, I explore and explain the purpose and aims of conducting a monologue writing workshop with drama student participants and how it formed the primary context for data collection. Because a considerable portion of the book is dedicated to 'creative' output, it would be understandable for a reader to

interpret the nature of this book as practice-based. However, the process of work-shopping the fiction theatre monologue writing method with drama students, and then conflating and constructing those monologues into a theatrical play, constitutes practice-led research into a student perspective on labelling rather than a practice-based research project, the primary outcome of which might be the play itself. It could be argued that this research is practice and that its primary contribution is the way in which 'play writing' is practised. However, I will argue that the contribution is the concept of labelling in schools, and the monologue writing and resulting play are merely a means to an end. It is therefore practice-led rather than practice-based research. The methodology explores ways in which practice can affect learning and how theatre can act as a vehicle for knowledge.

In addition to students work-shopping the method to create monologues, students and teachers were asked to complete a qualitative survey, providing further data on perceptions and understandings of the behaviourally or emotionally labelled 'disturbed student,' 'troubled student' or even diagnostic labels, such as ADD, used in some literature to describe students' behaviour. The most prominent examples using the label 'disturbed student' are found in American educational literature. Some of the ideas proposed in a book titled *Educating Disturbed and Disturbing Students* will thus be analysed and criticised, particularly in relation to the label 'disturbed student' (Zionts, 1985). Student monologues, combined with the survey data, were used to construct this practice-led, qualitative research exploring labels through drama. The primary purpose of the qualitative survey data was to prepare and engage participants in the practical component of the monologue workshops; that is, students were prepared for the task by having considered some of the issues explored in the workshop and through participation in the qualitative survey. Although a teacher does not need to prepare in the same way students do, the qualitative survey informs teachers about the nature of the project. The qualitative survey data from teachers give insight into how they feel about labelling and labels, where they label and how such a practice might be a positive tool or a potentially negative habit. For this reason, the participant group of 'teachers' was expanded beyond the scope of the classroom teacher participating in the workshop and included consenting teachers, accessed through the researcher's networks, to provide greater scope in the data.

Chapter 6 presents the results of a qualitative survey gauging student and teacher perspectives on labels and, as I explain, it also acts as a tool to prepare students intellectually, emotionally and creatively for the use of playwrighting processes to address and criticise problems of social labelling. Chapter 7 describes in detail the data collection process in terms of the writing data from student participants. I review the student monologues in their raw form. The chapter also revisits questions of methodology and ethics, as well as the process of exploring and discovering student voices through the monologues. In attaining these monologues there was the potential for disclosure of unsavoury, perhaps even illegal facts. Indeed, the entire book is sensitive to legal

considerations such as mandatory reporting, and whether there is anything particularly disturbing in the work presented by students.

The review of the student monologues is something of an ethical minefield for which the researcher must be prepared. A dilemma exists here in finding the students' voice, requiring an open and honest exploration of the self and its expression. However, this ought to be balanced with legal and ethical requirements. There are various examples of such dilemmas, including *Zimbardo and St. Pierre*, as well as the *No Outsiders Project* (Zimbardo & Musen, 2004; St. Pierre, 1997; Depalma & Atkinson, 2009). In these projects, the authors are asked to weigh up the potential for and perception of exposing research subjects to dangerous ideas, and the need for social and political reflection and activism through practice.

A classic example is Zimbardo and his *Stanford Prison Project*, which explored the power of social situations and how people responded to them whilst playing a social role. The experiment set up a mock prison with some participants playing prisoners, some guards. The prisoners soon began to rebel against their status and the guards began to behave in an authoritative and oppressive manner, described as the 'tyranny of the guards' (Zimbardo & Musen, 2004). Zimbardo's project, which he abandoned prior to its expected conclusion, coupled with some of Laing's work, has been the impetus for contemporary considerations of research ethics. These concerns are an important part of my research, partly because I am collecting data through an engagement with minors and this alone presents several ethical dilemmas. In addition to this issue, the nature of the data is potentially personally and socially confronting for participants. Consequently, ethical considerations remain central to the entire investigation.

Chapter 8 explains and presents the synthesis of material from the student monologues into a dramatic play. This procedure involved a consideration of methodological concerns and questions as well as a description and argument for the fiction theatre playwriting method and, of course, the writing of the play. The consequences of this process were as meaningful to the research as the actual creative outcome, since the emphasis for real fiction theatre is the social learning that occurs around the process of drama creation as much as it is about the drama created.

Chapter 9 consists of various extracts from my edited journal detailing the process of creating this project and my own journey from playwright to drama education theorist. It documents my experience and illustrates the outsider/insider dichotomy identified by Laing and St. Pierre in her exploration of methodology in Deleuze's concept of the 'fold,' roughly translated as a relationship of difference with itself (Deleuze, 1993; St. Pierre, 1997). St. Pierre raises the issue of the fold in relation to her project that seeks to explore the lives of women from her hometown. Her ability to distinguish herself from her research subject is diminished and we, as readers, find ourselves in a folded methodology. Whilst my relationship with the research subject is perhaps less overtly dangerous in terms of dissolving objective and subjective categories or

observations; the journal chapter reveals the conflict of a non-educator in an educational environment and how this impacts the research.

Chapter 10 explores future directions for ‘fiction theatre’ research, and its potential as a creative practice with sociological and pedagogical significance. It asks where we might go from here with the practice, as it has been practised in the primary research that constitutes this book. It expands on the idea of method acting being implemented to write and create ‘fiction theatre,’ the practice as it is applied in tertiary education and as autoethnography. It explores the application of three broad practice-based performing arts processes: Autoethnography, method acting and applied arts pedagogy, utilising monologue-writing in diffuse and diverse contexts, with multiple objectives.

Chapter 11 concludes the book and presents various findings including the potential for Arts-based practice to act as social comment and education, using a set of criteria introduced in Chapter 2 on the effectiveness of Arts practice in a classroom situation. It also concludes the sociological component of the book addressing the finding regarding peer-to-peer labelling from the research engagement with participants in the school.

## 1.6 Disturbing Labels and Monologue Writing Practice

An article in a teacher education publication speaks of the tendency of teachers to name and ultimately label students, concluding that it often has negative consequences, suggesting it ‘hides more than it reveals’ (Dixon et al., 2004, p. 53) and that the ‘labels we [teachers] give our students may operate to their detriment’ (Dixon et al., 2004, p. 53). This school of thought claims that: ‘Labels are limiting. They offer a single lens concentrated on a specific deficit when what we need are multiple ways of seeing a child’s ever-changing strengths’ (p. 11). This article seems to initially argue that there are some assumed advantages to teachers ‘naming’ students but that labelling involves a different and more potentially damaging process: One identified by the student participants in my research project and apparent in the monologue data from students presented in Chapter 7 of this book.

*This resonates with my own experience. I remember once, when I was living in a park in Newtown, and a guy came past and took a photo of me selling my poetry under the Martin Luther King sign. The use of the internet was not widespread at this time, it was before smartphones. I found the photo online somehow. It had the caption ‘HOMELESS MAN SELLS POETRY.’ I was very distressed at being called a ‘homeless man,’ though strictly speaking it was true. It was not long after this that I began to call myself ‘The Outcaste Weakly Poet.’ There are two important points here about labelling and naming: ‘homeless man’ was a social label that came from someone else and was about me, whereas The Outcaste Weakly Poet was a name, an identity that allowed for some sense of subjectivity and agency. The abstract nature of the name reinforced this sense of ownership and identity. It needed to be explained and added a layer of complexity that truly reflected the nuances of the experience. One was a label, the other a name. One*

*can claim ownership of one's name, whereas one can only submit to a label. There is a Foucauldian operation of power in the language here.*

This book also argues that social labels such as 'disturbed student,' 'disabled' or 'at-risk' are symbols in the language of education and psychiatric or psychological contexts, as well as social welfare and criminological or law enforcement contexts. Sociological and educational literature certainly uses these labels rather tenuously and many theorists indeed dedicate much of their work to a discussion of the relative nature of 'disturbed,' or in the case of Kortman, 'disabled' (2003). However, others such as Wilson and Evans (1980) presented a paper titled 'Education of Disturbed Pupils' at the World Congress on the Future of Special Education and seemed to use the term 'disturbed' without reflection (Wilson & Evans, 1980; Kortman, 2003). In one section of the book that followed the presentation, Wilson makes the overt comparison between 'troubled' and/or 'disturbed' students and adds that 'they' 'seem not to need something different but more of what the child in an ordinary good family receives at all stages of development' (Wilson & Evans, 1980, p. 83). Similar assumptions were made in a publication produced by the Australian Council for Educational Research in 1949, a time during which, as a society, some students were labelled 'mentally defective' (Lewis, 1949).

Even if such approaches to education have been recently abandoned, contributions from scholars, such as Wilson, make up the social and historical tapestry that constitutes contemporary students' social or cultural surroundings. I will claim that the language from which these terms emerge can be understood and critiqued by students of theatre using what I argue is a social and pedagogical practice of writing monologues, based on the practice of 'fiction theatre.'

There have been recent developments in this field, particularly when we consider participant-centred practice, participant-led research and the foregrounding of 'lived experience' as an area of expertise in many research fields, including psychiatry, education and special education, and cultural criminology. These forms of investigation challenge the established systems of authority from which labels can be said to be generated. The operation of language in 'lived experience' provides a counter-hegemony and an inclusive space where all experiences are valued. This has always been the objective of the 'real' practice that informs fiction theatre, where the object of social change is central to the artistic practice. In this sense it has a relationship with Boal and Freire (McLaren, 2021), in that it explores the worlds of oppressed populations, such as those experiencing housing or mental health challenges, those afflicted by complex trauma, or perhaps excluded from society due to disability or sexuality. And the writing of plays and monologues represent an attempt to disrupt these power imbalances and, following the lead of Freire and Boal, mobilise oppressed groups through the practice of critical literacy. Through empowering workers with the ability to read and write, and therefore articulate their own oppressive conditions, Freire was accused of spreading subversive and revolutionary ideas (Elias, 1975). It is important that we not only create words to describe these

diverse human experiences, but that we also create spaces in which we can express ourselves through educative and artistic means.

When we read the monologues or the outcome of this practice-led research, we not only learn what students think about labels but also how such perceptions can be stored and expressed in the form of a dramatic play. Therefore, this book is not only about education but the potential for theatre-based practice to re-contextualise itself in communities and classrooms. In this sense, I am interested in the potential for the use of ‘fiction theatre research’ in other social contexts such as welfare work or psychology and counselling. This book, however, is mostly focused on classroom engagement. It seeks out a point of view from students expressed in a creative form. What is revealed through the process of this book, and the monologues of student participants, is that the student perspective on labelling in education is vastly different to conventional understandings in the literature. Students understand, articulate and are more concerned with labels used by their peers, as opposed to those used by teachers or those in authority to describe their experience.

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