'Who told you there was meaning?' Narrative, Mimesis and the Search Narrative Complexity.

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Abstract

This paper reports on a longitudinal research study of a partnership between youth arts organisation and an inner city secondary school using case study and reflective practitioner methodological approaches. Earlier projects in this study explored a mimetic model of theatre practice, based on young people's dramatised stories, that culturally diverse, teenage participants described as 'real'. The young people also perceived these plays as delivering moral messages to their peers and wider community. In 2009 a play-building process, combining text from Shakespeare's *King Lear* with original material inspired by Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* and a devised contemporary narrative, was used to generate a new play called *Searching For Lear*. This work wove tragic and absurdist perspectives into a contemporary young persons' street story. This project is analysed using literary theory and considered in relation to a Foucauldian analysis of power, knowledge and truth production. The play utilised a model of mimesis that complicated the relationship between the audience and the dramatic narrative, interrogating the basis on which dramaturgical meaning was constructed. These theoretical perspectives are examined in relation to research data revealing participant and community audience perceptions of this work and its significance in its local cultural context.

In 2004 I commenced a longitudinal research project based at the University of Melbourne, examining an arts education partnership between Western Edge, a not-for-profit, youth arts organisation, and a secondary school in Melbourne's inner west. The study used reflective practitioner and case study methodology involving extensive field-based data collection. The study is on-going and has comprised to date nine discrete project case studies involving a total of approximately one hundred and eighty culturally and linguistically diverse, male and female young people aged between thirteen and eighteen, some of whom were involved in a number of projects. The young people came predominantly from Horn of African, South and South-East Asian and European backgrounds, and a significant number were from refugee families. Earlier publications from the study focused on the construction of moral meaning in young people's enacted

stories (Donelan et al, 2005) and the impact of the work on young people 'at risk' (Kelman, 2008). Some projects were delivered as part of the school curriculum but others were run as an after school activity and reached further into the local community. It is on one of the latter projects from 2009 – entitled *Searching For Lear* – that I will focus in this paper.

The principal model of practice that I utilised at the school prior to this project was what I have called a 'young person's story' model, in which young people devise their own play based on fictional stories about young people of similar age, cultural background and economic status to themselves. The devising process used for this work is a relatively complex one; it immerses young people in improvisation and script writing, allows them to explore emerging scripts on the floor, redrafting as they go, and perhaps most significantly, engages them in dialogue about moral values contained within the narrative. This dialogue is conducted 'on the floor' through the drama process (Kelman, 2009).

The research to date indicates that two dominant features characterise this work: the first is young people's desire to construct moral messages through dramatised stories. Based on my perceptions of working with culturally diverse young people on the one hand and white monocultures on the other, in a number of social contexts, I am inclined to link the desire for what the young people refer to as 'messages' in the work to non-western cultural traditions. As Bruner reminds us, narrative and moral positioning are inextricably linked: 'To tell a story is to take a moral stance, even if it is a moral stance against moral stances' (1990:51). Young people in this study from Horn of African and South-East Asian backgrounds, however, repeatedly saw their dramatised stories as containing positive moral stances that were delivered through the narrative. This aspect of the work did not make the plays simple or didactic because they generally involved some degree of moral ambiguity.

The second dominant feature of the work is the participants' and community audience's description of the young people's dramatised stories as 'real'. A feature of the participant interviews and the audience response data from public performances of the

plays is the frequent use of the words 'real' or 'authentic'. This has been a recurring theme in the research study and requires some careful analysis. The following quotations from post-performance audience interviews with young people, after they have watched a play devised using the 'young person's story' model, provide a clear example of what I mean:

Boy: *It's more <u>real</u>, instead of something you've made up – <u>more realistic</u>.*
Boy: *Yes I liked it, it was funny and told a lot about teenage influence. Quite <u>real</u>.*
Boy: *It was a bit serious, it was about <u>teenage reality</u> and everything, so yeah, like the stories and what happens in <u>real life</u> with teenagers, so I would like it, stuff about our age and what happens and everything.*
Girl: *It's <u>real</u>, it tells you what is happening in the world.*
Boy: *They made it like a <u>real</u> gang…*

Participants in the plays also repeatedly used the word 'real' to describe their work. For example, consider these descriptions of their dramatised stories from participants in two different projects:

Boy: *<u>Real life</u>, its just like <u>real life</u>. It's <u>really</u> happened.*

Girl: *These things do happen in <u>real life</u>, like conflict does happen in families, teenagers get into gangsters 'cos other of their friends and students…..That's why all this in <u>reality</u>, <u>like reality</u> is based on heaps of things and the play showed <u>reality</u>.*

But what did these young people mean by 'real'? They didn't mean the plays were naturalistic because, despite many of the young people using a film/TV influenced acting style, they weren't. They involved a symbolic stage set, narration to audience and cartoon-like slapstick comedy for example. However, as the girl points out above, 'reality is based on heaps of things', suggesting an interaction of social forces, some of which she

lists; so perhaps for a play to be *real* it must also be complex. Another participant in one of the projects made an interesting distinction between 'real life' and 'entertainment':

> *Yeah the people that's actually acting thought it was like real life – not entertaining, but when people watch it they thought it was entertaining for them, they didn't think it was real.*

Her analysis suggests a hierarchal interpretation for these young people in which work that is 'like real life' is more important than 'entertainment'.

These responses didn't surprise me because throughout my career in UK and Australia young people have referred to drama work of which they approved as 'real'. Given that 'real' is a term indicating strong approval, my reading of the young people's concept of 'real' is that the stories felt to many of the participants, and to their peers in the audience, like a reflection of their culture and/or subculture. The plays represented situations and characters and issues with which they were familiar, either directly or indirectly, through stories circulating in their community. Their *perception* of a 'reality' was being represented and explored on the stage.

In his work on narrative, Bruner defines mimesis as a 'metaphor of reality' (1990:60); that is to say, it is not a direct imitation of reality but rather an interpretation of it. If mimesis is metaphor, it suggests a representation of a *perception* of reality but also a representation that changes that perception; in a mimetic process we do not just see a version of 'reality', but also a comment on it. In Rasmussen's recent work on mimesis, he defines different types of mimesis as either imitative or representational and based on the audience's level of awareness of the mimetic act in performance; the plays that were described as 'real' by young people could be defined in Rasmussen's terms as: 'mimesis as refined representation' (2008: 311). Rasmussen defines this type of representation as a 'refined composition' in which 'the representational mode itself is often concealed.' In this model: "we expect the audience to 'realise', 'discover', 'unwrap' or 'make present' the meanings that are embedded in the performance" (Rasmussen, 2008: 311-312).

Many of the young people in the research study were passionate about the 'young person's story' model of practice and what it represented for them, as these quotations from participants indicate:

Boy: *It was OUR ideas, not someone else's, not telling someone else's story.*

Girl: *This way we get experience of script-writing.....our own heart, our blood sweat and tears are put into it, it's original, you know, it's US!*

These dramatised stories are therefore a way of young people asserting their own 'reality', their sense of truth. But as Foucault's analysis of knowledge/power tells us: 'truth does not exist outside power, still less in opposition to it' (Sheridan, 1994:222). In the localised context of a theatre performance to their peers and wider community, these young people have the power to create a model of their reality that holds, for them, a type of truth. In a Foucauldian analysis, power is personal and contextual rather than simply hierarchical and involves the use and abuse of power across all social contexts: 'power seeps into the very grain of individuals, reaches right into their bodies, permeates their gestures, their posture, what they say, how they learn to live and work with other people' (Sheridan, 1994:217).

The complex and contradictory workings of power in young people's everyday lives are precisely what the project participants explored through their dramatised stories about family, peer pressure, conflict with authority and the oppressions of race, gender and economic disadvantage. In the performances of the young people's stories, audiences see how power works upon young people through their own representations of teenage life. Through the process of creating and performing such work, young people can start to gain perspective on the social and political forces of which they are part. In the process of representing and commenting on social values in their work, young people participate in the processes of truth production through social discourse. Engaging in this process also has its dangers however, because by engaging in a discourse, young people can end up taking on board someone else's 'truths':

….individuals participating in a discourse appropriate that discourse's truths. The truths that are relative to and sustained in a discourse, and as such are the products of power, are appropriated by individual subjects when those subjects come to have beliefs about and attitudes toward those (discourse–sustained and discourse–determined) truths as matters of fact.' (Prado 1995:133)

Over the course of this study, there were times when, in my view, the young person's dramatised stories simply became unquestioning representations of main-steam, discourse-produced 'truths'. These concerns led me to develop the *Searching for Lear* project in 2009, working with my long-standing collaborator writer director Cuong Nguyen and a group of twenty culturally diverse, young people, half of whom were upper teenagers with whom I had worked over a number of years.

Returning to the central concept of mimesis, in this project I was interested in developing a different mimetic model that contained within it a greater critical awareness of the processes of representation in theatre. I wanted to explore ways of drawing the audience's attention to the framing of reality in a dramatised story, posing fundamental questions about the process of meaning-making through performance. In developing this approach I was aware of the danger of the work falling into nihilistic cynicism, thereby denying the young people their right to make passionate positive statements through dramatic narratives. However I also thought that if the work became complex and rich enough it would allow young people to interpret the work in their own terms through engagement with a multiplicity of fractured moral perspectives.

Searching For Lear was initially devised by taking ideas from Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* and using free adaptations of his characters Estragon and Vladimir as the narrators of a version of *King Lear*. This version of *Lear* is set in a future dystopian world in which global warming has led to societal breakdown, creating a situation in Melbourne similar to present day Somalia (where some of the actors were born) in which warlords control law and order. Lear is one such warlord.

I wanted to generate theatre that challenged its participants and its audience to consider the nature of moral meaning. The interplay of *King Lear* and material based on *Waiting For Godot* set up a dialogue of this sort in the work. Connections between Beckett's and Shakespeare's plays have been previously considered in literary criticism (Drew, 1993). Sullivan in particular analyses *Lear* and *Godot* and outlines the fundamental differences between the two works in these terms:

> Shakespeare's tragedy possesses absurdist moments but is basically serious, moral and linear. Beckett's tragicomedy is darkly comic, amoral and circular. What provokes horror in *Lear* provokes bitter laughter in *Godot*. Where suffering ultimately ennobles in Shakespeare, it merely passes the time in Beckett. ….While both playwrights deny a simple moral universe, Shakespeare is aghast at its breakdown; Beckett's pessimism allows him a bitter laughter (Sullivan,1993: 69-70).

Although *King Lear* is a dark and challenging work it has a moral foundation, defined by Nuttall in these terms:

> *King Lear* is not *ethically* nihilist. An ethically nihilist play would leave one thinking that "good" and "evil" have no meaning. *King Lear* leaves us with a sharpened sense of the difference between good and evil, and, lying behind that, of the difference between goodness and nothingness (Nuttall, 2007: 309).

Nihilistic perspectives, though, did have appeal for some of teenage participants, and were expressed and examined in *Searching For Lear,* using an absurdist narrative framing adapted from Beckett's *Godot.* Although Beckett's play has not abandoned meaning, it explores its elusive and shifting nature: 'In his sense of the extreme elusiveness of meaning Beckett is classically modernist.…Meaning flares and fades, erasing itself almost as soon as it emerges' (Eagleton, 2007:103). The shifting nature of meaning is particularly relevant to young people – like those in this study – whose lives span two or more cultures and whose identities change depending on the social/cultural context that they find themselves in.

In *Searching For Lear* I was trying to establish an ethical dialogue within the work between the moral and the amoral narratives; however, if this somewhat esoteric

dialogue about meaning was to be made accessible to the young people, it needed to have a point of entry that was about them and their lived experience. As we worked on this material it became clear that, although it was dramatically rich, the young people did not really own it, something was missing from the work. To address this absence, I worked with co-writer Cuong Nguyen to write a parallel, present-day Edgar and Edmund narrative. In this story thread, as in Shakespeare, Edmund is still the illegitimate son who doesn't know his mother, but instead of this becoming a grudge against his brother and the world in general, this Edmund turns his destructive impulses upon himself. This strand of the play becomes the story of Edgar trying to save his brother from self-destruction. A present day Cordelia is also part of this story, a young woman who has run away into the city to escape her overbearing, sport-obsessed father and elder sisters. Woven into the overall narrative, this piece of contemporary teenage fiction about depression and loss of meaning is intercut with the cruel, power-hungry characters of Shakespeare's *Lear*, and has an absurdist running commentary delivered by characters based on Beckett's tramps from *Godot*. The 'teenage narrative' strand became the catalyst that brought the diverse elements of the work together and connected it to the young people's world of experience, creating a coherent whole. Although the new material was serious, it also injected some much-needed humour into the play through the interactions of the teenage characters and the tramps. Dramatic work that makes young people laugh is afforded high status by them and is a defining characteristic of plays in this research study.

Throughout the play, the tramp narrators move a 'Rubik's Cube' set of painted wooden boxes into different configurations as they narrate the story and set up the next scene. This set, created by indigenous artist Glenn Romanis, was painted to represent the land, both pre- and post white settlement, that west Melbourne is built upon. Individual boxes were unfolded to make standing crosses, or the stocks in which Kent was locked up, or placed in different configurations to make tunnels and bridges. As the set unravelled, it broke up the image of the land, the 'map' as it were, into disparate pieces, thus *displacing* the characters, and to some extent the audience; they became disconnected from their environment. As the play developed, this imagery suggested a

different and more fundamental truth narrative that posed questions for cast and audience alike about their cultural disconnection from the land they live on.

Towards the end of the play, even the timeframe of the work breaks down and blind Gloucester from *King Lear* appears in the contemporary world of the narrators Estragon and Vladimir. At this point, two of the play's strands intersect in a scene that breaks the existing narrative frame of the work. The scene comically calls into question our notions of truth, when Gloucester, blinded by Regan and Cornwall, literally stumbles into the world of the Godot-esque tramp narrators. The following extract from the play has been edited down but will serve to illustrate the nature of the scene:

Gloucester: Help me… I cannot see.

Vladimir: There's not much to look at anyway…

Estragon: The same old sun burning down…

Vladimir: The same old sad city concrete.

Estragon: If you can't see, how do you know we exist?

Gloucester: I can hear you…

Vladimir: We might be voices inside your head.

Gloucester: I can touch you.

Estragon: I'd rather you didn't.

Gloucester: I can smell you.

Estragon: We don't smell, do we?

Vladimir: Perhaps a bit. In fact, to be honest, you stink.

Estragon: I stink! How dare you?

Vladimir: Never mind that, you're missing the point.

Estragon: There's a point to all this?

Vladimir: Of course, there has to be a point doesn't there?

Gloucester: As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport. (Pause) If you exist, help me to die.

Vladimir: Do we exist? I suppose we do. *(Gloucester wanders off)*

Estragon: What about him, did he exist?

Vladimir: Where's he gone now?

Estragon: How should I know? Perhaps he was never there!

Here, the cruel but comical questioning of the basis on which we know anything, which has been hinted at in the play up to this point, becomes explicit. This theme is returned to at the end of the play when the tramp narrators – having watched Lear's tragic death with dead Cordelia in his arms (a scene that moved some audience members to tears) – question the suggestion that such suffering might have any meaning:

Cordelia: That's so sad.

Edgar: What does it mean?

Vladimir: Meaning? Now you want meaning?

Estragon: Who told you there was meaning?

Edmund: It's just a tragedy that's what it is. A tragedy.

This, then, is a play that comments and reflects on its construction of moral meaning. In Rasmussen's analysis, 'Mimesis as framing' is a representational mode in which the theatre form 'reveals the way meaning is constructed' turning audience and participants' attention to the *process* of meaning construction. Rasmussen states: 'It is educationally significant that these processes do not only present 'new' meanings in their own form, but also reveal how meaning is constructed and reconstructed' (Rasmussen, 2008:313). In the scenes from *Searching For Lear* quoted above, and through their narration to audience and reconfiguring of the stage set, the tramp characters draw the audience's attention to the dramatic abstraction of the events that are represented. In doing so, they ask the audience to consider the basis on which they are constructing meaning from the dramatic narrative and even question whether any such meaning exists. Or, as the character of Estragon puts it: 'Who told you there was meaning?' In their role as storytellers, the tramps directly address their audience and question the moral framework of the play. A challenge is thrown out to the audience - 'question what you are seeing!' – forcing them to reflect on the mimetic process at work: not just *what* the play is saying but *how* it is saying it.

So what did the culturally diverse young people make of this complex and demanding work, both as participants and as audience members? I will start with the audience response: the play was performed in a dangerously packed community centre adjacent to the inner-city, high-rise public housing estate where the majority of the participants lived. The audience was very diverse in age and cultural background although there was a majority of young people and children in the audience. The play –

which is at least in part a fast-paced, irreverent comedy – was very well received and the actors' performances were fueled by audience laughter and engagement. In the audience response data two strong trends stand out. One is that young people from a variety of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds rated the show very highly and singled out the 'story' as something that they liked about it (although they did not describe it as 'real'). This is perhaps surprising, given the complex and demanding three-strand narrative of the work. A significant number also singled out the performance of Lear's Fool as their favourite part of the play. The Fool was acted by Abdi*, a talented fourteen year-old African-Australian, who described the experience in these terms:

> *I enjoy being the Fool, you've got to think outside the box – but the thing about the Fool is, you joke around and then you're serious on a topic. It's really hard to do because you've got to switch very fast and the audience don't notice. It's really fun cos then you think outside the box and do all these fantastic things.*

Significantly he then added:

> *The Fool's laughter brings you - when you lose yourself – he brings you back to the story. He's like a storyteller.*

Like King Lear's Fool, the Fool in *Searching For Lear* is a voice of absurdity but also of sanity in an absurd world. Abdi was aware of his character's complex dual function and perhaps his audience were too. Certainly there were other characters and situations that the young audience members might have chosen as favourites that more directly reflected their world – the modern-day, teenage characters of Edmund and Edgar for example – so perhaps we can infer some significance from the fact that they chose the complex and contradictory figure of the Fool as their favourite part of the play.

Turning to the performers' perceptions of the work, the first thing to note is that they took significant pride in being able to take on and conquer such a complex text and make it accessible to their community:

Sol: *It was weird cos normally no one does this sort of stuff, theatre and that. It draws the community more together. After we done it, the day after, I caught up with some of the guys and they were like: 'What happened? We never knew you guys could be that good! We thought we'll go there and expect an average performance but they were shocked to see how good it really was. They were shocked because they didn't expect anything to come out of this community like that, and when it did they thought people here do have talent, people are moving forward with their lives.*

Ali: *It's not everyday they get to have a show put on in the community centre by local youth – especially as complicated a show. Many may not have understood the show but the fact that it was staged in their community by local youth, that just in a way makes them proud of being from the community because this area's been through trouble, police and stuff. It brought a different spotlight to the place so I wasn't surprised (that it went down well). I was confident, everyone in the cast was looking forward to putting it on.*

Sol and Ali, two older African-Australian cast members, show themselves to be very aware of negative community perceptions of them as young people from refugee and new migrant backgrounds and they took pride in confounding these prejudices. They also give voice to the community's pride – that was manifest in the audience response – that *their* young people could produce work like this.

In overall terms, the young performers of the play saw it as having moral messages within it, as one of them put it: 'It's got a lot of powerful messages – it goes through family values, things like that, loyalty between close friends – and it was a great play to act'.

Performers in the play, however, highlighted different sections that had meaning for them or their friends. Significantly these moments were particular to certain

individuals as different parts of the wide canvas of the play connected with aspects of their lives. For Ali, a key moment in the play connected to his feelings for his father:

Also I like the scene where I (as Edmund) pretend I'm going to help my father save Lear, and me and my brother have a conversation about 'are we going to betray our father?' – we have a disagreement. The scene was so hard to do because I wouldn't betray my father for anything, but then you have to understand there are some people who do. Power and money comes to hand and you do manage to do things like that. I thought it was pretty good.

For Sol, who played Edgar, the story of the bastard son in both Shakespeare's *Lear* and in the contemporary context resonated strongly:

Being a bastard. Some people don't know their father. They lost them in wars or whatever (he is from a Horn of Africa refugee background). They could just use Edmund's story towards their own, because I know guys who are like that. So maybe they can realise there is other ways than just being aggressive and being hidden from the world and hiding your feelings. Losing anger is an escape.

This is a powerful statement that carries within it the concept of using a story 'towards their own'. I interpret this as meaning that the story of the play can help an audience member develop his or her understanding of their own personal story. From these examples, we can see that this challenging dramatic content was highly valued by these individuals who draw their own personal meanings from the collage of moral and amoral statements contained in the work.

The following exchange between two of the younger participants gives a sense of the young people working towards an overall understanding of their work:

Abdi*: It helps the community come together. They come to support me by watching me…*

Clara: *...and we support them by telling them a story and telling them what's going on.*

Abdi: *Strong words, they use Shakespeare's words and the words he uses, there's a hidden meaning...*

Clara:*... like reading between the lines. It brings feelings, emotions and people together.*

Abdi: *I think a lot of people came out having learned something – a lot of people learned that fear is something that you choose. You choose to fear something, it doesn't just come to you, it doesn't just come. They learned a lot of things. The story had a touch to it. I can't describe it.*

So a picture emerges of the young people seeing their work in moral terms and seeing the role of theatre to 'tell them (the audience) what's going on' but there is no clear unambiguous moral message here. The play is a collage of 'hidden meanings' that 'had a touch to them' in moments that resonated differently for each individual.

How does this pattern relate to the to the Godot-esque tramps and their commentary on our inability to 'know' anything and therefore to extrapolate moral meaning? This is Harun – who played one of the tramps – talking about his own perceptions in relation to those of his character Estragon:

I know it has meaning. For this character – for Estragon and Vladimir - it has no meaning. That is the sort of character they are. That's what I felt about those two characters and I know, as me, that this had a lot of meaning in it.

Harun essentially rejects the nihilistic perspective of his character and grounds his understanding of the work within a moral framework. In this ensemble production, Harun played Lear in a number of scenes as well as the tramp storyteller Estragon. He also talked about the difficulty of switching from Estragon to Lear – from an absurdist to a tragic perspective:

I had to switch from a character, Lear, who knows there is a lot of meaning, to Estragon who says: 'meaning, there is no meaning', that's what he says. I know who my characters are.

Like Abdi, who acted the Fool, Harun highlights this switch between the philosophical perspectives of tragedy and absurdity. *Searching For Lear* is full of such changes and each time they occur we are made aware, as audience, of the theatre form and/or the framing of events through character narration. This in turn raises an awareness of the mimetic process in ways that invite us to construct our own personal and social meanings.

What I am arguing for is a more complex engagement with – in this instance – culturally diverse young people's desire to construct moral meaning in their work. Rasmussen identifies processes of mimetic framing as central to this approach: 'In this model, learning is a matter of seeing different realities, or comprehending our lives, when our lives are framed in aesthetic ways' (2008:313). I think this is the process that took place in *Searching For Lear.* Sol, who played Edgar, said this about his experience of the project: 'Art is just a great way to express feelings and you know through art you can teach people and there is no greater way'. However, Sol's reading of the play – like that of other cast members and audience members – is very particular and individual. There is no overarching 'truth' here to be articulated. We can teach through art – as Sol says 'there is no greater way' – but to do so we must let young people construct their own meanings as well as question the basis on which they do so. One way of doing this is to structure a degree of narrative sophistication into the fabric of our work with young people to generate complex theatre that makes meaning but avoids simplistic moralising.

If we are going to authentically engage young people in a discourse about the interdependent and contextual nature of knowledge and power, then there is an important place for developing mimetic models that question the basis on which meaning is constructed through the dramatic narrative. In doing so we do not abandon any moral or political agenda we may have as educators, but rather we create more complex and

nuanced work that forces educators, participants and audience to work harder to construct moral meanings.

*All participant names have been changed to protect privacy.

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