

Fractal Patterns: The Challenge of Emergent Design

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Introduction

What happens when a group of Western Australian women participate in a four-day drama workshop called Sacred Theatre?

[L]ooking at your life and the world through eyes created by a sense of Sacred Theatre provides an invitation to dedicate your play to a holy audience the holy purpose of our life play is to entertain the sacred audience to explore the roles we play and the support we provide other sacred players (Rubin 2000: online).

Sacred Theatre is an interactive workshop in which participants actively engage in the exploration of a given pre-text. This specific way of working a pre-text using drama and other expressive arts was developed by Margaret Nash Rubin in Oregon, USA. The pre-text can be a play, a story, a film, a novel or a theme. For my research I selected *The Orchard*, a novel by Drusilla Modjeska.

Initially, for the purposes of my research proposal I used the term “sacred” as a spatial and temporal concept to align with Brook’s (1968) notion of theatre as a place set apart from the mundane. “Sacred” in the sense of “tenemos”, a place and space removed from demands of the everyday, a non-violable place and space for the theatre event, ie. the four-day Sacred Theatre workshops. However, during the months and months of

immersion with the data from interviews with twelve women “sacred” emerged as a metaphor of connecting and below are two extracts from the transcripts,

...a beautiful connection with one person and again the women’s group sharing of the women was more than you’d have in normal circumstances but that particular sharing together was extraordinary for me....

...sacred allowed to be in my own space connecting with whatever higher being...

From this I was able to reflect on Bateson who says that sacred is a word about wholes that is not about internal meanings but is something between parts (1991: 304). I then realised that for my research Sacred Theatre was best understood as a double metaphor: “Sacred” as metaphor of connecting or making connections and “Theatre” as metaphor for life. “Sacred Theatre”: Connecting with all of your Life and the Lives of Others. Again, following months of work with the data, “spiritual” has emerged as the relationship or relating factors needed to make these connections, “[T]he arts serve a spiritual function” (Tacey 2003: 162).

... I felt I shouldn’t have done it but it worked and I did see the inner and I realised, maybe I did do it, how can I tell what’s inside the other person unless it touches or resonates with some part of me?.... (extract from data)

The Purpose of my Research

It is we ourselves, our central ideas, our moral imaginary that must be problematised, brought to consciousness and held up to scrutiny, and thus shown not to be rooted in nature or biology or necessity but in the sedimentations of historical and social construction (Jantzen 2001: 225).

What is the experience of a group of Western Australian women who participate in a four-day Sacred Theatre drama workshop? What is the individual experience of each woman? What meanings are made from a drama experience that is explicit in its intent to “celebrate all of your life”? Does the personal and collective story become more because of the element of “sacred”, whatever that means in a secular context? There is

little information from research on the use of drama, a specific expressive art form and process, for women to “make a critical ontology of ourselves” (Jantzen 2001: 225).

Aims of the Study

- To investigate the phenomenon that is a Sacred Theatre drama workshop, i.e., what *is* this drama process called Sacred Theatre, for both the facilitator and the participants?
- To develop some understanding of how the expressive arts processes, in this instance drama, enable women to reflect on their experiences as women in a society in which gender and sexuality and the roles assigned to both are over-identified and thus intensify aspects of identity and subjectivity

The Context: The Sacred Theatre Workshops

The Sacred Theatre drama workshops create a context to explore the many possible ways that we may experience our world to contribute to a more reflective living. The Sacred Theatre workshops are the space/place and context, temporal, spatial and social, for this exploration and reflection to happen. It is this tenemos as interstice or place of possibilities to enact one role of the Arts and provoke, interrupt, evoke and distort or overstep existing boundaries (Ziarek, 1994).

I used Drusilla Modjeska’s *The Orchard*, as my pre-text for the drama activities as it is a metaphor of possibilities for women. The narrator is never identified and embedded within in it is the fairy story of the Maiden of the Silver hands, also known as the Orchard, in which the young woman eventually grows her own hands and comes to her

own authority, her own handedness. It is about moving beyond optic vision to inner vision, of embracing the dark, of finding personal metaphors for life.

The drama activities which constitute the four-day workshop are based on episodes or scenes from the novel. The drama activities may include improvisation, movement, and short rehearsed scenes and those who take part may develop a consciousness of what is not yet, of what might, unpredictably, still be experienced, ie, “we can play the lines that have not been written, say the words that have not been said and put the memory of that experience in our mind and body”.¹

The drama takes place in the field of the other (Diprose 2002: 126), ie. “we are here”. It is the proximity, each to the other, within the space and place of the drama process that we can “think otherwise” as we hear, watch and interact with each woman and her story. As Elaine Wainwright said in her Plenary Address to the WSRT Conference at which this paper was presented, “women’s stories may not be heard unless we tell them.”² “Sacred Theatre workshops are one forum or locus in which those stories can be told, heard, witnessed and transformed.

The Research Process

The Interviews:

The individual interviews with each of the twelve women were informal, open-ended and recorded on tape.

¹ Elizabeth Austen, Sacred Theatre Workshop, Oregon, 1998.

² Wainwright, Elaine. 2004. “SeaChanges: land, living and loving: WSRT over ten years”. Plenary Address. WSRT Conference, 23-26 January, 2004.

This was what Louise had travelled from Melbourne to hear – the story of his life - but when it came she didn't take out her list of carefully prepared questions, absorbing instead the scroll of talk that moved backwards and forwards across the years of Ettie's life with the richness of a complex palette (Modjeska 1994: 8).

Following a group discussion with the participants which took place six weeks after the Sacred Theatre workshops I arranged one to one interviews with nine of the women.

The interviews started with an invitation along the lines of, "tell me about your experience of the Sacred Theatre Workshops". As each woman spoke of her impressions and experiences I would focus on what was said using this as a lead into further discussion, eg, if "feeling free" was said I would say, "Can you talk some more about 'feeling free'?" or if "it was about standing up in front of others" I might say, "Can you tell me about that?". I tried to avoid using direct questions, e.g., "What do you think?" or "What do you feel?" intuiting that "Can you tell me?" or "Can you talk some more about that?" was less directing on my part and allowed for an easier flow. At all times I attempted to follow the interviewee and not superimpose my expectations or specific interests. I attempted to follow Mesler who suggests that "post modern research can be seen as having no fundamental difference from our 'natural participation in everyday life situations'" (1994: 55). The interviews were conducted in private and domestic settings but it was the inherent deliberate purpose and my intent as researcher ... which moved beyond the everyday. There was only one specific question asked of each woman which was, "In what sense sacred for you?"

The Logistics Of Collecting The Data

In my attempt to make a lengthy process clear I have deliberately presented this as an action plan:

1. arrange interviews with twelve women and “let go” those who no longer want to be involved – keep academic supervisor and peer reviewer informed – take time and attend to all procedures diligently (there can be no short cuts with people’s lives and your research);
2. conduct the interviews – check places, distances, time available, make alternative dates, keep the boundaries clear – quite an issue in qualitative research of this nature;
3. listen to the tapes many times, make notes, buy a big note book, keep it all together!;
4. transcribe the tapes by hand and give time to this, don’t rush (this helped me absorb what was being said. I took my time with it);
5. transcribe the tapes onto the computer using line numbers format (this proved to be invaluable).

At the end of this process I had conducted twelve interviews whose written transcriptions ranged in length from 500 words to 6500 hundred words and totalled 37900 words. I had also gathered material from the two group discussions held three months and twelve months later (the latter at the women’s requests).

Forming The Data

Now What? I had to work with the data – not “work the data” but “work with the data” because, in keeping with my belief that the women were the epicentre of the drama, I wanted to keep them at the epicentre of the research, therefore I decided that “*this data is not to fit but to form!*” There was an enormous amount of data and I read the transcripts through to identify topics which I then realised could be clustered into common themes. I experienced some angst though as the data was too unwieldy even with the emergence of clusters which became Common Themes. I undertook a process of further analysing the Drama Process Common Theme for “theme statement variations” and a fractal pattern emerged. The Sub Themes of the Common Theme:

Drama reiterated the four Common Themes. I then realised that I would be able to cross-reference the four themes throughout my discussion and avoid repetition. Once the writing of each Common Theme began I was further challenged to develop a conceptual framework for each.

The Analysis: The Heuristic Cycle

There are innumerable ways to prepare an analysis of written materials, be they descriptions of lived experience, or transcriptions of spoken conversations, or written notes from observations. Perhaps the simplest to work with is the written description of a first-hand experience. We have worked out a step by step procedure that we offer as a starting point for your conduct of an analysis. As we've said elsewhere this procedure is offered because we've found it helpful. It is not a fixed formula and we bend it to fit the information whenever that seems best. The goal of the analysis is to find common themes in the written descriptions and to find language that captures these themes (Barritt et al 1983: online).

As the women reflected on their experience of Sacred Theatre, "micro and macro meanings became visible" (Kealy & Mullen 1999: 385). The micro meanings are those individual meanings that may or may not overlap with other meanings, at a macro level are those meanings that are common to all the research participants.

The research unfolded, shaped by its own dynamic as I "researched 'with people' not 'on people' in a process of collaborative inquiry" (Reason in Mesler 1994: 51). The research is "the creation of the participants, becoming more authentic and incisive the less its direction is prescribed by external influences" (Mesler 1994: 51). It is a bringing forth and I became aware of how the research process mirrors or is the macro of the micro of the drama process and the workshops as a whole. Each activity was shaped by the women, as Ivy said, "...the others were moving and they chose to do that, but as we were doing it, it took a life of its own" (Ivy, transcript).

In working and shaping the data I had to know my own limits, be humble as Neville (1994) advises, to know that I would only get a fraction of a fraction of the information available from the data. I know that any approach to the data is limited by the worldview with which I approach it, my predispositions, prejudices, knowledge and understandings. By analysing the data in one way I might miss out on all the insights that an alternative approach might provide but I stayed with “emergent design” and “emergent meanings” and invite the reader to look for my oversights as well as insights and to re-author as all readers do, I make visible my limitations.

I wanted to develop an approach to my research that would express more the liveliness, the involvement and even the “passion” (Mesler 1994: 52) of the experiences being researched. Within the workshops we are audience to ourselves and to each other and in interview I am audience to each woman’s reflections.

The Method: Some Practical Details

I bought a 300 page spiral notebook and as I sat reading the printed transcripts would write a theme in the margin, eg, gender, the drama process, the garden, the sculpting, sacred, spiritual, women only, bodies etc.

It was my aim to approach the data and identify common themes that emerged from an intuitive, inductive reading followed by further readings in which I identified and named those themes. I read through each transcript many times and listened to the tape-recorded interviews more than once. This was my attempt to attune to the reality of each

woman's subjective experience of the Sacred Theatre workshops. As I read through the transcripts I made note of themes that emerged. I selected themes that I then clustered into Common Themes. I then selected the Common Theme: Drama and using theme statement variations, repeated the same analytic process. What emerged were the same four themes as the initial Common Themes that I called Sub-Themes. I realised I had a fractal pattern emerging. It was like working with a hologram, any one slice contained the whole. I am using fractal not in the mathematical sense of true mathematical value but as a metaphor of self-similarity (Buchanan 2002: 105). Buchanan talks of river networks in which there is a hidden simplicity in the structure which are sometimes called fractals and quotes the philosopher Whitehead, "the general in the particular and the eternal in the transitory" (Buchanan 2002: 106). This again is a metaphor for the drama process and maybe all expressive arts processes where the moment is the eternal or the holograph.

My insight about fractals, which was a couple of months in emerging, eased my anxiety on the amount of data and the final structure of the thesis. Each time I started to write about one aspect from the data I realised that I was writing about another aspect, it was very complex, unwieldy and I wasn't confident that it was manageable or would do justice to the women participants. It's not about a slice of the pie because you don't have the structure of the pie in your hand when you're holding a slice, the ingredients are represented, but the pie is not there (well, except in the fact of being "not-there"). The fractal or holograph has all the parts and the whole. I then realised that to analyse the data under the headings of the workshops, the drama elements of the workshop activities, the drama activities themselves, the pre-text and even the individual

interviews would reiterate the Common Themes as Sub-Themes. That's the fractal pattern. Also, the Common Themes would emerge as Sub-Themes within each of the twelve interviews.

Conceptual Frameworks for Each Common Theme

The final challenge has been developing a conceptual framework for each of the four Common Themes that have emerged from the data analysis and synthesis (quotes from the interview transcripts are presented in *italics*):

- Narratives of Identity and Subjectivity: Gender, Bodies, Men and Women
....your biology becomes your geography...
- The Sacred and Spiritual: Natality, The Wounded Feminine, The Goddess, Natality "Thou-within-I",
...so sacred temple is the me-ness in here which has because become very special and sacred as distinct from a holy place, even divine...
- The Drama Process: Role, Performance, Creativity and Play
...yes, that sense of not having to play a role and yet playing a role...

"That sounds like Clara," Ettie had said when we came to the disputed paragraph. *"The convoluted struggle for a woman to see herself as the primary term"* (Modjeska 1994: 18).
- Narratives of Learning: the Workshop Activities.
...it wasn't a case of working against the clay or against the grain ... so they chose to bring that out and the person being moulded could feel that and it was empowering because, it wasn't that they were being forced into a position against their will, but they were being guided to bring out this aspect of themselves that not many people might have seen before

Each of the Four Common Themes is present to some extent in each Theme but the discussion focuses mainly on one. I decided that further data analysis was unnecessary

as the Four Common Themes gave me sufficient information to form my discussion and as a fractal pattern had emerged the holistic approach was maintained. My writing now consists of footnotes which state that although this topic, eg. “women only” is mentioned in the drama and gender discussion but it is fully developed in the section on the spiritual and sacred.

Why Interpretive Phenomenology?

The holographic perspective aligns with the holistic conceptualisation I have used to “think” women, identity and drama. There is an holographic perspective in searching for phenomenological themes, in that the whole of the experience is represented in each theme, which presents more like different windows on the whole experience. The structure of experiences, by which they are accorded some commonality, are the recurring elements that are most meaningful to us. Thematic analysis is a way of uncovering those elements that constitute the phenomenon as experienced.

For this paper I draw on Hein and Austin (2000: online) who also use the metaphor of light and prism, in the light the prism changes and the facet gives a different light. I prefer to use the metaphor of differing positions, all colours of the spectrum and all the shapes are present at any one time, it is the shift in position which changes the colour – what quantum theory calls the observer effect and what I call the situated perspective. A full understanding of the phenomenon is not considered possible. There can be no saturation point, no final analysis, the inquiry is circular and spiralling. They quote van Manen in stating that hermeneutic phenomenological research has no step-by-step method or analytic requirements.

The writing that I have done to date for the Common Themes “The Sacred and Spiritual” and “The Drama Process, Creativity and Performance” also align with Hein and Austin. I have considered my personal experience, conversed with others, read what others have written, examined the words that are used to describe it and followed other clues found in poetry and literature as a means of discovery. My reading across disciplines has been extensive, I have insisted on fluid boundaries using a very broad range of materials to assist in the interpretive process. Like other researchers of phenomenology I have found the use of metaphor and poetic language is the only means to “stay true to the data and the research process” to avoid closure and definition. As Kockelmans says “sometimes poetic language provides the only adequate way to present human meaning and allows us to understand the phenomena more clearly” (in Hein and Austin: online).

I have found that phenomenological research is not about articulating something definitive, obvious or concrete, as Austin (citing Bollnow) says it involves “defining what is still uncertain and co-creating the meaning”. I do have some reservation about “defining” as I have wanted to avoid what to me is the pull of modernism and would create a tension with the aims and purpose of my research.

In my writing I have considered the participant’s meaning, my meaning and our intersubjective meaning. At that point I then form the conceptual framework to create a discussion, without this the final work would be unwieldy, resembling a tangled mass. Each time I have had to ask, “What is my way in?” e.g., at no time have I drawn on

psychology as I am not seeking to uncover psychological causations or explanations of the cognitive processes that bring to consciousness the mythic, analogic, rational or a-rational nor do I want to engage in deconstruction. It is my aim to re-present the women's experiences and insights which emerge as they reflect on their engagement with the processes of the four-day Sacred Theatre workshops.

My supervisor and I have used knitting and weaving metaphors, using words such as "untangle", "find the threads", "look for a pattern" and I called one draft "knit one, purl one, pass the slip stitch over". At all times it has reflected the Heideggerian idea of "bringing forth" and so I will finish with quotes from Zhang, Bigwood, Huntington and a poeticised text from one of the research interview transcripts,

[there is a] changed emphasis in hermeneutic theory ... interpretation no longer needs to eliminate one's own historicity as a negative prejudice, prejudice as the fore-structure to understanding, to be challenged, tested and modified by the text in the reading process ... realise understanding is an infinite process of inquiry – a dialogue between the author, the text and the reader in the constant exchange of questions and answers – the interpreter no longer needs to attempt to close the text with a definitive answer but to keep the critical dialogue open ... once it is realised that understanding is an infinite process and open to various possibilities, it is then no longer necessary to seek the definitive perfect interpretation, nor is it appropriate to think of the present understanding as superior either as a more informed knowledge or as a more conscious than an unconscious production. "It is enough to say." as Gadamer puts it straightforwardly, "that we understand in a *different way, if we understand at all*" (Zhang 1992: 158).

The reach of the thinker is like that of the gatherer of fruits in Sappho's poem. Gatherers are those who bring in the harvest with sheltering care. The harvest gatherer does not amass and store in the challenging-out because gatherers in their approach have a concern that shelters Heidegger's thinking ... is a reaching that refrains from closure (Bigwood 2001: 184).

In the Sacred Theatre, the audience invoked by each player bears witness to the connections that arise from past and present, the drama is an event in process of corporeal generosity which, “in the gift of everything to each other” we can find a “capacity to embrace the intrinsic beauty housed in the singularity of each human being” (Huntington 2001a: 33).

In re-presenting the extracts from Lally’s interview transcript I practice an hermeneutics of listening in an attempt to “let it say itself” (Ziarek 1994: 9)

THE BEST IS YET TO COME
*one has to dive deep
in order to be cleansed
into the deepest fear of any kind of experiences and danger
one has to take the risk
and
when you come up again its another experience
one has to be cleansed to that degree
so that you will know
the art of appreciation
so that you can thrive
and to come out
to survive
and the climax of the Sacred Theatre drama
is that not only are they there to play the game
at the crunch point of the game
they don't want
to survive, they want
to thrive,
the best
is yet to come*
(from interview transcript: Lally)

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