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Theatre as essay: a useful framework for the science play

Abstract:

Theatre director and writer Mick Gordon has devised a theatrical form that he describes as a ‘theatre essay’, that is, an attempt through an analytical and/or speculative approach to compose a contemporary theatrical performance.

This paper will analyse Gordon’s approach to creating a theatre essay by referencing several works Gordon has produced through the United Kingdom–based company, On Theatre. It will then illustrate how I have applied this approach to my own theatrical work, the science play *Staring at the sun*. This is an original play text that forms the creative component of my PhD (Creative Writing); while the thesis component focuses on a dramaturgy for plays and performance works that engage deeply with science. Through *Staring at the sun* I hope to explore several aspects of humanity’s long obsession with immortality. I will argue that the aspects of the theatre essay form offer useful dramaturgical techniques when creating plays that deeply engage with science.

Biographical note:

Glance’s plays have been performed in Australia and overseas. *Shaking the tree* was showcased at the International Playwriting Festival in London, 2012. She has completed her Creative Writing doctorate titled ‘Performing science: the portrayal of science and scientists in theatrical performance in relation to questions of practice, ethics and politics’ and a play text, *Staring at the sun*.

Keywords:

Theatre essay – Science play – On theatre – Theatre – Science

Mick Gordon, the artistic director of the British theatre company On Theatre, coined the term 'theatre essay' to reflect an approach he devised to theatre-making that focuses on a particular ethical or intellectual question. In writing my play *Staring at the sun*, I applied aspects of the theatre essay and I would argue that this form offers useful dramaturgical techniques when writing plays deeply engaged with science. *Staring at the sun* is inspired by biomedical science and attempts to deeply engage with that discipline through the use of language, character and performativity.

The theatre essay allows the playwright or theatre-maker to interrogate the initial question theatrically and emotionally through performance. While a theatre essay ultimately results in a play text, it is important to understand how the creating of this text is unique in its process and outcome. I will limit the scope of this paper to an interrogation of two On Theatre plays, *On ego* and *On emotion* (Gordon & Broks 2005, Gordon & Broks 2008) that are also science plays.

What is a theatre essay?

On the title page of the play text *On ego*, three words are printed beneath the title: 'A theatre essay' (Gordon & Broks 2005, 3). On page five, two definitions are set out as if copied from a dictionary. The first defines 'theatre', the second, 'essay'. The next reference to the 'theatre essay' is on the publication's back cover, which states,

On ego is part of a groundbreaking series of theatre essays, which use theatre as a way of exploring the fundamental preoccupations of modern life.

It could be argued that calling a play a theatre essay potentially causes an ontological disruption by juxtaposing two words to imply multiple meanings. Is this an essay about theatre, a published play text, a literary approach to theatre or a new theatrical form? The published play text for *On ego* is laid out as a conventional play rather than a written essay with dialogue and stage directions along with a cast list. So, should a theatre essay be seen as a literary approach to theatre?

On Theatre provides a definition of the theatre essay on its website, stating that:

A theatre essay is a theatrical presentation of the written essay form. As with a written essay, the starting point for a theatre essay is a subject. On Theatre selects an issue of contemporary concern and then proceeds to debate, dramatise and present it on stage. (On Theatre 2011)

London's Soho Theatre, which has presented many On Theatre's productions, provides a simplified description of the theatre essay. It states:

ON THEATRE explores fundamental preoccupations of modern life through a new form of theatre, the theatre essay. As with a written essay, the starting point for a theatre essay is a theme and a question. (Soho Theatre 2010)

Thus a theatre essay is developed and presented around a central question, and this question is examined in performance. The process On Theatre employs to do this is stated on its website (On Theatre 2011). This can be summarised as having six steps:

Frame the appropriate essay question

Find a primary collaborator from outside the theatre world to work with

Speak to many other experts, artists and interest groups to gain a wide range of views

Workshop the material with actors to find the appropriate theatrical language for the theatre essay

Create a written text

Interrogate the theme through a theatrical production.

It could be argued that the last four steps could be applied to any theatre ensemble creating work through a devising process. However, the first two steps appear to be unique to On Theatre and deserve closer examination.

The posing of an ‘essay question’ suggests an intellectual approach as a starting point to theatre making. For example, in *On ego* the question asked is ‘How does the brain create a sense of self?’ (Gordon & Broks 2005, 7). In the second Gordon & Broks play, *On emotion*, the question is, ‘Are we just puppets of our emotions?’ (Gordon & Broks 2008, 27). As with an essay, the question is asked at the beginning of the play and using various dramaturgical techniques to achieve this. For example, in the opening scene of *On ego*, the main character Alex, a neuroscientist, addresses the audience as if it is in a ‘seminar’. He asks, ‘How does the brain construct a self?’ This question is presented as an invitation to the audience to become inquisitive and to contemplate possible answers as the play unfolds. For conventional theatre writing, a dramatic question is often framed around a character in the play – for example, ‘How will Hamlet revenge his father’s death?’ For a theatre essay, I would argue that this question is framed around the audience. It directly addresses an idea or issue that the audience can relate to that is not focused on character or narrative. The audience is asked to consider this question as the drama on stage unfolds and to work towards possible answers to this question.

Drawing an audience’s attention to a question alongside the immediate drama resonates with Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt*, also known as the Alienation or Interruption Technique. However, unlike Brecht, On Theatre has not stated an overt political agenda for adopting this technique. Instead, it claims a creative rationale. Gordon describes this central question as an exploration of an idea through theatre, even if that means working outside conventional theatrical approaches to character and narrative, that ‘is bold, innovative and celebrates the countless possibilities of theatre’ (Gordon 2008). Nonetheless, the questions posed tend to interrogate a rational view of the world. *On ego* and *On emotion* present a neuroscientific view of ego and emotion respectively; they also acknowledge that we may find it hard to accept that we are simply the result of physiological processes. While the plays present an opposing metaphysical view, ultimately they appear to encourage the audience to share a rational view.

The second step of On Theatre process is ‘to find a primary collaborator from outside the theatre world to work with’. To date, On Theatre has collaborated with recognised experts such as neuroscientist Dr Paul Broks, philosopher, AC Grayling, psychologist

and palliative care worker Marie de Hennezel, and others. Although the collaborations are not documented in detail, it is clear that On Theatre's director, Mick Gordon, was inspired by publications written by these experts. For example, Gordon cites Paul Broks' book, *Into the silent land*, as the inspiration for both *On ego* and *On emotion* (Gordon & Broks 2005, Gordon & Broks 2008, Broks 2004). Importantly, not only do On Theatre's collaborators have their published works acknowledged, but also are credited as co-writers of the play texts. Grayling collaborated on with On Theatre to create the play *On religion*, which has also been performed under the title *Grace* (Gordon & Grayling 2006). He was present in the rehearsal room as part of 'the remarkable team effort that a play represents' (Grayling 2006). However, this presence alone does not imply an engagement with these experts in the theatre-making process itself, so little can be drawn from this limited evidence. Nonetheless, it is important to fully and effectively acknowledge any contribution that goes beyond simply referencing a primary source text, especially if the play is attempting to represent the ideas in that text performatively. Furthermore, I would question whether this acknowledged collaboration with someone outside of the professional theatre world is essential to the theatre essay as a genre. While it provides a consistent point of difference for On Theatre's work from other theatre-makers and is commendable in its endorsement of that author's work, there is little evidence of their actual contribution in the devising process other than as advisor and provider of various initiating points. I would argue that the primary point of difference between a theatre essay and a conventional play is the posing of an intellectual question and the construction of the play around this. So is the theatre essay an effective technique for theatre-making?

To date, criticism of On Theatre's approach has come mainly from reviews of the theatre productions rather than from scholarly research. The opinions of reviewers appear to be divided as to the success of this form and critiques of On Theatre's practice have not always been favourable. Michael Coveney's review of *On emotion* produced at London's Soho Theatre states that this work 'generates little theatrical heat' (Coveney 2008). He goes on to liken the play to Tom Stoppard's *Jumpers* but without the 'intellectual resolution to the conflict of philosophy and action'. Ian Shuttleworth is more supportive, and in his London *Financial Times* review of *On ego*, he states:

Plainly not all theatre can or should be like this, but there is room for such a mode of presenting object lessons rather than working through more opaque metaphor. (Shuttleworth 2005)

Furthermore, Neil Dowden in his online review for *CurtainUp* writes that, '[*On Ego*] makes complex scientific ideas accessible in an entertaining and thought-provoking manner' (Dowden 2005). However, he also states that the play still leaves the audience with a sense of mystery about human consciousness despite presenting aspects of current neuroscientific knowledge.

Alison Croggan, in her review of *On religion*, performed under the title of *Grace* and produced by Melbourne Theatre Company in 2009, praises the play for the quality of its writing, performances and production values, stating that it was a 'decent play

decently done' (Croggan 2009). However, ultimately she is unconvinced by the genre. She continues that the stage was reduced to 'an animated lecture hall' and felt that the play lacked 'drama'.

The theatre-essay form appears to challenge conventional text-based theatre and Gordon acknowledges this. He has responded to criticism by identifying critics as falling within two camps: those that accept the central premise of the work, and those that do not. He describes this central premise as an exploration of an idea through theatre, even if that means working outside conventional theatrical approaches to character and narrative. Gordon resists what he describes as the notion that 'theatre must be only one thing'. He states that On Theatre's work is 'bold, innovative and celebrates the countless possibilities of theatre' (Gordon 2008).

As stated above, criticisms of the company's work have been mainly focused on the outcome of the work, that is, the production, and not on the creative process. On Theatre has been creating work continuously since 2003 and its works are produced internationally, so there appears to be an audience for this form of idea-led theatre. Nonetheless, whether the theatre essay has been critically successful for On Theatre or not, I would argue that I have found aspects of its process to be effective when writing my science play, *Staring at the sun*. However, it would be useful at this point to outline what is meant by a science play before discussing how an understanding of On Theatre's creative process has been useful to my playwriting practice.

What is a science play?

A science play is an emerging theatrical genre that employs certain dramaturgical techniques to present crucial aspects of science in a dramatically engaging way. In summary these techniques are: orientation, visual signifiers, use of spoken and performed metaphor and the creation of a scientifically naive character.

Orientating an audience to the science during its first encounter with the play can be achieved dialogically, through stage directions (extradiologically), or through visual signifiers of a scientific environment. Visual signifiers can be located in the physical objects and stage properties, and the stage setting and design. For example, in the opening scene of *On ego* a powerful and humorous visual signifier is when Alex poses the question about the nature of self and then takes a preserved human brain from a bucket. Science can also be communicated dramatically through the use of metaphor (either dialogically or performatively) to engage not only with scientific concepts but also with socio-cultural and political ones. In *On ego*, two theories of self are presented either that our sense of self is simply a biological phenomenon, or that we have an essential self outside of our biology. During the performance Alex is replicated and performatively tests each of these theories. Finally, technical scientific language is either modified through an engagement with a naive scientist, or exploited to create an elite/expert character. The creation of a naive or novice scientist as a dramatic tool is common to all these works. This character is a device that serves to prompt information about the science relevant to each of the works and provides an effective reason to simplify complex scientific terminology. The character may be constructed within the drama or it could collectively be the audience. *On ego* uses

both approaches through the character of Alex's scientifically naive wife, Alice, and the audience which is addressed as if it is attending a public understanding-of-science seminar.

I would argue that these techniques are important for any theatre work that engages deeply with science. When science is communicated between scientists, care is taken to be exact and clear. A vast vocabulary of scientific terms has been created to enable this precision. When science is dramatised through performed play texts it is aimed at a general audience (that is, where the majority is assumed to be non-scientists). The science is presented in more prosaic language, which inevitably loses some of the finer details of the science. Scientific concepts in the service of drama are presented in rough outlines, even used as metaphors for human actions. While the playwright or performance-maker needs to have an understanding of the science they are incorporating, they do not need to take on the presentation or communication methods of the practitioners of that science but to engage with the language of performance. However, science plays are also concerned with intellectual and ethical questions around science and its place in society. The playwright's task is first and foremost to create compelling drama, which communicates as much of the science as is needed within the context of that performance. Through this, the playwright creates an effective performance as a means of critiquing and understanding science and often the role of science in society.

Gordon is aware of this when he states, 'Theatre does not serve us well when it is being didactic' (Gordon 2010, 63). Even though the theatre-essay form poses an initial question, it also endeavours to create a subjective engagement with story, plot and character within the performance. This subjective engagement is essential if the theatre work is to be considered a science play. Shepherd-Barr in her seminal work *Science on stage: from Dr Faustus to Copenhagen*, specifically excludes plays that are overly didactic or pedagogic in their intention from the genre of 'science play' (Shepherd-Barr 2006, 12).

So, the primary task for the writer of a science play is how to integrate scientific principles essential to a deeper appreciation of a play without the audience feeling alienated by overt didacticism. I would argue that the first two steps of On Theatre's practice when creating a theatre essay are useful tools to solve this dilemma. In the following section of this paper I demonstrate how I attempted to achieve this in my own creative-writing practice as well as the limitations I encountered.

***Staring at the sun* – a drama on the potential for biomedical immortality**

Staring at the sun is an original play text that employs aspects of the theatre-essay framework, as well as the dramaturgical techniques from my research as outlined above. My intention when writing this play text was to create a drama through which an audience could objectively and subjectively contemplate the potential for biomedically-induced immortality.

At this point, a brief synopsis of the play may be helpful. The narrative revolves around cell biologist, Dr Daniel Fredericks. He is driven by his ambition to work in

the exceptional research facilities provided by the commercial pharmaceutical company Artemis Global and the substantial financial rewards it offers. His work is associated with realising the physical immortality of Tanya, a brain-dead cadaver. His mother, Brigid, is a scholarly expert on the ancient epic of the Assyrian king Gilgamesh, and this story highlights the futility of Daniel's quest. Sandy, a laboratory technician at Artemis Industries, becomes curious about Tanya after she encounters the drug addict Raf, who wants to know what has happened to his former girlfriend. Daniel starts dating Sandy and her concern for Tanya, coupled with his mother's enquires about his work, prompt him to question more deeply his own professional motives and ethics.

Each character in the play is representational of a facet of the question being asked by the work. The laboratory technician, scientific researcher and company executive, located in the world of biomedical science (Sandy, Daniel and Diana, respectively), demonstrate the practical challenges of realising immortality and the costs and expertise required to control natural processes. These characters also represent of the roles of ambition in achieving excellence in research, and of commerce in bringing this research to society through the market. In the realm of the humanities, Brigid serves to focus reflection on the mythical exploration of immortality, through referencing the ancient text of *The epic of Gilgamesh*.

As mentioned previously, the ideas and some of the stories in the two theatre essays, *On ego* and *On emotion*, were inspired by a published text, Paul Broks' book *Into the silent land*. This primary text was written for a general audience and presented clinical case studies from Broks' work with patients suffering brain injuries, along with Broks' personal contemplation and questioning of the nature of self. However, I have not been able to follow On Theatre's process exactly due to various limitations, such as limited access to the author of a primary text, sole-authorship requirements of a PhD thesis, and the lack of financial resources for an extended workshop and devising process with actors with the scientific collaborator present.

Nonetheless, I have referenced recent publications in scientific journals and consulted with experts and interested parties to inform the work. In particular, I contacted a molecular biologist, Dr Guy Brown at Cambridge University, to ensure the accuracy of aspects of the science. Similarly to Gordon, I was inspired by Brown's book *The living end*, and this has been an important reference text for issues surrounding the science of longevity, ageing and death (Brown 2008). This book also intersperses the scientific text with mythical and classical references to longevity and ageing, and this inspired me to include such a thread in *Staring at the sun*. Even though I was unable to work closely with Brown, I was able to meet with him on two visits to Cambridge, England in 2010 and 2011, and to talk with him and his colleagues about ideas that are realised in the play text. Furthermore, although a completed draft of the text was tested in a two-day workshop with professional actors with my supervisor, Associate Professor Stephen Chinna as director, I was unable to devise with actors during the initial creative phase of the play. Despite these restrictions the narrative in my play revolves around a central question, mirroring the work of On Theatre. The play's characters signify aspects of this question and through this the audience is exposed

directly to the science. I would argue that this focus on a central question is the key element that differentiates the theatre essay from other forms of theatre making.

In addressing this central question *Staring at the sun* explores the particular area of biomedicine that presents the prospect of biomedical immortality, especially through the manipulation of cell apoptosis. Apoptosis is a form of cell death that results in the removal of damaged or malfunctioning cells. Along with as-yet-unrealised advances in nano-technology, the body of Tanya is kept functioning after her death. Her body is to be used as a substrate to test the potential of immortality-inducing treatments that are being developed by the fictional company, Artemis Global.

The main theatre-essay question that emerged from my research, and which is presented in the play, is ‘Would you want to live a longer, healthier life, and possibly become immortal?’ This question is presented in the opening scene, in this case through direct address in the form of an investors’ meeting where the audience members are ‘attendees’. The question supposes a positive answer and during the seminar this is stated as the most likely response. Through the narrative of the play a further question is implied: ‘Would you still answer “yes” if scientific research achieved this through dubious ethical practices?’ Various perspectives on this question are presented through the characters and ultimately Daniel, the play’s protagonist, has to make a choice about how he will act. Furthermore, the theatrical conceit of a brain-dead character (Tanya) suspended between life and death resonates with metaphysical questions about the nature and location of the soul. In this way *Staring at the sun* covers many territories and multiple perspectives through character that go beyond restricted territory of science, such as philosophy, ethics, history, society, the commercialisation of medicine, the conflict between science and religion, and the future of ageing.

As a theatre essay, *Staring at the sun* also references the history of humanity’s obsession with immortality. This is achieved by a secondary level of narrative located around the ancient story *The epic of Gilgamesh*. This intertextuality serves to highlight how biomedicine is the latest in a long line of quests for immortality, and reflects the juxtaposition of science and myth found in Brown’s book.

Another similarity to On Theatre is the technique of direct address, which is used to great effect by Gordon and Broks in *On ego*. This is adapted in *Staring at the sun* to become a company investors’ meeting. Here the latest advances in biotechnology are presented and the benefits of immortality are expounded. However, the presentation to the investors does not reveal the true nature of the research. Nonetheless, it serves to show how commercial scientific research requires significant financial investment as well as expertise in order to progress, and how this work is presented to the financial markets.

The intellectual arguments and the central question asked would appear more as a debate on stage unless the theatre work is able to engage with the audience on an emotional level. This lack of emotional drama has been one of the main criticisms Croggan and others have made about On Theatre’s work. In order to overcome this potential problem I have given the characters in *Staring at the sun* desires, relationships and conflicts that are located around the central character of Daniel.

These dramatic elements help Daniel to reconcile his main conflicts: the nature of his scientific research and his financial and personal ambitions.

Through *Staring at the sun* I am attempting to create for an audience a subjective space where members could contemplate and speculate on their own moral and ethical views on how far biomedical research should go in order to achieve immortality. By taking two of the central elements of the theatre essay, I have attempted to apply On Theatre's creative practice in a limited way. The first is the proposition of an objective question at the beginning of the play. This can be achieved through a form of direct address in a way that is appropriate to the world of the play, or through dialogue. Presenting the audience with the task of engaging with this central question allows the scientific facts to be presented overtly. Nonetheless, this does not mean the science play should lack drama and become merely a debate. It is imperative that the theatre-maker creates an emotional world for the characters which drives the narrative. The second element of collaborating with an expert was achieved in part for *Staring at the sun* and an expert primary text was referenced during the research for the play, along with other texts such as scientific journal articles. It was not appropriate in the context of a single-authored PhD to collaborate in the writing process, as On Theatre is able to do. Nonetheless, an attempt was made to rigorously research the science referenced in the play text. Also, framing an essay question at the start of the writing process was useful to contain the scientific issues I wanted to explore through the play text. Even though the first two steps of On Theatre's process have been useful in creating this play text, I would like to apply this process more fully for a future new work, as it offers a way to reconcile the objective nature of science with the subjective nature of theatrical performance.

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