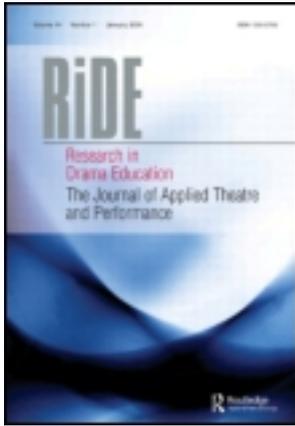


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## Applied Theatre/Drama: an e-debate in 2004

A question on the SCUDD (Standing Conference of University Drama Departments, UK) email board asking for origins of the term Applied Theatre led to a vigorous and engaging set of postings. With the agreement of the contributors and SCUDD, Viewpoints has compiled some of the thoughts that emerged.

*Annette Kramer, New York, NY, USA*

I'm familiar with the term in the US to mean applying theatre techniques to situations in which problems need solving (such as applying drama to emotional therapy, conflict resolution, or corporate learning).

*Franc Chamberlain, University College, Northampton, UK*

It comes out of education departments and then meets up with what was happening in Theatre for Development or the Theatre of the Oppressed . . . So Geese Theatre's work would now be called 'Applied Theatre' [. . .] It's a good marketing term to link this kind of work into social and health services rather than Tfd or TO, and also marks a difference from the connotations of Educational Drama. So many of us who have been working with Boal's work, for example, with different client groups would have been doing Applied Theatre for years without calling it that.

*Catherine McNamara, Central School of Speech and Drama, London, UK*

We run an MA and BA Applied Theatre and the courses focus on theatre practices that promote inclusion and access in a variety of settings where difference or disadvantage might exist. They address the ways theatre can be an agent for change, empowerment, enablement and transformation but also explore the problematics/ethics of such terms and concepts. The 'applied' aspect of Applied Theatre, for us, concerns practices that engage with issues, dramatise relevant stories and involve participants in processes that they find useful, informative in ways specific to them.

*Helen Nicholson, Royal Holloway, University of London, UK*

Applied drama/theatre relates to work which is orientated towards aspects of social change, personal development and community-building through various forms of participation in drama, theatre and other performance practices. All are obviously contested concepts (community, personhood, society), which is why this

emergent discipline raises questions which are germane to the wider social practice of theatre [...].

My experience is that, in the UK, the terms applied drama/theatre are more commonly used in university drama/theatre departments than in education faculties. This is largely because education faculties have become increasingly tied to school-based training, and there is often less scope for working in a range of contexts (prisons, hospitals, etc.) than there is in drama departments.

Internationally, the term is gaining currency as a relatively (for the time being) flexible term. It is interesting in this context that it is sometimes used in place of Theatre for Development—to avoid the problems of ‘development’ associated with ‘developing world’.

A small number of practitioners make a distinction between applied drama and applied theatre—applied theatre as having an element of theatrical product, and applied drama as entirely participatory. Most radical practitioners, however, recognise that there is a more fluid and productive consonance between performance and participation in many practices—and interpret performance more flexibly than the work of professional actors [...] Whether it is called applied drama or theatre tends to be a matter of habit and choice [...] and there are some of us that, although we work in the area, maintain a scepticism about separating off ‘applied’ from other forms of contemporary theatre.

*Greg Giesekam, University of Glasgow, UK*

How much has the rise of the term to do with the decline in use of terms like ‘community theatre/drama/arts’? A lot of the things which happen under the rubric are very similar to the range of things which went on in the 1970s and 1980s in the name of community theatre/arts. But then there was so much contestation about different practices/theories under that rubric and the increasing appropriation/institutionalisation of the word ‘community’ by governmental agencies, that a lot of people began to distance themselves from it.

I have to confess to finding the term a bit problematic: the first time I encountered it must have been in the late 1980s and it referred more to using drama to develop communication skills/role play exercises with businessmen, the police, medical students and so on. So it seemed odd when I later began to encounter its application to more radical work. It seems to be a very capacious portmanteau term [...] it doesn’t seem as loaded a term as some previous terms and scares the horses less.

*John Somers, University of Exeter, UK*

In shorthand: all theatre has an ‘applied’ context. For me, the difference with ‘Applied Drama/Theatre’ is that usually there is a conscious use of drama approaches to bring about positive change. Unlike most theatre where the performance is

presented to whoever chooses to come through the doors, Applied Drama/Theatre usually is done with known populations. For me, there are usually four parts of the process:

- the societal context is researched;
- the drama event is customised for that context;
- you do it;
- you evaluate its effect.

In the last few years my students have worked in pupil referral units, psychiatric settings, therapeutic environments for addicts in recovery, theatre companies for actors with learning difficulties [...] So for me, in that there is a specific aim(s), Applied Drama exists to ‘do a specified job’. Sometimes the aims are distinct (as with [an] interactive play on first episode psychosis which starts a national tour in October [2004]) and at other times there is just a general wish to ‘do good’.

*James Thompson/Tony Jackson, University of Manchester, UK*

The Centre for Applied Theatre Research here . . . has the following definition on its website:

Applied Theatre refers to the practice of theatre and drama in non-traditional settings and/or with marginalised communities. It refers to theatre practice that engages with areas of social and cultural policy such as public health, education, criminal justice, heritage site interpretation and development.

The term [...] has mushroomed recently because of the engagement of theatre artists with government agendas such as social exclusion—the PAT 10 Arts and Sport and social exclusion publication contributed to this. However there is no doubt that it problematically comes from academia (where the term ‘applied’ is used to preface a range of disciplinary titles)—and maybe now that graduates from the numerous applied theatre/drama courses are moving into the workplace it is gaining some recognition.

*Franc Chamberlain*

I don’t feel comfortable with the label because of the applied/pure split it implies. It would seem to split my own work between ‘applied’ and ‘pure’—and I want to say there’s nothing pure about my work!

I also agree with [the] point that theatre processes can be applied for any number of disagreeable ends (in a sense the Nuremberg rallies are more of an example of Applied Theatre than Brecht’s work). At least terms such as Theatre of the Oppressed or Theatre for Development carry something of their ethic in their title.

*Philip Taylor, New York University, USA*

In my view, applied theatre does have a transformative principle at its core, and unlike applied drama, usually is powered by a presentational aspect from skilled teaching artists and actors, although this characteristic could be contentious based on the cultural context in which one is working.

What actually constitutes ‘participation’ is variably determined. I would certainly include the performed ethnography as a genre of applied theatre (community powered work by Kaufman, Devere Smith, and Ensler would be applicable), but this work is usually not structured around active participation of audience members working towards resolving or probing a particular issue faced by a protagonist, although it could be. The work in Brisbane had numerous community and outreach orientations, where local stories informed the construction of the theatrical work. It was ‘applied theatre’ as it moved beyond the mainstage theatre (read ‘pure’) houses into various locales: community centres, museums, rehabilitation centres, ‘at risk’ populations, for the purposes of realising social change and cultural connections. And it occasionally drew upon principles of the *avante garde*, even agit prop forms, to solicit audience involvement. We would not have considered a drama workshop, based on improvisational activities alone as being applied theatre. It was Michael Foster from the GU (Gold Coast) campus who first brought the applied theatre term to us, I believe. [...]

Theatre of the oppressed, theatre for development, theatre in education, radical street performance and community theatre, all have a transformative aesthetic principle powering the work. Brecht’s work is applied in the sense that he was breaking from conventional European and bourgeois theatre form, and was deliberately searching for a more active and critical consciousness from audience members, as indeed the applied theatre workers can be doing. [...] The applied theatre label can be a useful umbrella term for including all this work, and for finding links and connections for all of us committed to the power of theatre in making a difference in the human lifespan whether they come from the arts or education departments, or community and vocational settings.

*Helen Nicholson*

The influence of Brecht’s *Lehrstuecke* on applied drama is very interesting—but whether or not Brecht might be called an ‘applied theatre’ practitioner misses the point. [...]

The point is that theatre is applied to different contexts, audiences and situations, and for specific purposes. [...] So, for example, I have seen practice with life-sentence prisoners who are likely to die in custody. Some time ago I worked with young people ‘at risk’ of suicide. We worked by analogy and through narrative. And, call me old-fashioned, they worked with (respectively) *King Lear* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Never have the plays seemed so painful and so rich. Not as an example of universal truths, but because both plays offered points of identification and

distancing which enabled the participants to engage with what felt important to them. Does that make Shakespeare an applied theatre practitioner? Of course not. Murray Cox, for example, famously worked with Shakespeare in Broadmoor. The point is not about the plays *per se*, but whether those engaged in the project benefit in specific ways. That is why theatre is applied . . .

*Franc Chamberlain*

Applied Theatre is not the application of theory to practice as such, but a label applied to a set of practices as a means of gathering them together. In that sense I understand that we're not discussing a theory/practice binary but attempting to differentiate between different kinds of practice. This appears to be proceeding by identifying family resemblances—'participation' and 'transformation' being important. The trouble with just these two is that they don't allow us to discriminate between TO (theatre of the oppressed) and the Nuremburg rallies. Hence the bringing in of 'intention'. The AT practitioner must 'intend' appropriate ends. Apart from the obvious fact that good intentions don't necessarily bring about the desired transformation (and may result in a worse situation), it also masks the ethical arguments for particular kinds of transformation and change over others [ . . . ]

My concern (philosophical, ethical, practical) with the term Applied Theatre is that if it only applies to performances with a particular view of 'transformation' then this makes it more difficult to discuss the complexity of the world where performances are used all the time to transform the world according to different sets of values—and participation is very much part of this. I understand the desire for a term which gathers practices with similar social agendas together, but 'Applied' doesn't do it for me at this level. I'd suggest that the attack on the twin towers was an act of Applied Performance—its intention was transformation and it involved participation—it's an extreme example but one which needs to be discussed (see both Schechner and Diana Taylor's thoughts on this for example). If we say Applied Theatre/Performance is only that which intends outcomes of social transformation and change which 'we' agree with, then how do we talk about that work which uses theatre/performance to effect changes we disagree with? It begins to suggest that what's 'Applied' in Applied Theatre is not 'theatre' but a specific set of ideological values. This was the problem for me with the term 'political theatre' but less so with 'Theatre of the Oppressed', for example—the constituency is clearly identified and the 'of' implies the participation that would not be there in Theatre FOR the Oppressed.

*Jeri Daboo, University of Exeter, UK*

I've done things with voice, body awareness and breathing. This became part of a workshop 'package' that included forum work etc., and was intended to offer a more 'holistic' approach. I didn't label it as 'Applied Theatre' at the time, but now feel that

it does fit under that label. I also did individual sessions in voice work with people to encourage confidence, self-expression etc., as well as exploring breathing and posture. This work definitely extended beyond mere vocal production for singing/stage/public speaking, into a broader sense of self-development. I found it a really powerful tool, as people started ‘owning’ their voice, which permeated through into their lives. I guess, as has been suggested in the debate, that a label is a label is a label, and if it works, then what we call it is just a convenience!!

*James Thompson*

Applied Theatre (as a term) first made sense to me when trying to make theatre relevant, challenging yet sustained inside prisons. We had to apply our craft to disciplines where the language of theatre was unfamiliar. Applying theatre was both a practical and ‘discursive’ exercise—e.g. what are the intersections between favoured models of prisoner rehabilitation (broadly in the late 1980s/early 1990s—cognitive behavioural group work) and theatre of the oppressed *and* how do you get the governor to let a group of pretty shabby looking artists come into her/his prison? I make no claim that this was successful or that we weren’t somehow compromised by the environments in the process—but applied had a sense that we had to apply ourselves to a difficult set of negotiations. Applied had the idea of graft. This work certainly was not ‘pure’ (in both the political and academe sense!) but pushing theatre practice into troubling contexts certainly revealed things about that context and about the practice. Final point—there are of course some other terms knocking about. The Italian’s use the term ‘teatro sociale’ for all that I have understood as Applied Theatre. Social Theatre is the title for the latest issue of TDR . . . so maybe another debate can now kick this one about. Or maybe it is simply too bland?