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Dramaturging Personal Narratives: Who am I and Where is Here? (2015)

By Judith Rudakoff

Bristol: Intellect

Review by Joseph Dunne

One of the inevitable and indeed somewhat unsurprising consequences of globalisation and the digital revolution are the multitudinous ways individuals and groups are able to articulate their identities in the private and public spheres. It is tempting to consider the porous nature of identity as a historically recent phenomenon, but as Judith Rudakoff's book demonstrates the ubiquity of the Web and the increasing mobility of peoples are too often cited as causal rather than symptomatic factors when attempting to grapple with the complexities in answering the age old question, "who am I?"

"Where is here?" acts as the corollary to "who am I?" in Rudakoff's dramaturgy. As this book lucidly demonstrates through a series of case studies and accompanying commentary, places elude definitive interpretations as much as individual identities do. A place's history does not 'just' exist as text but resides on its topography and in living memory. This creates a highly subjective sense of what constitutes a home: Does it denote a building or a country, a culture or an ethnicity? Or in an age of mass migration and fluidic borders, can a home be a dwelling that we carry in our psyches? These questions come into sharp focus when dramaturges work with displaced and disenfranchised peoples whose ability to anchor themselves to a homogenous identity often conflicts with the political, social, cultural, and economic factors they are forced to negotiate in their daily lives. Whether this manifests subtly or overtly these influences have profound effects on one's sense of personhood.

Having instigated projects in countries as diverse as South Africa, Canada, India, Iran, United Kingdom, Cuba, USA, Iraq, Israel, Cameroon, and Jamaica, Rudakoff is well placed to elucidate how performance and non-performance strategies can address these issues. She has worked with a diverse range of groups including school children, local community members – some of whom were homeless and struggled with alcohol and drug dependency – migrants, university students, as well as professional artists. Rudakoff writes in the introduction that it is not her intention to explain the role of the dramaturg in theatre through theoretical analysis but has instead chosen to document her projects in an effort to inspire others to make sense of her methodology through adaptation and experimentation.

The first two sections of *Dramaturging Personal Narratives* concern *The Ashley Plays* project, a series of site-specific devised works centring on the character of Ashley – a non-gender specific figure who embodies participants personal narratives and acts as "a conduit [who] affords a degree of freedom if not anonymity" (p.16). In some cases *The Ashley Plays* have manifested as visual, non-performance artworks, which is indicative of

the project's success in transferring across genres. The project is also a potent demonstration of how a dramatic persona can voice muted perspectives and interpretations of one's place in the world by providing a vehicle for self-expression that goes beyond autobiography.

The preparatory dramaturgical exercises involve creating a series of materials – photography, text, film, and audio – in response to prompts. In some of the iterations of *The Ashley Plays* the resultant materials were treated as artworks in their own right without the necessity of translating them into a theatrical event. In the third section, 'Photobiography', Rudakoff explains how this process worked in practice with examples of the writing and photographs the participants produced. This innovative approach makes the dramaturgy admirably accessible to a broad range of participants, not just those with training in performance or in any other arts practice.

An example of the dramaturgical prompts is the *Image Flash* exercise. Participants complete the sentence "There are stories about..." to formulate personal narratives of their home that exceeds the purely descriptive level. In an effort to enhance and diversify the responses, Rudakoff sometimes adds the additional provocation of photographs produced from a Lomo Kompakt Automat camera she calls "Lomograms": types of photographs that "tend to be evocative rather than documentative" (p.13). The *Four Elements* exercise is designed for participants to examine how the power dynamics they observe in their interpersonal relationships embody the qualities of fire, earth, air and water in order to build an Ashley profile. The specific qualities of the elements are not prescribed by the dramaturg but are determined by the groups through practical exploration and group discussion.

In the chapters discussing her work in South Africa Rudakoff does not explain in substantial detail how the participants were taught to observe each other or what instructions they were given to embody and express the images in a practical sense beyond rather general comments such as "stud[y]ing] behavioural patterns in each other" and executing an "action using element imagery" (p.32). Such omissions demonstrate the limitations in applying Rudakoff's methodology as she describes it in the book, but it does nevertheless reveal the necessity for dramaturges to be endlessly adaptive to a specific group's responses when working with personal narratives. This essential quality of the dramaturgy therefore makes the inclusion of any general applicative guidelines problematic.

In 'The Virtual Ashley Plays' chapters the author stresses the potential a website has for stretching this process outside of one locale by fostering online collaborative partnerships between participants who are often separated by vast geographical distances. The *Common Plants: Cross Pollinations in Hybrid Reality* project is a resource for documenting Rudakoff's projects on the Common Plants website (www.yorku.ca/gardens). The documentation does not function as a means of preserving past works in aspic but exists to facilitate dialogues and conversations between visitors to the website. *Common Plants* enables potentially countless audiences to upload their responses to the dramaturgical stimuli. The dramaturgy thus enters into a regenerative process where each visitor's contribution activates new possibilities for how Rudakoff's methods can be practiced in different contexts. Most crucially, the visitor has the option of being a creator or a viewer of material; in this sense

Common Plants functions as a repository of documentation and as an interactive site for new work to emerge from.

The *Roots/Routes Journeys to Home* project was a test of how the dramaturgy could be transferred to independently initiated artworks using the questions “who am I?” and “where is here?” as points of departure. The diversity of responses, in both form and content, illustrates how the methodology can be applied without a dramaturg’s direct facilitation, a process described by Rudakoff as “dramaturgical guidance rather than intervention” (p.252).

One of the additional but highly important aspects of the book is the strong ethical dimension Rudakoff brings to her work by consistently reminding the reader that her dramaturgy can only ever offer a guideline to working with the specifics of locality and identity. The innovative use of web technologies will appeal to artists and scholars who do not work in a performance discipline but who wish to explore the book’s core themes using her dramaturgical methods as a springboard for creation.

Dramaturging Personal Narratives is a useful resource for artists who work in all mediums by offering insights into how personal narratives can be translated into artworks. Rudakoff’s strong narration makes the book accessible to students who might be thinking of applying their practice in local communities. The format is also an excellent example of how practice as research projects can be documented through its inclusion of the author’s field notes and the participants’ texts and photographs. The book will doubtless inspire teachers working in the areas of autobiographical performance, devised theatre, and applied theatre to adapt the dramaturgy for their own practice.