

# An Alternative Path: A Physical and Metaphorical Group-devised Ethnodrama

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## Abstract

*Graffitopia* is a group-devised ethnodrama on the lives of twelve children aged 6 to 12 of different family and socio-economical backgrounds in Hong Kong. It was performed in May 2015 in the Hong Kong Cultural Centre, a public performance venue. In this paper, using *Graffitopia* as a case study, we discuss how researcher-devising-performers (RDPs) embody, transform and present ethnographic data in the creative process of an ethnodrama, and how such process deepens the RDPs' understanding of the informants, themselves as well as the devising methodology and aesthetics of ethnodrama. The devising process of the eight RDPs were recorded and studied, and small-group interviews with all the RDPs were conducted towards the last stage of the rehearsal process to investigate their experience and moments of discoveries throughout the creative process. It has been found that the physical, stylised, metaphorical, and reflective devising process and performing style generated an aesthetic space for the RDPs to build not only their understanding of the ethnographic data, but also a strong connection between the RDPs' selves and the children's lived experience. Such aesthetic space is crucial to the transformative power, authenticity, research purposes, educational and artistic values of ethnodrama as a form of applied theatre.

*Keywords:* aesthetic space, ethnodrama, group-devised, metaphorical, researcher-devising-performers

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## Introduction

Ethnodrama is a form of applied theatre that serves performative, educational and research purposes. It is a powerful way of bringing an ethnographic report to life, capturing and reflecting the humanities lived within the ethnographic research. As a performed research and a research methodology, ethnodrama involves the interpretation, selection and the artistic transformation of data to create new meaning for the informants, researchers and audience (Ackroyd & O'Toole, 2010).

*Graffitiopia* was a piece of group-devised ethnodrama on the lived experiences of twelve children in Hong Kong. It took twelve months for the creative team to complete the research process, the group devising process and the performances in a public performance venue, the Studio Theatre of the Hong Kong Cultural Centre. We named the creative team members of *Graffitiopia* as researcher-devising-performers (RDPs) in this paper, because they took part in the research, devising and performance processes. Instead of turning the ethnodrama data directly into scripted text, the RDPs adopted a group devising process to create the ethnodrama. The devising process required the whole group to collect, analyse, embody, transform and present the data to fulfil the research, aesthetic and educational purposes of the ethnodrama.

In creating *Graffitiopia*, we realised that not much research has been done on the aesthetics of a group devised ethnodrama in Hong Kong. Therefore, we decided to investigate the experiences of the team in the group devising process of *Graffitiopia*, in order to find out how the RDPs embody, transform and present the ethnographic data, and how such process inform the RDPs about the children interviewed, themselves as well as the devising methodology and aesthetics of ethnodrama. We hope our study could help to develop more understanding about the methodology and aesthetics of ethnodrama.

This study is literally a research within the research and creative

processes of *Graffitopia*. The creative process refers to all the steps that were taken to transform the research materials into a piece of theatre work, which included the discussion, analysis, interpretation and artistic transformation of data. The artistic transformation of the data was done through improvisation, devising movement sequences, selecting verbatim materials from the interviews, creating metaphors and short scenes, finding meaningful and suitable artistic elements such as songs, music, rhythm, props, use of space, sets, and structuring the piece with meaningful and appropriate transitions. Below is the description of the background of *Graffitopia*, including the purposes, the research-cum-creative team, the interview settings, and the aesthetic approaches of *Graffitopia*, to help readers better differentiate and understand the processes and context.

## **The Purposes of *Graffitopia***

*Graffitopia* was an ethnodrama project aimed at giving voices to local children, helping the audience to gain better understanding about children's lived experiences in Hong Kong, and inviting the audience to reflect on their own childhood and their roles as adults taking part in shaping children's lives in Hong Kong nowadays. It presented our findings about children's lives in Hong Kong which focused on how the local children tackled the challenges that they faced in their daily lives and what they found beautiful and precious in their lives.

## **The Research and Creative Team of *Graffitopia***

*Graffitopia* was carried out by a group of theatre practitioners and drama educators who were graduates of a Master Program on Applied Theatre and Drama Education co-offered by the Hong Kong Art School and the Griffith University, Australia.

## **The Background of the Children and the Interview Settings in *Graffitopia***

Twelve local children, aged between 6 and 12, with different social backgrounds in terms of socio-economic, parents' education and family structure were interviewed to collect their ethnographic data. Each of the children was a friend or a relative to one of our RDPs. Interviews were conducted in small groups, including one RDP who knew the child and one who did not. The RDP who knew the child was responsible for conducting the interview while the other RDP who did not know the child focused on observation, notes-taking of non-verbal data, and filming the interview, so as to make sure that the data collected covered both the verbal and non-verbal communications. All interviews were done with the child alone, avoiding the interruption and presence of the child's parents. Since the children were relatively young at age, the verbal data collected was quite fragmented with interrupted thoughts, unstructured responses, and incomplete descriptions of events and experiences.

## **The Aesthetics Approach of *Graffitopia***

It was inappropriate for the RDPs as adults to pretend as the children and act as the children's age on stage. Therefore, instead of going after realism and produce naturalistic re-enactment, the performers and the director of *Graffitopia* decided to capture and physicalise the less visible and more abstract parts of the data, such as the inner feelings, thoughts, fantasies, dreams, bodily sensations and bodily experiences of the children. A relatively stylised, abstract and metaphorical approach was thus employed for the performance. Such aesthetics approach required the RDPs to go beyond the obvious and to develop deep understanding about the data and to transform it through artistic means.

## Context of this Study

This study took place during the final stage of the group devising process of *Graffitiopia*. The informants of the study were the eight RDPs involved. In the creative process of *Graffitiopia*, we observed that the RDPs' engagement, physical expressiveness, concentration and identification changed during the process of the analysis and transformation of the data. The researchers conducted a qualitative research on the RDPs' creative process, which included observation of the RDPs' transformation, review of their reflective writings and interviews with the RDPs. As the data collected involved a lot of personal information of the informants, the names of the informants in this article were replaced with pseudonyms so that their true identities could be protected.

Ethnodrama is more often scripted by playwright than created by a group devising process. In *Graffitiopia*, the RDPs used their bodies to transform, represent and present the data, the body also revealed the physical and mental states of the RDPs in the moment. The artistic transformation of the data required the performers to interpret, experience and express the data through their imagination, feelings and bodies. As a result, the enactment of the data would help develop the kinesthetic, intellectual, and affective understanding of the data. It is thus interesting to investigate how the artistic transformation and embodiment of the data informed the RDPs about the children lived experience, the RDP's own life experiences and personal beliefs, as well as how these may shed light on the devising methodology and aesthetics of ethnodrama.

## Literature Review

Ethnodrama studies and performs the lived experience of ethnographic groups and turns the research results into a performance which allows the non-verbal data to be seen, perceived and understood by the audience. As defined by Ackroyd and O'Toole (2010), ethnodrama is "a form of reportage that maintains all the dimensions of the original interaction or

observation” (p.4). According to Saldaña (2005), the goal of an ethnodrama is “to investigate a particular facet of the human condition for the purposes of adapting those observations and insights into a performance medium” (p.1). As a result, empathetically understanding and artistically revealing the human conditions, which in *Graffitiopia* was the children’s lived experiences in Hong Kong, becomes the RDPs’ major goals. As an RDP in *Graffitiopia*, he/she experiences, examines and reflects on children’s thoughts, feelings and emotions, both consciously and intuitively, through the body and imagination in order to make new meaning.

As Saldaña (2001) pointed out,

An ethnodramatic actor’s body becomes a critical component of the performance. Rather than simply sitting or standing on stage, subtle and overt movements communicate rich subtext and inferences about the character’s psychological status. (p.143)

Therefore a performer’s body can be an important channel to communicate the informant’s stories and lived experiences. The performer’s body and its physical expressions are thus critical in making meaning of humanity for the performers themselves and the audiences. On the basis of the above understanding, we were interested in investigating what and how the meaning could be created in this embodiment process for the individual performers when working in a collaborative manner in this study, and to find out the significance of such process for the making of ethnodrama.

## **Ethnodrama’s Characteristics as a Performed Research**

One of the characteristics of ethnodrama as a performed research is that it requires the performers to digest and internalise the research findings, as pointed out by Ackroyd and O’Toole (2010), “For the researcher/performers, creating such a performance is an outstanding way to analyse and internalise research findings” (p.160). In *Graffitiopia*, as the RDPs undertook the research process, devising process as well as the performances to investigate into the

concerned lived experience or human conditions, therefore they interpreted the collected data not only in an intellectual way, but also in an artistic way, physical way, affective and sensory way. Such process was very crucial to a thorough analysis and the internalisation of the research findings.

Saldaña (2005) stated another very important characteristic of ethnodrama, “Depending on the particular goals for the ethno-dramatist and production company, the artistic project is not only aesthetic, it possesses ‘emancipator potential’ for motivating social change within participants and audiences” (p.3). The live performances of ethnodrama is not an end product of the research like a research report, it is a continuation of the research and creative process. Just like all the other live performances, an ethnodrama performance requires the performers to step into the informants’ shoes, to take on different perspectives, to be living in the moment, spontaneous and truthful, to experience and examine the researched issue through the performance all over again each time when they perform the piece. In each performance, the performers would carefully re-examine the materials and make new discoveries and meaning through the performing process. Such process of making discoveries and meaning created opportunity for changes to happen within the RDPs. It also offered a richer content and broader perspective for the performance which attempted to invite the audience to not just understand the data in a cognitive and intellectual way, but also perceive the data through intuitive, sensory and affectively ways. These characteristics of a performance are crucial to discovering new understanding and making new meaning about the issue. Hence, the performer’s ability to embody the ethnographic data is crucial to the artistic quality of the performance, and how well the ethnodrama can achieve its three goals, in order to bring about social changes.

## **Body-mind Connection in Performers**

In order to embody the research findings of *Graffitopia*, the RDPs employed various devising and performing skills in the genre of physical theatre. The RDPs used gestures and movements individually, in pairs and

as chorus to examine, make connection and express the lived experiences of the children. Kemp (2012) discussed the research findings on the connection between body movements and utterances by psychologist Adam Kendon and cognitive linguist David McNeill. Adam Kendon's experiments provided evidence that gestures are closely linked to speech, while David McNeill found that information not explicitly mentioned verbally by a speaker was expressed through physical actions. Kemp (2012) pointed out that "The research of Kendon and David McNeill demonstrate the way in which the physical activity of gesture is part of the process of generating 'utterances'" (p.35). The physical movements or "utterances" generated by the RDPs reflected their understandings about the behaviours as well as the inexplicit and abstract aspects of the children's stories.

Expressive movements are results of a skilful psychophysical process that comes from the connection between body and mind. Newlove (1993) believed that "for performers, technique is the ability to use the thought and feeling preceding an action, with awareness" (p.114). He also believed that such "mental effort" (Newlove, 1993, p.114) can be linked to Rudolf Laban's notion of "Space, Time, Weight, and Flow Continuums" (Newlove, 1993, p.68) which could be observed and analysed. Thus, when the performer moves with an intention of thought and feeling, he or she is capable of thinking while moving, and the quality and meaning of the movements can be felt or perceived by observers. Laban & Ullmann (1980) stated that,

Movement-thinking could be considered as a gathering of impressions of happenings in one's own mind, for which nomenclature is lacking. This thinking does not, as thinking in words does, serve orientation in the external world, but rather it perfects man's orientation in his inner world in which impulses continually surge and seek an outlet in doing, acting and dancing. (p.15)

Therefore, whenever the performer is in action processing the research data, whether he or she is devising or performing, thinking takes place together with the movements, which allows the performer to re-examine and reflect the materials all over again.

In the process of devising and performing, the RDPs in our project not only expressed their personal impulses through movements, they also examined the thoughts and feelings of the children, the “characters” in conventional terms of drama, whom the RDPs had to enact. Therefore, the RDPs were thinking and moving in dual reality. Such “dual-consciousness”, as coined by Chekhov (2005), is the performer’s mental process when the fictional and the real co-exist. The same process, has been termed by Augusto Boal (2013) as “Metaxis”,

[T]he state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image. The participant share and belongs to these two autonomous worlds; their reality and the image of their reality, which she herself has created. (p.43)

Hatton and Lovesy (2009) summarise that the notion of metaxis is “being at the heart of the transformative learning in drama education and in playbuilding” (p.12). They went on to explain that “the process of Metaxis enables playbuilders to identify with an array of situations and roles and, through their identification and interpretation of the drama, students find their attitudes and perceptions changed by the experience” (p.12).

Metaxis applies not only in drama education and students’ playbuilding, it also applies to all creative and performative process of drama, including the devising process of our ethnodrama. We believed that the RDPs had made meaning about the data and discoveries about their own life experiences through the state of metaxis in the process of devising the ethnodrama, in which the examination and interpretation of the children’s stories through dramatic improvisation and physicalisation, the imaginative world co-existed with the tangible, which was explained by Boal (2013) as “the image of reality and the reality of image”. In the state of metaxis, close connections were made between two realities, generating new meanings and new perspectives into understanding both realities. Such state allowed the performers to engage their own selves in the process, and to observe himself or herself in action, which was further explained by Boal (2013),

Theatre – or theatricality – is this capacity, this human property which allows man to observe himself in action, in activity. The self-knowledge thus acquired allows him to be the subject (the one who observes) of another subject (the one who acts). (p.13)

When the performer's body is moving, thinking, acting in the state of metaxis, meaning is emerged, and the process of embodiment takes place. Cohen-Cruz and Schutzman (2006) stated that "Embodiment refers to the double sense of the body as living and the experiential structure or context of cognition where living is embedded" (p.14). Therefore, when a performer is capable of witnessing himself/herself in the process of embodiment, he or she is engaged in the process of making discoveries in the moment of action, as summarised by Cohen-Cruz and Schutzman (2006), "Self-observation through metaxis allows us to see knowing as it is enacted in each moment of the present, not as something which already exists" (p.115).

With the above understanding about ethnodrama and performer's inner process, we hope to find out how the process of embodiment took place within the RDPs in the devising process of *Graffitopia*, and how such process would be related to the group dynamics, the artistic approaches being adopted for the ethnodrama, and changes or discoveries happened within the RDPs.

## Research Methodology

Qualitative research methodology was employed in this study. Corbin and Strauss (2015) pointed out that when one wants to explore the inner experiences of participants or investigate the process of forming and transforming meanings, qualitative research methodology should be considered (p.5). In our study, we aim at investigating the inner creative process of our RDPs, attempting to understanding how they interpreted, transformed and made meaning out of the ethnographic data collected from the children, qualitative methodology was thus adopted.

In order to understand the inner process of the RDPs, we needed to collect materials and data that tell us the details about their personal experiences, discoveries, thoughts and feelings in the creative process. However, since each RDP had different backgrounds, life experiences and perspectives, their description and interpretation of their own inner experiences would vary from individual to individual, and therefore could not be standardised or even quantified with suitable units. The nature of the data we had to work with was thus narrative, descriptive, non-numerical, internalised, interpretive and unquantifiable, which further confirmed that qualitative research methodology was appropriate for our study.

The techniques we employed to collect data included (a) observation and video recordings of the devising and rehearsal sessions; (b) reviewing of the first-hand documents: rehearsal notes of director, journals, reflective writings made by the RDPs; and (c) focus group: small group interviews with the RDPs.

## **Observation and Video Recordings of the Devising and Rehearsal Sessions**

In the devising processes, the RDPs generated materials with movements, text and objects, individually, in pairs and in small groups. Such processes aimed at helping the RDPs' embody and artistically transform the meanings of the stories of the interviewed children. The rehearsal sessions were videoed by smart-phones or other camera devices. The devising, presentation, and sharing processes were all recorded. The recordings can enhance the accuracy of finding the exact fragments or pieces for investigation. They acted as important reference materials for us to examine the details of the creative process, finding the linkage between the generated materials and the thoughts and feelings that were shared by the RDPs in the interviews.

## **Review the First-hand Documents: Rehearsal Notes, Journals and Reflective Writings**

By reviewing all these materials, we can have more specific and relevant discussions with the RDPs in the interviews. The rehearsal journals provided us more in-depth understanding on the inner experience and emotional journey of the creative team since they recorded feelings, experiences, difficulties, solutions, discoveries, reflections, thoughts, other related and concerned issues which helped themselves to reframe and reflect the creative process, as such deepening their understanding and association with the children's stories, internalising and consolidating the process of embodiment. The director's notes helped keep track of the important moments that happened along the creation process. Notes were jotted down for the observations, inspirations and the devising methods and instructions used in the rehearsals. The information from different sources, i.e. the director's rehearsal notes, the recorded sharing by RDPs during the rehearsal processes, and RDPs' reflective writings after rehearsal sessions also allowed for data triangulation.

## **Focus Group Interview with RDPs**

The interactive sharing of experience and discussion among the RDPs themselves in the focus group interview helped recall, articulate and reflect on moments and actions during the devising process that were otherwise not fully explored. The focus interview let RDPs have deeper discussion on certain specific creative moments which helped fill up the missing parts that cannot be understood by only using observation and reviewing written documents.

We formed semi-structured group interviews with two to three RDPs at a time during four to six weeks before the performance phase, when the devising process was getting close to completion. This means the RDPs had already gone through the discussion, analysis, artistic transformation of the data. They had experienced various difficulties and breakthroughs during the

creative process. The RDPs' memories were still fresh enough to be recalled accurately and described in detail. Three more individual re-interviews were carried out to understand and clarify certain details after the focus group interviews. The interviews were vital since they provided the most first-hand information about the RDPs' experience and the mechanism of transforming and embodying the ethnographic data, which could help us answer our research question more directly.

The RDPs were informed that their data will be used for a study and presented in a public context. They had given us their consent to use their names and data.

## Findings and Discussion

Different from the conventional scripted ethnodrama which employs traditional theatrical performance style emphasising on the use of spoken language and narration, *Graffitiopia* employed a highly physical approach for both the devising process and the performance style. RDPs explored the informants' feelings and stories through improvisational stylised physical movements and metaphors both individually and collectively. Also, through repeating and giving variations to these improvised movements, RDPs examined their transformation in their own emotions as well as their empathic understanding toward the informants throughout the process. In the following discussion, we are going to analyse how the use of "expressive gestures" (Bogart & Landau, 2005), repetition and variations of movements, as well as group-devised work, helped enhance the interpretation of ethnographic data and the meaning-making process, and how such devising approach gives us insight into the aesthetics of ethnodrama.

### Expressive Gestures

Bogart & Landau (2005) categorise gestures into two major categories, the "behavioural gestures" and the "expressive gestures" (p.9). When interpreting the ethnographic data of *Graffitiopia*, instead of using "behavioral

gestures”, the RDPs employed “expressive gestures” to explore the inner feelings or psychological states of the informants. Bogart & Landau (2005) explained that,

Behavioral Gestures are those that belong to everyday life, that are part of human behavior as we know and observe it... Expressive Gestures are those that belong to the interior rather than the exterior world (of behavior); they express feeling or meaning which is not otherwise directly manifest. (p.49)

We believe our bodies contain our feelings, experiences and values, and some of which we might not be able to consciously refer to. Bollas (1987) explained that, “This body memory conveys memories of our earliest existence. It is a form of knowledge which has yet to be thought, and constitutes part of the unthought known” (p.46). Embodying the ethnographic data not just allowed the RDPs to experience the informants’ stories but also to make connection to their own life experience and values, which no doubt enriched the meaning-making process. The use of “expressive gestures” further made prominent the inner feelings, allowing the RDPs to go beyond the analysis of behavioral experience and to enter the inner psychological state of the informants to develop a visceral understanding toward the informants.

In the fifth scene, “Cramp”, RDPs used a mix of both “expressive” and “behavioral” gestures to express how informants were coping with their stress. The RDPs were to digest the data of the informants’ psychosomatic reaction to the stress and anxiety in their daily lives, and to construct a movement sequence with a chair and a piece of A4 paper to express the informant’s psychosomatic experience. In the data, one of the informants revealed that he felt that exams like were cockroaches and he would get fever in every exam. One of the RDPs, Apple, who took on this child’s story, created a movement sequence in which she stared at the paper and kept pushing and pulling the paper back and forth. Apple expressed that she wanted to get away from the paper but she felt that the paper kept coming

back. She then escalated her action. She stood on the chair and stepped onto the paper. The stepping action triggered the feeling as if she could really see the cockroaches running around and she had the imperative urge to kill the cockroaches. She then got onto the table and stepped hardly and repeatedly onto the table and everywhere in a fast-pacing. Apple said that she saw the cockroach was only running around her at the beginning but then she could see cockroaches everywhere. Apple revealed that she could deeply empathise with the child's enormous anxiety towards school examination which she had never imagined before the enactment. And she could feel the deep sense of anger and helplessness in her that she had to release the uneasy feelings with the harsh stepping.

## **Repetition and Variations of Movements**

In the devising process, RDPs have done quite a number of repetitions of designed sets of individual as well as collective movements in an attempt to develop deeper and new understanding and to make meaning for the ethnographic data through the emerging variations.

Repetition is a frequently used element in creating and constructing contemporary performances. It helps to highlight the parts in the performance that the creative team would like the audience to look closely into and reflect on. However, as no experience can be repeated in the exactly same manner, when trying to repeat the gesture or movement, variations in the quality and structure of the gesture or movement will emerge, which would eventually lead to a transformation in the enactment and thus new understanding of the data. Fernandes (2001) pointed out that,

When a gesture is done for the first time on stage, it can be (mis)taken as a spontaneous expression. But when the same gesture is repeated several times it is clearly exposed as an aesthetic element... During the course of repetitions, meanings are transitory, emerging, dissolving and being altered. (p.8)

When we are doing devising and body enactment, we are at the same time exploring ourselves in action, it is because our bodies are carrying many thoughts and feelings from our past experience which are not necessarily being articulated consciously. However, these memories are a part of ourselves which would definitely influence how we relate to our current situation. Bollas (1987) states that “This body memory conveys memories of our earliest existence. It is a form of knowledge which has yet to be thought, and constitutes part of the unthought known” (p.46). Exploring with our bodies thus enables us to retrieve memories and emotions, which were sources of knowledge and experience to empathise with the informants’ data. Kandinsky, Lindsay and Vergo (1994) pointed out that, “repetition is a powerful means of intensifying inner emotion” (p.571). Emotions would be triggered when RDPs tried to repeat the movements and the imagined experiences, such emotions provided new perspectives in understanding and making new meaning from the data.

In the second scene, “Defecate”, RDPs employed repetitions to express the limited freedom and its conflicts with the personal will experienced by the informants. The RDPs were to empathise and express how the informants responded to their highly disciplined and controlled day-to-day experience, and to create a designed set of collective movement sequence showing the informants’ daily routines. In the ethnographic data, two of the informants revealed that they had to strictly follow the same routine arranged by their parents every day, even activities like “eating vegetables” and “defecating” were items scheduled on the timetable. The RDPs created several movement sequences composed of a number of stylised movements, each representing an activity/task on the timetable. The RDPs then repeated the sequence within a defined square space bounded by chairs. The sequences were enacted meticulously in a well-controlled manner at the beginning, however, as the repetition continued, small variations were added each time. Eventually the sequences were loosened in physical shape and regularity and eventually deformed into chaos. One of the RDPs, Tracy, expressed that she was bored by the repetition and her tired body just informed her how irritating it was to repeat the same routine every day and she could feel the

pain of her niece, who had hyperactive issue and had to be bounded by all the repetition and rules in her life when being physically active was actually her basic need.

## Use of Metaphors

Embodied metaphors were used in various scenes of *Graffitiopia* to express invisible and inner feelings of the informants. We believed that using metaphors would help open up space for imagination, making association and new meaning. Ackroyd and O'Toole (2010) found that,

Drama works through creating metaphors, embodied analogies which seem to have a life of their own and can provide new perspectives on the familiar or the lived. By re-creating the research site in metaphorical terms such as dramatic fiction or symbolic movement, the researchers may be able to expose some of the unspoken or unrecognised sub-texts of the subject community. (p.5)

For example, in the scene of "School Life", seven RDPs created and embodied the metaphor of a monster which actually represented the teacher. Karen, one of the seven RDPs who played the monster-teacher, was not able to connect with the teacher's feeling at first. But when she worked together with the other RDPs in a group improvisation, she sensed the physical energy, listened to the lines and felt the emotions that emerged, she began to realise that the monster-teacher's intention was originally "for the informant's own good". And she then went on to understand that the monster-teacher's good intention was distorted by certain absurd beliefs that resulted in behaviours and words that hurt and even traumatised the informant. The metaphor "monster" helped Karen to understand the situation as well as the informant's experience deeply.

The group devising process could stimulate the RDPs to feel and think more deeply. And this gave stronger meaning to the artistic piece as well as to the original ethnographic data. This fulfilled the purposes of ethnodrama

which was described by Saldaña (2001) "... these art forms (ethno-dramatic play script & ethno-theatrical production) are the most appropriate and effective modalities for communicating observations of cultural, social or personal life" (p.15). And it also has,

This ability, this power, to heighten the representation and presentation of social life, and if our research goal with a particular fieldwork project is to capture and document the stark realities of the people we talked to and observed, then the medium of theatre seems the most compatible choice for sharing our findings and insights. (Saldaña, 2011, p.15)

## **Group Devising Process**

The group devising process is very different from the individual creative process, such as when each individual performer devises his or her own piece, or when a single playwright writes up a script alone. The group devising process offers an ensemble with unique dynamic, summoned energy, and enriched layers of imaginative associations and emerged meaning, as performers gain inspirations from each other through interactions. Such kind of interactions brought new understanding of the data to the RDPs.

For example, one of the RDPs, Apple, shared a piece of reflection about a scene in which she played the role of a teacher (in reality she is a teacher indeed). Apple said when she looked at Kenny, another RDP, in-role as one of the informants, Angus (pseudonym), running around in the space, with the exercise books filled inside his t-shirt and trousers, looking very strange and clumsy, she still asked herself in-role to appreciate her own achievement as a teacher in educating Angus. However, when Apple continued to look at Kenny/Angus carefully as the scene progressed, she began to have doubts about whether she really wanted to appreciate what she had done. She suddenly got tears in her eyes and asked herself what "actually" she was doing at work in real life. In the interview, Apple expressed that "I am a teacher in real life, and I believe that by doing after school remedial classes for my students, I am offering myself to them, but sometimes, the students

are absent.” At the moment when Apple carefully looked at the RDP Kenny / Angus, she felt very sorry for him, “I started to question, what actually was my position? What was I doing to my students? Is my job as a teacher simply about passing on knowledge?” Such self-reflection happened within the group devising process. When Apple was in role as a teacher in a dramatic context, she saw another RDP playing a role with non-naturalistic artistic transformation. At that moment, Apple found new perspectives and asked herself new questions about a familiar situation in real life, which made her reflect on her own life experience.

## **The Devising Performers Were Also the Researchers and Interviewers**

It is impossible to illustrate daily life reality with complete accuracy on stage with a group of performers who are not the informants themselves. In light of this limitation, the attempt that we made to achieve in *Graffitiopia* was to reveal the invisible truth which was beyond or masked by the visible reality. We believed it was only through revealing the unseen truth, which was connected to the observed truth, that we could go deeper into the issue and to give voice to the informants.

The role of researchers in ethnodrama is very essential, whether it is cognitive or emotional, especially when the researchers are also the devising-performers in the ethnodrama, they would have a much deeper observation, stronger understanding and empathy for the informants. If the performers are seen as containers and interpreters of expressions, these expressions would include not only the feelings and life experience of the informants, but also the expressions of the performers’ life experience which are somehow connected to or resonate with that of the informants’.

Most of our imagination aroused made connection to the story. One of the RDPs, Karen, was the interviewer of the informant Yat-Fei (pseudonym) who was diagnosed with ADHD. In a group interview with Yat-Fei, Karen was very impressed by how imaginative Yat-Fei was. Karen had then

developed strong empathy with and felt deeply inspired by Yat-Fei. She found Yat-Fei had a really free and boundless spirit. When Karen tried to express Yat-Fei's story at school, she picked up the exercise book and played it freely like it was a bird flying around in the space. Without the interview, Karen would not be able to observe Yat-Fei in person and get connected to the freedom of Yat-Fei's spirit.

## **The Aesthetics and Devising Methodology of Ethnodrama**

The devising methodology of using expressive physical movements, repetitive movements, and metaphors not only captured the essence of stories, and revealed the invisible truth, it also offered an aesthetic space for RDPs to develop stronger and deeper empathetic understanding about the stories of the informants. Such devising approach helped overcome the practical and artistic issues of naturalistic re-enactment with complete accuracy, especially when the RDPs were very different from the informants both psychologically and physically, and it was simply impossible to repeat the moments described in the interviews on the stage. The metaphorical, physical and sometimes abstract style offered an aesthetic space which allowed the RDPs' to make meaning out of the stories, to explore through imagination and making association, and to express with artistic transformation. This, in turn, helped to achieve the three goals of ethnodrama: the research, the education and the artistic.

The group devising process offered multiple perspectives into understanding and making meaning of the ethnographic data. Such dialogic process allowed the RDPs to have deep reflection, gain insights through the construction of various perceptions through experimentation. The RDPs thus developed strong ownership and engagement, as well as deeper emotional, cognitive and physical connection with the ethnographic data, such ownership and engagement directly affects how well the three goals of ethnodrama can be achieved.

## Limitations

The limitations of this research lied mainly in the collection and quality of the data. The depth and detail of the data of this research relied heavily on the RDPs' own awareness of the self, body, space and others in the devising process, and their ability to articulate their experience in words. Sometimes the RDPs' might not be fully aware of some of the actions that they had done, even when those actions were observed by the other creative team members. Moreover, the interview was done only once to each performer towards the final stage of the devising process. Certain details of their experience in the earlier devising process might not be remembered clearly, which resulted in a loss of data. Another type of limitation came from the dual role of the researcher-writers as both the observers and creative team members. Such dual role may affect the objectivity during the process of collecting data, and create blind spots in critically analysing the creative process. Such problems may result in the possibility of mis-interpreting the data, overstating the achievements, or even becoming self-congratulatory.

## Conclusion

This study articulated how the understanding of the ethnographic data as well as the RDPs' self-understanding were embodied, transformed and presented in the creative process of the ethnodrama *Graffitiopia*, and how it gave rise to new insight in devising methodology and aesthetics of ethnodrama. The five elements discussed, namely the use of expressive gestures; the repetition and variations of movements; the use of metaphors; the group devising process; and the triple roles of RDPs, played a significant part in developing an aesthetic space for the ethnodrama to build on, and brought about the transformative power and authenticity of the research, educational and artistic values of ethnodrama.

*Graffitiopia*, with its unique creative process, no doubt deepened the RDPs' understanding of the concerned population through introducing a different perspective and building a strong affective connection. As a form

of applied theatre, we cannot diminish the value of this highly physical and metaphorical group devised ethnodrama, especially with its potential social impact, though it deviated from the traditional and conventional form of theatre. Applied theatre practitioners were encouraged to further explore this form of applied theatre and its potential in different areas to the fullest.

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## APPENDIX

**Table: Outline of the scenes in *Graffitiopia***

Scene	Name	Content	Theme to explore/express
0	Prologue (序幕)	An introduction of our project, the RDP's share their feelings, questions and experiences about the ethnodrama research project.	To prepare the audience's expectation and to help them adopt a reflective attitude to perceive the performance.
1	Opinions about Life (生活意見)	To show the personalities of the children in a physical and stylised way, introducing the children's background and views about their lives as well as the RDP's observations about them.	To give the audience some basic understanding and overall impression about the children's background and personality.
2	Defecate (大便)	To express how the children feel about their daily routine through repeated and rhythmic physical movements, and to share the RDP's observation about the children.	To explore together with the audience that how much autonomy did the children own or how much manipulation and control the adults imposed on the children.
3	Reward • Money (獎賞 • 錢)	To contrast different children's values for "money" and "materials" through juxtapositions of short scenes.	To explore how the adults shape the concept of "money" and "materials" to the children nowadays.
4	School Life (返學)	To express the children's experiences and feelings about their school lives at both the primary school and the tutorial classes.	To explore how the children feel about schools, inviting the audience to reflect on what education means to children.
5	Cramp (抽筋)	To show the responses of the children when facing the stress caused by the adults' and social expectations, school life, exams, and other issues. RDPs report data and findings about children's psychological health issues in HK.	To explore the connection between physical responses and mental stresses through repetitive movements with variations in the ensemble, in juxtaposition with statistical and medical data.
6	Embrace (擁抱)	To show how the children express love and get along with their parents and family members in different circumstances.	To explore how the informants found different ways to love their parents and family members.
7	Wishes (願望)	With painting on the floor, RDPs narrated and expressed what the children wished to do and hoped to enjoy with their families.	To allow the audience hear the real voices of the children, and to explore the connection as well as the differences between them as children.

此為上文摘要中譯

# 另一條創作路：一個運用身體和 隱喻的集體編作人種誌戲劇

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## 摘要

《塗丫》是一齣集體編作的人種誌劇場，研究12位來自香港不同家庭背景及社經位置的6至12歲兒童的生活狀況，並在2015年5月於香港文化中心公演。是次研究是關於我們藉著《塗丫》去探討研究編作演員（下稱「研編演員」）在人種誌劇場的創作過程中，如何體現、轉化及呈現相關數據資料，以及創作過程如何讓研編演員對研究對象、自己，以至人種誌劇場的編作方法及美學有更多的認識。我們記錄了8位研編演員的編作過程以進行研究，亦在劇場採排的後段與所有研編演員進行了小組訪談，以了解更多他們在創作過程中的經驗及發現。研究發現以形體、風格、隱喻主導並不斷作反思及回饋的編演形式，為研編演員提供了一個美學空間去更深入了解有關數據資料，及感悟自我與兒童生活經驗之間的密切連繫。這個美學空間對人種誌劇場作為應用劇場的轉化能力、真實性、研究作用、教育和藝術價值都有重要的意義。

**關鍵詞：**美學空間、人種誌劇場、集體編作、隱喻、研究編作演員

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