



# Playwriting as Participatory Action Research

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## ABSTRACT

This article draws connections between the non-fiction form of Documentary Theatre and participatory action research. It describes the fundamentals of Popular Education as being the roots of Documentary Theatre and shares the goals of this type of work. One particular new play, *Dream Hope Wish Desire*, developed at the American University in Cairo documents the hopes of the people of Egypt and is offered as an example of the process of creating a collaborative new Documentary Theatre play. The article explains how the collaborative playwriting process is similar to research data collection, analysis and sharing.

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## Introduction

Documentary Theatre, which can be seen as a form of popular education and participatory action research, makes use of interviews and other non-fictional literary sources as the primary text of a play script. This form has become increasingly popular as a way of devising new theatre works in part because it allows for multiple playwrights to collaborate and it typically asserts the ideas and experiences of persons who have not been given a popular voice. This form of ethnographic arts-based research views research participants as the experts in their own lives and problems. It uses the words of the participants as recorded in the play text as the data and the performance as the sharing of the data.

Popular education asks participants to become literate in both language and their world. It is grounded in the belief that in order for people to bring about change, they must act on their own behalf rather than allowing others to implement change for them [7]. The late Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, considered by many to be the father of popular education, helped to introduce this philosophy to the world through such books as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, *Teachers as Cultural Workers* and *Pedagogy of Hope*. Freire's educational model is first and foremost concerned with increasing awareness because transformation is possible only when people are introduced to a, "critical form of thinking about their world" [7 p. 104]. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire contends that teachers and students must learn to read not only the Word, but also the World. "The important thing," notes Freire, "is for people to come to feel like masters of their thinking by discussing the thinking and views of the world explicitly or implicitly manifest in their own suggestions and those of their comrades" [7, p.124]. Popular educators understand that language and cultural literacy empower people to make changes allowing for more successful and healthy lives.

Drawing upon Freire's popular education philosophies, participatory action research (PAR) recognizes that knowledge is power and it seeks to continually reflect upon how the action is functioning. With its roots grounded in the

field of Social Work, PAR is characterized with three words: people, power, and praxis [6]. PAR is a collaborative group approach to research that integrates "systematic investigation with education and political action" [5] and proposes that people become significantly involved in addressing concerns that affect their own lives. It is a democratic group process whereby the people participating are seen as experts regarding the problem or issue being researched [10].

### The Form

Popular theatre is a form of popular education that can be done virtually anywhere and like participatory research it is created by and for a group of people who share a common need. One type of popular theatre is Documentary Theatre which uses real words from real life as the text, therefore the voices on the stage are from actual people not imaginary characters [4]. This theatre tradition, and its cousins - Verbatim Theatre, Ethnodrama and Docudrama - have become increasingly popular as a way of devising new works, perhaps because they ease the ability for multiple playwrights to collaborate and they assert the ideas and experience of voices that have been marginalized. Two good examples of Documentary Theatre are from the US: Anna Deveare Smith's *Fires in the Mirror* which shares the stories of the residents of Crown Height Brooklyn in the aftermath of the 1992 riots between the Hasidic and Haitian communities there, and the Tectonic Theatre Project's *The Laramie Project* which tells story of the murder of Matthew Shepard and the resiliency of Laramie Wyoming where the crime took place. Examples of Documentary Theatre can be seen all over the world however: *Home* (UK's National Theatre) which documents homelessness in London, *Daughters of the Floating Brothel* (developed through Griffith University in Australia) which shares the diaries of female convicts who were transported to Australia from Portsmouth England in 1789 and *Lady Anandi*, developed by Indian actor-playwright Anuja Ghosalkar from excerpts of her great-grandfather's personal archive, are recent documentary theatre productions.

In Egypt, after the 2011 revolution, there has been a renewed interest in Documentary Theatre and similar forms perhaps because, like the revolution, which in part arose out of a desire for equality and justice, this theatre tradition give voice to the voiceless. *Tahrir Monologues* which Sonya Shabayek began as a storytelling process and a way for people to share, “what happened to them, not what happened” [3] during the 2011 Revolution, has been performed in several iterations both inside Egypt and abroad. It has evolved and collected new stories as the people’s reactions to the Arab Spring have developed. The work of actor-director-playwright Dalia Bassiouny, whose play *Solitude* links Sept 11 2001 with the recent Egyptian revolution, uses stories of Egyptian women as source material offers another example of how contemporary Egyptian theatre draws upon real events. And Laila Soliman’s 2015 play *Zig Zig* uses historical archives to re-tell stories of Egyptian women who were raped by British soldiers in the early 1900’s.

Documentary Theatre has been cited as a motivating force for social change for both participants and audience members [11]. It can also be understood as a means of interpreting history [2] and because it uses the real words of real people, Documentary Theatre is often able to present narratives based in personal recollections and feelings, rather than on a playwright’s interpretation of an individual’s experiences. This form of performance often shares the participants’ cultures, ideas, customs and habits and as such provides audience members ethnographic arts-based research. By facilitating the crafting of a play based on the stories of real persons, co-creators of Documentary Theatre rely on non-fiction – the real experiences of the participants - as the predominant storytelling method. By collecting information from the various participants to write the play collaborators produce a body of data that discusses an experience, issue, culture or event. By sharing the data with the public via an audience, the research findings are presented. As a method of qualitative inquiry this playwriting technique is not unlike ethnography, which asks a researcher to describe and interpret a cultural or social group or system [1]. This creative form of inquiry however, moves beyond traditional ethnography by asking the research participants to share in the description and interpretation.

### Process

*Dream Hope Wish Desire*, is an original Documentary Theatre play created by American University in Cairo (AUC) students and their professor. It premiered at the university’s New Cairo campus in May of 2016 and had subsequent performances at Cairo’s downtown Falaki Theatre in the fall of 2017. The play shares the stories of almost sixty Cairenes from different backgrounds and socio-economic classes as captured through a series of personal interviews conducted by members of a special topics class, Collaborative Documentary Theatre Making. Students in the class began the work (after studying the form) by brainstorming and listing potential areas of social interest, focusing specifically on issues and problems pertinent to the people of Egypt. Their list which included topics like mental illness, domestic violence, arranged marriage and familial repression, grew long and the conversation tense at times but they finally agreed to a central focus: personal and societal dreams and hopes, a popular topic of interest in post-revolution Egypt. The class formulated research questions around this topic ranging from abstract questions like, “What do you think hope does for people?” to the personal, “Describe your

biggest hope for your family.” Questions were open ended and participants were also encouraged to deviate from the questions posed and were asked, “What else can you tell me about hope?” and “Is there anything else you can add to this topic?” Then students practiced their interview skills first with classmates, friends and family members to help them feel a sense of ease during the interview process.

Despite their initial nervousness, the students were inspired by the rich forms and techniques they had earlier studied in the class and after the mock interviews students sought out people they did not know. To find the potential interview subjects some students used contacts they had with NGO’s, others went to local shops and gathering points in various neighborhoods including a tailor, a music store and various shisha cafes. One young woman interviewed her maid’s friends and the professor went to El Mugamma, the government agency in Tahrir Square. Twice a week during this monthly interview process the class discussed what gaps were present in the collection of interviews. The goal was to collect stories from persons of disparate backgrounds and to equally represent gender, class and age to make sure that one group was not privileged over another. Interview participants were always told in advance about the project and asked if they would like to be interviewed and audio recorded. In most cases those asked were very happy to oblige though occasionally those asked declined before being interviewed and twice persons interviewed decided against having their recorded interviews used. In each case particular care was taken to make certain no one was not coerced into taking and that they were comfortable having their answers used as text for our play. At times particularly captive and interested participants were discovered, such as taxi drivers who had a safe and private space to talk and who seemed eager to share their feelings. Once the interviews were collected they were translated into English, if need be, with the help of a translator and then recorded in entirety on a google document that all class members had access to.

### Product

With approximately 70 pages of text from the almost 60 people interviewed, the class looked for ways to effectively share the multitude of voices collected. After several readings three key ideas emerged: 1) the use of common language to describe hope (dream, wish, desire, faith, goal, expectation, yearning); 2) those who had hope and those who lacked hope; and 3) the discrepancy between different types of hope. With this in mind the process revolved around finding moments from the interviews that spoke to one of these key ideas. Co-creators highlighted common language, juxtaposed opinions about the possibility of hope (those who believed they could achieve their dreams versus those who had given up) and passages that discussed the different types of hope (hope for a marriage, hope for money, hope for the country). One of the major themes, a lack of hope, disturbed the class. Examples of this absence can be seen in answers from a variety of the participants: “I have no time to have a dream! I’m almost 40, never been married, I went back to living with my old parents, and I work as an Uber driver with a car that isn’t even mine! I don’t have time to pursue a dream.” and “No Egyptian has any hope.” Mid-way through the writing one student commented, “I thought people would be more hopeful - or have bigger dreams....” At this point the students decided to record themselves in class since their learning was so much a part of the process and something they wanted to share as results.

The classroom conversations also made it possible to avoid a having a play that was full of monologues and didactic speeches. Since the recorded classroom discussions were lighter in nature and demonstrated a growth in the understanding of the topic, they provided a useful frame for the play. And so the play text moved back and forth between the interviews conducted and the co-creators' feelings, questions and ideas. The addition of the co-creators as characters in the play this frame worked well and served to both balance the harsh reality of some of the monologues and to offer the creators a way to grapple with the process and the things they were learning. The end result of this process was a 70-minute play, *Dream Hope Wish Desire*, which explored the hopes the participants, including the interviewers and the interviewees, have for their selves, their families and Egypt.

### Conclusion

Theatre discusses and shares the human experience. It explores relationships, issues, cultures, and individual identities. Playwrights, like all artists, draw their material from what they know and in this way all plays might be considered ethnographic arts-based research. The difference with the *Dream Hope Wish Desire* project and other forms of Documentary and Verbatim Theatre is that the dramatic script is created by using the words of real people and that the people whose words are used in the play offer insight into a particular subject. It is perhaps a new way of looking a research: data collection is the brainstorming and interviewing process, data analysis is the shifting through and choosing of the material to include in the play and data sharing is the theatrical performance.

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