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‘Ac/counting the I’s’
Deirdre Heddon

I confess to particular habits of reading. Typically, I turn to the biographical information of a writer before reading their writing. In fictional books, this information might be on the last page, or inside the back cover. In my recently purchased international edition of Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*, the first thing I read is that Desai is not only the author of *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, but that she divides her time between the United States and India. This edition also encourages me to put a face to the name (although who knows when the particular ‘face’ that looks earnestly out at me was taken; or where – India or the United States?). Similarly, I scan the opening pages, looking for dedications: ‘To my mother with so much love’. My habits of reading more academic works are no different; with edited collections I turn to the ‘Notes on Contributors’ section before reading any of the contributions; ditto with journal articles.

And so, in a special issue of *RIDE*, dedicated to ‘Impact Assessment and Applied Drama’, I learn in her very modest ‘Contributor’s Note’ that Helen Baños Smith is a lead Learning and Impact Assessment Adviser. In Asif Munier’s longer note, I similarly learn that he is a Programme Officer – but also that he directs stage dramas on social issues in Bangladesh, that he is Bangladeshi, and has interests and background in media, communication and participation. Marcia Pompeo Nogueira, meanwhile, has shifted her focus from acting practice to education. She has a Masters and a PhD, both exploring Theatre, and she teaches at the State University of Santa Catarina in Brazil. Though all these notes on contributors are written in the third person, as though biographical, if my own experience is anything to go by they are likely to have been provided by the contributors themselves. They are, then, autobiographical inscriptions.

For the past few years, one area of my research has been on the use of autobiography in performance; to date, though, I have not engaged with the use of autobiography in people’s writings *about* their performances, and more specific still, writings about those performances called ‘applied’. Throughout the special edition of *RIDE*, it is notable that many of the assessments of applied drama work are written in an explicitly autobiographical register, the pronoun ‘I’ used freely within discussions of impact. I wonder what impact the autobiographical register might have on assessments of applied drama practice – or perhaps the question is more accurately addressed to our reception of assessments of applied drama?

Those of us employed in institutions of Higher Education are tiresomely familiar with the imperative to employ mechanisms intended to guarantee the presence of quality (mechanisms, then, that act as assurances). The development of these often appears to borrow from the discourses of science and social science, with the production of ‘cold’, quantitative data: of tables, graphs, statistics, sliding scales and, where included, anonymous responses. The apparent objectivity heralded by such texts are an inescapable part of the assurance that is desperately sought. In this context, the all-too human ‘I’ functions as a contaminating presence. However, surely the ‘Contributor’s Notes’ and other marginalia exist as potent, visible reminders to readers that all of the pieces (and all

pieces everywhere) are written from some body located somewhere and, equally importantly, are made for some other body.

We might argue, then, that those authors who do explicitly use the 'I' are simply making the 'self' at the centre of reflection more apparent. The use of 'I', in this context as in others, needs to be approached carefully. Whilst many feminist theoreticians/practitioners have strategically embraced the personal precisely in order to reveal the subjectivity that lies at the heart of the so-called objective (the perspectival in place of the disinterested), paradoxically the autobiographical gesture can also propose an equation whereby 'I' = 'truth'. Personal experience, rather than itself being recognised (like any analysis) as an interpretation, acts instead as a guarantor of 'fact'. If I saw and felt, then it must be so. 'I' become the incontrovertible evidence. Where the supposedly objective guarantees truth because it is distanced, paradoxically the openly subjective guarantees truth because it is admittedly close.

Yet every assessment should be recognised for what it is – an account (often driven by the need for accountability). As an account, it is only one of many that are possible to perform – with each performance determined by the context/audience. The conditions and aims of telling should, I think, be admitted rather than hidden. The explicit use of the autobiographical voice, in contrast to the necessary performance of objectivity produced/demanded by scientific discourse, has the potential to render this performance transparent and transparently strategic. Since applied drama is a usefully unpredictable, unrepeatable live process that takes place in and across time and space and between people, the autobiographical account that recognises itself as a similarly creative endeavour might not be an inappropriate tool to aid assessment. It is, then, something of a relief to repeatedly encounter the word 'story' throughout the pieces that comprise 'Impact Assessment and Applied Drama' – the stories of participants that are shared with facilitators, the stories of the facilitators reflecting on their practices as they attempt to assess it, the stories of the journeys made (across time; back to places once visited; back to previous selves even). The word 'story' signals clearly that the assessments, whatever their other methodologies, are constructions; a taking of the multiplicity of materials that adhere to the applied drama event (including memories, anecdotes, collected data, journals, photographs, videos), and the structuring of these into another event (in this case, a translation also, from the live into the written), for another time and place. Those of us who work in drama know the value of a good story (not least, as Anthony Haddon admits while luring us into his tale, its potential to act as 'a lure'). Stories can provide a different way of knowing about applied practice, and of further developing our practice of it. Rather than banish our autobiographical stories from assessments of impact we should embrace them as usefully evocative and provocative tools that have their own job of work to do. The 'self' is an agent of potential activation rather than contamination. The success of these stories, though, depends on recognition of the task in hand, and then a self-conscious and self-reflective use of the 'I', an 'I' that is deployed strategically and contingently rather than an 'I' that is taken as self-evident. It also depends on a reader or audience that refuses to take the 'I' at face value. Whilst my fidelity to the extra-textual, such as 'Notes on contributors', stems from my desire to locate the writer, the writer herself knows that the extra- is in fact inter-textual, and such words are as carefully

thought over as any that appear within the pages of the main text. Or to put it another way, the author of this text is still a text. As I read the 'Notes', and the various 'Is' scattered through the pages of *RIDE*, I would do well to remember this so that I can engage, actively and critically, with the stories and selves being told.

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