Preface

My relationship with ethnodrama grew out of making interview theatre at the beginning of my career. The early works of actress, playwright, and professor Anna Deavere Smith inspired me to think about topics I was interested in and then interview people who had thoughts and opinions about those topics. I considered this process theatre making, not research. In retrospect, I now understand I was conducting qualitative research in a way that mirrors the work of ethnographers: interviewing participants about a topic or experience to help describe or explain a particular phenomenon. Initially, I might not have worked from a clearly articulated research question, but I was trying to understand something confusing, unsettling, or curious about the world. Sometimes, the topic was personal, while other times, the topic came from a news article or current event. Or a collaborator approached me with a topic they had questions about and asked me to help them explore it through my interview theatre process. The common element across these starting places was that I knew I would share my discoveries through a theatrical performance for an audience.

I hoped that my interview theatre play would leave the audience with questions about what they had just experienced. I wanted to avoid solving problems for them or dictating how they should think. Instead, I wanted the audience to think for themselves. My goal was for them to leave the performance engaged in meaningful conversations with one another—not about where to grab a drink, but about their feelings regarding specific moments or characters in the play. If the audience left the theatre with more questions than answers, they would be were more likely to take action to change the circumstances portrayed in the play, whether that meant asking critical questions, seeking answers, or working toward solutions to the problems presented.

In most cases, I made these theatrical works as an attempt to understand something more complicated than I could work out on my own. I needed to engage with the thoughts and opinions of others to arrive at a deeper understanding of the topic. Sometimes, I sought external validation for my own experience. Other times, I wanted an explanation for something that made me angry, frustrated, or confused. Through each project, I

learned invaluable lessons through interactions with participants, fellow artists, and audiences. Creating an ethnodrama is an iterative process from start to finish, and the possibilities for learning and discovery exist at each step along the way.

Organization of This Book

This book introduces ethnodrama as a qualitative, arts-based research methodology and then outlines a unique and specific step-by-step process that I have refined over nearly 30 years of experience. Reading this book will not make you an overnight expert, but it provides a solid foundation for beginning your journey with ethnodrama. I also offer multiple examples from my projects that use interview-based data throughout the book. Ethnodrama and ethnotheatre can incorporate various textual data, but I have chosen to focus on a creation process using interview-based data, as that is where I have most clearly defined and articulated the steps of my methodology. I encourage readers interested in applying these steps to other kinds of textual data to explore, experiment, take risks, and then report back!

How you encounter and use this book will inform how you read it. I've organized the chapters to reflect moving through the steps in my process in a particular order. The book also emulates how I teach my ethnodrama course, so students move through these steps over a semester of study. I am a big fan of scaffolded experiences that allow steps to build upon each other to arrive at a tangible outcome. I also don't like to give away the end at the beginning. I recommend moving through the chapters in order so that you understand the overall process. Then, you can revisit whatever chapters you need as you work on your own ethnodrama.

To be clear, the approach I outline in this book is only one way of using ethnodrama as an arts-based research methodology. Other researchers and practitioners have different and valid ways of working with the form, and I encourage you to seek those out as well. I focus on one specific method that I have found effective because I believe learning a methodology, applying it, and experiencing the results can allow for greater experimentation and innovation. Learn the rules, understand how they work, then break them. Additionally, the years of working with this particular step-by-step approach have allowed me to continually refine and deepen my intentions related to the ethics of working with participants, gathering their personal stories, thoughts, and opinions, and then disseminating them to an audience. Throughout this book, I continually emphasize the need for care when working with participants and how care must inform the relational and procedural ethics at play in every step of an ethnodrama's process.

Chapter 1 establishes ethnodrama as a qualitative, arts-based research method and identifies connections to other forms of qualitative research and styles of theatre. The chapter also identifies reasons to use ethnodrama for a particular study or project and articulates how a person interested in using ethnodrama can best prepare for the experience. That preparation includes understanding their relationship and experience with theatre as an art form and becoming familiar with ethnodramas as dramatic literature and research projects.

In Chapter 2, readers learn how to conceive and design a project that leverages the power of ethnodrama as an arts-based form, while maintaining the rigor needed to legitimize the research within more traditionally minded academic environments. The chapter

emphasizes the importance of a central research question that drives the creation of the ethnodrama. It also outlines how to develop a set of interview prompts that generate data to answer the ethnodrama's central research question. The chapter also highlights the importance of the literature review, the ethnodramatist's point of view or stance, and an ethics committee and its review process.

Chapter 3 discusses ways to recruit interview participants for a data collection process and shares a template for an interviewing protocol that prioritizes the interview participant's experience first and foremost. I emphasize the importance of procedural and relational ethics within the process and how they must be monitored and maintained throughout data collection, analysis, and dissemination. The chapter also establishes best practices for recording interviews and gathering field notes.

Following the data collection process, Chapter 4 provides guidance for presenting interview data as transcripts and then coding those transcripts for recurring themes that answer the project's central research question(s). I give special attention to organizing the dataset, identifying emergent themes through individual and group analysis techniques, and considering how the proposed dramaturgical structure of the ethnodrama may affect the analysis process.

Upon completion of data analysis, Chapters 5 and 6 shift to disseminating the findings via the ethnodramatic scripting process. Structures of scripting take central focus in both chapters, with emphasis on creating a clearly defined script that translates easily to an ethnotheatrical production. The chapters include multiple examples of scripting structures from various projects demonstrating how to arrange interview material to disseminate research findings most effectively. Chapter 5 begins by addressing how best to begin a script, alongside some of the struggles associated with getting started. Chapter 6 concludes with advice about drafting and revising a script, so that the ethnodrama is in the strongest shape possible to enter a rehearsal process.

Once the script is complete, Chapter 7 explores moving an ethnodramatic script into rehearsal and production as a piece of ethnotheatre. The chapter includes information about performance phenomenology, including the difference between a performance triad and a performance pentagon, and discusses the approach an actor should take when performing in an ethnotheatrical production. I also share how the writings of Bertolt Brecht and Anna Deavere Smith inform and inspire my approach to ethnodrama and ethnotheatre. The chapter also addresses ways to rehearse for production and incorporate other textures, such as staging, movement, and various design elements, to help differentiate the dissemination for multiple audiences.

Chapter 8 concludes the process with a discussion of evaluating the research project based on how audiences who experience the ethnodrama in performance respond to the presentation of the research findings, how research participants in the data collection process react to the sharing of their stories via the ethnodrama, and what artists engaging in the creation and performance of the ethnodrama discover through their work. Techniques include surveying, facilitated discussions and focus groups, and postperformance data collection and analysis.

Each chapter concludes with activities to help you build the skills needed to create ethnodrama. Some activities focus on specific techniques, while others encourage you to consider the mindset necessary to work with ethnodrama as a research methodology. I also include a glossary of terms, all of which are **bolded** when they appear in the chapters, as well as additional resources that I hope you will find helpful.

Audience for This Book

As I discuss more in Chapter 1, ethnodrama has its origins in anthropology and psychodrama, but the methodology also shares a close relationship with documentary and verbatim theatre. Depending on how you identify as an artist or a researcher, you may find that these forms substantially overlap in source material, structure, and format. As I've written the book, I've imagined two kinds of readers. One might be a researcher who has recognized the potential for ethnodrama as a methodology, beginning with the start of a research process and carrying it through to the dissemination of the findings via performance. Another might be a theatre artist who wants to understand better how their creative work relates to qualitative research and thus can contribute to academic scholarship. Because I also teach master's and doctoral students, I have framed much of my articulation of the method for that audience; however, undergraduate students engaging in qualitative, arts-based research for the first time will find the book accessible. The book is also a valuable resource for scholars with experience in other qualitative research methods who wish to expand their understanding to include arts-based research, particularly ethnodrama. The book can support courses devoted to arts-based research, qualitative research, data analysis, research design, emergent research methods, and public scholarship. Instructors and faculty advisors will also find the book useful for guiding arts-based research projects in sociology, applied health sciences, creative arts therapies, education and curriculum studies, political science, and theatre and performance studies. Additionally, theatre instructors and students interested in documentary and verbatim theatre can use the research process outlined in this book to inform their own creative processes. Whoever you are and however you arrived in these pages, welcome. I'm happy you're here.

1 Definitions, Contexts, and Preparations

My understanding of ethnodrama emerged over time and via an indirect path. I earned an undergraduate degree in history, which included conducting historical research using primary and secondary source materials and even a bit of oral history, an early encounter with initial connections to ethnodrama. During my undergraduate studies, I saw a play called *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* by 20th-century German playwright Bertolt Brecht. I had already developed a love for theatre, mainly as an audience member and a performer, but the production of Brecht's play demonstrated new possibilities. After that production, I better understood how plays could prompt audiences to ask questions about the world around them, and I turned to Brecht and his writings to learn how to do that. I completed an undergraduate thesis about Brecht, and what I learned in that process continues to inform my work to this day. More on this in Chapter 7!

After those years studying history, I pursued advanced studies in theatre and earned a Master of Fine Arts degree, concentrating on dramaturgy and directing. I wanted to direct plays like Brecht's that could impact audiences, and I knew that, to achieve that goal, I needed to study dramaturgy to learn more about dramatic literature and play structure. During my graduate studies, I served as a teaching assistant for an introductory theatre course taught by my professor and mentor, Harley Erdman. In 1995, I was introduced to the work of actress, playwright, and professor Anna Deavere Smith through Erdman's course. It was a teleplay version of *Fires in the Mirror*, and I was dumbstruck. The analytical part of my brain fired throughout the screening. I found myself questioning the circumstances and events covered by the play and made immediate connections to my undergraduate work on Brecht.

Fires in the Mirror (1992) explores the events that unfolded in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, following the deaths of Gavin Cato and Yankel Rosenbaum in August 1991. Smith created the play from interviews with participants directly and indirectly affected by the event. She transcribed sections of those interviews and arranged them into a performance script. Smith then learned each interview excerpt

verbatim and portrayed all the characters in the play. As I watched Smith embody the various people she had interviewed, I appreciated that her arrangement of the interviews complicated my perceptions of the event rather than simplifying them. Smith presented many different viewpoints within the time constraints of the play and did not draw an easy conclusion for the audience to think, "Oh, that's what happened, and that's who's at fault." And I loved that. I loved that I agreed with one person at one moment and then someone with an opposing viewpoint at another. Smith's play and performance captured the realities and complexities of an issue in a way that I had never experienced before in the theatre. The impact on me was profound, and I wanted to learn how to have that same kind of impact. Luckily, another professor and mentor, Roberta Uno, included Smith's work in her course "World Drama: Contemporary Movements." Uno assigned us to interview someone and transcribe it in the style of Smith's early published plays, reflecting the speech pattern of the interview participant. The resulting monologue appeared like poetry on the page rather than typical prose.

That first interviewing assignment for that graduate course in the Spring of 1996 began my journey with "**interview theatre**," the term I used as I began working with interview data as source material for plays. I loved everything about that assignment. I loved the interviewing process, the transcribing, and the careful listening and documenting that the transcribing style required. As I continued my graduate studies, my interest in creating original plays began to overtake my interest in already published and produced works, so my focus as a dramaturg and director shifted to new play development. Another of my professors, Julian Olf, stopped me in the hallway one day after class and said, "You know, Joe, I think you're really a playwright." To which I just laughed and walked away. No, I did not publicly identify as a playwright, but Olf sensed something else. Yes, secretly, I did want to write plays, but I had tried, and at that particular time, I had very little confidence in my ability to write authentic-sounding dialogue.

Not long after that hallway conversation, I had a second opportunity to work on an interview theatre project in another of Uno's courses, and a lightbulb went off for me. Maybe I wasn't a playwright in the traditional sense, sitting alone in a room and crafting dialogue for fictional characters to say. However, I discovered an affinity for listening carefully to what real people had to say about a topic, identifying their most salient points, transcribing those moments, and arranging them, so an audience could better understand something new about the topic. Eureka! And the rest, as they say, is history.

In 1999, I made my first interview theatre play with my then–performance partner, Kate Nugent, and since then, I have continued making interview-based plays and performances across scores of projects. I have created plays about all sorts of topics: childhood bullying, nonromantic relationships between gay men and heterosexual and bisexual women, understandings of borders in the Republic of Ireland, COVID-19, and the list goes on. At times, my work has expanded to include various types of source material beyond interviews, such as letters, journal entries, and audio and video artifacts. That said, my primary mode of investigation and creation still relies mainly on data gathered from interviews.

Now, all these years later, I categorize my work as ethnodrama. I identify as an **artist-researcher**, a dual identity that I embrace as someone trained as an artist, who creates theatre and conducts arts-based research using ethnodrama. I recognize and understand that, over the last three decades, my creative output has lived at this hyphen between two identities, bridging *artist* and *researcher*. I have also developed methods and techniques

for teaching others how to create work in a similar style. Over the past 15 years, I've taught scores of students how to use this methodology, from secondary school to doctoral students, through university courses, school residencies, and professional development workshops. I've guided numerous group projects, independent studies, theses, and dissertations, and have had the privilege of seeing many of these projects scripted and performed.

In 2017, I founded the **Verbatim Performance Lab** (VPL), a project of the Program in Educational Theatre in the Department of Music and Performing Arts Professions at New York University's (NYU) Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. VPL creates ethnodrama and verbatim documentary theatre performances and investigates the results with actors and audiences. We perform words and gestures collected from found media artifacts and interview-based data. Through these investigations and performances, VPL aims to disrupt assumptions, biases, and intolerances across a spectrum of political, cultural, and social narratives. Since its inception, VPL has provided a platform to explore ethnodrama and related methods, emphasizing research and audience engagement to address societal challenges such as media literacy, implicit bias, and political polarization (Salvatore, 2023).

Throughout this book, you will encounter examples from plays and performances I have created as an ethnodramatist and with VPL. These examples will help illuminate my unique, step-by-step approach to building an ethnodrama. Before we get to those examples and my approach, let's define terms, establish context, and engage in some preparation to use this dynamic research method.

Defining Terms: Ethnodrama and Ethnotheatre

Ethnodrama and **ethnotheatre** are constructed academic terms that establish the legitimacy of form and process for scholars and researchers working within certain paradigms (Ackroyd & O'Toole, 2010). The root of both words—*ethno*—links them to ethnography, a research technique with origins in anthropology. **Ethnography** is a particular kind of qualitative inquiry that includes studying, describing, and interpreting culture and cultural behavior. Ethnography often contributes to naming and describing a culture or community. It has expanded beyond anthropology to other fields in the social sciences, applied health sciences, education, and cultural studies (Saldaña, 2005). When "drama" and "theatre" combine with the *ethno* root, a specialized form of ethnographic research emerges that uses theatre making in the process of meaning making. As an artist, I find these word combinations to make natural sense. In the same way that an **ethnographer** studies, describes, and interprets culture and cultural behavior, artists observe the world around them and then find ways to express an analysis of their observations. The artist's expression can be literal or abstract and illustrates their new understanding through some artistic presentation, be it a painting, a song, a novel, a dance, or a play. In both cases, artists and researchers working ethnographically use their heightened sensitivities as human beings to guide their process.

Drama therapist Stephen Snow (2022) asserts a clear etymology for the term "ethnodrama." He identified its earliest use in a published paper delivered at a meeting of the New York Academy of Sciences in 1953 by NYU professor of sociology and anthropology Joseph Bram, who had experienced the psychodramatic work of psychiatrist Jacob L. Moreno. Bram (1953) offered that there might be uses for elements of Moreno's psy-

chodramatic approach in anthropological research but "identified under a separate name, such as ethnodrama" (p. 255). Snow unearthed a subsequent use of the term in an article by Jerry M. Rosenberg (1962) titled "Ethnodrama as a Research Method in Anthropology." Rosenberg focused his writings on "the methodology and suggested application of ethnodrama to the field of cultural anthropology" (p. 236) and noted that "ethnodrama can become a valuable source of information about a culture, in respect of speechways, motor habits, attitudes, and the specific content of culture, the customs that are transmitted from generation to generation" (p. 237).

Beyond these 1953 and 1962 references, the term seemed to disappear from academic writing until the mid-1990s when Jim Mienczakowski (1995) used "ethnodrama" to name his ethnographic research practice within health education and health promotion. Snow (2022) identified Mienczakowski as "the creator of the performance-based method of ethnographic research, known as ethnodrama" (p. 5), linking the form to the field of performance ethnography (Denzin, 2003, 2018). Mienczakowski described his ethnodrama as a form of "public-voice ethnography that has emancipatory and educational potential" (p. 364). He cultivated emancipation and education through "informant validation" (p. 361), a process of working closely with interview participants ("informants") at each step of the research, from data collection to analysis to dissemination. Participants provided feedback to Mienczakowski and his collaborators during the scripting and rehearsal processes. They then previewed and fed back on the performance before researchers shared it with a public audience. Upon viewing the performance, audiences could respond with their own feedback, including through forum theatre scenes that investigated alternatives to the original scenarios shared in the performance (Boal, 1985). The audience's responses to and experiences with these alternatives then impacted subsequent performances of the ethnodrama. The sharing of the findings was not the end of the process but rather a step along the way. Informant validation and direct audience engagement with the research findings seeded the "emancipatory potential" that Mienczakowski (1995, 2001) identified as one of the hallmarks of ethnodrama.

Mienczakowski (2001) aligned ethnodrama with ethnography, anthropology, and theatre, as it is "explicitly concerned with decoding and rendering accessible the culturally specific signs, symbols, aesthetics, [behaviors], language and experiences of [participants] using accepted theatrical practices" (p. 468). In more recent writing on ethnodrama, Mienczakowski (2019) noted that the term is now "often applied to all forms of ethnography presented through drama or performance" (p. 3). His use of the phrase "applied to" acknowledges that scholars often assign the term to work created by theatre artists who would not refer to their creative processes or plays as academic research. Mienczakowski also distinguished between ethnodramas that primarily entertain and explain, ethnodramas that inform and report in nonwritten ways, and "critical ethnodramas [that] seek to deliver potential social and cultural change on behalf of [research participants]" (p. 3). Common throughout Mienczakowski's writings is an emphasis on ethnodrama's ability to share "research findings in a language and code accessible to its wide audiences" (2001, p. 468), a primary strength of ethnodrama as a research modality that connects it to the broader possibilities of public scholarship (Adams & Boylorn, 2019).

In *Ethnodrama: An Anthology of Reality Theatre*, Johnny Saldaña (2005) asserted, "All playwrights are ethnodramatists," indicating that playwrights have told the stories of human beings and their social conditions for thousands of years (p. 4). In his follow-up, *Ethnotheatre: Research from Page to Stage* (2011a), he further broadened the scope

of ethnodrama and ethnotheare by identifying 80 unique terms that refer to plays and performances that could fall under their umbrella (pp. 13–14). Saldaña defined ethnodrama as "a written play script consisting of dramatized, significant selections of narrative collected from interview transcripts, participant observation field notes, journal entries, personal memories/experiences, and/or print and media artifacts" (p. 13), while ethnotheatre "employs the traditional craft and artistic techniques of theatre or media production to mount for an audience a live or mediated performance event of research participants' experiences and/or the researcher's interpretations of data" (p. 12). In the simplest of terms, "ethnodrama" refers to the script and "ethnotheatre" refers to the performance of a script. Saldaña's definitions followed 16 years after Mienczakowski's (1995) and marked a significant moment in the form's history. By articulating these definitions, Saldaña invited works created by theatre artists to be identified as ethnodrama and ethnotheatre, even when those artists had no stated intentions of conducting research in a formal academic sense. Saldaña's strong assertions expanded the possibilities for the term, allowing scholars and artists to categorize more plays and performances as ethnodrama and ethnotheatre.

Around the same time as Saldaña's second text, Judith Ackroyd and John O'Toole (2010) identified the importance of "ethnodrama" as a compound term of "ethno" and "drama." They emphasized their use of it to acknowledge the connections between ethnography and drama inherent in the term, while simultaneously avoiding privileging one term over the other. Ackroyd and O'Toole also noted that "dialogic" appeared more often in descriptions of ethnodrama and related research forms and less frequently in descriptions of artist-driven forms such as documentary theatre and verbatim theatre. This higher frequency of appearance indicates more specificity around the intentions of ethnodrama as a form of research and the importance of audience engagement with the research's findings following a performance. This acknowledgment of intention complicates the broader approach to categorizing plays and performances as ethnodrama and ethnotheatre, suggesting that creators should have clear intentions for how they use the methodology and form.

In considering the writings of Bram, Rosenberg, Snow, Mienczakowski, Saldaña, Ackroyd, and O'Toole, alongside my own experiences, I think it is important to distinguish that ethnodrama and ethnotheatre require two key attributes: (1) the presence of a research question to drive the creative process *from a project's inception* and (2) the dissemination of research findings through a two-part process of scripting and performance that catalyzes further data collection and analysis. I offer these distinctions to highlight the importance of the creator's *intention*. A theatre artist may use **textual data** to construct a play with *ethnodramatic qualities*. However, if an overarching question did not drive the creative process and the audience does not somehow explore what they learned as part of the performed dissemination, I would not categorize that artist's work as ethnodrama or ethnotheatre.

For this book and the process I outline within, an **ethnodrama** is *a script created from textual data gathered and/or analyzed by an artist-researcher with the explicit purpose of investigating a research question, performing the investigation's findings for an audience, and collecting and analyzing their responses to those findings.* **Ethnotheatre** refers to *the theatrical production of an ethnodrama that disseminates the investigation's findings to an audience and then engages them in an additional data collection process to further explore the ethnodrama's research question and assess its impact.*

TABLE 1.1. Examples of Textual Data

- Interview transcripts
- Field notes
- Written and electronic correspondence
- Personal narratives culled from
  - Written journal entries
  - Social media posts
- Publicly available print and media artifacts, such as written transcripts and audio/video recordings
  - Court proceedings
  - Political speeches and debates
  - Media interviews
  - Sporting events
  - Testimonials
- Visual materials
  - Photographs
  - Video recordings
  - Films
  - Paintings
  - Drawings

Given the proliferation of easily accessible media, the textual data available as source material for ethnodrama and ethnotheatre have grown in recent years. Table 1.1 presents various examples of textual data.

Ethnodrama and ethnotheatre creation rely on skills and expertise linked to playwrights, actors, directors, designers, dramaturgs, and other theatre artists and professionals trained in theatre making (Saldaña, 2005, 2011a; Salvatore, 2025). However, they also require a clear research intention and sound methodology. An artist-researcher must combine the skills and methods of a theatre artist and a qualitative researcher to create effective ethnodrama and ethnotheatre. Given the necessity of theatre technique and research methodology, it is helpful to situate ethnodrama within some broader contexts in both areas.

Context: Theatre

Ethnodrama draws inspiration from theatre artists working in documentary theatre and verbatim theatre, particularly those working in community-engaged and social justice-oriented practices (Mienczakowski, 2019; Saldaña, 2005). Documentary theatre and verbatim theatre are debated and contested terms and, depending on whose writing you read and where that person is from, you will encounter these same terms used to describe similar kinds of performances (Fisher, 2020; Parenteau, 2017). In my own experience, I have found that "documentary theatre" generally appears more often in writings originating from the United States, whereas "verbatim theatre" tends to occur more in writings originating from Canada, Australia, Ireland, and the United Kingdom.

Documentary theatre traces its origins to the German agitprop theatre maker Erwin Piscator, who is often credited with creating the form in the 1920s (Fisher, 2020; Irmer, 2006; Watt, 2009). Piscator used recent political and historical events as source material for his large-scale performances, including film footage (Irmer, 2006). The documentary form based on current events also emerged in other parts of the world, most notably in the United States, through the Living Newspaper productions staged by the Federal Theatre Project in the 1930s (Watt, 2009). The form expanded in Germany in the 1960s through the plays of Rolf Hochhuth, Peter Weiss, and Heinar Kipphardt. All three playwrights used historical documents as source material to create plays that explored and reexamined significant events from the first half of the 20th century (Fisher, 2020; Irmer, 2006). Weiss (1971) identified that the sources for a documentary theatre performance could include various kinds of materials, such as "records, documents, letters, statistics, market-reports, statements by banks and companies, government statements, speeches, interviews, state-

ments by well-known personalities, newspaper and broadcast reports, photos, documentary films, and other contemporary documents" (as cited in Paget, 1987, p. 335).

Using Weiss's list of source material as a starting place, scholars also break down documentary theatre into subgenres, notably tribunal theatre and verbatim theatre. **Tribunal theatre** uses "edited transcripts . . . of trials, tribunals, and public inquiries" as its source material, whereas **verbatim theatre** uses recordings of "edited . . . interviews with individuals." When preparing to perform these interviews, actors may use transcripts generated from the recordings, the actual recordings themselves (Paget, 2011, pp. 233–234), or a combination of both (Salvatore, 2023). To further clarify the distinction between documentary theatre and verbatim theatre, Ackroyd and O'Toole (2010) note that "it is often assumed that documentary theatre uses more than voices as its source materials, whereas verbatim is based solely on voices" (p. 25), while acknowledging that this assumption may not always play out in practice.

In his often-cited article "'Verbatim Theatre': Oral History and Documentary Techniques," Derek Paget (1987) traces the emergence of verbatim theatre in England, beginning with the work of Peter Cheeseman at the Victoria Theatre in Stoke-on-Kent in the 1960s and continuing through the late 1970s with the work of Chris Honer, Rony Robinson, David Thacker, and Ron Rose at the Gateway Theatre in Chester. In an interview conducted by Paget in 1986, Robinson describes verbatim theatre as

> a form of theatre firmly predicated upon the taping and subsequent transcription of interviews with "ordinary" people, done in the context of research into a particular region, subject area, issue, event, or combination of these things. This primary source is then transformed into a text which is acted, usually by the performers who collected the material in the first place. (Paget, 1987, p. 317)

Paget (1987) identified that these early creators "found themselves in contact with an essentially *non*-theatrical tradition of social observation and oral documentation" (p. 318). These early verbatim theatre plays focused on issues within a specific community and prioritized performing the play in that community for the members who had participated in the interview process. The actors for these performances also embraced the vernacular of the particular community (Paget, 1987), meaning that they focused their performances on the language and dialect of the interview participants. As practitioners have continued to create verbatim theatre in the 40 years since Robinson's description appeared in Paget's writing, some now consider verbatim to be a technique rather than a form (Hammond & Steward, 2008), which contributes to the complexity of defining verbatim theatre because the meaning is ultimately determined by the practitioner engaging it in practice (Garson, 2021). Most importantly, with Paget's identification of "social observation and oral documentation" within the theatrical art form of verbatim theatre, we see the origins of ethnodrama as a qualitative, arts-based research methodology. We also see a precursor to Saldaña's (2005) later assertion that "all playwrights are ethnodramatists."

Context: Research

While strongly connected to art making, ethnodrama falls squarely within a qualitative **research paradigm** because it uses textual data as source material for the research process. Saldaña (2011b) defines **qualitative research** as "an umbrella term for a wide vari-

ety of approaches to and methods for the study of natural social life. The information or data collected and analyzed is primarily (but not exclusively) nonquantitative in character" (p. 3), meaning that the majority of the data are textual rather than numerical. This difference between numerical and textual data constitutes one of the main distinctions between quantitative and qualitative research paradigms. Other differences between the two have to do with approach and purpose.

Quantitative research is "characterized by deductive approaches to the research process aimed at proving, disproving, or lending credence to existing theories," while qualitative research is "generally characterized by inductive approaches to knowledge aimed at generating meaning" (Leavy, 2023, p. 9). Quantitative research uses numerical data to draw positivist conclusions that are more definitive and not as easily questioned. In contrast, qualitative research uses textual data to describe a situation or phenomenon that is more open to interpretation. While some like to place a value judgment on these approaches, saying one is "better" or "valid" or "trustworthy" compared with the other, the more useful distinction comes from understanding when to embrace which paradigm, why to use it, how to do it with rigor, and when to know that a combination of approaches might be the best option.

Because ethnodrama often relies on qualitative data gathered from participant interviews and field observations, scholars also note ethnodrama's relationship to **performance ethnography** and **performed ethnography** (Denzin, 2018; Madison, 2018). Denzin (2018) identified that an interview is performative in nature, a "site where meaning is created and performed" (p. 163), implying that when a researcher conducts an interview as part of their fieldwork, the interview participant's responses are a performance. Madison (2018) refers to these performances during fieldwork as performance ethnography; however, if a portion of that interview is re-performed by someone else, as it is in an ethnodrama, Madison names this action "perform*-ed* ethnography, to emphasize the dramatic scenarios, public staging, crafted theatricality, and improvisational enactments of fieldwork and ethnographic data that will *be*, that have *been*, and that are *being* performed" (p. xvii, original emphasis).

Vanover and Mihas (2022) characterize qualitative research as "a creative practice as well as an analytical one" (p. 1). As such, qualitative research has also come to include a set of practices known as **arts-based research** (ABR) that leverages various art-making processes to generate and analyze data and disseminate research findings (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Chilton & Leavy, 2020; Kara, 2020; Leavy, 2020b; McNiff, 2014). ABR can use various methodological tools grounded in fiction writing, poetry, music, dance, theatre, film, and the visual arts (Leavy, 2020b). Barone and Eisner (2012) describe ABR as "an approach to research that exploits the capacities of expressive form to capture qualities of life that impact what we know and how we live" (p. 5), and that "arts-based research is the utilization of aesthetic judgment and the application of aesthetic criteria in making judgments about what the character of the intended outcome is to be" (p. 8). Freiband (2023) similarly identifies that when making these judgments, artists are using literacies that are "unique ways of knowing," and as a result "artists know things nobody else knows, and are able to learn in ways nobody else can learn" (Artists' Literacies Institute).

When a researcher combines their unique ways of knowing as an artist with a clearly defined research process, they can then "[consciously pursue their] expressive form in the pursuit of understanding" (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 7). ABR also privileges the idea that a research question does not have just one answer. Leavy (2020b) reinforces this idea, writing, "Arts-based [research] practices are able to get at *multiple meanings*, opening up

multiplicity in meaning-making instead of pushing authoritative claims" (p. 27, original emphasis). The way to new understandings does not have to take a positivist route that leads to a concretized outcome on a particular topic, but rather ABR, via art making, can present an audience with research findings and encourage them to make their own interpretation of what they have experienced. In this way, ABR promotes participation, dialogue, and access, and democratizes how knowledge is constructed by and with an audience (Chilton & Leavy, 2020; Leavy, 2020b).

Since ethnodrama relies on theatre making as its arts-based mode of inquiry and can embrace multiple meanings and reach a broad audience, it also has connections with **research-based theatre** (RbT) (Belliveau & Lea, 2016; Shigematsu, Cook, Belliveau, & Lea, 2021). Belliveau and Lea (2016) recognize RbT's relationship to theatre making, arts-based, and qualitative research methodologies, while also identifying it as "a more inclusive term to describe the multiple ways of integrating theatre throughout the research process" (p. 6). Researchers often use ethnodrama and ethnotheatre only to disseminate research findings, rather than integrating the methodology throughout the research process. In identifying this limitation, Belliveau and Lea inspired me to articulate why an artist-researcher should name ethnodrama as their research methodology from their project's inception and then use its various techniques in the step-by-step research process outlined in this book.

An artist-researcher using ethnodrama must think carefully about the intended audience for the research, as this affects all stages of a project's development. The audience for an ethnodrama can include stakeholders with a particular interest or investment in the topic of exploration, participants who shared their ideas and insights during the data collection, or members of the general public who happened upon the project by chance. Suppose that the intended audience has a vested interest in the project's topic. In that case, the research question may use more specific language related to the audience's particular discipline of study, shared experiences, and/or relationships. If the intended audience is more general, the artist-researcher would need to frame the research question and the interview prompts through a different lens that does not assume inside knowledge of a particular subject area or experience. Regardless of the audience's makeup, the ethnodrama must present its findings, so all can understand (Salvatore, 2025).

Why Ethnodrama?

Since ethnodrama relies on textual data as its source material, the form works best with projects that gather multiple perspectives on a given topic through personal interviews and field observations or utilize archival data such as letters, journals, images, and artifacts (Salvatore, 2025). As with most interview-based, qualitative research, ethnodrama should be used for projects focused on "exploring, describing, and explaining a complex situation" or phenomenon (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 49). An artist-researcher should not use ethnodrama when a study relies on positivist outcomes. An ethnodramatic script may be included as a chapter in a dissertation or as part of a journal article, but the script is the first part of a two-part dissemination process. Playwrights write scripts to be performed, and an artist-researcher should create an ethnodrama for performance.

When an artist-researcher chooses ethnodrama as their research methodology, they should understand and accept that they will disseminate their data and resulting analysis to an audience as a script *and* a piece of ethnotheatre. I have encountered ethnodramas

that read like a book chapter or an academic journal article because they lack any sense of theatricality and demonstrate a limited understanding of how a script serves as a precursor to performance. Whenever that happens, I find myself asking, "Why ethnodrama?" If a researcher chooses ethnodrama only as a clever dissemination strategy, they are making a mistake. Qualitative researchers choosing ethnodrama must recognize from their project's inception that they are creating a script for performance. If published, that script will also be read, but the researcher should fully commit to the performative nature of the form or choose a different research methodology. An ethnodramatic process should not prioritize academic research skills or content knowledge over aesthetic and theatrical sensibilities, as doing so likely results in a disservice to the form, the data, and the audience (Belliveau & Lea, 2016; Leavy, 2020b; Saldaña, 2005, 2010; Salvatore, 2020b, 2025).

So why, then, do we choose to use ethnodrama? Here are four main reasons to consider.

Ethnodrama dynamically disseminates research findings. A few years ago, during a meeting about my work in VPL, a member of my school's leadership team said, "Joe, we're interested in what you do because it's not sitting on a shelf somewhere collecting dust." While I have been lucky that my school has consistently supported my work in ABR and ethnodrama, that comment marked the first time anyone acknowledged the work's dynamism and ability to reach a wider audience. Leavy (2020b) encapsulates this idea with her emphasis on the capacity of ABR to serve as public scholarship, reaching wider audiences and, therefore, being "useful" (p. 32). Researchers do not always have the most accessible methods of sharing the story of their research with a broad audience, and ethnodrama offers one way to combat that shortcoming. When audience members gather to watch a play, they experience the performance together versus when a person reads an academic article alone. The performance dissemination creates the opportunity for a collective experience that can lead to immediate conversation. Dissemination through an academic journal creates a lag in that conversation happening. Yes, researchers present their findings at academic conferences, but that presentation style relies less on theatricality and metaphor and more on straightforward dissemination. Ethnodrama increases the usefulness of research by expanding its reach and disseminating findings in ways that can be understood and processed by a wider audience, what Derek Paget (2011) calls "pleasurable learning" (p. 228).

TABLE 1.2. Steps for Creating an Ethnodrama

- Identify a topic of interest.
- Articulate a research question.
- Develop an interview protocol.
- Recruit participants.
- Conduct interviews.
- Transcribe and code data.
- Analyze the findings.
- Arrange the findings into a script.
- Stage a performance of the script for an audience (ethnotheatre).
- Gather the audience's response to the dissemination.
- Assess the ethnodrama's effectiveness and impact.

As an artist-researcher, I typically choose ethnodrama when conceiving a project and then implement a step-by-step process (see Table 1.2) that includes dissemination as two integrated steps, not add-ons. Each step requires an awareness of the scripting and performance as the two-step dissemination strategy. An interested person can read my script and learn something, but its full impact only emerges through the performance of my data analysis. I prefer that the performance happens live, but recorded film and video performances can have a similar effect and often reach even wider audiences.

As ethnodrama has grown in popularity over the last 20 years, more qualitative researchers have attempted to implement it as a dissemination strategy, but they make this decision later in their process. While possible, this late-stage choice does not create the best circumstances for success. The likelihood of dynamic dissemination increases when the artist-researcher identifies ethnodrama as their preferred research modality at their project's conception. I have had successful experiences using data collected by someone else to create projects, such as an archive of interviews conducted many years ago or personal letters and journals. However, regardless of the origins of the data, I articulate a research question to guide my investigation of that preexisting dataset, and dissemination occurs through performance. I share more about the process of working with a preexisting dataset in subsequent chapters.

Ethnodrama encourages multiple voices and ideas to come together in one space. Because ethnodrama focuses on exploring, describing, and explaining a complex situation or phenomenon, the form offers ample space to include multiple perspectives on a particular topic. Depending on the purpose of the project and the participant recruiting process, interview participants can come from various backgrounds and lived experiences, including those from historically underrepresented communities. An ethnodrama does not "give voice" to participants. Participants already have voices that need to be listened to and heard. Ethnodrama creates a space for participants' voices to gather and for audiences to hear them in an ethnotheatrical performance.

When I interview participants for a project, I do not interview with an agenda. I do not manipulate the interview to extract the answers I want or need from a participant to confirm my own preconceived notions or biases. I interview participants because I want to hear their genuine responses. I also seek out participants who may not otherwise be asked about their thoughts and opinions on a topic. Frequently, we hear from so-called "experts" and high-profile, public-facing individuals about a subject or issue, and they use a particular kind of language. At the 2020 Aspen Ideas Festival, Anna Deavere Smith referenced this way of speaking as the "official language," saying, "I think of the language of politicians and intellectuals as a kind of haute couture of language—very considered, long sentences." Instead, Smith expressed interest in the "unofficial language," saying, "I'm always interested in talking to the people who are not presenting what happened. . . . I'm interested in the people who are still walking around without their verbal clothes on . . . who can't get through a sentence" (The Aspen Institute, 2020). Smith's analogy describes participants working to construct meaning and make sense of their experiences in the moment rather than offering a prepared, practiced response.

Ethnodrama also offers an opportunity to place participants and their ideas in dialogues that might not otherwise happen. For example, I co-created a VPL project about political polarization in the United States that interviewed participants from across the political spectrum and then had actors perform their perspectives and viewpoints sitting alongside one another on stage. In reality, this kind of gathering of viewpoints in the same room might not be possible, but ethnodrama allowed it to happen. Individuals might have refused to enter into a dialogue with someone they disagreed with, but with ethnodrama, I could construct a fictional interaction between participants with opposing viewpoints, using their exact words and gestures as they delivered them. As a result, the audience experienced those fictional conversations, which complicated their understanding of political polarization in the United States. My project drew inspiration from the work of Carmen Meyers (2021), who created an ethnodrama from interviews she conducted with women

in New York City and Phoenix, Arizona, following the 2016 presidential election. Meyers interviewed women from across the political spectrum and placed them in dialogue with one another to explore the possibility of what might happen when people with opposing viewpoints come together and attempt to have a conversation. In a follow-up ethnodrama entitled *Two Truths and a Lie*, Meyers (2023) performed a set number of interviews from that same dataset and asked audiences to consider truths and lies about each person she performed as a way to examine how an audience's implicit biases might affect how they receive an individual's story.

Ethnodrama shares this power to gather multiple voices with oral history. Oral historians interview participants to gather stories from various viewpoints and experiences to complicate the understanding of a historical event or moment (Janesick, 2020; Summerskill, 2021). Historical accounts are influenced by point of view, often favoring the experiences of the elite class and those in power. Oral historians work to shift the focus to the testimonials of everyday people as a way to "balance the historical record" (Summerskill, 2021, p. 23). When that shift occurs, a complication arises around truth, as we suddenly become aware of the multiple perspectives and experiences that can exist around a single event. Participants' stories about their experiences are the catalysts for this complication. In considering the complex subject of truth in oral history, Madison (2018) writes, "Stories bind us: 'The shortest distance between two people is a story.' This short distance is where truths meet and gather" (p. 129). Within that quotation, Madison quotes Patti Digh, author, activist, and master storyteller. Madison's use of the plural "truths" reflects the power of oral history and ethnodrama as qualitative research methods, as they acknowledge that a single truth does not exist. Both forms encourage their audiences to embrace the complexity of multiple truths coexisting within one event, experience, or phenomenon.

Ethnodrama can disrupt that which we think we understand. As with all ABR practices, ethnodrama can evoke, provoke, and disrupt our preconceived notions and biases (Leavy, 2020b, 2023), what Mienczakowski (2001) referred to as its "emancipatory and educational potential" (p. 469). I have repeatedly experienced how ethnodrama can disrupt expectations around a particular topic or idea. My work in ethnodrama has confronted my own beliefs about various topics, and I have seen the same hold true for creative team members, audiences, and interview participants. For example, each time I begin a new project, I have some ideas about what I might discover through my investigation of the central research question, but I am consistently surprised by how wrong I am or how much more expansive my findings turn out to be. My exploration through ethnodrama frequently reveals the unexpected. When that unexpected finding goes against my own belief system or preferred way of thinking, the temptation always exists to silence the finding. However, staying open to these discoveries, albeit uncomfortable and unsettling, has helped me learn more than simply pursuing projects that confirm my own beliefs and biases.

Because Mienczakowski (1995, 2001) associated ethnodrama with emancipation and education, scholars often cite it as applicable to projects that explore issues of social justice or intend to instigate social change (Denzin, 2018; Leavy, 2020b; Saldaña, 2005, 2011a; Snow, 2022; Summerskill, 2021). I agree with their assertion and believe in the possibilities of ethnodrama in these areas. However, I also agree with Saldaña's (2011a) reminder for artist-researchers to remain realistic about what ethnodrama and ethnotheatre can achieve regarding social justice and social change. An ethnodrama does not have to disrupt complex systems or change people's minds to be considered relevant or successful.

Over many years of creating ethnodrama and caring deeply about the topics and issues that drove my creations, I have adopted a different goal: *helping participants, creative team members, and audiences to understand what they think and why they think it.* Because I often work on political and socially minded topics, people frequently assume that I intend to change people's minds about their beliefs; those assumptions are incorrect. I make ethnodrama and ethnotheatre so that all who participate in whatever capacity can consider or reconsider their own ways of thinking about a particular topic. If they experience an ethnodrama and its processes and still feel the same way about the topic at hand but have greater clarity about why, I consider that a success. Disruption from an ethnodrama may lead to a moment of cognitive dissonance. However, whether this disruption catalyzes change immediately, in the future, or at all depends entirely on the individual and their perception of the ethnodrama and its findings.

Sociologist Mario L. Small (2019) argues that contemporary society is deficient in qualitative literacy, which he defines as "the ability to understand, handle, and properly interpret qualitative evidence." This deficiency makes it difficult to differentiate between fact and opinion because of how those different forms of information are presented and interpreted. Small and Calarco (2022) also identify how this absence of qualitative literacy impacts polarization, social science, and public discourse. I extend this impact to how we interact with and differentiate our understanding of each other. Working as an arts-based researcher and using ethnodrama can be an antidote to this deficiency. As you will learn, ethnodrama demands careful listening and analysis, and a slowing down of how we consume qualitative data, which increases qualitative literacy, heightens awareness, and calls into question what we think we understand.

Ethnodrama catalyzes meaning-making in an audience and extends the data collection process. As a qualitative, ABR methodology, ethnodrama avoids drawing positivist conclusions for an audience. Rather, ethnodrama invites audiences to consider the various points of view presented and then asks them to draw their own conclusions about what they have experienced through the performance dissemination. One could argue that all art forms offer a similar kind of implicit invitation, asking the audience to interpret a song, novel, painting, or live performance. While I agree with that argument and identify that my artistic impulses come from a similar place, not all art making engenders the deeper analysis and meaning making that ethnodrama can catalyze in an audience. Nor do all artists intend to engage an audience in a complex dialogue through their work. They create art for art's sake rather than with the explicit intention to stimulate further questioning, discovery, and reflection. This difference in intention distinguishes the artist from the artist-researcher and a play created from interviews from ethnodrama.

An ethnodrama emerges from an artist-researcher's investigation of a central research question. Through data collection and multiple forms of analysis, the artist-researcher synthesizes their findings for an audience and then asks them to interpret that synthesis for themselves. The audience should experience a sense of agency during dissemination because the ethnodrama does not tell them what to think or how to feel. The ethnodrama in performance should leave space for an audience to question the findings, draw their own conclusions, and simultaneously pique their interests, so that they pursue their own postperformance investigations. In the same way that reading an academic article might inspire the reader to look at other works cited throughout, an ethnodrama might encourage audiences to consider different perspectives and points of view. This ability to activate

curiosity and empathy aligns ethnodrama with other forms of arts-based research as well (Kara, 2020; Leavy, 2020b).

Finally, ethnodrama can extend the research beyond dissemination and catalyze an additional round of data collection during and after the audience experiences the performance event. If the central research question drives the creation and dissemination of the ethnodrama, a subquestion can explore the audience's response to the ethnodrama's findings. For example, an artist-researcher can poll an audience throughout a performance to uncover which viewpoints resonate most with them. Similarly, a postperformance survey or focus group might measure what the audience has learned through their experiences with the data, while simultaneously evaluating the effectiveness of the ethnodrama in delivering the findings. The potential of an ethnodrama to foster further exploration and discovery through its performance offers exciting and unique possibilities for an artist-researcher.

Preparing to Create Ethnodrama

In considering ethnodrama as a research paradigm of choice, the artist-researcher should have the qualifications and the experience to tackle the aesthetic demands of the form: script development, staging conventions, live performance, and presence of an audience. Throughout this book, I intentionally use the language of theatre making because one of the main challenges to ethnodrama and ethnotheatre comes from inexperienced artists and researchers attempting to use the form to generate and report their findings without the necessary theatrical training. The artistry and aesthetics of their work suffer as a result, as does the analysis and dissemination of their research findings.

Given the word "drama" in its name, ethnodrama must engage artistry and aesthetics equally with all other elements of the research practice. Creating a theatrically compelling ethnodrama demands the ability to think critically and aesthetically about dramatic structure and to edit effectively, skills that playwrights and dramaturgs gain through specialized training and years of experience. Simultaneously, ethnodrama demands precise research techniques around data collection, coding, and analysis, skills that develop through training and mentoring in more traditional research methodologies. Ethnodrama requires the artist-researcher to value the ethical standards necessary for research involving human beings as participants. Similarly, staging an ethnotheatrical performance compels an artist-researcher to think like a director, a role that requires an understanding of performance theory and interpersonal skills to engage with actors and other creative team members while maintaining a clarity of vision and awareness of researcher bias and epistemology (Salvatore, 2025).

Without a balance between artistry and research, ethnodrama becomes static, vague, and overly complicated for an audience. Then, research findings get lost because they are never communicated clearly in performance. The movement to recognize ethnodrama as a legitimate form of qualitative, ABR has made significant strides over the last 30 years. However, when we create and present an aesthetically lacking piece of ethnodrama or ethnotheatre, we undermine the progress that arts-based researchers have worked so hard to achieve. To combat this issue, researchers engaging with ethnodrama must have strong skills in their academic disciplines and the craft of making theatre. Accomplished researchers develop their skills over time and are mentored by those who came before them. Accomplished artists are no different (Salvatore, 2025).

If ethnodrama seems like a research modality you would like to use, here are some suggestions to consider:

Identify and catalog your experiences with theatre. If you want to use ethnodrama and ethnotheatre for your research project, take some time to reflect on your past experiences with theatre. Consider whether those experiences provide you with enough background to use a methodology that privileges and centers theatre as its primary mode of expression. Please note that I'm talking about live theatre, not film or television. Some questions to consider:

- What is your primary relationship to theatre as an art form? Audience member, theatre maker, or both?
- If you have previously worked on theatre projects, what role(s) have you played in those processes? Actor? Director? Designer? Playwright? Producer? Stage manager? Other?
- What about these past experiences inspires you to use theatre for your research project?

Consider these questions carefully and honestly. If you have limited theatre experience overall, particularly as a theatre maker, you should reconsider using ethnodrama for your project. I'm being frank here because there is a long and unfortunate history of people deciding that they can work in the theatre (and other art forms, for that matter) with no training or experience. I have also seen aspiring ethnodramatists, with training primarily as actors, encounter significant struggles as they attempted to research and create their projects because they lacked any training or experience in playwriting or directing.

As an artist-researcher using ethnodrama, my work lives squarely in a qualitative realm; therefore, I cannot suddenly decide to do a project that requires me to analyze quantitative data by programming code and running regressions. If I wanted to incorporate quantitative data analysis into a project, I would find a collaborator who has those skills. The same holds for using a methodology as specialized as ethnodrama. If you want to use ethnodrama but have limited theatrical experience, identify a collaborator with the necessary artistic skills and work jointly rather than independently. I cannot overemphasize the importance of theatre skills and techniques when attempting this work. Once you assess your relationship and past experiences with theatre, the choice to use ethnodrama and how to use it most effectively should also be more apparent.

Read other research projects that use ethnodrama. This advice may sound logical and straightforward; if so, you're ahead of the game. However, if you have not read any other research projects using ethnodrama, begin here. I discuss the literature review in Chapter 2, but before solidifying a project idea, I recommend exploring how other researchers, especially those within your academic discipline, have used ethnodrama in their work. Read other research studies to understand how ethnodrama is applied in various contexts. I have included a list of studies and projects in the Additional Resources section of this book for your consideration, but I encourage you to conduct a keyword search in the disciplines that matter to you.

Read plays. Again, this advice also relates to the literature review, but it goes beyond simply reading other ethnodramas. Plays, also called scripts, have a unique way of presenting on the page, and reading a script requires an understanding of formatting. A traditional script includes stage directions that define the play's setting and provide information about how the characters in the play may move around in different settings. The dialogue between the characters in the play also appears in a particular format on the page. These added elements can make reading a script more challenging than reading a novel or journal article. The reader has to imagine how the script moves from the page onto the stage in performance. Researchers interested in using ethnodrama should read plays to become familiar with how writers present plays as scripts. Ethnodramatic scripts may have their own unique qualities, so once you understand how to read a traditional script, you can move on to scripts categorized as ethnodrama. Aspiring artist-researchers aiming to use ethnodrama must understand the repertoire they seek to emulate. This book's Additional Resources section contains a list of plays for your consideration, including documentary and verbatim theatre plays with ethnodramatic qualities. You should seek out others that align with your interests.

My experience with Shakespeare helps to clarify this advice to read plays. As I began college, I had a cursory understanding of Shakespeare's work from the four plays we had to read in high school, where we focused mainly on understanding the plot and analyzing literary devices. We read the plays as part of our English curriculum, and while we had assignments to perform scenes from the plays, we received very little instruction about how to do that. As a result, we gained a limited understanding of the plays as theatrical productions. My best training moment with Shakespeare's plays came during a semester in college where I had to read one play a week for 14 weeks. By the time I finished that semester, the immersion of reading 14 plays helped me to understand how Shakespeare used language to create action for actors to play on stage in performance. The professor for that course, Lois Potter, also encouraged us to watch the plays rather than simply read them because playwrights write plays to be performed—seen and heard by an audience—not read in isolation.

Attend theatre performances. Lois Potter was right. When I watched Shakespeare's plays in performance, either through a campus production or a video recording, I understood much more about the story, the characters, the playwright's technique, and most of all, theatre. I took Professor Potter's class over 30 years ago, and her advice has stayed with me. To work in the theatre, we have to see plays in performance. If you want to use ethnodrama, attend performances of plays. If you can access a script for the play you will see, read it before you go. Then, reread it after you see the play. What did experiencing the play in performance help to clarify for you about the play's content and message? How similar or different was the production that you saw compared to the script that you read? Thinking about these questions helps to illuminate how a director, designers, and actors make choices as they interpret a script.

As an ethnodramatist, you analyze and interpret data to formulate a script, and then a creative team brings that script to life as a piece of ethnotheatre. As I create my work, I draw inspiration from the work of other artists. I shared earlier the impact of Anna Deavere Smith's work on my practice. Through reading, seeing, and studying her work, I found inspiration for my own projects. While I didn't study with Smith, all the exposure to her work taught me invaluable lessons and gave me the courage to give it a go. Then, I

gained inspiration from other theatre makers, musicians, choreographers, dancers, photographers, and visual artists. Engaging with these different performances and presentations helped me develop my artistic sensibilities, which all come into play when I create an ethnodrama. Consider attending plays as part of the "literature review" you must complete to use ethnodrama most effectively for your project. And if you can see performances of ethnodramas, that's even better!

Seek out training and experience as a theatre maker. If you aspire to use ethnodrama in your work as a researcher, you should find ways to acquire training and experience as a theatre maker. While acting experience and acting classes can be helpful, experiences with playwriting, directing, and design provide additional skills that more directly help create a script and a production. If you have an affiliation with a college or university, you can contact the theatre department to see what courses they offer and which instructors might welcome you in to audit some of their class sessions. Introductory courses can provide basic skills in these areas and introduce exercises that serve as building blocks for a larger project. If you work outside of an academic setting, a community arts organization might be a source of additional training, as they sometimes offer training courses for a nominal fee. In recent years, following the COVID-19 pandemic, more of these opportunities emerged as online offerings, so you have a variety of ways to gain more experience.

I also suggest looking for opportunities to observe rehearsals of a production in progress. Again, colleges and universities could be great resources, but you could also contact amateur community theatre organizations to see if a director might allow you to observe their rehearsal process. Much of what I learned about directing came from watching other directors work and through trial and error. Same with design. I have some training in lighting design, but I also learned a lot by observing designers working through technical and dress rehearsals. Training in the arts still relies heavily on an apprenticeship model. Early career artists spend much time observing and assisting artists with more experience, absorbing their processes and techniques. Then, the early career artist begins to develop their own unique ways to accomplish their creative goals. They must learn the technique from someone else before making it uniquely their own. Being a fly on the wall in a rehearsal process can provide many opportunities for learning about how a play moves from a script into production and, ultimately, to a performance in front of an audience.

Understand qualitative ABR methods. Similarly, if you aspire to create ethnodrama through your work as an artist, you should gain an understanding of qualitative ABR methods and vocabulary. When I started teaching at a university, I had minimal experience with qualitative research methods. I understood how to conduct historical research, and I knew how to conduct an interview, but I did not have the experience or the vocabulary to articulate how those two skills might come together as a research methodology.

I have spent many hours conversing about qualitative and ABR practices with generous colleagues in the social sciences, education, and theatre education. These mentors helped me gain the necessary vocabulary to situate my creative practice as a research methodology and to write this book. They have suggested books and articles to read, introduced terminology and processes, and offered other ways of naming and describing what I do as an artist. I also learned that researchers who interviewed participants for a project within an academic environment paid much closer attention to the ethical implications of their processes than artists working outside of an academic environment. This increased

awareness of ethics has become integral to my process as an artist-researcher and ethnodramatist, which I illuminate more in the coming chapters.

Similar to my earlier suggestion about theatre courses, if you can find a way to take or audit an introductory course on qualitative or ABR methods, the exposure to terminology alone can help to demystify the idea of "research." Human beings tend to be naturally curious, and research processes satisfy our impulses to investigate and understand. The language of research formalizes our curiosity, which can sometimes inadvertently alienate people who are unfamiliar with that language. As you learn some of the research terminology and processes, you may discover that you are already doing them in your art making and calling them something else.

At one point, a colleague suggested that I teach a graduate-level research methods course focused on the process I used to create my interview theatre work. I remember feeling excited by the opportunity, while worrying about navigating the research language. I accepted the offer anyway and began to prepare for the course. Through preparation and teaching, I adopted research language that helped to explain my process and began to embrace my artistic work as valid research. Teaching others how to do what I do allowed me to step into the role of artist-researcher, and once I realized that role suited me, I didn't look back.

Practice! If you plan to use ethnodrama for your thesis or dissertation project or want to make an ethnodrama the showpiece of your tenure or promotion portfolio, make sure it's not your first time making one. When inviting guests over for dinner, most people don't try a recipe for a new dish for the first time. They've made the recipe before, tested it, worked out the kinks, balanced the seasonings, and then considered serving the dish to their guests. Similarly, I don't suggest testing your skills with ethnodrama for the first time on a high-stakes project.

Because ethnodrama is still considered an innovative form of dissemination, audiences tend to be wowed by it, which might make it tempting to use for a project that you hope leaves a mark. I've seen ethnodramas that were mediocre theatre pieces, including ones I created, but audiences loved them. However, just because an audience loved something doesn't necessarily mean it was a sound demonstration of technique. If a panel of experts in your academic field reviews the same project, they might see something different than an audience sees. Questions about your research design, coding process, ethical orientation, and analysis might arise. You must be able to answer those questions; more experience with the form makes that easier. When your academic career rests on a project, I recommend practicing with a smaller project before tackling a larger, more high-profile one. Practice, make mistakes, and learn from them. Repetition and self-reflection lead to a better understanding of a method. Allow yourself enough time to develop your technique before asking others to evaluate it.

In this first chapter, I've shared some terminology, context, and recommendations for proceeding. The following chapters guide you through my unique, step-by-step process for creating ethnodrama. Other valid approaches exist; I encourage you to explore those as well. Stay open to your questions and ideas as they emerge, but allow yourself to absorb what's on these pages. Learn this process, and your own unique approach to creating ethnodrama will follow.

ACTIVITIES

Keyword Search

Go to your favorite web browser and type "ethnodrama" into the search bar. Look at the entries that pop up and see if you can identify any commonalities and differences in how scholars and practitioners talk about the form and use the vocabulary. If you are affiliated with or have access to an academic institution's library, try the same exercise with its online library search. Try the keyword search for published books, but then also try a similar search with journal articles and databases. Notice the kinds of subjects in which researchers have used ethnodrama as their methodology. Take note of anything that surprises you about the emerging topics and keep those in mind as you read Chapter 2 of this book and beyond.

Theatrical Experience Checklist

Make a list of your past experiences with creating a theatrical production. If they were primarily acting experiences, identify what style of performance. Were they realistic plays? Do you have experience with more presentational performances? If your experiences are more varied, in what other areas do you have experience? Have you directed? Designed? Produced? Stage managed? Once you have your list, consider whether you have any gaps in your knowledge and how you might fill those gaps. Do you need to acquire more training? Do you need to build out your team of collaborators? Identify what steps you can take so your ethnodrama can move smoothly from script to production.

Eavesdrop to Start a Scene

As you'll soon discover, creating an ethnodrama relies on listening carefully and understanding how dialogue works between characters in a play. Try this basic exercise you might encounter in an introductory playwriting class to practice these two skills. Go to a public setting like a park or a coffee shop. Bring a notebook and find an open seat close to other people engaged in a conversation. Without being obtrusive, see if you can pick up a few lines of continuous dialogue from each person. Jot those lines down in your notebook, then use those initial lines to begin a conversation between two characters. Use your imagination from there to create an exchange between two fictional characters that go back and forth 20 times (10 lines of dialogue for each character). When you get close to the end of the exchange, somehow bring the conversation to an end. You've written a simple scene between two fictional characters. Now, ethnodrama works differently, but this exercise gives you a simple introduction to constructing a short conversation between two characters. You've explored a basic building block of playwriting, and from there, you can build a series of scenes into a play. While the source material differs, an ethnodrama still utilizes the basic building blocks of playwriting.