

Institution: The University of Edinburgh
Unit of Assessment: 29 English Language and Literature
Title of case study: 4. Life as Story: the Applied Theatre Practice of Nicola McCartney
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Nicola McCartney's work as a practitioner of Applied Theatre has had impacts on civil society, education, and cultural life, contributing to transforming society by directly benefitting both vulnerable groups and theatre professionals internationally. Via her work with Rachel's House, a prisoner re-entry programme in Ohio, 7 women ex-offenders and 8 members of staff benefitted from McCartney's use of dramatic narrative as the basis for therapeutic interventions and to facilitate the integration of disenfranchised groups into mainstream communities. 80 Theatre professionals in Russia, and pupils and teachers from 8 Moscow schools, have also benefitted from training in McCartney's Applied Theatre methods, providing them with a new and innovative way of working with disenfranchised groups and individuals.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Nicola McCartney's work brings together the enabling benefits of dramatic narrative with the social and educational benefits of working in the theatre. Applied Theatre is a widely recognized term in Performance Studies for the use of the theatrical process to address social issues encountered by a specific client group. In the course of a 15 year career as an award-winning playwright and dramaturge, encompassing two tenures at the University of Edinburgh (2005-08; and 2011 to the present), McCartney has developed a unique Applied Theatre method. This uses principles of dramatic narrative to furnish individuals (particularly those who face some form of social exclusion or whose access to the arts is impeded) with the skills to better interpret their own life circumstances, and to address these circumstances successfully via conflict resolution.</p> <p>Since it involves both the production of creative work and the development of the Applied Theatre process, the research and associated insights underpinning this case study have developed directly out of practice. McCartney's ongoing work as a playwright frequently draws on giving voice to the experiences of those involved in real events (as seen in the plays contributing to <i>1 in 5</i> (2011), designed for performance in the preserved Limavady Workhouse). She began to develop her insights into the value of enabling vulnerable individuals to treat their lives constructively as stories, over the course of her work with Class Act, Traverse Theatre's flagship ongoing education project. In 2005-06, McCartney travelled to Moscow, where she led a Class Act workshop in Applied Theatre with young people from both mainstream schools and social care. McCartney returned to Russia later in 2006 to deliver 'Class Act Caucasus', which brought together young people from four regions of the Caucasus with High School students in Moscow. This was very soon after the Belsan hostage crisis in the Northern Caucasus, and McCartney developed techniques to enable the young people present to process their own responses to the event as well as to engage in conflict resolution. McCartney wrote a docu-drama based on the insights generated by these workshops, <i>Beyond the Thunder Cloud</i>, which was broadcast by BBC Radio 4 in 2006. Her methods were further developed through her work with Category A prisoners at HMP Shotts in 2010-11. McCartney worked with Scottish Opera to help 33 Category A prisoners to devise an opera (<i>Round 5</i>), which was performed in front of MSPs (cited in the Scottish Government Report on National Performing Companies, 2009-10). As well as serving as librettist, McCartney ran workshops on narrative structure. She has further developed her methodology through her practice as a dramaturge for works such as Vanishing Point's <i>Wonderland</i> (2012). Thus McCartney's practice-led insights into Applied Theatre have resulted in the development of a methodology which can be deployed in very diverse contexts.</p> <p>McCartney's principal insight as a playwright and Applied Theatre practitioner is that treating life as story can enable individuals to frame their own life experiences as narratives and thus develop a more considered, constructive response to situations of conflict or deprivation. She has established a method whereby, through interviews and their own creative writing developed in workshop, she helps participants delineate the four levels of conflict (internal, inter-personal,</p>

social, and extra-personal) in their own life story "plays". These levels of conflict then link to her concept of dramatic character composition: Angels (motivational drives), Myths (belief systems) and Demons (forces of antagonism). McCartney has developed a means of working with participants in Applied Theatre workshops to unpick the interrelationship between the character/participant, the forces of antagonism facing them, and how their motivations and belief systems shape that conflict.

3. References to the research

URLs below are original links. Should any be unavailable, see archived copies at: <https://www.wiki.ed.ac.uk/display/REF2014REF3B/UoA+29>.

3.1 Opera libretto. Nicola McCartney. *Round 5*. 2012. Script for an opera for Scottish Opera (can be supplied by HEI on request). Video: <http://participatory.oaksbark.org/round-5-at-hmp-shotts/>. Scottish Government Report: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/02/03083628/10>

3.2 DVD of play. Nicola McCartney (dramaturge). *Wonderland*. 2012. Play for Vanishing Point Theatre Company. (DVD can be supplied by HEI on request.) <http://www.vanishing-point.org/productions/wonderland/production-history/>

3.3 Play script. Nicola McCartney. *1 in 5*. November 2011. Script for a site-specific play for Kabosh Theatre Company, Belfast. (Submitted in REF2.)

3.4 DVD of radio play. Nicola McCartney. *Beyond the Thunder Cloud*. 2006. DVD of a BBC radio 4 docu-drama based on Class Act Caucasus. (DVD can be supplied by HEI on request.) http://www.radiolistings.co.uk/programmes/b/be/beyond_the_thundercloud.html

4. Details of the impact

The insights provided by McCartney's work in Applied Theatre have produced significant, direct benefits for an international constituency of disenfranchised or vulnerable client groups, and theatre practitioners.

In April 2012 McCartney was invited to conduct a series of workshops with Rachel's House, a nationally-recognized prisoner re-entry programme for female ex-offenders in the State of Ohio, USA. Many of the women involved in Rachel's House are extremely vulnerable, subject to drug addictions and at risk of homelessness as they re-enter mainstream society. Their vulnerability means that many lead very disordered lives. Through a series of one-to-one interviews and workshop writing exercises McCartney encouraged and instructed the women in creating a dramatic narrative using their own lives as material. Dr Susann Marks, the Co-director of Rachel's House confirms that the process validated the women's experiences and "facilitated constructive reflection on the challenges facing them." In a documentary of the project, one participant commented that McCartney's unique method of treating life as story created a safe, creative environment in which this woman could develop insights into her past behavior: "She's [McCartney] a life-saver, really, because she can talk to you and get you to say things that I would normally keep inside." Another participant, who was addicted to crack cocaine, found that shaping her life story into a dramatic narrative enabled her to fill in gaps in her memory due to her drug use. Dr Marks commented that McCartney's method thus provided the women with "a narrative for how to avoid situations that may contribute to relapse, thus providing another tool in the prevention of future recidivism." (Corroborating sources 5.1, 5.2)

The enabling benefits of McCartney's Applied Theatre process were complemented by the previously unavailable opportunity for the prisoners to work with a professional dramaturge, to develop new skills, and to participate more fully in public discourse surrounding the re-entry of ex-offenders into society. This aspect of the project has been especially valuable to the participants: one remarked that by "tell[ing] my story, maybe [it] will help others"; for another woman, McCartney's work helped her to see that they were not telling "just one story, it's many stories as one". (Corroborating sources 5.1, 5.2)

The Rachel's House project itself is a further beneficiary of McCartney's methodology, which provides them with previously unavailable means to fulfill their mission. A draft version of a single play based on the women's experiences was read for the women and staff by professional actors

in April 2013. Dr Marks affirmed that this had the “specific effect of helping staff to reflect on their own ways of working,” particularly for one member of staff who “resolved to rethink her approach to sharing in a group setting.” The play has also raised international awareness of Rachel’s House: the draft was staged as part of the Traverse Theatre’s Dream Play project, during the 2012 Edinburgh Fringe. Joyce MacMillan, theatre critic for The Scotsman, called it “one of the key performances of this year’s fringe.” (Corroborating sources: 5.2, 5.3)

The impact of McCartney’s work has extended to influencing the use of Applied Theatre methods by professional theatre practitioners and educators internationally. In October 2011 she returned to Moscow to train professional playwrights and directors in using her methods of Applied Theatre with high-school age students, as part of the Big Break Children’s Festival (jointly funded by British Council Moscow and Teatre Praktika, a Moscow-based theatre company). This 2-day professional seminar was followed by a 4-day playwriting workshop attended by 8 teachers and 24 pupils from eight Moscow public schools. One teacher declared afterwards that he would “apply in my professional activities” the strategies introduced by McCartney. In 2012 she was keynote speaker at the Theatre Leaders of the Future Summer School funded by the Moscow Ministry of Culture at the Meyerhold Centre, in Moscow, which was attended by 40 practitioners. Here McCartney lectured on the importance of Applied Theatre in terms of both audience development and personal/social development within communities, and how to link these two strands through performance; and a practical session on how to adapt artistic practice to working with specific client groups. She returned again in June 2013 to give the keynote address to 40 practitioners, as well as a week-long workshop with 20 theatre administrators and critics, on using drama with high-school children. The Head of the Theatre Leaders School confirmed that McCartney’s work was “ground-breaking in a Russian Theatre context”, and that McCartney “presented the community of Russian theatre professionals with an entirely new and innovative way of working with disenfranchised groups and individuals.” (corroborating sources 5.4, 5.5)

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

URLs below are original links. Should any be unavailable, see archived copies at:

<https://www.wiki.ed.ac.uk/display/REF2014REF3B/UoA+29>.

5.1 Rachel’s House project website (includes clip of documentary about the project):

<http://www.lowerlights.org/9-programs/33-theater-project> . Corroborates women’s responses to McCartney’s Rachel’s House project.

5.2 Formal Letter from Co-director of Rachel’s House project. Confirms beneficial impacts of McCartney’s project on both prisoners and staff of Rachel’s House. (Can be supplied by HEI on request.)

5.3 Press review. Joyce McMillan. ‘Dream Plays 4,5,and 6 – Rachel’s House, My Loneliness Is Killing Me, Sex And Drugs And Rock And Roll’ 22nd August 2012, Joyce McMillan Online (<http://joycemcmillan.wordpress.com/2012/08/22/dream-plays-45ands-6-rachels-house-my-loneliness-is-killing-me-sex-and-drugs-and-rock-and-roll/>) Confirms Fringe performance of play based on experience of women prisoners, and increased international awareness of Rachel’s House. (Can be supplied by HEI on request.)

5.4 Formal Letter from Head of Theatre Leaders of the Future. Confirms impact of McCartney’s research on theatre practitioners and its ‘groundbreaking’ innovations in Russia. (Can be supplied by HEI on request.)

5.5 Formal Letter from Director of Class Act Big Break. Corroborates impact of McCartney’s methods on school students, and the teachers and theatre practitioners working with them in Russia. (Can be supplied by HEI on request.)