

Play scripts as knowledge objects

[Introduction for “Playwriting as Research” special section of *New Writing*]

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Playwriting practice is a nascent and under-valued research area. It is much like screenwriting studies in this regard (Baker 2013). Indeed, this special section of *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* is the first of its kind. That is, it is the first to treat playwriting as *Creative Writing* (disciplinarily speaking) and the first to publish a collection of stage plays as creative writing research outputs in their own right. A search of doctoral theses in Australia, the UK and the United States shows that of the many completed PhDs that included a stage script as a creative component, only a handful focussed on performance writing as a *writing practice*. Even fewer discussed playwriting as a research practice in its own right, and most of those seemed to be coming out of Australia. This is surprising, perhaps even shocking, given that plays have been studied seriously in the academy for generations, especially in the UK. Indeed, entire disciplines have emerged out of this study, including Shakespeare Studies, Performance Studies and Writing for Performance. Scholarly work within these disciplines has been, for the most part, focussed on published plays *as texts* to be hermeneutically mined, on the history of the staging, publication and performance of plays in the canon (e.g. Shakespeare) or on the social and cultural contexts in which these canonical plays were written, published or performed. Scholars of Writing for Performance have tended, unsurprisingly, to focus on live performance, using scripts merely as reference points in a reflection on performance or as ways to document live acts. In many senses, Writing for Performance scholarship has been more about writing for actors than about writing as a distinct creative and research practice, with a few notable exceptions (see Harris & Holman Jones 2016).

To date, few academic journals have published play scripts as research artefacts in their own right, especially not research artefacts that are the result of a practice-led research process. Apart from significant and seminal work on the performance aspects of dramatic writing, on topics such as bodies, spaces and audiences/reception (again, see Harris & Holman Jones 2016), very little scholarly work has been done on the *writing* side of the ‘writing for performance’ process. As a first step, this special section of *New Writing* foregrounds the initial stage of the play writing process – the script idea – and provides a space for the publication of play scripts created within a practice-led research process, or in response to a problem or research question. The initial idea, problem or research question that motivated or informed the writing of the plays published here is discussed in preambles that precede each play.

It is intended that publishing the plays with attendant research preambles will counter the current situation in which scripts are not valued or acknowledged as research artefacts in their own right by showing how an initial research question informs the writing of plot, characterisation, setting, dialogue and more, and how the knowledge produced by exploring that idea permeates every aspect of the play. Furthermore, publishing the plays with preambles shows how the research problem can be clearly identified as a theme of the work. Indeed, it becomes clear that these themes are apparent to readers and audiences whether or not they are aware of the research question or idea informing the writing of the play.

The situation in which scripts are not valued (or are undervalued) as research, or as fully-fledged creative works worthy of publication, stems from the persistent idea that play scripts are not stand-alone works but merely performance prompts for the stage productions and performances based on them (Baker 2013 & 2016). This is especially true for plays written in the academy, which are created to address a problem or explore a research question and

often, unlike plays commissioned by commercial production companies, without a production already planned. Hopefully, this undervaluing of play scripts as knowledge objects (or research outputs) will begin to change with this special section. This will change more quickly the more that playwriting is explored from within the discipline of Creative Writing. Within Creative Writing, the play script can be studied as an artefact that evidences specific creative writing practices that explore specific themes and produces and disseminates new knowledge. In this discipline it is possible, therefore, to study stage plays as more than mere performance prompts for the ‘real’ text that is the live performance or stage production. When the study of play writing is undertaken in such a way, a play script can be studied both as a text in, and of, itself (irrespective of production or performance) and as an artefact coming out of a specific writing and research practice.

Within Creative Writing departments, ‘scripts can also be seen as texts or artefacts that document the practices and investigations that are a part of the writing process itself’ (Baker, 2013, 7). Also, play writing as an academic sub-discipline within Creative Writing might prove to be a valuable position from which to investigate writing practice as it manifests in the theatre and performance arts, which emphasises a more collaborative approach to writing than, say, poetry or fiction. The Creative Writing discipline is also the perfect home for study of plays that are the research output of writing academics.

Studies in Writing for Performance that have focussed on scripts rather than live performance have rightly emphasised the ways that the textual meanings of play scripts are produced in ‘the radical contingency of performance—the unpredictable, often playful intersection of history, material conditions, social contexts, and reception that ... makes theatrical meaning a participatory act’ (Bulman 1995, 1). It is important to note that this participatory act is not dependent on performance, it also happens in the act of *reading*. The script on the page is also a participatory space.

John Hall (2013, 358) notes:

Writing is verb and practice, and *textuality* the general outcome of all writing, a second or third nature that weaves through the world as the already written, reactivated every time an act of reading or textual memory takes place. Textuality is produced and reproduced through writing and reading, its material and aesthetic forms proliferating without any sign of decay (emphasis original)

Hall’s poetics aside, it is clear that this textuality includes the meanings and, importantly, knowledge produced and disseminated by the written work, by the play script. In other words, play scripts as texts, as published works, are knowledge objects that trigger a number of processes in the reader. These processes include, but are not limited to:

- An affective experience containing non-verbal knowledge related to the scripted story (Baker 2012 & 2017);
- An engagement with the narrative that is intertextually linked to multiple other narratives the reader has been exposed to in the past (Baker 2012 & 2017);
- An assimilation of information contained in the narrative and connection of that information to other information leading to new understandings about both the new and the old information, which is new knowledge (Baker 2012 & 2017);

- Simultaneous creation of both a privileged or dominant meaning and individualised and highly idiosyncratic meanings of the narrative experienced, which is also new knowledge;
- An experience of pleasure or dissatisfaction;
- New memories of that experience of pleasure or dissatisfaction (and of the meanings of the narrative) that link to (and thus alter) other, sometimes similar, sometimes apparently un-associated, older memories;
- Ongoing and unpredictable change to the nature of the reader's subjectivity driven by these new experiences, by the new knowledge and new and altered memories (Baker 2012 & 2017).

There isn't space here to explore all of these processes, so I will focus on the first one, as I have covered most of the others in previous publications. The first process experienced by readers—the affective experience containing non-verbal knowledge related to the scripted story—relates to the reason for this special section of *New Writing*, the recognition of play scripts as research artefacts and knowledge objects. The most important thing to note about the knowledge these plays produce, contain and disseminate is that it is *performative* (Butler 1990). That is, the knowledge occurs in the act of reading, and perhaps later reflection and discussion, and thus 'produces not only a theoretical understanding, which it does, but also produces knowledge as an affective experience' (Baker 2012, 178). This is an alternative route to knowing, a different way of coming to understand the themes or issues investigated in creative works such as play scripts. As we engage with cultural artefacts, or texts, we experience them in quite an embodied way (Baker 2017). This is certainly true of performed works, but also of works that we read on the page. 'We laugh, we cringe, we cry, we feel good, we feel bad, we sympathise, we identify, we rage' (Baker 2017, 327). These affective experiences inform us about material realities and lived experiences that we may never have understood otherwise (Baker 2017). To put it simply, affective experiences are another (and a non-theoretical) way of producing knowledge (Haseman & Mafe 2009).

The play scripts produced with a practice-led research framework can be seen to disseminate knowledge in the context of narratives which readers directly experience, thus providing an alternative (and affective) way of coming to understand the themes or issues investigated in the research. Affect, as both a kind of research and a kind of knowledge, is also performative (Baker 2017). In the moment of experience (or reading) we simultaneously understand or know something about that experience. Accepting that affect is both a kind of performative research and a type of performative knowledge 'radically changes the way that we think about research in the arts' (Baker 2012, 94). More to the point, it radically changes the way we think about knowledge. If we accept that 'knowledge may be able to be figured as affect... as something that happens in the mind' (Cooke 2011, 60) then it is not contained in the text or script but arises from the participatory act of reading. Knowledge in this context is dynamic and processual rather than static ~~and-or~~ bound by what is contained on the page.

As an emerging field of research, Playwriting Studies has an exciting time ahead of it, with many intriguing questions to be explored. As Playwriting Studies develops its initial focus will likely be on explorations of creative practice, as was the case with Creative Writing and Screenwriting Studies as they formed into distinct disciplines. The alignments and resonances between Playwriting Studies and Creative Writing are significant and can only increase. Creative Writing has been a leader in the development of practice-led research and continues

to produce outstanding work on the subject (see, for example, Brien 2006; Smith & Dean 2009; Webb & Brien 2011). Thus, Creative Writing as a discipline is well-equipped to make a foundational and significant contribution to the emerging area of Playwriting Studies by doing what it already does best: 'privileging play scripts as texts in, and of, themselves, as well as artefacts of a creative practice, that produce and disseminate new knowledge' (Baker 2013, 7).

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