

RATING THE THEATRE PRACTITIONER: A SOUTH AFRICAN CASE-STUDY¹

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Introduction:

The debate on *Practice as Research (PAR)* in South Africa shares the same sense of frustration experienced internationally. This feeling has grown stronger over the years, particularly with the advent of a new, highly pragmatic, *outcomes based* approach to tertiary education and a controversial system of financial reward given for research outputs in South Africa.

Numerous meetings and conferences have addressed this over the years, but with limited impact on the larger system(s). Most influential in theatre in recent years have been a series of biennial conferences named *Dramatic Learning Spaces (DLS)* - leading to an ongoing *PAR* working group, a national *Peer Review Project (PRP)* and the 2007 *IFTR Annual Conference* in Stellenbosch.

Though *formal, national* acceptance still eludes the country's artist-teachers, these initiatives have had some effect, since almost all Universities now recognise *PAR* to some extent and have (internal) recognition system(s) in place for creative outputs and processes as research.

The *specific* local debate was fuelled by the a unique rewards system for *research outputs*, introduced in the 1980s by the *Department of Education (DOE)* as part of its tertiary funding formula. Aimed at encouraging academic research and publication, this scheme pays institutions a *specific amount per output unit* produced by their academic staff. (Output units are classified in 5 categories and are only awarded for publication in journals accredited by the *DOE*.) Since many institutions pass (part of) the money on to the particular department or individual researcher, this becomes a source of considerable additional research funds for prolific writers.

Unfortunately the programme has never recognized creative outputs as the equivalent of formal articles or books, and adamantly refuses to do so. Two strong and compelling arguments are made for their exclusion: (1) the process of making art is an autonomous activity with its own unique infrastructures and funding and reward systems and (2) it is difficult to obtain peer reviews of outputs.

Let us now turn to *another* relatively unique South African initiative.

The NRF Rating Process

In the 1980's the *NRF* introduced a *rating system* for natural scientists and in 2002 extended it to the social sciences and humanities. Intended to advance the quality and quantity of research at tertiary institutions, it uses a national and international benchmarking system that focuses on *individual researchers* rather than on *institutions* (as is done elsewhere). Utilizing peer review and various review and appeal processes, it places applicants in six broad categories, based primarily on their active output of the previous seven years:

- A: A leading *international* scholar
- B: Someone with *considerable international recognition*
- C: A leading *national* scholar
- P: Young researchers (normally younger than 35 years of age) with *exceptional potential*.
- Y: Young researchers with the *potential to establish themselves* as researchers within a five-year period after evaluation
- NR Not Rated, i.e. *does not qualify* for any of the categories.

(For details see <http://www.nrf.ac.za>)

Generally welcomed, the extension was nevertheless controversial because of a perceived lack of consistent and “objective” *evaluation and assessment criteria* for the humanities. To their credit, the *NRF* included the *arts* (creative arts, performing arts and design) in the process and altered their definition of *research* to include conventional research (e.g. the history and analysis of theatre) as well as the *artistic* output of the staff and students at tertiary institutions.

Stating that *research* refers to “original investigation undertaken to gain knowledge and/or enhance understanding”, the definition adds two new items, namely: “the creation and development of the intellectual infrastructure of subjects and disciplines (e.g. through dictionaries, scholarly editions, catalogues and contributions to major research databases)” and “the invention or generation of ideas, images, performances and artifacts where these manifestly embody new or substantially developed insights”. (See <http://www.nrf.ac.za>)

The significance of this is that a strategically placed governmental institution now recognized artist-researchers, journal and book editors, curators, encyclopaedists and archivists, *as researchers*.

Key issues raised by the rating process

Predictably, the *application* of these principles to the arts has not been easy. Let us consider some core issues foregrounded in the initial stages of implementation.

The notion of "research" in the arts:

Below are four possible approaches to the notion of "theatre research":

(a) Arts research as “the study **OF** the arts”:

The *object of study* is the work of art, the *methods* are rooted in arts theory and the research *output* is a read paper or a written report, presented at conferences, in journals, books and electronic format. This is the conventional approach used by literary, dramatological, musicological and art-historical studies and part of the venerable tradition of written scholarship. There are no reward and funding problems here.

(b) Arts research as “a study undertaken **THROUGH/BY MEANS OF** the arts”.

Here the object of study is some issue (e.g. in society), the methodology is *the process of making the work of art* and the output is a *performance (and/or a published text)*. This thus constitutes a unique form of “soft science”, where the work of art itself is seen as simultaneously “process” and “research output”.

In the words of John Gardner (1978, p 107-109):

“When fiction becomes thought... the writer makes discoveries which, in the act of discovering them in his fiction, he communicates to his readers”

This notion lies at the heart of the international *PAR* debate. Unfortunately, few conventional research institutions see the approach as legitimate, unless some *other* person (a critic or scholar) *interprets* the work in a written and formally published document. While the creator/performer could take on the multiple roles of creator, observer and researcher, few artists actually want to write conventional reports (or feel competent to do so), and thus tend to insist that the performance must be both the *thing studied* and the *report about the study*.

(c) Arts research as “the **DEVELOPMENT OF NEW TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES** for making art”:

Making an artwork is interpreted as a form of “*developmental research*”, in which the range and nature of an art-form is expanded. An accepted core idea in the natural and industrial sciences, it is considered problematic in the arts, *unless a more conventional report is part of the process*.

(d) Arts research as “the development of **NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND INSTRUMENTS** for use by artists”

Related to (c), but not problematic, is the development of new technologies (e.g. new paints or lighting systems) for producing art. This process and the registration of patents is a standard and accepted process of reporting in the natural and industrial sciences.

Defining and rating "research outputs"

Clearly, complex as the process of arts research is, the issue of what constitutes an acceptable *outcome* or *output* in the arts is even more problematic. For millenia the prime means of reportage has been the written word and the notion that the art work could be both process and report has been consistently rejected. In this respect the *NRF*'s new definition, outlining a broader, generic notion of what may constitute "outputs" in the arts, is of particular importance. Using this, the *NRF Panel* developed a working document (*Key Research Areas*), containing a list of acceptable types of research output (with examples). Included were scripts for, performances in, and the direction and design of live and recorded presentations, "*provided they can be shown to have entered the public domain and manifestly embody new or substantially developed insights*".

(<http://www.nrf.ac.za>)

The italicised statement was a crucial and useful criterion for distinguishing between performances which entail a *specific research aim* and distinguishable *research outcomes*, and the bulk of performances, which do not. Substantial problems arose however when the panel had to assess the *research* component involved in applications from teachers, performers or technicians, individuals whose contributions tend to be subservient to the performance as a whole. Consider two examples:

(1) A *playwright* writes a play to explore a social issue and the play is publicly performed and/or published. Here playmaking is a *research process* and the findings are provided *in the play*. A similar argument may be made for a *director's* exploration of themes in an existing play. These examples clearly fit the new, expanded definition of research.

(2) A *performer* plays the leading role in one of the above. Is this "research"? The usual answer is no, for s/he is basically *interpreting* and filling out a character as set by the author and/or director. The argument may be that research is required to "find" the character - but what precisely is the *research outcome* here? (The same would apply to a musician in an orchestra, a costume designer, lighting technician or stage manager.)

Improvisational and group work in theatre is another matter of course, for the *ensemble* now becomes the creator, with the performance a group product. Thus everyone involved can lay claim to it as team research and the performance as *their* (joint) output – as long as supporting materials document the process.

Which brings us to another crucial issue: The question of *replicability* and the need for some kind of supportive material.

The replicability of research

The notion of *replicability* is universally accepted in the evaluation research output. In theory this should not be an issue for serious theatre practitioners, since they look at other people's work not to repeat it, but to do something that has not yet been done.

Unfortunately most assessment procedures do not focus on *process*, but on the final *product*, and “replicability” suggests that any output must contain *within itself*, a description of the aims, the methods, the process(es) utilized, *as well as* the result(s). It is this the peer reviewer requires to be able to evaluate the output/results against the aims, intentions and methodology set by the researcher/artist, for without it only the *result* can be judged, the rest merely intuited.

The conventional proposal is that the researcher/artist provide the peer review panel with a *written* outline of the process. (Perhaps as a programme note or a catalogue, even in the form of a video or taped discussion².) This minimum requirement is set for all conventional researchers, but it is often vehemently rejected (also at meetings of the *NRF* Panel itself!) as a discriminatory imposition, denying the fundamental nature of the communication processes in the arts. The argument is that *the work must speak for itself*, communicating both its aims, its processes and its results in one presentation, or performance.

A compelling argument in the mouth of an eloquent artist-performer, it (a) is not always easy to do and (b) remains unacceptable to conventional researchers and research administrators, who see it as a strategy for privileging the “artist-as-researcher” above any other researcher (a physicist for example), who *may* (or often *may not*) have an innate ability to use words.

Milly Taylor (2002, p.5) suggests that artist/researchers develop “ [a] new form of presentation/ performance/ documentation [...] to enable understanding of other stages of the investigation and the conclusions”, which might be more acceptable to the research establishment. Logical as it sounds, the idea is unlikely to appeal to most artists, for at heart they want to be *seen* and *treated* as researchers, but not to *think or act* like them. They want to share in the privileges of researchers (i.e. grants, sabbaticals, rewards), but on their own terms as “artists”, retaining traditional privileges *denied* scientists (arts grants, arts awards and income from artworks).

This is perhaps the most crucial hurdle to overcome if the serious artist/researcher is to be recognized, not only by the rating system, but also by all other awards systems, including the *DOE* funding of tertiary education. The key seems to me to lie in the *nature* of the contextual discussion (and motivational supporting materials) required (as Taylor also suggests), rather than in the fact that it *is* being required.

Peer review.

Despite its own perceived fallability, peer review is the most broadly accepted principle for the assessment of academic excellence and the credibility of the academic enterprise. It is thus also one of the most troubling questions in the call to recognize creative outputs. How is it to be done? *Can* it in fact be done? Who is to pay for the undoubted expenses to be incurred to have ephemeral performances and site bound exhibitions spread across the

globe evaluated? How is the very range and variety of the arts to be comparatively judged, weighed and compared?

Peer review of conventional research works because the existing systems of journal and monograph publication *depend on peer review themselves*. By contrast, much of the work in the arts is "published" in non-conventional ways and most of it is *not* subject to conventional forms of peer review, though of course some may be.

None of the existing bodies (tertiary institutions, the *NRF*, and the *DOE*), view peer review of the individual output as a flexible matter, and certainly not as something which can simply be waived in the case of the arts. Indeed they consider the lack of a system of peer review (and the difficulties of actually creating one) another *key* stumbling block in considering the arts outputs as research outputs.

To this end the NRF took a pro-active step in 2005 by funding an experimental project on peer review, in which a national project team, led by Mark Fleishman of the University of Cape Town, sought to develop a national peer-review system for theatre, with a first round of trial evaluations in 2006, followed by an assessment meeting and a second round in 2007. The results are currently being evaluated and written up³.

Referees

Besides utilizing *existing* peer review in the various disciplines, the *NRF* rating process also has its own peer reviewing processes - and this presents some very particular problems in the arts.

Every application goes to a number of *peer reviewers*, whose reports form the real basis for the rating. The *NRF Panel*, which consists of one specialist per broad arts discipline (drama, art, music and architecture), only considers and interprets the *referee reports*, not the *applications* themselves, while the administrative staff and management of the *NRF* do not comment on applications⁴. Obtaining six competent referees per candidate is thus enormously important – both for the applicant and for the panel – but extremely difficult given the small pool of academic artists in the country. This is complicated by the difficulty all panels have in obtaining *good* and *useful* responses – or even *any* response at all. Much of the *NRF* panel and administration's time is spent simply chasing down enough referees.

Five factors seem to play a crucial role in the arts:

- (a) *Unfamiliarity with the rating process and the role played by peer review of the art work(s)*. Creative artists often find it difficult to judge another colleague's work *as research* and write an assessment which is understandable to non-specialists. Even experienced critics and historians often provide an evaluation of the person and his/her impact, rather than of the *quality of the particular work(s)*.

- (b) *Personal bias.* This can be either be overly positive or overly negative. The former may lead to blindly supportive comments on *any* candidate, irrespective of the merit of the work. (A natural reaction perhaps in a beleaguered arts community.) Negative bias is common in both the small and specialized worlds of the arts *and* academia, ridden with internecine strife, ideological differences, petty jealousies and so on.
- (c) *Rejection of the rating system per se.* The whole system is in its infancy (as far as the social sciences and humanities are concerned) and not everyone has welcomed it. When approached as referees some people attack the credibility of the system or refuse to participate.
- (d) *Overloading of available academics.* This is especially true of those able to write a referee report of substance.
- (e) *Unfamiliarity with the person and/or work.* International referees in particular have a problem here. Not having seen the live work, how are they able to judge? The key problem is of course that so much of the work in the arts is ephemeral or it is too bulky (or tied to a context) to be moved.

What is required is a working peer review system producing critical, well-substantiated and clearly communicated referee reports, by referees who have accepted, understand and support the process – and receive rewards for participation. Only this will make the system work and find general acceptance.

Quantity versus quality and impact

Not always well understood is the *difference* between the **DET rewards** system and the **NRF rating** system. The former is simply a (mechanical) way of rewarding a researcher for having produced a piece of peer reviewed work - irrespective of merit or impact of the output. Valuable as the process has been to the expansion of research at tertiary level, it is a rather blunt instrument, not primarily concerned with raising the *quality* of research, merely with increasing the *volume of the output*.

The rating system has the opposite aim, primarily focused on the stature and impact of the individual *as researcher within his/her field* and thus the *quality* of the work – the originality of the process(es) and findings, the impact and influence on future research/art production - is of paramount importance.

Most other processes of recognition, appointment and promotion at academic institutions tend to be influenced by the same two opposing (though not un-reconcilable) imperatives: to appoint, promote and/or support the proficient (income-producing) “hack” or the highly-rated (and prestige-producing) “genius”.

Facilitation of research

Really requiring substantial article in itself is the question of “research facilitators” – those editors, publishers, facilitators, archivists, producers, curators and compilers who drive the peer reviewing processes and publish, display or present the outcomes. Totally denied in many evaluation, reward and rating processes nationally and internationally over the years, their work, ironically, informs the whole notion of a *research community* and the very *academic system* itself – for both presuppose the existence of a specific infrastructure, set up and maintained by people whose sole role may be to *facilitate* the production of research outcomes by others.

Neither the *DET* nor the *NRF* yet acknowledge this in their systems of recognition (though – to be fair – most academic institutions do value more conventional activities such as editorials and book compilations, if only internally).

International exposure.

Finally the emphasis on international stature means that no-one whose work is not known and appreciated *outside* of the country is rated higher than a "C". In a system utilizing an international benchmarking system this makes sense, though each subject in the social sciences and humanities can make a case for the regional/local nature of some aspects of its studies (e.g. site-specific performances of San narratives), which do not "transport" easily to international interest and understanding. More critically, anything *not written in English* is automatically disqualified from categories A and B, since few international peer referees understand any of the other 11 national languages in South Africa, some which have produced a substantial body of academic literature.

The *NRF* remains adamant that the international dimension makes A-rated researchers so sought after, therefore the onus remains on artists to devise creative ways to place their work in the international arena.

Conclusion

The *NRF*'s rating system is only *one* of many recognition and reward systems in place for the artist in the academic community, but it is a particularly interesting and positive initiative by a scientific institution keen on expanding its own horizons and enhancing the *quality* of research in South Africa. This in itself has gone a long way towards revitalising the *PAR* debate in Southern Africa.

Notes

- 1 First presented at *Dramatic Learning Spaces: A South African Research Conference* in Pietermaritzburg on 24 April, 2004, published in the *South African Theatre Journal (SATJ)* Vol. 19:9-34 in 2005. Based on the author's experiences as a founding member of the *NRF Rating Panel*.

- 2 Interestingly, the *NRF* definition seems to favour this idea and actually opens up possibilities for the inclusion of substantial illustrated programme notes as part of a production, when they accept a *art exhibition catalogue* as a research output.
- 3 Based on the *Report on a Workshop on Research in Drama, Theatre and Performance in South African HE Institutions*, available on the UCT Drama website (www.drama.uct.ac.za).
- 4 On the whole process of rating - including the many checks and balances built into the system – see the NRF website (<http://www.nrf.ac.za>).

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