



FINDING IDENTITY THROUGH DIRECTING

Soseh Yekanians



Finding Identity Through Directing

Finding Identity Through Directing is a practice-led autoethnographical monograph that provides an in-depth exploration into the field of theatre directing and an individual's endless creative pursuit for belonging. The book specifically examines how a culturally displaced individual may find a sense of identity through directing and addresses the internal struggles of belonging, acceptance and Self that are often experienced by those who have confronted cultural unhoming. The first half of the book scrutinises Dr Yekanians' own identity as an Iranian-born Armenian-Australian and how she struggled with belonging growing up in a world that, for the most part, was unaccepting of her differences. The second half looks at how theatre directing aided her (re)discovery of Self. While evidence shows that within the past decade there has been a growing interest in the vocation of theatre directing, embarking on a career within this field, while exciting, can often be a daunting and experimental vocation. *Finding Identity Through Directing* questions this conundrum and specifically asks, in a competitive artistic profession that is rapidly developing, what attracts an individual to the authoritative role of the director and what are the underlying motivations of this attraction? By uncovering that there is more to the role of the director than the mere finality of a production, we can observe that the theatre is a promising setting for cultural exchanges in dialogue and for personal development. Theatre directing as the vehicle for these expansions and progressions of self can potentially address the internal struggles of identity often experienced by those who, in some form, have encountered cultural displacement.

Dr Soseh Yekanians is a theatre director and academic whose research focuses on understandings of Self, belonging and identity formation with specific reference to theatre directing. She is also fascinated with how theatre and the performing arts more generally can speak to an individual's sense of displacement. Dr Yekanians hopes that with more research on how cultural stereotypes manifest in individuals through the pressures of society and how these stereotypes are performed via theatrical representations onstage, performance as a cultural phenomenon can begin to break down harmful stereotypes and offer cross-cultural exchanges that develop and empower people's (re)discovery of identity offstage.



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To my *extra*-ordinary parents, I will never be able to repay you for the sacrifices you made and continue to make for me – for coming to this great country [Australia] in the first place and giving up your ambitions so that I could follow mine. If only every parent were that selfless. Միբայնուհանդերձ, այս գրածքը ձեր անունով է.

Not all those who wander are lost.

– J. R. R. Tolkien (1954)

Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	ix
<i>Foreword by Lyndall Adams</i>	x
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiv
Introduction	1
<i>Field of study</i>	1
<i>Structure of the book</i>	4
<i>Methodology</i>	5
Practice-led research	6
Tacit knowledge	7
Autoethnography and reflexivity	8
The interviews	9
In summary	11
<i>References</i>	11
1 Attracted to theatre: setting the scene	13
<i>Prologue</i>	13
<i>The essence of theatre</i>	14
<i>Theatre as a social construct</i>	17
<i>The theatre and me</i>	19
<i>References</i>	22
2 Seeking identity: searching for self	24
<i>Identifying identity</i>	24
<i>What's in a home?</i>	30
<i>Belonging and displacement</i>	33
<i>Flirting with the “unhomely” and the “in-between”</i>	35

The other 37

References 41

3 Affinity with Armenia: a narrative in two parts 44

Part I: what went before 44

Birth of a nation 44

The beginnings of the invaders 46

The Armenian Genocide 47

The Republic of Armenia today 51

My voyage from a dream to reality 52

September 2008 52

Part II: the journey back 54

September 2014 54

A New Armenia or a new me? 55

References 61

4 Dating directing: finding the perfect match 64

Deconstructing directing 64

Background 64

Collaborative research through the Kitchen Sink Collective 68

Turning points in the research 70

Moment one 70

Moment two 72

To be or not to be 73

Homing versus belonging 75

The director's journey 79

Immersion into the practice of directing 81

No Worries and *Uncle Jack* 81

Background 81

Stereotype, defamiliarisation and difference 83

References 93

Conclusion 95

Final thoughts 100

Appendix 102

Interview questions from phase 1 102

Interview questions from phase 2 103

Full list of theatre directors interviewed 104

Index

Figures

3.1	Laora’s kitchen, pantry, spare room and front yard in Tsaghkadzor (2014)	58
4.1	My portrayal of the “director’s spiral of creation within the theatre”	78
4.2	Georgia Metternick-Jones (2013), set (from <i>No Worries</i>)	86
4.3	Hannah Metternick-Jones (2013), costume sketches (from <i>No Worries</i>)	86
4.4	Production still (2014) (from <i>Uncle Jack</i>)	87
4.5	Production still (2014) (from <i>Uncle Jack</i>)	88
4.6	Production still (2013) (from <i>No Worries</i>)	90

Foreword

I am a fairly poor correspondent. Not through indifference. Being time poor is also a feeble excuse. Social media keeps me connected . . . enough. Then again, some conversations are unbroken. When I met this scholar in the making, I had an overload of postgraduate students. I wondered how I would ever manage. This one got under my skin. All shiny eyes and hair. Red lips and a smile so big that her nose crinkles. Soseh Yekanians is an actor and director with a voice trained to be heard. A personality big enough to fill a room. A Persian-Armenian-Australian at times wedged in between cultures.

What could bring us together in such close connection? Four-ish years on a PhD, yes. But I am a contemporary visual artist and academic, specialising in practice-led research. A phenomenologist interested in working with the body, the female body, the lived body that is determined and specific. My arts practice speaks to the lively concerns of feminisms, the day-to-day running of the lived body in a state of flux, defined and redefined by changing practices and discourses. In the studio, I rehearse the world through the body, performing the senses (sight, touch and memory) and making them visible and tangible (Meskimmon, 2003). Yekanians rehearses the world through the theatre. The discourses with which I work implicate contemporary arts practice in situated narratives than picture the ways I walk around in the world. Very much akin to the worlds Yekanians builds. As Terry Smith says,

In contemporaneity, world-picturing, place-making, and connectivity take many forms, tend in many directions. And operate in many dimensions, but keep circulating back to the four main themes that preoccupy contemporary artists: the changing sense of what it is to be in time, to be located or on the move, to find freedom within mediation, to piece together a sense of self from the fragmented strangeness that is all around us.

(2009, p. 235)

What is this book? A book about self-discovery and bringing the pieces of that fragmented strangeness into communication. A book about directing. A book about the process of cultural loss and recovery inside and outside the theatre. A book about dislocation. A book about Armenia. But mostly, it is a book about courage, resilience and passion. An eloquent exploration of the Armenian Genocide and its centrality to Armenian cultural identity, which raises questions about the politics

of memory and belonging. A life made through the rubble ruins of a place lost to the author. And yet it is a heritage that does not take no for an answer. No one else could write this book. An academic text, yes. But. An insight into the world of the diasporic. A herstory of the Armenian dispersion.

Watching Yekanians's trepidation as she prepared for her return to Armenia in 2014 gave me pause to reflect on just how significant this research was. Notions around *displacement*, the *other*, *belonging*, the *unhomely* and the *in-between* inform this narrative – themes that many individuals experience – enabling the reflexive praxis required to undertake such a brave journey of self-discovery. In this case an uneasy and at times painful Armenian self, which was extended through interviews with directors from multicultural backgrounds. These interviews are a fascinating insight into finding identity through the theatre and more than a glimpse at understanding the role of the director.

Dr Joyce Van Dyke from Harvard University examined the original PhD thesis. Van Dyke was unfamiliar with the academic *autoethnographical* approach taken but was persuaded of its validity and importance in its attempt to draw a circle around a fluid and indeterminate complex of ideas and experiences and to do justice to the not always mappable stages of the creative process. This thesis, in her view, was an ambitious, searching, honest and courageous project. In investigating the nexus of creative/artistic endeavour and personal development, especially in the *hidden* field of theatre directing, Yekanians expands the traditional purview of scholarly research and investigation. In particular, her questions about the motivation to become a theatre director in relation to one's own cultural displacement are, to Van Dyke's knowledge, both original and illuminating.

The methodology may seem to be simply an academic mechanism. It is, in many ways. What may not be readily apparent to many readers is the paucity of methodological writing in this field. Some may skip over this part, while some struggling to find their way through such a complex process will find it invaluable whether they reside inside or outside the theatre. The multi-method approach tailored to directorial practice is outlined in the introduction. This narrative scaffolds our understanding of the whole. It is woven together through the loom of interviews (Phases 1 and 2), the trip to Armenia (Phase 3), practice and literature reviews, journaling, the practice of directing, archival research for the director and creative development.

Van Dyke found the whole topic of theatre practice as a solvent for cultural displacement for all theatre practitioners, not just directors, something she would like to read and think more about. As for me, the narrating of Yekanians' personal journey, both literal and metaphorical, into her Armenian self makes for moving and provocative reading. The story told is honest, intimate and powerful.

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