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“A play is not a journal article:” A Review of Johnny Saldaña’s Ethnotheatre: Research from Page to Stage

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Johnny Saldaña’s (2011) book, Ethnotheatre: Research from Page to Stage, does exactly what it sets out to do: It is a hands-on guide that walks researchers across disciplines step-by-step through interpreting and representing data in an ethnodramatic format. It really is “research from page to stage.” For those with little theatre experience, Saldaña provides excellent suggestions for additional readings and comparisons of different types of plays. There is much merit in this book as a text for a qualitative research class or special interest class. The exercises provided are great way for students and researchers to be more reflective as they move towards ethnodrama or autoethnodrama as a new form of writing. Keywords: Ethnotheatre, Ethnodrama, Autoethnodrama, Qualitative Research

Johnny Saldaña’s book, *Ethnotheatre: Research from Page to Stage*, does exactly what it sets out to do: It is a hands-on guide that walks both aspiring and established researchers step-by-step through interpreting and representing data in an ethnodramatic format. It really is “research from page to stage.” From the terms and definitions presented in Chapter One to the studio exercises, to the suggested additional readings, to the how to’s of writing, to putting work on stage and capturing the ethnotheatre aesthetic, Saldaña captures attention early on with a tone that is non-intimidating and accessible. Anyone interested in writing ethnodrama would benefit from reading this book.

Saldaña’s (2011) book is written for broad readership across disciplines as a playwriting textbook. Because one of the fundamental steps to becoming a better playwright is reading good scripts, Saldaña guides readers to accessible, published scripts with also keeps readers abreast of new ethnodramatic and ethnotheatrical work as well. The book is divided into six chapters. Each chapter includes recommended readings that make an excellent addition to each chapter and allow readers to learn more about particular areas of ethnotheatre that capture their attention. Actual scripts or parts thereof are included in most of the chapters, adding impact and interest to learning as you move through the book. There are appendices at the end of the book that include sample consent forms and a detailed bibliography of additional resources.

Chapter one provides a strong overview for those new to ethnotheatre and it provides a good review for those who have experience. As someone who has experimented with script writing from data sets, I found the terms and definitions section (p. 12-13) especially helpful in understanding how different terms related to qualitative research and in particular, ethnotheatre, are used and how they can be used interchangeably. Saldaña (2011) stresses the idea that “the common thread that weaves through all of these terms is that the script or performance text is solidly rooted in nonfictional, researched reality – not realism, but reality” (p. 14). The chapter provides an excellent description of various approaches to ethnodramatic playwriting and Saldaña

presents examples of bad ethnodramatic scholarship and artistry as well. He does this with grace, experience, and professionalism. It becomes easy to see how “bad” is bad and good is “good” against the backdrop of the pages that follow giving examples of good ethnodramatic scholarship. Finally, I found it important that Saldaña touches on the ethics of representation and stresses how and why researchers must consider this when choosing performance pieces as representation.

Chapter two focuses on studio exercises designed for individuals in playwriting performance, studies, or qualitative classrooms. I also think this chapter would be practical for anyone who wants to take a structured approach to considering their own research. From an instructional perspective, the exercises in this book do not appear difficult to plan and can be modified to fit the needs of the particular class or group of students. Because many undergraduate and graduate students are so connected via technology, it was refreshing to see that Saldaña (2011) chose to integrate the use of social media into a couple of the exercises as well.

Chapters three and four are entitled, “Writing Ethnodramatic Monologue.” The first chapter describes the structure of a monologue, distinguishing between monologue and dialogue and how to incorporate them in plays. Saldaña (2011) does a good job of providing examples that include both prose and poetic arrangements. What captured me most in this chapter was Saldaña’s recommendation for every qualitative researcher and ethnodramatist to tell his/her own story first. His advice? “You really can’t learn how to tell someone else’s story until you first or also learn how to tell your own” (p. 75). So true and something that can be easily taken for granted amidst research, writing, and teaching. Chapter three ends with exercises on autoethnographic monologue development, suggesting a variety of topics that lend themselves to deep reflection for researchers.

Though Chapter four has the same title as Chapter three, it differs from its sister chapter in that the conversation moves more towards the mechanics of ethnodramatic writing. Saldaña (2011) explains that the function of dialogue is “to inform listeners about a particular cultural work and what it’s like to live in it” (p. 100). He articulates how to *write* dialogue. For example, building on the line of the previous character demonstrates active listening and “create[s] plausible interaction between them” (p. 101). In offering such lessons, he also begs the question that plagues many ethnodramatists, should the researcher be included or not? Saldaña suggests the key to answering this question lies in considering the more important question, “Whose story is it?” (p. 111). While it is reiterated throughout the book that many ethnodramas are political and take up a particular stand, Saldaña reminds readers in Chapter Four “they generally do so by letting their participant/characters speak for themselves” (p. 121).

Reality is the focus of Chapter five; the writing and staging of ethnotheatre. The chapter concentrates specifically on stage production including lighting, setting, costumes, etc. This was something I was not ready to engage in at this point in my work. However, those working in communications, performance studies, drama, or the like, will find this chapter acts as a guide for developing and making decisions regarding production. But, never fear, for others like me, Chapter five is not to be thumbed over. The end of the chapter contains good advice on copyright including links to copyright information and how to copyright your own work. Also, if you are struggling to find a

place to publish your script, Saldaña (2011) offers up some great journal suggestions in this chapter as well.

In the final chapter, Chapter six, Saldaña (2011) takes a reflective approach to his expertise in ethnotheatre and goes back to a question asked of him during one of his presentations, “Is there an ethnotheatre aesthetic?” While his initial response to that question was simply, “yes,” Saldaña admits that through much reflection, a more precise explanation is owed. So, in this chapter, he offers up that explanation by presenting five assertions of an ethnotheatre aesthetic and reasserts that “Theatre is a democratic forum for multiple and diverse voices and spectators to assemble and experience particular renderings about the human condition” (p. 213).

Judging by the sticky-tabs jutting out from the edges of my copy of this book, there were many things that stood out but there were four main things I liked best: (a) the book grabs attention in the beginning with an example of ethnotheatre, (b) the suggested comparative readings in Chapter four are excellent and provide readers with a way of understanding and getting involved in the many forms of ethnotheatre, (c) the plays woven throughout provide examples of ethnodramatic writing and keep the reader engaged in the process of “how” to write an ethnodrama, and (d) it is accessible for new researchers, those without theater training or playwriting experience and it is an excellent “go to” book for those who have experience with all of the above.

The only criticism I have stems from my love-hate relationship with Chapter four. I love that there are specific suggestions on the mechanics of writing dialogue and wonderful suggestions for comparative readings. However, Saldaña began to lose me in the details of story lining and plotting of ethnodrama. Though I recognize this as an extremely important aspect of creating an ethnodrama that captures and engages the audience while maintaining the true voice of the participants, my mind wandered through that part of the chapter. It might have been too much detail too early on for those new to play writing.

Overall, Saldaña has done an amazing job with this book. I think it is a great companion to his earlier book, *Ethnodrama: An anthology of reality theatre* (Saldaña, 2005) and would make an excellent text for a research class as Saldaña suggests. Being a qualitative researcher interested in ethnotheatre, I particularly valued the content and style this book. While I valued the overviews, particulars, and exercises provided, I valued most Saldaña’s reminder that to “Stop thinking like a social scientist and start thinking like an artist” (p. 209) and to remember that “Ethnodrama and ethnotheatre provide opportunities for artists and audiences to more closely examine how we and others experience life, and to shape those moments into new aesthetic forms that bring us closer to notions of what is real and what is true as we individually and collectively construct them” (p. 213). This book is a worthy addition to the library of any novice or experienced researcher as well as anyone interested in learning more about ethnotheatre and ethnodramatic writing.

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Author Note

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