

Article

Applied Theatre: Research-Based Theatre, or Theatre-Based Research? Exploring the Possibilities of Finding Social, Spatial, and Cognitive Justice in Informal Housing Settlements in India, or *Tales from the Banyan Tree*

Selina Busby

The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London, London NW3 3HY, UK;
selina.busby@cssd.ac.uk

Abstract: This article draws on a twenty-year relationship of short-term interventions with Dalit communities living in informal settlements, sub-cities and urban villages in Mumbai, that have sought to create public theatre events based on research by and with communities that celebrate, problematise and interrogate sustainable urban living. In looking back over the developments and changes to our working methods in Mumbai, I explore how the projects priorities the roles of the community as both researchers and artists. I consider where a specific applied theatre project, which focuses on site specific storytelling with Dalit communities in Worli Koliwada and Dharavi, functions on a continuum of interactive, participatory, and emancipatory practice, research and performance. Applied Theatre practices should not and cannot remain static, they need to be constantly reformed and as practitioners and researchers we need to constantly re-examine the ways in which we work. This chapter poses two central questions: firstly, can this long-term partnership between practitioners, researchers and artists from the UK and India working with community members genuinely be a space for co-creating knowledge and theatre? And secondly, if so, is this Theatre-based Research or Research Based Theatre? I interrogate Applied Theatre's potential to create a space of cognitive justice, which must be the next step for applied theatre, along-side its more widely accepted aims of searching for social and spatial justice and which places the community as both artists and researchers. The Dalit social reality is one of oppression, based on three axes: social, economic and gender. The chapter explores how working as co-researchers and the public performance of their stories has been a form of 'active citizenship' for these participants and is a key part of their strategy in their demand for policy changes. In looking forward I ask how working in international partnerships with community members can promote cognitive justice and go beyond a merely participatory practice. I consider why it is vital for the field that applied theatre practice includes partners from both the global south and north working together to co-create knowledge, new methods of practice to ensure an applied theatre knowledge democracy. In doing so I will discuss if and how this work might be considered to be Theatre-based Research.



Citation: Busby, Selina. 2024. Applied Theatre: Research-Based Theatre, or Theatre-Based Research? Exploring the Possibilities of Finding Social, Spatial, and Cognitive Justice in Informal Housing Settlements in India, or *Tales from the Banyan Tree*. *Arts* 13: 63. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts13020063>

Academic Editors: George Belliveau, Joe Salvatore and Kathryn Dawson

Received: 31 January 2024

Revised: 20 March 2024

Accepted: 23 March 2024

Published: 29 March 2024

Keywords: applied theatre; cognitive justice; India; co-researchers



Copyright: © 2024 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

This article draws on an eighteen-year relationship of short-term theatre interventions with communities living in informal settlements, sub-cities, and urban villages in Mumbai, India. These applied theatre interventions have sought to create public theatre events based on research *by* and *with* communities that celebrate, problematise, and interrogate sustainable urban living. Since 2018, the methods we have used both to make theatre and undertake research have developed iteratively. There have also been many changes in the field of applied theatre, which is how I have described this work. In this article, I focus on

one project that ran between 2018 and 2019 which positioned the women of Worli Koliwada, and my project partner Divya Bhatia and I, as co-researchers and artists.

I consider where this site-specific storytelling project might function on a continuum of interactive, participatory, and emancipatory theatre practice; research; and performance. Here, I pose three central questions: Firstly, can an applied theatre project with researchers and theatre makers from India and the UK working together with women whose lived reality is one of social, economic, spatial and gender injustice genuinely be a space for co-creating both knowledge and theatre where cognitive justice is equally as important as social and spatial justice? Secondly, if this is possible, is this theatre-based research or research-based theatre? And thirdly, do either of these terms or sets of practices reduce the resulting performance to instrumentalist theatre?

I consider how for the women of Worli Koliwada these participants working as co-researchers and the public performance of their stories has been a form of 'active citizenship' for them and what is a key part of their strategy in their demand for policy change. Looking forward, I ask how working in international partnerships with community members can promote cognitive justice and go beyond participatory practice to embrace emancipatory practice. I consider why it is vital for the field that applied theatre practice includes partners from both the global south and north working together to co-create knowledge and new methods of practice to ensure an applied theatre knowledge democracy. In doing so, I discuss if and how this work might be considered to be theatre-based research and consider what research methods are being employed. My primary argument is that more attention to cognitive justice is required if we are to work with participants as co-researchers and that this ethical responsibility on the part of university researchers is more important than the titles of research methods.

Tales From the Banyan Tree:

Maybe the Stage Directions, or Maybe a Pre-text, or Maybe the "Case" to Be Studied.

It's humid, so humid that my eyelids and the back of my knees are sticky. I am sitting on a shallow concrete step, my knees drawn up high and my elbows resting on them, a steady trickle of sweat runs down my spine, seeping into my shirt, making me feel damp to my core. My cotton clothing is sticking to me in too many places to count, the strands of my hair that have escaped the scrunchie supposedly holding it back and off my neck, have turned to frizz. I am leaving a damp puddle on the step I am sitting on and face a crossroads of narrow lanes; three of the lanes are no more than two metres wide, the third wider—maybe as much as five meters wide. The meeting places of the lanes are empty, save for a large Banyan tree—two-storey concrete homes line the lanes on all sides; a set of iron steps leads from the ground floor home on my left to the upstairs one. Sunlight only penetrates this space by the tree in front of the steps; the rest of the area is in a gloomy shade. In front of the houses in the lanes is a cluster of maybe thirty women in brightly coloured saris, some have small children with them playing at their feet—some are sitting on the steps like me, some standing, some jostling to see what is happening. . . nothing yet!

All of us are focused on the space where the lanes meet in front of the tree. These are the women of Worli Koliwada; an urban village on the edge of the sea on the south side of Mumbai. There is a sense of anticipation, excitement, and nervousness in the air. Everyone is still; no-one is talking—everyone is waiting; a thing is about to happen.

Maybe Act One, or Maybe the Problem Statement

Suddenly there is movement. Three women, one in red, one in blue and purple, and one in orange, scurry into the space around which we are all crowded. One from the top of the iron staircase carefully but quickly picks her way down through the children and women sitting on the steps; one rushes through the lane on my right—stepping over my feet to weave her way through the crowd lining the lane in front of me, dodging around people as quickly as she can. Some move out of her way, others she navigates around with a deftness only those living in Mumbai have. A third, almost running into the centre of the empty space, turns on her heels and speeds along the lane to my left. Each carries a large plate or platter laden with bowls—one is covered with a cloth, one also has a jug that precariously wobbles, one appears to be heavy. Each darts through the crowd and space eager to deliver the goods in their hands.

As they reach their destinations, a fourth woman bursts through the crowd to my right sweeping the lane with a yard brush—manically pushing through the dust and dirt, the sound of the hard bristles meeting concrete is creating a rhythm that is also hypnotic. She sweeps at the people—sweeping their feet—I feel the bristles on my bare toes, breathe in the clouds of dust as she moves on past me and through the space. Suddenly to my right five women are forming a human pyramid, around a streetlight. Three make the base—by forming a circle crouched down with their knees wide—resting on their neighbours' knees—two leap up to stand on the thighs of the first woman. A sixth woman passes a small child to these two, the child who is maybe four or five, scrambles up the women to stand on their shoulders, pulls a rag out from under their shirt and starts to polish the streetlamp. The scene lasts no more than ten seconds. The triangle is disentangled in half that time, as another woman scurries down the widest lane—dragging with her three children—one of whom skips eagerly with her, one of whom stops to wave at any child they catch a glimpse of in the crowd; the last resistant to go wherever it is their mother is intent on taking them, dragging their heels, she pulls back as far as her arm will let them.

As the woman laden down by the reluctant child disappears into the crowd, three more women process through the space each carrying a long, long, long white ribbon. One by one they line up in front of the tree and begin winding their ribbon around it—each weaving in and out—reminding me of the maypole dances of my English childhood, each woman circling the tree, ducking, and diving under and over the ribbons of the other women. As the last woman completes her seventh, and for each it is their seventh turn around the tree that completes the Vat Purmina ritual—all the performers appear from the crowd to stand in a circle and sing together. They sing a traditional Marathi song—they are laughing with each other as they sing—but I am told it's a sad song.

Maybe Act Two, Or Maybe the Literature Review

While still singing the women break out of the circle and scurry back into various points of the audience and once again the performers become hard to see amongst the people assembled to watch. After a moment of silence, three of them emerge, running and shouting, playing a game of tag, shouting giggling, almost catching hold of each other but always managing to slip through the fingers of the catcher, scarves flying behind them like tails caught in the breeze their rapid movements make in the airless lanes. As these three continued to tear around the space using audience members to hide behind, another three rush into the central space, one producing a piece of chalk and drawing the triangle grid of square boxes for a game of hopscotch as the other three skip and hop their way through a game, laughing shouting to friends in the gathering crowd to come and join them and play, as they used to when they were little.

The game is interrupted by joyous whooping and laughter as four women barrel through the audience. One sits on a bicycle, giggling madly and shouting at people to get out of the way; one holds her around the waist, running alongside her to make sure she doesn't slip off—a second is steering the bike and holding it up—while a third follows behind with her hands on the parcel rack at the back keeping the bike steady, straight and upright. They all laugh, and the sound is utterly infectious, the joy exhibited by the precariously balanced woman on the bicycle and her excited helpers is totally catching. They career to a dramatic halt, discard the bike—no, fling the bike—to the ground—leaving it lying in the space, its wheels still turning, as all the performers reform a circle and once again sing. This time a children's rhyme, which the audience gleefully joins in with. The song finishes. . . again the performers whirl away into the crowd while softly humming the melody of the song.

Maybe Act Three, or Maybe the Findings

A woman in an orange sari emerges from the crowd, with a tray. On the tray are four small clay cups of chai. She sits on the doorstep next to the one on which I am perched, her knee resting on my knee, my knee leaning on her knee. Three other women arrive chatting animatedly together and cluster on the concrete each taking a cup as they chatter about their children, they gossip about friends, and they complain about their mothers-in-law. I am within the group, part of a sisterhood, and yet outside the group, excluded by language and culture, and yet totally included—language isn't needed for understanding. We are five women 'hanging out'. But 'hanging out' with an audience. Another grouping of performers emerges from the ad hoc and informal audience. They carry vegetables and chopping boards; they squat and start to cut onions, knobbly green vegetables

that I don't recognise and tomatoes. One of the women is telling a story; I have no idea if it is fiction or reality, but the women around her chop while they are clearly wrapped up in the narrative, hanging on the first woman's every word, nudging each other with sharp elbows, raising an eyebrow every now and again, and then all bursting into vigorous bellowing gales of laughter. Those of us privileged to be sharing the space with them all laugh with them. A third group of women has snuck into the open space in front of the banyan tree. One of them carries a stool and a laptop; she quietly places the stool in front of the tree, which she then uses as a back rest, as she sits and opens the computer. Three women cluster around her looking at the screen as she speaks in Marathi, tracing her finger along the screen as she does so. Those around her nod, tilt their heads to one side or squint at the screen. . . . the woman on the stool looks at them eagerly asks if they understand; they nod to her and she continues. One by one the chai-drinking gossiping women leave me and move towards the woman on the stool, and the storytelling, vegetable-chopping women form a semi-circle around the small group huddled over the laptop. The woman on the stool welcomes each with a nod or a smile and begins her lesson again.

Once they are all assembled, they all start to giggle, to look to each other and stifle laughs, unsure how to end the performance. A man steps into the space and speaks in English; the first English heard for the last seven minutes, even though his language of comfort is Marathi, and he is fluent in Hindi. He says, "Come, dance, sing take your applause". The women do so and sing a Bollywood song that has been a firm favourite of the workshop room that we have been playing in for the last few days. The women sway and sing the song from a train-roof-top romance revelling in the risqué words, remembering the erotic dance moves from the silver screen, but not quite giving in to the temptation to really let rip. . . .but it's there, it's tangible, reckless joy and playful communitas, (Turner 1969) they know they could if they wanted to.

Is this theatre? Some would say not. Lasting a total of no more than seven minutes, with no tickets, no posters, no programme, no script; where is the director, the union-accredited performers? Those working in London's West End theatre district or on or off Broadway would, I am sure, say it is not. Is this research? Some would say no and ask where are the data, the statistics, and the cited references? Where are the researchers? What methodology was used? What are the research questions? Who is the corresponding author? Even theatre academics and those who understand what in the UK is called practice research and elsewhere practice as research would possibly conclude that this is not research.

I would claim that the women's performance is both theatre and research, but wonder if it is research-based theatre, or perhaps theatre-based research, and also pose the following question: is it important to make this distinction? It is researched-based theatre in the sense that it "is a creative mode of inquiry and knowledge exchange that uses embodied theatre-based approaches to address important social issues" (Shigematsu et al. 2021, p. 56). However, methodologically speaking, it is also a form of what Victoria Foster describes as, "collaborative arts-based research for social justice" (Foster 2016). Here, the art used to discover new knowledge is theatre. So, theatre is both the research output, or method of dissemination, and the means of investigation. At times, this distinction is difficult to find and yet important in the way the project was planned and executed.

The women drew on their lived experiences to create this performance piece as part of a research project funded by the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, (Central) as part of its Global Challenges Research Fund. The Project entitled *Worli Koliwada: My Neighbourhood, My Responsibility* received funding for three years from 2018 to 2020, to research and explore sustainable living conditions in an informal housing settlement on the outskirts of Mumbai, called Worli Koliwada. This research was centred on women's inequality and possibilities for women's agency in improving the quality of sanitation, waste disposal (including human waste), as well as the lack of space and sense of isolation engendered by crowded living conditions. The research was conducted in partnership with StageLeft, an Indian-based applied theatre company whose director Divya Bhatia and I have worked together for almost two decades, and G5A Foundation for Contemporary Culture, a not-for-profit organisation based in Mumbai. The grant proposal stated that

we would “undertake research that seeks to understand the issues around poor physical and mental health and lack of self-advocacy for Dalit women and propose sustainable community-led solutions to gender inequality” with community members operating as our co-researchers. In 2021, I wrote briefly about this project and its focus on spatial justice (Busby 2021, pp. 190–98). Here, I am specifically looking at the research undertaken in 2019 in detail to explore cognitive justice and emancipatory research practices to consider if this work might take shelter under the broad “umbrella” of research-based theatre (Shigematsu et al. 2021, p. 56). Belliveau and Lea described research-based theatre as a methodology combining arts-based and qualitative research methods with the artistry of theatre in such a way that it might engage both audiences and researchers critically and empathetically through performance. They highlight that this way of working “weaves” the theoretical and the scholarly and “honours both art and research” (Belliveau and Lea 2016, p. 3). Although in the past I have not considered the research I undertake with community groups to be research-based theatre, here I argue I am certainly combining an applied theatre/arts-based research methodology with qualitative methods and that the performances created as part of this practice elicit both critical and emphatic responses.

2. Research Methodology

O'Connor and Anderson (2015) outline how applied theatre can be both a research methodology and a means of dissemination. They claim that by using an applied theatre methodology the research can have a liberatory or emancipatory outcome for the participants. Optimistically, they posit that as a field we might now finally have settled the troubling binary that places art at one end of the spectrum and instruments at the other end, or the process/product argument that has held back the discipline for decades.

Applied theatre as a discipline and research-based theatre as a methodology have fully embraced the concept of participatory research methods as a given in their work to the extent that it has become a *modus operandi* for practitioners and researchers in these fields, even when blended with more so-called traditional methodologies. In theory, participatory research methods attempt to fully integrate our participants by amplifying community voices and positioning marginalised groups and young people to be co-researchers with a more equitable balance between the researcher and the researched. In practice, I am unsure that this is accurate, but even when it might be, I am starting to ask myself, is this integration enough?

My partners and I use applied theatre techniques in India to generate new knowledge and to create theatre performance that values the aesthetics of theatre, and it strikes me that this is a core value of what is being described as research-based theatre in North America and beyond. Although a term not widely used in the UK, it is evident that research-based theatre is “increasingly employed as a method for disseminating research in scholarly settings and as a methodology through which research is conducted (Michalovich et al. 2023, p. 267). In other words, research-based theatre is used as a way to “both generate and represent” research (Belliveau and Lea 2016, p. 3). Applied theatre researchers and practitioners are potentially doing the same thing as we use drama and performance activities with community groups as a research methodology; as a means to explore resistance and advocacy; and as a means of both artistic dissemination of research findings and the amplification of community voices and stories.

In my more recent writing about working with communities in India with Bhatia, I have framed our work tentatively as Emancipatory Action Research (Busby 2024). My thinking has been influenced by sociologist Margert Ledwith and her writing on *Community Development* (Ledwith 2020), which in turn is based on the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire (Ledwith 2018). Ledwith describes Emancipatory Action Research (EAR) as being “a process of participation where all the people involved come together as co-researchers in action for social change” (Ledwith 2020, p. 136). In this coming together of people, knowledge is co-created:

It begins with stories. Stories hold the manifestations of structural violence, make critical connections with political dimensions of personal lives and release both the fury of injustice and the imagination for counternarratives of possibility[. . .] EAR is a process of mutual discovery in communities (Ledwith 2020, p. 140).

In hindsight, this methodology chimes with the research and theatre-making practices that Bhatia and I were employing with the women of Worli Koliwada. However, our practice evolved from our applied theatre pedagogy rather than being informed by community development researchers. In our work in Mumbai since 2020, we have consciously adopted an EAR approach to our practice, embedding it throughout the work. We are mindful, however, of sociologists Swartz and Nyamnjoh's (2018) article, "Research as Freedom", which critiques the concept of participatory and emancipatory research methods. Swartz and Nyamnjoh carefully problematise a continuum of research practices from interactive research to participatory research to emancipatory research. Their continuum starts with a description of interactive methodologies as research that engages participants actively, prioritising their voices and lived experiences, while the researcher plans the research activities, collects 'data', which they might, or might not, share with their participants, but which the researchers own, and therefore control the methods and places of dissemination.

The next stage of Swartz and Nyamnjoh's continuum (Swartz and Nyamnjoh 2018) is participatory research. Here, the methodology aims to address the power imbalances inherent in research including interactive research, as described above by inviting participants to engage in interactive ways, but also positioning them as equal partners in the whole process from initial planning, and implementation stages through to dissemination. When this happens, the findings are co-owned by the researchers and the participants or co-researchers, giving the co-researchers some ownership of the dissemination processes. This moves beyond the description of co-researchers first offered by organisational analysts Jean Hartley and John Benington in 2000 when they described "co-research" as "a new methodology for new times". For them, co-research was the recognition that stakeholders and researchers could jointly create new knowledge together (Hartley and Benington 2000, p. 464).

The third stage of Swartz and Nyamnjoh's continuum is Emancipatory Research, which goes further by removing the boundaries between the researcher and the participants or co-researchers to such an extent that the university researcher is a facilitator of research methods and skills and the community researchers set the research agenda, questions, and means of dissemination without them assuming a position of authority over the process (Busby 2024). In this way, there is a liberatory agenda set by the community researchers who actively search for their own solutions to the real-life challenges that have informed the research questions.

Swartz and Nyamnjoh suggest that most research that claims to be participatory is actually more akin to interactive research, arguing that few research projects in the disciplines of social sciences and human development reach real participatory levels and hardly any at all fully embody emancipatory research methods. It is interesting to consider the work of Michelle Fine (2018) who uses the term "critical participatory action research" to describe approaches to research and publication that are broadly similar to Swartz and Nyamnjoh's (2018) and Ledwith's (2020) work. Fine concludes that little research material has been disseminated that uses critical participatory action research, and I would contend that some applied theatre research projects would fall into this category and suggest that some forms of research-based theatre get close to their notions of emancipatory research.

Swartz and Nyamnjoh's (2018) work examining four research projects with marginalised youth undertaken in South Africa, Cameroon, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone suggests that the term participation "hides" research that on an interactive, participatory, and emancipatory continuum is really merely interactive. They additionally suggest that the term participatory research might be obfuscating methods that might indeed be more liberatory in nature, summarising that researchers might use the continuum to accurately reflect where their work sits between participatory and emancipatory research. I have started to interrogate my

own socially engaged theatre projects to consider where they might sit on this continuum between interactive, participatory, and emancipatory research and to investigate what it would mean to shift them to the emancipatory practice, as outlined by Swartz, Nyamnjoh, Ledwith, and Fine.

I have questioned how participatory the research is that Bhatia and I engage with in real terms, and what more we can do to ensure that our research is not extractionary, self-serving, and reinforcing of power imbalances. In our recent projects, we have become more aware of this challenge and are positioning our research participants as co-researchers in a different way by, for example, specifically training participants in a variety of qualitative research methods. I am also questioning if we are therefore using a form of research-based theatre. Shigematsu et al. declare that research-based theatre is “particularly attractive to researchers who work with community members and marginalised community groups, who wish to share their findings through dramatic presentations to make the challenges faced by these communities visible...” (Shigematsu et al. 2021, p. 56). This was certainly the case with the women of Worli Koliwada, but they are in a dual role as researchers and the researched. The ‘data’ produced in this case were based on the co-researchers’ everyday lives and their lived experiences and were ‘researched’ through storytelling and art making. It was a “mode of enquiry that transforms data into live performance” in line with research-based theatre and which “fosters relationships between diverse collaborators” (ibid). In this way, I think that Bhatia, the co-researchers, and I were engaging in Emancipatory Action Research-Based Theatre.

3. The Researchers

Worli Koliwada is a fishing community situated on the south of the Bay of Mumbai. The area houses approximately 8000 people mostly of the Dalit, or unscheduled Caste. The housing comprises low single-storey, often single-space dwellings with no running water or sanitation resulting in high levels of marine pollution from human waste. It is estimated that 12 million, or about 40% of Mumbai’s population, live in informal housing or other forms of degraded housing and that 5–10% are pavement dwellers. The *UNDP Human Development Report (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2006)* claimed there was, on average, one toilet for every 1440 people living in slum regions in Mumbai, and the mortality rate is reportedly 50% higher than in surrounding areas. The Dalit social reality is one of oppression, based on three axes: social, economic, and gender. Dalit women are marginalised on all three counts. The women of Worli Koliwada are also often isolated within their homes; those who are involved in paid work undertake this largely from within the home and the work is related to the fish harvesting, preparation, and marketing that is undertaken by their husbands. When writing about rural women in West Bengal, Srila Roy discusses her lack of surprise that these women’s “first forays into public” are part of an NGO project noting that only 15% of women in India undertake paid work and that one of the “major markers of upward social mobility in India, in class and especially caste terms, is to withdraw women from work” (Roy 2022, p. 15). This lack of work outside the home is coupled with a sense in Worli Koliwada that a woman has no need to leave the home space if she is not leaving it to earn money. Shipla Phadke’s article ‘*Defending Frivolous Fun*’ (Phadke 2020) points out that Dalit women accessing public spaces for fun, or companionship, continues to be “deeply suspicious” (Phadke 2020, p. 281). This results in the perception that these women have no need to leave the home, and so do not leave the home. In Roy’s article, she describes how these women feel “caged” and quotes a participant, Supriya, who describes her life before working with the NGO: “For so many days we were living in a closed box. . .now, a door has opened” (Roy 2022, p. 16). This sentiment was echoed by the women of Worli Koliwada and as we worked as a group of researchers exploring sustainable living in informal housing settlement through theatre, lack of access to public spaces, or, in fact, just space, spatial injustice became a key focus of both the research and the theatre making.

It is clear that in this research the lived experiences of the women *are* the primary data. Neither I, a white British woman, nor my longstanding project partner Bhatia, an Indian man, could be described as experts in informal housing settlements and the effects of living in them, despite us both having worked extensively with women and young people who do. The research data here are created by the women in response to stimuli or drama activities planned by Bhatia and me and facilitated by Bhatia, and at times Central students. These activities are a mix of storytelling and performance work that results in simple narrative structures that are based on the women's real-life experiences of living in Worli—although they are rarely based on specific women's stories. The data generated are held within these stories and arise through the women's participation and are owned by the women as a combination of their lived experience and their creative work. Bhatia, and to a lesser extent I, hold the spaces in which the work takes place and in which we position the women to be co-researchers and co-owners. We work alongside them to explore the data and create new knowledge in partnership with the women. The subject of the research became focused on spatial justice, but in reflecting on this project I believe we were also working towards a sense of 'Cognitive Justice'.

4. Cognitive Justice and Research Questions

In applied theatre, we often work with the idea of our participants as being central to the research and performance making and claim that the practice is focused on social justice, the amplification of voices and knowledge democracy, and that we use methods of co-creation or the co-production of performance. The Worli Koliwada project had co-creation and production at its centre as well as positioning of the women as co-researchers. The research questions and the 'data' collected were not predetermined but created through the women's participation in workshops based on their lived experiences. In the Worli Koliwada project, the research questions of the research emerged in the early workshops from the women's drama work created through a range of stimuli provided by Bhatia. They quickly identified that access to a community or lack of access to space was a concern that warranted research in order to propose workable, sustainable solutions. This led to a series of community-guided walks, oral histories, soundscapes, heated debates, tableaux, devising, and, eventually, the site-specific performance pieces that disseminated the changing access women have to outside spaces as they grow up and their suggestion of how they would like to particularly use them today.

Visvanathan (2009, p. 5) defines cognitive justice as the recognition of the value of and 'right for different forms of knowledge to exist' and to be treated with equal respect and so can be a democratisation of knowledge. Positioning community co-researchers within a cognitive justice framework makes research questions and methodology hard to define in advance. It is often impossible to define where the research will take us before the first workshops. Often, writing about whole projects for academic contexts is not possible due to the highly sensitive and sometimes risky content of the work for co-researchers who can choose to explore dangerous subject matter from their lived experience. This was particularly the case in a project that took place in 2020 under Covid lockdown restrictions where the research took place behind closed doors and will not be disseminated beyond a network of young women who pass digital stories to each other secretly via their smartphones. The co-researchers' voices find their way into our chapters and articles as quotes and anecdotes, and sometimes we write with participants and community members as co-authors. Research-based theatre allows us to potentially develop this further and embrace Shiv Visvanathan's concept of cognitive justice (2000).

For centuries, a global north approach to research and scholarship has favoured specific knowledge and ways of knowing over others. The written word has been taken more seriously than the spoken word, scientific data more highly prized over community knowledge, researchers' findings over participants' input, and STEM over STEAM. Visvanathan describes this as an "intellectual apartheid" (Visvanathan 2009, p. 5). Cognitive Justice values all forms of knowledge and its creation with equity, valuing what Boaventura de

Sousa Santos (2018, p. 1) refers to as the epistemologies of the North and those of the South with the same respect. In applied theatre terms, and research with communities more generally, this approach ensures that communities have agency to create the changes they wish to see based on research that they have undertaken into their lived experiences using their own ways of knowing. This requires researchers to fully embrace not only an emancipatory research approach but also to fully commit to the concept of cognitive justice and knowledge democracy.

The forms of knowledge we recognised in the Worli Koliwada project are the experiences of the women; their stories, songs, games, and memories are the knowledge, and it is through their conversations, their playing, singing, and dancing, that the data emerge. For university researchers committed to a cognitive justice framework, there is an added challenge when it comes to disseminating research findings. If we are to honour cognitive justice, it means the research findings taken from our co-researchers' lived experiences are fully owned by our community researchers and these findings may only be shared when they authorise their sharing; they decide where and how this new knowledge can be disseminated, and they are free to withhold permission. This goes beyond the standard procedural ethics processes used by universities and the concept of informed consent. In these systems, community co-researchers are merely consenting to what can and cannot be used or recorded.

5. Research Methods

In this type of research, it is often a real challenge to locate a consistent research method or methodology at the outset of the research and these often emerge from the drama chosen by the participants. This makes the research both iterative and generative, as it was in Worli. The themes also emerge from the work the women choose to depict, discuss, and play with. I can make calculated estimates about what might happen and the longer we work with a specific community and the better we know the group and the individuals, the more likely it is that we can plan specific activities that will appeal to them, but these offers are invitations that may not be taken up. In the case of the women from Woril, Bollywood songs and tableaux will always be a part of a range of techniques that are used to ease the way into what researchers in different disciplines might describe as oral histories or narrative inquiries because this is what they put on the workshop plan. Sculptures and three-dimensional modelling from found objects or personal items or photographs taken outside of sessions and used as drama stimuli are also often a feature of the work of Bhatia and me, as well as photo voice, digital storytelling, soundscapes, or community-guided walks which might also uncover the themes and issues and research that the community want to explore. I tend to use the term applied theatre research methodology as an umbrella term for these and other creative or arts-based activities that form the research—in part because the research will always have a performative aspect—even if the performance only happens behind closed doors.

In India, although acutely involved in the planning of sessions, pre-, post- and, on occasion, during the drama workshops, as a researcher I very rarely facilitate these research methods. Bhatia, the wider team, and sometimes students facilitate the drama workshops. Technically, my role in the sessions is that of an observer, or sometimes as a participant observer but this position is not a chosen research method; it developed out of my resistance to facilitate in a community in which I am very much the outsider. As a white woman from a colonial power, it is not my position to give direction or instruction in the room. However, my role is more than that of an observer taking notes. For one thing, I very rarely take notes *in* the sessions. Nor do we record the sessions or use these to undertake reflexive thematic analysis. Although sometimes there is a scribe present who records the sessions in English for me to review later, we do sometimes video some sessions so that I can analyse what was happening. In the sessions, I am, however, deeply immersed in what happens; I watch and join in discussions and reflections with the co-researchers, not from a position of authority but as a woman in the room experiencing the work with

co-researchers. I am part of the group that drinks chai and eats snacks and chats about nail varnish, piercings, mother-in-laws, food, and the 'lot of women' in the world, as well as the work. We laugh together, and at each other, and there is a great deal of physical contact among us as a group. It is not ethnography as I am not studying the community, just what happens in the spaces in which we come together as co-researchers. Is what I am doing, therefore, a form of 'bounded ethnography' that is not bound by geography, but by applied theatre contexts? Could it be described as Ethnographic Applied Theatre Research? Anthropologists [Delamont and Atkinson \(2018, pp. 122–24\)](#) describe ethnography as being "iterative", "emergent", and "unfolding processes" that are built on social relationships. This certainly describes the research process in Worli, but the term implies a passivity that I do not recognise in my role as a co-researcher in the project. Sociologist Kath Woodward when discussing her own work with co-researchers in the world of competitive boxing describes the process of "immersion" as fundamentally part of her research strategy, which enables her to "get inside" a field of inquiry ([Woodward 2008, p. 538](#)). She also articulates the manner in which immersion into a research environment raises questions about the tensions between being an insider or an outsider to the research and the potential issues around the objectivity or subjectivity that this might engender for the university researcher. Woodward's words accurately describe my position with the Worli project when she states the following:

The research process can never be totally 'inside' or completely outside but involves interrogation of situatedness and how being inside relates to the lived bodies and their practices and experience. There are a myriad way of being inside [...] ([Woodward 2008, p. 547](#))

I am not totally inside or outside the research at Worli. But I question what is my way of "being inside"; how do I describe this? If not applied theatre ethnography, is it research-based theatre? Or is it theatre-based research? In her article, 'Hanging out and hanging about: Insider/outsider research in the sport of boxing', Woodward is preoccupied with the false polarisation of the objectivity offered by an outsider status and the greater access provided by an insider status ([Woodward 2008, p. 554](#)). With a commitment to cognitive justice, Bhatia and I are outsiders but need to be inside the process in order to work alongside the women. The title of Woodward's article is attractive to me when thinking about what my research method is—am I "hanging out and hanging about" with my co-researchers?

Worryingly, when Woodward makes the claim that 'hanging out provides the chance to overhear intimate exchanges that are not specifically addressed to the researcher' ([Woodward 2008, p. 554](#)), I pause. This troubles me as it inherently reveals the outsider role of the university researcher who can choose to use this unsolicited information for research purposes. For me, this breaks a trust boundary, makes the notion of community co-researchers impossible and strikes me as duplicitous even if this is unconscious. I am reminded to look at Swartz and Nyamnjoh's continuum and the offer of scrutinising one's research to ascertain where it is positioned; are we closer here to participatory research with all its problematics rather than emancipatory research? Woodward's suggestion of overhearing potentially private revelations between co-researchers and the possibility of using this data also diminishes the cognitive justice framework. Despite this, I am still drawn to the notion of 'Deep Hanging Out' as a research methodology and consider how to use this methodology embedded in an EAR research process.

6. Deep Hanging Out and Making Theatre

As a research term, deep hanging out was first used by anthropologist James Clifford (1997). The term was highlighted by Clifford Geertz, who titled his review of Clifford's book 'Deep Hanging Out'. In the review, Geertz mentions Clifford's "light" use of the term to describe "close in vernicle field research" ([Geertz 1998, p. 69](#)). The term deep hanging out has since been used by anthropologists and evaluated as a research methodology by Brendan Ciaran Browne and Ruari-Santiago McBride, who claim that hanging out with

participants and “becoming known as a regular helps the researcher establish a position with which others may be comfortable”. This allows researchers to “engage with people informally build trust and gain access to research participants” (Browne and McBride 2015, p. 37). There are elements of their description of hanging out as a methodology that, like Woodward’s, also trouble me. They discuss it as a means of gaining trust in culturally or politically sensitive areas, and state that it can be “viewed as a complimentary means of gaining access” (Browne and McBride 2015, p. 35), which again undermines the idea of cognitive justice and positions their participants as the object of study rather than co-researchers. However, some of their analysis does chime with my own thinking about deep hanging out as a viable research methodology. Specifically, I value the observation that deep hanging out “enables researchers to build meaningful relationships, develop inter-personal rapport, and foster mutual trust” (Browne and McBride 2015, p. 35). The emphasis here for me on meaningful, inter-personal, and mutual trust is in line with working within a cognitive justice framework that does not create a hierarchy of researchers. They further highlight this mutuality when they state that the most important part of the process is the “enduring” personal connections made, which lead to the production of new knowledge. (Browne and McBride 2015, pp. 35–39). This resonates particularly strongly with me when I think about the relationships I formed with the women of Worli. Through a combination of my failing to count in Hindi during warm-up games, being taught the infamous Bollywood train top dance of seduction, the sharing of food, conversations about space, deep analysis of short devised scenes, deep belly laughs, finding joy in unexpected places, and tears shed over tableaux that will stay with me forever, lines were crossed which are perhaps unusual in research partnerships but which are often part of a theatre-making process; lines that enabled discoveries of new knowledge about sustainable living in informal housing settlements, and the potential of applied theatre to uncover that knowledge and simultaneously create sites of resistance. At the same time, over a period of weeks, an aesthetically beautiful piece of performance was created that elicited laughter, tears, and hope from its audiences. In my mind, this was research and art both co-created with the women of Worli and my deep hanging out with the women was a key part of the process.

Browne and McBride analyse this process in their work, concluding that as researchers who hang out, they are visible outsiders whose personalities are entwined into the process in such a way that establishes a level of trust and a deep rapport that enables researchers to overcome outsider suspicions and to collect data, which is not usually possible (Browne and McBride 2015, p. 44). I would agree that hanging as a research methodology does allow me to do this, but reading this in the cold light of day it sounds manipulative, and more like subterfuge than what happens on the ground. Bhatia and I are open and transparent about our process and committed to the cognitive justice approach outlined above: I am not hanging out to secretly observe the women. I am hanging out, as myself, genuinely reacting to what happens in the space with my co-researchers in the moment as we examine a series of questions that are stimulated through drama work, which is then used to suggest and test possible solutions, the findings of which are disseminated, but only with full permission from the community co-researchers.

Most useful in my thinking about the value of deep hanging out as a research method is the research of Ben Walmsley (2018), who employed this as a research methodology to explore cultural value from a variety of perspectives. In this research, the hanging out took place when a university researcher and a community researcher were paired together to explore cultural events. Walmsley describes this process of deep hanging out as a way of ‘immersing oneself in a cultural, group or social experience on an informal level’ that can be combined with more recognised methods of qualitative research (Walmsley 2018, p. 277). This mixed or blended research methodology aimed to ‘produce a rich, evocative, polyvocal and complex account of the value of arts and culture to people’s everyday lives’ (Walmsley 2018, p. 275). In Worli, I suggest that our research produced a ‘rich, evocative polyvocal and complex account’ of spatial injustice, its consequences, and the process for agency through the community co-researchers’ proposed solutions.

In his article, Walmsley is concerned with the question of “to what extent deep hanging out constitutes a genuine bi-directional process. This in turn raises questions of power and control between academics, researchers and so-called co-researchers” (Walmsley 2018, p. 283). When the Worli project began, my position of hanging out was a bi-product of both Bhatia and my desire to avoid re-enforcing a colonial power imbalance and to reduce my status in the workshop room as much as we could, while still having me in the space. Hanging out was not a formal, or named, part of our process, but what we discovered in Worli is that if I just hang out in an active, interactive and engaged way then a ‘genuine bi-directional process’ emerges that makes both the research and the theatre making stronger. Walmsley goes on to say that in his project the deep hanging out created the most “equal power dynamic of any research process [he had] ever taken part in”. Walmsley also makes a connection between deep hanging out and Maragret Ledwith’s emancipatory action research. I might suggest that in the work he describes he approaches a participatory action research methodology but does not reach an emancipatory one as his community co-researchers had no part in the creation of the project, the questions, or the design of the research process. He nearly acknowledges this when he summarises that some co-researchers are always more equal than others (Ledwith 2018, p. 283). To some extent, this is undoubtedly true. However, as theatre-based researchers, research-based theatre makers, or applied theatre researchers, we should be striving to reduce these imbalances throughout the research process to create a democracy of knowledge by working with community-based researchers from the concept and design stages through to the dissemination of our findings if we are to reduce cognitive injustice in research that takes place in community settings, or in fact with those not employed by universities.

7. Conclusions

At the start of this article, I posed three questions: can a project that is both research and theatre honour a commitment to cognitive justice; does this make it a research-based theatre project; and does this reduce the performance to instrumentalist theatre? I am still conflicted about the answer to two of the three questions. The power imbalances between community researchers and university researchers are difficult to level out. Funding and funders play a part in this imbalance in a myriad of ways, as do rigid hierarchies of knowledge supported and upheld by institutions and the individuals who comprise institutions. My challenge to those who make theatre and undertake research with communities is to honestly and transparently interrogate the work in the light of a cognitive justice framework; question whether the research is interactive, participatory, or emancipatory practice; and consider how to develop processes to be as emancipatory as possible.

Secondly, is this work research-based theatre? One definition of this term according to Belliveau and Lea (2016) is simply that it “[i]nvolves theatre within a process” (Belliveau and Lea, p. 6). If this is the test, then yes, the work in Worli Koliwada meets that criteria and so can be considered researched-based theatre.

However, perhaps a more useful aid here are the four “guideposts” to research-based theatre compiled by Prendergast and Belliveau (2012):

1. Creating instrumental and creative balance in the work.
2. Sharing the art in the academic article to provide the reader with entry points inside the work.
3. Using all the elements of the theatre to share the research.
4. Honouring the research context of the fact–fiction balance (cited in Belliveau and Lea 2016, p. 11).

The first of these guideposts is a key question I ask at the start of this article and the one that I am choosing to address last. The second guidepost involves the sharing of the theatre in an academic article about the project. There is no script for the performance in the streets of Worli, but here I have chosen to share the artistic elements of the research in the opening sections of this article. I would claim that elements of theatre were used to share the research. I cannot say that *all* the elements of theatre were employed: we had no lights,

no set, no script, but for me, *all* the ephemeral and visceral elements that make good theatre were shared in the research. Of course, my view here is entirely subjective. Lastly, regarding honouring the research contexts and the balance between fact and fiction: yes, I believe we did exactly this. The performance was about the research we undertook to explore the impact of social injustice on the lives of the women from Worli Koliwada. The theatrical event took place in the lanes of Worli and depicted the experiences of the women. It clearly showed their access to outside space as children, their current access to outside space as adult women, and how they would like to use outside spaces if they had the freedom to do so. The facts, artistically woven together through tableaux, song, and movement sequences, were told with humour, regret, and hope—a balance of fact and fiction. This brings me back to the first guidepost and my own question about instrumentality. I conclude that there is instrumentality in this work, but I defy anyone to say that this work does not have a theatrical aesthetic.

I have argued that this project meets all four “guideposts”, but I still am left wondering whether that means this research is research-based theatre, or if it is theatre-based research, practice-based research, or simply applied theatre. I think that perhaps how it is described is less important to me than what it means to the researchers/performers who make the work and the audiences who witnessed the performance both in the moment and beyond. I think I am perhaps less interested in categorising the work and more interested in the people, theatre, and social, spatial, and cognitive justice and I am hopeful that these distinctions will no longer be necessary.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Belliveau, George, and Graham W. Lea. 2016. *Research-Based Theatre: An Artistic Methodology*. Chicago: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press.
- Browne, Brendan Ciarán, and Ruari-Santiago McBride. 2015. Politically Sensitive Encounters: Ethnography, Access, and the Benefits of ‘Hanging Out’. *Qualitative Sociology Review* 11: 34–48. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Busby, Selina. 2021. *Applied Theatre: A Pedagogy of Utopia*. London: Bloomsbury Methuen.
- Busby, Selina. 2024. *Applied Theatre and the Sustainable Development Goals: Crises, Collaboration and Beyond*. Edited by Taiwo Afolabi, Abdul Karim Hakib and Bobby Smith. London: Routledge Publishing, forthcoming.
- de Sousa Santos, Boaventura. 2018. *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Delamont, Sara, and Paul Atkinson. 2018. The ethics of ethnography. In *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research Ethics*. New York: SAGE Publications Ltd., pp. 119–32. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Fine, Michelle. 2018. *Just Research in Contentious Times: Widening the Methodological Imagination*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Foster, Victoria. 2016. *Collaborative Arts-Based Research for Social Justice*. London: Routledge Publishing.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1998. Deep hanging out. *The New York Review of Books* 45: 69–72.
- Hartley, Jean, and John Benington. 2000. Co-research: A new methodology for new times. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology* 9: 463–76. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Ledwith, Margaret. 2018. Paulo Freire and the politics of disposability: Creating critical dissent dialogue. In *Paulo Freire and Transformative Education: Changing Lives and Transforming Communities*. Edited by Alethea Melling and Ruth Pilkington. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 29–42.
- Ledwith, Margaret. 2020. *Community Development: A Critical and Radical Approach*, 3rd ed. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Michalovich, Amir, Yael Mayer, Laen Avraham Dov Hershler, Laura Yvonne Bulk, Christina Cook, Hila Graf, Michael Lee, George Belliveau, and Tal Jarus. 2023. Through a Glass Brightly: Generative Ethical Tensions in Research-Based Theatre. *Qualitative Inquiry* 29: 267–76. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- O’Connor, Peter, and Michael Anderson, eds. 2015. *Applied Theatre Research: Radical Departures*. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama.
- Phadke, Shilpa. 2020. Defending Frivolous Fun. Feminist Acts of Claiming Public Spaces in South Asia. *South Asai: Journal of South Asian Studies* 43: 281–93. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Prendergast, Monica, and George Belliveau. 2012. Poetics and Performance. In *Reviewing Qualitative Research in the Social Science*. Edited by Audrey Trainor and Elizabeth Graue. London: Routledge Publishing, pp. 197–210.

- Roy, Srila. 2022. From Feminist Killjoy to Joyful Feminism: Rural Women's Pleasure-Seeking in India. *Cultural Politics* 18: 12–27. [CrossRef]
- Shigematsu, Tetsuro, Chris Cook, George Belliveau, and Graham W. Lea. 2021. Research-based theatre across disciplines: A relational approach to inquiry. *Applied Theatre Research* 9: 55–72. [CrossRef]
- Swartz, Sharlene, and Anye Nyamnjoh. 2018. Research ad freedom: Using a continuum of interactive, participatory and emancipatory methods for address youth marginality. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74: a5063. [CrossRef]
- Turner, Victor. 1969. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing.
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 2006. Human Development Report 2006. Available online: <https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/human-development-report-2006-english.human-development-report-2006-english> (accessed on 7 January 2024).
- Visvanathan, Shiv. 2009. The Search for Cognitive Justice. Available online: https://www.india-seminar.com/2009/597/597_shiv_visvanathan.htm (accessed on 20 April 2022).
- Walmsley, Ben. 2018. Deep hanging out in the arts: An anthropological approach to capturing cultural value. *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 24: 272–91. [CrossRef]
- Woodward, Kath. 2008. Hanging out and hanging about: Insider/outsider research in the sport of boxing. *Ethnography* 9: 536–60. [CrossRef]

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.