"It doesn't have to be controversial. It's the nature of theatre. If it's performed well it will push a lot of buttons."

BY DIANE BOUDREAU

Johnny Saldaña

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The lights are dim, the audience quiet. On stage, a distinguished-looking older man and a muscular young man are locked in an embrace. The younger man pours out a tale of his troubled childhood while the older man—and the audience—listens raptly.

The performance, titled The Brad Trilogy, is a love story, a case study, and an ethical dilemma rolled into one. It takes the form of a play, with stage actors and props. But the audience is not your typical theatre-going crowd. They are all social scientists. They are attending a professional research conference. The play is a method for communicating ethnographic information in a format far more entertaining than the traditional lecture.

The art form—called "ethnotheatre"—uses theatrical techniques to present actual research findings. Ethnotheatre is an alternative to the traditional paper report or conference lecture. "This art form started from within the social sciences," explains ASU Theatre Professor Johnny Saldaña. "The form has swelled in the past decade or so, but it is almost a century old. Only recently has it gained legitimacy."

Why present research as a play? "It's more exciting," says Saldaña. "It's one thing to read about the Titanic, but seeing James Cameron's film really makes it come alive. Sometimes reading research can be a tedious task. Seeing it performed live engages you emotionally as well as intellectually."

Of course, the key to involving the audience is creating a quality production. This is difficult to do without some theatre experience. Saldaña is one of the few researchers approaching ethnotheatre from a theatre rather than social science background.

"I've seen researchers present theatrical adaptations of their research. From the theatre practitioner's perspective, it was usually poor theatre," he says. "When researchers create these types of performances, they don't understand the actors' expressive instruments, the body and the voice effectively. They are not educated as playwrights. They just transfer their research verbatim onto the stage."

On the other hand, dramatists often lack the research background needed to make such plays useful to social scientists. "There are very few people within theatre who are able to blend the two disciplines," Saldaña says.
In 1994, Saldaña took a sabbatical and enrolled in two qualitative research methods classes in ASU’s College of Education. It was there that he first read the writings of Harry F. Wolcott, author of the original Brad Trilogy. “I loved it,” Saldaña says of Wolcott’s writing. “It was so descriptive, so direct, so clean.”

Saldaña went on to read the three articles of the Brad Trilogy, an account of Wolcott’s experiences with a young man who appeared one day at his campus and who, on his first day, announced he was gay. The system had failed him. He had shifted from family to family. He had to rely on himself and his own survival. Wolcott wrote up the boy’s story in an article that was hailed among anthropologists as a compelling survival story.

But the story left out some crucial details. Later, Wolcott published a second article, showing that things weren’t quite so cut-and-dried. The young man wasn’t a perfect survival story. He actually showed a lot of emotional instability.

Finally, Wolcott published a third article in which he “came clean,” explains Saldaña. “Brad had progressed into paranoid schizophrenia. Furthermore, Wolcott and Brad had an intimate physical relationship.” Professionals in the field “went ballistic,” over this revelation, says Saldaña.

Reading the trilogy, Saldaña believed it would work well as a play. “What he didn’t know at the time was that Wolcott believed the same thing.” The ASU scholar wrote a letter to Wolcott and the two began corresponding. When Saldaña learned that Wolcott was going to present at a research conference in Canada that Saldaña planned to attend, he thought it was the right time to create the play.

Saldaña was enthusiastic about the idea. “I realized the elements were here for a good story, one that would raise a number of questions that need to be addressed by people doing qualitative research,” Wolcott says. “A friend in theatre told me that I wasn’t the one to write it—it would take someone with a sense of drama who wasn’t as close to the events as I was.”

With Saldaña as playwright, and Wolcott as dramatist, the pair wrote and produced The Brad Trilogy within a year. The play was a two-man show starring ASU doctoral student Charles Banaszewski as Brad, ASU Associate Professor of Theatre David Vining played Wolcott.

The play premiered in February 2000 in ASU before being performed at the conference later that month. The difference in responses from the two audiences shocked Saldaña.

At ASU, among main theatre audiences, the response was positive. “One man described it as a ‘very intimate love story’,” Saldaña says. A few researchers at the Edmonton conference, however, had negative views. “It was such a shock after such a receptive response at ASU,” says Saldaña. “Even though most of the flak was directed toward Wolcott, I received my share of criticism for staging the play.”

The experience taught Saldaña a great deal about how personal perceptions affect both the way a writer presents information and the way the audience receives it. “I write from a particular lens and emphasize some things more in the play, then, say, a heterosexual woman would,” explains Saldaña. Although Saldaña was able to send e-mail to Wolcott and ask what really happened in areas where the articles were ambiguous or contradictory, he also drew on his own experiences as a gay man in portraying how two men in a relationship act. “That perspective is going to create one kind of play,” he says.

“Audiences see the play differently too,” says Saldaña. “One person, a researcher, said the play put more emphasis on the relationship than the research. A theatre person said it would have been better without all the research!”

Saldaña notes that everyone who took issue with the play was female. At first he thought it was a reaction to the homosexuality in the play. But he learned that the negative responses often had to do with the perceived abuse of power. “They only saw Wolcott’s so-called abuse of power over the young man,” he says. “Brad set fire to Wolcott’s house, and even attempted to murder him. Wolcott did a lot to support Brad, emotionally, financially. He got him into counseling, and contacted his mother.”

“People did not pay attention to the fact that the personal relationship came first, and the professional relationship—Wolcott’s case study—came later,” Saldaña adds.

Ultimately, however, controversy and criticism are the nature of the theatre business. “If you do this kind of theatre you open yourself up to value-laden scrutiny,” says Wolcott. “When your story is on stage, you are opening up your life to the public. It doesn’t have to be an end-run to be controversial,” Saldaña explains. “It’s the nature of theatre. If it’s performed well it will push a lot of buttons. Someone told me, ‘If the play hadn’t been so good, no one would have cared.’ Because it was so powerful it had an effect.”

Wolcott agrees. “I’m glad we did the play, glad we got to see it performed, glad for the controversy it raised,” he says. “Johnny has continued to work on it and it will appear in a book I am now writing. The book addresses the broader issue of where our studies go and what they do there, using this as the illustrative case.”

Certainly, ethnotheatre can breathe life into research that might otherwise sit on a bookshelf. But bringing case studies to the stage can create some tricky ethical situations because the characters being portrayed are real people. Saldaña learned this firsthand in his first attempt at writing ethno drama.

He was studying the artistic development of an adolescent actor, and initially planned to write up his work as a journal article. “Then I thought, ‘Why am I putting this young man’s story in a 30-page paper when it deals with his love of acting? Why not put it on stage?’”

There weren’t a lot of resources available to help Saldaña, however. “I learned by doing, and experimenting was okay. I was still trying to learn who my audience was.”

In the performance, the adolescent actor played himself, but he didn’t reveal it to the audience until the end of the play. One of Saldaña’s friends worried him against doing this, asking, “If you put the actor on a pedestal, how will he come down?”

Saldaña later found out that the young man had made a suicide attempt. Thinking of his friend’s warning, he wondered whether the performance had something to do with the attempt. The young man had been hospitalized. He had never told his whole story to Saldaña, nor had his parents. “Fortunately, the young man is fine now but in the original play, everybody was portrayed in their best light. It didn’t make for good drama. It was a first-rate performance of a second-rate play.”

The Brad Trilogy did, but it also wasn’t as accurate a representation of reality. And ultimately, that is what research—and therefore ethnotheatre—tries to accomplish. “In its own way, it is every bit as rigorous and systematic as science. Artists portray. That’s what field work is all about,” says the character of Wolcott in The Brad Trilogy. “We never get the whole story, and we aren’t likely to fully understand whatever part of the story we get.”

“He continues, “After years of so much method, I finally realize that only understanding matters, not how we arrive at it.”

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