



Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance

ISSN: 1356-9783 (Print) 1470-112X (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/crde20>

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To cite this article: Heli Aaltonen (2015) Voice of the forest: post-humanism and applied theatre practice, *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 20:3, 417-421, DOI: [10.1080/13569783.2015.1059263](https://doi.org/10.1080/13569783.2015.1059263)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13569783.2015.1059263>



Published online: 16 Nov 2015.



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Voice of the forest: post-humanism and applied theatre practice

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I teach applied theatre practice at a university drama and theatre department. In the 1980s and 1990s I was deeply concerned about voicing young people's stories, and discovered that creative drama and embodied physical theatre practices empower children and create a safe place to play with diverse identity constructions (Aaltonen 2006). Dramatic changes in the environment have changed my applied theatre practice and the focus of my work. Phenomena typical of our present time, the post-human condition (also described as the Anthropocene – time when human activity acts as a geological force), are climate change and loss of species. These everyday experiential aspects characterise the conditions of all life forms at the beginning of the third millennium. During the last 15 years, I have been interested in voicing living nature, and shared nature stories with people. In 2010–2011, I was artistic leader of the *Nordic Voices* storytelling festivals in Turku, Finland. I invited an English storyteller living in Norway, Georgiana Keable, who has worked from the 1980s with tree stories, to participate. A few years later, in autumn 2014, she invited me to document and research a project called *Voice of the forest* (Figure 1).

On a sunny, early September day, I was a participant–observer, took photographs, and interviewed participating children in the storytelling event on the island of Hovedøya, in Oslo, Norway. Storytellers Georgiana Keable and Torgrim Mellum Stene created a four-hour interactive performance with nine-year-old children in this botanically rich nature reserve. The aim of the event was to nourish an empathetic relationship between the participants and trees growing on the island. The storytellers told tree stories from myth, folktale and botany. Mellum Stene took the role of the botanist Carl Linneaus. He taught children the scientific system of categorising trees, and gave them the task of recognising the leaves of different trees. Keable was a forest spirit, and she encouraged the children to explore the trees through 'sensory experiments'. The children walked part of the route barefoot. They identified different trees blindfolded. They listened to the trees. In the middle of walking, they had a lunch break and shared forest tree food, hazel nuts, with the forest spirit. During the break, a young wild fox came to meet the children, and they shared their food with it. The performance combined sequences of storytelling with direct contact and intra-action with the natural world (Figure 2).

The *Voice of the forest* event represents applied theatre practice, where the voicing of trees and identification with trees were central. Such practice opens up to connect human identity with the natural world, and explore our construction of human identity, not isolated from the surrounding world, but always entangled and

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intertwined with it. Braidotti's (2006, 263) 'non-unitary subjectivity', 'nomadic' (2013, 188), post-human selfhood construction helps us to understand why forest walking may assist participants to feel empathy with living trees. Characteristic of such collective selfhood construction are situatedness, complexity and multiplicity. I describe here how nomadic subjectivity connects with four key areas of effective applied theatre practice, as proposed by Prendergast and Saxton (2009), namely participation, aesthetics, ethics/safety and assessment. I exemplify these principles by referring to the *Voice of the forest* event. This text asks: What influence does a post-human subjectivity, which is non-unitary and nomadic, have on these four key areas in applied theatre practice?

The idea of community building and participation is the first motif that Prendergast and Saxton (2009, 187) bring up as crucial in applied theatre practice. Usually, participation in applied theatre practice means human participation. This definition of participation means that the environment is simply a landscape for human agency and non-human life is just a resource for human use.

However, post-human understanding of participation includes intra-activity between technological devices, human and non-human agents. A process-orientated, nomadic subjectivity is never stable. It is on the way to becoming. The question of understanding selfhood in a new way becomes central. Braidotti defines the post-human nomadic subject in the following way:

The post-human nomadic subject is materialist and vitalist, embodied and embedded – it is firmly located somewhere, according to the radical immanence of the 'politics of location' [...]. It is a multi-faceted and relational subject, conceptualized within a monistic ontology, through the lenses of Spinoza, Deleuze and Guattari, plus feminist and post-colonial theories. It is a subject actualized by the relational vitality and elemental complexity that mark post-human thought itself. (Braidotti 2013, 188)



Figure 1. The storytellers told tree stories from myth, folktale and botany.



Figure 2. During the break, a young wild fox came to meet the children, and they shared their food with it.

Braidotti's thinking about post-human subjectivity belongs to a social branch of complexity theory. It connects with new materialist, ontological feminist thinking. The vision of the post-human subject also borrows ideas from deep ecology and post-human ethics, and is grounded in an awareness of the interconnectedness of all life forms.

Braidotti follows on by describing the political consequences of post-human subjectivity. The most important consequence is that the idea of community also includes non-human beings or 'the more-than-human worlds' (Abram 2011, 196). Participation is a process of coming together with the other. Participation in the world offers moments of taking new positions, so-called 'transpositions' (Braidotti 2006). Storytellers offered several such transpositions in the *Voice of the forest* event. For example, Keable told a story about a girl who could transform herself into a tree, and become the girl again. Such a story is a good example of imagined nomadic identity construction, where humans identify themselves not only with human species, but with trees. In this real-life event, children and storytellers took transpositions and participated with one another and with trees, enlarging the motif of community building to include the forest.

The second motif of efficient applied theatre practice, aesthetics, refers to 'the qualities of an artistic work that we can identify and value' (Prendergast and Saxton 2009, 25). Art and the appreciation of aesthetic pleasure are in a classical humanistic view thought to exist only in the human domain. In *Survival of the beautiful* Rothenberg (2011) records Darwin's observation of animals' own aesthetic sense. He takes Darwin's famous peacock example to illustrate that the beautiful, not simply the strongest, will survive genetically. The peacock's tail is beautiful, but is otherwise quite impractical or makes the bird physically weaker, and still the peacock survives. In the *Voice of the forest* event the beauty of the tree crowns silhouetted against the azure sky produced quiet gasps of 'Wow' from the participating children. Thus, applied theatre practice can assist the participants to value the aesthetics and artistic work of real animals and plants, which actively share the world with us. Another aspect

of aesthetics concerns sensual experiences. The 'sensory experiments' assisted the participants to use all their senses and experience their interconnectedness with trees. David Abram has an eco-phenomenological starting point and he proposes that the world is 'our larger flesh, a densely intertwined and improvisational tissue of experience' (2011, 143).

Thirdly, the motif concerning ethics and safety in applied theatre practice usually refers to ethics and the safety of the human participants. Ethics is closely connected with respect and listening to the other. Guattari's (2000) three ecological registers remind us of how ethics links with psychological, social and natural ecologies. Braidotti writes: 'The ethical ideal is to actualize the cognitive, affective and sensorial means to cultivate higher degrees of empowerment and affirmation of one's interconnections to others in their multiplicity' (2013, 194). The post-human nomadic subject knows that all human activities become part of a larger experience, and this is the reason that post-human ethics is concerned about the wellbeing of *Zoe* – Life itself. The storytellers performed this kind of ethical ideal in *Voice of the forest*. They reminded the participating children to take care of other children as well as not harm trees and animals living on the island. This reached an exciting climax as a young fox spontaneously followed the performance for over an hour.

The last motif, assessment, also requires thinking through three ecological registers (Guattari 2000). Post-human theory guides us to think of ourselves as interconnected with the world. Seen in this light, the assessment of applied theatre practice needs to be holistic. The main topic is to evaluate how the personal, social and ecological spheres connect with each other. In *Voice of the forest* children's learning about trees could be the focus of assessment. Their learning was embodied and combined with visits to the fantasy worlds of storytelling. The storytellers organised the walk such that the interconnectedness of children and trees was experienced. For example, several children, without any suggestion from the performers, spontaneously hugged a tree. Children's learning about nomadic subjectivity and becoming together with the world took place in an aesthetic experience.

In this text, I argue that the cultivation of non-unitary, nomadic subjectivity in applied theatre practices can be a highly effective way to experience a post-human era where diversity of living and non-living forms are acknowledged agency. Applied theatre practices are embodied research methods to examine post-human subjectivity in relation with other beings living on the Earth, as well as human-made things and technology. Post-human thought opens new questions around participation, aesthetics, ethics/safety and assessment. In the *Voice of the Forest* storytelling event I saw how applied theatre practices can empower young people to act and think freshly about their place as part of the multiplicity of species. These practices can contribute to widened ethical ideals, and help us move towards a more sustainable future. Applied theatre practice which aims towards a sustainable future, contains an 'affirmation of hope' (Braidotti 2013, 192). My hope, indeed my manifesto is for a theatre of transpositions and renewal where the participants connect and liaise with 'more-than-human' and thus envision and enable a truly inclusive world.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Anastasia Aaltonen, Pauliina Heiskanen and Georgiana Keable for their valuable and wise comments during the process of writing this text.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Keywords: forest walking; nomadic subjectivity; post-humanism; storytelling; sustainability

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