



**Playbuilding as Arts-Based Research Health, Wellness, Social Justice and Higher Education (2nd ed., 2024) by Joe Norris, Kevin Hobbs, & Mirror Theatre**

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## Book Review

# Playbuilding as Arts-Based Research Health, Wellness, Social Justice and Higher Education

Joe Norris, Kevin Hobbs, and Mirror Theatre  
Routledge

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University of Texas at Austin

Why use the arts in research? How can the arts be used to catalyze social change? Drama and theatre scholar and educator Joe Norris broadly tangles with these questions in a second edition of his award-winning 2009 book, *Playbuilding as Qualitative Research: A participatory arts-based approach*. The second edition has a new title: *Playbuilding as Arts-Based Research: Health, Wellness, Social Justice and Higher Education*. It also has a new publishing home and location in the Routledge's *Developing Qualitative Inquiry* book series, edited by Janice Morse. *Playbuilding as Arts-Based Research* also has an expanded authorship. In this second edition update, Norris co-authors with Kevin Hobbs, whose research examines the pedagogical possibilities of improvisation and role-play in the fields of health and medicine. Hobbs and Norris also name the Mirror Theatre company, as a third and final authorship attribution. Mirror Theatre was originally developed by Norris at The University of Alberta. The program was later re-imagined at Brock University in Ontario when Norris moved academic positions. Mirror Theatre—its methods, social issue productions, participants and audiences and evolution—is the source material for this productive investigation of playbuilding as a qualitative, arts-based research method.

I come to my review of this text with knowledge of Norris's methods. As a US academic, I use Norris's first edition, *Playbuilding as Qualitative Research*, in my own graduate-level research methods course. I find the original text to be an effective, cogent way to introduce nascent graduate student researchers to theatrical devising as participatory action research. My MFA students have cited and used Norris's explication of playbuilding as theoretical and practical grounding for their theatre for social change devising practice with youth and communities. With this history in hand, I am pleased to report that *Playbuilding as Arts-Based Research* offers a purposeful improvement to the original source material. The numerous second edition shifts—updates to the theoretical methodology, an explicitly curated typology of the five research dimensions engaged through playbuilding, timely inclusion of digital methods and archival examples, expanded script source material, additional insights from scholars working with similar methods, and a brief section on program impact—are excellent. Norris et al.'s new text gives students, teaching artists, academics, and researchers working across the fields of health, social work, education, and the arts a more substantive grounding in the theory and practice of

playbuilding. In sum, the new text is a useful, comprehensive guide to playbuilding as an arts-based research methodology.

A substantive preface opens the book. The introduction serves as a positionality statement and historiography of the material conditions that shaped the authors' approach to playbuilding over time. In doing so, Norris and Hobbs considered how their playbuilding work contributed to an emergent arts-based research field; and the ways the emergent field shaped their playbuilding approach. Specifically, they detailed how Mirror Theatre's production work in Alberta served as "outreach" between the university and surrounding communities. This period is contrasted with the "inreach" emphasis of Mirror Theatre at Brock University where projects primarily focused on "applied health sciences, adult education, health and safety committee, student health service" (p. xxxi) at the university.

Chapter 1, "Underpinning Philosophies and Guiding Principles," is a significant update from the first edition. Here, the authors introduced an expanded typology of playbuilding as research. Spanning a robust eighty pages, five key research stances—epistemology, ontology, axiology, aesthetics, and pedagogy—serve as the organizing structure for the chapter. Each research stance is thoroughly unpacked, considered, and illustrated using Mirror Theatre production examples and related theory from a range of performance studies and educational discourses. Highlights across this densely populated synthesis include the legible crosswalk between key research actions and theatre; for example, data generation and data interpretation are linked to Mirror Theatre's use of storytelling and improvisation in playbuilding. Norris et al. made an argument for the devising ensemble participants' experience as "a rich data source" (p. 15). They argued that playbuilding can support participants as researchers to "not only tell but also interrogate their stories, highlighting both the differences and similarities" of their experience of a selected topic through the process of storytelling, improvisation, scripting, and performing their work for others (p. 15). Especially useful are the authors' naming and theorizing of the numerous steps commonly used to devise or make original theatrical performance work. Naming, exploring, theorizing across the explicit artistic, research, and pedagogical tasks of the actor role (Actor/Researcher/Teacher or A/R/Tor) and director (Director/Actor/Researcher/Teacher or D/A/R/Tor) continues to be key strength to Norris et al.'s second edition update.

Chapter 2, "Mirror Theatre's Performance Processes," builds on the first chapter's foundation with a detailed excavation of Mirror Theatre's performance process. The authors offered central strategies, theatrical conventions, and adaptations of playbuilding work illustrated through examples sourced from a wide variety of past projects. Mirror Theatre productions are referenced in title with further descriptions cited to prior publications, virtual links—not accessible in my paper copy but extremely helpful for digital readers, and scripts located in later portions of the text. I respect and appreciate the ethical choice to acknowledge Mirror Theatre contributors' labor and research through ample citation to past productions. However, some judicious pruning of sources in this section might have mitigated the infowhelm I began to feel from the multitude of references. A particularly productive aspect of this section is its concluding section on "Dispositions." This rich compendium and investigation of the role of joker as participatory researcher and facilitator is terrific. The often-undertheorized role of Joker has rarely been explored with such accessibility and clarity. Norris and Hobbs deftly dance between theory and practice in this section. Additional insights on digital platform hosting, virtual vignettes and online facilitation make *Playbuilding as Arts-Based Research* a rare resource that brings playbuilding firmly into the era of blended online instruction and virtual accessibility.

Entirely new to the second edition is chapter 3's "State of the Art," a thematic analysis of

playbuilding (and its variations) use in global contexts. Norris et al. returned here to the typology of playbuilding as research introduced chapter 1. They presented data collected from interviews with twenty-three global scholar/practitioners (what the authors call D/A/R/Tors) who use performative research/pedagogy in their work. The inclusion of other scholarly voices further situates the Mirror Theatre's playbuilding approach as one method in a broader landscape of drama/theatre arts-based research (including ethnodrama, performance ethnography, research-based theatre, verbatim theatre, among other approaches).

Next, the authors offered five expanded case study examples (chapters 4–9) of Mirror Theatre's playbuilding research performance: chapter 4 "Drinking Choices," chapter 5 "Person-Centred Care," chapter 6 "Challenging the Myths: Stories From the Outside and From the Inside of a Woman's Shelter," chapter 7 "Mental Health Conversation Starters," chapter 8 "Decisions, Decisions: Aka University 101," and chapter 9 "Entrances and Exits: Addressing Possible Interpersonal Issues in Co-op Placements." Each case study provides a full script of the performance materials, followed by a detailed narrative analyzing the content and form of the work. The choice to offer fewer case study examples with more depth in the second edition is a productive shift from the first edition's eleven truncated case studies and brief script samples. I did wonder about the use of gender binaries in the playbuilding story structure of the playbuilding text chapter 4 "Drinking Choices," case study. Some further discussion of the "specific gender difference" (p. 181) that led to the creation of a "Female Story" (pp. 182–196) and "Male Story" (pp. 197–208), along with information regarding how this university program is inclusive of gender-expansive identities (e.g., agender, bigender, genderfluid, genderqueer, intergender, pandgender, among other) could be a useful addition.

The text concludes with a final second edition update in chapter 10 "Determining Our Efficacy and Impact." Norris and Hobbs explored key impact themes using data from a series of mixed-methods measures including quantitative audience satisfaction surveys whose items offer a positive statement about the work and then check for a level of agreement e.g., "I would recommend this type of program to others" or "I appreciated that I was given the opportunity to provide my opinions on the topic," as well as open-ended qualitative prompt responses. I appreciate the instructive choice to illustrate how themes emerged from across the different forms of data. Those new to arts-based research will certainly benefit from the very clear explanation of how quantitative and qualitative measurement is used to provide a holistic view of impact. In future publications I would enjoy knowing more about if and how Mirror Theatre uses vetted pre/post research measures focused on educational or health constructs (e.g., self-efficacy, academic identity, resilience, mental health, etc.) related to the content being explored in the theatrical vignettes.

Arts advocate and scholar Maxine Greene (1995) noted that the arts cannot change the world but that they may help us to remain awake and responsive to the possibility of change in our collective lives. *Playbuilding as Arts-Based Research* offers a rich and productive response to Green's proposal. It is a historical document and a dynamic road map for artists, researchers, and facilitators who want to understand how the arts, specifically playbuilding, can catalyze positive change within us and with/in others.

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