

EXORCISING “GHOSTS” THROUGH PERFORMED ETHNOGRAPHY: A TRANS-ATLANTIC PROJECT IN COMMUNITY BASED THEATRE - ANALYSING THE *BUS STOP JOURNALS*

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Abstract

This paper is based on the analysis of setting and character in two plays entitled *Bus Stop Journals*, which were written and performed for a trans-Atlantic project in community-based theatre. The project was conducted by two teams from the departments of Theatre at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona (USA) and the University of Zimbabwe between October 2004 and September 2005. The paper investigates the use of performed ethnography to subvert certain essentialist identities, which are often mutually held by African and American citizens. The project went under the title “Border Crossings – a Transatlantic Project in Community based Theatre”. It was funded through a Fulbright Alumni Initiatives Awards grant (AIA) involving two alumni of the Fulbright program from the two participating Theatre Departments. The aim of the project was to enhance mutual understanding through cultural co-operation between the peoples of Zimbabwe and the peoples of the United States.

The paper argues that the Border Crossings project harnesses the element of ‘thick description’ found in performed ethnography to parallel setting and character in such a way as to exorcise the ghosts of mutual distortion, stereotyping and essentializing that often takes place between African and American citizens. In the face of these mutually held (mis)conceptions and distorted identities, the paper seeks to demonstrate the power of performed ethnography to reach large audiences and encourage public reflexive insights.

Introduction – The Border Crossings Project in Context

“The live aspect of theatre is critical. Live performance not only constitutes a site where our identities can be enacted, it also opens up entire realms of cultural possibility, enlarging our sense of ourselves” Dorinne Kondo

This paper is based on the analysis of a transatlantic project in community-based theatre, which took place sometime between October 2004 and September 2005. The project went under the title “Border crossings – a transatlantic project in community-based theatre”. It produced two similar but different plays entitled *Bus Stop Journals* in Harare and California. The project was led by Owen Seda and William H. Morse both of who had previously spent a reciprocal year each at one another’s campuses as Fulbright Scholars-in-Residence.

Following their successful residencies, Owen Seda and William H. Morse were awarded a competitive joint Fulbright Alumni Initiatives Awards Grant in 2005 to facilitate a collaborative research project in line with the broad aims and objectives of the AIA (Alumni Initiatives Awards) program. As captured below, the aims and objectives of the AIA included *inter alia*, the cultivation and expansion of existing links between Fulbright alumni and their hosting institutions:

The objective of the AIA program is to help translate the individual Fulbright experience into long-term institutional impact... To develop innovative projects that will foster institutionally supported linkages and sustainable, mutually beneficial relationships between the Fulbright’s scholar’s home and host institutions

The joint award that was used to design and implement an applied or community-based theatre project that was conducted in the urban areas of Harare, Zimbabwe and Pomona in California. Inspired by and built around the personal experience of the two scholars’ academic residencies interacting with broader related publics, this paper investigates the use of performed ethnography to subvert certain essentialist identities, which are often mutually held by African and American citizens. This was the case not least because one of the stated aims of the project was to enhance mutual understanding through cultural co-operation between the peoples of Zimbabwe and the peoples of the United States.

In this analysis, the adoption of the theoretical framework of ethnotheatre or performance ethnography is informed by the basic capacity for ethnotheatre or ethnodrama to investigate a particular facet of the human condition with the goal of adapting the ensuing observations and insights into a performance medium that allows self-reflexive activity by both the dramatist and the observer. As Johnny Saldana (2011) correctly observes, “ethnotheatre” is in fact a term that joins two separate words namely ‘ethnography’ and ‘theatre’ in order to use the traditional craft and artistic techniques of theatre or media production to mount a live performance and interpretation of the experiences of research participants.

Having adopted performance ethnography as its theoretical frame of reference, the paper argues that the Border Crossings project harnessed the element of ‘thick description’ to parallel setting and character in two similar but different plays performed in Harare and California. The deliberate paralleling of setting and character was done in order to provoke critical analysis among audiences and ‘ghost out’ or eliminate certain stereotypes or identities about Africa and the US in the two similar but different communities. As will be demonstrated during the course of description and analysis, in this project identity is viewed as a fluid entity that is never static but in a constant state of flux (Hall 1996, Bhabha 1994). In other words what we see or what we assume is not necessarily what we always get. Perceptions and assumptions can be highly deceptive.

In line with similar practices in applied or community-based theatre where participation is broad-based, and in addition to the project's ethnographic character as outlined above, the two principal facilitators were joined on the project by two other members of faculty as well as staff, students and ordinary people from their respective universities and surrounding communities.

Researching Life through Performed Ethnography or Ethnodrama

Among the greatest strengths of the dramatic medium is not only its sociality as an art form (Jones 1981, Brocket & Ball 2009) but its ability to re-create the three-dimensional fullness and richness of life on the basis of observed reality. It ought to be remembered also that in the final analysis, playwrights and dramatists research lived reality as the basic quarry for their dramatic representations, whether or not the representations in question maintain close fidelity with lived reality or seek to deviate from it.

Performed ethnography has been referred to by a variety of related terms such as ethnodrama, performance ethnography, ethnographic performance, ethno-performance, docu-drama, performance and reflexive anthropology, and performative research etc (Ackroyd & O' Toole, 2010). Because these terms mean one and the same thing, in this paper I shall be using them interchangeably to refer to a type of performance that came in vogue during the course of the last twenty years.

Denzin (2003) and Saldana (2005) use the term performed ethnography to refer to dramatic performances which involve turning ethnographic texts into dramatic scripts that are either read out aloud in groups or performed for an audience. Saldana (2011) further elaborates on the concept to refer to the dramatization of significant selections of narrative collected from interview transcripts, participant observation, field notes, journal entries, personal memories, historical documents, diaries, blogs, and newspaper articles. Ethnotheatre therefore involves the dramatisation of texts that are based on authentic sources as primary data. Put differently, performed ethnography is a dramatization of life in that the script or performance text is solidly rooted in non-fictional narratives and researched reality. As Saldana (2011) also puts it, performance ethnography is not just realism but reality itself.

The efficacy of performance ethnography in applied or community-based theatre practices comes to the fore if the practice is set against the inherent capacity of the dramatic form to heighten people's perceptions of lived reality. It can be argued then, that if the basic aim of research is to document and articulate the great questions of life in so far as these pertain to the people who are spoken to and observed, then the theatre, especially ethnotheatre, seems to be the most effective way of sharing and disseminating research insights.

Saldana makes the point that it is worthwhile to collocate 'performance' and 'ethnography' because, "Both disciplines... share a common goal: to create a unique, insightful and engaging text about the human condition" (2005: 29). It is in this context that the strength and richness of performed ethnography derives from the ethnographic data that is used to create the play script, and the engagement and self-reflexive conversations which emanate from the play performance. These self-reflexive conversations constitute a key element in allowing research participants and their audiences to have a joint input in arriving at the research conclusions.

When researchers package ethnographic findings in the form of a play script, they are following Brechtian aesthetics, reminding their audiences that ethnographers 'present' rather than 'represent' ethnographic truths. And with this comes the self-reflexive predilection for change and engagement, which is supposed to be the hallmark of good practices in applied theatre.

In the project under analysis, ethnographic playwriting through the paralleling of setting and character in two similar but different plays was meant to discourage the replication of fixed and immutable, albeit distorted representations, which have steadily contributed to the construction and consolidation of mutually destructive ideas and beliefs about the other.

Methodology for the Border Crossing Project

The Border-Crossings project was conceived as a project in applied theatre with a specific purpose to interrogate mutual attitudes between the ordinary people of Zimbabwe and the United States through action and dialogue. It was therefore a form of practice-led research, in which creative artists sought to initiate and pursue research through practice. Carol Gray (Quoted in Haseman) has defined practice-led research as research which is initiated in practice, where questions, problems, and challenges are identified and formed by the needs of practice and practitioners.

In order to achieve its basic aims and objectives, the Border-Crossings project adopted the standard Ross Kidd (1977)/Dale Byam (1999) methodology for applied theatre as follows:

- (a) Personal experience/Research in the target community/Ethnographic field research
- (b) Data Analysis
- (c) Playmaking
- (d) Rehearsal
- (e) Performance
- (f) Post-performance discussion

Being a project that was meant to interrogate mutual attitudes between the people of two different nationalities, it began by asking the basic question: What does the average American citizen think about Zimbabwe and vice versa?

Having come up with this basic question, the two project teams operating from Harare and California then assembled an open-ended set of roughly 20 to 25 questions, which it was assumed a hypothetical Zimbabwean or US citizen finding him/herself stranded at a bus stop in any one of the two countries would be likely to ask of those around him/her. Among these questions were the following, which I have selected randomly for inclusion in this paper:

- (a) Can I possibly make it living on the streets?
- (b) Do people always go hungry?
- (c) Do people here speak “African”?
- (d) Do you have people who live on the streets?
- (e) Does everyone carry a gun?
- (f) Where can I find the nearest community of black people?
- (g) Where is the nearest church?
- (h) If in distress could I appeal to Oprah Winfrey for help?

The 20 to 25 questions so-developed and the bus stop setting came to constitute the basic scenario for the two parallel plays in both Harare and Pomona, also providing the title of the two plays as *Bus Stop Journals*.

Ethnodrama is meant to generate true-to-life plays that are based on narratives collected through participant observation, personal conversations, interview transcripts and personal memory. The data gathering process made use of the series of open-ended questions listed above to allow both the interviewer and respondents the flexibility to respectively ask questions and respond in a focused but conversational way. This enabled the interviewer to pursue any interesting but relevant tangents that could enrich the data so-elicited. It has to be borne in mind that in performance ethnography data gathering is central to the practitioner’s ability to present true-to-life stories. This allows the performance to be a snapshot of reality. And snapshots of reality can be established only over a considerable period of time. For this to be achieved, the data gathering process took place over a long period of time, beginning with the personal experience and personal anecdotes of the two Fulbright scholars during their respective residencies and culminating in the informal interviews, conversations

and journal experiences during the actual field research. In order to obtain varied snapshots of reality most of the data gathering was obtained through conversations and interviews with characters randomly selected at public bus stops in both Harare and Pomona.

In line with the element of ‘thick description’ which inheres in performed ethnography, some of the characters depicted in the two plays were based on real personalities encountered and engaged with during the data gathering stage. The choice to use bus stops as the principal sites for ethnographic data gathering was informed by our general perception of bus stops as points of convergence for people from varied walks of life. This too was depicted in the paralleling of character in the two *Bus Stop Journals* plays where the two principal characters variously meet a prophetic woman who is blind, a politicized professor who is also blind, two youths who are self-avowedly libertarian, a lonely and desperate nurse, a trickster con-woman and a traditional African healer among others.

Data analysis involved sifting through the responses from the interviewees in search of relevant and interesting commonalities and divergences of opinion in terms of perception about what it meant to be an American citizen in Zimbabwe and vice versa, as well as mutual perceptions of the citizens of the two countries towards one another. A major discovery from the data gathering and analysis on both sides was that knowledge about the other was an interesting mix of both fact and fiction, including outright fantasy, with a considerable bias towards fiction on both sides of the Atlantic. What was equally fascinating was the discovery that informed and factual knowledge of the other often came from the least likely characters and settings, and that the potential for being conned and swindled was much in abundance in California as it was in Zimbabwe.

The two *Bus Stop Journals* - Basic Scenarios & Performance

Because they were devised using the same data gathering processes, based on the same theme and designed to achieve the same purpose, the two plays deliberately paralleled setting and character, assuming the title *Bus Stop Journals* on account of their thematic concerns and their stylistic similarities.

The point of departure for both plays was that the worst and the best in and out of every one of us is what we do, and what others are most likely to do to us if we find ourselves stranded in unfamiliar and potentially difficult circumstances. For this reason, in each play there would be a main character from the other country that was essentially ‘a stranger in a strange land’. This character has just arrived in the host country for the first time and finds him or herself ‘lost’ or stranded at a bus stop, anxiously hoping and waiting for his/her host or potential assistance to arrive. As the character waits in apprehension, he/she meets and interacts with a variety of different characters from all walks of life from the host country (not least because, as indicated above, bus stops are generally a point of convergence for all kinds of different people and characters).

The people whom the central character meets and interacts with reveal themselves and their general attitudes as they relate their stories, dreams, aspirations, attitudes towards the other, and fantasies about what it means to be who they are and what it means to be the other. Through these varied and fascinating interactions, the experience on both sides of the Atlantic becomes a mutual journey into self-discovery and an opportunity for the main character in both plays to get to know and appreciate the other, as they also begin to exorcise the ghosts of their initially held assumptions. The Pomona play had a Zimbabwean *mbira* player or musician as the main character, while the Harare play featured an African American exchange student stranded at a bus stop somewhere in suburban Harare.

Tara Goldstein (2008) has indicated that when ethnographers write up their findings in the form of a play, which is then performed for a target audience, their respondents or research subjects and others within the target community can view the performance of their ethnographic work and either ratify or critique what is put before them through analysis as they also learn from it. Using the public space, performed ethnography has the potential to reach large audiences and encourage public reflexive insight into the cultural experience that is put before them. It is this quality which persuades Goldstein to refer to performed ethnography as a critical border-crossing between anthropology and literature (or fiction) with a purpose to encourage self-reflexive activity that is designed to teach. It is in this quest that the two plays were targeted at a range of different audiences and contexts which included *inter alia*; university students, faculty and staff, township residents in Harare, as well as middle and working-class suburban audiences in both Harare and Pomona.

The Pomona play was presented at a theatre in down-town Pomona while the Harare play was presented in the city centre, at a university theatre and a community hall in one of the city's working-class suburbs that had been a key research site during the data gathering process.

Because performed ethnography links dramatic performance to critical conversations through post-performance dialogue, all these performances provided audiences with an opportunity to speak out about attitudes and perceptions and contribute to on-going analysis about the project and its stated objective to 'ghost out' mutual distortions about the other as will be outlined in the following section.

Exorcising Ghosts through the *Bus Stop Journals*

Historically, the practice of applied or community-based theatre has been associated with economically disadvantaged rural and urban communities, with much focus on the former. Because the Border-Crossings project had a radically different purpose, which was that of informing and animating debate surrounding mutual perceptions of the other, it deliberately shifted focus from the rural and urban poor to the urban middle and working classes.

Rather than address the customary issues of economic disempowerment, growth and development as has become the norm in most applied theatre contexts, for once this was a project that trained focus on issues of the 'mind' and on perceptions. The Border-Crossings project set out to demonstrate that applied theatre need not necessarily be a practice of protest in aid of the poor and the disadvantaged. The decision to focus on urban middle and working classes was informed by our realisation that contrary to the popular imagination, it is in fact urban middle-classes and other so-called urbanites who more often than not display some of the most shocking ignorance in terms of social intelligence and knowledge of the other, as well as the world around them. From the data gathering process and personal anecdotal experience, we were able to establish that some of the shocking ignorance and stereotypes about the other were held by the least likely people on both sides of the Atlantic. There were individuals who displayed astonishingly limited knowledge of the world beyond their immediate social experience.



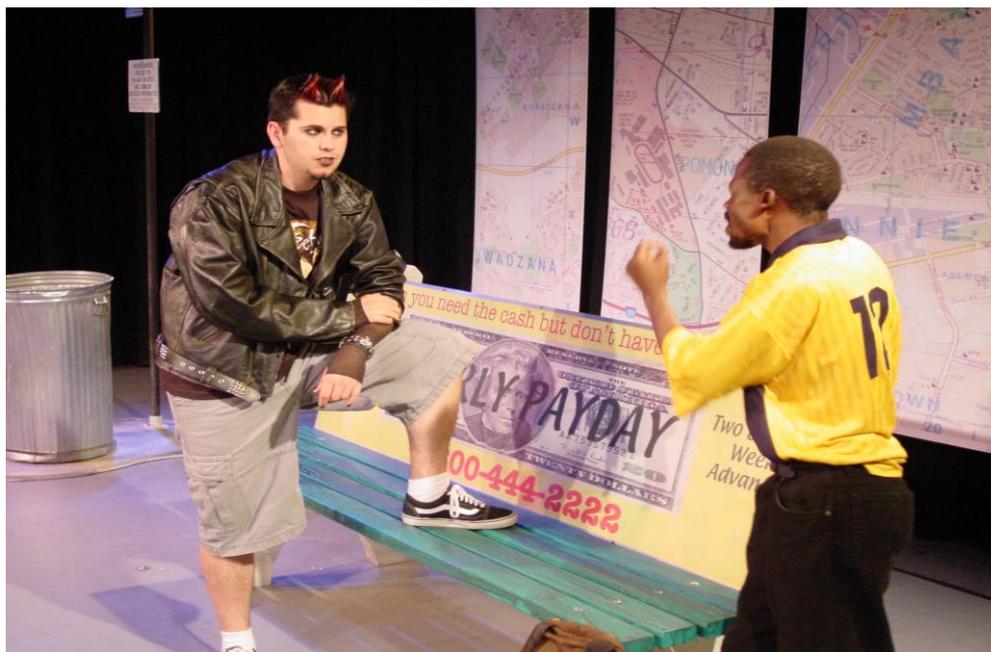
Pomona play “Africa Dread” s encounter with a young woman who subsequently cons him out of all his money

In the Pomona play Thembinkosi or “Africa Dread”, a Zimbabwean musician and prolific player of the traditional Shona instrument the *mbira* decides to skip the rest of his band and “miss” his next flight from LAX international airport while on tour in the US. Having just arrived from economically ravaged Zimbabwe, Africa Dread sees his fortuitous trip to the US as a god-sent opportunity to skip it into the US and make it big, with the intention to send for his wife and two children to join him at a later date. Stranded at a bus stop in Pomona with nothing except a small rucksack with a few personal belongings and his *mbira* instrument, Dread suddenly finds himself facing a future of utter destitution in stark contrast to his initial fantasies of instant prosperity on American soil. Mysteriously too, Africa Dread suddenly loses his adeptness at playing the *mbira*, which becomes something of a strange contraption in his hands. As he waits at the bus stop contemplating his next move, Dread meets a number of characters key among who is an apparently well-to-do young woman who cons him out of all his money. Next, he chats to a lonely nurse aid who upon learning that he is member of a touring band from abroad tries to seduce him into a long-term relationship. As he waits at the bus stop, Dread is accosted by a menacing looking Goth type, clad in stylish leather outfits, with lots of jewellery and the associated bling. Terror stricken that he may be in the clutches of a racist gang or something approximating the racist far right, Dread is pleasantly surprised to realise that not only is this menacing-looking goth type character nice, gentle and friendly, but he also knows a lot more about Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwean music scene than Dread probably does.



Pomona play “Africa Dread” meets the woman who is blind who re-connects him with the spirit of his long-deceased mother

With his situation growing more and more desperate, Africa Dread finally finds sanctuary with a young African American who in spite of his crass naivety in believing that Africa is one country and one gigantic rural outback, graciously takes him in at an uncle's. Perhaps Africa Dread's most significant encounter takes place when he meets a woman who is blind who spiritually re-connects him with his long-dead mother. After this encounter Dread decides to abandon the mythical American dream and return home to Africa as he also suddenly re-discovers his proficiency at playing the *mbira*.



Pomona play “Africa Dread”’s encounter with the goth-looking character

For its capacity to act as a self-reflexive mirror on reality, performance ethnography thus became a vehicle for inter-cultural dialogue where verbatim transcripts of actual conversations were either modified or presented “as is” in order to create authentic situations and characters. As Brown (Quoted in Saldana, 2011) observes; the repetitions, convolutions, pauses, malapropisms, idioms, vocabulary and non-word sounds that make each character’s voice as distinctive as a fingerprint or a voice-print in performed ethnography heightened social awareness as they also encouraged constructive community reflexivity and dialogue to the extent that hearing these verbatim accounts of their commonly held viewpoints echoing back at them from the stage allowed critical reflection among members of the audience.

In the Harare play, Sade an African American exchange student who has just arrived in Zimbabwe finds herself dumped at a nondescript bus stop somewhere in a Harare working class suburb following a hopeless misunderstanding with a taxi driver. As she waits anxiously at the bus stop, Sade meets a cross-section of local characters who all lead her on a journey of self-discovery and knowledge of the other through conversation. Among the most significant characters she engages with is an unemployed youth whom she initially mistakes for a potential hoodlum and con-artist from the local neighbourhood who is out to accost her. It turns out that the unemployed youth is an accomplished dancer who has toured many parts of Europe and the US, much to the surprise of Sade who also gets to learn about Native American music and traditions from him. The young man becomes Sade’s closest associate during her stay in Zimbabwe. As Sade continues to frequent the bus stop during her stay in Harare she gets to meet two youths who will have none of the black power and back-to-Africa mantras, which excited Sade’s interest to come to Africa. Sade gets to learn that their general indisposition towards home is no doubt informed by their disillusionment with the post-colonial condition of Zimbabwe. Sade also engages with a professor from a local university who is blind. His sharp insights into America’s foreign policy in Iraq and the middle east begins to make Sade doubt America’s “might is right” approach to world politics. However, for all his anti-American rhetoric, the radical university professor makes an oblique attempt to extort some American dollars from Sade via a murky black-market deal.

As she frequents the bus stop more and more on her way to school, Sade also gets to meet a local traditional healer with an impressive knowledge of slavery and African American history. It is also through this character that Sade gets to know the true meaning and interpretation of her West African Yoruba name.

One of the central aspects of applied theatre and the ethnography of performance is participation. Participation derives from the ability of the practice to engage audiences and to involve it (the audience) in the creative process and in dialogue. In other words, the Border-Crossings project harnessed audience participation from the stage of data gathering through to rehearsals, performance and post-performance critical reflection and engagement. As is standard practice in other ethnographic practices, in this project participation was in the service of truth and not obfuscation or idiosyncratic representation. By setting the two plays at a nondescript bus stop somewhere in Harare and Pomona using a minimalist set and simple characterization, the project tried to eschew the self-indulgent performance forms normally associated with the art theatre of illusion, privileging a presentational design and aesthetic in the service of truth. To this extent, the Border-Crossings project was in sync with Pica’s characterization of good applied theatre as that which is; “Vital and vitalizing, entertaining, intelligent and provoking the intelligence of the people...” (1979: 55). In addition, by drawing its characters on the basis of personalities encountered in real life the project ensured that; “The personalities of the characters [were able to] correspond with living persons, [where] the authentic truth of the people must be reflected” (Pica: 57).

A critical reflection on Pica’s statement above reveals something of the ethnographic and the quest for truth-to-life in the general practice of applied theatre such as we found in the Border-Crossings project. Using the technique of paralleling of character and setting in the two *Bus Stop*

Journals plays, we believe that the *Border-Crossings* was able to expose and to problematise some of the easily taken-for-granted attitudes and perceptions between the two different nationalities. In the Pomona play, Africa Dread gets to realise that the promise of the American dream is probably not as rosy as it may appear, also losing touch with his traditional instrument of choice until against all expectation, he meets the prophetic woman who is blind who miraculously re-connects him with his dead mother before he makes up his mind to return to Africa. In the Harare play, Sade gets to meet ordinary people who dismantle her stereotypes about Africa as they also give her a completely new outlook on her own history, taking her through a journey of self-discovery.

The *Border-Crossings* project was also able to exorcise the ghosts of mutual misperception between the peoples of Zimbabwe and the people of the United States in more ways than just rehabilitating distorted views. Ever since the turn of the 21st Century when the government of Zimbabwe embarked on its ill-fated land reform programme, leading to virtual economic collapse and unmitigated levels of inflation, diplomatic relations between Zimbabwe and the US have continued to plummet. Following this well-publicised diplomatic fallout, the official narrative from the government of Zimbabwe has been that the generality of Zimbabwean people is ill-disposed towards America and her citizens for being the primary cause for their economic misery through their support for “economic sanctions”. The government of Zimbabwe routinely claims that these sanctions are responsible for the country’s economic implosion. The *Border-Crossings* project was able to exorcise the ghost of this phantom of mutual hostility between the ordinary citizens of the two nations by giving a voice to ordinary citizens whose dialogue and post-performance engagements clearly indicated that contrary to the rhetoric issuing from the government of Zimbabwe’s official megaphones, the ordinary people of the two countries fully appreciated one another without fear or prejudice. It can be said then, that by involving people at the grassroots, the project provided a different perspective from the ground-up. It was clear that the political rhetoric coming out of the government of Zimbabwe’s official megaphones was quite at variance with the views of ordinary people who were far more curious and accommodative towards the other.

One of the positive spin-offs from the two plays engagement with issues of mutual perception and international understanding was an invitation to perform at the Harare’s prestigious Harare International Festival of the Arts (HIFA) in April 2006. Similarly, the performances in California were followed by suggestions to adapt the *Bus Stop Journals* plays for airing on America’s PBS because of their topicality and engagement with issues of mutual perception between nations. In the context of the *Border-Crossings* project the two invitations serve as ample testimony to the sociality and dynamism of applied theatre and performed ethnography as well as its ability to unravel situations of mutual misunderstanding and distortion. As Kaarsholm rightly observes; “Where there are areas of conflict in world-view and tensions between the forces of dominance, acceptance and revolt, theatre often serves to illuminate self-understanding and to articulate precise needs and aspirations” (1991: 225).

Conclusion

This article has attempted an analysis of a transatlantic project in applied theatre that went by the title, “*Border-Crossings*”. The project was undertaken sometime between October 2004 and September 2005 and it involved two participating teams from the departments of Theatre at the University of Zimbabwe and California State Polytechnic University Pomona.

Having played an active role as one of the principal facilitators and participants on this transatlantic project in applied theatre, I wish to acknowledge my situatedness within the project *vis-a-vis* my ability to independently and objectively assess the success or lack thereof of the *Border-Crossings* project. In other words, I wish to state in conclusion that in the final analysis the voice that has been heard in this analysis is mine.

Be that as it may, the paper has argued that the project adopted the self-reflexive strategy of performed ethnography or ethnodrama to produce two plays entitled *Bus Stop Journals* that were performed in Harare and Pomona. This was done with a purpose to ‘ghost out’ or eliminate certain misconceptions and erroneous views about the other which it was felt, were mutually held between the people of the two target communities. The project used the element of ‘thick description’ often found in ethnographic contexts to parallel setting and character in order to animate audience awareness and self-reflexive discussion among members of the target audiences.

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