

FUTURES THEATRE: A GENRE INFORMED BY FUTURE STUDIES

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Abstract

Current images of the future found in popular entertainment publicise a limited range of extreme future scenarios. There is a niche for performing near-decades futures involving individuals who could be our children, in more prosaic scenarios that invite conversations about our possible directions. In Futures Theatre, tools and concepts from the field of futures studies can inform playwrights in exploring social change with ordinary people – ‘kitchen sink’ futures in a spirit of regeneration and stewardship.

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Introduction

Futures Theatre was born in 1997 when, as a drama teacher, I discovered futures studies and thought that futures thinking could provide topics for drama performances in school. Since then I have borrowed futures tools and concepts, reshaping some of them to suit my teaching, developing a description of this genre that helps me to work with students as they come to terms with the 21st century through drama practice.

The discipline of futures studies is concerned with studying change and its potential consequences, and uses thinking about the future to help people better understand and act in the present (Bussey, 2010). But rather than predicting futures, Dator (2000) recommends identifying major alternative future possibilities and examining their importance as guiding ideas or images.

Inayatullah (2011, home page) stresses the value of exploring the worldviews and myths underlying these possible futures, adding that: “the futurist employs time, especially future time, to transform the present. Through deeply democratic processes, the futurist helps organizations and institutions move from the default future (which is often the used or the disowned) to the preferred future.” The term ‘futures’ is used as a plural by the World Futures Studies Federation (2007) in order to widen perceptions to consider more than the common assumption of one linear progression from the present time, and

implies the power to choose possibilities. Thus the territory is opened up for creating preferred futures. Plurality is also a feature of futures activities: the University of Houston (2011) states that futures studies can synthesise insights from other fields such as economics, engineering, sociology, politics, systems theory, creativity and community building, and that futurists focus and build on specific areas of expertise. The field of drama has productive links with the futures field in its use as a medium of exploration and presentation of alternative futures, though this potential is not realised fully as yet.

Milojevic (2002) describes assumptions shared by most futurists: that the future is not fully known or predictable and it is influenced by social structures and historical factors, human intervention and invention, as well as random events. Human values shape future visions that influence decisions made in the present, affecting later outcomes. She describes a crucial contrast between planning and design employed in early intervention, and a later reactive approach with fewer options, seen in crisis management. Milojevic (ibid. p. 37) adds that, "There is a slow shift from futures studies as a business tool to strategically manage the future, to futures studies as a framework for social emancipation", an interest shared by many drama practitioners. Ibsen's 'A Doll's House' is an example of a play that explored social emancipation for women and offered an alternative life for Nora as well as a reaction to this from Helmer, arousing strong responses from audiences at the time. The play hardly represents a future alternative in Western society today, but it may well have the power to shock and challenge more repressive patriarchal societies still.

One way of approaching an understanding of futures studies is by using six foundational concepts or pillars (Inayatullah, 2011): mapping the future and present; anticipating with futures tools; timing the future by "understanding the grand patterns of change, macrohistory and macrofutures"; deepening perceptions of the future through using methods such as causal layered analysis [CLA, discussed below]; creating alternatives using scenarios; and at the same time transforming the present and creating the future through visioning, backcasting, action learning and the "transcend conflict resolution method" (np).

The World Futures Studies Federation (2011) identifies five traditions that operate within the field, representing different epistemological and ideological underpinnings. The *empirical tradition* focuses on trend analysis and prediction; the *critical tradition* originated in Europe, and the *cultural tradition* is based on the work of Federation members involved with non-Western cultures, as well as those interested in developing a broader long-range consideration of civilisational and planetary futures.

Two other traditions include the *empowerment-oriented*, prospective, action research approach and the *integral/transdisciplinary* futures approach. All of these are pathways for futures research and pedagogy. In this latter area, futures education for young people is seen by Slaughter (2008, p. 24) as giving understandings and perspectives which can provide a foundation for long term solutions to human problems: "active foresight, sustainable cultures, stewardship of the Earth". Hicks (2011) agrees, advising that education should help young people in making sense of their world and thinking critically about the future for themselves and society.

Briefly, then, futures studies broadens awareness of possibilities and alternatives as humans manage their choices.

Futures Theatre

Slaughter (1991, p. 98) articulates “one of the problems to be faced if we want to implement foresight at the social level. How can future possibilities be made *real* enough to stimulate present-day responses?” One answer to this lies in the use of drama to concretise those possibilities, even if only temporarily, and Futures Theatre has been developed for the purpose. Informed by futures studies (perhaps in conjunction with other fields), Futures Theatre brings scenes from alternative possible futures to life on stage, showing audiences new ways of living for ordinary people as they influence, or react to, one or more possible changes in the near decades (Head, 2010). Here, action is presented in a functioning world set in this time frame, and its content may be based on futures scenarios created using any of the approaches and traditions. One futures tool has potential for deepening the engagement with alternative situations in a Futures Theatre performance: causal layered analysis.

Causal layered analysis

CLA is a framework conceived by Inayatullah (2004, p. 1), and outlined thus:

Causal layered analysis consists of four levels: the litany; social causes; discourse/worldview; and myth/metaphor. The first level is the litany – the official unquestioned view of reality. The second level is the social causation level, the systemic perspective. The data of the litany is explained and questioned at this second level. The third level is the discourse/worldview. Deeper, unconsciously held ideological, worldview and discursive assumptions are unpacked at this level. As well, how different stakeholders construct the litany and system is explored. The fourth level is the myth/metaphor, the unconscious emotive dimensions of the issue. The challenge is to conduct research that moves up and down these layers of analysis and thus is inclusive of different ways of knowing.

Many available examples of CLA have been applied at the macro level, involving large groups of people and societal institutions; the time frames for change range from short term at the visible litany level, to long term at the deep level of metaphor. For example, Inayatullah (ibid. p. 18) applies CLA to traffic futures in Bangkok. At the litany level, he lists traffic congestion and pollution. At the social causes level, the problem is seen as not enough roads being available. At the level of discourse, issues are identified as industrialism and colonialism, and at the myth level, the beliefs that ‘bigger is better’, and ‘West is best’ are described. Thus the issues are seen in a vertical gaze that includes different ways of knowing, and spaces are opened up for awareness and discussion.

Inayatullah (2002, p. 56) states:

Causal layered analysis asks us to go beyond conventional framing of issues ... [it] does not privilege a particular level. Moving up and down layers we can integrate analysis and synthesis, and horizontally we can integrate discourses, ways of knowing and worldviews, thereby increasing the richness of the analysis.

He also (2004, p. 530) explains that “CLA, as developed, is a sociological tool. However, it can be used to unpack individual perspectives”. These perspectives can include individuals enacting scenarios on stage; the characters may represent and be attached to different discourses (at level 3) and play out the conflicts, with their effects at level 1 (the litany), their causes (at level 2), informed by the underlying belief systems and metaphors at level 4. The potential of CLA in drama lies partly in revealing sources of character motivation clearly.

In its vertical function CLA creates spaces where data may be examined at each level; and in its horizontal function it allows for comparative analysis at each level. This is particularly useful when comparing different characters' dialogue, actions, motivations and beliefs, and the discourses they represent. The descriptions of layers themselves will not be unfamiliar to the reader; but the spaces created insist that thought at each level is not left out of any analysis, and there are opportunities for movement between the layers. Thus a specific piece of text may contain meaning at more than one level, echoing Esslin's (1976, p. 17) description of how drama can "show ... several aspects of [an] action simultaneously and also convey several levels of action and emotion at the same time". The further value of CLA is that the level of metaphor is a necessary component, ensuring space for the examination of identity, beliefs, and definitions of reality, levels where critique is most profound.

The exploration of vertical complexity with CLA is particularly useful in comparative analyses of different fields; the comparison or contrast of underlying guiding metaphors is exposed, so that exponents of both areas can understand the different viewpoints more fully. It is then possible to explore guiding metaphors that suit a partnership of the two fields, so they can move forwards in a synergistic and productive relationship, as has been my aim in Futures Theatre. CLA also has potential for examining new hybrid genres to see how different genres work together in creating meaning at the four levels. It may help to reveal whether any genre changes offer critique and alternatives at deeper levels, or in fact represent business as usual with no challenges to the status quo, merely a set of new clothes for the same emperor. It perhaps has potential for examining research and new ways of knowing, to explore the challenges they offer, and to see where those challenges lie. The spaces at each level of CLA are always present, and they lay bare the existence of either new thinking or assumptions unexamined. Writers may also use CLA as a tool for analysing their own writing, to deepen the planning process as they create characters, each with their own set of interpretations and assumptions at the four levels, contrasting them with a view to exposing power relations and beliefs clearly through interaction and dialogue. CLA does not reveal the skill of the writer, however; it exposes depth of thinking rather than the use of the elements of drama.

Scenario Planning

Scenario planning is one of the most important activities of futures studies. It is also a feature of drama practice. A futures scenario is a "self-consistent picture of the future or an aspect of the future" (Slaughter, 1995, p. 186), and is created using futures tools such as the 'social invention' (ibid. p. 187), described as "any intentional act that seeks to make new social arrangements in order to solve a problem or extend boundaries. [It is] seen as a counterbalance to technological innovation/invention". *Futures wheels* are brainstorming flow charts using a central hub of a 'what if' innovation (social or technological), with spokes leading to imminent possibilities, as well as long-term effects. The scenario can be based on some of these effects linked together. Working in conjunction is *incasting*, or adding further detail to the picture. Ideas for the central 'what if' may come from the examination of trends such as internet usage, population figures, sales of particular items, weather patterns, current affairs and so on. *Backcasting* (ibid. p. 164) is a method in which "a particular future scenario is identified in some detail. Its origins and lines of development are then carefully traced back to the present", with imagined causal events and legislations logged on a timeline. Other futures methods include exploring the forces that shape the future, studying *transformational cycles*, and examining *emerging issues* as they develop from their early, barely noticed stages before gaining media attention and finally percolating into popular consciousness. Using these tools it is possible to create well-fleshed, possible, perhaps even probable future social contexts.

However, these tools are clearly not necessary for creating a play depicting a future alternative, given the work of Ibsen and other writers who proffered alternative conditions that did not exist in their own society at the time. Caryl Churchill may or may not have used such tools in the play ‘A Number’ (2002), which examines some of the possible repercussions of human cloning, still only a technological future possibility at this time. But futures tools are available to better inform playwrights and offer abundant alternatives for consistently novel content development. And the existence of a specifically futures oriented genre with its own modified tools used for creating alternative social contexts invites and encourages dramatists and students who are interested in engaging with futures issues and exploring the opportunities available.

According to Jarratt and Mahaffie (2009, p. 8), the scenario has been “probably the one slender reed that futurists have extended to their uncomprehending public as a way of understanding the future”, noting this as a reason for its continued popularity as a method. They see its value as an analytical futures tool but are concerned with its limitations as it “does not necessarily create the most effective narratives for bringing non-futurists new insights on the future” (ibid.). They speak of the need to reframe futures alternatives and scenarios so that these can reach their intended audience in a way that is more easily assimilated, adding that “futurists must rethink scenarios as a process and a tool, and discover ways to use them much more effectively as powerful stories that can motivate reshaping the future” (ibid.).

Jarratt and Mahaffie (ibid. p. 9) recognise that “to move people to new thinking, we need to supply new stories—ones that are compelling enough and make strong enough connections to people's worldviews, that they succeed against the frames and stories that people already have”. They describe a story about leading a comfortable low-carbon lifestyle as an example, and outline these advantages of reframing scenarios as a story: it can replace the dominant discourse and associated notions; show different but achievable ways of living an alternative life; simplify for better understanding; supply emotional meaning; connect ideas that may have seemed separate; and enable better communication of new information. The opportunity for dramatists to create performances of these stories to share is clear. What futurists can do, Jarratt and Mahaffie claim (ibid.), is to study the “swirl of forces at play ... and validate new stories and frames”, extending the story beyond today’s structures and offering new thinking “to get somewhere new”. Thus futurists can supply the contextual knowledge and extrapolation skills, as well as the insight into a new scenario and its implications.

In response to Jarratt and Mahaffie, the potential of Futures Theatre is to offer futures stories, topics and concepts to audiences that may have little futures awareness, so introducing them to the non-futurist, and potentially working as a vehicle for social change, a purpose found in both fields. It offers the opportunity to critique the present, since a performed future may challenge simply by contrast, and as Jarratt and Mahaffie say, “This should be a step in freeing up the thinking for new framing” (ibid. p.8).

The Project

I use a futures approach in my drama teaching practice, aiming to help students share their ideas through performing scenarios on stage to entertain, inform and challenge audiences with alternatives for future living. I use the near future (30 years ahead) as a working time frame well within the lifespan of the students, and close enough for them to see the relevance of any changes to their own lives. Thus they benefit from developing their own futures literacy in partnership with studying drama.

As part of the Futures Theatre research project, 25 students in two Year 12 drama classes were introduced to some futures tools and used them to create their own scenarios. They also observed a stimulus Futures Theatre production before the unit. Their participation involved acting in these roles: co-researchers as they researched trends and created contextual scenarios; co-artists as they wrote and performed futures informed scenes; change agents as they presented possible alternative futures to outside audiences; and critics as they evaluated aspects of the teaching unit. They were research subjects in that they were exposed to futures concepts and tools, describing any changes in their futures thinking after the unit.

Before the students undertook study in the unit, they were given Questionnaire 1, seeking individual written responses. It introduced and framed ways of thinking in a futures context, extending the students' thinking beyond their own personal context. They were asked for their thoughts, hopes, and fears for themselves, Australia, and the world in the future, thus introducing different contexts of thought. Questionnaires 2 (written) and 3 (focus group) were administered immediately after the unit was completed and sought a critique of the unit, the topic of addressing a global purpose, and the genre of Futures Theatre. Questionnaire 4 (phone interviews) took place 18 months later.

To start with, the students researched a global issue to manage. They made a centre proposition 30 years ahead for a futures wheel, adding near and later consequences and connecting them, and backcasting from the 'what if' in the future by placing lead-up events and legislations on a timeline reaching back to the present. One class worked towards making education available to all children up to 15 years of age using Health, Education and Lifeskills Programs (HELP) centres, and the other class explored raising global life expectancy to 65 years worldwide through purifying water and transporting it where needed by airship. Each class created a scenario through incasting, adding detail and noting possible issues from the innovations. They created roles (careers) and relationships for characters and linked them with the events and issues at a chosen point on the timeline, before or after the 'what if' futures wheel had 'happened'. From these, story ideas were generated and scripts were created.

The students' depth of engagement with the issues was discovered by using CLA as a tool for deep analysis of the thinking revealed in the students' Futures Theatre scripts. It has shown clearly whether the proposed changes in their short scene from the future scenario actually offered a paradigmatic and metaphoric critique and alternatives to the status quo, or if their interpretation of the future scenario was based on a change only in the upper levels, perhaps offering a new technology rather than a difference in discourse or an offering of a new way of living with a new guiding metaphor. In fact, few critiqued and challenged at the level of metaphor. As an example to illustrate the application of CLA to a text, the following extract from a student script is described. The methodology applied to dialogue and action is illustrated in detail here in order to demonstrate its potential. This extract is from one text that did engage consciously with the scenario at level 4.

Script 11, or 'Defrica' (Head, 2010, p. 136) is set in a country that is newly modernised and corporatised, and laws have been passed that forbid certain spiritual practices. Conflict arises between the business-like Cheta and her father Yumat, who has faith in the traditional ways of calling rain. CLA applied to the following dialogue illustrates the depth of conscious engagement with the future scenario shown by the student. At the litany or event (action) level, Cheta (ibid. p. 86) accuses her father of practising forbidden rituals: "You had your beads, didn't you?" and he retorts, "The warding of spirits doesn't happen if you do not use beads". She uses arguments at level two, the level of social cause to support her position: "We no longer live in tribes, but we live in towns. The world is changing and you must change with it." His response to this

is that “older people are not respected in society any more”. At the deeper level of discourse she claims that religion has been done away with in the country, so he should not attempt to educate his grandson in the traditional rituals. She says that “I did not choose to bring up Rab with no god – the law did.” He laments this as it has taken away an important purpose in his life: “Why? So I can sit here and waste away with nothing to do.” Next she uses an argument at the fourth layer of myth to continue the argument: “There is no such thing as a bad spirit. People like you pretend the rain dance really works.” He counters this with his insight at the same level, stating that, “no nation can exist without beliefs – they are what make us human.

The necessity of including the level of myth and metaphor is clear in this script – if the analyst does not investigate the underlying beliefs in comparing and contrasting two systems of thought, a vital part of the picture is left out, and understanding is compromised. But it can also be applied to scripts where, at the deepest levels, assumptions lie unchallenged. In this case it can be seen that the writer accepts the status quo, and there is no critique at deeper levels of thought, rather a story enacted at the upper levels of action and cause. The examination of metaphor is not new; but the CLA matrix insists that no level of thought is left unexamined, and vertical complexity is observable as the matrix shows the four levels at once. As a tool for critique in drama, the CLA matrix has potential, particularly since it includes this level of metaphor and symbol, one of the staple ingredients in performance. It has been used to analyse the play ‘A Doll’s House’ (Head, 2010).

Outcomes of the Project

The application of CLA to student script work demonstrated that they could create alternative futures in dramatic form, and perform these for a variety of audiences. Their responses to Questionnaires 2 and 3 highlighted practicalities such as the teaching resources in poster form; some saw them as helpful and accessible, and some found them of little use. It was suggested that more examples of Futures Theatre plays be made available for their viewing. Some saw the unit as an opportunity they found nowhere else; a chance to explore future issues, building on previous experience in creating performances on current issues. The content was seen as workable and accessible; student response in terms of unit delivery was positive and encouraging. On the topic of a global purpose, they showed a qualified support for the articulation of this, admitting to its impracticality and overambitious leanings, yet allowing for theatre to have a thought-provoking capacity, even a strategic planning potential; certainly beneficial effects in terms of hope and the possibilities for future action, despite its dealing with nothing more tangible than ideas.

The features the students thought were useful in the Futures Theatre genre included the rare opportunity for first-hand access to enacted future scenarios for audiences, the encouragement of their empathy with affected individual characters via their reactions to the scenario, and the mix of entertainment with critical freedom and education, including information on the consequences of present action. The issue of optimism or pessimism in a Futures Theatre production was considered, with students valuing positive content but seeing the use of negativity for airing and dealing with problems, as well as being used to build dramatic tension. Most of the responses supported the usefulness of the genre; critical awareness and advice were offered with the intent to maintain its attraction and relevance to students and audiences. Those who did not support the genre gave reasons based on their perception of the nature and purpose of drama, as well as the methodology in the teaching unit. Drama, it appears, is not a tool for change, according to these students. In general, however, the genre was seen as viable for presenting scenarios set in the near future on stage for audiences’ thought-provoking enjoyment. Four students were interviewed 18 months later for Questionnaire 4, and all stated that their awareness had

expanded and their thinking influenced by the unit. Two had experienced no change in their feelings about the future; one felt worse – “we... realised how bad it could get”, and one felt better, wanting to be “more proactive” (Head, 2010, pp. 180-181).

Conclusion

Thus the students ascribe Futures Theatre with the potential to provoke thought through presenting scenarios of innovations and their consequences in an entertaining way that engages audiences. It also has the potential to foster audience optimism and confidence in human agency in managing our futures, and inviting debate about where we should be heading, as part of a broad democratic process. The field of futures studies has therefore much to offer drama in providing a fresh and innovative purpose for a theatre of the 21st century, as well as an analytical tool in causal layered analysis that encourages depth of response and insight into the complex issues of this century’s early decades and beyond. Futures Theatre, then, is a theatre of ideas, possibilities, regeneration and stewardship.

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