

# The Aesthetics of *Towards Youth*: Making Relations in and through Theatre

Kathleen Gallagher and Andrew Kushnir

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Article abstract

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# The Aesthetics of *Towards Youth*: Making Relations in and through Theatre

KATHLEEN GALLAGHER

*Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning, Ontario Institute of Studies in Education,  
University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada*

ANDREW KUSHNIR

*Independent Artist, Toronto, Ontario, Canada*

Cet article de Kathleen Gallagher et Andrew Kushnir présente une étude ethnographique effectuée de 2014 à 2019 auprès de 250 élèves dans des salles d'art dramatique au Canada, en Angleterre, en Inde, en Grèce et à Taïwan. L'expérience et les résultats de la recherche ont servi de base à la pièce *Towards Youth*, un projet de théâtre documentaire coproduit par les compagnies torontoises Project: Humanity et Crow's Theatre en février 2019. Cet article fait état du lien qui s'est construit entre la chercheuse en chef et le dramaturge ayant participé au projet. Ces derniers font état de leur vision commune de l'œuvre, de leurs principes esthétiques et éthiques en ce qui a trait à la recherche et à la dramaturgie, ainsi que des efforts qu'ils ont déployés pour tenter de comprendre comment leur auditoire a reçu la pièce documentaire et les pédagogies qui y étaient associées.

**Mots clés :** théâtre documentaire, théâtre verbatim, recherche ethnographique, esthétique relationnelle, esthétique du soin, recherche sur le public

This article introduces a multi-year, multi-site ethnographic study undertaken with 250 young people in drama classrooms in Canada, England, India, Greece, and Taiwan between 2014 and 2019. The experience and findings of that research then became the basis of an original documentary play, *Towards Youth*, co-produced by Project: Humanity and Crow's Theatre in Toronto in February 2019. This article elaborates on the relationship built between the lead researcher and the embedded playwright on the project, accounting for their shared vision for the work, their aesthetic and ethical principles in research and playmaking, and finally their efforts to understand how the documentary play and its surrounding pedagogies were apprehended by audience members.

**Keywords:** documentary theatre, Verbatim theatre, ethnographic research, relational aesthetics, aesthetics of care, audience research



Luke:

I felt like I had done something really good 'cause the way I see it, that in life, I feel like, in life, not every person in the world has to do something world-changing. Not every person in the world has to cure a disease. I just think anyone who can go through life and do something

small—even improve one person’s life just a little bit, and make them feel welcome, then you’ve had a good life. (Kushnir, *Towards Youth* 37)

The relationship between drama in the lives of young people and notions of care resides at the heart of the 2019 documentary theatre piece *Towards Youth: a play on radical hope*. Crafted by Andrew Kushnir from the data of Dr. Kathleen Gallagher’s five-year SSHRC-funded ethnographic study—*Youth, Theatre, Radical Hope and the Ethical Imaginary: an intercultural investigation of drama pedagogy, performance and civic engagement (2014–2019)*—the play explored the nexus of youth, schools, teachers, drama classrooms, artists, theatres, and social organizations in England, Greece, India, Taiwan, and Canada. Working with 250 young people and seventeen researchers and practitioners across these diverse spaces gave us critical insight into the world as young people know it, and as they might *wish* it to be. Creating a play with the very words uttered by youth in interviews and classroom activities made manifest our own impulses to amplify their voices, to translate their feelings to new audiences and to encourage the so-called adult world to *adjust* and listen more finely to what youth are telling us.

With that backdrop, our co-authored article will trace the working relationship between an artist-researcher (Kushnir) and a researcher-artist (Gallagher) as we carried out a multi-sited ethnographic research project and created a documentary theatre piece that represented, imagined, and nurtured new forms of caring relationships with young people. Through reflecting on how a professional artist and social scientist discovered their shared values, our experiences in both the processes of research and artmaking, and finally our engagement with the public, we will explore an affective impact chain that finds origin in hearing young people as the experts of their lives and embracing the drama classroom as a powerful place for them to dream.

Art making takes place in a series of relational acts, some more explicit and intentional than others. Where an ethics of care focuses upon the values inherent, exhibited or perhaps desired within these human interdependencies, the aesthetics of care seeks to focus upon how the sensory and affective are realized in human relations fostered in art projects. (Thompson, “Towards” 436)

Activating Thompson’s notion of an “aesthetics of care” in our own work was predicated on learning how to reorder ourselves to better hear young people, not only as a personal but as a relational act. Transforming research into theatre had us undertaking practices of care that were both communal and accumulating in nature. For instance, this article will distinctly reflect on how our rehearsal process and performances involved a professional company of adult actors performing, for audiences of young and old, the personhood of young people alongside their adult allies; young people and adults engaged in relational acts of art-making. And in the case of the Crow’s Theatre/Project: Humanity co-production of *Towards Youth* in Toronto (March 2019), this act of theatrical translation not only encompassed age, but also race, culture, language, geography, and politics. By drawing from the undertaken audience research surrounding the play’s production, we will conclude by considering how the acts of translation and representation came to be understood by audiences, especially youthful audience members.

Our readers will be served by one further contextual piece—a particular finding from our Radical Hope research that many of us found especially difficult. Across all five sites of our study, there was a strong, positive co-relation between age and the diminishment of hope: the older you get, the less

hope you feel (see Gallagher, Rodricks, and Jacobson). This was neither a finding we were expecting nor one we felt good about. However, it became an underpinning for *Towards Youth* and the movements of care we sought to nurture. Philosopher Isabelle Stengers proposes that we become more hopeful when we find solidarity and connection to others (“Cosmo-Politics”). Specifically, Stengers’s notion of an “ecology of practices,” which she understands as “tools for thinking,” resonates especially strongly for us; practices that aim for the construction of new “practical identities” (“Introductory Notes” 186). Our “ecology of practices,” we will argue, became our “tools for thinking,” to resist habit, to resist what we think we already know. About young people. About art. And about ourselves.

## Movement One: Researcher-Artist and Artist-Researcher Meet

### *Kathleen Writes*

Andrew and I are very often asked versions of this question: How did a social science researcher and a theatre-maker come to collaborate? Our answer usually throws us back into a narrative of first meeting and how, from there, we have built a practice with each other that has grown in strength, over years, and across several different projects.

While I was carrying out previous ethnographic research, I was working with a teacher-collaborator in a Toronto school who had invited Project: Humanity members Andrew Kushnir and Antonio Cayonne to work with her students in the very classroom where I was carrying out research. Kushnir and Cayonne were coming in to introduce the form of Verbatim Theatre to the students prior to bringing their touring show, *The Middle Place*, into the school. That day, the two artists took the class through several activities that had been developed in their rehearsal hall with director Alan Dilworth. They were giving the students an interesting inside look into the creation of *The Middle Place* and into the many ethical and aesthetic questions posed by the genre itself. The work they did that day was based primarily in movement exercises, especially one called a “Punctuation Walk” devised by Dilworth.

It was all very interesting for my research team and for the drama teacher and her students—very fresh ideas and creative experiments. But what struck me most powerfully that morning was the pedagogy of the work. The *how* of their facilitation, the pedagogical sophistication of these two men working with a diverse group of seventeen-year-olds and indeed how that was met by the students in the room. Later, Andrew would call this moment a dawning of our “shared values concerning the personhood of young people.” I think that is a fine summary of what I was feeling.

What is often referred to as “relational pedagogy” finds its lineage in art criticism, and particularly in the work of Nicolas Bourriaud, who attributed this turn to the relational encounter in art to the worldwide birth of urban culture after the Second World War. People’s growing mobility resulted in intense new encounters in social spaces and the conception of art as social interstice (14). He felt that art was particularly suited to this “hands-on civilization” because it “tightens the space of relations” (15), writing:

The possibility of a *relational art* [...] points to a radical upheaval of the aesthetic, cultural and political goals introduced by modern art [...] As a human activity based on commerce, art is at once the object and the subject of an ethic [...] Art is a state of encounter. (emphasis in original, 14–18)

It is no surprise that some drama educators have come to draw heavily upon Bourriaud's work: the curriculum and pedagogy of a drama space is nothing if not a "hands-on" social encounter with potential for great intimacy. Drama educators Tim Prentki and Madonna Stinson suggest that "stories are co-constructed relationally with and between all participants, their teacher, the content of significance and the social, cultural, familial and economic contexts the students inhabit [...] and translates into new ways of knowing and being in the world outside the classroom or workshop space" (5). I could recognize that Kushnir and Cayonne were operating from a very similar set of commitments to drama as a way of *making community and making art*. The students could feel the daring invitation too.

A few weeks after that workshop, *The Middle Place* came to the school as a touring show. With a simple and powerful design, this show unfolded in a dilapidated high school auditorium in an old Toronto school. Some eight hundred young people filed into the auditorium. The energy was loud and distracted, maybe even slightly resentful that time was being spent/wasted on a theatre performance. I waited with trepidation. I have seen many touring shows to high schools where neither the artists on stage nor the students in the seats were happy. They are not, for so many reasons, connecting. But, from the moment that *The Middle Place* started, until its final moment, that high-school auditorium was eerily still and silent. Only at the very end of the show was that holy silence broken when a stampede of students rushed the stage in the hopes of speaking to the talented ensemble (Cayonne, Jessica Greenberg, Akosua Amo-Adem, Kevin Walker, and Aidan deSalaiz) about the communication they had just received, the unexpected experience of relationship to a play.<sup>1</sup> I had not ever in my years of drama teaching and research in schools seen such a response to a play. Sometime after that, I approached Andrew to ask if he thought there might be "a play" in the data of my research.

### *Andrew Writes*

In 2007 I was commissioned to write a play inspired by Project: Humanity's outreach at Youth Without Shelter in Rexdale, Ontario (one of the Greater Toronto Area's so-called priority neighbourhoods). The socially engaged theatre company was commencing drama pro bono programming in the shelter with aims to help its residents de-stress, bolster communication skills, and break down social barriers in their community. I had pitched a process of playmaking that was at that time new to me: I would create a play from interviews I conducted with shelter residents in an office adjacent to our workshops. My intent was to have young people's insights, narratives, and distinct voices interrupt, through a piece of theatre, our cultural anxiety about them. Professional actors would deliver these words. Given numerous variables that kept us from creating a public offering with the youth as performers themselves, it felt like the most viable version of what art theorist Rosalind Krauss calls "artivism," where "the ethical condition and aesthetic creation, cross paths" (Léon par. 2).

In 2009, in advance of several runs for general audiences, the play made its way through twenty-one high schools in the Toronto District School Board—including Kathleen's research site at Middleview (a pseudonym). Though I do not have vivid recollections of the workshop that Antonio Cayonne and I facilitated or the quality of our performance for the Middleview student body, I do have a strong memory of speaking with Kathleen for the first time. Following the performance, which I had watched, Kathleen approached me in the auditorium and

introduced me to a term I had yet to encounter: “What you’ve done is an *ethnodrama*.” She went on to speak about what she had observed that day: young people vibrating after a play that had sounded and felt “real” to them. In her estimation, the young people in the room had felt “seen” and cared for through the aesthetics of the piece.

Kathleen and I quickly discovered that we were, as artist-researcher and researcher-artist, invested in the same key principles, and, chiefly, engaging with young people as ends in-and-of-themselves and experts of their own experiences. We also shared values around the nature of Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) and the extent to which so much TYA falls short of hard questions, formal dynamism, or the exploration of the unfamiliar. This grievance extends not only to the scripts and themes of this theatrical genre, but also (and perhaps most of all) to the performance aesthetic that tends to pervade it. *The Middle Place* was directed by Alan Dilworth with a mind to eschewing generalizations, to examining the ways young people speak (as opposed to how we hear them) and for artists to become as selfless as possible in their stewardship of another’s words. This made a significant impression on Kathleen. Her reaction made a significant impression on me.

As Kathleen has mentioned, in 2011 she approached me to do a tour of the data from her then recent multi-year study. This proved fruitful, and resulted in a verbatim etude called *The Teachers*, which dramatized the first year of her Urban School Performances research project. What struck me, along with the richness of her research data, was Kathleen’s reception of a young person in the field. It was abundantly clear that for her it was not a matter of interpolating a young person’s words on their behalf. The words themselves were the keys to new understanding. This reflected something of my own ethos: multiple subjectivities are possible in a documentary play so long as you honour their integrity.

## Movement Two: Living the Hyphen in “the Ethnographic Field” and “the Rehearsal Hall”

### *Andrew Reflects*

Effective documentary plays take data into an affective place—one in which we can be dislodged from our assumptions and put into contact with other, unfamiliar narratives in a live, stimulating, and public way. In this work, the forces of beauty and joy should coexist with and bolster the political. As James Thompson, professor of applied and social theatre, writes:

First, art is understood to have a role in the present, as a protective force with an “in spite of” quality that enables people to tolerate suffering, not so that they become immune to it, but so that they have the energy to continue to resist. This is not dance as an opiate, but as a source of nourishment. Second, participation in the joyful is part of a dream of a “beautiful” future, in the sense that it becomes an inspirational force. Far from being a diversion, it acts to make visible a better world. (*Performance Affects 2*)

A documentary play is absolutely a creative and *playful* construct, but underlining its gesture is an invitation: encounter the world as it is and see how it might change your heart and your relationships.

In my experience, documentary plays about young people can be powerful interrupters. Though all adults have travelled through their version of youth, we degrade youth today if we think we know their stories in advance of authentically hearing them. In these plays, a young person can be framed as the leading authority on their own experience—a space not commonly afforded to children. As was stated in a *New York Times* article about recent climate justice protests: “At a time of fraying trust in authority figures, children—who by definition have no authority over anything—are increasingly driving the debate” (Sengupta par. 34). In a documentary play about them, youth have the potential to drive the debate.

The words of a play cannot be information alone—they have to take action against a problem. The central problem of *Towards Youth* was encapsulated by something a student asked in Kathleen’s last research project. On the other side of explaining her plans to work with young people and inviting them to collaborate, Bella asks Kathleen, “How are you going to hear me since you have done so much of this with so many youth?” (Kushnir, *Towards Youth* 11). With this riddle vividly set into motion, I was charged with finding the play’s response, its argument, its metaphor. What was the play saying to Bella and to its audience? American journalist James Geary writes:

Metaphorical thinking—our instinct not just for describing but for *comprehending* one thing in terms of another, for equating I with an other—shapes our view of the world, and is essential to how we communicate, learn, discover, and invent. Metaphor is a way of thought long before it is a way with words. (3)

As artist-researcher, it was incumbent on me to create conditions for the public to access the multiple meanings of things, the inadvertent poetry in the seemingly mundane, the potential for anything to transform into a larger insight into the human condition and our social constructs. The central metaphor activates the game of the play, the ways in which multiple elements coalesce around a unifying idea or argument.

My route to the central metaphor of *Towards Youth: a play on radical hope*—and a response to Bella’s question—found origin in our international site visit to India. In Lucknow, India, the confluence of unfamiliar landscapes, language, and pedagogies provided the clues. As Roland Barthes puts it, “The Photographer’s ‘second sight’ does not consist in ‘seeing’ but in being there” (47). My field notes in India included the following:

You feel it on the road first. The law of the land. Our driver, Pawan, weaves in and out of traffic—other cars, motorcycles, buses, rickshaws, pedestrians, vegetable carts, wild dogs, cows—indeterminably. [...] Pawan never takes his hand off the surface of the horn, and he pumps it a dozen times per minute, at anything and anyone that gets in his way. He isn’t angry or flustered. He is making his way. (April 5, 2016)

This observation about the road could be quaint, were it not put into further perspective by something we were eventually told by Shibani Sahni, daughter of our host, Dr. Urvashi Sahni. Shibani explained to us that in India you can be sitting with your friend on a bench made for two and a third person, a stranger, will squeeze themselves onto it. This stranger will not say to you “excuse me” or “sorry.” According to Shibani, in India, the person will say “adjust.” And

so Pawan, with the bursts of his horn, again and again, was perhaps reminding those around him: *adjust*.

How might this line of thinking connect with the young people we were meeting at Prerna Girls School, founded by Dr. Sahni? In tandem with an academic curriculum, the school carries out a critical feminist pedagogy, one that is devoted to youth empowerment: teaching these girls the language of their worth, the right they have to their own bodies, their own thoughts, their own futures. As Dr. Sahni puts it, “Just as you can internalize the oppressor, we use all this to help them internalize the freer” (Kushnir, *Towards Youth* 95). This is easily at odds with the contexts these students come from and go back to on a daily basis. We were informed that threats of “eve-teasing” (street harassment from boys and men) and sexual violence were an everyday concern. *Care* at Prerna meant an original, intricate, and reciprocal learning process between youth and adults where each student discovers the vividness of her struggles and aspirations, teaches her peers and teachers about her life, and collaborates with everyone in the room on shifting her reality.

For the first time in my documentary theatre-making practice, I was being afforded an opportunity to build a play from observed relationships. That is to say, that alongside my typical use of interviews to generate dramatic text, I would bear witness to how research participants interacted with and cared for one another. What had historically been a single axis between me and subject was now an experience of triangulation. On the one hand I was being gifted extraordinary interactions that revealed something about the space and community I was visiting. On the other I was stripped of most influence on what was unfolding. I have long argued that the documentary theatre-maker’s work begins in the interview process: the questions asked, the threads pursued, the silences honoured, the silences interrupted. *Towards Youth: a play on radical hope* was going to be partially composed of interviews with young people, but the play was primarily to be found in beholding youth relating to one another, their teachers, and the creative projects they were collectively undertaking.

Another significant first for me was that the research phase of my play development was not undertaken independently, but with a team of researchers of which I was a part. This of course included Kathleen, but also graduate students who accompanied us to each international research site. These researchers broadened the data by conducting interviews alongside me; they expanded the collective sense-making through group discussions we had in the field; they coined insights that influenced my dramaturgical “compass.” On each of its many tiers, *Towards Youth* was critically influenced by the multiperspectival views and processing of a group of people. The playwright’s practice was undergoing the forces of *adjust*.

At Prerna, Urvashi employs Critical Dialogues<sup>2</sup>—a pedagogical tool that uses drama to help the students better understand and rehearse their lives. And in our time in Lucknow, Urvashi introduced this technique to her newest charges: Prerna Boys (a class of about twenty boys, ranging from twelve to eighteen years of age). Dr. Sahni retold, to the boys, the true story of a Prerna girl who, the week before, had tried to use a public washroom because her home did not have one. Some neighbourhood boys cornered her and attempted to rape her. She managed to escape. Urvashi broke the boys into groups, inviting them to craft scenes related to the incident, with the boys playing police, parents, family members, and the girl herself. While implicitly understood by the Prerna girls, who engage in at least one Critical Dialogue per



week, the boys were just discovering how the aesthetic embodiment of oppression can form the basis of collective problem-naming and -solving.

Though witnessed in Hindi, it was perfectly obvious how the sharing of scenes catalyzed discourse; the at-first quiet boys were now sharing abundantly. This Critical Dialogue ran long and on the other side of the expansive ceramic-tiled workroom, twenty or so Perna girls arrived for their class. The girls showed no signs of apology or deference around what they had walked in on: the time and space was theirs now. In the final moments of the dialogue, seemingly unaware of the girls in the room, the youngest boy, merely nine years old, asked Urvashi, “Why don’t girls just want to be friends with us?” He persisted in asking Urvashi, as his peers tittered, and it became quickly apparent that he genuinely wanted to know.

When Kathleen and I facilitated a workshop with the Perna girls, it was impossible to hold in our imagination and conscience where these girls are coming from alongside the way they engage in the classroom. When we called on any one of them, even the shyest of the lot, she would participate to the best of her ability, full-voiced, holding her space—we felt an overwhelming impulse to get out of her way, to give her more room. It was in the fullness of encountering these students’ capacities for hope and activism that the central theatrical metaphor of *adjust* came to *Towards Youth*. The drama classroom is a space wherein the lives of young people can be the curriculum. And when a young person gleans something, through embodiment, about the systems of oppression that impact their lives, they can be equipped to protest those systems and even reform them. I recognized in myself, and in Kathleen’s receiving of our sites, a kind of movement: we were to adjust our narratives about young people and the world they deserved.

### *Kathleen Reflects*

The production of *Towards Youth* is one culmination of a long-term, multi-sited, collaborative ethnographic research project. A play was always imagined; an intentional part of the design of the arts-driven, social science research project. But its realization at the end of five years of research work created in me both excitement and terror. The excitement is understandable, but what was the terror?

Part of it was simply logistical, or perhaps a failure of imagination. I could barely wrap my head around the idea that, firstly, a playwright would be capable of capturing the breadth, depth, sheer scale of the project in a form that was aesthetically powerful, complex, and ethically solid. That the very real people of my study, across cultures, languages, geographies, and generations, could be distilled into one play.<sup>3</sup> Here, my faith in Andrew’s skills were unwavering. But once inside that rehearsal hall with an ensemble of nine actors and a co-director, along with a large design and production team of ten, more questions arose.<sup>4</sup> Would there be *enough time* to ask all the questions that needed to be asked, to build the right relationships, to give the original research its due, to find the play’s own voice?

Andrew called me the “research dramaturge” of the production. This title made good sense as I did often feel in the room that co-director Chris Abraham, in particular, wanted to be sure that the explorations were not out of step with the research, or missing some key element. He consulted with me regularly, especially, I noted, in difficult moments when interpretation

solutions were elusive. I never felt like a gate-crasher in that room; my knowledge and instincts were valued.

In the rehearsal hall, I was aware that my presence was a constant reminder to the actors making imaginative leaps that there was a *real* real out there, and I had witnessed it. I was de facto the arbiter of the *real* people and events of the world of the play. This fact was, at times, unsettling for others, I am sure. But at other times it was very practical, when, for instance, Zorana Sadiq asked me if my collaborator Urvashi Sahni had written anything about her practice in India that would help Zorana understand Urvashi's life's work more fully. Or when Liisa Repo-Martell asked to borrow a book I had written in 2014 so she could get a better sense of who I was as a researcher, as she built the Kathleen of the play. Poor Liisa had me in the room every day. And every day I marvelled at how she questioned who she was in the play, whether she was the "host" for an audience, or *how* precisely she should listen to the young people in the play, what in fact was the *quality* of listening of an ethnographer. Liisa never tried to "nail me," Kathleen, the researcher. She found her own motivations; she questioned her way out of tight spots; she thoughtfully considered options and interpretations.

Andrew had the genius impulse initially to bring the voices of all the researcher-collaborators (from India, England, Greece, and Taiwan) into the rehearsal space via letters he invited them to write to those who would be re-presenting them. This was exactly the right "launch" into this complex world. And, subsequently, every time there was a major query about a word, a line, a right interpretation, an artistic choice that was taking some licence with words or images or thoughts, Andrew went back to the "source," to those who had veto power but also were key consultants-at-a-distance, particularly when questions of ethics arose and our collective wisdom in the room seemed insufficient.<sup>5</sup> After several weeks together, I came to understand how our working relationships inside this rather more compressed process were developing, were being guided by the many years of relationship-building that had come before, and how trust was being built in the rehearsal hall; how relational pedagogy was at work too, arriving at Bourriaud's notion that the intimate and the interpersonal are critical parts of our aesthetics and our politics (36).

Political scientist Fiona Robinson makes a powerful case for the relationship between our private and public worlds, our local and global communities, writing that care ethics is "relevant not only to small-scale or existing personal attachments but to all levels of social relations and, thus, to international or global relations" (2). Building from the work of such feminist scholars, James Thompson has brought these ideas specifically into the world of applied theatre and community performance, which have powerful resonance for my experience as witness to and participant in the relational pedagogy and relational aesthetics at play in the *Towards Youth* rehearsal hall. Thompson builds a powerful argument around the simple idea that "seeking to overcome widespread social indifference implies commitment to deep and extended processes" ("Towards" 437). Turning explicitly to the work of creating art, Thompson further elaborates an aesthetics of care as

one that might consist of small creative encounters or large-scale exhibitions, but it is always one that notices inter-human relations in both the creation and the display of art projects. [...] It would not pretend to a distinction between a process and an outcome because both might stimulate affective solidarity between people—perhaps participant to participant or performer to audience. (437)

Ultimately, my researcher-artist experience in the rehearsal hall challenged me to really live the hybridity of my role in the project. It was likely the positive experience it was because of the aesthetics of care enacted daily. This impulse sprang from the co-direction of Andrew Kushnir and Chris Abraham, who worked extraordinarily well together from their different positions relative to the research and their very different styles as directors. They depended on each other's strengths in obvious ways. This shared leadership invited the company of nine and the whole extended creative team to practise care in their creative work and in their social relations. There were, of course, tense and difficult moments as might be the case in any rigorous creative process, but the relational aesthetics were never compromised. From where I sat, I felt the work of many years and many people across the globe had been handled with care, respect, and, dare I say, love.

### Movement Three: Representation in Theatre and Research

The concept of *adjust* was going to become a central metaphor for not only the content but the form and performance ethic of the play. *Towards Youth* contained myriad challenges with regards to representation. The play required passages to be spoken in Hindi, Mandarin, Greek, and a wide range of English dialects. Actors—some in their forties—were to convincingly embody research participants as young as eleven years old. Andrew decided to rewrite the beginning of the play to call out the fixed identities that may chafe between interpreters and the sources they were interpreting. Though the Radical Hope project was indelibly influenced by our international collaborators, how might we dare to ethically transcend our own perceived limits?

Andrew had interviewed Kathleen in August 2017 and from this transcript fashioned what he called “A Letter to the Actors from Kathleen Gallagher.” What would it mean to open every performance of the play with the ensemble reading this to the audience:

Dear actors,

You are about to perform *Towards Youth: a play on radical hope*. Andrew Kushnir has written this play based on the experiences and recordings of his and my shared travels to drama classrooms, 5 cities across the globe. I hope our experiences are in some way reproducible and appreciable to others.

You are being asked to navigate many complex differences in this script. Differences of class, of race, of gender, of histories and context. Then, there is language. When people imagine international work or think about these cross-cultural conversations, they often ask “how do you get over the language barriers?” And I want to say: “It can be the opposite of a barrier. It can actually be a gateway. It can be a door.”

And I remind myself that no less challenging than translating from, say, Mandarin to English is translating a 14-year old boy with a slight, awkward gait, looking you in the eye, and saying something, at once innocent and profound, and you go “Everything I thought about kids before now is null and void.” You know, those moments when a young person upsets for you everything that you’ve thought up to that point?

I’m not sure how to help you with that, as actors. Though I am deeply admiring of your willingness to try. I think striving for these voices is the thing. “Nailing” them is

impossible. So let it be a forgery. There are a lot of different kinds of forgery in the world. And so let this be a deeply respectful forgery. Let this be a faithful betrayal.

I wish you well, in the drama classroom.

Sincerely,  
Kathleen.  
(Kushnir, *Towards Youth* 5)

What was being pointed to in this preface to the play was the very metaphor of *adjust*, that a group of artists with fixed identities were going to explore multiple identities in public. But pointing is insufficient in the theatre—the metaphor had to be activated. This was partially achieved by having the ensemble in a line across the stage, trading off sentence for sentence, evoking a sense of adjustment, accommodation, making and taking up space. However, the most poignant form of *adjust* took the form of a theatrical intervention. When the co-directors were directing “A Letter to the Actors from Kathleen Gallagher” in rehearsals, they invited the actors to personalize the letter through any elaboration they saw fit to include. Actor Stephen Jackman-Torkoff (twenty-seven, Black—mixed race, queer, non-binary) generated the following, and performed it every time we shared the letter with the audience. He inserted this after the line “It can be a door.”

Stephen:                             And I’m just gonna add—me, Stephen—um, that maybe *we*, and all of us [actors] and all of us [audience] can be gateways and doors, ’cause you know, we all wake up one day, all of a sudden we’re on planet Earth, and we exist, and we have all these histories within our belly (*he rubs his belly, then starts reaching behind himself and bringing his hands back to his belly*), all these people that go back to the beginning of time, to the first bacteria and single-cell grandma, all these places that go back to the beginning of time, and we gotta like contend, and like reconcile with what we are (*grips his belly*). Then we’ve got all these characters in the play (*he reaches forward, as if into the future*), with all their beauty and their muck and their pain, and maybe we can meet it and be a gateway or a door and be like (*sings a high-pitched sound, arms outstretch, free*) ahhhhhhh. You know? Yeah. Hopefully. (Kushnir, *Towards Youth* 5)

Stephen engendered the central metaphor in a vivid way. What he set into motion, along with the ensemble supporting him, was the very concept that would help us embrace radical feats of representation thereafter. In the latter part of the first act, when Zorana Sadiq (forty-five, Pakistani-Canadian, female, “in the heterosexual paradigm, currently”) embodied Bruce from Coventry (thirteen-year-old Caucasian boy in foster care), artists and audiences had their footing.

The group’s last major revision to the letter involved actor Tim Dowler-Coltman (twenty-three, Caucasian, male, “middle and lower class”) sharing the following:

Tim:                                     In the spirit of this letter, as Canadian artists, we acknowledge the land we are meeting on is the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississauga of the credit First Nations, The Anishabeg,

the Chippewa, The Haudenosaune, and the Wendat People. Part of settler responsibility also includes a recognition of the ongoing systemic marginalization of Indigenous peoples in our educational and social institutions. (Kushnir, *Towards Youth* 6)

A space was opened up by Stephen's invocation around reconciliation and respecting the distance between our own stories and those of others. The last part of the acknowledgement—a line inspired by Indigenous education scholar Eve Tuck—ensured that beyond an expression of gratitude towards Indigenous people past and present, we were recognizing ongoing injustice incurred by Indigenous people. The territory acknowledgement itself—which differed from more gentle and common iterations read in theatres across the country—had a tacit relationship to the metaphor of *adjust*.

Where there is a call, there ought to be an answer. The culminating passage of the play, its final and arguably climactic push, involved the ensemble of actors—as practitioners and not characters—sharing a piece of text again that responded directly to the opening and Bella's question of "How are you going to hear me?" This time it was another Kathleen interview excerpt. It constituted a reflection of her "everyday" with young people in the drama classroom, and how within this humble space the activist voice can be birthed and rehearsed and launched into the world. In its final wave, the actors, as a chorus, said:

And if we listen to what young people have to tell us, if we outstretch a hand, if we become companions in learning, the stuff that can happen in the drama classroom, but in other classrooms too, maybe we can build something different, together. I mean— (Kushnir, *Towards Youth* 97)

At this point the whole ensemble took on the critical imperative, the bald articulation of the metaphor, and collectively proclaimed, "Adjust. Adjust. ADJUST. ADJUST. ADJUST. ADJUST. ADJUST." After a moment of silence and suspension, the lights came down.

The production of *Towards Youth* also afforded the research team the opportunity to carry out audience interview research, analyses of talk-backs in the theatre, and ethnographic research and participant interviews around a workshop series carried out by Project: Humanity with many of the young people who came to see the play.<sup>6</sup> We would like to close with some reflection on a few responses by young people that specifically pertain to our acts of translation and the ethical challenges of the border crossings undertaken in the play.

A great number of the young people we interviewed were struck by the multiracial casting they saw on a Toronto stage, the multiple perspectives being represented in *Towards Youth*.

Mir (female student<sup>7</sup>): I have to say that beyond watching school and student theatre, I've never seen a cast like that before, and I think it definitely is a good turning point in theatre because I think that it gave a clear viewing of the different—it wasn't an all-white cast. And a bunch of plays that you go to see, it's an all-white cast. And the other voices are not shown, and I feel like with *Towards Youth* and bringing in other voices in the world, it helped with bringing it all together,

and I loved the fact that there were actors playing characters of a race that they wouldn't go and get cast in for an audition. It was phenomenal.

Kate (female student):

That was a thing that I was noticing too. We had to do a project focusing on a specific theatre company and the main thing that they focus on. One of them was like Asian Canadians, and I'm mixed, so I was like, oh, that's cool. So, when I saw that there was a strong Asian-Canadian character, I thought that was amazing, and I feel like with every different ethnicity that they tried to portray, they handled it with definite respect, and it's not like they were doing stereotypes or trying to make fun of different cultures. I think they did it in a very respectful way and it turned out very well.

Not only did our research illustrate how the care taken in this demanding cross-cultural, cross-generational, and cross-gender casting was perceived by audiences, but also there was astonishment about and delight in the relatability of the play as a consequence of its representational polyphony. Many reported that they felt they were actually learning more because of the diversity of voices represented and the complexity of their representations.

Many of the adult actors had naturally expressed trepidation about their youthful characters. Andrew, Chris, and all the actors had taken such care not to make assumptions about the young people they were representing, to make them as complex and dimensional as we had experienced them "in the field." Those Verbatim words, handled with care and imaginative scaffolding, were received as intricate and complicated depictions by the very young people who might have been their harshest judges:

Christian (Asian, Filipino, male, working-class):

I thought it was really authentic. Going, like, the culture and how they grew up, different ages that were explained. And especially the group, um, in the starting scenes, like tend to be the Toronto students? I've been in that class before, and I was just like, this is spot-on. And then like looking at how they were acting, at younger ages, or like, when they were acting with each other, I thought it was really authentic. [...] Um, when it was first being explained to us in the first verbatim like, interview, um, I like, I remember finding out that it was the voices of the youth, like, our peers, like talking, and the play would just speak with that, and I was like, wow, the voices of the actual youth get to, like, get the word out. And like, with plays, we tend to be stereotyped a lot. And I just thought it was really cool to like, to actually see the authentic, and like, the real words of us and what we're going through.

Interviews happened post-show and post-workshop. We had a team approach to interviewing at the theatre, where different researchers would find a secluded space in the large and open Crow's lobby after the show and sit down to have a rather intimate conversation with strangers.

The following response, however, comes from the private comment box we left in a corner of the lobby for people to record their thoughts and leave them behind for us; a young person responding to a play about slightly younger people finds hope:

I, a twenty-six year old physician, have been feeling extremely hopeless about the world recently. How nice it is to be reminded of hope. How nice it is to be reminded of the importance of dreaming. The world changes because of young people who shout. Thank you for this play. (Anonymous)

## To Conclude

The relational acts of our collaborative ethnographic research across vastly different geographies was an equally important practice of the play and its daring invitation to Toronto audiences. Be in a conversation with us, it exhorted; feel the movement of young people around the world asking adults to turn towards them, to listen with care, to *bear* them, to adjust.

An “aesthetics of care” (Thompson, “Towards”) was very much at play in the work of the research and the work of the production, focusing on “how the sensory and affective are realised in human relations fostered in art projects” (436). While there can surely be no definitive accounting of a project’s success in this regard, our aesthetics of care was about “values realised in a relational process that emphasises engagement between individuals or groups over time” (437). Our audience research told us that the aesthetics of care enacted in the ethnographic study spanning multiple communities engaged in creative activities—and the relationships latterly built between those communities and the ensemble who ultimately translated their ideas for a wider public—were perceived by audience members. This kind of success is undoubtedly the outcome of many, many people privileging relational ways of being; care “appears *in-between those involved*, so that there is a sensory quality of the process and outcome that cannot be disaggregated from the collective effort” (“Towards” 438, emphasis added).

The “aesthetics of care” measure of our experience came from our conjoined effort, first a playwright and a researcher, and then multiple others—researchers, young people, social workers, teachers, artists, directors, and designers—through both our real and symbolic acts. The processes of the Radical Hope research and the *Towards Youth* production urged a mutual regard and esteem between its makers in the more private moments of research and creation, and in its public moments of sharing. And the layers of connection and co-construction of this work—which only seem to grow with time and further reflection—attest to its common core: young people raising their voices to be heard anew.

## Notes

- 1 Previously, two of my former research team members and I published an article, “Verbatim Theatre and Social Research: Turning Towards the Stories of Others,” in this very journal wherein we tried to make sense of the students’ reception of the play, foretelling perhaps the vital directional notion of “towards” that would be realized in *Towards Youth*.
- 2 For Sahni’s elaboration of this pedagogy, see Sahni.

- 3 In fact, there was a previous imagined version of *Towards Youth* that was five acts long, each act representing a different site of the study, experienced by an audience over two nights. While this helped us believe the whole endeavour more possible in those early days, it did not ultimately solve the problem of five years of research data, five countries, 250 young people and seventeen adults depicted by an ensemble of nine being asked to speak four different languages.
- 4 It is important to note that several versions of Andrew's play were workshopped over several years prior to the Crow's Theatre production. An early version of Part One was read by drama students at the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Toronto and by professional actors in a Project: Humanity workshop under the direction of Alan Dilworth in 2013. An earlier version of the full five-act/two-part play had also been previously workshopped at Crow's Theatre in December 2017. In this article, I am containing my reflections to the fully produced version of the play at Crow's Theatre in March 2019.
- 5 An interesting example of such a moment would be when Andrew's script used the expression "a cacophony of tastes" to describe Indian cooking. Zorana worried that this somehow played into Western stereotypes of South Asia as noisy, smelly, chaotic. We troubled over the language and Andrew ultimately returned to Urvashi to seek her guidance. Urvashi concluded that "cacophony" was a good word to use in this instance and she did not find it offensive or stereotypical. In the end, the word was not used in the script. The play would be seen by Western audiences and if we were risking a misrepresentation, we preferred to leave it out.
- 6 A SSHRC Partnership Engage Grant (PEG) is meant to bring the resources of research to a community partner. Kathleen's grant allowed us to carry out audience reception research in the form of interviews, on-camera talk-backs with actors, on-camera feedback, and an anonymous comment box, as well as ethnographic research inside the classrooms where Project: Humanity members carried out their Verbatim work before and after the play. Here, we could also engage in interviews with the young people to see how they were receiving the pedagogy of the P:H artists. We carried out seventy-six post-show interviews with audience members, young and old; eighty-nine pre- and post-show interviews with youth who engaged in the P:H pre- and post-show workshops; analysis of forty-two hours of video footage from the workshops; analysis of four post-show talk-backs; one audience debrief with youth led by members of P:H; analysis of a panel event for drama teachers; two workshop practitioner interviews; two actor interviews; and two teacher interviews.
- 7 Interviewees were invited to include as much or as little demographic information as they wished.

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## Contributors

A Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and a Distinguished Professor in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning, cross-appointed to the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Toronto, **DR. KATHLEEN GALLAGHER** studies theatre as a powerful medium for expression by young people of their experiences and understandings. She has published numerous books and articles on the intersection of youth, theatre, and the social world. Her most recent edited collection, *Global Youth Citizenry and Radical Hope: Enacting Community-Engaged Research through Performative Methodologies* includes chapters from all the collaborators on the Radical Hope research project.

**ANDREW KUSHNIR** is a playwright, performer, and director who, since 2012, has served as artistic director of Project: Humanity. His produced verbatim plays include *The Middle Place*; *Small Axe*; *Freedom Singer*, co-created with Khari Wendell McClelland, and *Towards Youth*. He has brought his distinct Verbatim theatre workshops to Queens, University of Toronto, University of Alberta, University of Regina, the NYU Forum on Ethnodrama, the Ghostlight master-class program, the Crow’s Theatre Docu-theatre Creators’ Unit, and to youth in the Toronto District School Board and Toronto’s youth shelter system. Andrew is a University of Alberta alum, a Loran Scholar, and the inaugural recipient of the Shevchenko Foundation REACH artists’ residency.