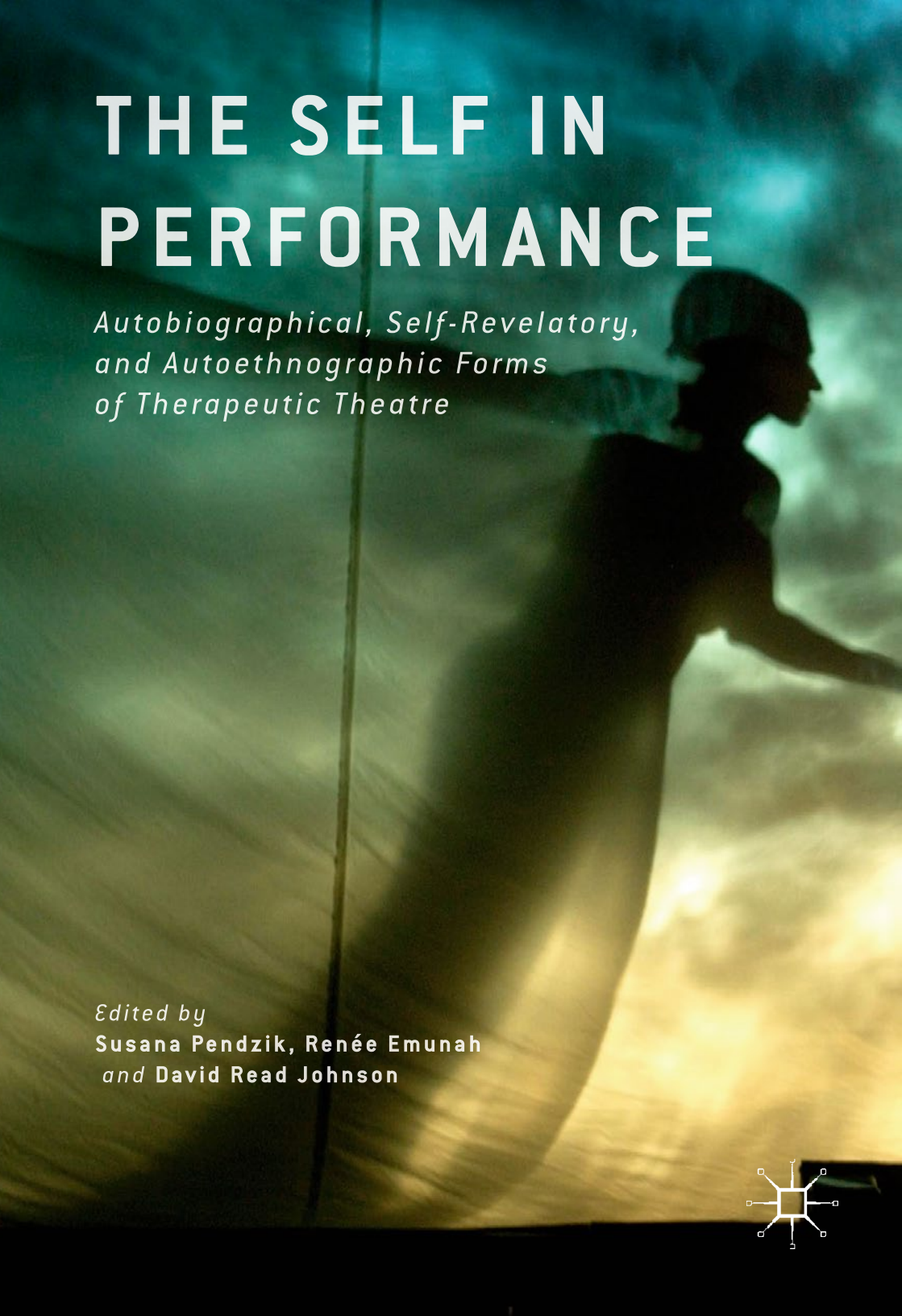

THE SELF IN PERFORMANCE

Autobiographical, Self-Revelatory, and Autoethnographic Forms of Therapeutic Theatre

Edited by
Susana Pendzik, Renée Emunah
and **David Read Johnson**

The Self in Performance

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Editors

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Preface

This book was born out of misunderstanding. When Susana proposed to Renée and David that we compile a book on therapeutic autobiographical, self-revelatory, ethnographic performance, there was immediate agreement. When we met to discuss our prospective project, we quickly realized we did not share the same definitions of these labels. Worse, after more debate, we lost confidence in our own views of these labels. Review of the literature convinced us even further that there was a lack of clarity about the concepts, boundaries, and practices of the self in performance. Paradoxically, this proved to us the necessity for the book: to gather a collection of work, and then to make initial efforts to map out the topography of this field. In so doing, we discovered that an entirely unique branch of drama therapy performance has been developing over the past thirty years, and that now is the time for it to be properly identified. The three of us had strenuous conversations that challenged each of our previously held assumptions. We have each grown from these encounters. We hope that you, the reader, do as well, for something powerful and healing occurs when a person creates a performance based on their life. Why that happens, and how that happens, is the subject of this book.

We would like to acknowledge the contributions of our authors and the courage and creativity of the clients and students who have revealed their lives in these performances. Susana would like to acknowledge the creators quoted in her chapter, as well as those who over the years, through their experiences and performances, helped to elucidate a dramaturgical approach. She is profoundly indebted to Dr. Chen Alon for his long-standing partnership in accompanying Therapeutic Autobiographical

Performances and for his precious insights for this chapter, and to Galila Oren for her invaluable input and encouragement. Susana would also like to thank Tel Hai Academic College, and the Swiss Dramatherapy Institute for their support. Renée would like to acknowledge the many students and graduates of the Drama Therapy Program at the California Institute of Integral Studies who embraced the Self-Rev process, and over the years helped to deepen and expand the form. She is also grateful for the ongoing collaboration with her colleagues and fellow faculty in the Drama Therapy Program, especially Gary Raucher. David would like to acknowledge the members of the Developmental Transformations community who have been the inspiration and audience for his self-revelatory performances.

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CHAPTER 1

The Self in Performance: Context, Definitions, Directions

Susana Pendzik, Renée Emunah, and David Read Johnson

During the second half of the twentieth century, performance and artistic expression took a strong turn toward the personal with the embrace of the memoir in literature, sociopolitical and feminist visual art, solo

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performance art, and autobiographical performance. Since the start of the twenty-first century, with the pervasive public interest in reality television, YouTube and iPhone selfies, the private has indeed become public. As a result, the boundaries between truth and fiction, the real and the dramatic, have never been so ambiguous; the self can be viewed as being performed, everywhere.

Within the field of theatre, this impulse has expressed itself in the emergence of what might be called *self-referential* or *personal* theatre—that is, theatre in which the content of the performance consists of material from the actual lives of the performers. This work can be loosely categorized into *autobiographical* forms (concerning the actor's personal life) and *autoethnographic* forms (concerning the actor's ethnicity, class, gender, or social grouping). Within each of these can be differentiated *nontherapeutic* forms (where the aim is primarily artistic, educational, or advocacy), and *therapeutic* forms (where the aim is personal growth). This book is about this last category: autobiographical and autoethnographical therapeutic theatre/performance.

The idea that therapeutic practice correlates with the telling of personal stories has a deep hold on western thinking. But when does telling one's story have a liberating effect, and when does it become merely a recounting of one's misery and victimization? This question acquires further significance in the context of autobiographical performance, as rehearsal practices allow experiences to become more rooted in our bodies and brains, and exposure in front of an audience helps to validate them. Does performing life experiences, obsessions, memories or dreams on stage invariably bring about therapeutic results? (Pendzik, 2013a; Thompson, 2009). What is required for an autobiographical performance to fulfill the function of promoting psychological well-being, healing from trauma, or advancing personal growth?

Psychoanalyst Charles Rycroft (1983) has questioned the therapeutic potential of autobiographical writings that merely serve the purpose of 'advertising the continued existence of a long-standing ego' (p. 193). He emphasizes the need for therapeutic autobiography to involve a reflexive practice that aims at self-discovery. In a true therapeutic process, he says, 'a dialectic takes place between present "I" and past "me," at the end of which both have changed and the author-subject could say equally truthfully, "I wrote it" and "It wrote me."' (p. 192).

The potentially empowering or healing effects often attributed to autobiographical performances may be associated with the feminist and

political inception of the genre, which fueled the sense of personal agency exercised by the authors/performers, underlined the transformative possibilities inherent in the act of storying our lives, and offered a place of centrality—literally, a stage—to uncanonical, radical, and public representations of the personal (Claycomb, 2012; Heddon, 2008; Park-Fuller, 2003; Spry, 2011).

In this introductory chapter we begin by contextualizing therapeutic self-referential performance in the framework of other self-referential modes (western and non-western), connecting and contrasting it with parallel developments, particularly in autobiographical and autoethnographic theatre, that do not emphasize a therapeutic aim. The chapter lays out various definitions proposed by scholars and practitioners, highlighting common concepts as well as discussing areas that lack clarity. Throughout, we attempt to articulate the complex relationships between theatrical and therapeutic aims in such performances. After briefly summarizing the essence of each chapter in this book, we conclude by offering suggestions for future research.

Self-Referential Artistic Modalities in Non-Western and Western Traditions

Historically, the use of self-referential modes as a tool for personal expression that is both introspective and artistically crafted goes back centuries, and has been practiced throughout the world. As Jane Walker (1994) asserts, 'All civilizations, not just the western, are attentive and have been attentive throughout their history to…"individual self-understanding"' (p. 207)—including Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Arabic, and other non-western traditions, in which aesthetic self-referential forms have been cultivated by both women and men. For example, the Japanese literary tradition since its onset contains self-reflective works that can be viewed as having an autobiographical intent (Walker, 1994); among these, the *Japanese poetic diary* that flourished throughout the eleventh century, was considered to be 'in its highest aesthetic quality, the property of women' (Miner, 1968, p. 42). Closer to a performance of the self are the autobiographical narratives of the Kayabi people (an indigenous group living in the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso), who interweave accounts of their personal experiences in the context of their rituals—including shamanic cures, in which shamans present their own dreams, emotional states,

and former cosmic travels as part of their performative healing methods (Oakdale, 2005).

Autobiographical narratives in non-western traditions may exhibit more stylized or fictionalized versions of the self (Walker, 1994), multiple and hybrid images (such as the merging of self and context in Frida Kahlo's self-portraits (Helland, 1992), or may defy organization 'around a privileged Self, in relation to which events and other persons are arranged as background' (More-Gilbert, 2009, p. 103). As noted by postcolonial and feminist critics, marginalized artists may voice their self-narratives in forms that privilege plurality, emphasize orality, or use dialogical forms, rather than the traditional western self-presentation or confessional style (Miller, Taylor, & Carver, 2003; Smith & Watson, 1998).

Grace (2003) highlights that in western culture, textual narratives tend to dominate the critical discourse as an organizing axis for understanding all forms of autobiographical representations. Scholarship traditionally grants Saint Augustine's *Confessions* a position of fatherhood, placing it as 'the origin of modern western autobiography' (Anderson, 2011, p. 17). Aligned with his work are a host of male descendants (such as Rousseau and Wordsworth) who have been considered exemplary in the genre, despite the fact that life-writing has been used by many female authors (such as Saint Teresa of Avila) as a strategy to gain access to the written word through one of the few channels that were open to women: writing about their personal experiences (Weber, 1990). The western literary canon has taken a mostly ambivalent stance regarding self-referential writing, either questioning its literary merit or restricting its focus to illustrious (usually male) representatives. Critical debate has centered for the most part on establishing the author's honesty and truthfulness in autobiographical works, memoirs, and other forms of self-writing, and in discussing the relationship between author and text (Anderson, 2011; De Man, 1979; Smith & Watson, 1998).

Contextualizing Self-Referential Theatre and Its Relation to Therapeusis

In contrast to the long-established patriarchal approach to self-referential written texts, it appears that *self-referential performed praxes* in all their shapes and forms have been born in freedom: A gender and politically-aware perspective has been adopted in the critical discourse of

self-referential theatre, supporting self-determination, promoting emancipatory actions, challenging colonization, shaping a critical awareness, and endorsing a feminist worldview that reveals the in/visible threads linking the personal and the public (Forte, 1988; Schmor, 1994). As Deidre Heddon (2008) claims:

> The autobiographical and the political are interconnected. Who speaks? What is spoken? What sorts of lives are represented, contested, imagined? The vast majority of autobiographical performances have been concerned with using the public arena of performance in order to 'speak out,' attempting to make visible denied or marginalized subjects, or to 'talk back,' aiming to challenge, contest, and problematize dominant representations about those subjects (p. 20).

She adds that during the 1970s the main motivation for translating personal content 'into live performance was inarguably tied to consciousness-raising activities' (p. 21), which were meant to activate the collective understanding that personal life and gender oppression should be explored together. In the last decades of the twentieth century, this spirit reverberated in the celebratory performances of queer autobiographical solos, which challenged social invisibility and marginalization, exploring issues of identity and 'speaking out' (Sandhal, 2003; Pearlman, 2015).

Heddon (2008) defines the current work of autobiographical performance as one that aims 'to explore (question, reveal) the relationship between the personal and the political, engaging with and theorizing the discursive construction of selves and experience' (p. 162). In her view, by bringing 'to the fore the self as a performed role,' autobiographical performance reveals 'not only the multiplicity of the performing subject, but also the multiplicity of discourses that work to forge subjects' (p. 39).

In a similar vein, autoethnographic theatre methods are context-oriented and informed by socio/political/gender approaches (Saldaña, 2003; Spry, 2001); they tend to 'have a social awareness agenda' (Saldaña, 2011 p. 31) and to address issues such as gender and racial inequity (Spry, 2010). Conceived as politically and academically transgressive forms of inquiry, these methods aim at re/introducing the body into research discourse in a way that 'can emancipate the scholarly voice from the monostylistic confines of academic discourse' (Spry 2001, p. 720). In Tami Spry's (2011) words:

> Performative autoethnography is a *personal/political social praxis*, and a critically reflexive methodology, meaning it provides a framework to critically reflect upon the ways in which our personal lives intersect, collide, and commune with others in the body politic in ways alternate to hegemonic cultural expectations. It provides a narrative apparatus to pose and engage the questions of our global lives, asking us to embrace one another as fully as we challenge one another. (p. 54)

It is in this context that self-referential theatre methods come to intersect with therapeutic practices, as personal inquiry and critical self-reflection are pursued in connection with topics such as identity, agency, empowerment, emancipatory/oppressive self-representations, memory, and narrative (Langellier & Peterson, 2004)—which have traditionally been the foci of psychotherapy and psychology. An implicit, almost natural alliance is thus forged between self-referential theatre forms and therapeutic processes.

Scholars from the fields of both theatre and drama therapy have acknowledged that self-referential performances can have therapeutic side benefits (Emunah, 2015). Heddon (2008) recognizes that autobiographical performances 'may equate with personal healing,' by referring to works by artists like Spalding Gray and Linda Montano that deal with traumatic life events as 'acts of recovery' (p. 54). She notes the therapeutic potential of pieces such as Linda Park-Fuller's *A clean breast of it*, which the performer defined as an act of personal and political agency that helped her to transform her subjective identity from the 'prescribed… role of "patient-victim"' into that of a survivor (Park-Fuller, 2003, p. 215). Yet many of these scholars and performers hesitate to identify their work as therapeutic, underscoring a common confusion about whether expressing emotion or revealing personal information necessarily lies within a therapeutic domain. Noting the emotional impact of self-reflective performed autoethnography, Spry (2011) cautions that 'emotion is not inherently epistemic' (p. 108):

> Performance studies practitioners have worked with the embodiment of emotion in the production of knowledge for centuries, and are aware of the potential dangers when expecting the expression of emotion in research to stand-in for aesthetic acumen. (p. 108)

The intersection between self-referential performance as an art form and as a therapeutic method therefore is both a place of meeting and of departure. Emunah (2015) notes, 'Autobiographical theatre… involves dramatic storytelling or dramatization of personal life material, but without a conscious aim of transforming or healing this material' (p. 72); on the other hand, what she terms *self-revelatory performance* is both a therapeutic process and a form of theatre. She states:

> An aesthetically portrayed revealing and reweaving of a core and current issue in the performer's life can be compelling, if not riveting, to an audience. The natural suspense and unpredictability in the unfolding of the piece, along with the immediacy of real issues being grappled with in new ways, are all ingredients for good theatre. (Emunah, 2015, p. 79)

Richard Schechner (2013) uses the concept of the *efficacy–entertainment dyad* to differentiate between ritual and theatre (both being performances): When the primary purpose is effecting change, the efficacy aspect is highlighted, whereas when aesthetics are the primary goal, the entertainment factor prevails. Schechner (2013) encourages us to see the relationship between efficacy and entertainment not as a rigid dyad 'but as a braid or helix, tightening and loosening over time and in specific cultural contexts' (p. 80). We are in agreement: aesthetics and therapeusis are not mutually exclusive; more often than not, they powerfully coincide (Emunah, 1994, 2015; Emunah & Johnson, 1983; Pendzik, 2013a, 2013b; Sajnani, 2012; Snow, D'Amico, & Tanguay, 2003).

Definitions and Terminology

Self-referential forms tend to call themselves by a plethora of names. According to Smith and Watson (2010), the 'rich and diverse history of self-referential modes requires that we make some crucial distinctions among key terms—*autobiography, memoir, life writing, life narrative*—that may seem to imply the same thing' (p. 2). And there are more terms, including *testimonial, autoethnography* and *psychobiography.* A similar nomenclatorial overabundance applies to self-referential theatre and performance. Researching the genres of *ethnotheatre* and *ethnodrama*, Saldaña (2011) discovered over 80 unique terms for the form, including: *autodrama, autoperformance, everyday life performance, factual theatre, generative autobiography, heritage theatre, memory theatre, mystory, reality*

theatre, performing autobiography, reminiscence theatre, self-performance, and testimonial theatre (pp. 13–14). More names could enrich this list—especially in referring to autobiographical performance: *autobiographical storytelling performance* (Langellier & Peterson, 2004), *confessional performance* (Schmor, 1994), *self-story* (Beglau, 2012), *solo autobiographical performance* (Wallace, 2006), and *theatre of the real* (Martin, 2013). Some names consider the place where the performance takes place as having biographical agency, thus adding terms such as autobiographical site-specific performance or *autopography* (Stephenson, 2012).

A similar multiplicity for describing performances of the self is present within the field of drama therapy—sometimes informed by culture, language, and practice-related factors. Renée Emunah (1994, 2015) conceived and developed self-revelatory performance (Self-Rev), a form of drama therapy and theatre that has been practiced predominantly in the USA and Canada. In her words, 'Self-Revelatory Performance is a form of drama therapy and theatre in which a performer creates an original theatrical piece out of the raw material of current life issues' (Emunah, 2015, p. 71). The focus is on multi-leveled strands of healing, which ultimately augment (rather than compromise) theatrical quality. Her descriptions of therapeutic performance, and particularly her analyses of methods of theatrically grappling with therapeutic issues, and of what constitutes healing in personal theatre, have influenced and informed the field as a whole regardless of terminology and form.

Many practitioners use the more generic term *autobiographical therapeutic theatre/performance* (ATP). Pendzik (2013a) defines autobiographical therapeutic theatre as a form of drama therapy that involves the development of a performance based on personal material, presented in front an audience, and is conceived with a therapeutic aim. She adds:

> Even such a broad definition already implies what it is not: It is not an improvised piece, but one that is developed over time, and is therefore subjected to a rehearsal phase; it is not centered on literary or universal works, but on personal experience; it has a communicative function: it is meant to be performed in front of other people, thus, taking their implicit presence into consideration. Finally, it is not made for entertainment ends, but there is a therapeutic aspect at play. The combination of these premises also indicates the existence of a balance between *process* and *product*—one which is indispensable to keep; for in autobiographical therapeutic theatre both ends of the rope are equally important. (pp. 4–5)

In the United Kingdom, performances about the self that dramatherapy students are required to create during their training have been called *personal theatre* (Seymour, Chap. 14), or simply autobiographical performances. Jacques (Chap. 7) speaks of *autobiographical performance in dramatherapy*, while Dokter and Gersie (Chap. 13) note that these as well as other terms have been used interchangeably in the UK.

Despite the subtle distinctions between the names many of our chapter contributors apply to their work, we recommend the term *autobiographical (or autoethnographic) therapeutic performance (*or *theatre)* (ATP) as the generic, overarching label for this work, and will therefore use it throughout this book. Although Emunah brought her concept of Self-Rev into being before many began to use the term autobiographical therapeutic performance, in the end, Self-Rev is a more specific form with its own criteria - given its emphasis on exploring current personal issues, on a depth of therapeutic *working through*, and on a high degree of artistic mastery. Although overlapping with or informed by Self-Rev, some of the forms under ATP's broader umbrella emphasize specific aspects pertaining to the author's method of drama therapy or focus within clinical practice—as in Dunne's *Restoried Script Performance* (Chap. 10), or Volkas (Chap. 8), who finds the word *therapeutic* to be indispensable in describing the purpose of his work to potential clients.

Overview of Book

The book is conceptually grounded in the intersection between theatre/performance and psychotherapy, moving fluidly between these paradigms; in some chapters concepts from other related disciplines are also incorporated.

Part I provides historical background and conceptual perspectives underlying current practice in ATP. Stephen Snow examines how experimental and avant-garde theatre influenced the development of Self-Rev—beginning with 'the demolition of the famous fourth wall of illusionistic theatre.' He elucidates how Artaud, Grotowski, The Living Theatre, The Open Theatre, and the autoperformance of Spaulding Gray were significant precedents to Self-Rev. Renée Emunah takes the reader on a close-up tour of what occurs 'behind the scenes' in the process of developing a Self-Rev (including the intensive collaboration between performer and director), followed by an analysis of what takes place for the performer in facing an audience—along with the role played by the audience—in such

intimate theatrical productions. She emphasizes the centrality of *working through,* a process of engaging, developing, and transforming personal conflicts through embodied, theatrical means during rehearsal and performance phases. She then addresses the potential 'elephant' in the theatre with this kind of performance: the risk of self-indulgence.

Susana Pendzik outlines the dramaturgical elements involved in autobiographical therapeutic performance, focusing on what makes the presentation of personal stories move from a mere recounting of victimization to a therapeutic experience. Drawing on ideas in the work of Eugenio Barba, and exploring recurrent patterns that characterize the process as well as the performance pieces, she points out some archetypal configurations in ATPs, and offers examples of dramaturgical structures that turn the process into a therapeutic one. David Read Johnson then examines the experience of *surprise* in Self-Rev and considers the question: How does the performer achieve discovery on stage, when the piece has already been rehearsed and memorized? Johnson stresses the significance of Otherness in these personal creations, arising from the actor's unconscious, the director, stagecraft, and the presence of the audience. Relying on the instability theory in *Developmental Transformations*, he underscores the importance of the actor's vulnerability and openness to the present moment during the performance.

Nisha Sajnani also highlights the significance of others in solo performance, and explores the performance of personal story through the perspective of *relational aesthetics.* Her chapter elucidates a relational view of art, ethics, and audience. Incorporating examples of the works of several performance artists, Sajnani emphasizes the relationships that are inherent in both the process and content of personal theatre pieces, as well as between performer and audience. From the theoretical perspective of *intersubjectivity*, Jean-Francois Jacques continues the exploration of the relationship between performer and audience—a distinct theme throughout this book. Integrating elements from performance studies, drama therapy, phenomenology and intersubjectivity theory, he examines the dynamic encounter between actor and spectator. Jacques suggests a conceptual framework for the production of meaning, outlining layers and types of witnessing inherent in autobiographical performance in drama therapy.

Part II begins with presentations of ATP based on a range of approaches. Armand Volkas blends Joseph Campbell's concept of the *hero's journey,* anthropological models of *rites of passage,* and Eric Berne's *Transactional*

Analysis, into a process for helping clients create ATPs within a psychotherapy practice. Sheila Rubin focuses on Self-Rev in healing shame and trauma. Her *Embodied Life Stories* process stresses the therapeutic relationship in helping to repair damaged or disrupted interpersonal bonds. Like Volkas, she highlights the importance of the reparative witness in accessing deeper aspects or new dimensions of the story. Pam Dunne's *Restoried Script Performance* process is based on Narrative Therapy and Positive Psychology, and, like Volkas and Rubin, is typically utilized with psychotherapy clients. The focus is on revealing problematic patterns or scripts in the client's life, and *re-storying* these to produce a more positive outcome or identity, presenting these transformations in the performance.

Drew Bird applies Clark Moustakas' six phases of *heuristic research* to the process of creating ATP, incorporating reflections from his own personal performance piece. The phases of engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis provide a developmental framework for understanding the process of preparing ATPs. Examining four contemporary and recognized autobiographical performances in Israel, two of which were developed drama-therapeutically, Gideon Zehavi uses John Austin's concept of the *performative* within performance theory to examine the dynamics of transformative moments of presence that occur within autobiographical performances. He concludes that often these moments occur when the actor breaks out of role and briefly confronts the audience as him/herself, not unlike Johnson's conclusion that working through occurs when the discrepancy between the actor and his role is revealed to the audience.

The next two chapters focus on the use of personal theatre performances as part of dramatherapy (British spelling) training programs, specifically in the United Kingdom. Ditty Dokter and Alida Gersie review the history of autobiographical performance in British dramatherapy programs, and convey their content analysis of a set of performances as recollected by their alumni. Key themes of family relationships, diversity, being witnessed, privacy, and transformation are discussed, overlapping with some of the issues identified by Pendzik and others. Anna Seymour also interviews graduates about their personal theatre performances, and analyzes them from a dialectical, sociopolitical perspective, relying on Brecht and on Jacques Rancière's study of the power relations between performer and witness/audience. Her analysis reveals the multilayered and contradictory impulses within the actor (e.g., wanting to be seen and to hide

from view), and raises questions about the nature of the audience's role in autobiographical performance.

The book then turns to more specific applications in Dovrat Harel's and Zeina Daccache's chapters on directing ATPs with particular populations: Harel, in Israel, with elderly people who have dementia, and Daccache, with inmates in Lebanese prisons. Harel describes how ATP revives and preserves memories, consistent with research on reminiscence within narrative gerontology. She illustrates how elderly clients improve their self-esteem and expand their positive self-identities. Daccache's work also empowers her clients to tell their life stories and dramatize their experiences in prison before large public audiences, building hope where there has been none. Inspired by Boal's *Legislative Theatre,* she relates her journey in using these performances to instigate social and legal reform in Lebanon, leading to the passage of a new law for 'The Protection of Women and Family Members from Domestic Violence,' approved by the Lebanese Parliament in 2014—a powerful demonstration of the potential of ATP to create tangible social change.

The final two chapters comprise descriptive accounts of collaborative personal performances by the creators of these pieces, who use the form in unique ways. Jules and David Richmond recount their process as a long-time couple of creating an autoethnographic performance exploring loss, aging, and the passage of time. Their poetic personal stories interface with their political commitment (and disillusion) with regard to urgent societal and ecological needs. Maria Hodermarska, Prentiss Benjamin, and Stephanie Omens turn the usual structure of ATP on its head by identifying the *play as the client*. In most performances, the actor is simultaneously the source of material, the playwright, and the performer. Hodermarska's team of drama therapists separates these roles entirely: there is no human client, and only the director links the performer, playwright, and the person who is the source of the personal material. Their reflections on this deconstructed process illuminate important themes and raise interesting questions in ATP and Self- Rev.

In our call for chapters we tried to reach a diversity of practitioners and scholars throughout the world, who may be using ATP or related forms of interventions; yet the reply came mainly from European, North American and Middle Eastern sources. We are therefore aware of the cultural and geographical limitations of the book, which will be addressed in future editions.