Dissertation Title: “The Play’s the Thing!” Ideology, Entertainment and Conflict
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Current level of study: Third year doctoral student

It is now clear that the coming decades will be defined by a war in the shadows […]
This enduring battlefield will have no definable frontiers, no apparent or visible enemies and these battles will be waged not only physically but also ideologically […] This will be the ultimate and decisive challenge in the global war on terrorism.1

According to Statistics Canada, hate crime in Canada - defined as attacks on individuals based primarily on their association with a given group - increased by 35% between 2007 and 2008.2 The three most targeted groups were Jews, Blacks and Muslims.3 Vancouver had the highest rates of hate crimes of any major city in Canada.4 Canada is not alone in this increase - rates of Anti-Semitism and Islamaphobia, for example, are increasing worldwide. These increases are not surprising in a world experiencing increasing ideological terrorism and conflict, with hate crimes representing on an individual level what terrorism represents on a national and international level - ideological conflict.

Research Question: To what extent can entertainment inspire audiences to question beliefs, attitudes and prejudices that commonly relate to ideological conflicts and hate crimes?

Research Objectives: This research has two primary objectives: to design an entertainment event which addresses and counters cultural, religious and ideological images common to acts of prejudice, hate, and ideological conflict. The second objective is to evaluate the ability of that production to inspire discussion, debate and questions relating to these ideological issues. For example: the perception that a group is inferior; manipulative; aggressive; a threat; or should be destroyed.

Theoretical Framework: In the 20th century, the use of theatre for social or political change spread across the world from Brecht in Germany,5 to Boal in South America.6 Some artists, notably South African artists like Athol Fugard, Pieter Dirk-Uys and Mbongeni Ngema have emphasised the popular appeal of socially relevant theatre, in addition to its social or political content. Their work provides one foundation for this research. Additionally, entertainment is already being used to inspire discussion and debate in communities about medical research,7 for example, on such topics as preimplantation genetic diagnosis.8 These studies provided significant methodological foundations for this research. Beyond these foundations, however, this research is grounded in a wider theoretical context including the value of narrative persuasion9 and the importance of symbolic levels of conflict in conflict resolution.10 The choice to focus the research objectives on inspiring discussion, debate and questioning of problematic ideological beliefs is based on persuasion theories positing that people are less likely to be persuaded by messages (such as prejudicial propaganda) when they are willing and able to argue against them.11 In this way, a production designed to inspire debate will, also, inspire the counter-arguments that reduce the efficacy of propagandistic messages which frequently form the basis for prejudice, hate and ideological conflicts. While the politics of conflicts are debated ad nauseam in the mass media, their ideological underpinnings - the beliefs and prejudices that connect international conflict to individual hate crimes - are rarely addressed and it is this kind of debate that the production is designed to inspire.

Methodology: This research is a multiphase,12 mixed methods study. After an initial exploratory phase focusing on the representation of Jews and Muslims in popular culture, the main data collection process will take place in a mixed method, convergent13 design based on a quasi-experimental/field experiment model in which the qualitative and quantitative elements of the study will be given equal weight.14 The experimental intervention in this research is a theatrical production of Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice, abridged to the length of a one act play (approximately 50 minutes). It will then be performed twice in the same night, by the same cast playing the same characters. The two versions of the play will be interpreted differently based on a single variation in the social structure of the play: in Version I, Shylock and Jessica will be Jews (as written) in a society that is predominantly Arab (an adaptation from
the original in which the surrounding society is Christian). In Version II, the social structure will be inverted, with Shylock and Jessica being Arabs in a society that is predominantly Jewish. This technique is a projective variation of role reversal in dispute resolution. 15

The focus on Jews and Arabs is based on a number of factors including the evidence that Jews are the most likely target of hate crimes in Canada and Muslims are the third most likely targets. (While Arabs and Muslims are not necessarily the same group, the conflation of these two groups is a common misconception.) A second reason for this choice is the association between Jews and Arabs and international conflict; the Arab-Israeli conflict has direct results on discrimination against Jews in North America, just as international terrorism influences discrimination against Muslims and Arabs. 16 Given that the original Merchant of Venice displays a society in which the prejudices against Jews and Christians make most of the characters in the play equally the targets and perpetrators of prejudice, it is an ideal choice to portray the omnipresent distrust and fear that permeates entrenched conflicts.

The play will run for ten nights in 2011 and data will be collected before and after each production using quantitative questionnaires, in-depth interviews, audience observation and small group discussions. The initial exploratory phase of the research will take place between January and May of 2011 following review by the UBC Ethics Review Board in December 2010. The production itself will open at the Telus Theatre in the Chan Centre for the Performing Arts in November of 2011, running for ten performances providing a maximum audience size of 2500 people. Data analysis and writing the dissertation will take place between January and December 2012 for an expected graduation date in May 2013. A SSHRC Doctoral Scholarship would cover the period from September 2011 to August 2012, during which time the implementation of the production and the majority of the analysis will take place.

**Hypotheses:** All of the theoretical models upon which this research is based indicate that an entertaining, socially relevant production will, at least, result in increased discussion and debate of relevant social and political issues. While this is the ultimate research objective, both persuasion theory and theories of theatre for social change suggest that a production of this nature could have a moderating influence on attitudes such as prejudice and discrimination which the play explicitly addresses.

**Advancement of Knowledge:** At present, there is little empirical, methodologically sound evidence of the impact of socially aware entertainment on audiences. Moreover, while the need to address ideological concerns in the battle against hate crimes, terrorism and ideological conflict has been recognised, the techniques available to do this are, as yet, limited and evidence of their efficacy is not yet clearly defined. Addressing these two deficiencies in both academic literature and its practical application will be the most significant advancements that this research will make. Beyond this, however, the long-term applications of this research are both varied and potentially hugely significant. The findings of this study could provide methodologies applicable in areas as diverse as knowledge to action research in a diversity of health settings as well as in areas of economic and political development - particularly with regards to public engagement methods and knowledge dissemination.

**My Qualifications:** I have a BFA in theatre and more than 20 years of amateur and professional experience and training in theatre, primarily as an actress and stage manager, but with some experience as a designer and in theatre administration. I also have an MA in interdisciplinary studies that focused on genocide (propaganda and ideology), theatre for social change, and psychology. I have taken graduate level and senior undergraduate courses on the history and sociology of genocide, theatre for social change, archetypal psychology, Holocaust history, Palestinian politics, litigation and dispute resolution, intercultural dispute resolution, negotiation, and the politics of humanitarianism. I have also studied both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies and am currently taking a graduate level directing course with Theatre at UBC in addition to having recently worked as an assistant director on a Theatre at UBC production. My interdisciplinary academic background is unusual and, combined with my training and experience in practical theatre, makes me uniquely suited to conduct this research.
Works Cited


4. Police-Reported Hate Crimes.


13. Ibid., 77.

14. Ibid.
