

Community Theatre

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Neither human existence nor individual liberty can be sustained for long outside the interdependent and over-lapping communities to which we all belong. Nor can any community long survive unless its members dedicate some of their attention, energy and resources to shared projects.

(Etzioni 1997)

Community theatre has different roots and functions related to its cultural, social and political setting and its purpose in those specific environments. In some cases it may be that community rituals and stories, often deeply embedded in cultural traditions, are performed as an integral part of defining and celebrating a community's cultural and spiritual identity. Other forms of community theatre have political intent, to inform and energise a community in bringing change or in asserting human rights. The continuum stretches, therefore, from radical activist theatre to benign celebration. Whatever the source and form of community theatre, it is generally welcomed as a positive sign that a community is prepared to supplement the generally passive reception of stories available in multitude from the print and broadcast media with narratives which are made and performed within, by and to a specific community. In all cases, these forms of community theatre take account of the particular histories and concerns of the communities in which it is made and performed.

Since Ann Jellicoe's theatre work in the 1970s, in the UK, 'Community Theatre' now generally refers to a particular theatre formⁱ which involves the creation of a theatre event that has relevance for the particular community in which it is created and which is performed, predominantly, by members of that community (Jellicoe, 1987).

In the Jellicoe model, a professional writer and selected members of the community are involved in collecting community stories and sifting them for dramatic potential. A written dramatic text is produced as a starting point for community workshops that give rise to further modifications of the text. A professional director, aided by community members and a professional designer, then transforms the written text into performance. These performances often involve up to one hundred and

fifty people. Many are promenade style in which the audience walks in the performance space and the performance happens amongst them. They happen in non-theatrical spaces. Almost always, they involve the performance of seminal stories of a community's past and are aimed at bringing increasingly fragmented populations together (see the article on 'Parson Terry's Dinner and Other Stories' elsewhere in this book).

In the space of sixty years, the fabric of rural English communities has changed radically. These shifts have occurred due to a number of influences, among them the changed nature of farming leading to fewer employees; migration of the working class to urban areas; the move to the countryside of the middle classesⁱⁱ; the impact of global cultural values; the impact of television, consumerism and the new technologies; and the growth of excessive individualism (Etzioni *op cit*). Some of these influences have had positive effects. Conversely, the decline of shared work, interdependency and significant celebrations and rituals has led to social fragmentation. People living in the same place geographically do not necessarily create the circumstances which can produce 'community'.

One significant loss in current rural communities is the knowledge of community stories. Residents without access to these lack a 'sense of place', a quality which is best achieved through absorbing the layered meanings accreted through centuries of, often oral, storytelling and shared experience.

Stories shape identity, and social cohesion depends on shared identity [We share] not just a land and language, but also memories and hopes, aspirations and ideals sharing a story is the best way of creating shared identity and a sense of the common good.

Chief Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sacks

Thought for the Day

BBC Radio 4, 7.45am, 15 June 2007

Such stories have no forum for being shared unless, as Etzioni says, members of a community 'dedicate some of their attention, energy and resources to shared projects.' In writing about memory, AC Grayling (2001) says:

...what makes a person the same person through life is the accumulating set of memories he carries with him. When these are lost, he ceases to be that person and becomes someone else, new and as yet unformed.

If we substitute 'community' for 'person', the statement still holds true. Theatre can be important in building this new community identity and can, through its research and performances, ensure its development is based firmly on elements of the past. Such theatre represents a dynamic exploration and presentation of the defining narratives of a community.

The concept of theatre as communal work

As previously mentioned, sixty years' ago, rural English communities were relatively closed and interdependent. At this time, the parish was a site for *work*. Perhaps 90% of people worked in the community, with only the small number of professionals venturing outside it. Currently, in Payhembury Parish where I live in England, it is probable that 90% of the population of 470 work outside the Parish which is seen simply as a place to 'live'. Activity is age-related. Young mothers meet at the playgroup, older ones outside the school. Older community members meet at the 'lunch club', principally seen as a once-a-month social activity for widows and widowers. The short mat bowls club attracts the over 55s and the youth club caters for teenagers. I estimate that fewer than 15% of the Parish residents are active in such groups, most of which attract small numbers.

I decided that the theatre-making should be a challenge; not just dramatically, but in terms of the 'labour' needed to make it happen. I wanted to create a communal focus in the Parish, a shared project that would bring the disparate elements of the community together. This was when I arrived at the concept of 'theatre as communal work', a shared activity which counters 'excessive individualism' and brings disparate people together to discover and articulate the stories of the community.

Examples of Community Theatre

1. The school and community

Exwick lies just north-west of Exeter, a city of 110,000 people, separated from the City by the River Exe. It was once geographically, socially and culturally distinct but, with the expansion of both City and village, administratively and in many other ways, it is now seen as part of Exeter. Exwick has expanded forty fold in the last thirty years and the hillsides that overlook the river plain are covered in

modern housing developments. Some old buildings remain however, embedded in this enlarged community. I worked here with seven of my university students and 30 school students aged 11-12 years.

Theatre and community

One of our prime aims was to create opportunities for the school students to discover and understand aspects of Exwick's past, and to articulate that to the community. We wanted to use the performances as a focus to celebrate and broadcast a shared culture. Benedict Nightingale notes theatre's ability to work within a community to heighten people's awareness of where they live:

Isn't it good that a community should learn more, more about the past that has shaped its present, the roots that have determined its identity? Isn't it good that it should deepen its understanding of itself; entertain itself?ⁱⁱⁱ

The aims of the project also coincided with British school curriculum aims. The model that I chose had to satisfy the needs of the seven university students with whom I was working. I actually made two productions – a live performance and a radio play broadcast on local radio. I describe only the live performance here.

'When I was a Boy'

This theatre project was based on local, true stories. The two class teachers covered a range of contextual material to do with the Victorian and early 20th Century. Older people who had lived in Exwick all of their life were invited into the school to share their memories. In their research, pupils and teachers made use of books, videos, slides, maps, local museum collections and field visits, together with a study of original documents in the County Records Office. Documents, artefacts and written testimony came in from community members.

Developing the Drama

Once the curriculum work was established, the notion of the play was introduced. This involved inferring story and the detail of human existence from the intriguingly sparse descriptions of events contained in the school's log-book (the headteacher of each UK school keeps a daily record of events. Some of these logs go back over 200 years). Entries from the Exwick log books, dating from 1892 to

1924 (all made by the same headteacher, Mr Adolphus Rousham), were scanned to identify significant comments that had potential for dramatisation. One such log-book entry read:

1910

Aug. 30th.

Edith Cornall, Standard 111, aged 10 yrs, was drowned in the river during the dinner hour today. She was present at School this morning.

An enlarged copy was glued to the centre of a large sheet of card. The school students then identified key questions raised by the entry:

Who was Edith?, Where did she live and in what sort of family?, What was she doing down by the river?, Who was with her?, How did the teachers find out about the incident?, Who told the family? What was said to other pupils following Edith's death?, Who found Edith's body?, Were new school rules established following her death?

Each question was explored through discussion and dramatic improvisation. The authenticity of the material we were dealing with was an important aspect of the work. An evaluation of the project revealed:

The school logbook, in itself prosaic in tone and giving little away, nevertheless was a talisman which conferred historical authenticity on the events which were shaped in the drama. Being able to perform in the old school room and to visit the river, the site of the old mill, the war memorial, the graveyard, all these experiences added to the authenticity and to the children's growing realisation that they could identify closely with the children they were portraying because they were, in a sense, living parallel lives to their own.^{iv}

The performance was created by joining the resulting seven scenes together to form a play. Tickets for the performances took the form of a 16-page programme that contained additional information useful as context for the drama. Our audience was encouraged to read this before coming to the performance.

On performance nights we mounted exhibitions in rooms surrounding the old schoolroom. Live and taped music and sound effects and recordings of residents' memories were played as people viewed the

exhibition. Children in character enacted incidents around the old school and in the playground as the audience arrived. Audience memories were collected and added to the other material that now formed part of the school's permanent archive. Added relevance was derived from the play being performed in the community centre - the old school in which all of the incidents referred to in the log book took place.

2. The Living at Hurford

This play was created in a deeply rural area of Devon, England in 2004. It was an attempt to address two things – the difficulty small family farms are experiencing in the current economic/agricultural climate and the effect of foot and mouth disease which so devastated parts of rural England in 2002. A group of community psychiatric nurses, psychiatrists, psychologists, agricultural experts and arts therapists commissioned me to intervene through theatre in a rural community that had experienced foot and mouth disease. They told of a farming community laced with trauma. I wrote *The Living at Hurford*, an interactive play that focuses on the life of a typical Devon farming family struggling to stay in business. It was performed in a barn on a farm that had lost its animals to foot and mouth disease.

When buying a ticket, audience members received an envelope containing material which gave them insight into the personal, financial and agricultural world of a farming family.



The contents of the envelope

The purpose of this pack is to:

- orientate the audience to the story;

- give contextual information that will aid understanding of the story and;
- carry factual information, thus taking from the performance the responsibility to provide all information.

Story synopsis

Hurford Farm is owned by Janet Chaplain who inherited it from her recently deceased father. She is married to a clinically depressed husband, Mike, who is deeply affected by the difficulties of making a living from the farm. To supplement the family income, he drives a milk collection lorry. They have two children - Alan, eighteen years old and in the Army, and Sally, twenty, studying at university. Information audience members had gained from the pre-pack was expanded through a performance which ended in crisis. Janet must choose what to do. The audience is invited to help her make that decision and, following a range of interactive theatre approaches, they watch the consequences of their decision as actors play it out. The script used local dialect terms and contained many local references.

Janet's brother, Greg, left home at sixteen for an engineering apprenticeship and, although he was expected to take over the farm, never returned. Janet had her own career planned, but agreed to a delay until Greg returned. She is now resentful of Greg's actions and is stressed by the farm's financial difficulties and her husband's poor mental state. After attending his father's funeral (which took place a few weeks before the time period of the play) Greg announces to his sister that he wants to 'come home' and help the farm out of its difficulties by investing his redundancy money in it.



Janet and Greg argue about the farm

The present-day kitchen scenes at Hurford are interspersed with flashbacks to Janet's parents' era. The performance ends as Janet tells Greg that she needs to think about his offer. At this point a facilitator invites the audience members to consider the options open to Janet.

After discussion, audience members questions characters in a process called 'hotseating.' After a break, the audience decides on the course of action Janet should take and the actors play it out. Cards are distributed giving audience members telephone help line numbers.

3. A seminal community story: Foresight.

Currently I am directing a new community play 'Foresight' which focuses on a real story of a German Junkers 88 bomber which crashed in May 1941 in the valley where I live. It will be performed in a marquee in a field close to where one of the four German crew fell dead after the Junkers was shot down by a British Bristol Beaufighter. This is a story well known to the residents of this rural area who were alive at the time. During our research of the incident, some have revealed photographs and artefacts which relate to the crash, including a Luftwaffe belt buckle taken from the body of one of the airmen.^v The play will be performed on 11th, 12th and 13th of October 2007. For more on this project, please refer to the website alevalleycommunitytheatre.org>

References

Etzioni, A. (1997) *The New Golden Rule: Community and Morality in a Democratic Society*, New York: Basic Books.

Ann Jellicoe, *Community Plays and How to Make Them*, (London: Methuen, 1987).

Endnotes

ⁱ In the USA, 'community theatre' means amateur theatre which almost always involves the use of published, scripted plays.

ⁱⁱ David Orr, Chief Executive of the National Housing Federation said in a press release:

"Unless we act now, we will create a rural theme park, where only the very wealthy can live" (NHF: 'Rural housing crisis forces unprecedented alliance', Tuesday, 25 Jul 2006 11:07: see:

[http://www.politics.co.uk/press-releases/domestic-policy/housing-and-planning/rural-communities/nhf-rural-housing-crisis-forces-unprecedented-alliance-\\$445795.htm](http://www.politics.co.uk/press-releases/domestic-policy/housing-and-planning/rural-communities/nhf-rural-housing-crisis-forces-unprecedented-alliance-$445795.htm)

ⁱⁱⁱ Benedict Nightingale, in *New Statesman*, (London: 9/10/85).

^{iv} Fox, R., Evaluation of the Exwick Project, unpublished paper.

^v For more about 'Foresight' and Tale Valley Community Theatre, see <talevalleycommunitytheatre.org>