

# DISCOVERING SEMINAL STORIES: COMMUNITY THEATER AS CULTURAL MEMORY

John Somers

## *Introduction*

The project I describe here was carried out in Exwick Middle School, Exeter, and its surrounding community in the county of Devonshire, UK. At the time I was teaching in the School of Education at Exeter University, and each year, teacher education students specializing in English and Drama take part in co-operative projects with South West schools. I was actually working with fourteen university students who were split into two groups of seven. One group worked with two teachers and sixty school students from year six (10–11 year olds) to produce a live performance dealing with Exwick in late Victorian times. The other group helped two teachers and thirty school students from year seven (11–12 year olds) develop a broadcast radio play based on happenings in Exwick around the time of the Second World War. The radio project is not dealt with here.<sup>1</sup>

Both projects were based on the notions that school drama productions add greatly to the learning experience of the students that take part and that through their celebratory, ritualistic nature, they enhance generally the quality of school life. In UK schools, such productions are often based on well-known, extant dramatic texts pitched at the age group concerned and containing a suitable range of parts for large numbers of performers of varying abilities. I intended to break away from this conventional approach. The project described here was intended to:

- further the research skills of the school students in the discovery of interesting events to do with the history of the community in which they lived;
- involve a large number (60) of students in devising dramatic material based on chosen events;
- provide opportunities for the students to learn appropriate skills to allow them to perform the resultant play;
- give students, through the research and drama-shaping processes, a familiarity with Exwick as a pre-development community;
- allow students to broadcast to the community the play that they had made;
- provide a forum for the community to consider and discuss its past
- empower students through an understanding of how they can be makers of significant cultural events.

These aspects of theater, history, research skills, aesthetics, social dynamics, community awareness and active learning were to coalesce to provide a cultural experience rooted in memory but related through the school students' involvement to their sense of now.

## *The school and community*

Exwick lies just north-west of Exeter, a city of 110,000 people, and is 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 fortyfold in the last thirty years and the hillsides that overlook the river are covered in modern housing developments. Some old buildings, remnants of the old village, are embedded in this enlarged community.

The school students were able to identify a number of former farms, their landless farmhouses now mostly converted to suit late twentieth-century urban living. They found one

where the retired farmer, his holding reduced to just a garden due to housing development, talked to us as he sat with his dog in the old barn. The village also has a mill, Priory Mill, originally built by monks in the thirteenth century, and working as an animal feed-stuffs concern until quite recently.

The original school was built in 1890. A new school was built above the flood plain in 1971, the old school becoming a community center, a function it still performs. The village hall and church are nearby, and the old school rubs shoulders with a toll house, built to house those who collected the dues for crossing the Exe using the ‘new’ bridge. Until that time, people forded the river in summer or made long treks up or down stream to cross by existing bridges. The river was a constant threat until the completion of a flood prevention scheme in the 1970s. Although the City is a short walk away, Exwick retains a certain separateness for, although it is poorly served for shops, its pub, community center, church and school still allow residents—especially those with young school students—to feel part of a, albeit sprawling, community.

### *Theater and community*

The parents of the school students involved in this project were mostly newcomers to the village and they possessed little knowledge of its history. 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 their knowledge to the community. We wanted to use the performances as a focus to celebrate and broadcast a shared culture. Unlike other parts of the world (the U.S., for example, where it means amateur theater) in Britain ‘community theater’ is a term given to theater that attempts to feed off a community’s seminal stories.

Ann Jellicoe has created community plays in many West Country towns and she recognizes the importance of this function:

Communities need community events to continually refresh them. Community drama can be a celebration of community; discovering the nature of a community; articulating it *to* that community<sup>2</sup>

Jellicoe’s organization, the Colway Theatre Trust, goes into a community up to eighteen months before the play is performed. Professional and amateur local researchers dig out the interesting people and stories and a professional writer is employed to focus within one or more of these to create a play for the community. Amateur directors work alongside a professional to bring the work to the stage. Her work is famed, particularly in the South West of England where magnificent community plays have been developed and staged. In Ottery-St-Mary in 1985, for example, a well known happening, the burning down in 1866 of much of the village’s thatched properties, was researched and a number of stories associated with this were woven into the exploits of a rich family—the Farleighs—and a poor family—the Hakes—to produce a play entitled *The Ballad of Tilly Hake*. One hundred and sixty adults and young people were involved in realizing this promenade play and its effects on the community were very marked. Fourteen years later, for instance, a local, amateur community theater company, set up in the wake of the Colway Theatre Trust’s work, still commissions plays about local history.

Benedict Nightingale notes theater’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?<sup>3</sup>

The model that I chose had to satisfy the needs of the seven university students with whom I was working. They took part in a process that expanded their notion of what drama was for and what it could achieve. It could also be transferred to professional contexts in which they might find themselves after graduation. The school also looked on the project as in-service training for the staff involved.

We were aware that there were several communities associated with the work of the project. Predominant was the population that had entered Exwick since the early 1970s housing expansion. They were, in the main, young marrieds who, even though they may have moved from elsewhere in Exeter, had little knowledge of the village as it existed before expansion. In their sheer numbers, they overwhelmed those who had been previously resident. The latter group, by definition, were generally older and therefore tended not to have children in the school. We estimated that the ratio of ‘newcomers’ to ‘previous residents’ was around 40:1 which, given the lack of social activity and meeting places in Exwick, meant that the community with knowledge of old Exwick was overwhelmed by those who saw it as a dormitory settlement and, effectively, part of the city of Exeter.

The third community was the school students themselves. Unlike their parents who traveled out of Exwick to work, they spent the greater part of their waking hours in the settlement. They knew it in the way that only children can—through playing, walking and going to school in it. Given that the majority would progress to adolescence and adulthood here, they had an investment that their parents could not have. The other defined group involved was the teacher education students. They had an interest in making this ambitious project work and in exploring its professional relevance to their future careers. The teachers involved formed another subset. They were looking for professional challenge, knowing that the work would demand of them more effort and time and that the activities associated with the project were intentionally disruptive to their normal routines. They were of that band of precious professionals who welcome this sort of stimulation.

Finally, my interest was in originating, setting up and facilitating a sophisticated educational venture that put into practice emerging notions of how drama could form the focus for a cross-curricular study that energized and benefited all those who had dealings with it.

### *The project*

The two class teachers covered a variety of material to do with the period under study, relating the topic to most school curriculum subjects. The aim of the history work was to set the local study, which was to be the focus of the project and the drama, within an effective understanding of national and world events. General curriculum work on the topic was under way for some weeks before the notion of the play was introduced. The usual resources—books, videos, transparencies, maps, documents from the County Record Office, local museum collections and field visits were available, and teachers made good use of material that was brought in from the few families whose forbears had lived in the area since Victorian times and before. Older people who had lived all their life in Exwick were invited to talk. The school students gained an understanding of the nature of Exwick life and the place of the School in the community through time.

### *The roles of those involved*

Six months before the project started, I approached several schools in Exeter with the idea for a community production that would involve teachers, school and university students under my leadership. The headteacher of Exwick Middle School, Ken Turner, telephoned me as soon as he received the letter asking me if I would carry it out in his school. When I went to discuss it with him, he intimated that he wished to counter what he saw as the mechanistic and bureaucratic requirements of the recently introduced English National Curriculum for schools with the mounting of an imaginative and challenging activity, engaging significant numbers of his students and staff, that would celebrate the creativity and co-operative energy of education in his school. I accepted.

By enthusiastically embracing the potential of the work, he gave license to the five school staff involved (four class teachers and a music specialist) to give time and commitment to the project. Very importantly he had given the work priority and status, something he continued to do throughout the months of this co-operative effort. He dropped in on research and rehearsal sessions, openly encouraging everyone in their efforts to achieve an outcome of which they could be proud. His attitude was fundamental to the success of the work and anyone contemplating similar projects should take this to heart.

The teachers were professionally able, outgoing, inventive and resourceful. They ranged in experience from a young male recently graduated from my department to a senior teacher who had an important management role in the school. This blend of differing experience was fundamental to the in-service function of the project, allowing relatively junior teachers to work alongside those of considerable experience. The teachers met with me and the university students at the end of most days to review the progress of the work and to plan its development. Within the overall project structure they, as did all involved, had autonomy in deciding how to facilitate the creativity of the school students. Importantly, they were able to access appropriate resources that would aid the project, ranging from hardware such as slide or overhead projectors, to negotiating with colleagues for the use of rehearsal spaces.

The school students understood the nature of the task from the outset. Within the given framework, they were encouraged to call on their creative powers to create the play that was the expected outcome. They interviewed older residents, transcribed tape recordings, researched archive material, read selected log book entries and much more to dig out the intriguing stories that formed the basis of our play. These stories were explored through improvisations, aspects and adaptations of which found their way into the final production. Their work was the engine of the project. They understood the parameters of the exercise and this knowledge gave their efforts structure and security.

The university students understood that their role was to facilitate the work of the school students. They guided, advised on and acted as sounding boards for the emerging work. They also provided leadership and structure when groups were, for example, trying out ideas through improvisation. They were the vehicles for the teaching of specific skills. Some of this teaching was planned at our after-session meetings whilst other was an intuitive response to the perceived needs of their group as work was in progress.

My role was to conceive the nature and organization of the project and to ensure the impetus that would establish it firmly in the life of the school. Importantly, I also had to radiate the professional credibility that would persuade the school that this was a well conceived, challenging but realizable project.

### *Developing the drama*

After one month of curriculum work, the notion of the play was introduced. This involved inferring story from the intriguingly sparse descriptions of events contained in the School's log books (Head teachers in British schools are required to keep a record in these books of significant daily happenings). Previously, I read all the log books for the relevant period and photo-copied those entries that appeared to have most dramatic potential. The selection was presented to the school students in booklet form in which the entries covered the period 1892 to 1924 when all were written by the formidable Headmaster, Mr. Adolphus Herbert Rousham. Groups of school students, each working under the guidance of a university student, chose particular entries as starting points for exploration. Here is one from August 30, 1910:

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 of the extract was glued to the center of a large piece of card. The school students then identified key questions raised by the entry. We hoped that speculation about the answers would create convincing detail to clothe the intriguingly sparse statements from the log book. The drowning entry prompted such questions as:

Who was Edith?

Where did she live and in what sort of family?

What was she doing down by the river?

What time of day did she drown?

Who was with her?

How did the teachers find out about the incident?

Who told the family?

What was said to the other pupils following Edith's death?

Were new rules established by the headteacher?

Who found Edith's body?

Individual questions were written around the log book entry. Each question was explored through discussion and dramatic improvisation and as the work progressed, the web of detail grew, each new decision informing subsequent ones. The card served as a working document on which the school students jotted salient ideas. The boxes on the card gradually filled with detail about Edith and the events surrounding her death.

From the work done on the extract, the group decided that Edith was the youngest of five children. Her mother was a widow who took in washing to earn just enough money to keep the family from the work house (an institution to which the old and destitute were sent and of which there is a particularly large example standing in Exwick to this day). On the morning of her death she had been reprimanded by the headteacher for not paying attention to her lessons. Rebelling against this, she persuaded a group of her classmates to leave the school yard and, against school rules, accompany her to the nearby river. There, on the bank of the swollen river, they played a game of piggy-in-the-middle with a shoe. When the shoe accidentally ended up in the river, Edith, the strongest swimmer, was persuaded to retrieve it, and in attempts to do so, she was swept away and drowned. At the start of afternoon school, her friends were too frightened to tell their teacher what had happened. When two of them eventually pluck up the courage to report the incident, the teachers run to the river bank where the Headmaster, Mr. Adolphus Herbert Rousham, carries Edith's body from the swirling shallows.

These events had power even from the first exploratory improvisations, and the scene that resulted found its way into the play, the school students performing it with great skill and sensitivity.

Reconstructing lives and events from the past is a matter of considered conjecture based on a careful examination of available evidence. We could only make an educated guess about the background to the drowning. Our performance triggered additional information. An elderly woman who came to the play remembered, as a young child, Edith's death. According to this woman, Edith had not waded into the river to retrieve a shoe but to recover her hat that had been thrown into the water. She would not say who had thrown it in—the perpetrator and our informant will carry that secret to the grave. This woman's mother had used the death as a warning to her daughter not to go near the river. The school students were very interested in this revelation and were intrigued that their reconstruction had come so close to the truth.

The authenticity of the material with which we were dealing was an important aspect of the work. There was a special moment when the school students realized the significance of the log book records to the environment in which we were researching them and would create our performance. The old school, now a community center, was to be our performance space and as we stood in the largely unchanged main school-room, I read selected extracts from the logbooks that described physical features that could still be identified. I read for instance:

A new curtain rail was fitted to divide the school-room into two

The school students were asked to look for evidence to support this entry and discovered the original brackets that held the rail. This process was repeated with entries such as:

New cast iron grilles were fitted to the ventilators today

These grilles were still in place and the school students were able to open and close them just as the predecessors they were researching had done.

Flood water reached to the window sills in the school-room today

We measured the height of the window sills to understand better the extent of the flooding.

The cloakrooms near the girls' entrance are to be out of bounds to the boys at all times in future

We went to the cloakrooms and imagined what sort of behavior had led to this decision.

Gas burners were removed from the walls today as our new electric lighting was switched on

The positions of the gas lights were more difficult to find but intrepid detective work by the school students resulted in them discovering imperfections in the paintwork at eight points around the walls and these sites were designated as the locations.

Events such as these helped the school students realize that their play was about the reality of the events they were researching and representing. One girl said to me as we walked back from the old school to the new, "they are a bit like us," and an interesting discussion followed concerning similarities and differences between the lives of school students in the early part of the century and their own.

Each of the other groups developed further scenes based on other log book extracts. A brief description of a Christmas Prize Distribution of December 1906 gave rise to a scene in which a boy steals a beautiful potted plant from a fellow pupil and wins first prize with it; a second came from an entry concerning the overwhelming victory of a girl in the June 1911 May Queen election and explored the rivalries and jealousies involved; a third sprang from a description of how 'Empire Day' was celebrated in May 1905 and depicted the nationalism and pomp involved;

a fourth centered on an announcement to the assembled school of the death of Queen Victoria in January 1901; a fifth came from a log book entry of 1910 that detailed the symptoms associated with scarlet fever, described the treatment current at the time and mentioned the names of children who were seriously ill with it; a sixth concerned the physical abuse in May 1901 of a pupil by her parents; and the last a detailed description from September 1917 of the planting and harvesting of potatoes in the school garden as part of the national war-effort. Each extract was worked on in the way described for the drowning incident, allowing the school students to create further sections of the play.

The university students facilitated the exploratory work of the groups during improvisations. The emphasis was on creating the atmosphere where all group members felt able to contribute to discussion and practical work. School students made sound recordings of their final improvisations and, with the help of the university students, they transcribed these into a written script which formed the basis of the performance.

### *The performance framework*

The performance was achieved by joining the resultant scenes together to form a continuous drama. We needed a linking narrative to give continuity and to fit the individual incidents into a coherent story line. We decided to use a device based on the school students' own data collection. We supposed that a group of them who were doing research on local history was going to interview Fred Hannaford, an elderly ex-pupil of the school, about his memories of childhood. This idea was prompted by the children's enthusiasm for the help given in the research phase by an elderly local historian. Fred was played by Gary Read, one of the class teachers involved in the project. The play opened with their arrival at Fred's house. After a brief explanation of why they have come they are invited into Fred's home and their questions trigger Fred's reminiscences of his childhood. As he begins to talk animatedly about particular incidents, the scene cross-fades from the living room discussion to an enactment of what he is remembering—a flash-back.

This device allowed us to build the apparently disparate incidents into a coherent drama. Transparencies, some of them related to album photographs Fred was showing the school students, were projected on to two screens and live instrumental music, songs, live and taped sound effects, lighting, simple staging, costume and props were used to support the drama. Parents were involved in and informed of as much as possible in all phases of the production. Regular newsletters were sent home giving progress reports, rehearsal information and asking for assistance. These were produced in the style of the play, with appropriate typography and graphics.

Tickets for the performances—all sold out—took the form of a 16 page program that contained additional information useful to the audience as context for the drama. Decisions about the content were made by the school students. It was desktop published with the help of the university students. As it went on sale two weeks before the performances, our audience was encouraged to read it before coming to the performance in order that they absorbed some of the contextual background to the drama.

On performance nights we mounted an exhibition of artifacts, photographs, posters and school students' work in spaces surrounding the old school-room. Live and taped music and effects were played as people looked at this exhibition, and school students in character enacted incidents around the old school and in the playground as the audience arrived--skipping games in

the playground; an argument between two pupils over a game of marbles; a teacher remonstrating with a pupil, for example. The performances were magical experiences for some. The audience members, many of them coming as a result of special invitations to older residents, were enthralled and the performance and the exhibition triggered considerable reminiscing by audience members. As far as was possible, these memories were collected and added to the school's archive. In addition to the public performances, the play was presented to the rest of the school, including all the teachers, and the pride with which the young actors carried this out was palpable.

### *Reflections*

At the end of the project, everyone was left in a state of satisfied exhaustion. The performance had drawn an impressive commitment from each individual and there was a shared sense of having created something significant both in terms of the drama and its affect on the community of Exwick. Gary Read, class teacher of one of the classes involved in the project commented after it was all over:

It was the drama element which enabled us to make the leap from acceptable class teaching to an educational, social and cultural experience the effects of which will remain with those who took part for a very long time

What cannot be wholly evaluated is the value the school students derived from the experience but the pride they felt after the live performance was manifest:

I felt good when we were doing it for my granddad because he went to my school a long time ago, when he was taught in the room where we did the play, and he said it was just like that. It's the best thing I've ever done.<sup>4</sup>

From the evaluations we carried out it was clear that <sup>1</sup>the school students felt that they had taken part in an experience that had touched them and their classmates, the whole school and the community in general<sup>4</sup>. An evaluation that was carried out during the whole period of the project showed that this was an event of major significance in this community. Follow-up discussions with some of the school students two years later bore this out. They had vivid memories of the work and their part in it.

Since doing this project I have been able to use the approach in other settings. My local village school, Payhembury Primary has devised two such plays. One was based on the First World War period of the village's history. They too searched the school's log books and talked to local residents who remembered the period and its aftermath. The research had a particular poignancy as the war memorial bore the names of the fathers of some of the older residents. The play that resulted was one of the most powerful pieces of theater that I have ever seen.

More recently, in 1997, this school decided to take the world-famous road protest at nearby Fairmile as their topic. A group of tunneling road protesters, led by the mythical 'Swampy,' constructed a network of underground chambers and tree houses as a protest against a new road that was to push its way through beautiful Devon countryside. The events were the focus of media attention for best part of two years. Once again the play, complete with original music, was a huge success educationally and theatrically. It also managed to deal sensitively with a topic that split the community down the middle as some wanted the new road to overcome traffic queues and accident blackspots whilst others saw it as an unnecessary despoliation of the environment<sup>6</sup>.

School plays are regular occurrences in British schools. School students are introduced to performance from as young as five, taking part in enactments of well-known stories and



Christmas nativity plays. Older students generally perform standard texts—either musicals such as *Oliver!*, *Grease* or *The Boyfriend* or set texts from examination courses. There is some devising within most drama examination syllabuses for sixteen and eighteen year olds but these performances are usually no longer than ten minutes. A full-length play that results from a devising process, in which the school students are valued as co-workers, empowers those students. Although it is several years since the Exwick work was completed, the participants remember it clearly and with pride. When the material that is being dealt with within the drama is drawn from events that have happened within a local community there is a special power in the drama.

Recently I went back to Exwick School to develop a drama from curriculum study of the Black Death, a plague that killed between one third and one-half of Europe's citizens in the fourteenth century. Once again it was set in the Exwick locality. The archaeologist's box we used as a starting point for the drama story contained fragments of documents and other material that had been dug up on the site of their current school. The story that resulted therefore had a particular association for these students.

Schools often form an essential focus within communities. Students are deeply affected by their attendance as they grow to adulthood and the school provides a shared focus for their parents. Through drama a school can reach out to embrace those that surround its location and in acting as storytellers students reinforce their sense of the community's bonds with times and people of the past. That is a very special responsibility for the teachers but one that can bring huge satisfaction and pleasure.

There were many testimonies to the efficacy of the project. Among them were the tremendous motivation of the young people, the warmth of the response from the community to the performances and associated material, the 'buzz' created in the school and the immense satisfaction felt by the university students in learning how to set up sophisticated learning opportunities in which children are active partners. Widespread conversations with many involved and with members of the community, especially parents, convinced me that the most telling legacy was the strengthened self image of many of the school students. They appeared to have discovered how they could be an essential part of this sprawling community of Exwick. They knew it better through their encounters with the people of the past and the adults - both in school and in the community seemed to respect that. The project seemed almost to form some kind of community initiation.

Schools are situated in diverse communities all around the world. At a time when the globalized narratives of the big studios, TV stations and publishing houses spread around the earth I hope that this project description might inspire others to see how the making of theater can help define the uniqueness of each of those communities and the individuals who inhabit them.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>For more details of the radio project, see John Somers, *Drama in the Curriculum* (London: Cassell, 1994), 158–87.

<sup>2</sup>Ann Jellicoe, *Community Plays and How to Make Them* (London: Methuen, 1987).

<sup>3</sup>Benedict Nightingale, in *New Statesman*, 9 Oct. 85.

<sup>4</sup>An Exwick pupil.

<sup>5</sup>School students' open writing tasks and interviews with school students and teachers.

<sup>6</sup>For more details of this project see John Somers, "Get the Show On the Road," *Times Educational Supplement Music and the Arts Extra*, 14 Nov. 97, v.

John Somers is in the Drama Department at Exeter University. He specializes in applying drama in community settings, including alcohol and drug education in schools, tours to France and Slovakia and co-operative work in Turkey, Brazil and Poland. He has a special interest in research. He directs the international conference *Researching Drama and Theatre in Education* and edits the journal *Research in Drama Education*. He is director of an MA in Applied Drama.

---