

# What is Theatre for Social Change?



*An extract from From the Personal to the Political: Theatre for Social Change in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century with particular referenced to the work of Collective Encounters: a review of relevant literature*

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In this paper Sarah draws on literature dealing with Applied Theatre, Community Theatre, Grassroots theatre, Community Cultural Development, Political Theatre, socially engaged arts practice and protest performance to develop an understanding of what Theatre for Social Change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century might be. She seeks to define the field, tease out the key problems and challenges and begin to explore ideas around best and ethical practice.

# A Review of the Field

## Discerning a Field of Practice: Mapping the Terrain

The first challenge when writing about Theatre for Social Change (TfSC) is one of definition. While the term is in common usage it is not a clearly defined field and has not gained currency within academia. There are no books or journal articles that neatly explain what TfSC is. The term is deceptively straightforward: clearly this is a “theatre in the service of social change” (Prentki and Preston, 2009, p. 12). It waves its politics like a flag with the inherent assumption that society needs to change. It implies that theatre can contribute to change, so has an instrumental value. It is a “hyphenated genre” (Cohen-Cruz, 2005, p. 106) bringing together the two distinct worlds of theatre and the social. But beyond this seeming simplicity, which will be problematised throughout the review, TfSC is much more complex. It is not one form of theatre but, as Nicholson (2005, p. 2) said of Applied Drama, a set of “interdisciplinary and hybrid practices”. It spans the participatory and professional arts sectors and the fields of arts and activism. It inhabits the liminal space where art and social practice collide.

The historical origins of TfSC are most obviously to be found in the Popular and Community Theatres of the 1970s, the Happenings and Alternative Theatres of the 1960s and the Political Theatres of the 1930s; but its roots are also evident in the theatre and democracy ideals of the Ancient Greeks, the subversion of early carnival, the inflammatory writing of Ibsen and Shaw and, of course, in the radical theatres of Brecht and Boal. TfSC is potentially amorphous depending on how one chooses to interpret the ideas of change and society.

The frame of reference and research for this review have identified three distinct areas of related activity: Participatory TfSC, Professional TfSC and Protest Performance. Each has its own unique qualities and concerns, but before discussing the detail of each it is important to map out the unifying features and ask what distinguishes this body of work from similar practices. In what ways is Participatory TfSC different from other kinds of Applied Theatre, for instance? What differentiates Professional TfSC from other forms of Political Theatre? By surveying the interconnected collections of literature informing this review in relation to the frame of reference provided by the work of Collective Encounters a set of defining characteristics emerge, and it is possible to discern a specific field of practice. These defining characteristics relate to intentionality,

community, hyphenation, conscientization<sup>1</sup>, and aesthetics. The broad principles of each will be laid out in this introduction and then ideas will be explored in more depth in relation to the individual strands of practice.

“When the play ends, what remains?...When the play ends, what begins?” Bharucha’s (2011, p. 366) questions expose the intentionality at the heart of TfSC. Work within this field is not just about the theatre, or the process, the moment, or the experience; but how those things fit into a bigger picture. It is, according to Haedicke “an activist form of dramaturgy which aims to influence and alter the actual world, not just reflect it” (in Koppers, 2007a, p. 8). While the idea of intent is hotly debated in the Applied Theatre literature (see for instance Kramer et al., 2006) in TfSC it is the *raison d’être* (Boon and Plastow, 2007). This articulated intention to use theatre in the service of change, to state specifically what is hoped to be changed, to aim for a lasting legacy and be part of something bigger, immediately sets TfSC apart from other forms of participatory, Applied, Community or Political Theatre. It carries with it implications for practice: that there will be a strategic underpinning to the work, for instance, that goes beyond the art of theatre. It provokes challenges concerning the ethics of change and compels a careful consideration of questions of power, efficacy, instrumentalism and radicalism.

TfSC is committed to making theatre that grows out of the communities it serves. Whether the community is one of location, such as north Liverpool, or of identity, such as the homeless community or indeed an activist community, participation and access are core values. It involves communities ethically in shaping and informing the work (see for instance Leonard and Kilkelly, 2006). It often draws the authenticating conventions of the theatrical product from its community context (Kershaw, 1992, p. 248) and is frequently performed in non-traditional, community settings where the work can “rub up against” the everyday (Thompson and Schechner, 2004, p. 13). TfSC is often based on community development principles (see for instance Goldbard, 2006) and works in partnership with community-based organisations to engage participants and audiences that “political theatre so often hopes for but rarely reaches” (Thompson, 2003, p. 30). Clearly, though, *community* is a complex concept, fraught with ethical and conceptual difficulties to do with identity, power and autonomy. While TfSC is not unique in its commitment to community, a particular ethical stance can be discerned - particularly in relation to Participatory TfSC.

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<sup>1</sup> See Glossary

TfSC “operates on the cutting edge between performing arts and sociocultural intervention” (van Erven, 2001, p. 1): it is a coming together of two worlds. While the worlds that theatre engages with may change from project to project, depending on specific aims and context, the fact of its hyphenation is consistent. As with intentionality, there are inherent ethical, ideological and pragmatic challenges connected with hyphenation; in particular, concerns about instrumentalism, co-option and strategic impact. But in addition to the strategic imperative of inhabiting the space between two worlds, hyphenation ensures that ideology is at the centre of the practice by “unravelling the frame that would cast ‘the social’ as ‘extra’” (Jackson, 2011, p. 16). Liminality blurs the boundaries between art and life and has implications for TfSC aesthetics and ethics.

Like many other Political and Applied Theatre practices, TfSC seeks to reveal more clearly the way the world works: to make strange the familiar and expose the systems and tacit understandings that remain largely invisible in our everyday lives. Brecht’s A-effect<sup>2</sup> is a clear example of this. But TfSC seeks more than raised consciousness, it seeks conscientization: awareness’s leading to action. This idea is borrowed from Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1996) and has been influential in shaping the methodologies of Theatre of the Oppressed and other forms of Applied Theatre. An interesting recent development is Holloway’s “scream that points to doing” (2010, p. 22) which ties more directly to contemporary activism and elements of Protest Performance, thus moving the ideology and practice forward and offering new ways of thinking about TfSC in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Through both its production processes and its aesthetics TfSC offers an alternative to mass-produced forms of contemporary cultural entertainment. While performance styles are diverse, they are often “profoundly subversive of established power” (Boon and Plastow, 2004, p. 3). TfSC does not have a unique aesthetic but, like other forms of Applied and Political Theatre, seeks a balance between artistic and cultural forms of expression. It connects to the earliest impulses of popular theatre in drawing on traditional cultural forms, whilst seeking artistic innovation (see for instance Prendergast and Saxton, 2009, p. 51). Its theatrical product is usually developed through a process of collective creation<sup>3</sup>, which influences

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<sup>2</sup> See Glossary

<sup>3</sup> See Glossary

its form, often leading to theatre that utilises multiple voices and perspectives. These more popular and accessible forms of theatre have implications for the actor/audience relationship and for critical reception of the work. The TfSC aesthetic draws on an *outsider* narrative, telling stories that are often hidden or ignored:

“Sometimes the plays speak what everybody knows; sometimes they speak what nobody says. Sometimes they open paths or unveil truths; sometimes they challenge the way things are done or understood” (Leonard and Kilkelly, 2006, p. 27).

It is an aesthetic of alterity. Performances aim to give voice to the voiceless, but the assumption that giving voice is a necessary good is contested, as will be discussed while exploring issues of power and representation in Participatory TfSC.

These characteristics of intentionality, community, hyphenation, conscientization, and aesthetics, then, begin to distinguish TfSC as a discernable set of practices. While individually they are not unique to TfSC, taken together they do frame a field. This review will now address the different strands of activity within this field, which will help to provide a more detailed picture of the principles, practices and problems of contemporary TfSC. It will be noted that this review is weighted significantly towards Participatory TfSC. This is largely because there is a much more extensive body of writing connected directly to this strand than the others. The least attention in this review is given to Protest Performance since it does not currently fall within the frame of reference for the research. The survey of Protest Performance, therefore, is tentative and intended to highlight the ways in which this kind of work might be considered as important to a 21<sup>st</sup> Century TfSC, and might be relevant to the work of Collective Encounters in the future.

## **Participatory Theatre for Social Change: *Creating Democratic Spaces through the Social Artistry of Theatre*<sup>4</sup>** **Describing the practice**

For Collective Encounters, Participatory TfSC means a professional artist/facilitator<sup>5</sup> working with a marginalised group in or of a specific community, to explore ideas and tackle topics of interest or concern to the members of that group. This involves a process of theatre skills

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<sup>4</sup> Needlands (2007, p. 308)

development and draws on a variety of pedagogical and methodological approaches. Following a period of development and exploration the facilitator, often with a team of additional professional artists, supports the group to devise, craft, rehearse and perform a piece of theatre which articulates the ideas the group has explored and gives voice to their concerns. Occasionally there is no cumulative piece of theatre and the creative process stands alone as an end in itself. According to *Collective Encounters' Evaluation and Quality Framework* (Thornton, 2012) the Participatory TfSC process should be inclusive, creative, challenging, empowering, responsive and developmental.

These and many other tenets and assumptions about Participatory TfSC are contested concepts and require interrogation. This is a complex field, where questions of quality and impact collide with questions of aesthetics and value. Where diverse practice sits on a series of sliding scales between reproducing and challenging hegemony; between passive and self-mobilising participation (Pretty in Prentki and Preston, 2009, pp. 128 – 129); between participant-led and donor-driven practice; between instrumental and exploratory processes. To investigate these complexities Participatory TfSC will now be considered in relation to the themes of community, participation, power, instrumentalism and aesthetics.

## **Community**

It is generally perceived that Participatory TfSC can bring people together, bridge difference, heal divisions and shatter stereotypes; that it can help to build community (see for instance Leonard and Kilkelly, 2006). This is predicated on the notion that community is necessarily a good thing; that community stands in opposition to isolation; and offers solidarity and strength in shared identity. A sense of belonging, feeling part of a group, getting to know other people, and feeling more connected are all important impacts cited by participants on Collective Encounters' projects (Crook, 2009, pp. 8 - 12). But while the literature recognises that feeling part of a community is generally a good thing, it also understands that community is not a simple construct, and that being or becoming part of a community is a complex idea (see for instance Nicholson, 2005, pp. 83 - 98).

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<sup>5</sup> See Glossary

There is a significant risk that in the effort to build community, to find shared values and common ground the work can “pursue or enforce visions of harmony and consensus” (Jackson, 2011, p. 44), glossing over difference, finding simplistic connections and preventing critique (Nicholson, 2008). Like Ann Jellicoe’s problematic Community Plays of the 1980s<sup>6</sup>, the work can too easily seek *communitas*, a “state that transcends difference” (Turner in Koppers and Robertson 2007, p. 11), rather than seeking out the multiple and diverse voices within communities. When working with communities of location, this can involve nostalgia for an imagined, idealised sense of community-past, and can lead projects to seek a homogenous local identity (Nicholson, 2005, p. 86-87). This localism can be exclusive, rejecting otherness and seeking only sameness. *Communitas* may feel good but it does not lead to politicisation.

When working with communities of interest, the central problem is in defining a group of individuals solely by one thing that they have in common: an experience of homelessness or of dementia for instance. To define a person by one aspect of themselves or their life experience is limiting, reductive and disallows multiple identities (Nicholson, 2005, pp. 94-98). It can lead to labelling which can reinforce a negative sense of self and the label can become the sole focus of the group, restricting vision and socio-political potential. When the label is applied by a funder, or by those leading a project, it can reinforce hegemony, exacerbate a negative experience of marginalisation and cause anger amongst participants who reject the ideas it implies. bell hooks (in Prentki and Preston, 2009, pp. 80-85) proposes the reclaiming of the margins as positive sites of resistance, and similarly labels can be subverted as positive sites of expertise. But to subvert negative labels in this way requires close attention to issues of power, representation and self-determination.

Much of the contemporary literature discusses the need for Participatory TfSC praxis to find a balance between equality, similarity and difference, and to look more carefully at how to define and describe community (see for instance Nicholson, 2005). Needlands (in Prendergast and Saxton ed., 2009, p. 135) offers an interesting way to think about this by making a distinction between consensus and conspectus, or a rainbow of differing opinions, rather than a consensual homogeneity of opinion. Nicholson (2005, p. 86) describes how in building communities diverse “social

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<sup>6</sup> Jellicoe, *Community Plays and How To Put Them On* (Methuen, 1987); for a critique of this approach see for instance Kershaw (1992) pp. 168 - 205



relations are negotiated and redefined through dynamic processes of interaction, communication and shared experiences". In a Participatory TfSC process it is often the primary responsibility of the facilitator to navigate this range of voices, perspectives, experiences and opinions.

## **Participation**

While the Participatory TfSC process is usually led by a professional facilitator and can involve collaboration with teams of professional artists, the participants are at the core of the work. Active participation as opposed to passive consumption, ownership of the means of cultural production as opposed to art remaining in the hands of an educated elite, participatory engagement as opposed to disengaged isolation are all essential to the politics and practice of the work.

It is believed that Participatory TfSC manifests the spirit of participatory democracy, embodying the democratic ideals that the work strives to realise in the wider world (see for instance Cohen-Cruz, 1995). Since the late 1990s numerous studies have found that participation in democratic arts activities can lead to a wide range of personal and social benefits (see for instance, Matarasso, 1997; Jermyn, 2004; Bunting, 2007). Orthodoxy says that these perceived beneficial changes lead to the empowerment of the individual and of the group. The literature recognises, however, that these benefits and impact are not intrinsic but are dependent on the level, quality and nature of a complicated participatory process that is full of ethical challenges. The success of this process depends on the skills of the facilitator, the power relations at play, the context of the project, and the pedagogical processes employed. It is troubled by the rise of instrumentalism and relationship with social policy agendas; and by questions of marginalisation, inclusion and representation.

The quality of the participatory experience is keenly debated within the sector (see for instance Paulger, et al., 2012) and there are no agreed standards or descriptors. It is clear that across the breadth of participatory arts one size could not fit all and rather than limiting the range of practice by seeking to describe what a good participatory theatre process might look like, the literature surveyed for this review prefers to pose provocative questions that open up thinking about participation. Who are the participants and why are they participating? Is the process entirely voluntary? (Thompson, 2003) What are the barriers to participation and how can they be navigated? (Osterlind, 2008) Who is setting the agenda

for participation? What are the terms of the participatory contract and who set them? (Nicholson, 2005) Are the participants being manipulated into “compliance with a social order” or is the prevailing hegemony being challenged? (Prentki and Preston, 2009, p. 127) What is the extent and depth of participation in the process? Where does the power and decision-making lie?

## **Power**

The notion that engagement in a Participatory TfSC process will result in the empowerment of the individual and the group is problematic and contentious. It smacks of imperialism and relates back to paternalistic notions of transformation discussed earlier: empowerment of whom, by whom? To explore questions of power it will be useful to consider three areas of concern: the relationship between the facilitator and participants; the pedagogic processes employed; and ideas of representation.

The power relationship between the facilitator and the group is one of the most frequently discussed throughout the literature. The language of the *professional* artist and *non-professional* participant is loaded and potentially disempowering. Does the facilitator perceive herself as the “cultural saviour”? (Coutinho in Prentki and Preston, 2009, p. 174) The “help-mate”? (Jackson, 2011, p. 44) Do the participants perceive her as the expert, bringing knowledge to the group? Does the facilitator intervene in the discourse of participants imposing her privileged agenda? (see for instance Snyder Young, 2011) If so, the power relations within the Participatory TfSC process will necessarily replicate those experienced under Neoliberal Economic Globalisation and so reinforce, not challenge, the prevailing hegemony. An editorial to a special Ethics edition of *Research In Drama Education* (2005, p. 121) highlights “the need to exercise continual vigilance about whose values, truths and notions of goodness are represented”. Nicholson (2005, p. 122) argues that the “ethics of intervention” are at the heart of any political claim underpinning the work; and this is encapsulated in the power-relation between facilitator and participant. Needlands (2007, p. 307) suggests that the ethical approach lies in finding

“forms of theatrical and social intervention which aim to establish an ‘ideal reciprocal relationship’ between practitioners and participants through negotiation of representation and working towards equitable norms of mutual recognition”.

If there is to be an equitable balance of power, the unpaid contribution of participants (story, life-expertise, ideas, time, energy) must be valued and respected equally with the financially-rewarded contribution of the facilitator (theatre skills, expertise in shaping a theatre process, outside perspective). Thompson and Schechner's (2004, p. 13) idea that the facilitator must enter into a mutual learning process with the participants, rather than going in with the answers, offers a useful lens through which to view the facilitator's role and the pedagogical frame. When Prentki and Preston (2009, p. 365) suggest the facilitator is responsible to "offer alternatives, to ask questions and to provoke new ways of seeing" then, there should be no implied assumption that the facilitator has solutions, or knows what those new ways of seeing might be. For the shared learning journey, mutual recognition and equitable balance of power to be realised then, an appropriate pedagogy must be found, and much of the literature deals with such questions. Participatory TfSC draws heavily on Freire and other pedagogies that place the learner at the heart of the learning process; that recognise knowledge as being "produced through interaction with others" (Nicholson, 2005, p. 39); and that understand all parties engaged in the process of learning and development are in a "process of becoming" (Freire, 1996, p. 65).

The question of representation, of voice and authorship, is central to considerations of power in Participatory TfSC and is another preoccupation of the literature. The idea of giving voice or creating platforms through which marginalised groups can have their voices heard is a key aspect of Participatory TfSC and considered to be an important step towards empowerment. Telling untold stories is fundamental to the TfSC aesthetic (Kuppers and Robertson, 2007). But even this orthodoxy is contested (see for instance Wilkinson and Kitzinger in Prentki and Preston, 2009, pp. 86 - 93). Common concerns are raised as to who has editorial control over what material is included and excluded; who shapes the devising process and finished product? Whose language do we use to tell the stories, both in terms of spoken word and theatrical form? How and why are specific identities depicted? Should we speak on behalf of others? Jackson (2011, p. 7) asks if the professional input of artistic vision enables or neutralises the community voice. Thompson (2003, p. 31) is concerned that the voice can become a singular construct, silencing others in the process of speaking. He suggests that in certain contexts it might not just be the facilitator that holds the balance of power, but that individual participants, supporting staff, or the context itself can influence, or silence, the voice: giving voice can thus become "an ethically complex problem rather than an easily offered solution" (Thompson, 2003, p. 31).

It is clear that the issue of representation permeates the process, products and power-relations of Participatory TfSC. For O'Neal (in Hammer, 1992, p. 12) it goes beyond the frame of the theatre: he argues that there can be no real empowerment or shift in power relations unless there is "equitable participation on all levels of organization, administration and production of the marginalized and the privileged". This radical agenda has found an unusual, but superficial bedfellow in the social policy of recent years with its push to involve volunteers and participants in decision-making and local services delivery, and to promote a social inclusion agenda.

### **Instrumentalism**

Over the past twenty years practitioners have worked increasingly in ways they consider to be strategic: working in close partnerships with social, community, NGO and government agencies to try and make sure their work has an impact. The impulses are diverse - whether it be engage participants considered the most *difficult to reach*, to have opportunities of influencing policy and provision, or to enable them to access non-arts funding for their work, the unifying factor is a direct connection to current social policy objectives. For many practitioners this has been a positive affirmation: the arts are recognised outside their own exclusive world as having real value and contributing positively to people and society. If theatre is to be used as a tool for change it is widely acknowledged that there must be a strategic component to the work. But is this the right approach? Instrumentalism and the connection to social policy agendas are much debated in the literature and must be problematised (see for instance Jackson, 2011, p. 26).

First it is necessary to unpack the idea of social inclusion - the policy agenda that much TfSC has worked towards for the past two decades - and return to distinctions between liberalism and radicalism with regard to notions of change. The assumption behind social inclusion is that the marginalised within our society should be brought back into the mainstream, but it is a contested concept: leftist critics believe that social inclusion leaves "underlying structural divisions undisturbed" (Lister in Preston, 2011, p. 254), and "works mainly to incorporate the poor and unemployed into the lower regions of the labour force, offering little explanation for the structural causes of their domination" (Cultural Policy Collective, 2004, p. 23). It is at odds with the political essence of TfSC and is antithetical to the idea of empowerment. Often the social inclusion agenda is not revealed to participants and space is not created within the project to explore that central agenda. The values imposed by the funder can lead to

depoliticisation and containment. There is a question then, as to whether work in receipt of social inclusion funding can possibly be radical (Balfour, 2009).

But even if the social policy objective itself were entirely unproblematic, the literature suggests that there are fundamental difficulties inherent in this way of working. The problem of co-option by the partner organisation or setting is widely discussed in relation to Instrumentalism (see for example Cohen-Cruz, 2005, p. 6). Co-option can lead to an uncomfortable balance of power between the arts organisation and funder or social partner, where the language and needs of the funder are much more powerful than the language and values of the art. Art can become entirely instrumental with “aesthetic engagement being eroded in the service of pragmatism” (Balfour, 2009, p. 351).

The impact of arts engagement is often assessed in such cases through the application of scientific measures in the language of the social sciences. While some argue that this results-based accountability is essentially a good thing, removing art from “the doghouse of elitism” and laying the “burden of proof” for the value of art in the hands of the artists (see for instance Frye Burnham in Kushner et al., 2001, p. 65); others believe that the application of scientific measurements reduces art to a set of measurable attributes and can only describe the instrumental not the intrinsic qualities (Belfiore and Bennett, 2008, p. 6). Questions of measurement and evaluation are particularly pertinent in the UK in 2012 when the government is exploring if, and how, the arts can be evaluated by exclusively economic measures (Donovan et al., 2012). There is much debate, but few solutions, as to how TfSC can evaluate its impact in its own language and with its own measures, but in ways that can speak to those outside of its world.

## **Aesthetics**

Considerably less attention is given in the literature to questions of aesthetics than to considerations such as ethics, politics, power, process and community; some argue that aesthetics has been marginalised in the critical debate (see for instance Prentki and Preston, 2009, p. 19). Winston (2006, p. 43) suggests that this is because questions of beauty, which lies at the heart of aesthetics, raise “conceptual and moral difficulties” for those working in the field of social justice. He considers beauty to be expansive and life enhancing though, holding great spiritual

and psychological potential, and therefore worthy of much more discussion within the field. Thompson (2011, p. 115) further explores these ideas, discussing beauty along with joy, fun and pleasure, arguing that “these areas are the vital affective registers of participatory arts that should not be accidental or peripheral but need to be central to the purpose and thinking about the work”. He discusses the idea of beauty in sites of deprivation, and as an alternative to what he calls the “aesthetics of injury” (2011, p. 146). Bharucha (2011, p. 379) introduces the intriguing idea of “perverse beauty”, which he suggests might offer an alternative to the normative notion of beauty presented by Scarry<sup>7</sup>, which he argues is “predominately liberal and emphatically ‘white’”.

It may be that aesthetics warrants less consideration in the literature because it so often warrants less consideration in the practice. In much Participatory TfSC the product, or theatrical performance, is simply the end result of the process, which is considered by far the most important aspect of the work. This can particularly be the case in work driven by social policy objectives where is little budget allocated to realise high quality production values, and often little time to craft a performance once the processual development work has been completed; the art is not the priority. These factors can lead to the perception that community-based performance is “a code-word for bad” (Cohen-Cruz in Leonard and Kilkelly, 2006, p. 16) or to the performance being received with a patronising attitude of praise for the very fact that a group managed to get through it. Critical analysis of Participatory TfSC performance is underdeveloped, both in the literature and within the sector.

The poetics of the process receives more attention, and a wealth of case studies present different models (see for instance Koppers 2007; Prentki and Preston, 2009; Prendergast and Saxton, 2009). These are largely underpinned by a handful of basic dramaturgical or methodological approaches. Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed is arguably the most constant referent, along with the Theatre in Education, Comedia and clowning, Brecht and Bakhtin. But the relationship between the drama process and theatrical presentation is underexplored. Case studies are often given in isolation, with little writing analysing aesthetics and poetics or their connection to efficacy. Critical analysis is required of “the relationships between all aspects of the creative process: the theatre form, its application and its reception” (Prentki and Preston, 2009, p. 19). An important exception to this, and a starting point for new ways of thinking about the aesthetics and poetics of Participatory TfSC, is Thompson’s *Performance*

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<sup>7</sup> Bharucha cites Scarry’s *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); and *On Beauty and Being Just* (London: Duckbacks, 1999)

*Affects* (2011). His ideas about shifting the focus from effect to affect, and his call to revisit the connections and strategic alliances between work within this sector and wider arts practices open up new possibilities for both the aesthetics and political orientation of Participatory Theatre for Social Change.

## **Professional Theatre for Social Change: *An Agitational Injection***<sup>8</sup>

### **Describing the practice**

Collective Encounters' professional programme grows directly out of its engagement with communities, and responds to the research, ideas and concerns uncovered through its participatory work. A team of professional artists is appointed and, usually led by the Artistic Director, explores the material and ideas that have been generated. This sometimes, but not always, involves periods of artists' residencies within the community. While the shape of the development process varies, it is based upon the principle of collective creation. Collective Encounters' professional productions draw on varied theatrical influences and forms, trying to find ways of engaging people who would not usually access theatre. Also to this end, performances are provided free of charge and take place in non-traditional settings. The focus of this strand of the practice is on the creation of professional theatre by professional artists that grows out of and performs back to the communities with which the company works. According to Collective Encounters' *Quality and Evaluation Framework*, a TfSC performance should be exciting, provocative, technically accomplished and important.

The past fifteen years has seen a significant increase in Political Theatre within the UK mainstream, which has been much debated in the sector and the media (see for instance McGrath, et al., 2011). In particular the rise of Documentary Theatre and Verbatim Theatre<sup>9</sup> have been notable developments, and these connect to communities in ways that are unusual the for mainstream. Having moved beyond the Post Modernist problem that since everything is political, nothing is political (Holderness, 1992), and having lost the traditional underpinning leftist narratives with

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<sup>8</sup> McGrath (in McGrath and Holdsworth, 2002, p. 49)

<sup>9</sup> See Glossary

the rise of NEG (Filewod and Watt, 2001), Political Theatre has reoriented itself and become resurgent. But while it might be agreed that this work can “inform, illuminate, entertain [and] raise awareness” (Billington, 2012) can it be TfSC? There is a strong argument throughout the Political Theatre literature that the very context of the mainstream, what Kershaw calls the ‘theatre estate’ (1992), prevents the work from being radical; that radical theatre must challenge both institutions and habits of mind and that it is not possible to do this within a mainstream setting. An interrogation of this question will introduce debates and ethics central to an understanding of what defines and distinguishes Professional TfSC.

### **The Politics of Production**

The first problem is one of co-option, and presents an ironic parallel to the concern within Participatory TfSC that art can be lost in the service of social policy. In this case, however, the concern is that the politics will be lost in the service of art (Kershaw, 1992). It is argued that politically-oriented theatre and artists are “in constant danger of being appropriated in production by the very ideology they set out to oppose... that [the politics of production] can turn opposition into novelty” (McGrath in McGrath and Holdsworth, 2002, p. 113). This connects to wider leftist concerns about the capacity of NEG to absorb, appropriate and thus undermine radical activity. Kershaw (1999) and McGrath (in McGrath and Holdsworth, 2002) both raise concerns that in entering into the mainstream, theatre becomes complicit in the system of production that commodifies culture and embeds normative social values.

The politics of production are further problematised in relation to the creative process. Hancock (2006, p. 281) argues that in the mainstream theatre “basic human truths are heavily guarded [by an] invisible cabal” of writer, director and designer and there is concern that the power balance in single-author production is antithetical to genuinely political work (see for instance Moriarty in Boon and Plastow, 2004). It replicates a hierarchical model of representative democracy and often depends on a single authoritative master narrative. Even when multiple voices are presented or verbatim techniques are employed, they are usually structured, selected and edited by one writer. TfSC (both Participatory and Professional), on the other hand, tends towards what Haedicke and Nellhaus (2004, p. 3) call “more innovative models of script creation”: equitable creative processes. While one artist may lead and shape the process, multiple artists (including performers) collaboratively develop, and thus share a sense of ownership, of the piece.



## Space, Place and Audience

For TfSC, the success of performance is dependent on the resonance of the piece with its audience (Prendergast and Saxton, ed., 2009). As well as seeking relevant subject matter, TfSC actively seeks to break the barriers and forge a dynamic symbiosis between stage and auditorium (see for instance Boal, 1998 & 2008). Political Theatre within the mainstream usually maintains the traditional actor/audience relationship: however moved or engaged the audience member becomes etiquette dictates that she passively receives the performance, showing appreciation in the form of applause at the end of the show. TfSC seeks to disrupt this stage/auditorium dichotomy; to foster *spectactors*<sup>10</sup> (Boal, 2008); to find ways of engaging the audience directly in the action of the theatre; to return to more popular forms of performance that actively encourage rowdy audience engagement (McGrath, 1996).

Professional TfSC seeks to reach audiences who would not ordinarily go to the theatre and so often rejects mainstream theatre houses. Arts Council England's policy *Great Art for Everyone* (2010) was launched in recognition of the fact that the arts in the UK have a very limited reach. Its research showed that, while theatre was comparatively popular in relation to most art forms, "the vast majority of English adults have no encounters with theatre... and those who do attend tend to do so relatively infrequently" (Wing Chan, et al., 2008, p. 7). By far the most popular forms of theatre were commercial musicals and pantomime, with subsidised-theatre audiences rapidly diminishing and reaching a very small demographic: white, middle class, middle aged and older. TfSC seeks to reach beyond this demographic: it is, as Cohen-Cruz said of Grassroots Theatre "about not just the play but the play in its community context" (in Leonard and Kilkelly, 2006, p. 5). While some Professional TfSC remains in one particular community, and other companies tour their work to different communities, it usually plays in non-traditional settings where people can stumble across it; or where local community organisations can galvanise an audience.

The desire to work in alternative spaces, though, is about more than reaching people who would not consider crossing a theatre threshold; it is a wider aesthetic and political choice. Playing in non-traditional sites is about inhabiting the liminal space discussed earlier where art and the everyday collide. Situating the unusual in the frame of the ordinary can lead to new ways of thinking about the world. Exposing the aesthetic

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<sup>10</sup> See Glossary

infrastructure of performance can serve to expose “the social infrastructure that supports human societies” (Jackson, 2011, p. 39). The transformation of space can open up possibilities in sites of dereliction and inactivity. As Thompson and Schechner (2004, p. 13) said, these are sites of multiple performances: not just the actors performing the theatre, but the performances of the everyday going on all around.

### **Aesthetics, Poetics and Ethics**

The content for Professional TfSC and much other Political Theatre grows out of research with communities, and this usually happens in one of two ways: the stories, ideas and material that have been generated provide the stimulus for the artists’ creative response; or, particularly in Documentary and Verbatim Theatre, the actual words and stories are pieced together and used directly in performance (Favorini, 1995). This can be deeply problematic in terms of ethics, with cultural imperialism evident in what Cohen-Cruz (2005, p. 91) calls mining stories:

“artists ship in to so-called fourth world pockets of entrenched poverty within the first world and... mine the raw material, all that experience and all those stories. Then they leave with the natural resources and make their own art out of them”.

Collective Encounters has an *Ethical Research Policy* to try and combat this problem. This is common practice in Canada and Australia where a history of work with indigenous peoples has led to highly-developed ethical practice, and where there is a clear understanding of how precious peoples’ stories are, that in some instances they are all a person or community has. There is an understanding that stories and ideas coming out of research or development process must be treated with respect, and that questions of ownership, consent, withdrawal, honesty and relationship must be addressed ethically (Filewod, 1987). Ethical Research Policies, or formal engagement with the ethics of using peoples’ stories, are much less common in the UK and US outside an academic setting. It is unusual for a mainstream theatre company, for instance, to explain clearly to interviewees how their stories and ideas will be used, or to check back and ensure they are happy with how their story is being situated in relation to other narratives, or that they feel fairly or accurately represented. Max Stafford Clark illustrated this problem when he explained that ethics didn’t enter into the development process of the verbatim piece *A State Affair*, that the sole concern was using the stories and words gathered to make

the best possible piece of art<sup>11</sup>. This prioritising of the aesthetic over ethics would not be acceptable in a TfSC context (Cohen-Cruz, 2005), and offers a clear way to distinguish Political Theatre from TfSC.

A Professional TfSC then, is not simply radical in the content of its drama, but in its politics of production, its engagement with audience and space, and in its aesthetic. Some organisations, like Collective Encounters, are radical in refusing to charge for tickets believing that art should be available to everyone. This, however, raises the issue of subsidy and questions raised within the Political Theatre literature as to whether it is possible for work to be genuinely radical when subsidised (see for instance Barker in Holderness, 1992). This relates to the problems of working within a social policy agenda discussed in relation to Participatory TfSC. But it is not just strategic partners or funders that could limit the radicalism of the work, Cohen-Cruz suggests that audiences themselves can limit theatre's radical potential: that theatre companies who have to charge for tickets "must find a balance between speaking truth... and not alienating people or segmenting their communities" (Cohen Cruz in Leonard and Kilkelly, 2006, p.37).

### **Protest Performance: *affective tool and instructive device***<sup>12</sup>

In 1999 Kershaw (p. 5) argued that "while theatre mostly has become a marginal commodity in the capitalist cultural market place, performance has emerged as central to the production of the new world disorder". He talked about the limits of theatre but limitlessness of performance, drawing attention to the political potential of performance beyond the theatre estate. Kershaw explored the performance of power and protest under NEG, and others have written engagingly on the performance of politics. Schechner (in Reinelt and Roach ed., 2007) for instance, discusses the dramaturgies of the Tiananmen Square protests and the fall of the Berlin Wall, and quotes Rublin, saying that "life is theatre and we are the guerrillas attacking the shrines of authority... the street is the stage" (p. 93). Hughes (2012, p. 125) highlights this as one of three specific relationships between performance and protest: protest that can be analysed as performance. But it is Hughes' other two identified relationships

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<sup>11</sup> In conversation with the author at *Political Futures: Alternative Theatre in Britain Today* conference at the University of Reading, 2004

<sup>12</sup> Shepard (2010, p. 12)

that are of the most interest to this review: theatrical interventions in protest by activists who don't consider themselves artists and the explicitly performative contributions to protest by 'artist activists'. Perhaps there are parallels here to Participatory and Professional TfSC.

### **Why Protest and Performance? *Generative and Negating capacities*<sup>13</sup>**

Hughes (2012, p. 129) offers an interesting way into thinking about the potential of Protest Performance when she describes it as having both generative and negating capacities. It will be helpful to use these categories to review the claims made by the literature.

First to address the generative capacity of Protest Performance. Shepard (2010, p. 1) suggests that there is a long history of social justice campaigns using play<sup>14</sup> and performance to "act out an image of the world in which activists hope to live". Protest Performance then, can generate new possibilities for living and new ways of looking; offer new narratives and imagine new futures (see for instance Cohen-Cruz, 1998). It draws on an agitprop<sup>15</sup> heritage to educate around issues, mobilise specific action and compel people to confront new realities (Shepard, 2010). It connects to Holloway's (2010, p. 22) "scream that points to doing" by drawing attention to the resultant ills of NEG and simultaneously embodying action. It is suggested that Protest Performance can generate powerful symbolic moments and radical creative opposition. Kershaw (1992, p. 128), for instance, discusses its potential to masquerade: "a violent struggle pretending to be a friendly hug". Writers describe the use of large-scale props, outlandish costumes, music, dance, attention-grabbing theatricality. Bogad (2020, p. 139) describes poetic images such as the clown kissing a riot police officer's shield. These highly theatrical images and poetic moments are key to generating media coverage and reaching wider and more diverse audiences (Bogad, 2005; 2010) thus opening up a "gateway to the masses" (Cohen-Cruz, 1998, p. 2).

Performance, it is believed, can generate new creative spaces where a different kind of democratic exchange can take place (see for instance Lane, 2002, pp. 73 - 74). It is a liminal space between protest and performance where, like in other forms of TfSC, the boundaries are transgressed between art and life (Hughes, 2012, p. 124). It is an oppositional, radical, reclaimed space: often activists involved in Protest Performance refuse to

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<sup>13</sup> Hughes (2012, p. 129)

<sup>14</sup> While Shepard uses the term 'play', his definition of play is extensive and incorporates theatrical presentation and creative processes. (2010, p. 13)

<sup>15</sup> See Glossary

apply for permits, considering the fact of the protests' *unpermittedness* a direct challenge to the ownership and control of public spaces (Bogad, 2010, p.540).

Many of the benefits cited by activists and writers as to the personal and social impacts of playful creativity within activism are reminiscent of those attributed to Participatory TfSC. Research with activists, for instance, showed that they believed play could generate positive feelings: joy, energy, pleasure, humour, thought, social Eros, excitement and hope (Shepard, 2010, p. 269). It is thought that the creative process can help to build community and aid group cohesion (Shepard, 2010, p. 1), assert movement identity (Bogad, 2010, p. 537), and aid activists in their attempts to generate new ways of organising, and negotiate power relations (McKay, 1996).

In discussing negating capacities, Hughes (2012, p. 129) describes them as the ability to critically resist and deconstruct. Bogad (2010, p. 542) discusses the ability of Protest Performance to unsettle "the hegemonologue of the corporate media and state rhetoric, which often demonizes... activists as crazed, nihilistic hooligans". This resistance of the master-narrative and presentation of an alternative is discussed across the field (see for instance Cohen-Cruz, 1998) and connects Protest Performance to Professional TfSC. Bogad (2010, p. 537) highlights the capacity of Protest Performance to disrupt corporate business and events, to occupy and disturb public space; in short, to unsettle business-as-usual. Activist performers describe their practices in terms of de-familiarising, resisting and deconstructing the status quo. They create unpredictable, unmediated, unauthorised interventions to disrupt and disturb. These are performances that go beyond satire, that question the demarcations between art and life, that provoke new ways of seeing.

A feature commonly described in the literature is that Protest Performance can be simultaneously generative and negating: "instead of just offering a "no", play helps advocates articulate what they want the world to look like" (Shepard, 2010, p. 277). It is "a celebration of how good life can be, and at the same time a statement against those who spoil it for the majority" (Carnival for Full Enjoyment in Bogad, 2010, p. 540).

Despite the many capacities of Protest Performance described in the literature, its limits are also recognised. While it is a useful tactic, it is argued, it is no substitute for a policy proposal or organisational strategy, and is not a consistently effective response to political oppression; its aesthetic can become quickly stale and can be misunderstood (Shepard, 2010, pp. 244-5). Finally, Bogad (2010, p. 555) draws attention to the fact

that participation in Protest Performance is not entirely egalitarian: “it is more easily faced by those with the resources to be able to face arrest, and the race or class privilege that lessens the risks and penalties for confrontation with the state”. Clearly then, there are practical and ethical questions to be explored in relation to this emergent and dynamic set of practices; but an initial survey of the relevant literature suggests that it should be firmly placed within the framework of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Theatre for Social Change.

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## Glossary

A-effect	Brecht's Alienation Effect or <i>Verfremdungseffekt</i> meaning the effect of distancing or making strange with a view to objectifying the audience from the action
Agit Prop	Short for agitation propaganda this form of Political Theatre was particularly popular in the 1930s and grew out of a communist influence on theatre. It involved the performance of very short sketches, songs and tableaux in streets, factories and other spaces likely to attract an audience of workers, with a view to spread propaganda and make political comment on news stories of the day
Collective Creation	the process by which theatre is created collaboratively by a team of people, rather than produced by a single author. The term is used more commonly in Canada and the US than in the UK, where <i>devising</i> is preferred. Collective Creation, however, is preferred by this study as more descriptive and specific.
Conscientization	a Freire term developed from Marx's Critical Consciousness, meaning the process of developing critical awareness through reflection and turning this into action aimed to bring about change.
Documentary Theatre	theatre that uses pre-existing documentary material to create a script. This might include newspapers articles, reports, interviews, statistics etc.
Facilitator	throughout this review this term refers to a person leading a drama/theatre process with a participant group who has usually been professionally trained as a theatre artist and/or community theatre facilitator
Spectactors	a term developed by Augusto Boal to describe the spectator who becomes the actor through the process of Forum Theatre
Verbatim Theatre	documentary theatre which uses the actual words of the source text, in particular the words people speak in interview

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