Bigger's not better, but it's just as important: making the case for large-scale professional production within the applied theatre sector

Sarah Thornton, CSSD Theatre Applications Conference (April, 2010)

In 2003 the only thing anyone in north Liverpool was talking about was regeneration and how it was affecting local people. As with the slum clearances of the 1960's whole communities were being acted upon, and planners' models looked like first world war battle games that took little account of the real lives being shifted around. Consultation was alluded to, but was tokenistic. There was a 'we know best' attitude and confusion around who was responsible for what… It was a mess.

At the time, I was a lecturer at Liverpool Hope University aiming to develop my practice-as-research profile. As our campus was based in north Liverpool, it seemed a good place to start. I met with 40 north Liverpool community leaders and quickly found a focus. There was a desperation to have their voices heard by the people regenerating their communities, and a repeated sentiment that nothing else had worked so why not give theatre a chance. The hook for these community leaders was to create a big, exciting piece of work that would reflect and validate the experiences of local people, and cause a sufficiently big splash to be noticed by the people making the decisions. Alongside this, the R&D demonstrated that there was a dearth of arts provision in the area: north Liverpool was incredibly disadvantaged and had been neglected for decades not only by public and private sector agencies, but also by Liverpool's arts organisations. There was very little for young people to do, high levels of anti-social behaviour; a real sense of community fragmentation and wide-spread dissatisfaction; to add to the undisputable material problems. They were fed up with public and private agencies putting a spin on things, telling them to be positive, that things would change for the better; when those

agencies were refusing to admit how bad the problems were and just what a state the area had been allowed to get into. They felt that the first stage must be for the regeneration agencies to listen openly to people's real experiences. The result of this R&D was that I established Collective Encounters (borrowing the name from Alan Filewod's excellent book about documentary and community theatre in Canada); and developed Living Place Project as the company's first intiaitve.

Initially it was just me using one day a week's research time from Hope and another day a week funded by the Arts Council. Over the next two years Collective Encounters raised £150,000 to fund the project; employed 54 arts professionals, involved 60 degree students and engaged more than 500 local people in a creative research process. We undertook desk research into regeneration and met with senior staff from all the agencies responsible for the regeneration of the city. We ran two accredited participatory courses for local people, which enabled them to create their own work about the impact regeneration was having on them. We created an interactive piece of TIE for and with Keystage 2 children, and co-hosted an international conference on theatre for social change with Liverpool Hope. But the centrepiece of the project, as promised to those 40 community leaders, was a large-scale performance which articulated our research.

The Harmony Suite animated a derelict street in Anfield in the heart of north Liverpool and under the eaves of the football ground. We 'untinned' several of the houses, brought the audience into a bank of seating at one end and filled the street with song, music, light, multimedia and live action. We had a central narrative, which told the story of Lilly, an elderly lady who, like so many of the older women we had met, had been a very active member her community and was deeply concerned that there was no one coming up to

take her place; she was worried about the despondency and lack of engagement of her children and grand children's generations. Lilly had been served with a compulsory purchase order and was in her last week of residence in the street. She'd decided to throw a street party to mark the occasion and in a final bid to encourage her younger friends and relatives to get involved in shaping their own futures. A researcher character, representing us, was invited to the party and through his story we were able to weave a more abstract narrative through the piece. This facilitated a big 'show-stopper' number highlighting the inadequacies of neoliberalism in tackling inequality generally, and the decimation of north Liverpool in particular; a Kafkaesque journey of confusion through layers of bureaucracy and mis-information; verbatim sequences. the use of direct footage and other documentary techniques. The piece recognised the massive challenge of trying to 'regenerate' an area that has suffered decades of neglect and lost half of its population. But, most importantly, it gave voice to the feelings, experiences and needs of that community. And we got that right: the bulk of the audiences for The Harmony Suite were local people, and feedback was incredibly positive. They were relieved and proud to have their voices heard in that way. And senior officials did attend – we'd involved them through the research, and the process, and they did come to see the piece.

Living Place Project demonstrated a real need for on-going provision in north Liverpool, and we subsequently secured funding to become a full-time company. I left Hope to take up a permanent Artistic Director role and we've continued to make work with and for marginalised communities ever since. At the heart of Collective Encounters' work is the aim to produce new work for new audiences in new spaces, which tackles pressing social and political concerns. Since The Harmony Suite, we have toured professional productions, and shows with integrated casts of professionals and non-professionals in many, diverse community settings in north Liverpool; but the bulk of our work has been

participatory programmes which enable local people to develop new skills, explore ideas and make work about the things that matter to them. This work is usually accredited and supported by a team of professional artists. It has mostly played locally within their communities to their peers and service providers; and has on occasion found a wider national stage. We've delivered intergenerational and intercultural projects and delivered many outreach initiates. We've always aimed to maintain on-going provision and avoid parachute projects; so we run a permanent free youth theatre and on-going opportunities for people of the third age. Over the past couple of years there have been many changes in north Liverpool: not least that the city's 8 largest arts organisations have begun to develop a concerted programme of work in the area. With this increased activity, in the short term at least, there is less need for us to deliver generic programmes and so, although we remain based in north Liverpool and maintain those contacts and connections, we have extended our reach to work with other marginalised groups that no-one else is touching. In particular we've been working with Liverpool's homeless community.

Across the road from our office is the Whitechapel Centre, one of Liverpool's longest established support centres for homeless people. I'd had contact with them through Hope when Cardboard Citizens had come up to do a project some years previously, and was aware that there were currently no arts projects working with Liverpool's homeless community. We embarked on an R&D process through which we undertook desk research and met with service providers locally; we undertook creative research and practical workshops with over 90 people, and led a 10 session programme with a core group which led to a sharing of work. We asked people across the board to think about how theatre might be used as an effective tool for social change within this context. Again, it was recognised that participatory programmes which could empower and upskill

people, grow confidence, offer positive, creative activities, and do all the other things that we know high quality applied theatre can do, would be very welcome and were currently severely lacking. So we worked with the 'meaningful activities' coordinator at the Whitechapel Centre to develop a longer-term programme of work. But, the over-riding ambition, articulated again and again by homeless people themselves, was that they wanted their stories heard by the general public; they wanted people to know that they weren't 'scum'; they wanted people to look at them and think about them differently.

So we created a professional opera which was performed in an empty shop in Liverpool's St John's Shopping Centre last Christmas. Songs for Silenced Voices was a ten-minute tragic opera: a scratch piece intended to grab people's attention and offer a short sharp shock. It introduced the audience to two characters who, again, were composites of our research. An immutable ex-military man, returned from the horrors of war, unable to adjust and wracked with conflict. A toughened every-woman who had left home after years of abuse. Their brief moment of human contact came too late, and the play charted the man's dying moments.

As with The Harmony Suite, it was created and performed by professionals in response to the grass-roots research we'd gathered. As with Living Place Project, all the research was gathered, processed and re-told in line with our Ethical Research Policy. And as with Harmony Suite, it reached about 500 people, most of whom don't usually go to the theatre. Songs for Silenced Voices was very well received by the homeless community Feedback from audiences said that indeed it had made them think differently about homelessness; and people were visibly moved and engaged in the piece. We're currently seeking ways, through fundraising and collaboration, to develop this into a full-scale opera production.

A key feature underpinning both these productions and linking them with the third and final piece I'm going to discuss in this paper, is that they have animated unusual urban spaces; and the final piece I'd like to introduce to you is Smoke and Mirrors, which animated a disused mill in the north Liverpool docklands.

Smoke and Mirrors whisked audiences back in time a hundred years, and used music-hall forms and historical parallels to explore issues of disengagement, disenfranchisement and voter apathy. Four years of research in north Liverpool had illustrated that while there were some very active, strong local community members; the bigger picture was one of apathy, discontent and dissatisfaction. People have become embroiled in the neo-liberal deception that this is how the world is and there's nothing we can do about it; and the area has on several occasions had the worst voter turn out in the country. Unlike the other two pieces, it didn't use stories from the community, or aim to articulate a community voice. It drew together a team of professional artists in a process of collective creation and offered a response. It set out to challenge apathy and provide a battle cry for people to stand up and be counted, to get the city that they want. We created the character of Leticia, a young woman who was a metaphor for Liverpool, charting her and it's rise to glory, subsequent decline and leaving her poised on the edge of taking control, becoming politicised and pro-active. Her narrative was interwoven between songs, sketches and random music-hall acts which poked fun at our systems and used comedy to highlight inequality and injustice. It was a feel-good, sugar coated critique of corruption, inequality and abdication of responsibility.

While I recognise the value of most of the work we've done since the early stages of Living Place Project, these three shows are the most important to me, personally. Yet, they're

the pieces I find myself most often having to justify, and they've been the most difficult aspects of our work to fund. Everyone recognises the value (and cost effectiveness) of one or two professional artists working with a group of local people. It's easy to see the benefits of non-professionals performing their own stories and ideas to peers or service providers. Clearly, the long-term 'transformative potential' of theatre is likely to be greater on an individual who has been involved in a lengthy process than that on an individual who has simply seen a show. I don't dispute the value of or need for participatory applied theatre, or for small-scale shows that tour community centres and schools. We do all that. But I do question programmes of work where that is all there is.

My impulse to create large-scale professional pieces, performed in unusual spaces has been there since I first established Collective Encounters. Partly it's personal taste: I love big, exciting events; I love the magic and trappings of theatre; partly its my own nature: I may start with a small idea, but it invariably seems to snowball into something a little over-ambitious. But I would like to think that mostly, it's because I believe that the nature of this work is really important in the applied theatre field, that we should be doing more of it, and that it's value is not sufficiently recognised.

People often don't get it. It's not that I'm adverse to criticism: clearly the work's not perfect. With another ten grand or another week's rehearsal, with better weather, less health and safety problems, the benefit of hindsight, or if I was just a better director, all the shows would have been improved. I'd love to have another shot at all of them, and I've learned loads through doing them and receiving constructive feedback from peers. It's not criticism that's the problem. It's peers and funders not getting the driving reasons behind

the work. And maybe I'm only just now becoming ready to communicate these ideas a little more clearly.

So here are the main challenges, questions and criticisms that have been levelled against this aspect of our work by peers in the applied arts, theatre or community sectors; and by from some of our funders.

I do want to make unashamedly BIG shows. Shows that can take the local, private, personal issues experienced by many people living on the margins of our society to a bigger, more public stage. Shows that shout out on behalf of those hidden voices; that are a loud, public mouthpiece for our wider but more intimate programme. I've wanted to create BIG shows that, because of their scale, quality, innovative approach and performance location, attract both local people who would not usually go to the theatre, and those who make policy and decisions in relation to the issues we're addressing; work on a scale that's difficult to ignore. And BIG because it's exciting! We're competing with computer generated movies and all the smoke and mirrors that TV and film can offer, theatre is not something most people are used to; we try through our work to point up the uniqueness and excitement of live performance. And finally, BIG because I believe that when we transform disused spaces we offer hope in dark places. If (with a bit of money, some creative thinking and sheer bloody-mindedness) we can transform a derelict street or an abandoned mill into a place of beauty and magic, then what couldn't a united community with a clear sense of purpose and urgency do? While I accept the argument that 'transformation' can be a loaded and difficult term, for me it's about challenging the neo-liberal hegemony that things can't change. Things can change, and we're showing that explicitly.

But despite this transformation of strange spaces, the work doesn't sit comfortably in the site-specific category. I don't know if it fits the site-sensitive label any better. It doesn't grow out of and respond to a particular site; the site is not the thing that defines it. It's just an appropriate performance space for a particular piece or work, and that then uses the site as well as is possible and practicable. For The Harmony Suite, the choice of site was obvious: most of the people we interviewed lived in part-derelict streets or next to fully tinned up blocks. They were depressed by the look of the place, saddened by walking home every night past empty houses, graffiti and dereliction. We wanted to breathe a little beauty and magic there. For Smoke and Mirrors, we wanted somewhere hidden away, down sneaky back lanes in the dingier part of the area where the early music halls used to be. Somewhere that you'd see the outside and have one set of expectations then go inside and be utterly amazed and transported by the magical transformation. It was joyful. For the opera, we wanted somewhere with a passing footfall, that was safe for people to stop, and that would point up the difference between the lives of the audience (mostly at that point doing their Christmas shopping) and the lives of those we could all so easily become. Somewhere that, given half a chance, a homeless person would set up camp. And somewhere that would surprise passers by. So, the site hosts the work and is temporarily transformed into a playing space.

Yes, I recognise there are issues around beautifying derelict spaces. Are we contributing to the 'cover-up' agenda? I don't think anyone who saw Harmony Suite or Smoke and Mirrors, and who had to travel through the reality of north Liverpool to get to the sites would think so. I think it's more like pointing up the lights hiding under the bushel; the possibility inherent in even the most unlovely places. With Songs for Silenced Voices it

was less clear cut: we were capitalizing on the Arts Council/government agenda to bring art into empty shops and animate dying public spaces. And the St John's is one of those grim, 1960's shopping centres that, along with the rest of the city centre has suffered massively since the development of the new Liverpool One shopping mecca down the road. I don't know if that's a problem, but it didn't feel like it. It felt like a great opportunity to take opera to a group of people who don't usually access it, and to reach one of the key audiences our homeless participants had asked us to reach.

. Yes, it might be cheaper and easier to do it in a theatre: we wouldn't have shows rained off, wind blowing screens down, dust affecting actors voices, and a myriad of health and safety nightmares, but for me it would miss the whole point. Harmony Suite and Songs for Silenced Voices were particularly successful at bringing in new audiences: the get-in to the street took a week, during which time many local people stopped by to find out what was going on or watch a bit of rehearsal – our presence on their doorsteps brought them to the show. The opera stopped shoppers in their tracks, and because it was so short they stayed to watch. Yes, Smoke and Mirrors re-created a traditional pros arch stage in the mill and could quite easily be staged in a theatre space; but very few of our audiences are 'traditional theatre goers'. They came along because it was something a bit different, in their area – they wouldn't have come to a theatre in town to see it. And the whole idea is to stage the work which has grown out of the north Liverpool community, in that community, with a backdrop of the community itself. In the whole of 2008, Liverpool's year as Capital of Culture, only one professional show, funded by Liverpool's Culture Company was staged outside of the city centre.

And, yes it is expensive. Smoke and Mirrors and Harmony Suite cost around £100 thousand each. And we don't charge for tickets, so the onus is on us to raise the money

to fund it. Maybe we should do community plays and save paying actors, musicians etc. Well we do that as well, but for these shows the professional status matters. These shows are well resourced and produced by experienced, exciting, risk-taking professional artists. I believe that all our shows are of a very high artistic quality, but have of a *different* quality to our participatory shows. I believe that we have a responsibility to make absolutely the best work we can with the material that people have so generously given. The people we gather our stories from have too often been let down and given second or third best; they deserve high quality professional theatre as well as high quality non-professional theatre. And, the professional status of the work does sometimes help us to reach decision makers in ways that our community-based work doesn't. I was delighted recently to discover that one of my favourite influences grappled with this same problem. In the early part of the last century Piscator went against the will of the party faithful to produce what he called 'Revolutionary Professional Theatre' when 'right-minded' theatre makers were supporting 'Proletarian Amateur Plays'. He argued that these: "two types of theatre [were] fighting on different sectors of the cultural front and they consequently face different tasks". I'd argue that the same is true today. The community play/participatory piece/'proletarian amateur play', call it what you will, empowers local people, enables them to tell their own stories in their own words, supports a plurality of voices, democratizes culture, and can excite, entertain and stimulate debate. The professional piece, in my opinion, can raise the stakes. Not always, and not necessarily, but it can.

This sometime conflict between work in which people tell their own stories and that in which the stories are told by 'others' brings me to the final challenge I'll take on today. Can making work 'about' a community ever be right? Well yes, I believe it can. I think it has to be done carefully, I don't think its enough to have 'good intentions', and I've seen it done in ways that make me very uncomfortable; but for our work I've tried to ensure that

the processes we have in place are as ethically sound as possible. We have a pretty thorough Ethical Research Policy, which guides all aspects of how we gather and use research; and how we involve the community in the development process. And as to one voice speaking on behalf of many, while we have employed writers and dramaturgs, and I've certainly 'directed' the devised pieces, we use collaborative, democratic processes of creation that enable all those involved to have a creative role in the development of the piece. It's a multi-artist response to the many voices and stories captured through our research.

So, in short, I do want to make large-scale, professional theatre that tells the stories of those who are not often listened to, or that challenges its audience to think in different ways; work that transforms unusual spaces, breathing magic and beauty into unloved places; and no I won't charge our audiences for tickets when so many of them are living in poverty, and when I agree with Bread and Puppet, that theatre is food for the soul.

I'm very proud (and a little awed) to have had a piece included in Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston's recent, excellent, Applied Theatre Reader. I think it's a fabulous summation of where the sector's at right now, and what's driven it there. In it there's a piece by James Thompson, possibly the most quoted person at this conference, in which he argues that it's not always enough to keep the work within the community, functioning at an intimate and personal level. That in some instances, in order to have a greater political or strategic impact it must reach above the parapets of localism. That's what I believe this aspect of Collective Encounters' work does, and I hope will keep on in many and diverse ways.