

Can the arts change things and should they try?



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

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In this paper Sarah problematises the ideas of change and transformation, asking not only if the arts do have the power to bring about transformation, but should they seek to? Is there an imperialistic agenda at play? What are the ethics?

Problematising the notion of change

The Transformation Principle

Claims for the transformative power of the arts are common, yet complex and contested. They have been made consistently throughout history, and are currently made by arts organisations across the world. Great, but usually unsubstantiated, claims that “the arts can change and improve lives” (Henry in Arts Council England, 2010). Claims that are, as Belfiore and Bennett (2008, p. 4) note, the “product of widely and deeply held convictions”. Many working in participatory arts describe experiences of witnessing personal transformations, and these are often important both in motivating artists and securing funding. But critics call these anecdotes “hero narratives” (Needlands in Balfour, 2009, p. 353) and worry that while such stories and case studies may illustrate impact, they do not offer an appropriate language to articulate or theorise it (Thompson 2003, p. 32).

Much of the literature considered in this review recognises the transformation claim as central to TfSC and accepts this potential to some degree. To this end it is argued that theatre enables us to explore meaning and truth: that the nature of the shared space and the emotional and intellectual engagement of the audience make concepts real and ideologies immediate (Kelleher, 2009). Through its use of metaphor, narrative, embodiment and symbolism it is suggested that theatre can enable us to “say the unsayable” and challenge both performers and audiences emotionally, socially and politically (Prentki and Selman, 2003, p. 101). It can challenge perceptions and make strange the status quo, reminding us that our world and its systems are not natural, but manufactured and alterable constructs (Holderness, 1992). Theatre is considered to be a positive shared experience: the collective encounter thought valuable in this time of fragmentation and isolation (Kershaw, 1992). Theatre performance enables private individuals to consider the public: exposing the non-autonomy of people and their interdependence in the world (Jackson, 2011). In terms of participating in an arts experience, Matarasso (1997, p. 11) lists 50 personal and social benefits, all related to transformations; and many of the case studies outlined in the literature reviewed for this study support his ideas (see for instance Kupperts, 2007 a).

The connection between these capacities and the four prerequisites for change discussed earlier is clear. If these claims are accurate, evidently theatre can help to de-familiarise the status quo, to create a space for thinking and imagining alternatives, to engage people as citizens

rather than consumers, and to create new dissenting narratives. But the literature also problematises these claims both in relation to scale and context. It aims to separate advocacy and analysis.

Many of the writers dispute the assumption that these transformative potentialities are inherent, and suggest instead that they are context specific (see for instance Prentki and Preston, 2009, p. 303 - 306). That given certain conditions and circumstances (which will be explored in Part Three) some transformations may be possible; but that there are ethical considerations to be made, and that the scale of transformation claims should be more measured. There are calls for less grandiose claims: Balfour (2009), for instance, proposes a “theatre of little changes”; and Thompson (2011, p. 34-38) discusses “actions possible for the weak”. Concerns are raised that making such great claims for the power of the arts can result in them being used as a sticking plaster to fix all problems (see for instance Jackson, 2011, p. 27). This can lead to co-option by funding agencies who then “commission transformation” (Balfour, 2009, p. 347). These ideas all connect to concerns about methods of measurement, and the literature tackles the controversial questions of proof and evidencing impact (see for instance Research in Drama Education, 2006). These inter-related issues will be explored through the lens of Instrumentalism in Participatory TfSC.

Some of the literature disputes any potential of the arts to effect change, entirely rejecting causal logic and the “great paradigm of the efficacy of art” (Ranci re 2010, pp. 135 – 137). Kelleher (2009, p. 57), for instance, believes “theatre’s instrumentalism, its use as a means of guiding our actions and changing the world, does not work – never did, never will”. While arguing passionately in favour of the power of theatre, McGrath (in McGrath and Holdsworth 2002, p. 223) agrees that “theatre alone cannot achieve any social change. At best it can voice the demands of forces already in motion, or strongly desired”. Much of the literature discusses the necessity of strategic work to underpin the theatre if it is to achieve socio-political impact (see for instance Bharucha, 2011, p. 374). This connects to a broader recognition that theatre in itself does not cause change, but that if the conditions are right, theatre can provoke people to cause change.

The Ethics of Change

The central ethical dilemmas raised in the literature to do with change relate largely to ideas of imperialism and liberalism. Much of it recognises an inherently paternalistic connotation in the idea of transformation and highlights imperialism as a common cause for concern (see for instance Nicholson, 2009, pp. 28 - 29). The romantic idea of saving or rescuing with the artist-as-cultural-saviour is deeply problematic; the mystical, almost magical language is considered disempowering and exclusive (Prentki and Preston, 2009, p. 304). Alarm bells ring when Taylor (2003, pp. 54-55) highlights “transforming” participants as a key role of the “teaching artist”. His description of the field is reminiscent of the earliest community theatre literature and debates from the 1970s and 1980s regarding cultural imperialism: the artist parachuting into disadvantaged communities to improve the lives of the poor. This imperialistic, liberal agenda is directly connected to NEG as discussed earlier. Nicholson (2005, pp. 155 - 166) aims to unpick these ideas and offers more careful thinking around the role of the facilitator when she uses the metaphor of “the gift” - a positive offering which often brings pleasure - but with intrinsically egotistical connotations and content problematically pre-determined by the giver. Nicholson, like others, reminds the facilitator to be cognisant of and vigilant against the imperialistic impulse. This body of literature invites a consideration of the questions: whose change, to what, by whom and why? Since this imperialistic impulse replicates the power structures and prevailing hegemony in our society, work carried on under these conditions will, it is suggested, reinforce rather than challenge the status quo. It opens up questions of power and relationship which permeate thinking about TfSC.

The other central ethical concern to trouble the change agenda is liberalism. A substantial body of TfSC practice draws on what Prentki (2012, p. 2) calls a “deficit model” which inherently positions participants as lacking something or having a problem that TfSC can fix. This practice “trains citizens to seek individual solutions to systemic problems” (Jackson, 2011, p. 27). It runs the risk of blaming the individual for the situation they are in, and assumes that by making a change in their own behaviour or feelings they can significantly alter their experience of poverty, marginality or disadvantage. Leftist thinkers contest that not only is this inaccurate but it carries the inherent assumption that if the individual does not make the required change she must deserve the situation in which she finds herself. Preston (2011, p.262) suggests that this attitude legitimises inequality and maintains the status quo. Essentially it connects to the NEG agenda discussed earlier which positions the blame

for poverty and inequality on individuals rather than the system itself. If TfSC is based purely on a principle of personal transformation then, it conforms to NEG's individualistic liberal agenda. Cohen-Cruz (2005, p. 91) distinguishes between the liberal and the radical artist, suggesting that liberal artists work with communities to try to improve an individual's own life chances and perhaps try to improve aspects of the system. The radical practitioner, on the other hand, understands the wider and deeper political context of the work and seeks ways of working with communities to challenge and change the systems that govern us.

These ideas connect to current UK government thinking highlighted earlier about welfare reform, and concerns within the charitable sector about the demonisation of the poor. In this climate it is important for arts organisations with a commitment to change to be clear about the implications of their alliances.

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