Taking Part: art, culture and civil society
Goldsmiths, October 2010

Sarah Thornton
Collective Encounters: Moving from the Personal to the Political

In 1936 Theatre Union, an inspirational group of creative radicals, wrote in their manifesto: "Theatre must face up to the problems of its time; it cannot ignore the poverty and suffering which increases everyday. It cannot with sincerity close its eyes to the disasters of its time." Of course many commentators have drawn parallels between our current global financial crisis and the great depression of the 1930's: in fact, according to the IMF we are now more unequal in the UK than at any time since the '30s with the top 10% of earners receiving 40% of all UK's income. I'm Artistic Director with Collective Encounters and much of our work takes place in north Liverpool. Communities in that area have up to 36% illiteracy. Up to 87% of children are officially living in poverty. Many of the north Liverpool communities are in the worst 10% in the country for educational disadvantage and poor health. And that's before the impact of the cuts kicks in. Liverpool's expected to loose at least £180 million over the next four years and some 16,000 jobs. We do a lot of work with the homeless community, and given the rate of house repossessions and the fact that there are already 23,000 people on the city's waiting list for social housing, their numbers are expected to swell considerably. So I'm with Theatre Union, "we can't ignore the poverty and suffering which increases every day". But how do we respond?

One way is by making work that can't be ignored, either because of its scale, nature or performance context.

For example, we transformed a derelict street into a performance space: untinning the empty houses, bridging the audience into the street, and articulating the experience of those living through painful change: their houses were being demolished and they were being forced to relocate and they their voices weren't being heard by decision makers. City council officials and housing agencies came to see the show because we'd engaged them in the research process, and because it was too big and unusual to be ignored; so they heard the voices of the community through the performance.

We created an opera about homelessness that played in a shopping centre in the run up to Christmas, stopping 500 shoppers in their tracks and, according to audience feedback, changing the way that 73% of them felt about homeless people: precisely the aspiration we'd had.

We've made work about older peoples' negative experiences of the health service and performed it to health care professionals in training and conference settings.

We've made work about the crisis of democracy and performed it to communities with the lowest voter turn out in the country.

We've made work about young peoples' experience of living in impoverished communities with no facilities, and performed it to tenants associations and neighbourhood management teams.

The work rings true because, whether performed by professional actors or by local participants, it always grows out of extensive creative research with the communities we're working with, and tells the stories that people have asked us to tell. Whether we use music hall, opera, documentary theatre, forum or puppetry it's always about using the magic of live performance to excite, entertain and stimulate debate: using theatre to respond to the problems of our time.

But, as an organisation that has as its raison d'être 'theatre for social change', is this raising awareness and telling hidden stories enough? We've reached 11,000 audience members since 2005, which for an organisation as small as ours isn't bad going, but in the scheme of things it's tiny!

So how else should we be responding? How else using theatre as a tool for change?

The obvious answer is through programmes of work that offer opportunities for engagement and empowerment. We do that. We run a diverse range of short, medium and long-term programmes with marginalised and disadvantaged communities. We believe absolutely in the intrinsic value of cultural entitlement and in the transformative power of the arts. We use theatre to enable participants to explore the issues and ideas that matter to them and to create their own work which tells their stories to the people they want to speak to. Often these are accredited, so participants can achieve nationally recognised qualifications. They always offer the opportunity for people to work with professional artists and make high quality products. We recently commissioned an independent research study into the impact of our work over our first five years. The final report stated that: we'd contributed to social cohesion, enabled people to widen their horizons, developed skills, improved life chances, facilitated empowerment and inspired people to become more pro-active in their communities and their lives. The majority of participants and ex-participants consulted felt that their self confidence, sense of self worth, and sense of who they are had significantly increased. They had met people they would never normally have spoken to and broken social and 'tribal' barriers based on district, clothing, appearance or age. Some people had become more active in their school or community and in some cases they had taken up someone else's cause because of the contacts made through working with us.

I am of course extremely proud of these achievements. For communities where inequality is so high; disaffection and disenfranchisement so widespread; empowerment is the first step to change. Many, many of the people we work with don't believe they have a voice or that they can make a

difference. They've bought the neo-liberal myth that this is how it is and there's nothing we can do to change it. So yes, I think this work is vital. But I have an ideological dilemma.

Under New Labour culture became a tool of government policy intended to promote and increase social inclusion; according to DCMS, to help people confront "social and economic challenges"; and to bring people from the margins into the mainstream. But for those of us who want to see real change there is a fundamental problem with this approach: social inclusion, as argued by the Cultural Policy Collective, "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"; it demonises marginality and, whilst officially celebrating diversity and difference, seeks homogeneity. So applied theatre practice, when delivered in support of a social inclusion agenda, can reinforce the status quo, rather than seek to challenge it. It becomes implicit in the neo-liberal myth that 'this is how the world is' and that we must adapt our selves to fit the world, rather than adapt our systems to fit us. As bell hooks says, "…speak, tell me your story. Only do not speak in a voice of resistance. Only speak from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, an unfilled longing. Only speak your pain."

So while we must celebrate the increased confidence, improved skills base, enhanced health of participants; and must welcome the broken barriers and healed tensions that the work can stimulate within communities; we must also recognise that these transformations are not affecting fundamental change in our society. Rather, they are enabling our more oppressed and disempowered citizens to cope more effectively within the current systems. Acting, in fact, as a sticking plaster on the wound. I agree with Tim Prentki that applied theatre can actually reinforce inequality by working almost exclusively with "the victims of the way the world is run rather than with those who run the world". While I'm delighted that the Arts Council's vision is 'great art for everyone'; it is undoubtedly the case that the benefits of art have become polarised predominately along class or social lines with intrinsic values largely expected for the middle classes and instrumental benefits for the disadvantaged. While the work may lead to important personal transformations these programmes alone will not effect political change. In James Thompson's words, such interventions can only ever be tactical; they cannot be lasting and strategic.

So what can we do? We know that unbridled greed and rampant inequality are wrong; that unlimited growth is unsustainable on a finite planet; we live in the foreshadow of peak oil; but we're whipped up into a state of fear, disempowered by the scale of the world's problems, then sedated with reality TV and cheap food. There's a great piece of graffiti in a Liverpool loo at the moment that reads: "Opium of the people: pint of lager and Sky Sports." We don't know what the Big Society means yet, but we know that (according to the IFS) the coalition's cuts will hit the poorest worst. In many ways it's a dark time. But perhaps that's why it's also a time of great hope.

Perhaps we've finally reached a point at which people will begin to question more openly and vocally our existing social and political structures and perhaps theatre can help that process, both through making work that provokes new thinking and important debate; and through providing processes that enable people to empower themselves and become more engaged and proactive. The kinds of work I've already discussed.

But perhaps there is one further step that we can take that can help us move from tactical to strategic change. Given that change has to come – local authorities and other public services are going to have to change to cope with the cuts; and they'll have to change radically. Given that, maybe now's the time to harness the creativity of communities to inform those changes.

Over the next five years Collective Encounters is embarking on a programme of work we're calling From the personal to the political. It builds on the work we've already started where we've been building strategic partnerships with public, private and voluntary sector providers. Where we've been finding opportunities for our participants to speak directly to those who make decisions around services. We hope to extend this to engaging policy makers in creative programmes; and to working more closely with the City Council on it's community engagement strategy and delivery. We hope to use the partnerships we've been forging to enable our participants to influence not only local, but also national policy helping them to be heard as the experts they are in their own lives and circumstances. We'll be researching international models of best practice: looking at where theatre, and the arts more widely, have really had a political impact and been used to bring about lasting, strategic change, and then trying out ideas taken from this research in Liverpool to see what works in a UK context.

So in response to Theatre Union, we'll open our eyes wide to the disasters of our time; shout out about the poverty and suffering which increases every day; and use our art not only to comment and question, but also to bring about change.