

Vive la theatre! A valuable weapon in the armoury of change

Sarah Thornton

Theatre for Social Change: a 21st Century view

In 1936 a group of radical theatre makers wrote in their manifesto “Theatre must face up to the problems of its time; it cannot ignore the poverty and suffering which increases every day. It cannot with sincerity, close its eyes to the disasters of its time.”¹ This is as true now as then. During its long history, theatre has been central to the workings of democracy; offered a safe way of talking back to power; provided a space to challenge received wisdom; and told stories that represent the breadth and depth of our communities. Today theatre buildings are either the preserve of the elite or palaces of distraction. They reinforce not resist the status quo. While some valiant attempts have been made to create political theatre that “faces up” to contemporary problems it is impossible for the work to be radical when developed and presented within the structures and strictures of the theatre estate. But while *theatres* are breathing their last, the *art of theatre* is alive and kicking.

Across the world theatre is being used as a tactical intervention in the battle against neoliberal economic globalization. It is a valuable weapon in the armory of change.

Theatre is used in communities of the voiceless to build confidence, capacity and clout. Theatre workshops can create space for participants to explore and share ideas in a depth beyond the soundbite. They can create the conditions for dreaming, imagining, planning; and provide a rehearsal for change. Connected to Freirean education, community development and self-empowerment principles theatre can be a process of conscientization: enabling us to reflect on where we’re at, why we’re here, what we want to change and what action we can take change our immediate circumstances. The creative process is collaborative and often embodies the ideals of participatory democracy. The performances that emerge resonate deep into the communities where they are created and performed. And they can speak outside those communities, giving voice to stories and experiences ignored by the media, offering valuable new perspectives and an alternative to the regurgitated corporate mythology pedaled through mass production.

Theatre is used by radical artists in non-traditional spaces both as a metaphor for change and to challenge, provoke and engage. When a theatre company, for instance, transforms a derelict street into a place of magic and beauty not only does that breath new life, but it offers hope, it says ‘look what we can do: if a few artists can do this for a week, what could a whole community do

¹ Theatre Union Manifesto (1936) in Goorney and MacColl eds, 1986 *Agit Prop to Theatre Workshop*, Manchester: Manchester University Press p. ix

together?' Artists create smaller interventions, making theatre pop up in places where people will stumble across it: in pubs, community centres, parks, building sites, beaches... In these unexpected places theatre can jolt people out of routine. When the extraordinary happens within the frame of the ordinary, new ways of thinking become possible, new ways of seeing emerge.

And the trappings of theatre have been adopted by activists. Whether to draw media attention at an occupation or subvert elections and events, the language of theatre and the tools of its trade are useful: the strong images, visceral metaphors, larger-than-life props and costumes, and the opportunity for both empathy and distancing.

So theatre in all these contexts is a powerful tool of opposition: to challenge hegemony and foster new ways of thinking; to enable those on the margins to reclaim the place of resistance; to cultivate new models of participatory democracy; to offer fun, laughter and entertainment that is not aimed to keep us in our place but to stimulate and provoke.

Collective Encounters: Theatre for Social Change

Collective Encounters is a professional arts organisation specialising in Theatre for Social Change. We make live performance that aims to tell the hidden stories of our time and give voice to those who are seldom heard. Our Manifesto states: we believe that the arts are vital to a healthy, thriving society; that great art has been at the heart of all great civilizations; and that all people should have the right and the opportunity to engage with high quality art that helps them make sense of their world. We believe that our world is undergoing huge changes, and that we face unprecedented environmental, economic and socio-political challenges. We believe that in these difficult times, the arts are more important than ever: they can help us to question our ways of life and the systems that govern us; help us to feel better about ourselves and our communities; and help us to recognise ourselves as agents of change.

Our work aims to excite, entertain and stimulate debate. We perform in unusual spaces: transforming a derelict street or an abandoned mill; taking theatre to places it rarely reaches: empty shops, parks, social clubs, community centres, and exclusion units. We seek out places that people can stumble across our work. On average 74% of our audiences either rarely or never go to the theatre. We find alternative platforms, like conferences, stakeholder days, and training initiatives, to ensure that the voices of those who have informed our work are heard by those who can make a difference.

Our work is all developed at grass roots level and much of it takes place in north Liverpool, an area of extreme disadvantaged ranking in the top ten in the Indices of Multiple Deprivation. Our office is based in England's fourth most deprived ward and we deliver outreach work and performances in areas that fall in the most deprived 1% nationally. 73% of children here are living in poverty;

educational attainment is only half as good as the national average; ill health and obesity levels are high; life expectancy low. We work with diverse marginalised groups including the homeless community, excluded and at risk young people, unpaid carers, people with dementia, young refugees and asylum seekers, and people of the third and fourth ages. Throughout our eight years we have created 45 new performance pieces and performed in more than 60 separate locations. We provide all our work free of charge. Current work includes: *The Edge of the City*, a professional opera tackling the subject of homelessness, which will transform shopping centres in the north of England into opera houses in 2013; *Transparent Truths*, a physical theatre piece created by our Youth Theatre members exploring the lives of trafficked children; *In Our Times*, a project that integrates our professional and participatory programmes through live and digital performance to explore the impact of poverty, inequality and the cuts.

An overriding set of concerns underpin our work, and these influence our planning, programming and the ways in which we reflect on our practice. We want to move from the tactical to the strategic: from personal transformation to political change. We believe that if theatre is to be at its best and most useful, radical theatre makers must address some pressing questions: If we work exclusively on the margins how can we impact on the mainstream? How can we avoid complicity and cooption if we receive public funding? How can we move beyond 'holding actions' that may make life more bearable in the short term but don't contribute to long-term strategic change? And how can we connect our work more directly into the massive wave of global resistance and become a valuable part of the Multitude of opposition? These are not easy questions, but we believe that if we are to make genuinely radical work they must be tackled.

Theatre has an important role to play and a great deal to offer in our revolutionary times.

Sarah Thornton is founding Artistic Director of Collective Encounters and is currently establishing a research lab to explore these questions both practically and intellectually. As part of this research Sarah is undertaking a Professional Doctorate in Applied Theatre with Manchester University. To contribute your thoughts and join the debate visit <http://collective-encounters.org.uk/international-research-laboratory/>

To find out more about Collective Encounters' work visit www.collective-encounters.org.uk , <http://inourtimes.ning.com/>