

Community Theatre

What are we evaluating?

Counter-cultural roots

- The roots of community theatre are to be found in various forms of counter-cultural, radical, anti- and post- colonial, educational and liberational theatres of the 60s/70s. (Van Erven 2001: 1)
- see also Kershaw 1992.

Definition of community theatre

Community theatre is theatrical activity which involves:

- Non-professional participants and professional theatre facilitators working together
- The creation of original work based on stories generated from communities
- Theatre created and performed by non-professional community members
- Creating theatre with a social relevance and impact

(acta, *COAST: Crossing Borders in Community Theatre*, Bristol: acta Community Theatre, 2013: 4)

Potency of Community Theatre

“Community Theatre privileges the artistic pleasure and sociocultural empowerment [expertise] of its community participants. Its material and aesthetic forms always emerge directly (if not exclusively) from ‘the’ community, whose interests it tries to express. Community Theatre is thus a potent art form that allows once largely silent or silenced groups of people to add their voices to increasingly diverse and intricately inter-related local, regional, national and international cultures” (Van Erven 2001: 3).

Cultural Policy

- Economic Impact (late 1980s)
- Social Impact (late 1990s)

- cultural value?

<http://culturalvalueinitiative.org/>

Economic impact of the arts

- 80s – Thatcher govt.
- John Myerscough *The Economic Importance of the Arts in Britain* by John Myerscough, Policy Studies Institute, 1988.
- From ‘subsidy’ to ‘investment’ in creative/cultural industries in post-industrial Britain.
- (Social) Return on Investment (SROI)

Social Impact of the Arts

Use or Ornament? The social impact of participation in the arts. François Matarasso, Comedia, 1997.

Matarasso explains that work was a “reaction to work on the economic impact of the arts done by John Myerscough and others in the late 1980s. At the time, many people felt that the Thatcher government was interested only in economic analyses and that a case for the arts had to be built on their financial performance rather than their cultural value”

<http://www.demandingconversations.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/Full-free-and-equal-Matarasso.pdf>

(p 1)

Social Impact

Matarasso's study provided a taxonomy of social impacts under the following headings:

- Personal development
 - Social cohesion
 - Community empowerment and self-determination
 - Local image and identity
 - Imagination and vision
 - Health and well-being
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- See p. 11 for summary of 50 social impacts

<http://www.feisean.org/downloads/Use-or-Ornament.pdf>

Critique of Social Impact

- Matarasso's study has “played an important role in establishing a near-consensus in Britain among cultural policy-makers” (Merli 2004)
- Political influence/significance of ‘social impact of the arts’ study made it fair game for critical analysis - “research project is flawed in its design, execution and conceptual basis” (Merli 2004).
- Methodological and conceptual critique. I’ll leave the methodological issues. Conceptual critique questioned use of “participatory arts as a form of governance, under the heading of promoting social cohesion” (Merli 2004)

“Evaluating the social impact of participation in arts activities
A critical review of François Matarasso's Use or Ornament?”

Paola Merli 2004 (after 2002)

<http://www.variant.org.uk/19texts/socinc19.html>

Charge of instrumentalism

- Matarasso's study coincided with election of New Labour govt.
- Creation of Social Exclusion Unit (stressed social and cultural dimensions of economic disadvantage)
- Arts/culture as government instrumentality - subsidised cultural sector "expected to deliver on basis of social and economic policy targets that relate to social inclusion and local economic development strategies already in place" (Belfiore in Mirza 2006: 24).
- 'Social Impact' study caught up in criticism of govt. instrumentalisation of arts/culture - top down remediation of social deprivation while the structural causes of poverty are not addressed by 'third way' politics.

Community arts -> Participatory arts?

- Merli - : while community arts was “a spontaneous movement, its revival [as participatory arts] is a device “offered” by the government... the aim is the restoration of social control using the same tools, although otherwise directed. (Merli, 2004)
- Participatory artists - 'new missionaries' soothing the poor with benevolent arts projects: “Social deprivation and exclusion arguably can be removed only by fighting the structural conditions which cause them. Such conditions will not be removed by benevolent arts programmes” (Merli 2004).

Matarasso extends cultural democracy into 90s

- Links between Matarasso's work on participatory arts and the community arts movement which, he says, 'extends cultural democracy by opening artistic practice to others, enabling a sharing of creativity and experience' ...p5
- Owen Kelly was part of the 'social impacts' research team.
- Cultural policy studies critique rehearses an argument already had in community arts field in 80s.

Community Arts – Cultural Democracy

Owen Kelly's *Community Art and the State*
(Comedia, 1984)

- Tripartite structure (Parts 1, 2 & 3)
- Most critics don't get past Part 1 – partial (piecemeal and biased i.e. participant-insider) history of community arts movement (70s)
- Dominant critical narrative is of rise and fall of community arts movement.

Community arts movement questioned:

- The role of art in society – asking the question ‘arts for whom?’ (Baldry in Crehan 2011: 85) or “Why are the arts not an experience shared by all people, every day of their lives, in the places that they are – be it in the work place, the school, the home, the shopping centre?” (Andrea Hull in Watt 1991: 55).
- The relationship between cultural and political struggle – it was a matter of principle that it was everybody’s right to participate in the shaping of of the world in which they lived ... people should be able to control the means of communication themselves ...” (Kelly 1984: 21-22).

Kelly's Part 1

- Critical history of community arts movement from activism to pseudo-social/community work.
- The strategic refusal by community artists to articulate a critical programme, and their determination instead to pragmatically pursue 'vague' definitions in order to secure government funding of their activities (Kelly 1984: 22-23), reduced the movement to "something with the status of ameliorative social work for what are pejoratively called disadvantaged groups" (Watt, 1991: 56).

The original impulse behind what came to be community arts had been the desire for a liberating self-determination through which groups of people could gain, or regain, some degree of control over some aspects of their lives, and the parallel realisation that an artistic practice could itself be a form of cultural activism. The way in which this practice was established, however, meant that it was, in many areas, likely to lessen the self-determination of those people with whom we worked. We were arriving more and more, not as activists, but as quasi-employees of one or another dominant state agency. We were, in effect, inviting people to let one branch of the state send in a group of people to clear up the mess left by another branch of the state, while at the same time denying that we were working for the state (Kelly p. 29-30).

Re-defining community – Social Welfare vs Cultural Democracy

- Part 1 – critical history
- Part 2 and 3 – redefinition of community and programmatic goals.
- Kelly situates critical programme of community arts in context of long tradition of British socialist thought (Williams, EP Thompson, Richard Hoggart).
- Takes EP Thompson's notion of class – “a class is not a thing, but a relationship which ‘happens’, and can only be defined dynamically and historically” (in Watt p. 61)
- Same could be said to be true of community: “the interactions within a group of people who choose to see themselves as a community continually alter the nature of that community so that it is always in a state of becoming and therefore growing and thus avoids the status of a thing to be serviced” (Watt p. 61).

Static vs dynamic community

- “Static notions of community are seen as impositions, usually categorisations, by a dominant culture concerned to maintain itself as monolithic by exercising its power to define and subsume subgroups.”
- “Dynamic notions of community ... allow the creation of purposive communities of interest which, by the process of self-definition, resist being thus subsumed and can retain an oppositional integrity. This autonomy introduces the possibility of internal negotiation as a basic mode of social interaction, and they are consequently potentially democratic and alterable. The commitment to democracy as a principle is then seen as leading to the possibility of broad alliances between autonomous groups working to undermine the dominant culture through an insistence on common access to the process of creating meaning and value within the culture”

(Watt 1991: 64).

Cultural democracy

- Shelton Trust's *Culture and Democracy* Manifesto (1986)

http://www.bluedrum.ie/documents/AnotherStandardManifestoComedia_000.pdf

- Cultural hegemony (Gramsci)
- “Work on the cultural front serves to replace an imposed, monolithic culture with cultures which emerge from communities of people, and reflect democratic modes of social relations” (Watt: 63).

Core Value – Cultural Democracy

- Begin evaluation from core values i.e. from ‘inside out’ rather than other way round.
 - ‘Value in context’
 - ‘Reflexivity in practice’
- + advances in evaluation in arts/health field
- See Mike White 2009 and ‘Foreword’ in *A Guide to Evaluation for Arts Therapists and Arts and Health Practitioners*. London: Jessica Kingsley, 2014.

References (not listed or linked to in slides)

Belfiore, E. "The Social Impacts of the arts - myth or reality?" in M. Mirza (ed.) *Culture Vultures. Is UK arts policy damaging the arts?* Policy Exchange, London, 2006.

Crehan, Kate *Community Art. An Anthropological Perspective.* Oxford; New York: Berg, 2011.

Kershaw, Baz *The Politics of Performance. Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* London and New York: Routledge, 1992.

Van Erven, Eugene *Community Theatre. Global Perspectives* London and New York: Routledge, 2001.

Watt, David "Interrogating Community: Social Welfare v. Cultural Democracy" in Vivienne Binns *Community and the Arts. History, Theory, Practice.* Sydney: Pluto Press, 1991.

White, Mike (2009). *Arts Development in Community Health: a social tonic.* Radcliffe.

Links

- Clare Keating evaluation guide:
<http://www.effectivechange.com.au/Documents/PDFGuide.pdf>
- Big hART external evaluations by Community Development researchers: <http://bighart.org/art/current-projects/#big/reach-and-impact/>
- The Penelope Project (three way partnership led by Anne Basting with Sojourn Theatre and Luther Manor) – critical friends methodology: <http://www.thepenelopeproject.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Penelope-Program-Evaluation.pdf>

links

Matt Jennings and Andrea Baldwin (open access) – article on problems of evaluating NI projects + ways forward:

<http://www.musicandartsinaction.net/index.php/main/article/view/communitytheatre>

Recent study by educationalists funded by AHRC Cultural Value programme:

<https://performingimpactproject.wordpress.com/>