

## **Critical Dialogue 1: The politics of community theatre, an introduction.**

We are prompted, in part, by the recent election of a Conservative government and the onward, unfettered march of austerity policies, inequality and precarity (with the ongoing dis-assemblage of social welfare systems) under a Cameron/Osborne government.

We are also prompted, in no small part, by acta's 30th birthday celebrations in 2015. Formed in 1985, acta's historical arc reaches back to a time when Conservatives were last in power. This gives us pause to wonder what we might learn from the study of community theatre practices that have weathered three decades of neo-liberal government. What are the core principles that have enabled acta and others to sustain a resilient praxis in and through turbulent times? Has the work shape shifted to fit political exigencies, has it been steadfastly guided by fixed or deep rooted political convictions, or is it the product of a more pragmatic dance encompassing different constituencies, (un)common partnerships, advocacy, activism, cultural democracy and theatrical innovation?

At the centre of our discussion is the meaning of the term "community." Whilst the lack of a precise definition was perhaps not essential to the 1970s counter-cultural movement seeking to storm the citadels of high art and restore the means of cultural production to the many rather than the few, critics have pointed out that the lack of a coherent political agenda for community arts has led to the practice being perceived as "something with the status of ameliorative social work for what are pejoratively called disadvantaged groups" (Watt 1991: 56).

Subsequently, some (Kelly, 1984) have sought to ground the concept of community in a British socialist tradition of thought, articulating the dynamic process of (working) class formation and self-determination, and, as part of a collective known as "the Shelton Trust," to define the core principle of cultural democracy, after Gramsci's critique of 'cultural hegemony' (1986).

Did these ideas stick 30 years ago, what remains of this political agenda today, and how useful is it to the development of community theatre practice in 2015? How do community theatre practitioners and participants today conceive of their theatrical labours? How do political and cultural concerns play out in the everyday practices of making community theatre – grant applications, fund raising, relationship building (with specific communities or audiences), partnership formation, performance methods, advocacy/activism, evaluation, and so on?

This seminar aims to discuss these and other provocations provided by Dr Jenny Hughes, drawing on her research into theatre, poverty and performance (<http://blog.poortheatres.manchester.ac.uk/>), bringing together students & academics with acta practitioners, partners, participants, audiences and friends.