

## **Making Theatre in Communities: A Search for Identity, Coherence, and Cohesion**

**JOHN SOMERS**

UNIVERSITY OF EXETER

[J.W.Somers@ex.ac.uk](mailto:J.W.Somers@ex.ac.uk)

### **ABSTRACT**

*Traditionally, theatre was created and performed in communities to celebrate religious and other significant aspects of shared community life. Many such customs possessed a quasi-religious identity in which theatre depictions were thought to appease those spiritual forces which controlled the lives and fortunes of mere humans. In the UK and the Western world more generally, the cohesiveness of community life has lessened as families become more self-sufficient. Until relatively recently, rural communities in South West England were dominated by the farming industry. The land of many farms has been merged and the farmhouses sold to relatively well-off incomers. They often operate a self-sufficient life, sending their children to private schools outside the community and engaging in leisure pursuits which take them out of the community in which they live. Thus, community cohesion is weakened and the opportunities for cooperative and communal action lessened. Theatre has the potential to bring disparate members of a community together in common purpose, providing a forum in which new and lasting relationships can be formed. If the dramatised stories*

*have their roots in the identity and history of the community in which they are made, long-term residents have ways of sharing their knowledge with the 'newcomers'.*

Neither human existence nor individual liberty can be sustained for long outside the interdependent and overlapping communities to which we all belong. Nor can any community long survive unless its members dedicate some of their attention, energy and resources to shared projects (Etzioni, 1997).

## **WHAT IS COMMUNITY THEATRE?**

Community Theatre has a variety of roots and functions related to its cultural, social and political setting and its purpose in those specific environments. In some cases, it may be that community rituals and stories, often deeply embedded in cultural and/or religious traditions<sup>1</sup>, are performed as an integral part of defining and celebrating a community's cultural and spiritual identity. Some of the latter date back for many centuries but continue to be performed, although the theatre content has become objects of heritage rather than contemporary life. Other forms of Community Theatre have political intent, to inform and energise a community in bringing change or in asserting human rights, Theatre for Development in Africa for example<sup>2</sup> or Purna Chandra Rao's work in Hyderabad supporting peasants' land rights against rapacious landowners<sup>3</sup>. It can also be dangerous. Rao's fellow-countryman, theatre activist Safdar Hashmi, was beaten to death while performing a street play *Halla Bol* during municipal elections in the Jhandapur Sahibabad area on January 1, 1989<sup>4</sup> (S. Pai, University of Delhi, personal communication, April 2008).

Alternatively, the exciting work of 'Z Divadlo' in the small town of Zeleneč, Slovakia, combines amateur community actors with the expertise of a professional director, Jozef Bednárík. In Brazil, the

---

<sup>1</sup> The Oberammergau Passion play, for example.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see: Salhi, K. and Thiong'o, N. W. (Eds.). (1998). *African theatre for development: Art for self-determination*. Bristol: Intellect.

<sup>3</sup> See Sinha, S. (1995). "Education and the role of NGOs.". In *Deccan Herald*.

<sup>4</sup> See "Nine convicted in Safdar Hashmi murder case" in [Rediff India Abroad](#) (2003)

theatre-making of Marcia Pompêo Nogueira (2006) and Beatrice Cabral resonates in communities, some of which are in danger of losing their cultural identity through the arrival of electricity and television. I have had the pleasure of working in both places with these people. The continuum stretches, therefore, from radical activist theatre to benign celebration. In this article, I focus on Community Theatre in rural contexts as I now practise mostly in a rural environment.

## THEATRE FOR CHANGE

Radical theatre for change has an extensive history in the UK. Given the significant international demise of communism, most current authoritarian governments are of the political extreme right; consequently, many such theatre initiatives are situated in confirmed socialist ideology (McDonnell, 2006). John McGrath's work with 7:84 Theatre Company<sup>5</sup> in Scotland is typified by the play '*The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil*' which toured to rural locations in Scotland broadcasting its protest against the exploitation of that country, especially its off-shore oil, by the English<sup>6</sup>. In addition to triggering societal change, there is also an intention to transform the nature of theatre itself. Baz Kershaw believes that:

Community Theatre is potentially a radicalising and energising force for effecting, if not a transformation of society, at least a model for the transformation of the theatre into a more genuinely popular and democratic art form (Kershaw, 1992, p. 28).

Such direct political theatre diminished in the UK with the demise of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government of the 1980s, after which radical Community Theatre seemed to lose its wellspring, focus and target.

Whatever the source and form of Community Theatre, it is generally welcomed as a positive sign that a community is prepared to

---

<sup>5</sup> The company's name based on the statistic that 7% of the world's population own 84% of the wealth.

<sup>6</sup> See McGrath, J. (1981). *A good night out*. London: Methuen.

supplement the generally passive reception of stories available in multitude from the print and broadcast media with narratives which are made and performed within, by and to a specific community. In all cases, these forms of community theatre take account of the *particular histories* and *concerns* of the communities in which they are made and performed.

## **COMMUNITY THEATRE IN THE UK**

In the UK, 'Community Theatre' now generally refers to a specific theatre form. Since Ann Jellicoe's theatre work in the 1970s which led to the formation of the *Colway Theatre Trust* in 1979, it has meant the creation of a theatre event that has relevance for the *particular community* in which it is created and performed, predominantly, by members of that community (Jellicoe, 1987). One objective is to extend participation beyond those who would normally be expected to engage in performance events. There is also an element of celebration of what it is to be part of a community. There are many roles that community members can take up, especially in the community-based research and creation of the drama content itself. As such it can be seen to differ substantially from the USA definition of 'Community Theatre', which can be characterised as the creation of performances, often of well-known plays, by a group of amateur enthusiasts, usually in a traditional theatre building and employing long-standing styles. In the UK, this form of theatre is known as 'Amateur Theatre' or 'Amateur Drama' and it is not what is being discussed here – except that a few amateur theatre companies do have relatively radical policies in originating and staging theatre.

## **THE CHANGING NATURE OF COMMUNITIES**

In the space of sixty years, the fabric of rural English communities, and many others throughout Europe, has changed radically. These shifts have occurred due to several influences, among them:

- the changed nature of farming, leading to fewer people being employed in agriculture;
- the migration of the working classes to urban environments;

- ease of transport from rural to urban areas, the move to the countryside by the middle classes<sup>7</sup>;
- the decline of many of the rituals of country living which only made sense in a community of shared experience and interdependence;
- the impact of global cultural values;
- the impact of television, consumerism and the new technologies;
- the growth of excessive individualism (Etzioni, *op cit*). Some of these influences have had positive effects – young people's increased awareness of wider educational and occupational opportunities and life styles, for example, and the freeing up of restrictive social conventions which made rural communities uncomfortable for some who failed to 'conform'.

The decline of shared work, interdependency and significant, shared celebrations and rituals has led to the social fragmentation of rural communities. Physical proximity is not enough; people living in the same place geographically will not necessarily create the circumstances which can produce a 'community'.

A recent UK report shows that the economic and social background of rural dwellers disadvantages them in comparison with urban dwellers. For example, in rural areas, wages are 5% below the national average whilst house prices are 16% higher. The resulting disadvantage is particularly acute amongst the less prosperous, indigenous, working class members of the community who tend to move to urban areas where wages are higher and social; housing more plentiful (Commission for Rural Communities, 2008, p. 28). My Community Theatre work is mostly undertaken in South West England, and the report says:

Outside some parts of London, the most unaffordable areas are nearly all rural, with the South West showing as the 'worst' area for affordability. There is a consistent pattern...that areas with poor affordability also tend to have higher levels of inward

---

<sup>7</sup> David Orr, Chief Executive of the National Housing Federation said in a press release, "Unless we act now, we will create a rural theme park, where only the very wealthy can live" (National Housing Federation, July 25, 2006). Rural housing crisis forces unprecedented alliance.

migration and high levels of homes that are sold for cash. (*Ibid*, p. 37)

Thus, inward migration of a middle-class nature is occurring in my locality whilst the less well off migrate to the towns. Those of the latter group who remain are subject to a range of disadvantages:

Disadvantage is likely to be multi-dimensional: not just about financial resources, but also about a range of factors that prevent a person from participating fully in society. (*Ibid*, p. 40)

## **THE LOSS OF SHARED STORY**

One significant loss in current rural communities is the knowledge of community stories. Residents without access to these, often apparently inconsequential stories therefore lack a 'sense of place', a quality which is best achieved through absorbing the layered meanings accreted through centuries of, often oral, storytelling and shared experience. Such stories have no forum for being shared unless, as Etzioni says, members of a community 'dedicate some of their attention, energy and resources to shared projects.' In writing about memory, A. C. Grayling says:

...what makes a person the same person through life is the accumulating set of memories he carries with him. When these are lost, he ceases to be that person and becomes someone else, new and as, yet, unformed (2001).

If we substitute 'community' for 'person', the statement still holds true, for if a community's collective memory is lost, it too must be reformed. Theatre can be an important approach in building this new community identity and can, through its research and performances, ensure its development is based firmly on elements of the past. Such theatre represents a dynamic exploration and presentation of the defining narratives of a community. There is evidence that communal activity is decreasing whilst isolated, individual action increases. This is borne out by Robert Putnam's analysis of the changes in community in the USA:

... the forms of participation that have withered most noticeably reflect organised activities at the community level .... Conversely, the activities ... that have declined most slowly are, for the most part, actions that one can undertake as an individual .... In other words, the more that my activities depend on the actions of others, the greater the drop-off in my participation (2000, p. 44 - 45).

Another metaphor for 'newcomers' lack of knowledge of a community's past is that, if we regard the long-term history of a community as a story, unless newcomers make efforts to understand the community's past, they will be in possession of pages of a book which stand alone and do not have the preceding story sections. Thus, for example, it is difficult to work out if the statements on that page are sincere or simply intended by the speaker to deceive. Long-term residents who hold knowledge of the community's past may see the incomers as 'more educated' and in other ways disconnected from them; yet the 'locals' may hold knowledge of a community which is of great value in creating Community Theatre.

## **THE CONCEPT OF THEATRE AS COMMUNAL WORK**

As previously mentioned, sixty years' ago, rural English communities were relatively closed and interdependent. At that time, the parish was a site for *work* with perhaps 90% of people employed in the community and only a small number of professionals venturing outside it. Currently, in Payhembury Parish where I live in England, it is probable that 90% of the working section of the population of 470 work outside the Parish which is seen simply as a place to *live*. Clubs, societies and more informal meeting points in the Parish are largely stratified by age criteria, reducing inter-generational contact.

I believe that theatre-making can be a challenge; not just dramatically, but in terms of the 'labour' needed to make it happen. I use it to create a communal focus in the Parish, a shared project that brings the disparate elements of the community together and generates social capital. This was when I arrived at the concept of 'theatre as communal work', a shared activity which counters 'excessive individualism' and brings disparate people together to discover and articulate the stories of the community within vertical

rather than horizontal age-related groupings.

## **PERCEIVED IMPACT**

I have many testimonies from participants to bear out the positive outcomes which many experience having taken part in this form of theatre. More generally, it is clear that individuals who have been preoccupied with their careers and home life, find involvement in this theatre form and its creation from scratch, invigorating and enriching. This is particularly so with women who, having dedicated important energies to their paid work, domestic life and the creation of a 'family', rediscover their largely dormant creative urge and abilities. Several women of this nature have written proposals for new projects and in several cases, complete scripts or scenarios. Over three years, one retired policewoman who had never written a script before, researched the history of a local house from the 13<sup>th</sup> Century onwards and, with assistance, created scenarios for nine site-specific scenes. In several cases, those who journeyed to Payhembury to take part in projects have established theatre companies in their own communities. Numerous men who regarded drama-making as socially 'above them' have become and remain involved as they come to realise that their local knowledge is valued in such enterprises. Some dip in and out of projects, others are regular participants in workshops, creative meetings and productions. Several teenagers have followed drama degrees and the lead boy in the WW1 production has been accepted at and will attend RADA. At many levels and ways, Community Theatre has impacted on the community and individuals and families within it. Since its inception in 2000, thousands of audience members have witnessed the outcomes of our work.

*Examples of the work referred to in this article can be seen at the [Tale Valley Community Theatre website](#). For further details of the work, please [contact the author](#).*

## **SUGGESTED CITATION**

Somers, J. (2017). Making theatre in communities: A search for identity, coherence, and cohesion. *Arts Praxis*, 4 (1), 14-23.

## **REFERENCES**

- Commission for Rural Communities. (2008). *The state of the countryside*. Cheltenham: Commission for Rural Communities.
- Etzioni, A. (1997). In Arthur, J. (1998). Communitarianism: what are the implications for education? *Educational Studies*, 24 (3), 3352-368.
- Grayling, A. C. (2001). *The meaning of things: Applying philosophy to life*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Jellicoe, A. (1992). *Community plays and how to make them*. London: Methuen.
- Kershaw, B. (1992). *The politics of performance*. London, Routledge.
- McDonnell, B. (2006). Theatre, resistance and community – some reflections on ‘hard’ interventionary theatre. In M. Balfour & J. Somers (Eds.), *Drama as social intervention*. North York: Captus Press.
- Nogueira, M. P. (2006). Taught only by reality, can reality be changed?. In M. Balfour & J. Somers (Eds.), *Drama as social intervention*. North York: Captus Press.
- Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

## **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

An Honorary Fellow at, Exeter University, England, John Somers is Founding Editor of the journal *Research in Drama Education*. He created Exstream Theatre Company which specialised in interactive theatre in non-theatre sites. His play *On the Edge* won awards for its contribution to a better understanding of mental health issues. He has worked extensively internationally. He won the *American Alliance of Theatre and Education* Special Recognition Award in 2003. Books include *Drama in the Curriculum* (1995), *Drama and Theatre in Education: Contemporary Research* (1996) and *Drama as Social Intervention* (2006). His research interests focus on Applied Drama and the role of narrative theory in drama.

