

The temporary community: beyond nostalgia

Intergenerational performance work in East London

Presented at the TaPRA conference, Cardiff, 2010

What I want to do is give a brief glimpse of where I am in thinking about what is going on in intergenerational performance work, how we know that and what we call it. This springs from my own experience as a practitioner with Magic Me, a small arts organisation based in Tower Hamlets, in East London. The organisation works with many art forms, and the majority of its projects bring together young people and older people to work creatively together. I will draw on two performance projects, which brought together Year 5 children, elders from a Jewish Day centre, and Drama students from Queen Mary, working with a team of four artists. The projects took place at Queen Mary, with performances in the Pinter Studio.

Intergenerational work is very photogenic! I am aware that photographs of the work and the work itself often evoke in the viewer a sense of relief; a sense that, after all, our society is not as divided as we thought. There is currently a real interest in intergenerational work as a solution to problems of social cohesion. Intergenerational work can encompass diversity of faith, ability, ethnicity and gender without ever mentioning them. And this sense of relief doesn't only come from outside.

Two things got me started on this line of research. One was some responses to the experience of the project.

The first is from a musician and film maker working on the project, who took a break from participating to sit back and watch.

“ It seemed to put things back into balance having all the ages together. You don't notice the separation until you get them all together then it feels right.”

And the second from a participant, Cosmas, a man deep into Alzheimer's.

“When the children are not there everything is scattered. But when they arrive it all comes together again.”

The second provocation to my thinking was an encounter with Field Theory in some training I participated in led by the Gestalt Psychotherapist, Carl Hodges. Field theory is central to Gestalt Psychotherapy. Here I am exploring it as a helpful way of understanding what I think of, (knowing that both words need interrogating) the 'temporary community' that can emerge in a project.

What I am finding very useful is the notion of field and figure

- The field consists of all the interactive phenomena of individuals and their environment and all aspects of that field are potentially significant and interconnected

- The field and the forces operating in the field are in constant flux. Individuals are constantly changing their perspective of the field as they organise and understand it differently, from moment to moment
- People actively organise and reorganise their perception of their circumstances (or field) by continually making some aspects of that field the focus while others become background, and vice versa. The need or interest organises the field.

From Developing Gestalt counselling by Jennifer Mackewn

So, in this room the field is all that we are as individuals, the context we are in, in this room, in the conference, in this City, and so on. Our connections, differences, knowledge, memories and experiences are all potentially significant. Our current need or interest organises the field – different aspects, pieces of information are constellated, and that can change from moment to moment. This constellation is the figure, against the background of the field.

In the context of the intergenerational work I am looking at using this frame, several things emerge,

The first one is about community and individual identity

In the project I am describing, we brought together three groups of people, two of whom were chosen by age, and who also brought with them faith identities. The elders were all Jewish and the children were all Moslem. The third group were all undergraduate students, and although this isn't a precondition, were aged between 19 and 22. All of the children and elders lived in Tower Hamlets, some of the students did.

All this information is part of the field, but it's not the only information. Part of the development of the group as a group, as a community, is to begin to unfold the diversity within each named group, to discover commonalities and connections and common purpose. One way of looking at this is to say that this happens as the field is reconfigured by the need and interests of the group. An exercise where we map the local streets configures the field in one way; making props together allows another figure to emerge. Hearing that a QM student had recently died crossing the Mile End Road reconfigured the field. And the facilitators are not outside the field, They bring with them potentially significant elements of the field, and it is not only their instructions, guidance or interventions that configure the field at any given moment. 'If the field is in flux, if our perceptions of reality are continuously being recreated, and the stability and equilibrium of the field re-established moment by moment, there are no absolute cut-off points'. *Malcolm Parlett Reflections on Field Theory British Gestalt Journal 1991 1, 69-81*

No-one need to perform their age, ethnicity, faith, or Eastendness, but these are all present and potentially figural. One participant commented

“It’s ageless, classless.....”

The second one is about community and context

While the projects do provide a liminal space, in which there are moments of moving outside the definitions that might have become habitual, to feel “ageless, classless ..”, there is an intentionality, on Magic Me ‘s part, borne of a belief that young and older people have an enormous amount to offer one another, and evidence that Tower Hamlets has a population living in isolated islands, not just between ethnically identified communities, but within those communities, and that this is causing damage. The East End of London has a number of clear identities, caught as much in the stories of the Blitz, as in the architecturally revealed layers of immigration – the Huguenot Chapel that became a Synagogue and then a Mosque, for example.

A women who I worked with on the Isle of Dogs spoke about what she called ‘bondship’, a neighbourliness that she believed had disappeared because of immigration. Another older women refused to believe a young women who spoke about living in a street where everyone looked out for each other, because it was important to her identity to believe that such things were part of the past.

In one moment of ‘Stepping Out’, our second show, a young (8 year-old) Bengali waiter throws an old Jewish man out of his cafe, an unconscious echo of the feelings of many older and many Jewish people about being displaced in East London. In the performance the humour of this ‘little and large ‘ moment was what seemed figural, but the potentialities of the field are there too.

Although Field theory may seem to point very clearly to attention to the present moment, the dynamic of the Field means that anything from the field may become figural. The ‘community’ that emerges in a project is not dependent on agreement or setting tensions outside the boundaries of the space and time set apart.

In my work I have a sense of getting caught sometimes between the nostalgic – the longing for sense of community that is perceived to be lost, for connections that are challenged by urban life, and the utopic, always striving towards making significant change in individuals, groups and society through our work.

Field theory reminds me that within the space we have the past as remembered now, and the future as anticipated now, in a dynamic relationship, but the most important thing is the present.

Sue Mayo

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