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Reasons to be cheerful: Resilience, structure and care-fulness in socially engaged theatre practice.

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In this paper I will return to the research I carried out in 2012-13, with Dr Katharine Low, into the teaching of socially engaged theatre practice. [1] In this report we considered the study of Applied Theatre at MA level, and compared this with the pathway that many practitioners take, that of apprenticing themselves to more experienced practitioners, and or/just diving in.

Considering ideas of resilience, I will examine the ways in which practitioners can learn from, and support one another, in formal and informal ways. Drawing from filmed interviews with practitioners who haven't studied applied theatre in an academic setting, as well as from interviews with students, I will explore the ways in which exchanges of learning can criss-cross generations of artists, sometimes confirming, but often disturbing notions of experience and 'eldership'. This learning takes place within a field that is dynamic and complex, a field that often overlaps with other disciplines; one where there needs to be an unpicking and exploration of complex ethical issues and an understanding of precarious and sometimes dangerous contexts. Syed Jamil Ahmed's critique of binaries, for example that of oppressor/oppressed, in what he describes as 'interventionist theatre', provides a reference point for trying to identify what the balance is between structure and space that seems to be so needed in the development of skills and sensitivity. He describes a world of dynamic, shifting breaks and connections, which I suggest is crucial to bear in mind when we consider learning and teaching. It suggests a complex web of exchange, resistance and creativity, which affects artists and their collaborators. It challenges the idea of knowledge and experience as trophies.

A conversation that emerged often in the research that Low and I did was about teaching and learning. With no disrespect to their teachers, students emphasised that there is a lot of learning that goes on without being taught. They talked about how much they had learned from their peers and placement hosts, and by being inspired by participants with whom they came into contact. The artists who we interviewed all cited individuals from whom they had learned, sometimes just by working alongside them, and sometimes because they had been mentored and encouraged by them. This speaks to the wide range of opportunities to bump into knowledge that can add to our store of skills and wisdom. It's certainly possible to see how this happens between generations, with more experienced practitioners passing on ideas, tips and frameworks because they have already trodden the path. In one of our filmed interviews experienced practitioner Gerri Moriarty spoke about sharing a very challenging situation.

I have just had an MA student on placement [ ] and she said "one of the things I have learned from you in this project is that you are very careful about boundaries and what is not your responsibility" [ ]and I just said "That is a hard one, through bitter experience

and making myself extremely ill", and I said that it has come through being badly, badly burned because I had no notion of how to put parameters around myself…..[v] I had no notion of how the work was affecting me".[2]

Dramaturg Ola Animashawun spoke about working with a more experienced practitioner, who "knew I was young and was going to develop and grow, but also got me out there, doing it. The great thing was then being able to really reflect on it all, to dissect it."[3]

This sounds like exactly the kind of learning that can come best from working with a more experienced practitioner; embedded, lived knowledge.   However, a clear, vertical, generational apprenticeship path is not always possible, or desirable. I want now to refer to two anecdotes that illustrate some of the challenges to this mode.

At one of Devoted and Disgruntled's days [4], where the theme was 'Eldership in the Theatre', small groups discussed many associated ideas. In one group that I participated in, the idea of 'eldership' was roundly challenged. The main objection to it as an idea was the lack of financial and professional progression in the theatre. One person stated that they, at 60, were highly likely to find themselves unemployed and needing advice and help from younger people. In order, he suggested, to have the capacity to be a mentor or advisor, you need to have some sort of stability and position, and not be competing for the same work. I brought this example up recently in a workshop for 'older' actors, and many of them were shocked that this artist had said that he could not help younger people when he was on his uppers himself. Their feeling was that you helped and mentored as much as possible, but this was because any of you could meet someone coming down who had been in the ascendance, or vice versa. However, they did confirm that it would be false to imagine older, more experienced people at the top of the pyramid, they could be found anywhere.

My second example comes from meeting the entire 'learning team' of a big cultural organisation, situated in a large city in the UK. They were all white women, of, I would guess somewhere between 25 and 30. This image could be reproduced with people from a different age band or gender in many workplaces, with no opportunity for cross generational learning.   This may partly occur because of an understanding that work conducted with young people must be led by young artists.   A theatre practitioner of my acquaintance, who is 40, was recently turned down for a placement with young people because of her age and asked to work on the Company's work with elders, despite her background as a Youth Theatre Director in her country of origin. From both these examples I believe that we can see a subtle but well imprinted understanding of where different generations belong.

If cross-generational learning needs the right environment to flourish it may be helpful to have a look at what it is that's being learned.

In the research that Katharine Low and I did there was a clear sense of wanting both structure and space. For example, students and alumni of MA courses said that they wanted

[2] Ibid. Filmed interview
[3] Ibid. Filmed Interview
[4] https://www.devotedanddisgruntled.com/

- Understanding of the structures and values of formal learning
- Rigorous and expansive analysis
- Connection to the ideas, reflection and experience of others
- Discovering the subtle, nuanced differences that come out of all our choices
- Learning on the spot flexibility
- Constant reshuffling

They also wanted to become practitioners who could be flexible and responsive, who knew how to look after themselves, and how not just to be, (through their Degree) but to <u>feel</u> 'qualified' to do what they were doing.[5]   They seem to be identifying the need for clarity and knowledge, and some tangible skills, as well as a much harder to define set of aptitudes and qualities. This brings me to the idea of resilience.

Angie Hart, Professor of Child, Family and Community Health at The University of Brighton, talks about resilience being based on 'an interaction between internal resources and external environments'.[6]   I propose that this correlates to the sense of structure and space; the building of internal resources through gaining clarity, learning skills, understanding context, but also learning not to enforce one's knowledge onto exterior environments, but to be responsive and adaptive. If resilience is a continuing, developing capacity, it can be nurtured and developed.   To be resilient, and therefore to have the structure and the spaciousness, seems to me to be crucial, in the light of the potential complexities of the work and the contexts within which the work can take place. An employer who took part in our research said that what she looked for in the artists she employed was

> The ability to work with the participants, the place, the context, your co-workers, the caretaker, the secretary, all those people engaged in this project together who you need on your side, and not some fantasy group who you dreamt up while you were doing your planning in your bedroom.   They didn't show up, these real people showed up, so stick with the real people.

Real people often don't behave according to known frameworks, theories or concepts. It doesn't mean that we can't gain understanding of behaviours and contexts through all of these, but it is clear that an artist working collaboratively is going to need quite a varied raft of skills, and adaptability.

I want to turn now to Ahmed's writing, and the challenge to the binaries that he suggests can be presented by the 'change' agenda in socially engaged practice. Ahmed first of all presents us with three understandings of the word intervention, taken from the OED

Firstly, intervention is the action of stepping in, or interfering in any affair, so as to affect its course or issue.

Secondly, the term is used in the context of an intermediate agency, or the fact of coming in as an intermediary.

The third meaning of intervention is the fact of coming in or being situated between in place, time or order, such as the Trade Winds being frequently impeded by the intervention of islands.[7]

While all of these definitions reveal potentially quite problematic aspects of intervention, Ahmed's main argument is that they are also very provisional, and that what intervention means, (quoting Green) 'in particular circumstances and at particular historical junctures is precisely a matter of how it is made to mean, and by whom.'[8] Ahmed's study is of theatre, in particular Theatre for Development and Theatre of the Oppressed, where intervention, he proposes is central, responding to Marx's call to action. 'Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point is to challenge it.'[9] Influenced by Freire, both TOO and TfD seek to contest dominant ideologies and State hegemony in order to give voice and influence to the Oppressed. Ahmed goes on to challenge the change agenda in what he calls 'interventionist' theatre even more strongly, by looking at intervention through the lens of the Buddhist understanding of Transience. He writes:

Buddhism recognises transience (anitya) – or change with the passage of time (or time as a unit of change) – as one common characteristic of everything. [ ] Hence the 'real' is not 'being' but 'becoming.' Quoting Victor Mansfield's writing on Buddhism and Physics, he continues 'If it is acceptable that phenomena are 'fundamentally a shifting set of dependency relations' ', then it follows that 'impermanence and change are built in the core of all entities, both subjective and objective.'[10] 'This is not to deny the possibility of conscious intervention, but it is important to realise that the intervening subject, who believes him or herself to be acting against a particular relation of power, is actually acting against a shifting set of dependency relations that are part of the condition of flux. Even if the subject succeeds in overcoming all oppositions and instituting the change s/he desires, it too will be brushed aside by the dynamics of flux. Hence the change too will change.'[11]

He goes to illustrate how, looking at Victor Turner's notion of social dramas, there is a cycle; starting with a breach, where discontent is brought out into the open, which is followed by 'a precipitating action', then redressive action, and finally reintegration which restores

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[7] Definitions quoted in Ahmed, Syed Jamil: (2006) Examining Interventionist Theatre in Multi-axial World of Transience: An essay in Refusal. Balfour & Somers (Eds) Drama as Social Intervention. Pp 40-41

[8] Ahmed, Syed Jamil: (2006) Examining Interventionist Theatre in Multi-axial World of Transcience: An essay in Refusal. Balfour & Somers (Eds) Drama as Social Intervention. P41

[9] Karl Marx 1997:158 quoted in Ahmed, Syed Jamil: (2006) Examining Interventionist Theatre in Multi-axial World of Transcience: An essay in Refusal. Balfour & Somers (Eds) Drama as Social Intervention. p42

[10] Ibid p 43
[11] Ibid p 44

balance, but not to the old order because the new accommodations have brought change. This, Ahmed contests, demonstrates a process being constantly made and remade. To help myself out, I am going to sum up this transient, multi-dimensional world, in the words of an elderly lady from Stepney, who responded to many questions with the answer, "Well, it's all according".

Navigating a world where 'It's all according", where it may not be possible to
To find fixed answers, and where the structure that is identified may soon be challenged, because it 'in particular circumstances and at particular historical junctures is precisely a matter of how it is made to mean, and by whom', is a complex and demanding business.

How does Ahmed's proposition help with the question of how we learn and teach, and how we share across our levels of knowledge and experience? In the research I started this paper with, undertaken with Dr Low, many students reported that their courses had led them to develop a level of anxiety and risk averseness, as they unpacked the many layers of complexity of the work and started to think "too much" about everything. On the other hand the practitioners who had not undertaken formal training talked with great gusto about failing again and again, learning, going back, reading stuff, asking other people, being guided and mentored, but always going back to the place of practice, and learning from the group with whom they were working. What I suggest is at play is to do with our expectations of what learning will do for us. When we hope that what we learn will make us ready to act and then it doesn't we can become afraid. The understanding that "it's all according" can feel destabilising and precarious. The challenge then becomes how to use the knowledge to support our intuition and flexibility, to enable critical thinking and reflection. Understanding that we are participating in 'a process constantly being made and remade' seems to me to open up more possibilities for balancing the structure and the space, and to be ready not to know. As one of the artists we interviewed put it. '[ ] the point of being in a University is to make mistakes and to learn – that's why we go there. We go because we don't know. We don't go there to prove what we already know.' I believe we can use this equally for the adventure of working collaboratively, in the field, and if we can all keep this thought in mind, that we go because we don't know, and we want to know, some of the anxiety about what he had hoped knowledge will bring will dissipate. This also unhooks us from any assumptions about who (in what generation) will know what and opens up the possibility of learning and teaching flowing across the generations.

I want to conclude with three examples from the filmed interviews with experienced artists and teachers that formed part of our research. Each one links back to one of Ahmed's definitions of intervention.

Firstly: Stepping in. Gerri Moriarty describes the benefit of interrupting a common experience that might be becoming an assumption.

'Graeme got up in the middle of a Community Arts Conference and said, 'I have got a very serious question to ask everyone in the room'. [ ] People were scared, they went very, very quiet, and Graeme just said, "What do you do when no-one turns up?". And I just thought 'what a brilliant question!", because in the middle of this, doing all these fantastic workshops [ ] at some point you have to say, yes, there are evenings when nobody turns

up or when the entire cast has been put in prison. [   ] the temptation is for everyone to do PR, it's all about advocacy and how marvellously we are doing and how great, you know, and I think that is unhelpful.'

Secondly: being an intermediary. Fabio Santos talks about passing on experience and knowledge from inside the event.
'I don't think you can teach participation without participation. I don't think there is a technique. I don't think you can talk to people and say, 'that is how you do it.' You learn participation by doing things.'

Thirdly: coming in or being situated between in place, time or order, such as the Trade Winds being frequently impeded by the intervention of islands. Fiona Macbeth talks about resistance to the established ways to gain liberation for teachers and students.
I want more anarchy about the academic constraints – which I'm not convinced are as powerful as I believe – as I feel I have to believe, and fill out that form and do that and complete that for the student and actually I think "really, do I?" [   ] Just a bit of liberation for myself might then pass on to the students. Because I think some of the anxiety is really, really unnecessary, because its perceived pressures rather than actual pressures.[12]

This leaves us with a real challenge to the idea of, to borrow from the idea of 'art objects', knowledge, skills or experience as 'objects': "Phenomena are fundamentally a shifting set of dependency relationships'.   This signals how important exchange, bumping up against, sharing, infecting, inspiring are, to help us bring alive our resilience. Knowledge is a gateway or a signpost, but not a place to stop, especially in the knowledge that even the change will change.

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[12] Filmed interviews/tps://www.cssd.ac.uk/research-projects/how-do-we-teach-socially-engaged-theatre-practice