

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The politics of intention: looking for a theatre of little changes.

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Abstract

The paper provides a review of some of the terminologies and definitions of applied theatre, critiques the ‘transformative principle’ argued for by some applied researchers, and extends this to a discussion on the complex relationship between donor agendas and the politics of intention that contribute to the shaping of applied discourse. (Taylor 2003, 1) The paper goes on to propose a theatre of ‘little changes’ which eschews big claims of social efficacy, and suggests the need for a discourse which can better articulate an interdependence between the aesthetic imperatives and the possibilities of social engagement.

Introduction

The paper reviews how the applied theatre field defines itself and examines the central commonality of social intentionality. It outlines the tension between the donor agenda and the politics of intention, and argues for the need for applied practice to circumvent being used as an adjunct to social policy. Applied theatre needs to be conscious of its orientation within a complex political and social web, and while it may not always be able to extricate itself from it, at least it needs to be conscious of the implications of inertia or struggle. The economic base of much applied theatre work by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), charitable trusts (sometime religious, sometimes not), arts councils and government agencies ensures, at least partially, that the rationale and practice adapts to myriad social discourses. The commissioning of transformation by these donors infects the ways in which applied theatre defines and talks about itself. The paper seeks to illustrate the problems of ideological ambiguity, and suggests there is a need to recalibrate the emphasis from the primacy of

donor-based objective setting practice, to a discourse that encompasses the values of aesthetics *and* social agendas.

Histories

One of the issues with the term applied theatre (or drama, or performance) is that there is disagreement about whether the loose coalition of practices occupies a definitive disciplinary field or an 'umbrella' title that contains as many contradictions as it does commonalities (Kramer, Chamberlain, McNamara et al. 2004, 90). The exhaustive (and exhausting) debate about definitions (see Jackson, 2007; Thompson, 2006; Neelands, 2007, 2004; Nicholson, 2005; Kramer, Chamberlain, McNamara et al., 2004; Taylor, 2003; Institute of Health and Social Studies, 2003) serves only to demonstrate how terminologies overlap, creating a complex territory of ever shifting interpretation, inference, competing genealogies and ideologies, that derive from similar yet distinctive vocabularies. The recent re-launch of this journal to extend the terminologies from drama education to applied theatre and performance is an attempt to encompass the cultural expansionism of the practice (however that might be defined).

The term, applied theatre (or drama, performance), is contested in its naming and in its multiple histories. It is only recently that there have been attempts to trace the precedents and root systems of applied and educational theatre (Nicholson 2006; Jackson 2007; Neelands, 2007). Jackson's (2007) 'Theatre, Education and the making of meaning' is an important addition to the discourse, as it takes the time to broaden the perspective to earlier theatre practices with an educational or change agenda, e.g. the 'New Drama' of Zola, Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov and Shaw; radical theatre in the 1930s; and post war developments. These examples could hardly be defined as applied theatre or drama education, even by the most optimistic of revisionists, but Jackson is keen to point out the lineage of work that attempts to revitalise the relationship between theatre and the social issues of the time (Jackson 2007, 49). Kershaw (1992, 251), in his analysis of radical theatre in the late 20th Century, describes alternative theatre as a 'litmus paper', adapting and engaging with the changing historical context.

The emergence of the term, applied, in the late 1980s (in UK and Australia at least) can be interpreted as a response to the 'material conditions' of this period (McDonald 2005, 68). The development of the discourse may be read as a response to 'monetarist and market-led policies' (Kershaw 1992, 251) and as a way to continue the principles of participation by carefully stripping away overt political allegiances and deliberately re-phrasing ideology in more pragmatic and marketable terms. This interpretation may be viewed as 'debilitating', as 'the movement/sector is cast as an object, always as it were, at the beck and call of the dominant order' (Kershaw 1992, 251).

An alternative interpretation is that the changes may have been a strategy for multi-pronged interventions into the socio-political context 'to infiltrate and influence the dominant order, by attacking it on many fronts' (Kershaw 1992, 252). This too is likely to be a fallible reading because the growth in diversity led not only to a fragmentation in practice, but also, as Kershaw argues, an ideological diversity and an increased sense of incoherence (Kershaw 1992, 252). This 'radical shattering of the "public" as a singular entity' into myriad groups made up of individuals that might be categorised and defined in numerous ways demonstrated the ideological shift from community to a culture of the individual. This had some interesting permutations for theatre companies traversing the territory during this

period. For example, companies such as Geese Theatre, whose organisation extends from the late 1980s to the present, began as radical practitioners working with the marginalised in prisons in the US, to becoming a company specialising in the use of theatre to focus on an individual's responsibility for their offending behaviour. The evolution of the company may not be directly attributed to the political developments of the period, but certainly it is possible to see the traces and possible influences that were in dialogue with the practice.

The economic reality of the 1980s and 1990s was that community theatre organisations either folded or adapted to the shifting ideological and economic territory (Jackson 2007, 203). There were also new practices and approaches that emerged, still politically committed, but more tentative and questioning, and not born out of the ideological certainties of a left wing agenda. The traditional values of alternative theatre were 'troubled' by new political perspectives:

...the conceptual metaphors associated with social change within this new world disorder emphasise the politics of (dis)location – difference, alterity, mapping, hybridity, liminality, borders and margins – all of which draw critical attention to the way place and space articulate diverse cultural and political meanings. (Nicholson 2005, 11)

The sheer diversity of social contexts in which applied theatre currently operates - refugee camps, schools, hospitals, homes for the elderly, remote villages, prisons, indigenous communities, care homes for children - undermines any attempt to fix definitions into a coherent framework. The broad expanse of the work means that while general philosophical characteristics may be identified and discussed, specific conclusions and definitions will remain elusive. Applied theatre as a term is useful in as far as its limitations are accepted (Kramer, Chamberlain, McNamara et al. 2004). However within this diversified practice commonalities are feasible, even if different terminologies are deployed. Ackroyd's (2000) attempt to identify the defining components of applied still seems to hold, namely that social intentionality underwrites most applied practice, specifically in relation to participation and transformation.

Commissioning transformation

A considerable amount of applied theatre markets its social utilitarianism by asserting that it has a 'transformative principle' at its core (Taylor, 2003; Kramer, Chamberlain, McNamara et al. 2004). The aesthetic is utilised for social intervention (Balfour and Somers 2006), for building self esteem and challenging specific behaviours (O'Toole, Burton and Plunkett 2004; Thompson 2002), promoting new attitudes to health education (Dalrymple 2006) working with trauma (Bundy 2006). The tautologies of transformation are often part of the accommodation process derived from the specific social settings; the delicate process of translating aesthetic agendas into non-theatrical contexts. The translation process is extended to engaging in, and being influenced by, the specific theoretical territory of the context. So for example, prison theatre draws on a range of criminological and therapeutic models (e.g. cognitive behaviour); and theatre for development is guided by development discourses. The process is informed by the need to learn the language and discourse of the social context in order to both understand and be accepted (and funded?) by its constituents.

The problem with applied theatre as an adjunct to social policy, is that it can and does lead to aesthetic engagement being eroded in the service of pragmatism. For example, when I worked in the prison theatre field (1993-1998) it was clear that certain practices were endorsed, and others were not. Funding seemed to be available for skills-based anger management, bullying and drugs education programs but not agenda-less creative work. In other words, culture was viewed as acceptable if it promoted particular types of individual change or life skills, and this was governed and defined, in the main, by the funding agency.

Blagg! was devised by the Theatre and Prisons and Probation (TIPP) centre in 1992 (Thompson 1999). The program combined exercises drawn from Image and Forum theatre, psychodrama, TIE and creative drama. On the basis of the Blagg! work the TIPP Centre was commissioned to develop a second programme, The Pump (focussed on anger management and challenging violence) which adapted probation orientated learning outcomes into a participatory and interactive delivery style (Balfour 2003). The result was an 8 week programme that used cognitive behavioural theories combined with simple role play exercises, forum theatre and image work.

While the programme was well received, and the evaluation of participants demonstrated a shift in attitudes towards violence, the practice itself was limited in its aesthetic impact. The quality of the role plays were little better than sub standard simulations or enhanced discussions. In running the course though, it was immediately apparent that the complexity of the stories and reasons for violence were very different. Addiction, racism, sexism, childhood abuse – were all strong and powerful drivers. Teaching anger management strategies seemed simplistic and superficial. These issues may have surfaced in more useful ways through a more embracing and wider aesthetic approach. By arguing for a particular type of probation-infused practice, based on cognitive behavioural models, role plays, and simulations, prison practice started to lose the possibilities of other performance approaches and became a diluted version of forum and image theatre. The programme marked a turning point in the organisation (Thompson 2006). The language had drifted from theatre forms to cognitive modalities.

The donor agenda

The adaption to social contexts involves theatre practitioners immersing themselves in the related culture and discourse, absorbing relevant theoretical perspectives and translating aesthetic objectives to service what is often a 'donor agenda' (Ahmed 2008, 209). At its best this leads to strong partnerships where the creativity agenda is honoured at least in equal terms to the politics of the social agenda. But the 'donor agenda' can lead to 'a subtle form of manipulation', as Ahmed argues about many practices in TFD (Theatre for Development), where local NGO's (Non-Governmental Organisations) are 'not forced or even dictated to but are simply not funded unless they are willing to follow the normalising framework set by the donors' (Ahmed 2008, 209). The economic reliance on external donors and agencies sets up an agenda in which theatre practitioners come under pressure to comply with organisational priorities of targets and outcomes and in which a 'debate about art and aesthetics can seem pretty irrelevant' (Jackson 2007, 28). It repeats an economic model from the 1970s that, in Kelly's view, undermined the creative and cultural freedom of the community arts movement:

Addicted to grant aid, which was provided at all times in amounts and in ways which suited the funding agencies, it could only scream for a regular increase in dosage. It became incorporated as a quasi-independent subsidiary of the welfare state, and although it 'did good', it was no more revolutionary than the district nurse. (Kelly 1984, 97)

Schinina's misgivings about 'social theatre' some twenty years later echo Kelly's concerns about the socioeconomic structures that support the practice: 'Many of us work for entities that are complicit or at least connected/related to the exclusions of the very same marginalized groups for which and with which social theatre operates' (Schinina 2004, 27). He goes on to identify the dangers inherent in naively and energetically accepting roles without understanding the deeper politics of the funding organisation, whether it be a UN type organisation or the smallest of NGOs. The concern is that the practitioner becomes a 'secular missionary' (McDonald 2005, 71) or NGO 'mercenary' (Ahmed 2007) promoting an orthodoxy that may or may not relate to the actual needs of a group:

Sometimes I assume I am being sent to work on institutional limitations in order to raise awareness and include marginalized people in the democratic dialogue, but once I am in the field, I discover that I was actually sent only to "calm these people down." (Schinina 2004, 27)

In the process of accommodating, adapting to, and being funded by external agencies the risk is that applied theatre can become too close to the powers it may want to question. Even at the macro level, Etherton and Prentki (2006, 141) argue that practitioner can end up being 'jugglers of contradictions', confronting the perspective that:

the nations who are signatories of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child are also the perpetrators of rights abuses born of their economic policies, either as top economic dog or underdog. (Etherton and Prentki 2006, 150)

Ackroyd (2007) warns that the discourse of transformation makes the field 'more vulnerable' because 'the funding comes with a promise of change'. Often the definition of phrases such as 'personal and social change' or 'social transformation' can be ambiguous (Hughes and Wilson 2004, 58). The attempt to understand the nature of change and the impact theatre might have is often only addressed tangentially by theatre practitioners (Etherton and Prentki, 2006).

For Neelands (2004, 47) there is a concern that 'hero narratives' of change promote testimonials of drama as precipitating hopeful revolutions and transformative personal experiences. Neelands argues that it is important to distinguish between localised and anecdotal 'miracles' and how these instances are 'generalised and theorised or proved in the textual discourses of the field' (Neelands 2004, 47). For example, Ahmed's critique of theatre for development practice in which big claims are made for having made a positive social impact, and yet the problem clearly persists, highlights the need not just for more stringent research methods, but a redefining of how and what claims are made.

Theatre and drama have not been the only disciplines to discuss social change in relation to simple models of cause and effect. Noel Pearson (2007), a key Aboriginal leader in Australia, eloquently outlines the historical impact (or misfiring) of policy initiatives on race relations

in US and Australia from both the left and the right. He explores how 'ambitious rationalist social planners cause unintended consequences by using the state to plan good societies and good futures for citizens, when they do not have the capacity to do so' (Pearson 2007, 45). He critiques socialist planning and argues that centralised social policies, administered by the State, are bound to failure because the gap between planning, implementation and administration is far too vulnerable to a myriad of social, political and cultural influences. As Pearson, borrowing from Hayek, says 'the road to serfdom is paved with good intentions' (Pearson 2007, 46). The point Pearson draws out is that left and right wing policies fail, not because they are good or bad, but because policies fail. Change rarely occurs in the way any social architect plans for.

The rationale of the useful artist, making creative interventions into a fixed social reality with predictable impacts is problematic. As Thompson (2003, 201) suggests, 'applied theatre discussions must allow for clarity of intent, but at the same time not permit a denial of the unpredictable and diverse effect'. The concern about intentionality in applied theatre is that if there are more complex motivations and ideologies in operation, it is important that practitioners are able to articulate and rationalise these. As Jackson remarks, some researchers and practitioners have clear rationales and are able to identify agendas within the work, 'but far more difficult to untangle are the hidden, assumed premises on which the work is based and the unstated purposes that may drive it' (Jackson 2007, 2). Chamberlain (2004, 93) problematises this further by questioning if practice is only defined as being applied when it is about types of social change that 'we' agree with: "it begins to suggest that what's 'Applied' in Applied theatre is not 'theatre' but a specific set of ideological values'.

A theatre of little changes

The ambiguity of ideological principles in applied work is something that Ackroyd (2006) fears leads to the field 'presenting a case that doesn't fully reveal itself'. Certainly it leads to questions about what kinds of change might be envisaged by a practitioner and the coherence, or otherwise, of their political orientation. Neelands argues strongly for a practitioner to reveal allegiances: 'we need to know why we are acting – to understand which society or section of society the author is for or against?' (Neelands 2007, 305) He views this as a clear cut definition between the personal and political 'the tension between cops at the door and cops in the head' and the need to orientate practice with either 'the ambivalences of identity politics and philosophical communitarianism' or 'the politics of redistribution associated with their ancestors in political theatre' (Neelands, 2007). While the need for absolutist political declarations may be viewed as overly stringent, the case for political coherence and awareness is less easy to avoid. The need for political intelligence is not just an abstraction, but has concrete consequences in the work itself as it is shaped and re-shaped by the experience of practice. The politics of intention, whether the facilitator is a secular missionary, NGO mercenary or a 'bewildered' creative, needs honest attention because there is likely to be a 'crisis of engagement', or at least ideological tensions:

Impact cannot be detached from the aims or desires of the facilitator but these can often be masked by the determination to enable the community to set its own agenda, at least until the point where that agenda clashes with the ideology of the facilitator. (Etherton and Prentki 2006, 150)

It is precisely these ideological tensions which reveal the most. They draw out the 'messiness' of practice or, Turner's 'contamination of context', which makes 'flaws,

hesitations, personal factors, incomplete, elliptical, context dependent situational proponents of performance' visible (Nicholson 2006, 12). The 'contamination' is extended to the practitioner who rather than being viewed within an outsider-insider paradigm, is implicated and accountable to the ethics of a relational social context. The articulation of this 'messiness' within practice and research antagonises the dogma of change by calling into question the validity of the applied practitioner's social role:

It is this belief that we are *necessary*, that we can offer something which is, by definition, irreplaceable, that creates the crisis of engagement...If we could see that we are not necessary, then we might be able to form more useful human and political relations based on genuine dialogue. (McDonald 2005, 70).

McDonald argues that the role of facilitator as 'cultural missionary' needs to be made redundant. He argues that sustained social efficacy has occurred not through the work of facilitated theatres, but 'organic' theatres, which are rooted in the same social and cultural contexts of the audience. He argues that it is not the 'oppressed' that needs its consciousness raised, but the practitioner, who often remain unaware of their own contradictory casting as 'emissaries of international or global values....at odds with local responses' (Etherton and Prentki 2006, 141). McDonald presents two alternatives, firstly to give wider acknowledgement to indigenous or subjugated ways of knowing as sophisticated tools used by 'subalterns' to resist, challenge and survive dominant cultures in ways that are most likely to work for them. Secondly to develop a culture of genuine dialogue 'not based on methods and models of change, but on shared political values and on an ethics of practice' (McDonald 2005, 70). McDonald argues for a practitioner/researcher perspective that is complex and full of uncertainties, in which change is transitory, a set of conditions constantly in flux, but in which the impulse for political coherence and awareness are vital attributes to guide and misguide a facilitator through ever present dilemmas and contradictions.

Perhaps a radical gesture would be to question the relationship between theatre and 'change', to break the assumption that this is an obvious partnership. Or maybe it is a matter of simply re-considering the scale of the claims for change that are made about the practice:

Since I trained to be a drama teacher in 1982, I have aspired to Bolton's aim: to bring about a 'shift in appraisal' (1979). It seemed so important and so difficult to achieve after a wet break on Friday afternoon. But compared to community transformation and touching people's lives, it now appears pretty frail an aim. (Ackroyd 2006, 9)

A theatre of 'little changes' provides a way to re-orientate what is possible about the work. It moves away from the need for change rhetoric, impact assessments and the strain for verifiable measurements in defining applied theatre, and places an emphasis on the need for 'theory generating' research, and propositions about how theatre actually works (Hughes and Wilson 2004, 71). Potentially, it also creates space for a more 'playful' relationship between practitioners and participants, and can 'shift the focus from persuasive, coercive, objectives-driven work' to a greater emphasis on aesthetics (Jackson 2007, 211-212). As Schonmann (2005) notes, the language of applied theatre seems more pre-occupied with the by-products of theatre than an exploration of the aesthetic dimension, 'we are stifled by applied drama and theatre that have so often put real obstacles in the way of broadening the horizon of the field by its expansion of the utilitarian function of theatre..' (2005, 38). The real 'tell' in this debate is not that the tension between the aesthetic dimension and the utilitarian is not

experienced by most practitioners, but that the articulation of that practice often eschews a discussion about the value of aesthetics. Caught in the habit of writing too many field and evaluation reports, the concentration is on proving the social efficacy of the work, rather than analysing the affect of aesthetics. The artistic dimension therefore is often relegated to the second division, a footnote to the value or purpose of the project.

Applied is a broad and ever expanding field, but it is important that the aesthetic in the work doesn't become subsumed in the usefulness of its social value. Small miracles and changes suggest a need to check against unrealistic claims, and to ensure that the aesthetic is interdependent with the possibilities of social engagement. For example Dennis suggests that one of the main problems with refugee performance begins with the linking of 'refugee' with 'performance' (Dennis, 2008, p. 212). It immediately sets up a fixed orientation between subject (the presence of the refugee voice) and the non refugee audience (witness). As Schuman, cited by Dennis, warns: "this builds a familiar, reductive scaffold that shores up the promise of mutual understanding and the redemptive power of empathy" (2008, p. 212). This is particularly difficult as there is often an emphasis on personal narrative in refugee performances, for example verbatim theatre (performance of refugee or asylum seeker transcripts), testimonial theatre (refugees 'performing' their experiences on stage), or playback theatre (improvised interpretations of personal refugee stories). Dennis argues for a rich aesthetic in overcoming the "dampening effect of empathy" (2008, p. 212), and appreciates that the act of improvising testimony in playback theatre is a fine synthesis between authenticity and essence:

Far from bringing a script to life or presenting a transcript or testimony, the playback theatre actor is responding to a real-life story, in the presence of the (real-life) teller. In this distinctive form, efficacy is somehow tied up in the negotiable nature of the improvised aspect. (Dennis, 2008, p. 214)

It is also important to be vigilant and aware of the quality of the relationship between donor and practice. Practice does need to be funded but not at any price. The negotiation between donor and practitioner are part of the performative process of applied theatre. The practitioner often has to be half car salesman, half ideologue. Gaining access/permission into a context is where the ideology of the practitioner is paramount, in discharging and advocating for aesthetics as central, and of establishing open ended relationships that hold in tension the quality of the process that participants go through in making theatre and the quality of the work that is created. The point of entry is where competing ideological values interplay with each other, some are articulated, whilst others are deeply subterranean within the practitioner, the institution, or group. Even in a theatre of small changes, these permissions may be used and appropriated for diverse ideological outcomes. However, in resisting the bait of social change, rehabilitation, behavioural objectives and outcomes, perhaps (and it's a small perhaps), applied practice might more readily encounter the accidental, and acknowledge that what applied does is not always linear, rational and conclusive in its outcomes, but is more often messy, incomplete, complex and tentative.

Notes

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