

NEW TIDES CONFERENCE Malta 2015

A marvelous experiment.

In 2009 I led a performance project on the theme of Utopia. The participants were women aged between 15 and 90, who were diverse in faith and ethnicity as well as in age, but all residents of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. It became clear quite quickly that the group were unimpressed by ideas of Utopia. Many thought it would be dull to have everything just right, and others reasoned that, since one person's Utopia was another person's purgatory, it was simply an impossibility. Kate, an Irish woman in her 80s, gave us the key, when she came in one day and told us that all she asked for was "glimpses of Utopia". Today, this was for her the news that her local council would have free compost available for collection in her local park throughout the Spring. While the non-gardeners were unimpressed, we all took hold of her words, "glimpses of Utopia" and it became the theme of our project.

I bring this phrase to your attention today because of what it elicits in relation to the title of my paper, 'A marvelous experiment', another phrase coined by a participant in an intergenerational performance project. Understanding a community arts project as an experiment confirms its dynamic nature, its openness and responsiveness to who is present, and its potential as a glimpse of something. I will suggest that it gives us a glimpse of community.

What I will say today is based on my chapter of the same name, in Caoimhe McAvinchey's Book, *Performance and Community*, and I will be adding a postscript based on work that I have been involved in since its publication in 2013.

Much of my work as a practitioner is in settings where young and older people are purposely and not just accidentally brought together to create work. The emphasis is on themes and practice that are equally accessible to all participants, without either younger or older people becoming donor or recipient of knowledge or expertise all the time. I want to host a space where no-one is expected to perform their age.

Much of this work is with Magic Me, an arts organisation based in Tower Hamlets, in East London. The organisation works with many art forms, and the vast majority of its projects are intergenerational. Its pool of artists work in Day Care Centres, Residential Homes, Schools and in Community venues, creating performances, publications, films, and exhibitions. Magic Me was founded in London by Susan Langford in 1989 and has continued to develop and expand understandings of intergenerational practice through its work, its research and its collaborations. What has remained central is the relationship building through arts practices, springing from not only an understanding of the challenges of living in a diverse urban setting, but also the weight of assumptions that people can carry about their own and other people's age, assumptions that can disable communication.

The projects that I will draw on today are a series of performance projects, which brought together Year 5 children, aged 8 & 9, elders from a Jewish Day centre, and Drama students from Queen Mary, University of London, working with a team of four artists. The first projects took place at the Jewish Day Centre, but by the time we came to the second two, the numbers of older Jewish people in the area had dwindled, and the Centre had had to sell off half of its building. As the neighborhood changed, the project adapted. We moved to Queen Mary, with performances in the Pinter Studio.

In each project the group met weekly over three months, devising text, scenes and songs, creating costumes and props, working through individual and pair work, small and whole group activities. Rehearsal time and informal social time brought participants together in different ways, and this often overlapped, with small pieces of performance emerging from conversations over tea, or friendships growing during the rehearsal of a cabaret moment.

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 fractures in social cohesion. Intergenerational work can encompass diversity of faith, ability, ethnicity and gender without ever mentioning them. This may be an aspiration that comes from funders and others outside the workshop and rehearsal space, but it can also be felt inside. A

musician and film-maker working on the project, who took a break from participating to sit back and watch everyone dancing later wrote.

“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.”

A participant, Cosmas, a man deep into Alzheimer’s, said.

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

So the purpose of the projects is to bring people together to find connections, to help people challenge assumptions that they have about each other, and to commit to creating something together. I am feeling my way towards the word, ‘community’. The quality of the art making is inextricably caught up with the building of the group into a temporary community.

Zigmunt Bauman writes about ‘the protective walls of community’, and it is clear that this chunk of space and time carves out a temporarily walled space, and the art making gives it a purpose. Perhaps in a temporary community, in particular one that everyone knows is temporary, like a project, the group conspire together to find enough in common between them to allow them to discover their differences without losing the sense of group. The group is free to co-create the internal identity. Bauman goes on to talk about the ‘breaches in the wall’ caused by a lack of unity, but I would argue that in a project that is working well, there is room for difference as well as commonality.

As Lucy Lippard writes: *Community doesn’t mean understanding everything about everybody and resolving all the differences; it means knowing how to work within differences as they change and evolve.*’ (Lippard 1997 p 24) ¹

Field Theory

¹ L. R Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*, (Place? The New Press, 1997 p. 24.)

The frame that I have found most useful through which to understand this temporary community is Field Theory. Developed by Social Scientist Kurt Lewin, and embraced by Gestalt Therapy in relation to group work, Field Theory is ‘ a set of principles, an outlook, a method, and a whole way of thinking that relates to the intimate interconnectedness between [] events and the settings or situations in which these events take place.’ (Parlett in Woldt & Toman 2005 p 47). It is a phenomenological approach that sees a group as individuals constantly in flux, constellating around internal and external needs or drives. 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 all potentially alive and significant, but the perspective of the field changes as the group organises and understands 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, or foreground, while others become background, and vice versa. The need or interest of those in the group organises the field.² This sense of clustering, of coming together temporarily but meaningfully, is at the heart of what I am describing as temporary community. What this perspective brings us is a clear recognition of the liveness of the process. The group bring with them some things that they know about each other, but within the life of the project, within the field, things can change and be reconfigured according to needs, wants and events. Coming into the room with age, ethnic, faith and other identities is a security and a challenge. The process of playing together, imagining together, sharing stories and being heard all contribute to a gentle easing of habitual identities and an experimenting with new ones.

The relationships that emerge aren’t dependent on agreement or setting tensions outside the boundaries of the space and time set apart. Beaumont, writing about Field Theory in relation to group building writes: ‘Contact is not passive perception of a fixed objective reality, but rather the *creation* of a phenomenal experimental reality....Contact is...a mutually creative interaction’. (Beaumont 1993 p90)

² See Jennifer Mackewn *Developing Gestalt Counseling* (1997) Sage Publishing

The creation of this temporary community is not just in the hands of the artists who hold the space, but is emerging through the creative interaction of the whole group, who are 'makers' not just of the creative work, in this case the performance, but also of the group itself.

In this 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 future change in individuals, groups and society through our work. Bauman writes of the idea of community that carries a 'feel'; community is a place where we can relax, can trust each other, 'can feel safe and never puzzled or taken aback'. (Bauman 2001) This overestimated notion of safety in community is, I believe, a particular challenge in intergenerational arts practice, where there may be expectations of 'instant bonds' between young and older people, (the idea that people automatically get on with people of their grandparents' generation), or an idea that reminiscence will form the core activity, removing us from our present. It is helpful to remember that within the intergenerational project space we have the past as remembered now, and the future as anticipated now, in a dynamic relationship. As Lewin expressed it, various forces, vectors and 'influences' act together to provide a specific, unique outcome in a particular situation at a particular time. (Woldt and Toman 2005)

This research came about through a particular set of projects, when working with a group of people who lived near to one another but did not know each other. The themes, for example, "All in the same Boat" and 'The wisdom of all the ages' were designed to provide a wide container for a variety of fictional and non-fictional narratives. I am currently working on a new intergenerational performance project, this time explicitly aimed at uncovering the many, and sometimes conflicting narratives of Tower Hamlets, 'Speak as you Find'. Where I previously did not feel anxious that the protective walls might be breached (to cite Bauman), on this project I have experienced an awareness that individuals were struggling to stay within the project or struggling to accept someone else within the project. According to the Indices of Deprivation (Communities & Local Government 2007) Tower Hamlets ranks as the third most deprived local authority in

England.³ It is also home to Canary Wharf, and Liverpool Street, thriving commercial centres, and Brick Lane, known both for its Asian restaurants and shops and its alternative arts community. This complexity is reflected, through the participants, Knowing that we are aiming to explode any sense that there is a single story to tell about Tower Hamlets immediately created tension for one participant who stated, “I don’t do negativity”. People born and brought up in the area, who include Bangladeshi origin young women as well as older white working class Londoners, are wary of the accounts on newcomers. One young woman, interviewed for our research, was proud to tell us that she knew no local people, because that wasn’t the point of living in London, was it. Anxieties about the potential arrival of refugees emerge in covert ways, and one person spoke of the deep wound caused by the July 7th bombings. Might we, by making a piece about community, find that we are unable to foster a sense of community in the group?

In Field Theory, there is no edge to the group. This kind of field doesn’t have a fence and gates. This field is an idea imported from physics, where iron filings are sprinkled on paper placed on top of a magnet. The specific patterns displayed are representation of the magnetic field and the configuration of the forces within it. Change the position of the magnet and the whole pattern shifts. ‘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*

This is a pattern I see repeatedly in my current project. There are moments of whole group focus and harmony, and moments when one statement or narrative drives some people away from the centre to the edges. When one participant (an atheist) asked why all the religions couldn’t come together because they all believed the same thing, another stood and left the group, with the excuse of making tea, saying under her breath, “No, they absolutely are not.” Is this a breach in the protective walls? Since both people are still coming, two months later, and the person who ‘doesn’t do negativity’ was the first to sign up for the final phase of the project,

³ <http://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/idoc.ashx?docid=e953de2f-9405-489f-af4c-62ee75c16e50&version=-1> accessed 11.12.2011

I currently conclude that the dynamic experiment in which we are all engaged, artists and participants, is, without protective walls, proving to be a location for connection and creativity. I have also witnessed a very diverse group, when asked, abruptly, by one participant during a tea break, how anyone could believe in God, lean forward to engage in a long and lively conversation. An improvisation about an industrial sewing machine found echoes in the experience of everyone in the room; it turned out to be a Nigerian, Bangladeshi, Jewish, East End sewing machine used in the olden days, ten years ago and now, by women at home and men and women in factories. It was an anchor, liberation, a millstone, a money earner, a relic, a Rolls Royce. Within the dynamic field of the group, the dynamic field of theatre making, it was all possible

Here 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 country 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. So, in the making of performance with a community group, across generations, so long as we remain alert and aware of all the potential stories and identities brought into the room, and the way in which they might change, the coming together in temporary community has room for everyone.