**Title:** **Re-igniting the radical legacy in Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA): How the work of David Johnston and Theatre Centre in the 1980s can inform current practice.**

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**Abstract:** In this article I consider the legacy of my late mentor David Johnston, the pioneering producer of Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA). Prompted by a symposium at Derby Theatre in February 2018, I reflect on how Johnston’s innovations as Artistic Director of the TYA company Theatre Centre (1977-1986) can inform current debates about professional theatre in schools. Through analysis of a re-discovered 1986 documentary film about Theatre Centre and a re-examination of David Holman’s influential play *Peacemaker* (1982), I argue that the TYA theatre-makers of the ‘80s were part of a radical, democratic movement that can inform the creation of an alternative to current neoliberal practices. Finally, in recognition that Johnston’s central talent was to apply democratic principles to fluctuating contexts, I propose some recommendations for current UK TYA in his spirit.

**Keywords:** Theatre; education; schools; diversity; democracy.

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*“Slowly a brick is moving and then is removed on the blue side. A blue hand is seen. It places a blue handkerchief in the space that has been made. SIMP comes back to the wall and takes the handkerchief. She looks at it and wraps it round her. She takes off her red handkerchief and lays it in the hole. She comes back to FRANNY. The blue hand reappears and takes the red handkerchief. Pause. The last brick is replaced. Music continues.”*

Final stage direction from *Peacemaker* by David Holman (1982).[[1]](#endnote-1)

My friend and mentor David Johnston, the pioneering producer of Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA), died on 23rd November 2017. On 21st February 2018, a previously lost film about Theatre Centre, made in 1986 by film-maker Tony Palmer, was screened at [a symposium](https://www.derbytheatre.co.uk/peacemaker-research-symposium) curated in Johnston’s honour by his long-time collaborator Ava Hunt. That film was the inspiration for this article.

I first met David Johnston when I was a fledgling workshop-leader at the London Bubble in 1986 and later he was my boss as part of the pioneering educational theatre work in Nottinghamshire in the 1990s. This reflection on his work, then, is in part personal. David was an inspirational figure; he provoked, supported and inspired. Above all, he encouraged the application of fundamental principles to changing circumstances. This article is a consideration of his unheralded achievements, used as a lens to examine the current landscape.

Perhaps the best known and most performed play Johnston produced was David Holman’s *Peacemaker,* part of a programme of work undertaken over several years that included Holman’s other peace plays (*Susuma’s Story* and *ABC*) and the emergence of Theatre Centre’s Women’s Company, who staged Nona Shepherd’s *Getting Through* (1985, unpublished), Bryony Lavery’s *Over and Out* (1985, unpublished) and Lisa Evans’ *Under Exposure* (1984)[[2]](#endnote-2), as well as a host of other plays.  On the newly-discovered film, Shepherd herself speaks movingly about the emergence of the Women’s Company, noting how feminism informed learning for both girls and boys:

Feminism is obviously being positive towards girls; it’s not being negative towards boys. If you’re a feminist I don’t consider that you’re anti-male, but that you’re pro-women, which is a very different thing. I don’t agree that there’s not positive role-models for boys. For instance, in the play … *Getting Through*, the boy in that, who is the main character Kaz’s best friend in the whole world, is a very positive role-model for boys.[[3]](#endnote-3)

As well as notable feminist theatre practitioners, the company attracted a range of artists from across the spectrum of alternative theatre, with strong influences from companies such as Black Theatre Co-Op, Gay Sweatshop, Graeae, Oval House and the Women’s Theatre Group. As Johnston records in his interview with the website *Unfinished Histories* (Croft & Higgs, 2018)*,* the resulting plays - such as Noel Greig’s play *Laughter from the Other Side* (1986, Unpublished) about an Asian boy in love with a white boy - started to tell stories that had previously been hidden.

The UK TYA movement in the ‘80s, as epitomised by Theatre Centre’s approach, was significantly more radical than current practice, not just in content, but in process. David Johnston’s role in this was pivotal. During his tenure at Theatre Centre, he came to realise that his strengths were not as a conventional director and writer, but as a facilitator of other people’s talents. He became expert at the alchemy of putting together artistic teams, informed by balancing political commitment with an equal and complementary passion for improving artistic quality. For Johnston, artistic quality was intimately connected to a democratic ethos that reached beyond the rehearsal-room floor into the decision-making mechanisms of the company. As Johnston himself says in the newly-discovered film:

We do have people who are closer to working-class backgrounds […] the Black community […] who are fighting those grass roots fights […] outside their work as well as within it. […] There’s very little danger that they become detached, that they become patronising. It’s very easy for theatre of this nature to become very liberal […] There’s a danger that the sort of things that we prioritise become token gestures for organisations and funding bodies who really aren’t committed to change [...] There’s no doubt that supporting disabled people, supporting Black people, supporting feminism, gay rights and so on is often done now as a token gesture, to cover the deep innate resistance to change that they have […] After two years we created an equal wage policy […] We introduced company meetings and decisions, so everyone could participate in company decisions.[[4]](#endnote-4)

This work had a profound, if unrecognised, influence on the UK theatre ecology and also extended its impact on TYA across the globe, mainly through the vehicle of the international TYA network: ASSITEJ. This rich mix of diverse artists, then, led to Theatre Centre becoming a laboratory for finding artistic expressions to celebrate difference. This was as a direct result of the need to engage with young audiences and the schools’ context. As well as providing life-enhancing narratives for marginalised young people whose stories they mirrored, each company member used their life experience to inform a dramaturgy to reach those *not* sharing their backgrounds. However, Johnston himself was acutely aware that didactic plays with strong “messages” would not serve the company’s purpose. This approach contrasted strongly with some of the more evangelical work of the alternative theatre movement. As Johnston says about the Peace Plays:

These did become controversial, but they weren’t controversial in the schools, they were happily accepted in conservative areas […] we did have to fight off a challenge that said these plays were biased and political, and that challenge came from Norman Tebbitt, who was a senior government minister at the time […] It was clear that our work was thought-out, that it wasn’t biased, that it was well-done, entertaining and it was done in complete cooperation with parents and teachers.(Johnston, 1987, p23)[[5]](#endnote-5)

*Peacemaker’s* controlling idea - of culture being a route to open up dialogue - was echoed in the company's ethos. Written seven years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the story is simple, but not simplistic. The Reds and the Blues are divided by a wall. They stereotype each other as the enemy, with myths abounding about the other sides’ malevolence. Through the characters Simp and Bluey’s exchange of performance skills and friendship, they start to understand each other. However, the play assiduously avoids the naïve and unrealistic solution that the people can bring down a wall. Instead, at the end of the play, there’s a small breach in the wall symbolising the beginnings of understanding and dialogue, as quoted in the stage direction at the beginning of this article. Thus, the play is radical in its promotion of dialogue across what seems insurmountable difference. And it is this act of creative exchange across difference that was also a central theme of Johnston’s leadership at Theatre Centre.

Thirty-six years later, of course, the play’s themes are as potent as ever. Seemingly unbreachable walls, both literal and metaphorical, are our major challenge in classrooms, families, workplaces, international relations … and in theatre.

It is worth emphasising the radicalism of Theatre Centre’s practice at this time, in contrast to mainstream UK theatre. To take one pertinent example, the National Theatre’s precis of their opening decade, *Stage by Stage South Bank: 1976-1987[[6]](#endnote-6)* almost exactly mirrors Johnston’s time at Theatre Centre. It records no women directors or writers and no disabled people or people of colour as artists at all. By stark contrast, Tony Palmer’s film records a green room conversation with one of Theatre Centre’s touring acting companies. Actors Hamish MacDonald and Royce Ullah discuss their reception by teachers and colleagues as a disabled actor and Asian actor respectively:

Hamish: I think it was very much how I felt with able-bodied[[7]](#endnote-7) people coping with me being disabled … At one point in the show I had to be lifted up and thrown forward. “Good God! Can we do this?” Of course, I said: Go on, see what happens. If I break my leg, I’ll break my leg. They had my permission to do it, so they threw me, it was OK.

Royce: When we go to a school, a couple of us go in, we talk to a teacher, we find out where the toilets are and where we’re performing [...] There are times I’ve been in with Joe[[8]](#endnote-8) and I’ve asked questions to the teacher and they’ve been answered back to Joe. And I felt I wasn’t being taken seriously. Do you have any experience like that? Where you’ve gone in with an able-bodied person and all the information’s been given to the able-bodied person?

Hamish: Yeah. All the time … It’s happened all my life.

This exchange gives a significant flavour of the company’s workplace culture. As well as working creatively with other theatre-makers in the rehearsal room, Theatre Centre actors were expected to engage with every aspect of the company’s work. Working in schools, there was a pedagogic purpose to all aspects of the visit: the liaison with teachers; conversations with the audience before and after the play; and the relationships within the company during get-ins and get-outs. In all these circumstances, the politics of class, disability, gender, race and sexuality were negotiated; not always without conflict, but always with a collective focus on producing the highest quality artistic and educational experience for the audience.

It was also significant that the acting companies were largely populated with young actors, some as young as seventeen. This was congruent with the company’s emphasis on equalities in every aspect of its work. Prejudice based on background was continually challenged, so the company naturally championed the young. Therefore, children and young people were not viewed as nascent adults, but regarded with respect; this was a theatre that defiantly never patronised its core audience. Theatre Centre’s actors in the ‘80s were frequently recruited straight from youth theatres, rather than drama schools, and audiences would be welcomed into worlds inhabited by vibrant, dynamic and engaged young adults. The actors were not proxy-parental figures, but more like older siblings.

It is certainly no coincidence that Johnston, along with others in the wider TYA/TiE movement, was inspired by the work of Augusto Boal. Boal himself was influenced fundamentally by the pedagogy of Paolo Freire, who “… places the dialogic at the very centre of his philosophy of emancipatory education” (Jackson, 2007)[[9]](#endnote-9). Learning through dialogue was happening at many levels and in many places at Theatre Centre; in school halls, rehearsal rooms, company meetings, at festivals and at conferences. Vital to Johnston’s philosophy was a mutual respect extended to all those involved - artists, administrators, technicians, audiences, teachers and funders - all encouraged to engage in dialogue about the effectiveness of the plays.

Theatre Centre’s team therefore had an implicit understanding that their role was multi-faceted, with dialogic learning at the heart of their practice. Pedagogy, the political context, policy formation and company strategy were all discussed and negotiated by every company member and there were numerous opportunities to meet and share work with other companies. This meant that company members saw themselves, crucially, as part of a radical movement. Just as Johnston himself was in part influenced by his predecessor at Theatre Centre, the children’s theatre and drama-in-education pioneer Brian Way, so more experienced professionals took responsibility for nurturing the next generation. It is this sense of legacy, a passing-on to the next generation, that distinguishes this moment in TYA as a *movement,* rather than solely a field of work defined by place, audience or genre.

Consequently, Theatre Centre, along with many other TYA/TiE companies, became a dynamic training ground for theatre workers. Specifically, many actors from non-traditional backgrounds of all kinds created professional pathways that otherwise would have been denied them. This is in stark contrast to current career prospects for theatre-makers. Despite the raft of recent diversity initiatives, such as the quotas now embedded in the National Theatre’s planning[[10]](#endnote-10), the nature of most contemporary actors’ experience is within an economic model dependent on precarious employment. As a result, examples are rare of UK theatre-makers involved in dialogic, experiential learning as part of their work.

Theatre Centre’s commitment to diversity also led to them pushing aesthetic boundaries. Here, Disability Studies theory is useful. In their article “Towards an Affirmation Model of Disability” (2000), John Swain and Sally French move beyond the more familiar territory of the social model of disability (Oliver, 2010; Priestly, 1999) and state:

The affirmative model, however, is not about the 'pain of impairment', but on the contrary the positive experiences and identity of disabled people from being impaired and disabled. The social model is collectively expressed, most obviously, through direct action and campaigns in the struggle of the powerless for power. The affirmative model again builds on this particularly through the development of the Disability Arts Movement within which disabled people collectively affirm their positive identity through visual arts, cabaret, song and … poetry.(Swain & French, 2000, p259)[[11]](#endnote-11)

We can extend Swain and French’s “affirmative model” beyond disability to illuminate the experience of diverse theatre artists coming together; where concerns about class, disability, gender, race and sexuality converged. What held Theatre Centre together, given the disparate range of life experiences was, as Swain & French would have put it, a “non-tragic view”[[12]](#endnote-12). Not only was the work informed by an array of perspectives borne out of non-normative lived experience, but it was the ensemble’s very *combination* of experiences, the expression of solidarity that became termed “celebration of difference”[[13]](#endnote-13), that gave the work its unique identity. By illustration, the characters Simp and Bluey in *Peacemaker* (a dancer and juggler respectively) become representative not just of the underclass in their different, but similar, tribal societies, but also, in another way, symbols of creative artists struggling to find a shared means of expression that recognises differences.

The success of Theatre Centre’s plays was dependent on addressing the challenge of the context of a school hall; with all its distracting acoustics, dimensions and smells. At their best, the company created a profound sense of *communitas* (Turner, 1987)[[14]](#endnote-14), a sense of a cohesive, but temporary, community. Jill Dolan in *Utopia in Performance* takes Turner’s concept further and posits the idea of *“utopian performatives”*, which she describes as:

… small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense. (Dolan 2005: p5)[[15]](#endnote-15)

In the 1986 film, we see the Theatre Centre Mixed Company performing to a group of infants. The most compelling element of this section of the film is the way the camera lingers on the children’s enthralled faces. There’s a sense that the audience are experiencing one of Dolan’s utopian moments. In addition, combined with the communal experience, each child would be experiencing their own private interaction with the play. As Mike Alfreds says:

Good audienceship can only occur if they’re allowed space for their creativity. […] Any moment in a performance can have a totally different meaning and be a totally different experience for each person. All members of the audience create their own story. […] Storytellers initiate, audiences complete. Storytellers suggest, audiences fulfil. (Alfreds, 2013, p29)[[16]](#endnote-16)

It’s in this act of completion, filling in the gaps with imagination, that deeper learning occurs. This, then, is not a static utopia imagined by an absent author. The play provides a unique space where every child can imagine their own unique affirmative possibilities.

The sense of a radical TYA/TiE movement with a dynamic legacy is still alive, although more muted than in the last century. Many of the pioneers from the mid-20th Century are still active and have continued in the past fifty years to pass on ideas and knowledge. Producer-writer-director Vicky Ireland added a further provocation at the Derby symposium:

David made revolutions. He raged against unfairness, against elitism, lack of care, lack of recognition. He fought for inclusivity, by supporting all those he felt needed it. He spoke up for children and young people, because he cared deeply...

… And I find it interesting that whilst I tend to connect outrage with something hot and burning, the definition is in fact 1250-1300; from the Old French *outrage,* meaning, “to push beyond bounds”.[[17]](#endnote-17)

It is this sense of outrage that is present now in calls for greater equality and diversity in theatre. Always starting from a clear set of values, Johnston had the facility to create change through divergent thinking. He was constantly aware that the work could only flourish, that the outrage could only lead to tangible results, if there was a rigorous analysis of the current context. He was constantly working for TYA to achieve the recognition and the status it deserved. For that reason mainly, he was instrumental in producing festivals and forging international partnerships. One wonders, then, how he would respond to the current state of TYA and how to unlock its potential?

For the most part, the halcyon days of TYA/TiE in the 1970s and 1980s are viewed as an historical anomaly. However, I wonder, taking another metaphorical lead from *Peacemaker*, if there’s a chink in the wall that could re-ignite a movement, albeit one that would inevitably have different characteristics from the past.

To ground this thinking, it’s worth analysing the current landscape and the inhibiting factors to a resurgent artist-led TYA movement. The terrain of much of the debate on arts education in general is to justify it in the instrumental terms of curriculum delivery[[18]](#endnote-18). In 2007, Anthony Jackson pointed out how education changes have affected theatre in schools, particularly the marginalisation of Drama as a subject:

Education policy in the UK has been dominated for some twenty years by an obsession with results and league tables – ever since the introduction of the national curriculum in 1988 and subsequently the progressive implementation of performance indicators for teachers and pupils alike. Subject benchmarks, detailed assessment criteria for every learning outcome and a barrage of tests to be undertaken at almost every level of the child’s progression through the school have led to a mountain of forms to be completed and boxes to be ticked. The resulting bureaucracy, together with the omission of drama as a formally recognised curriculum subject (except under the umbrella of English), has contributed to the marginalisation of the performing arts in many schools.(Jackson 2007: p199)[[19]](#endnote-19)

This argument is still pertinent over ten years later, emphasising how established, and therefore obdurate, this narrow education paradigm has become.

One can see that the kind of artist-led work Theatre Centre was making in the ‘80s can seem an impossible fit in today’s schools. For a theatre company to be effective, it needs the time, space and finance that the system now ill-affords. Above all, teachers need to see TYA as a benefit to their purpose, not a hindrance. Part of the answer to this dilemma has rested frequently with curriculum-targeted plays, but they narrow the potential of the theatre experience substantially. If high quality theatre in schools is to flourish again, it follows that it should *not* primarily be evaluated solely against instrumentalist criteria.

A new evaluation framework is needed to assess the more slippery area of TYA’s intrinsic values, as well as what it can achieve in terms of the curriculum. To accomplish this, I have designed the Dialogue-across-Difference (D-a-D) framework, adapted from a model designed by the marketing company Morris Hargreaves MacIntyre (2005) (MHM)[[20]](#endnote-20).

**Dialogue Across Difference (D-a-D)**

**A framework for evaluating Theatre in Schools**

Figure 1.

The educational strand, of course, still fulfils the function of curriculum tie-in. In addition, the “social”, “emotional” and “spiritual” categories can also be recognised for their pedagogic value, albeit not strictly measurable in terms of data on academic achievement. A chief benefit of the D-a-D framework is that it doesn’t separate raw academic achievement data from the promotion of a positive learning environment; a prerequisite of achievement, however defined. In this respect, it is worth reflecting on the wealth of research on how “positive psychology” contributes to achievement, with strong evidence that growing mental health problems are affecting not just happiness, but also, unsurprisingly, achievement (Roffey, 2015). I would assert that a strong focus on identifiable contributions to well-being, evaluated against the D-a-D model, will enable TYA companies to appreciably reinvigorate their partnerships with schools.

With a focus on positive mental health, bold future government policy could unlock a new wave of TYA. This in turn might influence policy further afield internationally. To create this sea-change, the Arts Council, for example, could increase funding to international festivals and require well-funded portfolio organisations to ring-fence a percentage of funding for an independent TYA provision to take plays to schools.

In conclusion, there were three essential elements of Theatre Centre’s policy and practice under David Johnston that should be taken forward today, namely:

* The promotion of a democratic ethos encouraging dialogic learning and optimising professional development for diverse artists;
* The presentation of high quality plays in schools, combining aesthetic and pedagogic attributes;
* A determination to give this hidden work wider profile, particularly through international exchange.

These essential elements are achievable with a seemingly paradoxical combination of utopianism and pragmatic strategic thinking. It was these twin qualities that Johnston brought: a divergently-thinking creative producer, combining a sense of outrage with articulate advocacy and a clear vision.

**Footnotes**

1. *Peacemaker* is published in: Redington, C. (1987). *Six theatre-in-education programmes*. London: Methuen, p.23 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Lisa Evans’ play *Under Exposure* can be found in : Redington, C. (1987). *Six theatre-in-education programmes*. London: Methuen, p.41. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Palmer, T. (2018). *David Johnston - Memorial*. [online] YouTube. Available at: https://youtu.be/gjZrmJgrFVg [Accessed 19 Jun. 2018]. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Haill, L. and Wood, S. (n.d.). *Stage by stage South Bank: 1976 – 1987*. [ebook] London: National Theatre. Available at: https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/sites/default/files/stagebystage-pt3\_1976-87.pdf [Accessed 27 Jun. 2018]. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. It is worth noting that the term “able-bodied” is now not generally considered to align with the aims of the Disability Rights movement, although it was common currency at the time. See: The art of respectful language. (n.d.). [ebook] Available at: http://www.equalitytraining.co.uk/images/news/language\_of\_respect.pdf [Accessed 29 Jun. 2018]. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Joe was a white actor with the company. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Jackson, A. (2007). *Theatre, education and the making of meanings*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p.185. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Nationaltheatre.org.uk. (2018). *Diversity on our stages | National Theatre*. [online] Available at: https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/about-the-national-theatre/diversity/on-our-stages [Accessed 4 Jun. 2018]. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Swain, J. and French, S. (2000). Towards an Affirmation Model of Disability. *Disability & Society*, 15(4), pp.569-582. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid p569 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. For a public statement on Theatre Centre’s “celebration of difference” position, see: Tyler, P. (1987). Celebration of Difference. *New Voices : SCYPT Journal*, (16). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Turner, V. (2000). *The anthropology of performance*. [Place of publication not identified]: PAJ Publications. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Dolan, J. (2005). *Utopia in performance*. University of Michigan. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Alfreds, M. (2013). *Then what happens: Storytelling and adapting for the theatre*. London: Nick Hern. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ireland, V. (2018). The Annual David Johnston TYA Lecture on 'Outrage': A proposal. In: *Peacemaker - Research Symposium*. Derby. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. The instrumental approach to promoting arts education is best typified by: STEAM: Why STEM can only take us so far. (2017). [ebook] Cultural Learning Alliance. Available at: https://culturallearningalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/CLA-STEAM-Briefing-A4.pdf [Accessed 28 Jun. 2018]. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Jackson, A. (2007). *Theatre, education and the making of meanings*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p.185. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Morris Hargreaves McIntyre (2005). *Never mind the width, feel the quality*. Manchester, UK: The Museums And Heritage Show, pp.9-13.

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