

Pushing the Boundaries

The Living Legacy

The last stage direction of the play *Peacemaker* goes like this:

“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.”

It’s an interestingly ambivalent moment. Especially considering that this is a play for primary-aged children. The play, for those who don’t know it, was written by David Holman for Theatre Centre in 1982 and is about two peoples divided by a wall – still sadly all too contemporary both as a metaphor and as an actuality. The play is neither gloomy nor idealistic. Although

the Reds and the Blues have started to communicate and tackle the prejudices that they held about each other, those in power haven't yet changed – it's the people that have *started*, yes just begun, to change. You could, I suppose, sum up the spirit of the play by the Gramscian phrase: "Pessimism of the intellect: Optimism of the will."

In a sense, this was not just the guiding philosophy of the play, but also that of David Johnston's Theatre Centre in the 70s and 80s. It could be said to be true of much of the movement of Theatre for Young Audiences and Theatre-in-Education for the last decades of the last century. In fact, much of what I'm about to say about Theatre Centre was a distinct feature of a whole vibrant movement. I emphasise "movement", because I want to propose that a *movement* is as much needed today as it ever was – that is: a collection of small but significant acts that amounts to something bigger than the sum of its parts. I hope a reinvigorated TYA movement in the UK could be imbued with the spirit I witnessed at Theatre Centre in the 80s,

but also with an understanding that our context has changed immeasurably. We need fresh thinking. Actually, we've always needed fresh thinking...

In the short time I've got, I want to flag up three key elements of the work that I think we can learn from today – they're apparent in the film we've just seen: leadership, learning and quality. And, I want to say something about how we might harness these principles in our very challenging current climate.

Firstly, I want to start with the leadership role that David took on. He was a Creative Producer long before the term was anything like common currency. In this, he was facilitative and democratic. He resolutely did not appoint in his own likeness – he relished the opportunities brought by diversity. The teams he brought together, were remarkably diverse for their time in terms of gender, race, class, disability and sexuality. Compare and contrast with what was going on in conventional theatre. Perhaps the only way that they were not diverse was that the

vast majority of artists were young. At Theatre Centre in those days you were considered old if you were over thirty. And artists were, in the main, trusted. They weren't hired and fired, contract by contract. And every member of the company was not just *allowed* to have their say – it was *expected*. Perhaps David was driven by a style of leadership summed up by that quotation often attributed to Lao Tzu:

“The bad leaders the people blame. The good leaders the people praise. But the great leaders, the people say: we did it ourselves.”

And the result was not only excellent plays for young audiences, it was also the creation of an incubator for talent for the sector ... and beyond. The stone that David lobbed into the lake has had far-reaching ripples.

Secondly, and of course connected, *learning* was at the heart of the work. Of course, the plays were rich in themes, which

were actually dealt with in very sophisticated ways – not didactically (mostly), but dialectically. Questions were posed, rather than “teachers’ answers” imposed. Also, every aspect of a school visit was radically pedagogic. The get-in might challenge gender stereotyping; the teacher liaison might question normative assumptions about who’s in charge; and the mostly young actors would, in the short time that they were guests in a school, talk to their audience. This was defiantly not a parental voice, or the kind of teacher’s voice they might have been used to. Actors as young as 17 would be initiating dialogue about the world of the play. Which, of course, was also deeply connected to the world of the young audience.

All the work of the company beyond the performances had learning at its centre as well. Company meetings might have been painful, but they were not merely ways of cascading information. Policy and strategy were forged there. Plays might have been written, rather than devised, but the process of dramaturgy was deeply collaborative. So, at every level,

company members were active participants in dialogic learning. It's no surprise that theatre makers who began their careers in the field as actors, have blossomed as directors, writers and producers as well. Of course, this deep learning was made possible by permanent companies on long contracts. But I ask: Are jobs that substantially contribute to young artists' professional development as impossible an aspiration today as it may seem? Optimism of the will?

Lastly, I want to reflect on one aspect of what made the actual performance events in schools so extraordinary – of such high quality. Here, I'm defining quality not by notions of technique, craft or virtuosity – although there was plenty of that on display - but by the electricity of the event. An event happening for the most part in a school hall. Just a glimpse of the audiences we see in the film should tell us that here is an audience that was completely rapt and absorbed in the world of the play. In some ways, this is surprising. Schools can present many barriers to creating the perfect circumstances for performance. Those of

us who've created work for schools know that rows spilling over from the playground, teachers' shushing children and doing their marking in the back row, echoey acoustics, random smells of cabbage and lunchtime staff clattering trollies during sensitive moments all have the potential to sabotage our best artistic intentions. And yet, more often than not, a play's dramaturgy can overcome all the distractions. There's not a single recipe for this. But overall and most importantly the creation of what the theatre anthropologist Victor Turner terms *communitas* – a temporary sense of community. It's vital that the audience can leave behind the habitual way that they interact with an environment and in one way or another imagine that things could be different. The visit of a theatre company to a school can do that – and it's a powerful tool for learning in its broadest sense.

So, what of the future? We are now in a climate where there really is barely a TYA movement. Certainly not as vibrant and extensive as it was when that film was made. It's been 30

years since the Education Reform Act brought a raft of measures, notably the national curriculum, that have radically changed our school system. Hosting a visiting company requires a great deal more work than ever before from hard-pressed teachers. Artists and companies have responded in a number of ways. They have, for example, targeted more work to meet the specifications of the curriculum. And much of this work is still of high quality – but much is not. The danger, of course, is that the work will be evaluated chiefly against raw metrics. How much higher in the league tables will a school go if it brings in a theatre company? Even if we can manage the acrobatics needed to prove it does – isn't this the wrong question to be asking of the value of art to young people? Can a theatre company acting primarily as a deliverer of the curriculum still be an engine of innovation for the whole of theatre - as it once was. So what can we do?

Here's the beginnings of a thought of how we can re-frame theatre for young audiences in schools.

Let's start with the assertion – borne out by research – that there is a mental health crisis affecting our young people. We can agree that. And this is a global phenomenon.

Unsurprisingly, the research also indicates that this mental health crisis has an impact on attainment. So, rather than having an evaluative framework that assesses educational value narrowly, with metrics around, say, retention of knowledge and understanding and articulation of concepts, I propose evaluating more widely. Let's look at other aspects that contribute to learning: that contribute to the wider positive mental health of young people. So, how does a play engage its audience *emotionally*? Does it lead to greater empathy and unlock greater expressivity? What about the *social* value of theatre in schools. Does it bring the community together, including the adults, especially across difference? And perhaps most controversially, a category difficult to measure: how does the play offer a broadly *spiritual* experience? One that creates

the kind of memorable and uplifting event that we could perhaps infer was happening for that audience in the 1986 film.

I offer these thoughts as a way to bridge - from the extraordinary discovery of this lost film to you today as people interested in theatre for young audiences. I hope the thoughts are useful as we explore these issues for the rest of today.