Introduction to Politicising Communities

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The title of this section announces its central tension: the potentially contradictory strains of political and community theatre which historically have pursued different trajectories. Political theatre is usually considered to be theatre created by professional artists with an avowed political intent in terms of how the world is presented and how that representation is intended to influence the attitudes and, possibly, behaviour of its audiences. While theatre, at times and in places, has always been political, the twentieth century witnessed the emergence and evolution of a distinct branch of theatre bearing the label, as announced in Erwin Piscator's 1929 account of his theatre activity, *Das Politische Theater* (Piscator 1980). In line with the spread of socialist and communist movements throughout Europe after the First World War, theatre companies were created with explicit aims of rehearsing alternatives to governance based on capitalism (Stourac and McCreery 1986). Long after these companies have come and gone, the abiding influence on political

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theatre has been Bertolt Brecht whose practice and theory continue to form the foundations of contemporary notions of theatre intended to provoke social change. Echoing Marx's *Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach*, Brecht recorded in the notes to his production of *Katzgraben* in 1953: 'I wanted to apply to the theatre the principle that it is important not only to interpret the world, but to change it' (Kuhn et al. 2015, 251).

Though community theatre is also largely a concept deriving from the early twentieth century, its founding principles both overlap with and exhibit differences from political theatre. Eugene van Erven characterises it in these terms: 'Community theatre is a worldwide phenomenon that manifests itself in many different guises, yielding a broad range of performance styles. It is united, I think, by its emphasis on local and/ or personal stories (rather than pre-written scripts) that are first processed through improvisation and then collectively shaped into theatre … Community theatre yields grass roots performances in which the participating community residents themselves perform and during the creative process of which they have substantial input' (van Erven 2001, 2). These notions of personal story and collective creation are extended by Petra Kuppers into the broader realm of performance with an emphasis on a process that may, or may not, lead to a product: 'I understand community performance to be work that facilitates creative expression of a diverse group of people, for aims of self expression [*sic*] and political change. Community performances are **communally created**. They are not individually authored: the end product, if it comes into existence, is not predetermined by an artist who directs people towards this goal' (Kuppers 2007, 3–4). Notwithstanding the postmodern mantra that the personal is political, potential contradictions lurk here. Self-expression, depending on the self in question, may be conservative, reactionary and profoundly anti-social but, if it is the collective will of a specific community to express such views in performance, is the facilitator merely the support mechanism for such an outcome? Self-expression and political change may not always be the cosy bedfellows that Kuppers envisages in her definition.

There is a twin crisis surrounding the notion of politicising communities: that of 'politics' and that of 'community'. The direction of social change in relation to traditional leftist notions of what society should look like is no longer either clear or straightforward to achieve. Many of the concepts underpinning classical Marxism were predicated upon

a model of industrial progress, itself based upon the idea of continuous growth as the core aspiration of nations. The 1972 publication of *The Limits to Growth* and its sequel, *The Limits to Growth: The 30 Year Global Update* (Meadows et al. 2004), have exploded the myth of infinite, material progress and ushered in a post-industrial era of globalisation that has redrawn the old class battle-lines while exacerbating inequality to a degree not seen in Europe since the Middle Ages. By the same token, these transnational disruptions, together with the arrival of the digital age, have thrown into question former notions of what constitutes a community. Mass migration has caused the creation and disintegration of communities at a speed and on a scale never previously experienced. What is the community to be politicised? What are the politics to be embraced at the grassroots? The authors in this section struggle with these questions even as they offer specific examples of practice which may provide tentative clues towards answers.

This section begins with Prentki's theoretical discourse on the operation of power in a neoliberal state. Through a referencing of his argument around Shakespeare's core text on the corruptibility of authority, *King Lear*, Prentki offers an analysis drawn from the broadly Marxist framework of dialectical materialism. Within this framework, he sees a combination of Paulo Freire's pedagogy with the theatre aesthetics of Bertolt Brecht as opening up possibilities for communities to become engaged in politics. In particular, the counter-hegemonic strategies of Brecht, centred on his *Verfremdungseffekte,* suggest some means by which applied theatre can support communities in acquiring the critical consciousness with which to combat the dominant political discourse of neoliberalism. For this to be effective, however, education, understood along Freirean lines as the 'pedagogy of freedom', will need to be reconceived. Prentki looks to *King Lear* (an increasingly pertinent text in the context of Britain's xenophobic and autocratic self-definition in the light of the Brexit referendum) for an example of how folly might be engaged as a means of provoking changes of attitude at the heart of power. Shakespeare's disquisition on the power of folly and the folly of power renders the 'Boalian binary' of oppressed and oppressor dangerously simplistic and risks enabling applied theatre to become the instrument of that very domestication it seeks to resist.

Dominic Hingorani investigates issues around diversity and representation through a case study of a contemporary work which looks at

these questions in a local community through a historical lens. Besides challenging mainstream notions of British history and community formation, Brolly's choice of the opera form for *Clocks 1888: the greener* disrupts elitist notions of the genre as Brecht did in an earlier period. The location of the production at the Hackney Empire gives rise to ironic thoughts about the nature and lingering influence of notions of empire. A key element in the case study is the engagement of young people in political issues that have shaped their own community in the past and continue to shape it today. Hingorani adds further layers of complexity in his analysis of identity formation in nineteenth-century East London. Here too resistance is predicated upon playfulness; those who survive being those best able to slip backwards and forwards across the borders of fixed identities and to defeat expectations of how the markers of ethnicity, language and class might predict behaviour among both individuals and social groups.

Gary Anderson and Lena Šimić bring these considerations up to date with their own case studies of identity and resistance to the current discourses of neo-fascism and post-truth threatening to engulf Western democracies. They find that traditional notions of revolutionary activism and of national identity need to be recalibrated in the light of globalisation and all possible means adopted for politicising communities at home and abroad. Through the activities of The Study Room in Exile project, Anderson and Šimić use reportage, diary entries, commentary and stream of dissident consciousness in order to create an essay in cultural agency that captures a connection between the private citizen and her engagement with community. The juxtaposition of the domestic with the international, home with abroad, Liverpool with Athens, enables a heartfelt examination of what constitutes a European identity while provoking the questions: Who is now my neighbour? Who is now the other? What does it mean to be 'at home'?

The interview with Roland Muldoon, a founder-member of CAST, returns us to the orbit of the Hackney Empire and its symbolic function during the riots in East London in August 2011. Although Muldoon is a figure associated with the heyday of British political theatre in the 1960s and 1970s, his ever-active intelligence rejects nostalgia in favour of an exploration of what those times may have to offer for political engagement by grassroots communities, in particular his 'patch' of East London, today. Rather than being written off as an alienating agent of

globalisation, the digital, effectively contextualised in the live event, can offer an extra dimension to a community's search for an artistic practice in line with contemporary modes of communication.

In asking what politicising communities might look like in practice, we are immediately plunged into the arena of aesthetics. Bertolt Brecht is the twentieth-century playwright who confronted the challenges of the aesthetics of social change. His world is not our world and he, himself, was adamant about the importance of the process he called 'historicisation': 'The actor must play the incidents as historical ones. Historical incidents are unique, transitory incidents associated with particular periods. The conduct of the persons involved in them is not fixed and universally human; it includes elements that have been or may be overtaken by the course of history and is subject to criticism from the immediately following period's point of view' (Silberman et al. 2015, 187–188). However, as Shannon Jackson (2011, 144–181) points out in her analyses of The Builders Association and Rimini Protokoll, to lay bare the mechanisms that support performance, it is necessary to engage Brechtian strategies of *Verfremdung*. But the aesthetic imperative does not finish there, according to Jackson, who distinguishes between 'the theatrical *medium* that Brecht sought to expose' and 'the conditions of its *support*' (Jackson 2011, 106). Therefore, a post-Brechtian theatre for the digital age, where both means of production and communities are rendered invisible, cannot reveal the means of production without suggesting that that means determines every aspect of the 'reality' presented, a kind of *doppel Verfremdungseffekte* where the mechanisms of defamiliarisation are themselves defamiliarised. 'A twenty-first century post-Brechtianism would also be sceptical of any theatre that imagined itself outside or uncorrupted by the social structures it tried to question' (Jackson 2011, 148). Both social media and their imagined communities are the institutions to be critiqued. The traditional dichotomy of art crushed between the market and the state is now largely redundant, since the state is merely the administrator for the market. Political theatre now has to propose a new state to resist the market or a form of resistance where the community, in effect, sidelines the state. But in the post-industrial, post-dramatic, digital age, what is a community and how does it mobilise for collective resistance? The macro agendas of neoliberalism constantly assert that there is no alternative, yet the examples in this section demonstrate, as Anderson declares, that resistance is fertile.

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