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Community Plays and Community Projects Today: British Artists Share their Experience

Testimonies

Marianne Dugeon, Jon Oram, Ruper Creed and Mike Kenny

Websites

- 1 Conference on Participatory Theatre, Montpellier: <https://emmamontpellier.hypotheses.org/1024>
- 2 Claque – Community Plays: <https://www.communityplays.com/claque.html>
- 3 Dorchester Community Play: <https://www.dorchestercommunityplay.org.uk>
- 4 Rupert Creed: <https://rupertcreed.com/>
- 5 York Mystery Plays: <https://www.yorkmysteryplays.co.uk>

Biographies

John Oram

- 6 Jon Oram is Artistic director of Claque Theatre, formerly Colway Theatre Trust the company founded by Ann Jellicoe in 1979 to explore and develop the concept of the community play which she had devised a year previously. He first worked with Ann in 1982 and was handed the reigns of the company in 1986. He had initially trained as a teacher at the Froebel Institute, Roehampton, London, and studied educational drama for a Licentiate of the Royal Academy of Music and Drama diploma. He trained in mime, and physical theatre with Desmond Jones, Marcel Marceau, celebratory art, and spectacle with Welfare State International, improvisation with Keith Johnstone and Roddy Maude Roxby of Theatre Machine. He taught in primary schools for six years in

London, Newcastle, and Sunderland where, under the guidance of Dorothy Heathcote, he began using mantle of the expert in his teaching practice, an education approach that uses imaginary contexts to generate purposeful activities for learning. Finding the education system incompatible to his own pedagogy, he took a job as an educational drama advisor in Norfolk teaching teachers to use drama as medium for learning and founded Tie Break theatre in education company. In 1982 when he heard of Ann Jellicoe's pioneering work, he saw immediately it was the creative educational environment he was looking for, where young and old could collaborate in a creative process directly and equally in the real world. From working as a movement director and then assistant director with Ann he went on to be the theatre animateur for South West Arts (SWA) in Cornwall where he helped in the development of Knee-High Theatre devising and directing and engaging them as the production team for *The Earth Turned inside Out*, a community play written by Nick Darke, which later transferred to the National Theatre. As director of Colway and Claque he has produced, written and or directed over forty community plays across UK and in Europe, USA, and Canada; these include the first touring community play and an international play in Finland involving towns from seven European countries. He has been developing a more collaborative approach to community plays involving the community in soundings to identify contemporary social issues; drama searches that incorporate principles of educational drama: and improvisation and devising workshops to inform the community's play and performance. He is presently writing *The Art of The Community Play* in which he advocates principles rather than rules and a mutually discovered process rather than a method.

Rupert Creed

- 7 Rupert Creed has worked in participatory theatre for over 40 years. He wrote and directed a series of documentary verbatim plays about working lives, based on the recorded stories of deep-sea fishermen, nurses, steelworkers, social workers and the police. He has written and/or directed community plays in Howden (*Reap the Whirlwind*, 1988), Hull (*Vital Spark*, written by Jon Oram 1992, and *No Surrender*, written by Marvin Close 1996), Dorchester (*Fire from Heaven*, 2002 & *Drummer Hodge*, 2014). He has devised plays with community participants for Hull Truck Theatre and wrote and directed *Turning the Tide* (about Hull's 1968 Trawler Tragedy & the wives campaign for safety) and *Turn and Face the Strange*, about rock guitarist Mick Ronson. He wrote *Made in Hull*, the opening event for Hull City of Culture 2017.

Mike Kenny

- 8 Mike Kenny is known mostly for his plays for children and young people. He began work as an actor/teacher in Leeds Playhouse Theatre in Education. Since beginning to write, in the 80s, he has worked on well over 100 plays for children. He was the first recipient of the Arts Council of England's Children's Prize for his work, and his version of *The Railway Children* won an Olivier Award.
- 9 He has also worked on many community projects in the UK.
- 10 He adapted a version of the York Cycle of Mystery Plays for 2012, which involved around 1700 citizens of York. The following year he wrote *Blood and Chocolate*. This was

co-produced by Slung Low, Pilot Theatre and York Theatre Royal. It told the stories of the men and women of the Rowntree Chocolate factory in the city during the First World War. It played over a mile and a half route through the streets of York.

- 11 In 2014 he cowrote (with Bridget Foreman) a piece called *In Fog and Falling Snow*, which took place in the National Railway Museum (in York). It told the story of the birth of the railways and the subsequent financial crash.
- 12 He worked with Theatre 509, in West Yorkshire on two shows generated from research in the community. *Bike Stories* (part of the cultural programme of the Tour de France, when its first two stages came to Yorkshire) and *Sing and Louder Sing*, created from interviews with old men. The work with 509 developed into two larger scale Community operas (*Calderland* and *The Batley Variations*)

Introduction

- 13 As part of my research on community projects and more particularly on what is called the “Colway model” of community plays, best exemplified by Dorchester community plays¹, I co-organised with Emeline Jouve, Juliette Mézergues and Déborah Prudhon a conference on participatory theatre which was held on 13 May 2022 at Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3.
- 14 We decided to explore more particularly the politics of participatory experiments which aim at celebrating existing communities, or creating new communities through theatre. The conference was entitled “Le théâtre participatif, une forme de théâtre engagé²”. On that day, we welcomed six British artists who have all created and taken part in participatory theatre, either as stage director or as playwright, or as both.
- 15 Here are the thoughts of three of them, on their work over the past few decades. They read as conversations with us spectators and researchers, and also as personal notes, as the authors started reflecting on their artistic itinerary, commenting on the limits and strengths of a very particular way of creating theatre, and recognizing the importance for them of a theatre which they saw also as a tool at the service of the community.
- 16 The first testimony is that of Jon Oram, who is now an internationally-known leader in the field of community plays. He discovered and helped shape this particular form of participatory theatre under the guidance of Ann Jellicoe, who invented the Colway model in the late 1970s and early 1980s.
- 17 As artistic director of Claque³ since 1986, Jon Oram went on producing dozens of community plays across Britain, Europe, the United States and Canada, developing an international movement and transforming the lives of the people who participated in the plays.
- 18 Next, Rupert Creed⁴ shares with us his wide experience, as the director of many community projects in the past 40 years, including documentary verbatim plays based on the recorded stories of workers and community plays for the cities of Howden, Hull and Dorchester.
- 19 Finally, Mike Kenny takes a look at his career as playwright and stage director to discover how important community projects have been for him as an artist. Among his works are a Mystery Play for York which involved around 1700 citizens and other

immersive experiences that inspire and stimulate participation, building a strong sense of community.

20 Marianne Dugeon, September 2022

Jon Oram—From Colway to Claque

Background

21 I'm going to write briefly about my approach to Community Plays as a director though I do also write them. If you are looking for a method, I don't want to be responsible for advocating a definite process. Ann Jellicoe was accused of creating a formula because of her book, *Community Plays and How to Put Them On*. The title was not entirely helpful because the book was more accurately about how Ann put them on. I know Ann would be the last person to advocate a rigid methodology. Everyone should bring themselves to the work and make it their own. On each successive project I draw on experiences from the previous so it's an evolving process. I am not the same person I was yesterday, new ideas regularly materialise; we learn from others' experience as indeed I did at the conference in Montpellier. I never got to give the talk I prepared, because the day didn't go as I imagined, (it was all the better for that) so this essay is based on what I was going to say. I was asked to talk about Ann Jellicoe at the conference—so I had better begin there.

Ann Jellicoe

- 22 Ann Jellicoe is universally credited as being the founder of the contemporary community play. As far as I am aware the term 'community play' was first coined in 1978 to describe *The Reckoning*, a promenade play that had just taken place in Lyme Regis, a small coastal town in the southeast of England.
- 23 It earned a new term because there were unique elements about it. It had been written, produced, and directed by Ann Jellicoe, a nationally renowned playwright, and facilitated by a professional theatre team. Significantly some two hundred local people participated in all the various aspects of making and producing the play including historical research, project management, marketing, fund raising, prop and costume making and performing. It was described in its simplest term as a play for, by and about the people of the community, although the prepositions 'for' 'by' and 'about' can be challenged, but it paved the way for an increasingly democratic approach.
- 24 Ann Jellicoe was a relative newcomer to Lyme Regis: she arrived after more than a decade in London in the 1950's and 60's. She had come to fame as the first woman to have a play produced in the main bill at the Royal Court Theatre, the first woman to direct a play at the Royal Court, the first woman literary manager of the English Stage Company. *The Sport of My Mad Mother*, her first play had a profound impact on British Theatre and paved the way for other women playwrights. Her next play *The Knack*, became a Broadway hit and a film version won the Palme d'Or. She was among the group of leading playwrights of her generation, but by then she was feeling disenchanted; it seemed to her the same audiences were trotting from theatre to theatre, whilst theatre didn't seem that important in most other people's lives.

- 25 Less than a year after the move to Dorset she got the idea of writing a play for the school her children were attending. She wanted to base the play on the town's history, so enticed a few local people to help with the research. The story required a lot of adult parts, so she decided to involve the parents, which prompted her to write the play with some one hundred characters. Then performance workshops began drawing in more townspeople; she instinctively didn't want to turn anyone away, so the project became fully inclusive. No-one imagined it would eventually involve hundreds of people. She persuaded her professional friends to form a small production team, barely paying them their expenses. Exeter University drama department provided a stage management team and lighting equipment for free. The project was affectively growing spontaneously, a response to one decision influencing the next. She worked around setbacks as they occurred or turned them to her advantage. For example, it became obvious that the school stage couldn't hold the now 90 strong cast, so she reshaped the staging to seat a third of the audience in the back of the stage and built stages around the perimeter of the hall leaving an empty space in the centre to accommodate the audience. This established the principle of promenade theatre. Decisions emerged as much out of the pressure of natural forces as by design.
- 26 *The Reckoning* was intended to be a one-off but when Ann realised that she had in fact created a new theatre form, she established the Colway Theatre Trust to develop the process. Between 1980 and 1985 Ann directed three plays and mentored and produced four others. The projects began to display recurring features, and unique methodology became more defined. It wasn't too long before professionals who had been working on Colway play projects began to do their own. I was one of them. Having seen Ann's third community play I persuaded her to take me on as her assistant director for her fourth. By 1985 I was working on my second independent play when Ann called to tell me that the Regional Arts Council was cutting her regular grant by half, and despite a strong public campaign she had lost the battle and in protest announced she was going to retire, but not before taking on her most ambitious project to date. David Edgar had written *Entertaining Strangers* for Dorchester. Ann asked me if I would co-direct it with her and then take over the helm of Colway Theatre.
- 27 Following her resignation Ann wrote *Community Plays: How to Put Them On*, describing her discovery of and journey into community plays. At the end of the preface, she wrote:
- This book seeks to provide a model: you can imitate its practice or create your own. (...) At its simplest the process boils down to credibility: can you deliver and convince others that you can? To discovering how to involve people in creating a work of art, and where to draw the line between the needs of the community and the needs of art⁵.
- 28 This is a recognition by Ann that she was only at the beginning of an evolving process and it's also an invitation to the next generation to develop it further.
- 29 What was distinctive about Ann's approach was the idea that you don't have to compromise on art because you are working with a community and it is thanks to Ann that where she ended is a starting point for the next generations. In the 37 years since, the world has changed, and the work has progressed radically, as she would have wished. Communities should have big influence on what the plays are about and the nature of the process, but they are also unquestionably influenced by the individual practitioners. The directors especially play a significant role in the wider development

of the community play as a form; their values, experiences, and influences on them determine the style in which they are practicing. It is because community plays are personal and specific that it is difficult to define generally what a community process is or to say how democratic they are. So, as I can only talk about the community plays as they are specific to me, I thought it might be helpful to quickly identify some of the influences in my own life.

Personal Influences

- 30 My father was in the Air force so we were constantly moving every two years This may contribute to the conflict I have between an envy towards people who have strong roots, who grew up in the community they were born in, and my contentment with solitude. I agree with my wife's summation of me "I love the idea of community, but I don't want to live in one."
- 31 Travelling also meant I had a disrupted education; I went to thirteen different schools. My allure to the community play was in part due to my scepticism about the education system. I believe we are all born with tremendous natural capacities but have lost touch with most of them by the time we are adults, the major reason this happens is education. The result is that too many people never connect with their true talents and therefore don't know what they're capable of achieving.
- 32 I see the community Play as a corrective vehicle for undoing some of the damage done by our education. School at least gave me the barest handful of certificates paradoxically to train as a teacher at the Froebel Institute. Froebel believed that young children learn best in settings that provide a 'stimulating and prepared environment' where they can explore and learn from their own experiences and perspectives. It was at Froebel I was for the first time in the presence of a great teacher Sybil Levy. It wasn't so much what she taught, but how. I know now that she developed a creative environment and dropped things in front of us like traps for us to discover. I realised to truly grow and find yourself you needed skilled guidance to take ownership of your own creativity.
- 33 Whilst there is criticism levelled at a 'professional hierarchy' in a community play I believe in good leadership to develop and safeguard a creative democracy.
- 34 Then I got a teaching job in Newcastle where Dorothy Heathcote was teaching a full-time Advanced Diploma course at the University. She was developing revolutionary dramatic inquiry approaches to teaching and learning, using role-play, as a teaching tool. Basically, giving children simulated life experiences to motivate enquiry. I used it in my own teaching, eventually getting a job as an educational drama advisor teaching teachers to use drama in this way. It is essential tool now for getting large groups to role play in sessions we call Drama Searches. They help us collectively 'find the play' and inspire the writer.
- 35 In the late 1970's early 80's I got to run a course with Keith Johnstone and work with Roddy Maude Roxby the initiators of contemporary British Improvisation; it was a transformative experience and gave me an improvisational mindset towards teaching, directing, and writing. Improvisation and movement, the use of 'action' are essential disciplines for developing the actor.

Claque's Community Play Process

- 36 I changed the company's name to Claque to break away from the 'Colway model'. We must allow the work to develop in different directions. This is how it works for me presently.

The Pilot Project

- 37 A project starts either by responding to an invitation or identifying a community.
- 38 I get to know a community through running a pilot project which also allows me to ascertain whether a longer-term play project is feasible. My pilot projects go under the banner of 'Empty Gallery' (www.emptygallery.org).
- 39 The same principles of a play apply but the final product is converting an empty shop or other space into a community devised exhibition, interactive installation, or immersive performance environment. The projects all involve group collaboration. When we finish the pilot project and if the play looks suitable and feasible, we hold a public meeting where we present the idea of a play and a feasibility report. It may include local advocates and others from previous play projects to say something about their experience. We will hold a vote and if the meeting votes 'no' that's the end of the affair. If they vote 'yes', we hand out volunteer forms which explain all the potential activities people can sign up for.

The Stimulation of Groups

- 40 During the pilot project, not knowing whether there will be a play or not I am already promoting and animating collaboration.
- 41 The most valuable characteristic of community plays is that most of our work involves people working with groups. I believe groups consist of however many individuals there are in the room plus the entity of the group or 'the group mind'. If we can be socially aware of the group mind, then the characteristics of the group are especially stimulating – it consists of many voices.
- 42 If an individual were to speak as groups speak, we would think them crazy. I find individuals are more of a problem than groups. Individuals are too emotional; you spend years trying to get them over their habits, blocks, and resistance.
- 43 The beauty of a group is that there is less resistance, because groups don't behave that way. Groups are more impulsive than individuals. They are more reckless, less resistant to change, by being reckless the group is more open to transformation. Individuals are much more conservative. Groups can simultaneously take you to different places and engage in a whole host of contradictory activities. Consequently, it disobeys rules, contradicts itself, is restless, delivers the unexpected, is spontaneous, takes you places you wouldn't normally go – these are qualities you need to be creative. This is not a metaphor for individual creativity – groups have the characteristics of groups and individuals have the characteristics of individuals. A group throws you into being collectively creative in ways you can't achieve individually. Groups are far less patient than individuals, which is a virtue in developmental terms.

The Social Actor

- 44 Working as a group is the beginning of what I call ‘The Social Actor’, and here is the thing, contrary to a group focus being a denial of the individual, the nature of groups is that they *can* challenge and develop the individuals within it, in ways they wouldn’t alone, it is also an acceptance of individuals as social beings rather than people in isolation. Groups give individuals courage to take bigger risks so paradoxically, individual potential expands because groups are stimulators. Listening to the group is listening with a willingness to change. This is not to do with a loss of one’s individual uniqueness, it becomes a vital part of what makes this group itself unique. Take yourself away and it becomes a different group. If one can subdue the ego sometimes to serve the group, paradoxically you develop as an individual.
- 45 So, from the pilot project onwards I put a strong emphasis on working not just co-operatively but collaboratively.

Preparing the Play Project

- 46 Once we have the community’s broad agreement to the project, they form a Steering Committee to help manage and oversee and proactively support the whole project.
- 47 We have developed a community play board game that covers a large hall floor and the team spends a half day minimum going through a simulated eighteen month play project, solving problems.
- 48 Creating imaginative initiatives, designing posters, making paper costumes—the idea is to finish the game with as many community points as possible, and within budget.
- 49 We also set up a devising or play development team which replaces the old research team. This team works on two levels. A small core management group who oversee the script development, assess where we are, promote the workshops, set up the rooms and gather material we might need. They are practical hands on. The other team are those who attend and participate in the drama searches and devising and development workshops, every activity, in all areas and on all levels are task-based.

The Drama Search

- 50 The Drama Searches are powerful role-playing simulations of an imagined world that can accommodate large groups.
- 51 We select some time and place in the community’s history. We may start in a large circle with everyone imagining and describing the place and times we want to take ourselves to. I am relying on the whole group’s knowledge. On the Isle of Sheppey, when we were exploring a famous mutiny, we first imaged the dockside in 1800 then we took up actives of mending nets, gutting fish, dockyard watchmen looking out for trouble. Later we were sailors huddled in cramped, wet and rat-infested bays on the lower decks of ships complaining about conditions and I was provoking them in role to mutiny.
- 52 Participants improvise their roles in the make-believe world and in this way can immerse themselves and experience other people’s lives together. I take the role of facilitator to animate the drama, guiding or challenging them moment-by-moment or releasing information gradually and indirectly.

- 53 They must work at solutions, and gain understanding by reflecting on what is going on, and think about the consequences of the decisions they take; and so, find meaning for themselves. Although the writer is present at the drama search, we never talk about the play, the focus is always on the content. The writer is a vital part of the process and is there to ask questions, participate, suggest things they want explored improvisationally.
- 54 The depth to which the group identifies with the events they explore physically often inspires them to research privately or collectively between sessions, either to prepare the next Drama Search or in response to the previous one which has perhaps prompted deeper research, maybe into actual individual characters, or checking historical accuracy.

Devising, Script Development and Writing

- 55 We take the material from the Drama Search and various other sources to transform them into the medium of theatre through devising sessions.
- 56 Now we have the material we draw the content of the play from, we move our emphasis to conventions of theatre for the first time.
- 57 The aim is not to impose myself, I try to hold the writer back for a little longer. I continue to evoke and implement an inclusive collaboration of many contributing minds.
- 58 Devising's eclectic and unpredictable nature makes it impossible to reduce it to a fixed method. I may begin with broad plan, but I will expect it to go in other directions because I know progression will emerge from moment-to-moment through improvisations, play and conversations. Collaboration can fill the room with a multitude of possibilities that gives us opportunities to move in many different directions and produce a range of creative solutions beyond the scope of an individual.
- 59 There will be an interchange of ideas with the writer with greater focus on 'plot', 'creating-characters', 'genre', and so forth. There is no clear moment when devising turns into script development, it simply happens when the writer can hold back no more and is impelled to start writing.
- 60 The writer begins by giving it structure and incorporates his or her unique style. The relationship between writer and community is a negotiation based on mutual respect. Neither the revelations of the community in their search should be negated nor the integrity of the writer be disrespected. There will be discussions and experiments about scenes that can show rather than be told.

The Script

- 61 The advice I have given and received from writers is a book in itself and not a subject I can cover here. And every time the process has been vastly different.
- 62 Much depends on how close the writer is willing to work *with* the community. Writers have delivered scenes which the community actors have improvised around, physically analysed in workshops with the writer present or its videoed or fed back versions in some way.

- 63 Once the play is written it's read publicly to the town, and more rewrites are likely to fit the distribution of genders and who has come to casting. It is generally asking writers to add more parts for women.

Casting

- 64 Casting is inclusive: if you show up you have got a part. There is a sign over the door as you go IN "Congratulations you've got the part".
- 65 At casting everyone is measured for their costume, they fill in an availability form so their rehearsal schedule can be designed to suit their lifestyle. None of this is easy to administer but it is one of our most important policies to include everyone.

Production Period

- 66 Around thirteen weeks before the performance date a professional theatre team become resident in the town.
- 67 The size of the team and the length of rehearsal time are determined by the budget and community needs.
- 68 The production team mostly consists of a Director/Writer Project Coordinator, Designer, Design Assistant, Production Manager, and a Musical Director. But other roles may be required.
- 69 A twelve-week rehearsal period begins, we may have as many as four spaces of various sizes in different parts of the town, and the performance may be in a school hall, a church, an industrial warehouse, a tent... whatever is available.
- 70 The play office opens to the public. A Design Studio opens in an empty industrial warehouse, or an empty shop in the town centre. It is open to public six days a week, where they can arrange to work with the designer on specific projects or drop in ad hoc.
- 71 The community is invited to help build sets, props, and costumes with the guidance of designers and production manager. Workshops are taken into schools and other establishments. Small scene rehearsals happen nightly and on alternate Sundays the whole cast gather, and the fragmented scenes are linked together.
- 72 Two weeks before opening night, we start building the scaffolding stages and rigging lights. The week before we hold full cast rehearsals every night.
- 73 The performances run for twelve consecutive nights.
- 74 The productions are presented in promenade style. The space, a school hall, is transformed with a series of stages around the circumference. There is limited seating for disabled and elderly audience members who need to sit down at the back of the school stage, but the majority are expected to stand with the cast in the central area.
- 75 The action of the play, with casts of over a hundred and twenty, swirls all around and through the standing audience.
- 76 We put the audience and performers in a shared space, so the audience are no longer silent witnesses in the dark but become a major scenic element as much in evidence as the performers: they become part of the world of the play.

- 77 Entirely new relationships are possible, there can be face to face social contact between performers and audience; voice levels and acting intensities can be varied, the sense of a shared experience is felt.
- 78 In a promenade play we find that the audience quite naturally press in close during intimate scenes and moves away when the action becomes broad. Usually, they willingly give way to the performers and re occupy areas after the actions pass through. This does not result in chaos; rules are not done away with, they are simply changed. The audience are participating in the shaping of the spaces.
- 79 Initially the audience may be nervous. One way of breaking down barriers is to have performers staff the box-office, play host and greet the audience, socialise and advise them on where best to see the show.
- 80 The audience need help in making the connection between their experiences at other popular entertainments, religious observance, and festivals. They are knowledgeable about what to do, they just don't know it.
- 81 Sometimes we achieve this by holding a real fair at the start, so the audience are clear about 'how to behave'. The difference between the community actor and audience is clear because of costume, but no attempt is made to hide the non-performing life of the actors. The audience and performers collectively form the community.
- 82 To emphasise our belief that individually and collectively people can make a difference, we implicate the audience in the action of the play where we can.
- 83 Implicating techniques include treating the audience as 'other'; giving the audience another role or identity; taking part physically; moving them away from spectator into witness.
- 84 In the Minneapolis play *Flying Crooked*, a play that explored class in America, depending on which door they entered through, the audience were treated either as a guest at a society function or destitute street people under the rail arches. A fence divided the space in half. It was noticeable how this opening experience altered their points of view to the events in the drama.
- 85 The moments where we implicate the audience directly are no longer acting for, but in a social relationship and discourse with the audience. In *Out of the Blue*, a character speaks to the audience as if they were fellow villagers and invites them to adopt three orphan girls and save them the horrors of the workhouse. Actors were briefed to withhold volunteering and await audience intervention.
- 86 Participation can disrupt the prepared rhythm or even line of a scene and its uncertainty can be quite frightening for the cast, they resist events that disrupt prepared rhythms. Once we involve them at this 'higher level' we try not to let the audience off the hook.
- 87 For me the final and greatest achievement are those nights which produce the feeling that cast and audience have created a performance together as one community.

Rupert Creed—A Journey Through Participatory Theatre

- 88 My involvement with participatory theatre began in the 1980s, writing and directing a series of verbatim documentary plays about 'working lives'. The first of these was *The*

Northern Trawl a play based on recorded interviews with deep-sea fishermen from Hull and Grimsby.

Verbatim Documentary Plays

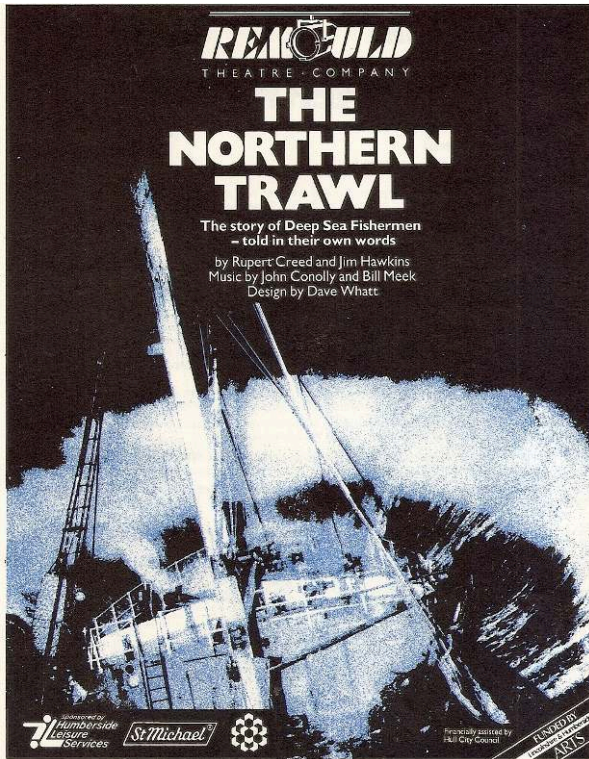
This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/50323>

89

Film clip of *Northern Trawl* (1985); Credit: Rupert Creed

- 90 In this context 'the community' is defined as a group of people who have done a particular job, and they are the subject of the play. A community can also be defined by age, geographical location, or it can be a 'community of interest'- a group of people with a shared interest, passion or a set of shared values and beliefs. Or in this case the community is defined by work.
- 91 The project team record the stories and memories of the subject group. The writer collates transcripts of these interviews and begins to shape the play with the aim of it being a truthful, dramatic representation of this group's working life, world view, and identity. The writer works under the discipline of not inventing material, but moulding the material that is offered by the community to create an entertaining, engaging and authentic piece of theatre. What the characters speak onstage is taken directly from the words recorded in the interviews (hence 'verbatim')- albeit edited and compressed. Documentary verbatim theatre puts this community at the heart of the story- these people provide the stories, descriptions, the words of the play, that the writer then shapes into the final script.
- 92 From 1985 to 1996 Remould Theatre produced verbatim documentary plays about fishermen (*The Northern Trawl*):

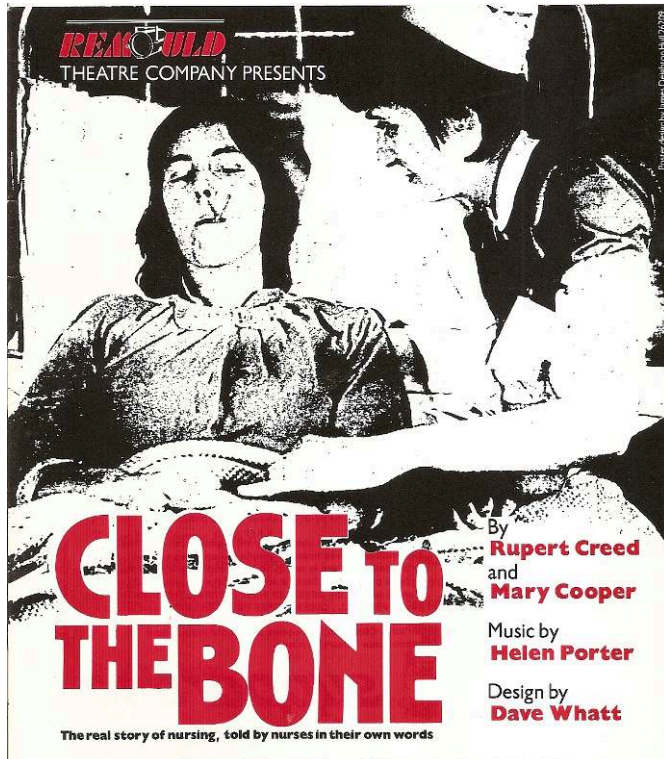
Figure 1



Poster of The Northern Trawl
Photographer credit: Rupert Creed

93 nurses (*Close to the None*)

Figure 2

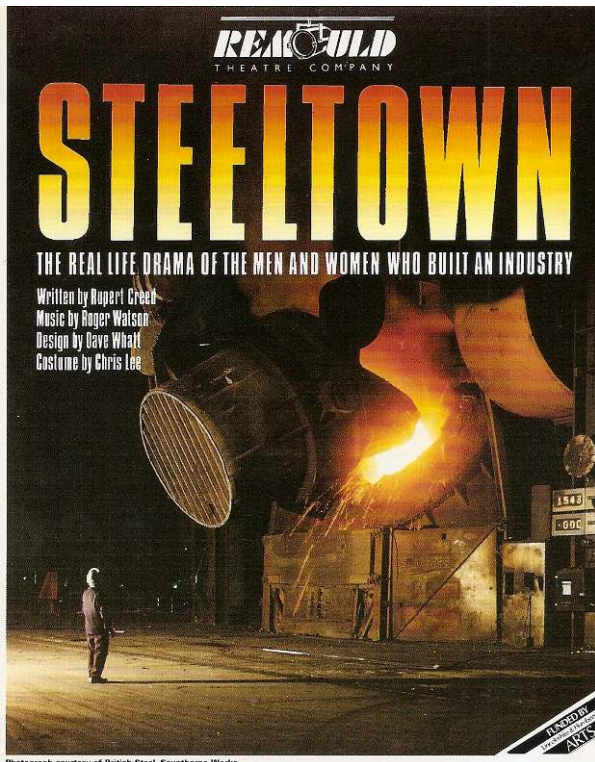


Poster of Close to the Bone

Photographer credit: Dorchester Community Play Association

94 steelworkers (*Steeltown*)

Figure 3

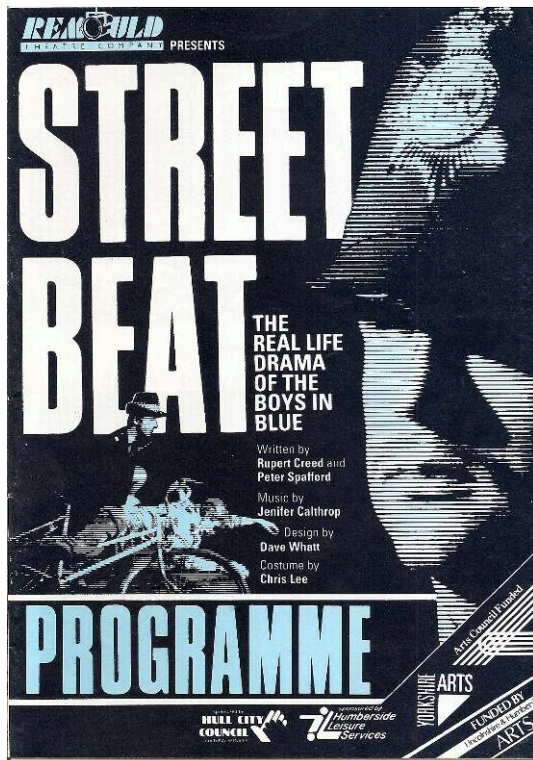


Photograph courtesy of British Steel, Scunthorpe Works.

Poster of The Steeltown;
Photographer credit: Rupert Creed

95 the police (*Street Beat*)

Figure 4

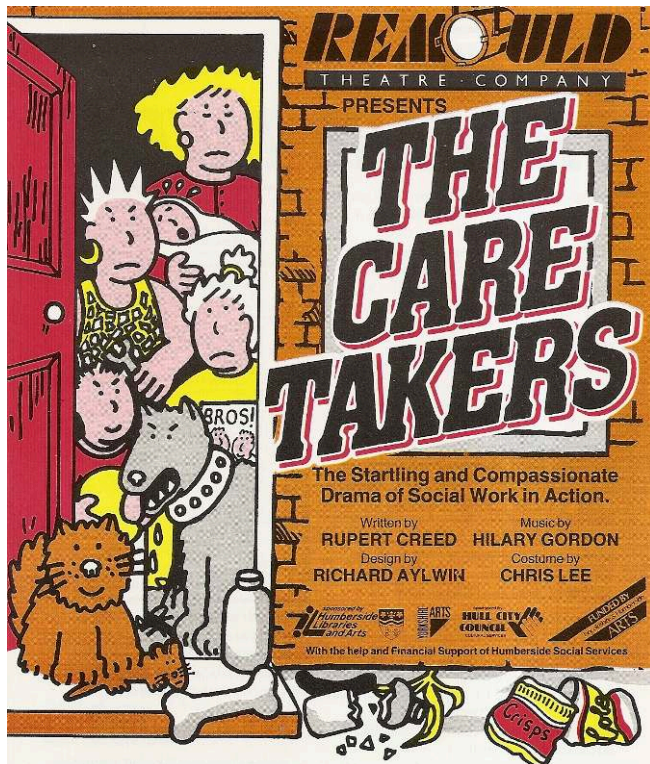


Poster of Street Beat

Photographer credit: Rupert Creed

96 social workers (*The Care Takers*)

Figure 5

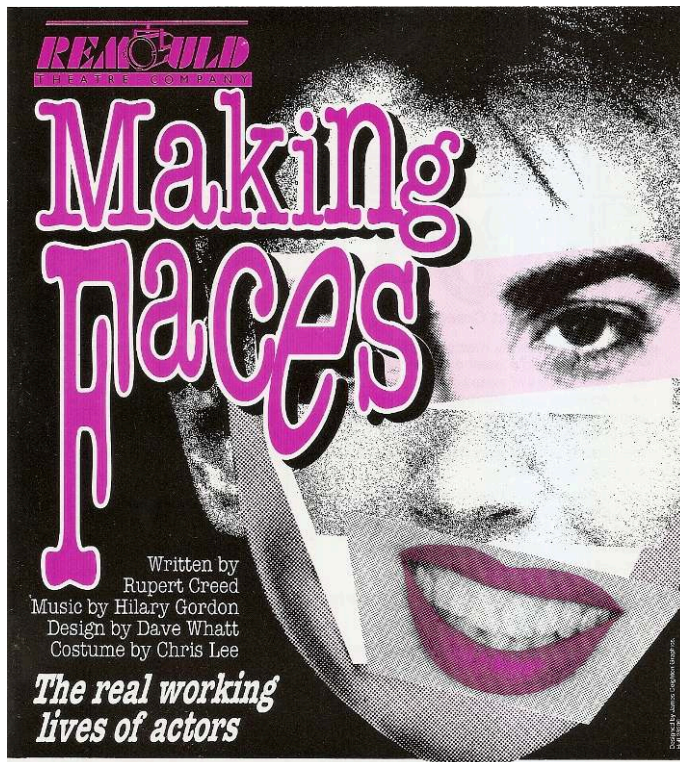


Poster of The Care Takers

Photographer credit: Rupert Creed

97 actors (*Making Faces*)

Figure 6



Poster of Making Faces

Photographer credit: Rupert Creed

98 and newspaper journalists (*The Greater Story Ever Sold*)

Figure 7



Poster of The Greater Story Ever Sold

Photographer credit: Rupert Creed

- 99 This form of participatory theatre offers an authentic experience because the stories come from the people who lived it as first-hand experience – it is their version of the story, not the writer’s conceit; it also offers a platform for people whose stories are not often told; and lastly, the community provides the material for the play and assists and advises in rehearsals ,but these plays were performed by professional actors.

What Do Community Plays Achieve?

- 100 They empower people.
- 101 They tell stories that come from the local community, and are relevant to that community.
- 102 They create powerful memorable theatre.
- 103 **Community plays empower people**
- 104 The community actors rise to the challenge of performance (it often pushes people out of their comfort zone).
- 105 They learn new skills.
- 106 They forge new friendships and make stronger community bonds.
- 107 The productions can change people’s lives.
- 108 **Community plays tell stories that come from the local community, and are relevant to that community**

- 109 The plays often portray a story or events from the community's past that resonate or have meaning in the present.
- 110 The story engages all the citizen characters portrayed in the play, and has consequences for them.
- 111 The Dorchester Community Play *Drummer Hodge* took a story from the town's history covering the period of the late 19th century to the early 20th century. This is a period when the town invested in the British government's war against the Boers of South Africa, by responding positively to the government's appeal to create and send a local volunteer force to fight in South Africa. As the deaths amongst these local men continue to rise, the town is divided over the wisdom of this military engagement. This film clip is an early scene in the play where the town celebrates a local soldier's military exploits, establishing the town's desire to bask in the glory of its soldiers.

112 This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/50323>

Film clip of *Drummer Hodge* Dorchester Play 2014, 'The Hero Returns' section; Credit: Rupert Creed

- 113 **Community plays create powerful memorable theatre.**
- 114 The plays involve a large cast, and are often staged as promenade performance where the audience experiences the play happening around them, rather than simply watching it in the traditional stage-seated audience relationship.

115 This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/50323>

Film clip - Hull Community Play 1996 – *No Surrender*- dockers picketing scene; Credit: Rupert Creed

The Politics or Dynamics of Community Plays: Managing Conflict and Different Perspectives

- 116 Community Plays aim to be inclusive - open to all, all ages, and social backgrounds. But a 'community' is not one thing: it comprises a large number of people with different opinions, life experiences, backgrounds and personal tastes.
- 117 So community plays will invariably involve navigating, managing and resolving some level of conflict.
- 118 This can be creatively constructive and socially valuable but it can become divisive and threaten the play if it is not managed well.
- 119 There can be disagreements, even conflicts between:
- 120 **Conflicts between the writer/director and the Association or Local Steering Group managing the play**
- 121 In *Fire from Heaven* for instance, I was asked to either omit or 'tone down' a ribald scene on the grounds of taste.
- 122 **Conflicts between the writer/director and the community cast**
- 123 In the first Hull Community play *Vital Spark* (1992), the community wanted to cover the period of World War Two when Hull was heavily bombed. This was not in the first draft

of the play. The writer Jon Oram re-wrote the play to accommodate this, even though we both knew it wouldn't serve the play artistically. So we arguably compromised the art for the wishes of the community.

124 **Conflicts with individuals in the cast**

- 125 In *Drummer Hodge* a member of the cast played a family ancestor in the play. The story revealed how a member of that Pope family served as an officer in the Boer War in 1905 and was stationed in a South African location where the British Army established a concentration camp, incarcerating Boer women and children, many of whom died from disease or malnutrition. The local actor was troubled that the play was suggesting his family had been involved in the policy and operation of that concentration camp and wanted us to change the script to eliminate that perception. We argued that his ancestor was serving as a metaphor in the play to express the British complicity in this practice. The play script remained the same but we secured a compromise that ensured his continued participation- namely a note in the programme identifying the given facts – and that his character's complicity was a justified artistic invention, rather than a verifiable historic fact.

Relationships of Theatre Professionals With the Community

- 126 The writer and director, as all the contracted theatre professionals are 'at the service of the community'- but are also 'at the service of the art'. The art and the community are symbiotic- and the best outcomes happen when they are genuinely aligned. This professional/community alignment is what gives community plays their power and differentiates them from purely professional productions.
- 127 The question of 'ownership' of the production is however neither clear-cut nor simplistic. The community play process encourages the community to 'own' the production and how it is made, in so far that they research the story, and are involved and consulted on all aspects and every stage of the play being created. But in reality there is a limit to the extent of this community ownership. The production is led by the theatre professionals, and they retain control over many decisions being made in partnership with the Steering Group or Play Association, as opposed to all community participants.

Mike Kenny: Working With and For the Community

The Start

- 128 My career started in the late 70s as an actor/teacher in a Theatre in Education Company in Leeds. The basis of the work was educational, but also political. Ordinary (working class) people did not come to the theatre, so we would take it to them. The knock on of this simple idea was immense. It affected the content (we did a lot of theatre about race, class, gender, imperialism); the locations - we worked in classrooms, corridors, playgrounds, streets; the forms - we worked with participation, immersion, performance, multi-part projects, and occasionally plays; and the make-up of the company - so that we reflected our audiences, of the six members of the performing company, three were men, three were women, and at least two were always

people of colour. Because we all lived in the city where we worked, there wasn't a huge separation between company and audience. We were embedded in the community.

- 129 I stayed with that company for nearly ten years, and much of what I went on to do was seeded there. Most of that kind of work has long gone. Margaret Thatcher's government cut the funding, for a combination of financial and ideological reasons. It now seems an impossibility (in the UK, anyway) to be a theatre artist who lives a 'normal' life, to make work in the place where you live and bring up your family.

What Happened Next

- 130 I moved on and slowly became a playwright. Most of my work was for children and families, increasingly outside of school contexts (the curriculum became increasingly restricted), and over the years, as artists and communities were forced to become ever more inventive, I found myself working with large scale community projects.
- 131 I should point out here that, until I was contacted to take part in a conference about community projects and participatory theatre, I had never really looked at my community work in a coherent way. This was my first attempt to do that. It had always seemed like an offshoot. In considering it as a whole I began to realise it is actually central to what I do.

Basic Principles

- 132 Right from the very start, the audience has been at the heart of the work. When artist and audience meet, a conversation is taking place. Over the years I have worked a lot with companies led by disabled artists. They often say the work has to be 'by, for and with' them. This isn't always possible. I have often found myself in a situation where I am the only non disabled/white/cis male in the room. I can't bring the authentic voice to the table. All I have going for me is empathy and, I suppose, experience.
- 133 Few of the large-scale community projects I have been involved with have followed the model associated with Ann Jellicoe (and latterly with Jon Oram). Mind you, I imagine that that model revealed itself retrospectively, based on pragmatic decisions, rather than as a statement of prior intent. What follows is a description of the projects I have written, and the various ways in which they rang the changes on a seemingly infinitely flexible art form. And some of the questions, artistic and 'ideological' that they threw up, particularly in relation to the 'ownership' of the piece, and the 'voice' in which it is spoken.
- 134 These things turn out to be complicated, more so than you would think.

The York Mysteries: 2012 York⁶

- 135 The York Mysteries was the first time I tackled a huge cast play. There are volumes written on these works, I am focusing very tightly on my experience of working on the 2012 production.
- 136 In York, there are two parallel traditions with these plays. Every four years, a selection (of the 47 extant plays) are performed as wagon plays. It is an attempt to remain close to the authentic tradition, performing from the backs of wagons, pulled through the

streets and performing in locations around York. It is generally community led. Usually around a dozen plays are chosen, each one taken on board, by a school, a church group, a drama group, a University society. No attempt is made to impose a coherent style. The cast for each play is different.

- 137 There is a different tradition, beginning post Second World War, which attempts to bring together the 14 hours of text into a single narrative, performed in one location.
- 138 The last time they had been done in this way was in Millenium year. The location on that occasion was the York Minster. In 2012, the plays were returned to the ruined walls of St Mary's Abbey, and I was tasked with providing a workable text, turning 14 hours into 3.
- 139 The job involves 'translating' from the medieval originals (and later versions) into something that is comprehensible to the modern ear, yet still has a strong flavour of the original, and recognises the rhythms and sounds of the dialect of North and East Yorkshire. It is a thing that is owned by everyone and no one. I live in the city, which is unusual. It is a long time since the writer of the Mysteries has had a local connection. As a result, I kept bumping into local people who would engage with me about it (in the end there were 1700 local people involved in the staging of this, so there were a lot of individuals with opinions). As time went on, I began to feel that everyone, including all the previous people who had been in my position, right back to the original 13th-century monks, had some kind of voice in this.
- 140 For a while I was totally overwhelmed by the responsibility until finally I pulled myself together and thought, I am not a poet, a historian, an expert, a cleric or an academic, but I am a good playwright, and I applied what I know to the text. Every time I had seen the Mysteries previously I had felt several things. Firstly, it was broken backed. The Old Testament felt like a child's picture book, and the New Testament was like a psychodrama, also, it was very episodic. God, the father was always an old man with a fake beard, with no relationship to the chaos he had created. I made it the story of God. I decided that the same actor would play God in the first part, and then Christ in the second. God was a young father, creating the world and humanity in a burst of youthful energy, then making all the mistakes a young parent does, blaming and punishing his children until he decides he needs to incarnate as a human, in order to understand humanity, only finally reaching an understanding, on the cross, realising he must depart and give them permission to become, to make their own mistakes and to learn from them. In effect, I made the trinity linear. I made god human, literally.
- 141 I also made some pragmatic decisions. Given that most of the people who turn up to volunteer for these events are women, I made sure it was a cast with a pretty much equal gender split. Therefore we had equal numbers of male and female apostles etc. Only one person left the cast because of this, arguing that it was both historically inaccurate and anti-doctrinal.
- 142 On the whole, I was pleased with the results. I felt I had been passed a version of Schroedinger's box and didn't drop it. When it was next done, they did it again in the Minster, with someone else's text, and the women cheering and weeping in the crowds. The fake beard was back.
- 143 This was my first experience of engaging with a community play. I had gone into it expecting something democratic, I came out of it having effectively made a series of very autocratic decisions. It was more of a learning vertical than a curve.

Blood and Chocolate: 2013 York⁷

- 144 The starting point for this was the metal chocolate boxes that the Rowntree Chocolate family gave to every York man who served in the First World War. At the time of the war they were the biggest employer in the city. One of the family was the Lord Mayor. Significantly they were also Quakers, and strictly speaking they should have taken an anti-war position. However, the war was extremely popular, and they were very commercially canny, so rather than saying ‘we oppose the war,’ they said, ‘Now is not the time to speak of these things,’ and they allowed their workers to sign up and guaranteed to keep their jobs open.
- 145 I did a great deal of research in the archives of the Rowntree factory, collecting stories, so far so traditional.
- 146 The form of the piece was probably the most interesting feature of this piece. It was a coproduction between York Theatre Royal, Slung Low, and Pilot Theatre. Slung Low specialise in immersive pieces, using audio equipment which means every audience member has a headset: it is possible to hear actors whispering from 100 metres away, and to have a movie-like soundtrack playing. Pilot specialise in projections, meaning that whole buildings could be animated. The play followed the separate stories of the men who went to war in France, and the women who stepped into their jobs in York. It took place over a mile and a half route through the city, which had an active role. It was the place the women lived their lives. It was also a northern French town, where a war was being fought out, and finally, it was itself in the 21st century. As scenes set 100 years ago were being played out, people were going about their lives today, passing through the middle of the play, occasionally hen parties stopping to look what was going on.
- 147 If I had a doubt about the whole thing, I felt that sometimes the technology pushed me away from the experience, rather than drew me near, but when it worked, it was somewhere between being inside a living movie, and engaged in an extended meditation.

In Fog and Falling Snow: 2014 York⁸

- 148 When the Theatre Royal in York was being refurbished, they tried an interesting experiment of moving the organisation into the National Railway Museum, also based in York, and as part of their residency I worked on a community piece, using the extraordinary archives and expertise of the museum to do something which animated the collection and building.
- 149 The resulting piece took place in two halves. The first was immersive, taking place all over the museum (remembering that we had trains, carriages, bridges etc which we could use). The second half was in a purpose-built theatre space at the back of the building, which had moving platforms on train lines.
- 150 The subject matter of this piece was, I think, untypical of the form. Previously, I had embraced the untold stories of ‘ordinary’ people. On this occasion, the research threw up a character called George Hudson. Now largely forgotten, he was hugely famous in his day. Starting as a farm boy in a village outside York, he had risen to become the financial brains behind creating the whole of the British Rail Network. He had passed

through being Lord Mayor of York and ended up making a massive fortune, buying the largest private home in London (oddly, now the French embassy). In doing so he also created an enormous financial crash and ended up in prison. It was the 1840's equivalent of the 2008 crash. We literally staged it as a train wreck. And although it was rooted in history, we ended with a piece looking very closely at our own recent history, and its effect on 'ordinary' people.

Calderland (2017) and The Batley Variations (2018): 509 Arts⁹

- 151 These were two Community Song cycles, performed by a community choir and orchestra.
- 152 *Calderland* told the story of the Calder Valley in Yorkshire. The first half was the history of the valley, which had been the heart of the Cotton industry in the Industrial Revolution. The second half told the story of Boxing Day 2015, when the valley experienced catastrophic flooding. This was based on a combination of traditional research, and contemporary interviews.
- 153 *The Batley Variations* are 24 hours in the life of a small Yorkshire town, currently hit by economic depression. This place had had their MP Jo Cox stabbed in the street by a right-wing extremist a couple of years earlier. We performed this in a Working Men's Club.
- 154 I felt enormously proud of both of these projects, but they did throw up issues about this kind of work, particularly in the case of Batley. Batley has a proud working-class tradition, rooted in the Mills that dominate the town. In the present, post-war period, the town has changed. Nearly half the population are Moslem, with backgrounds in the Indian subcontinent. This community was almost completely unrepresented, both in the team of professionals who created the piece, and in the people who performed it. There is no tradition of involvement in this kind of work in that community, and as soon as we made the decision to perform in a Working Men's Club it closed the door totally, as we were performing in a place that serves alcohol. The view of community we presented was partial, and we would have needed way more time and funding to achieve something more representative. I have always been quite sceptical about teams of professionals parachuting into a community for this kind of work, and on this occasion I found I was guilty of doing that very thing. This is not to question the integrity and hard graft of everyone involved, and certainly the people of Batley who participated found it life changing. But we did not give voice to the totality of the diverse community we found ourselves in.

This is Not For You: 2018 Woolwich Arsenal¹⁰

- 155 This is a piece for a community which defines itself in a different way than geography. It was funded by 14 - 18 - Now, (an organisation commissioning arts projects over a four-year period to commemorate World War One). It was worked on with Graeae, a deaf and disabled-led company, who had previously been involved with the staging of the opening ceremony for the 2012 Paralympics in London. It was specifically in remembrance of the 3 million disabled by that war, and it was researched with and performed by disabled forces veterans of recent conflicts. It told the story of the war, but was mostly about returning home. It got its title from something that was shouted

from the crowd at the disabled veterans, when they were taking part in the Armistice day ceremony at the Cenotaph in London, a ceremony to commemorate the dead, not to celebrate the living. This show was deliberately created to mark the contribution of the living.

- 156 There are visuals of most of these shows to be found on You Tube. They will give a flavour of what was achieved.

NOTES

1. To know more about the Dorchester community plays and the Colway model, see their website: <https://www.dorchestercommunityplay.org.uk>
 2. You can find the programme of the conference here: <https://emmamontpellier.hypotheses.org/1024>
 3. See the website : <https://www.communityplays.com/claque.html>
 4. See his website : <https://rupertcreed.com/>
 5. Jellico, Ann. *Community Plays: How to Put Them On*. Methuen: 1987, xviii.
 6. See teasers and videos on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q1KHM75H1Nw&list=PL50395213DCBBC67C&index=1>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YnCZ2b32YF8&list=PL50395213DCBBC67C&index=3>
 7. See the trailer on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5K2OKmdLZI>
 8. See the trailer on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C3JtnSOZux0>
 9. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbIKsqjKJ7M> and <https://www.509arts.co.uk/project/the-batley-variations/>
 10. See the website of the performance: <https://www.1418now.org.uk/commissions/this-is-not-for-you/>
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ABSTRACTS

At a one-day conference on participatory theatre and its links with the community, held in Montpellier on 13 May 2022, six British artists were invited to discuss their vision of community projects. Three of them are sharing their experience, looking back on their prolific career and showing how writing and creating for the community has always been at the heart of their artistic life.

Lors d'une journée d'études consacrée au théâtre participatif et à ses liens avec la communauté qui a eu lieu à Montpellier le 13 mai 2022, six artistes britanniques, dramaturges et metteurs en scène étaient invités à confronter leurs expériences. Trois d'entre eux reviennent ici de manière

très concrète sur leur carrière pour partager un regard rétrospectif qui met en lumière le fil directeur de toutes leurs créations artistiques : le théâtre au service de la communauté.

INDEX

Subjects: Theater

Keywords: theatre, community, community plays, Dorchester, contemporary mystery play, York, participatory theatre, amateur theatre, promenade

Mots-clés: théâtre, communauté, Dorchester, mystère contemporain, York, théâtre participatif, théâtre amateur, promenade

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