

CATHEDRALS AND BARNES

- a paper given by Jonathan Petherbridge to the Turning The Page Conference*, held at Reading University, Sept 2013.

I am the Creative Director of London Bubble Theatre Company and a member of the board of ITC and I've been asked to talk about new theatre making and also to talk about funding. I'm going to try to weave the two subjects into one strand.

Last year we celebrated our 40th birthday. Interestingly the idea of the Bubble did not come from artists, but from a committee. The then Greater London Arts Association decided in 1972 that they wanted to provide theatre for those who lived in Outer London. For those who could not easily access the riches of the West End. And a member of the drama panel suggested that instead of disbursing small grants to companies and shows that they, the panel had usually not seen, they might guarantee standards by creating a touring company. It did not turn out as they planned.

The first director, Glen Walford, was head-hunted but she didn't want to tour to church halls, and would only take the job if there were a venue to tour. So the idea of a theatre tent was born. They opened in May 1972, with a production called the Blitz Show, in a park, in Hammersmith, with air raid sirens calling to an audience. Those who were brave enough to come were welcomed with cocoa into what was presented as an air raid shelter. Immediately the Bubble came in direct contact with the "audience". Under canvas. In all weathers. And the company quickly discovered that the programming had to appeal - attractive titles, pub shows, twisted classics, and that the performing style in those frontline conditions had to acknowledge the audience. People likened the tent audience to Shakespeare's groundlings - ignore them at your peril.

But this was not what the Greater London Arts Association had intended. Talking to the originator of the idea at one of our birthday gatherings last year, he explained that the company had never really delivered the high standard classical theatre that the funding had been intended to provide to outer London. He complained that from the beginning it had offered rough, broad, theatre.

Over the following 4 decades this tension continued. The company has really been a bit of canary. The company was threatened with funding cuts 3 times. Each time the company fought back, supported vociferously by its audience, and by artists who had worked with the company and felt strangely passionate about the work it did. But each time the company was charged with changing. Firstly to bring in a "serious" director. He lasted one year. Not only was serious theatre now what not what the outer London audience wanted, it was also not what the Bubble board and company felt was right. Then when the new director and company started really giving the audience what they wanted - rock and roll musicals. The funding bodies decided rock and roll wasn't what public funding should be used for and the axe came out again. This cut was staved off with the agreement that a new Community Projects team would be employed, and that these pioneers would deliver community engagement programmes in what were seen to be cultural deserts. This brought theatre to a new audience but it also created an unworkable tension between those who were now directly engaging the "hard to reach" or "non-attenders" (in Thamesmead and Hounslow) i.e. the Community Projects Team, and those who were responsible for creating "productions" for the tent - i.e. the director and board.

Things nearly broke down. But Bubble has always been flexible and resilient. And out of the mess came a search for new methodologies. Ways to close the gap between making theatre for people and making theatre with people, as Lyn Gardner describes it. Forms that might blur the line between actor and audience, that might implicate them in theatre and theatre making. Forum Theatre, Promenade Theatre, Story Gathering and Enactment, Verbatim Techniques.

In 2008 the company was really tested, when it became one of just under 200 organisations that were "de-funded" by the Arts Council. That was the first year of cuts, the one that gave the organisations just 3 months notice. We, and the Arts Council, knew that a funding agreement with another major funder was also to end that year. These two losses together comprised 65% of our core funding. At that time we didn't think we would survive. We took a long hard look at our work and our assets and set to work finding out how good our friends really were, the company became smaller and more focussed. As previously we worked closely with our audience, introducing Fan Made Theatre an audience led programming exercise, and we developed more fully our participatory programme. And as with previous funding crises, this latest one undoubtedly affected the way we make new theatre.

Today, 5 years later, we run a substantial programme of theatre making in primary schools - year long, structured weekly theatre making sessions. We work with young adults to create forum theatre pieces in consultation with the youth settings where the performances are delivered. We work with elders in Residential Homes, run orthodox workshop groups and less orthodox intergenerational projects. A lot of the work is devised, or thrown like a pot, but writers and other specialist artists help shape the work, and our job is to find a creative balance between the "participant artists" and the "paid artists". To satisfy the aspirations of both parties. When the work is shared it's usually good.

Most of our theatre is made through what we call the Foraging process. We gather materials through researching, interviewing, workshoping. Getting a heap of stuff and then working with the group - sifting, tasting, shaping, testing the materials. Then when we've "prepped" the materials, we invite in the specialist artists. The writer will come in to see what is being made and then take the gathered materials away to really write the recipe. The recipe is then brought back to the wider group, read, given feedback probably re-drafted. Before proper cooking begins - the work of rehearsal. We then invite audiences to enjoy the result and to feast on what has been made. Some of those who come will have been involved in the original gathering process. But over 60% of the audience will have had nothing to do with the project and will not be known to the participants - and usually these a very mixed audiences. Afterwards we talk with them about what might be needed next. And to steal words from this morning, the work usually "holds up a mirror and asks what have we done?" Last term, our young adults made a piece about a young boxer coming out, this had been asked for by young people. The elders consulted what is important to them, ended up making a piece about hands. Our intergenerational group are rehearsing a piece about Work, last night they were working on the testimony of a security guard. And today and every weekday in term time children are dictating and acting out their own stories to their classmates and teachers. There is nothing unique about this, other companies are making original local theatre quietly in and for their patch. Occasionally we gather and talk, but it there is work to do in describing and critiquing this practise.

I suggest that this work created in a community context might perhaps be described as Vernacular Theatre. I don't mean Vernacular as in accent, but as in Vernacular

Architecture. Vernacular Architecture is defined as "based on localised needs and construction materials and reflecting local traditions". It leads to cottages, houses, some modest places of worship, barns. Quite utilitarian buildings, created by local people, working as a team, using traditional methods, with young learning from old - to Raise a Barn for example.

Apparently Vernacular Architecture can be contrasted against Polite Architecture, which is led by architects or architectural firms, and characterised by stylistic elements of design intentionally incorporated for aesthetic purposes. For me Polite Theatre is inspired by the architect-writers and it leads to some splendid theatre. Cathedrals and Schools of splendour and intelligence. Vernacular Theatre is defined to a large degree by the will and wants of the people and it leads to more modest utilitarian work. Sheds and barns. We need cathedrals and we need barns.

How does this stretched metaphor translate to Bubble today? We work very locally now, in just 3 boroughs - Greenwich, Lewisham and Southwark, I say "just" but the population of these three boroughs if aggregated would create the third largest city in the UK.

And now, going back to the vernacular image, our writers, designers and directors act more as a foremen and engineers than architects. Responding to what is brought, and what is required. What needs to be built? Helping to Raising barns of theatre where Barns need to be raised. Created by a cross section of our neighbourhood, created from local materials, owned.

But Vernacular Theatre like vernacular buildings tends to have a low profile. It is rarely critiqued. And it often has to argue it's Social Worth to gain funding. But I would argue it has its own aesthetic that bears examination. Like the work of choreographer Rosemary Lee it has a humanity at its centre, performers who are like ourselves, it has flaws, it may be messy, but it has energy and a impulse, it has little gloss and the grain of naive honesty, similar to the honesty often found in outsider art. And it does require great skill.

Despite this work connecting to the agendas of sustainability and localism, I think we as a sector tend to turn our noses up at it. I don't only think it's to do with this awful climate of competitiveness that the current funding system has created. I think it's more that we think this work won't be any good. It won't be art. It will be naff. I sometimes feel that myself. But in the final analysis, who are we making theatre for? Is it for posterity - for the cannon? Or is it for ourselves and our communities - helping to shape the communities we wish for?

When Bristol Community or Wimborne Community theatre make a piece, they aren't making it for me. And they shouldn't be making it for the funders. But some embedded companies should be supported to make work in conversation with their Community. And we should look carefully at how they broaden their audience, and develop their localities sense of place.

Which brings me back to 1972. When the GLC decided to raise funds for a touring theatre, I don't think they fully knew who were they doing it for. And I don't think they thought about whose money they were spending? But in setting up a company with no permanent auditorium and giving them the mission to take theatre to outer London, they did create the conditions for an interesting experiment.

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