

## A Critique

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“Drama as an arts medium works with, illuminates and makes public the whole person and the whole experience in all its complexity and contradiction, strength and weakness. My experience of doing drama with women in Styal shows again and again the waste inherent in a system that locks people up, and then abuses, mystifies, and forgets them. By thriving on the cusp of this contradiction drama work within closed and oppressive institutions can exist and continue to reinvent itself as a potent and transformative force, both on a personal and political level”

Jenny Hughes, writing about her experiences, encapsulates perfectly my sentiments on working with young offenders in Swanwick Lodge Secure Unit and HMP Ashfield. It does not represent my feelings about the workshops we ran with offenders in the community, and this is discussed later.

I could spend this whole critique writing about the oxymoron that is the youth justice system. The temptation is almost overwhelming. The way we handle young offenders says much about our society and I would love to explore this. I suspect however that an analysis of the community drama I experienced will yield more both in terms of practical learning that I can apply and measurable outcomes from which this critique can be assessed.

I wonder if my fascination for the subject of the youth justice system comes as a result of the drama practice. Has the creativity generated by the process caused a ripple in me, evoking strong feelings about the content? Or is it that young offenders make a fascinating subject whatever the method used to represent them and this stimulating content is what made our drama ‘successful’ from a personal learning perspective? I suspect the relationship between content and form was mutually beneficial in this project; drama provided a mechanism for the young people, who are often unwilling and/or unable to express themselves, to communicate. The stories they told, involving violence, injustice, cruelty, conflict and contradiction, inspired the drama. As Hughes puts it in the quote above, drama seems to *thrive* on the very *oppression* that is designed to prevent creativity and expression, so that it can be a *potent and transformative* force in spite, or perhaps because, of the surroundings.

If you are interested in outcome of our work from a content perspective I have included the report we were asked to produce by our sponsor, the Wessex Youth Offending Team (YOT) as an appendix to this critique. The report also includes a more detailed description and chronology of the process of the project.

In a project dealing mainly with locked-up vulnerable young people it is perhaps not a surprise that I will start by analysing the impact of gatekeepers and decision makers on our project. From there I will explore three, quite different, experiences of drama in Swanwick Lodge Secure Unit, within the community and finally at HMP Ashfield.

### Gatekeepers & Decision Makers

We always knew there would be a plethora of gatekeepers in this project. The easy ones to deal with either carried keys or were the guardians of policy. More interesting was the subtle gatekeeping, invisible to the untrained eye. We came across gatekeepers both within the institutions we worked in and also within the hierarchies of the organisations involved in running both Hampshire Childrens’ Services and the Youth Justice System. It became clear to me that the culture of the complex organisational structures involved in this area, with their multiple agendas and focus on ‘partnerships’, was a recipe for ineffective action. The overriding conclusion I formed was of well-meaning professionals incapable of generating meaningful interventions.

The idea that every one is responsible for achieving success, as the Every Child Matters ethos suggests, means that in reality no-one is responsible. We made seven presentations to groups of professionals, whose jobs were to a greater or lesser extent involved in fixing the problems we had helped the community of offenders to describe. The unanimous reaction was support for our work, acceptance

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of the issues raised and, without exception, a lack of clarity and drive to do something about the problem. Most individual audience members were able to diagnose that they were doing their job adequately and that it was elsewhere in the system that the problems resided.

As a group, I would describe our professional audiences as a supportive but largely powerless collection of decision makers. Perhaps it is the newness of the organisational structures and strategy, in terms of Every Child Matters; on the other hand the sceptic in me thinks such complicated multi-agency structures with their reliance on partnerships are, by design, destined for ineffectiveness. 'Partnerships', in the sense of multi-agency approaches to social policy, is a concept that has been a feature of the UK for the last fifteen years or so. Balloch and Taylor are among those who have studied the impact of this form of partnerships in some detail. They conclude that, at their best:

"Partnerships has put excluded groups and communities on to the agenda in a way that they have not been before"

However, the provision of services for children in this country is complicated and relies upon a plethora of stakeholders from local government, private enterprise and voluntary organisations. Balloch & Taylor describe a number of case studies where partnership working is ineffective and, worse, discourages action. They conclude:

"The challenge derives from the inability of agencies involved in partnerships to address, or even be prepared to address, issues of power"

In other words it is ambiguity of ownership and responsibility, coupled with competing agendas, that prevents partnership work from achieving efficacy. This was certainly the case from our experience where, for example there was clear tension between the YOT and Hampshire Children's Services about who should be leading the prevention of youth offending and how it should be tackled.

Returning to the gatekeeper function, the most powerful learning produced a dilemma which remains an open question. Put simply, how can we, as drama practitioners, remain true to the experiential and pedagogical nature of our work whilst at the same time securing access to our chosen community via gatekeepers who might have conflicting objectives and cultural values. The prime example of this came in Swanwick Lodge Secure Unit. This is an institution that locks up both young offenders and 'welfare cases', or children who have been placed there by the court for *their own well being*. As a result of this mixture of 'criminals' and 'victims of crime', which would make a fascinating study in its own right, the institution has a strong policy of non-disclosure of personal information, particularly relating to life stories. The idea that our project, titled "How Did I end Up Here?" was going to work with a community in an environment where the one question they were not allowed to answer was "how did I end up here?" seemed perverse in the extreme. Added to this a policy that forbade open discussion about 'bad subjects' like drugs, sex, violence meant we knew we were sailing into trouble if we were to maintain the praxis we had learnt on the course.

At our initial project meeting these policies were made crystal clear to us in such a way that if we had challenged them we all felt we would be denied access totally. In an ideal environment that would have been fine, and we could have walked away with our heads held high, knowing that our credibility had remained intact. In reality, we were keen to achieve the measurable outcomes of the module criteria, in other words we needed them more than they needed us. We also felt that we could agree to what they said and then do our own thing regardless; this proved not to be the case.

After three workshops the group had created a character, Zach Darcy, a drug-dealing, gun-wielding homophobic orphan, turned roofer, from Tooting. Zach was presented with the dilemma of how to react to the discovery that his younger sister had become a prostitute. The group, who had slowly engaged with the work from a very reluctant base, were discussing, and in some cases acting out, how Zach should confront his sister. Time ran out and we planned to pick up the enquiry at our workshop the following week. However, in the intervening period we were advised by our main contact at the institution that she had received reports from care workers and educational staff – we were normally watched by 4-5 adults – that 'although the children seemed to be enjoying themselves', some of the material being generated seemed to be a little 'inappropriate'. We were advised to steer clear of this going forward.

At this liminal moment we faced a choice. Should we comply totally, or continue with what the community appeared to want to talk about and risk being denied any further access? What would you have done?

We eventually complied, although we convinced ourselves that we had not given in totally, and the workshops subtly dropped Zach and moved to safer ground. With hindsight I have mixed feelings about this. On the positive side, the group evolved powerfully with individuals appearing to develop their ability to trust and communicate with others – this therapeutic effect is discussed later. Also the

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institution was delighted with our work, we achieved a 'good' rating when one of our sessions was inspected by OFSTED, and I am sure we could get more work there. On the other hand the community was oppressed and desperate to explore the very subjects that they were not allowed to talk about, those issues probably playing a significant role in their lives. We had not helped this community achieve any sense of advocacy, nor had we facilitated a dialogue on their behalf. We had not challenged the injustices we saw in the system, rather we had become part of it. Although there were many positives to draw from our experience at Swanwick Lodge, I left this first phase of our project with the distinct feeling that our primary contribution was catharsis.

Before leaving Gatekeepers I should document the learning from our negotiations for access into HMP Ashfield. Sharon Nash, who was representing Hampshire Children's Services as our co-sponsor and is worthy of a whole thesis on gatekeeping, had made the initial contact with Wessex YOT and the prison, positioning us as carrying out research into why offenders ended up in prison. The notion of psychological research appeared, alarm bells went off and we spent weeks in fruitless negotiations around the subject of risk of harm. This was resolved only when we re-pitched removing all traces of research, to which the prison's chief psychologist said memorably "oh you want to do drama, no problems then". This led me to the conclusion that we should avoid the Western cultural imperative to over-intellectualise in order to try and impress. As it transpired, 'doing drama' was fine with HMP Ashfield and we were provided with virtually no editorial control, which had become vital to us after our experience at Swanwick. Not that the management at Ashfield had a particularly enlightened attitude to 'doing drama'. I suspect they are just keen to fill up the inmates spare education slots with more interesting subjects.

## **Drama Therapy?**

Our brief for the project was a preventative one. Find out, using drama and creativity, how young offenders ended up in prison and represent the findings to people who could make decisions which in turn would prevent future young offenders from following the same path. We asked ourselves, and were asked by the Governor of Ashfield prison, what was in it for the young offenders who took part. Apart from the fact that we hoped they would all enjoy it, we were unable to quantify any measurable outcomes in terms of benefits to participants. In Swanwick Lodge it was less of an issue, because the gatekeepers were clear that they required the young people to work on developing communications and empathic skills, so that they could "cope better" upon release. With the SOVA workshops in the community, we aligned with their restorative justice and rehabilitation objectives. But in Ashfield we relied in trust in our praxis and vague assurances to the participants and gatekeepers to trust us to ensure the lads would benefit.

Having now completed the projects it is clear to me that the principal benefits of our work as far as the participants were concerned were about their own empowerment, growth, self awareness, confidence, self-esteem, sense of other – I could go on. Of course not everyone experienced all the benefits, and there were a few who we seemed to make no progress with at all, but the therapeutic nature of the work was undeniable. However, to describe our work as drama therapy is to risk incurring the wrath of our lecturers (witness the animated discussion at our show back) the project gatekeepers and our colleagues, not to mention the British Association of Drama Therapists, who describe drama therapy as follows:

"Dramatherapy has as its main focus the intentional use of healing aspects of drama and theatre as the therapeutic process. It is a method of working and playing that uses action methods to facilitate creativity, imagination, learning, insight and growth."

In which case it is possible to argue that all drama is at least in part therapeutic. The suggestion that drama therapy stands alone as a science, separated from community drama and only delivered by qualified practitioners, is flawed in my opinion. Could it be that the anti-dialogical position taken by writers such as Sally Stamp and Sue Jennings is a case of protecting self interest? Stamp, whilst acknowledging the similarities between dramatherapy and drama, makes clear distinctions in her mind.

"This is where it is important there is a contract, an agreement between the prisoners, or patients and the drama-therapist that the work is therapeutic, that they do not begin doing drama and find themselves involved in therapy".

This hints at a clinical reading of the word therapy. I would argue however that the therapeutic benefits of drama are potentially present no matter what the label and, in some cases, are enhanced because group members can take part without the spectre of it being a 'therapy session'. By working with a title like 'coping strategies' or 'how did I end up here?' a group can take part on a number of levels, from those who see it as a bit of fun - 'better than Maths' - to those who, whether by choice or not, gain some massive personal insights and start to change as a result.

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Sue Jennings and Alida Gersie, writing about group drama therapy with 'disturbed' young people, document the process in quasi-scientific terms, before then going on to describe the benefits in a way which could equally apply for much wider forms of drama:

"We have suggested that dramatherapy can be used productively to work on body and spatial awareness, role identity in its many contexts and projections of the past, present and future lives."

'Therapy' comes from the Greek word *therapeia* meaning 'healing'. Without being patronising, I would suggest the children we worked at in Swanwick and Ashfield did experience what could be described as healing. The girl who, within seven weeks, moved from a withdrawn person who hated everyone, and particularly the boys in the group, to an active participant who placed total trust in those boys and everyone else to take part in blindfold sprint races. The lad who barely spoke for three weeks, and who by the end was debating forcefully with a room full of professionals about the injustices of parenting orders. My instincts – and please note I have no quantifiable measurable criteria on which to base these – are that these young people and several others, derived some real therapeutic benefits from the work.

## **When the Formula doesn't work**

As part of our early research into the youth justice system, we discovered a local charity, SOVA (Supporting Others through Volunteer Action), who were commissioned by the YOT to carry out restorative justice. We approached them and agreed to run a series of one-off two-hour drama workshops for groups of young offenders with community sentences. Our objective was to add a dimension to our project, by working with people who were on the offending 'treadmill' but hadn't yet reached incarceration. SOVA's objective was to provide the young people with something more stimulating to do than 'collecting litter', and at the same time explore their underlying reasons for their behaviour.

The workshops we ran, in Basingstoke and Aldershot, were not particularly successful, apart from what they taught me as a drama practitioner. First of all, although the term 'process' is used a lot to describe community drama it is not like a manufacturing process where the outcomes are consistent and predictable. The SOVA workshops were destined to failure. Force 5-10 young people, who didn't know each other or us into a room to spend two hours doing something completely alien to them when they didn't want to be there. Add to this the fact that these young offenders in general have a distrust of most people, and especially 'authority' figures, and the ingredients were all there for failure. Faced with pressure to achieve some sort of outcome we initiated our 'formulaic' process and, although we were flexible and adapted as we progressed, we presided over a relatively unrewarding couple of workshops.

To be fair to us, I am not sure that the circumstances allowed for success no matter what we could have been tried. The key missing ingredient was trust. The group did not trust us, the gatekeepers or their fellow group members. In Swanwick and Ashfield we built trust over time; with the SOVA workshops, which were one-off events, we were not given, and did not give ourselves, the time or opportunity to build trust. In my opinion, re-inforced by the SOVA experience, trust is the foundation stone for our community drama practice.

As a group we did not have the strength of character to prevent our predicted problems from becoming a reality. As with the liminal moment in Ashfield, our focus was on achieving measurable outcomes for the benefit of the project rather than meeting the needs of the community we were working with.

## **The Power of Dialogue**

For three years on the course our lecturers have stressed the importance of using dramatic performances to stimulate a meaningful discussion between the community and its audience. In that time, whilst appreciating the theory, I had not really experienced the practice of a powerful dialogue as part of a dramatic presentation or performance. However, this changed at the celebration in Ashfield. Twenty five professionals had sat through an hour of performance, game playing and presentations of work carried out by 14 lads. We had facilitated this and allowed 30 minutes at the end for the obligatory 'discussion'. Our hopes were not high; the lads had previously shown a great deal of animosity towards the authority that these professionals had represented and also had been very reluctant to speak out in large groups.

However, on this occasion the discussion ignited and what followed was an insightful exploration of some of the key issues affecting the lads. The questioning by the professionals showed a genuine interest in hearing the community's voices and the answers from the lads were both coherent and very powerful. One boy, who had been painfully shy throughout the process, spoke passionately about the injustices he perceived concerning ASBOs and parenting orders. Another lad, who had only joined the workshops the week before, talked movingly about failings in the education system.

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We later discovered that these voices had created powerful ripples back in the offices of the professionals, such that a re-appraisal of several policies was being considered. It was a moment in time that would prove to be impossible to capture in the report we produced later (appendix 1) and confirmed the unique power of live 'performance'.

What did I learn to be the recipe for this success and what was our contribution as a group? First and foremost we had created an environment of trust and openness, where voices were encouraged and prejudice lampooned. The inspector from HM Probation service, who had watched our work, described the environment as a 'level playing field and a different space, not like a prison at all'. We had also facilitated the first hour in such a way to demonstrate to the lads that they could challenge authority, particularly with the stereotyping game. Although the theatrical hour may not have been particularly inspiring aesthetically or creatively, it had provided a foundation of openness, interactivity and fun from which the discussion could emerge. Finally we consciously re-arranged the chairs for the discussion, using the presentation of certificates to subtly move the lads, so that they were in one semi-circle facing the audience with a distance between the two which was neither intimidating nor distant.

Another factor that might have inspired the discussion was the space itself, the event was held in a chapel. Also the realisation that we were all locked in a room and would not be let out for 30 minutes meant that there were no easy exits available. There is one other possibility to be considered, namely that the celebration at Ashfield represented a form of *theatre of the oppressed* as described by Augusto Boal.

"The goal of the Theatre of the Oppressed is not then to create calm, equilibrium, but rather to create disequilibrium which prepares the way to action. Its goal is to *dynamise*".

We did not set out with this intention in mind, Boal's theories had not consciously informed our practice. However, did we inadvertently *dynamise* the participants, both professionals and lads by sharing stories and experiences with which the audience could sympathise and engage rather than empathise? It is possible to argue that the discussion was successful because the participants had become *spectators* and took part in finding solutions to shared problems, albeit via dialogue rather than performance.

"In a Theatre of the Oppressed show anyone can intervene. Not intervening is already a form of intervention. I *decide* to go on stage, but I can also *decide* not to; it is I who choose."

The stereotyping game we played involved audience participation, could this have *dynamised* the professionals? It could certainly help to explain why two lads, who had taken no active part in the celebration, spontaneously decided to go on stage and become extras during the fourth group's play. Or does the fact that the participants represented both the oppressed and the oppressors disqualify our work from Boal's praxis? On reflection I would argue that there were elements of what Boal describes within our celebration event, as described above, and that these elements contributed to its efficacy as a forum for open dialogue.

## **Measurable Outcomes, Sustainability and the Future**

In one sense this critique, together with our presentation to our cohort, represents the measurable outcomes of this project. Add to this the report (appendix 1) and a collection of work produced by the lads at Ashfield and that is the sum total of our measurable outcomes. However, these 'products' do not reflect the outcomes of the project, and thereby lies the problem. The most valuable outcomes of our project in my opinion can be found in the experience of working on it, the learning derived from it and the ripples it may have created. All of these outcomes are immeasurable in any scientific way and rely on the opinions of those who took part or observed. Findings are not quantified rationally, conclusions are not formed objectively. As our Supervisor, Gordon Murray, suggested during the discussion following our show back, drama is an art not a science.

I make these points because our community drama project, and I would suggest many others, operated in a culture where measurable outcomes are perceived as vital. In the education system, both within prisons and more widely, inspectable evidence is deemed to be the yardstick for success. I would argue that it is deeply significant that our audience of professionals, despite experiencing first hand dramatic representations of the issues, are still insistent on written documentation, the implication being that their personal feelings are sub-ordinate to the written word. This tension between the science of management and the art of participation, between analysis and emotional engagement, has been a prominent feature of our project. From my experience the hegemonic voice is that of the scientist and this is something I need to bear in mind as I look to carry out similar projects in the future

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One area where I hope our report will have value is in the sustainability of the work we have done. In the same way that a documentary film can provide an audience with a legacy, a lasting memory, of an experience, the report can hopefully awaken feelings in those who experienced either the celebration at Ashfield or one of our seven presentations, and turn those feelings into action.

From a personal perspective the most satisfying, and at the same time most frustrating aspect of sustainability, has been the ongoing enthusiasm for, and engagement in, the project by two of the lads who participated in Ashfield and have since been released. Both of these young men have shown a genuine interest in taking the work forward and it is a shame that we have nothing more to offer them in terms of active involvement. Time will tell if their personal development is sustained by those paid to support their re-integration into society.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Report of Findings**

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