

## Interactive theatre: Drama as social intervention

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### ABSTRACT

In the book *Performing Communities*, Bill Rauch, Artistic Director of US-based Cornerstone Theater Company, is quoted as saying:

You cannot predict what art changes. You're naïve if you think you know you're going to change the world with the art you create. It's equally naïve and irresponsible even to acknowledge that art changes the world ...

(Leonard and Kilkelly, 2006, p. 72)

Although I do not argue the impossibly extreme position that art<sup>1</sup> can 'change the world' I disagree with the basic tenet behind Rauch's comment. As a theatre-maker who for many years has created dramatic experience which has the express intention of bringing about change, I am convinced that, when shaped, targeted and delivered in particular ways, theatre and other forms of drama excite change. In order to achieve this, the dramatic intervention must consist of artistic output of the highest quality embedded in relevant pedagogic, sociological and dramatic approaches. The trick is to balance efficacy with artistic merit.

This article examines the theoretical underpinnings for this kind of drama and theatre and provides examples of this work in action.

<sup>1</sup> Although this article deals with drama intervention, other art forms can also bring change. For example, anyone who, in early 2008, saw the four BBC television programmes which constituted 'The Choir – boys don't sing' which followed choirmaster Gareth Malone's journey in convincing over one hundred highly sceptical boys and staff at Lancaster Secondary School, Leicester, to form a choir can have no doubt about the transforming power of art. The choir sang at the Schools' Prom at the Albert Hall and it was clear that the experience had a profound effect on the participants. Among these were greatly increased self esteem; students discovering that they had excellent singing voices and a wish to develop them; an obvious sense of joy in taking part in a project which spilled out from their apparently unexceptional school to be enthusiastically received by huge audiences; and the pride generated amongst parents and the wider community.

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## INTRODUCTION: 'SOFT' AND 'HARD' INTERVENTION

Theatre audiences normally comprise random groups of people and while individuals may be affected by the form and/or content of the play, theatre performances do not generally explicitly aim at audience change. The exception is political theatre - now an almost absent genre from British theatre - where careful commentary or radical propaganda does aim to change people's awareness of and attitude to 'issues'.<sup>1</sup> Most theatre practitioners would, I feel, subscribe to a more general 'humanising' aim for theatre, that audiences should leave performances more sensitive to human nature, its foibles and strengths.

For many years, my theatre practice has aimed overtly at change. The work has ranged across Drama in Education in schools, drama workshops<sup>2</sup> in many countries, Interactive Theatre and community theatre.<sup>3</sup> Across this range, I have sought both to instigate 'hard' change - that is well-defined attempts to confront audiences or workshop participants with particular issues - and 'soft' change, where the purpose of making and performing the drama and the participation of others in witnessing it is less well defined

'Soft' intervention can be difficult to identify since, in a sense, all theatre might be considered to take this form. Perhaps its main feature is that it has a purpose, albeit diffuse. For example, a play I originated and directed in 2000, which had an original script primarily devised by community participants, celebrated seven real stories from the location in which they lived. It was performed at seven sites around the community. Its purpose was to celebrate aspects of the community's heritage and any other achievements were secondary to this aim.

By contrast, the more specific purposiveness of 'hard' intervention makes it easier to recognise. It aims at changing difficult psychological, political and social conditions and is exemplified in the work of political theatre activists in many countries. Here, the dramatic experience is used explicitly to inform and galvanise public attitudes and opinion and to encourage remedial action. 'Hard' intervention carries risk, especially when performances openly criticise the existing power structures and ruling elites. On January 1st 1989, for example, in Sahibabad on the outskirts of Delhi, India, Safdar Hashmi's theatre group Jana Natya Manch (Janam) was performing a play - 'Halla Bol' - which dealt with the factory workers' struggle with employers and government. Hashmi was attacked and killed by a group opposed to the message his theatre company was propagating.<sup>4</sup>

My work is usually carried out in contexts where those participating and administering the initiative are in consensual agreement on the drama's intent. It ranges from the 'soft' end to the middle of the hard/soft spectrum. All of my efforts to bring change through dramatic experience fit under the umbrella term Applied Drama.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on political theatre, see, for example: Patterson, Michael. *Strategies of Political Theatre*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 2003

<sup>2</sup> A drama 'workshop' covers exploratory and experimental activities related to particular themes, issues or drama skills. There is emphasis on participant creative involvement. The workshop may progress to performance as a means of capturing the 'wisdom' and insight which have emerged in the working processes.

<sup>3</sup> In the UK, the term 'community theatre' describes theatre usually made by and for a community centred on stories seminal to that community, and not the US definition which is synonymous with amateur theatre.

<sup>4</sup> For more on this see <http://www.rediff.com/news/2003/nov/05khan.htm>

## APPLIED DRAMA

Applied Drama involves a customised dramatic experience in specific societal contexts – prisons for example – with the expectation of creating positive change. Put simply, Applied Drama ‘has a job to do’. Its approaches may contain distinct theatrical elements, or be composed of mainly experiential drama activity where the participatory experience itself is the change agent. Applied Drama is based on four main principles:

1. That drama involves the modelling of reality through the use of the dramatic medium. Just as the engineer builds a model of a bridge to test its capabilities when built, so in drama we model life and examine its complexities. Like the engineer who can change aspects of the model and its context - stronger side winds, heavier lorries, thicker steel - so variables of the drama model can be changed - this time, the parent is more angry, the amount of money stolen is greater, etc;
2. That our identity can be seen as a personal narrative which is constantly extended and modified by the effect of the many other narratives - global and local - and experiences to which we are exposed;
3. That by entering the fictional world created in the drama, we may gain greater understanding of our own, personal narrative. This is a major source of the claims that attitudes and behaviours can be changed;
4. By knowing that the dramatic experience is not real we can release ourselves safely into it. We are 'in' it enough to care about it, but 'out' of it enough not to fear it and to be able to recognise its distance from reality.<sup>5</sup> This is also a key factor in attitude and behaviour change.

Drama is a social art. It operates at a real social level and at the symbolic level of the dramatic language. These two functions operate in dynamic relationship.<sup>6</sup>

## NARRATIVE THEORY AND INDIVIDUAL IDENTIFY

Storying – the creation of narratives – is an indispensable aspect of human existence. As Barbara Hardy comments, it ‘... must be seen as a fundamental act of mind transferred to art from life’ (Hardy, 1975, p. 4). Story acts as a placenta that connects our inner world to the world outside, the medium through which our thoughts, feelings and knowledge of the outer and the inner pass. Richard Fox believes this to be one of the prime functions of all art:

[...] the adaptiveness of art, including narrative art, is then seen to lie in this function of keeping the inner life in touch with the outer, and in the exploration of the gap between them. Imaginative work may be the prelude to reshaping reality. (Fox R, 1994)

In their book *What Art Is: The Esthetic Theory of Ayn Rand*, Torres et al summarise Rand’s theory as ‘... art enables man [sic] to experience his most important abstractions, his conception of reality and his fundamental values in concrete,

<sup>5</sup> This is the basis of Boal’s term ‘metaxis’, the both ‘in the drama’ and ‘out of the drama’ state that he regards as the basis for learning in drama. See Boal, A., *Theatre of the Oppressed*, London: Pluto Press (2000)

<sup>6</sup> For more on Applied Drama see, for example, Thompson J., ‘Applied Theatre: Bewilderment And Beyond’ Oxford: Peter Lang (2003) and Nicholson N., ‘Applied Drama’, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (2005)

perceptual form ....?. This externalising of the inner is an essential aspect of art's function (p. 50).

The struggle to make a story, to clarify the issues, our feelings and those of other people involved in events, allows us to come to terms with the complex and potentially chaotic signals that bombard our psyches. Story permeates our whole consciousness for, without its organising frameworks, we would be unaware of our existence except in the moment of experience. Storying allows us to engage in three fundamental processes - to:

- organise momentary experience into a series of memories;
- predict a future;
- experience, vicariously through the stories of others, aspects of the world we ourselves do not experience.

The first gives rise to notions of who we are – identity rooted in memory. The second allows us to have hope, expectation and to organise our actions. The third forms the basis of much of our learning and is the source of most formal education.

## PERSONAL STORY

The most fundamental psychological need humans have is to know 'who we are'. Our personal identity is painstakingly built throughout our lives, and embedded in it are our notions of self-worth. David Novitz (1997) maintains that we construct our personal story much like an artist makes a work of art, selecting and ordering experiences into a memory bank that becomes our signifier of identity. Much of what happens to us in life is deemed by our memory to be insignificant, and is left on the cutting room floor as we continuously edit the 'film' of who we are. Good mental health requires us to develop and maintain a coherent personal story that we respect and in which we find value and meaning. Much psychological therapy is devoted to the reordering in some way of the patient's personal story. The debilitating effect of the absence of a sound personal narrative is demonstrated, for example, in the helplessness of Alzheimer's sufferers.

John Locke said 'I am what I remember myself being' (Stevens, 1996, p. 199) and I am suggesting that this 'remembered story' may be re-edited. The more effective the fictional story-encounter is, the more likely it is to intersect with our personal story and to change our perceptions of how the world is and our vision of our part in it.

## META-STORIES

We inevitably move in a world that contains stories other than our own, in fact they constantly surround us. Some we choose to experience, such as the novel, film or TV programme, although we almost never have control over their production. Others are as invisible as the air we breathe – national identity stories, the unspoken identity of our family, social behaviour patterns that we absorb from society, for instance.

Recent research confirms that the imagined world can impact on the individual personal story. Work by Elizabeth Loftus (quoted in Radford, 2001), a psychologist at the University of Washington, shows that imagined events or those witnessed on film, result in people being more likely to believe they have *experienced* such events,

producing, what Loftus' calls 'false memories'. Loftus found that people who were asked to imagine being lost as a child were, when questioned months later, much more susceptible to believing that this had actually happened to them. Loftus says:

In a sense, life is a continual memory alteration experiment where memories are continually shaped by new incoming information. This brings forth ethical considerations. Is it okay for marketers knowingly to manipulate consumers' pasts?

## INTERTEXTUALITY

Drama's power to change attitudes is rooted in the notion of intertextuality, the dynamic relationship and intertwining of stories, in this case the interpenetration of the performed story with the story which forms the personal identity of the individual. Research of the context in which Applied Drama is to be used is essential if the optimum conditions for successful intertextuality are to be created. The intricate intertextual dynamic created when, in community theatre, inhabitants perform their own histories', thereby discovering more about and placing themselves within the community's identity involves a productive collision of the personal, the community and context.

## APPLIED DRAMA'S RESEARCHED CONTEXTS

Effective intervention requires the drama to be 'applied' in researched and understood contexts. This applies whether the drama used is rooted in workshops with little or no intention of performance, is the product of a scripted play, or is a devised performance. If the drama is a scripted play then, of course, the playwright must make herself familiar with the field of human experience dealt with. In single workshops, the leader will need to bring all information which might be digested by participants, although the latter may be able to research the topics themselves prior to the workshop. When workshops stretch over several days or weeks, ongoing research can be conducted by those involved, and similarly when a devised work is undertaken.

Without in-depth research<sup>7</sup> it is unrealistic to expect that drama participants will be able to capture the reality of those affected by the issues being dealt with. Authenticity is a necessary quality of the drama if we are to expect audience or knowing workshop participants to feel the relevance of the drama for them. Thus, an Interactive Theatre programme on stress and suicide in the veterinary profession which will be performed to practising vets and vet students must capture the psychological, social and technical reality of a vet's life.<sup>8</sup> The research process works best when all participants are engaged in it, leading to a pooling of understanding which enhances the group's insight and supports a sense of ownership of that knowledge and the emerging drama.

Where drama practitioners expect to find the content of the drama in another discipline – as in the veterinary programme referred to above – interdisciplinary co-operation is essential and, potentially, inspirational. I have worked recently with psychiatrists, historians, bioethicists, police, social workers and clinical psychologists

<sup>7</sup> 'Research' here involves participants in collecting relevant information on the topic being examined within the drama. Relevant material is gathered, for example, from specialist literature, research articles, newspaper and magazine archives, websites, specialist organisations, professional bodies, campaign groups and interviews with experts - including those expert by experience as well as professional specialisation.

<sup>8</sup> Vets in the UK have a suicide rate four times the national average. I created in 2006 an interactive Theatre programme 'Practice Imperfect' which focused on this issue and which was acclaimed by the profession. It was toured again in 2007. For more on this contact the author.

specialising in eating disorder. They are able to provide specialist knowledge in the research stage, advise on the developing narrative and critically review any dramatic representation of their professional world. The benefit for the co-operating discipline is that drama approaches are able to make realistic models of issues those specialists find hard to raise. Thus sensitive issues are usually dealt with through generalisations which do not locate the issue in particular socially detailed contexts, thereby lessening the learning impact.

## SPECIFICITY

Many important moral and ethical issues do not become interesting if dealt with as generalities. In a case of theft, for instance, is the money stolen 10 Euros or 10,000 Euros? Is it stolen because of greed or desperate need? Judgements about the levels of legal and social transgression depend on the circumstances and Drama allows us to create such detail and to embed the issues in the lives of believable human beings. The issues therefore become context specific.

## THERAPEUTIC INTENT

The successful drama experience is implicitly therapeutic. Applied Drama participants understand the dramatic experience through reference to their memory/personal story but, more importantly, the drama experience also enables them to recategorise their memories, to reedit their personal stories as a result of taking part in drama that connects fundamentally with who they consider they are. In this way Applied Drama provides experience that leads to personal growth through meaning-making in a complex, reflexive relationship between dramatic experience and personal identity. As I argue later, although some of our personal story may be liable to modification through rational consideration, deeper ones may only be accessible through artistic and spiritual experience.<sup>9</sup>

It is axiomatic that workshop leaders, teachers and educational and community theatre companies generally expect that some change for the better will take place as a result of their work. At the very least, there is an expectation of 'doing good'. Certain drama activities aim at achieving potentially complex psychological and emotional shifts - the work of dramatherapists and psychodramatists, for example. Applied Dramatists often work outside, but close to the direct therapy zones. We are allowing participants in drama to contemplate 'other', that which may be different from us, to consider 'what might be' and to compare it to 'what is'. For many in society, the prospect of change is too painful or threatening to contemplate. By involving participants in a fictional experience that does not focus on their *own* attitudes, feelings and behaviour (but which has relevance to them) the immersive, distancing effects of drama experience can create conditions for reappraisal and change.

Drama workshops can be seen as a kind of social laboratory in which we examine the attitudes, values and relationships of chosen people in selected situations. They add to our personal and societal understanding of the human condition. When we engage in drama we need to employ a spirit of playfulness and openness. Many of the discoveries we make in drama are serendipitous and, although the structures within which we work must almost always be clear, it is not possible to predict how

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<sup>9</sup> For more on this see Crites, S. 'The Narrative Quality of Experience' in *Memory, Identity, Community*, Hinchman, LP & Hinchman SK (Eds), SUNY Press, NY.

the drama experience will affect individual participants. It is this tension between predictability and unpredictability, consolidation and change, completeness and incompleteness, reality and fiction that provides the dynamic space for attitude and behaviour change.

## PARTICIPANT ENGAGEMENT

If the conditions for participant change are to be optimised, effective engagement with the drama and the issues carried within it is essential. The aim is to create a situation in which the participants ‘care about’ the story and the people within it. *Instructing* them to care has limited effect. The feeling of involvement, relevance and ownership must be generated by the activity. Accepting that the work has been conceived to have the maximum chance of being judged relevant by the participants, one way of achieving this is to give them ownership of an embryonic narrative; the generation of a pre-story. As an example of this process I will describe an approach I have experimented with for several years in many UK and international contexts - the *compound stimulus*.

All inanimate objects designed for personal use are redolent of their owners. A tool can suggest labour and the labourer; an item of clothing the wearer and their behaviour; a letter a motive for writing and a relationship. Individual artefacts have limited story-generating potential. The picture of a baby is, well, a picture of a baby and it is difficult to generate any stories other than simplistic ones based on the concept of ‘baby’. Add the sound of a metronome to the image and a new impetus for story making is generated. The story is not rooted in ‘image of baby’ or the ‘ticking’, but hovers in the dynamic of their interaction.

Documents can be subtler and more complex in the story they suggest - the two letters shown in figure 1, for example. Here the formality of a solicitor’s letter is set against the informality of a personal note. The users conjure visions of a relationship that has gone wrong, an intimacy that is now exposed to legal wrangling. Like baby and metronome, the story is to be found in the space that exists between them.

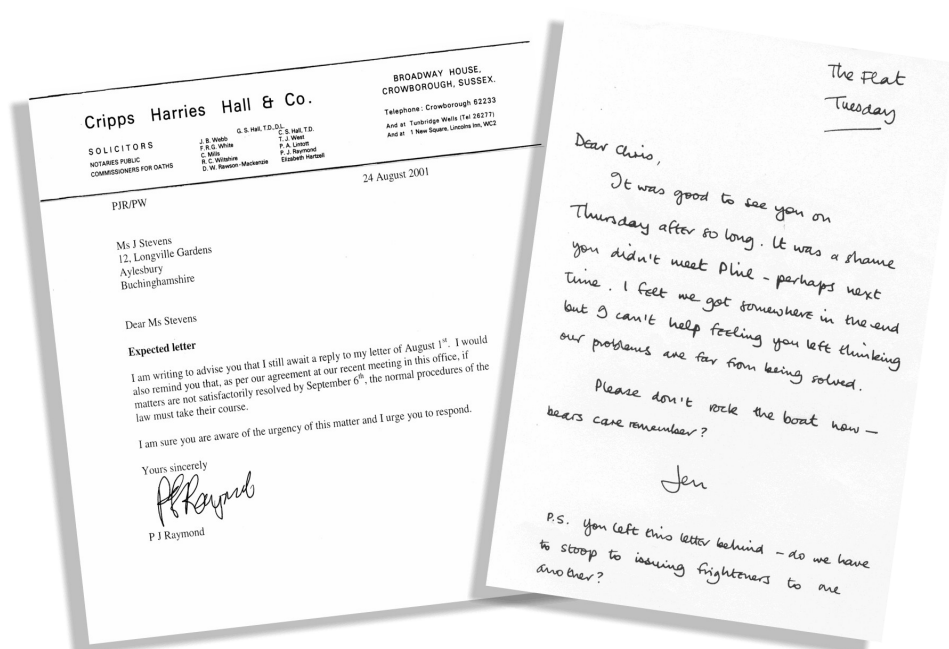


Figure 1

The compound stimulus is composed of a number of artefacts – objects, photographs, letters and other documents, for example, enclosed in an appropriate container. Depending on the story in which the compound stimulus is set, the container might be, for instance, a young person's backpack, a shoebox, an archaeologist's storage box or a lockable police scene-of-crime strongbox. At the end of the process of exploring the stimulus, the person presenting it usually places it within the performance space where it and its content become part of the performed story.

The compound stimulus and the story that flows from it is given significance by the careful juxtaposition of its contents – the relationship between them – and how the detail of the objects suggest human motivation and action – a crushed photograph or torn-up letter, for example.

Herein lies the secret of the creation of a compound stimulus.<sup>10</sup> The elements of the story that each artefact represents must, when juxtaposed, create a web of relationships that are at once neither so quickly understood that the story becomes immediately obvious, nor so remote from one another that no obvious narrative possibilities, based in the felt story tensions, emerge. When the relationship is just right, the participants generate visceral hypotheses which beg to be explored.

This state is achieved by giving enough information for there to be plausible links between the artefacts, the nature of which can only be defined by further exploration.<sup>11</sup> Examples are: placing names within letters that are echoed in initials on other artefacts; correspondence of dates; a photograph that could be of a person mentioned in an official form; a keepsake that may have been cherished as a result of a relationship hinted at in a diary entry.

In 'The Living at Hurford', an Interactive Theatre programme about stress and clinical depression in the farming community, and described later in this article, the compound stimulus was a brown envelope which contained several documents. This was given to audience members when they bought their tickets, giving them time to explore the content before the performance. Audience members are asked to examine the compound stimulus using two questions:

*'Who are the people in this story?' and 'What's happening to them?'*

The documents included a map of Hurford Farm, a set of farm accounts, photographs of farm buildings, an obituary from a local paper for Henry Chaplain (the woman farmer's father), a solicitor's letter offering additional land, a school report on Sally (her daughter), a birthday card from Alan (her son) to his mother and a family-tree diagram - presumably drawn by Janet (the mother). The purpose of this pack was to:

- orientate the audience to the story;
- give contextual information that would aid understanding of the story and;
- carry factual information, thus taking from the performance the responsibility to provide it all.

<sup>10</sup> 'Compound' because it comprises several artefacts and 'stimulus' because it stimulates story-making.

<sup>11</sup> The compound stimulus can be used in a variety of drama contexts including preparation of an audience for a theatre company's visit; the generation of ideas for exploration by participants through dramatic improvisation. The latter use may lead to the sharing of these structured explorations through performance.



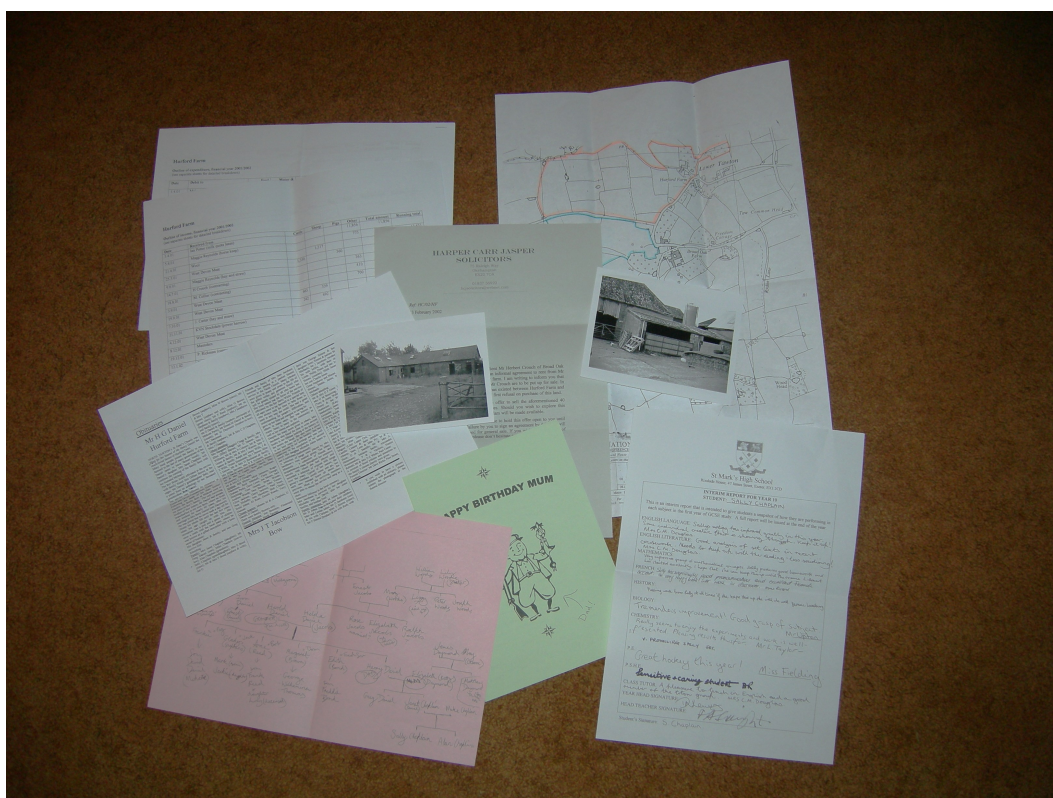


Figure 2: The Hurford compound stimulus

Audience members responded enthusiastically to the envelope's content:

I thought the preparation material an excellent idea. The expenditure and income sheets - very good: really highlighted the situation - reinforced by the irony of being given first refusal on extra land. The obituary set the generational context of the farm [...] Loved the map: fictional but localised.

(Respondent 14 P)

I loved getting to grips with the Chaplain's problems and then having a chance to discuss it with the rest of the audience and the cast, then going on to see the decisions being taken. A great sense of audience involvement and one of the best things I have seen in years.

(Respondent 19, P)

In spite of knowing that the material was fictional, one audience member admitted to spending two hours hunting through local maps to find the farm.

## MORAL ATTACHMENT

Most European theatre still takes place in a darkened auditorium with an illuminated stage. The protocols suggest a strict demarcation between performers and audience, with the latter usually expected not to speak or interact openly with the stage action. The nature of Interactive Theatre is different in that it expects and supports audience members' engagement with the story and its characters. Consequently, the distinction between the audience and performance spaces is intentionally blurred. When the compound stimulus is used, the audience often will come to the performance with prior knowledge of story elements, together with hypotheses

about what is going on in the characters' lives. The interactivity and follow-up activities seek productively to employ audience involvement and to allow them to exercise their moral concern for those in the story.

The enduring attraction of story, at its best, is the acceptance that the described experience of others has relevance for self, that in the detailed circumstances and struggles of other human beings, we recognise aspects of our own.

## TARGETING

Unlike the usual theatre experience, Applied Drama practitioners usually know the composition of the target audience/workshop participants. This enables them to create a dramatic experience which is most likely to engage participants. This does not preclude some variety in target participants; in my recent project focusing on stress in the veterinary profession, for example, audience members included student vets, veterinary researchers, practising and retired vets, counsellors, therapists and those who govern the profession. What they all shared was a knowledge of the profession and the stresses it may generate in its members. This allowed me to assume basic understanding about the field explored in the drama, enabling the use of material which drew on deeper professional understandings and attitudes.

## AUTHENTICITY

The representation will fail in its objectives if it is judged by its target audience as unauthentic. The Interactive Theatre programme 'The Living at Hurford' dealt with the struggle of small family farms to stay in business following the foot and mouth disease outbreak in 2001. Written by me, it was performed by community actors in a barn on a farm which had experienced the disease. When a farmer came up to me immediately after the programme ended, poked me in the chest and said 'I don't know what you know about farming boy, but how you wrote it is how it is,' I felt that the long period of research, which included talking with farmers, had produced something which he felt represented his world. Another said after a performance 'That's my life you put up there tonight.' Unless the target audience feels that the story captures its lived reality, the power of the medium to create engagement and change will be weakened. When authenticity is captured within the dramatic form, powerful outcomes are possible. Richard Williams (1997), writing of the film *Nil by Mouth* and commenting on Gary Oldman's real life experience of alcoholism and drug taking says that, although Oldman has the experience, it is the film that gives it power - 'Without art, authenticity doesn't mean much'. Authenticity is linked strongly with the issue of validation.

## VALIDATION OF AUDIENCE LIFE EXPERIENCE

One of the crucial roles for Applied Drama work is to create a sense of validation of people's experiences. Many individuals who have defective well-being are embarrassed at their condition and do not wish to share the issues they are experiencing with those they feel may not understand. There can be something quite positive in witnessing the story created by a group of drama workers who have taken the trouble to capture aspects of the life circumstance of audience members. For this to be effective, the latter need to feel that the storyline and the characters within it reflect the verities of their own experience. I will use 'The Living at Hurford', described above, to illustrate this point.

Much is now known about the mental state of farmers and the ways in which the Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak exacerbated the situation.<sup>12</sup> The play and its accurate representations of the farming Chaplain family provided validation for farmers' experiences. The event also allowed farmers to come together to witness a collective concern for a family in trouble. This had a 'de-solating' effect, helped by the way in which some farmers seemed to network in relation to the play. Rightly or not, many farmers feel disenfranchised and the play provided a forum in which their opinions mattered and their expertise was valued. As a group which often finds expression of emotions difficult, they were able to provide advice to the Chaplains in ways that shared and alleviated pain, perhaps providing some kind of healing and restoration. In that it recognised farmers' problems, the play could be seen as solace-making, drawing off some of the pain and combating isolation.

Another significant contribution to the theme of validation is the presence of a community in which validation is being sought. Farmers were talking to those they live amongst, but with whom they may have little contact. The fact that six of the ten performances were on farms helped to reinforce this as farmers were 'on their own territory'.

In these ways I judge the play to have had a therapeutic effect in the farming community. There were other, significant effects, among them the social capital derived from such a community theatre project in a rural area where many of the ways in which generations come together to celebrate are disappearing. Good friendships were made and developed, and people who lacked confidence came out of the experience enhanced. Dormant skills were exercised and new ones acquired. In the act of making the project, farmers co-operated with theatre-makers. The play was staged in two venues with predominantly community actors and musicians. In both casts, the part of Mr Chaplain was played by a local farmer, and his son by a farmer's son. This is emblematic of a resonance between the lived reality and the fiction of 'The Living at Hurford'.

## INTERACTIVITY

In Applied Drama, participants – workshop members, audience, children in drama classes – are often encouraged to explore the life-situations generated in the drama. In this way, a continuing discourse on human beliefs and behaviour is established as the representations interact with the participants' own psyches. Typically, the performance element in my Interactive Theatre programmes end at a crisis point which, unlike the well-made play, is not resolved in a *dénouement*, but through the efforts of a concerned audience which is encouraged to understand why the crisis has occurred and to find positive ways forward for those involved. Interactivity can take many forms and there is not room here to explore them. One quick example comes from an Interactive Theatre programme made in Czech Republic in April 2008. After presenting the compound stimulus, the facilitator (the person who links the audience and the story) placed the container – a girl's back pack, into the set. A 14 year-old girl wanders on, opens the bag and takes from it a letter which she reads and crumples up. She takes a razor blade from a side pocket in the bag and makes to cut her wrist. The facilitator stops her and talks sympathetically to her, intimating that she and the audience might be able to help. The girl tells her story through a series of 'flash-back' scenes, ending at the point where she intends self-harm. She

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<sup>12</sup> The Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) followed a policy of destroying all ungulates on infected farms. This was achieved through shooting the animals and incinerating the bodies. Contiguous farms were also culled of their stock. For more on this disease see: <http://www.chstm.man.ac.uk/news/pressrel-fmd.htm>

agrees to the facilitator's further offer of help. She leaves the room whilst the audience questions the people in the story and discuss ways of helping her. She comes back and they suggest that she talk to her piano teacher. An improvised scene is staged between these two characters in which the piano teacher tells the girl that she has a special talent.

After the scene ends, the facilitator asks the girl how she feels. She is more positive, and after some deliberation, she agrees to give the razor blade to the facilitator. There is no magic solution – many of her problems with parents and peer group remain, but the audience have brought her back from the brink of self-harm and started a process of healing.

The purpose of the compound stimulus and performance is to bring an audience to a point where they are involved in and 'care' about the protagonist and his/her dilemma. The interactive phase – in the example above, talking to the characters, discussing ways forward for the protagonist and watching the outcome of their advice, gives space for audience members to exercise moral engagement and concern. That engagement is prolonged through follow-up and extension activities.

## THE COMPRESSION OF MEANING

Those engaged in the processes of dramatic improvisation and theatre-making use the dramatic language to concentrate meaning in the semiotics of representation. If those processes are successful, the artwork contains compressed truths about human existence and people's search for significance. If the outcomes are performed, and the representations resonate with audience members, that compressed meaning expands within the receivers. The dramatic language is therefore, like poetry, a heightened form of expression.

## EXTENSION

I use a variety of approaches to assist the participants to sustain the affect and effect of the drama. Some of these are obvious pedagogic techniques – writing a letter to one of the characters in the story in the week following a performance, reflecting in an organised session (or lesson in schools) on aspects of the story and the issues raised, creating poems or dramatic improvisations which plumb the topic further, for example. Some can be more oblique. As part of the follow-up of an interactive programme performed to 12 year-olds in Exeter (England) on the topic of friendship, the school students discussed the characteristics of true friendship. Having chosen the most important five qualities, everyone made coloured bead bracelets which were tied onto friends' wrists. As, collectively, we held each bead in turn, we spoke the quality associated with that colour. A large sheet was produced itemising the qualities with the appropriate colour next to it. As I left the classroom that day I turned and saw two children touch bracelets in a form of tryst (*see next page*).



*Figure 3: The bracelet*

In another Interactive Theatre programme which dealt with intercultural relationships, groups of students made written declarations about how humanity should behave in the next seventy years to ensure justice and well-being. Representatives of each group read its declaration before placing it in a box. The box was placed on a new shelf in the corner of their classroom as a visual reminder of the pledges made.

Following this ceremony, children wrote the key words of their pledges on helium balloons before releasing them to the statement 'We have decided that these values are important to the future of humanity. We now give them to the world.'

All of these activities are aimed at extending the contact the participants have with each other and the topic of the programme.



*Figure 4: Reading the declaration*



Figure 5: The balloons are released

## EVALUATION

Discovering whether the drama experience has achieved the change intended is no easy matter. Often, it is difficult to judge or even be aware of the affect and effect of dramatic experience. Once the drama ‘event’ has occurred, the after burn of the experience may stay with participants for many days, weeks, years or, in my case and others I know, a lifetime. Because of the combination of direct experience, emotional engagement and socially situated learning, certain drama experiences can have a profound effect. Whilst writing this article, I received the following e-mail from an ex-school student who took part in a large, devised production which centred on coalmining and energy production:

I doubt very much that you remember me but I have never forgotten you and my first experience of a large scale production. I had a tiny part singing a traditional song unaccompanied. I still remember it now and the thrill those performances gave me. I shook from head to foot auditioning for you but you were the first person to tell me that my voice was special. [...] I [now] sing professionally [...] My contribution to the production was tiny but your influence was huge.

(Personal e-mail to the author, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2008)

This production took place thirty two years’ ago. It illustrates that this kind of dramatic experience can be effective for both participants and audience. Thus, an evaluation should attempt to discover the outcomes for both parties.

A variety of approaches to evaluation are available. In a series of lessons taught in secondary schools across England on the topic of students’ attitudes to disability, I used pre- and post attitude scales to discover changes in students’ attitudes (Somers, 1996). I am just about to use this device again as part of an evaluation of an Interactive Theatre programme on young car drivers and risk. Post-experience

interviews with participants, asking participants to respond in writing or to keep a log of their experience, asking them to complete short stories before and after the event, are all possible evaluation devices. It is relatively easy to assess attitude change. Judging the effect of the drama on behaviour is much more difficult and requires sensitive, longitudinal research.<sup>13</sup> One technique I have experimented with is to interview participants many months after their involvement. Working on the principle of that which we remember holds personal significance for us, in an unpublished study I found that around 18% of participants in an Interactive Theatre programme for 12 year olds had near total recall of the programme and its story, 48% remembered aspects of it and the remainder could remember nothing of the experience.

## ATTITUDE CHANGE

Some of the stories that contribute to our personal, family, community and national identity are close to the surface of 'knowing' and may be open to rational discussion, examination and modification. These represent the values and attitudes that are most easily changed. The fundamental stories that form the foundation of self, however, are so deeply embedded in our consciousness that they are not easily told or, often, explicitly understood. Stephen Crites posits that the deepest stories of our identity that inform us of who we are – those that form the strongly held basis for an aggressive criminal's behaviour, for example - may only be accessible through artistic and spiritual experience.<sup>14</sup> What artists may be doing, and I include child artists among them, is attempting constantly to articulate those deep stories, their own and those that give collective identity to their culture. As a subversive activity, art also questions and challenges those stories, subjecting them to sustained evaluation as to their continued power, relevance and moral stance.

Psychologists tell us that we remember best that which we find significant. If one takes retention in the memory as an important factor for the learning process, the research of Malgorzata Tarasiewicz is evidence of the value of Theatre in Education. In her research, she checks the efficiency of different methods of delivering knowledge and how they influence the process of retention. The percentages indicate how much material remains in the memory of participants after applications of different methods of presentation:

- lecture 5%
- reading 10%
- audio-visual methods 20%
- demonstration 30%
- discussion 50%
- testing material in practical exercises 75%
- using material in practice 90%

(Machulska et al, 1997, p.88)

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<sup>13</sup> For more on assessment, see Somers, J., 'Measuring the Shadow or Knowing the Bird: evaluation and assessment of Drama in Education', in *Evaluating Creativity*, (2000); Sefton-Green, J. and Sinker, R. (Eds), London, Routledge, pp. 107- 128.

Also Henry, M., 'Drama's Ways of Learning' in *Research in Drama Education*, Vol. 5 no. 1 pp. 45-62 Feb 2000, Basingstoke: Routledge.

<sup>14</sup> For more on this see Crites, S. 'The Narrative Quality of Experience' in *Memory, Identity, Community*, Hinchman, LP & Hinchman SK (Eds), SUNY Press, NY.

Developing realistic assessment procedures for this area is difficult. And yet we harbour a belief that by attempting to raise and experience certain 'life areas' in drama, participants are gaining more humane attitudes, that they are, at the very least, not becoming more negative about the people examined and the issues raised. Research I conducted with experienced UK drama teachers illustrates that to believe otherwise would be intolerable. The teachers maintain that their chief criterion for choosing material to work on in lessons is its suitability for making good drama. They state they do not aim to achieve developmental or attitude change and that, even if they did, such changes would be impossible to assess. When asked, however, if they would be happy if a more negative attitude was being taken by students to, say, old age following a series of lessons on this topic, they were adamant that they believed there was a positive effect. The evidence suggests that deeply embedded in their philosophies was a belief that drama changed students 'for the better' as a result of their contact with issues embedded in lesson material.<sup>15</sup>

Research shows that Applied Drama involvement is one of the most effective ways of altering attitudes and behaviour.<sup>16</sup> A meta-analysis of existing, published research by James Catterall, for example, found that:

Drama helps with understanding social relationships, complex issues and emotions; improves concentrated thought and story comprehension. (Catterall, J, 2002)

Research I did in the 1980s based in thirty-five schools across the UK showed that students positively changed their attitudes to disability as a result of experiencing a series of structured drama lessons.<sup>17</sup> Following experience of the Interactive Theatre programme 'On the Edge', a community mental health nurse said:

With the best will in the world, mental health workers do tend to become desensitised to the individual's experience and that of their family. The play was humbling and will also affect my practice by highlighting the human experience.  
(Female community mental health nurse, evaluation form).

The qualitative data suggest that the programme has provoked careful thought about the effects of stigma and discrimination on people suffering from mental ill health, and there is some evidence of attitude change towards a more tolerant and accepting view of those who are, in this context, regarded as 'different'. The programme can thus be seen to be successful in meeting its three aims. Professionals in the field were very supportive of the work, believing that it would achieve attitude change amongst those who experienced it:

The National Early Intervention in Psychosis programme depends for its success on improved relationships and understanding between young people, schools and colleges, families and mental health professionals. 'On the Edge' is far and away the most effective vehicle that I have encountered to expedite this. It is an interactive play that brilliantly depicts the descent into psychosis of a young person and the complex interaction with his parents, school and first girlfriend and their attitudes to mental illness and mental health services. The play engages audiences of school and college students, teachers, families and mental health staff and is organised in a way that leads to a dialogue between these different groups that can only lead to a

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<sup>15</sup> Paper presented by me at the second International Drama in Education Research Institute, University of Victoria, 1997, as yet unpublished.

<sup>16</sup> See *Taskforce on Underage Alcohol Misuse*, Kate Fox (1997), London: The Portman Group, p.27.

<sup>17</sup> See my article in Somers, J., (Ed), (1996) 'The Nature of Learning in Drama in Education', in *Drama and Theatre in Education: contemporary research*, Captus Press, North York, Canada, pp. 107-120



reduction of the barriers stemming from stigma, leading to better care and more humane interventions.

(Letter from Dr Brian Martindale  
Consultant Psychiatrist

Western European Zone representative to The World Psychiatric Organisation)

I will use this programme as one of my case studies, and as an example of work which attempts to achieve well-defined change.

## ON THE EDGE

This play was created by a group of final year drama students in the School of Performance Arts, University of Exeter under my direction. It is an example of 'hard change'. We were assisted by an Advisory Group comprised of a psychiatrist, psychologist, mental health service users, drama therapist and representatives of mental health charities. Subsequently it was toured by *Exstream Theatre Company* of which I am Artistic Director.

The aims were:

- To reduce stigma associated with psychosis;
- Educate people about mental health issues;
- Signpost routes to support and recovery.

The programme forms part of an initiative to achieve earlier intervention in psychotic episodes as evidence shows that success and speed of recovery are related to reducing the time lapse between the appearance of the first symptoms and effective treatment and support.

As 1 in 4 people will experience mental health issues during their life,<sup>18</sup> it is imperative that we adopt a more open attitude to discussing and understanding them. Following extensive research, I created a story and wrote sections of dialogue from it. This was reviewed by the Advisory Group, judged to be authentic, and gave a starting point for the process of developing the play with the student group.

People who saw it on its six-month tour have been mostly enthusiastic:

I found it rather [...] an ordeal because I spent eight years with someone who suffered a post-natal psychosis and it was quite horrific [...] it led in the end to the breakdown of the marriage [...] I did explain [...] that if I couldn't, I'd leave. I went through and I, yeah in fact it's all coming back now, I was pleased I sat through it and I thought it was handled very, very well. I felt at the end I could have offered advice to people, you know. Some of the questions to the actors I felt I could have, I wanted to say, look, don't hang round, there are people who can help you, don't wait, get help now. I thought it was handled very sensitively really and very professionally and I was impressed with that and I thought, if only this had been done prior to those eight years of hell, the first couple of years might have been a lot easier. Because it hadn't been recognised and we were given advice like 'Go and have a cuddle and everything will be all right' [...] what came through there was quite stark and quite, I thought, quite accurate.

(Audience member)

<sup>18</sup> [http://northumbria.ac.uk/sd/central/stud\\_serv/disability/mental/](http://northumbria.ac.uk/sd/central/stud_serv/disability/mental/)

The four-phases of the programme were:

*Phase one: compound stimulus*

In the case of 'On the Edge' this comprised a shoebox which the audience is told, was found under a seventeen-year-old boy's bed.



Figure 6: The contents of the shoebox

*Phase two: the performance*

Prior to the performance starting, the facilitator used the compound stimulus to draw from the audience the hypotheses they had formed when working with it the week before. She then said 'So those are some of your ideas about the people who are in this story and what's happening to them. We are now going to see what really happened'. She then placed the box under the bed on the stage area and the 40 minute performance began. It showed a boy who gradually descends into a psychotic episode, ending in a crisis scene.



Figure 7: The actor playing Terry is hotseated

### *Phase three: interactivity*

Audience members are invited to talk with someone next to them about what the boy is experiencing and how those around him are reacting to his behaviour. They are then invited to question – ‘hot seat’ - the characters to gain a better understanding of their motivation and feelings. Audience members then break into groups to discuss how each character could support Terry through his ill health. The characters then sat in front of the reassembled audience and received advice on how to move the story on.



*Figure 8: Audience members give advice to characters*

The facilitator, a mental health nurse, then diagnosed Terry’s condition and gave information on how and where to seek help in such circumstances.

### *Phase four: follow-up*

A one hour classroom follow-up session is held approximately a week later. Led by the teacher, this was to enable students to reflect on and consolidate knowledge gained through the programme. Each school/college was given a copy of the education pack ‘Back from the Edge’ which could be used as a resource to support the session.

### *Evaluation*

A very sophisticated evaluation of this programme was carried out.<sup>19</sup> It showed that significant changes had occurred. These included increased student awareness and knowledge of psychosis; greater awareness and consideration of stigma and

<sup>19</sup> For access to the full report undertaken by Dr Rowena Passy and Dr Jos Dawe, go to [http://www.spa.ex.ac.uk/drama/exstream/ontheedge/ote\\_report.pdf](http://www.spa.ex.ac.uk/drama/exstream/ontheedge/ote_report.pdf)

discrimination amongst families and those affected by psychosis and; greater awareness of where to seek help.

## FORESIGHT



This very unusual theatrical experience – an example of attempts at ‘soft change’ is based on a real story of the crash of a German Junkers 88 bomber in the Tale Valley in 1941. It was written by a first-time local playwright Rose Watts and was performed in a marquee near the spot where one of the German airmen hit the ground – dead. It took place in Payhembury, a small East Devon (England) rural parish.<sup>20</sup> The aim of the project was to provide ‘theatre as communal work’.<sup>21</sup>

## COMMUNITY THEATRE

Neither human existence nor individual liberty can be sustained for long outside the interdependent and over-lapping communities to which we all belong. Nor can any community long survive unless its members dedicate some of their attention, energy and resources to shared projects.

(Etzioni 1997)

Community theatre has different roots and functions related to its cultural, social and political setting and its purpose in those specific environments. In some cases it may be that community rituals and stories, often deeply embedded in cultural traditions, are performed as an integral part of defining and celebrating a community’s cultural and spiritual identity. Other forms of community theatre have political intent, to inform and energise a community in bringing change or in asserting human rights. The continuum stretches, therefore, from radical activist theatre to benign celebration. Whatever the source and form of community theatre, it is generally welcomed as a positive sign that a community is prepared to supplement the generally passive reception of stories available in multitude from the print and broadcast media with narratives which are made and performed within, by and to a specific community.

Since Ann Jellicoe's theatre work in the 1970s, in the UK, ‘Community Theatre’ now generally refers to a particular theatre form<sup>22</sup> which involves the creation of a theatre event that has relevance for the particular community in which it is created and

<sup>20</sup> For more on this project see <http://www.talevalleycommunitytheatre.org/>

<sup>21</sup> A paper on this concept is available from the author.

<sup>22</sup> In the USA, ‘community theatre’ means amateur theatre which almost always involves the use of published, scripted plays.

which is performed, predominantly, by and to members of that community (Jellicoe, 1987).

## GENESIS

In 2004 I, a Tale Valley resident, devised and organised a sixteen-session 'Community Theatre School' which comprised multiple workshops on writing, acting, directing, design, music, technical and marketing.<sup>23</sup> These were led by appropriate professionals. Several initiatives emerged, and Rose Watts, a first-time playwright, wrote *Foresight*, developing the play over two years with my support.



Figure 9: German Luftwaffe airmen

<sup>23</sup> The Theatre School was financed by Exeter University's Community Outreach programme.

## STORYLINE

When out metal detecting, Frankie and his friends (including his ‘sort-of’ girlfriend, Joanna) discover some debris from a second world-war aircraft. Frankie tries to clean a cigarette case which he can’t even open. He places it on his bedside table whilst he sleeps; during the night, it opens and reveals its stories.

Frankie discovers that his Great Grandmother, who was French, had an affair with a German airman in occupied France. He gradually unravels the events leading to the crash, partly by using documents belonging to his recently deceased grandfather.



*Figure 10: Vintage bus*

The play ends with Frankie having gained moral insight into the nature of violence and war. He returns to the spot where the cigarette case was found and reburies it, wishing to place the memories where they belong. He also inter in the hole a dead buzzard which he previously saw wheeling above the fields. He is ‘watched’ by those – alive and dead - who have also gained insight and who understand what he has acquired from the incidents portrayed. Audience members then walked outside the performance marquee to hear the real farmer describe how his father found the dead German airman. A real WWII aircraft flew over, trailing smoke, to the sound of a tolling bell.

## FORMAT

As well as a bus ticket of the 1940s, audience members were issued with a documentary programme days before attending the play. This contained background information on the events on which the play is based. Local historian, Robin Stanes, had researched the topic and prepared a booklet which was on sale from July 2007. Audience members arrived by vintage 1940s buses at Tuckmill Farm, Payhembury

where *Foresight* was staged in a large marquee. Military and other vehicles of the time stood outside the marquee and, as audience members entered the marquee they were able to look at an exhibition of related material and video recordings of interviews with eyewitnesses.



Figure 11: WWII lorry

The play was performed ‘promenade style’ with the action happening in amongst audience members. The performance marquee was pitched in a field close to where one of the bodies landed. Live music involved a choir and instrumentalists. Two large screens were used for projected images. Staff and pupils in local primary schools were involved in the project, especially through singing workshops.

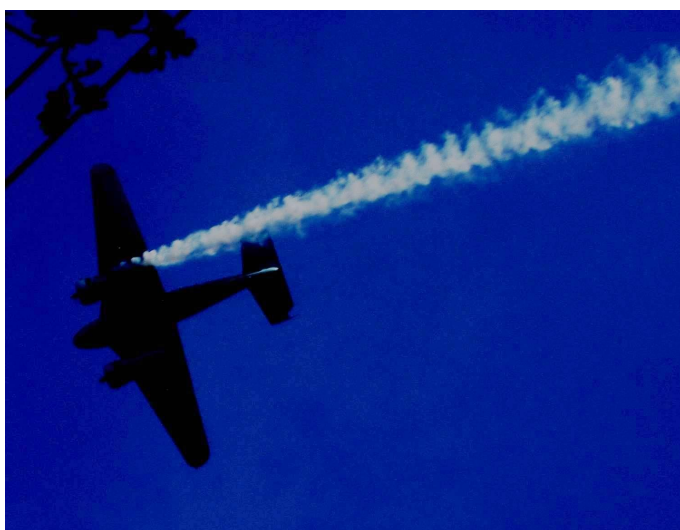


Figure 12: Aircraft flies over audience

Participant and audience responses were almost universally enthusiastic. One audience member said:

The sense of community was also a powerful theme that came across in *Foresight*. I found the inclusive nature of the event inspiring. From the old to the young, *Foresight* provided a point of engagement that enabled a community's story to be told through a combination of education, music, performance, interaction and digital media.

AM 6

And another:

I was most impressed with the production, which was ambitious, but carried out with a confidence which assured success. The scale of the piece, from such a small community was staggering [...] The whole evening was very moving; I was born just after the war, so the songs and spirit of it all seemed very familiar.

AM 12

Participants often placed emphasis on the social integration achieved:

At the time I thought it was good but looking back now I am even more convinced when I think about how many more people I know from the area, how we came together, worked together, shared together and enjoyed the whole experience together.

P 4

The whole experience was one of the most memorable things I have ever been involved in, perhaps magnified by the fact that I only got involved at the 'business end' - the last two weeks. So it was all very intense. It was a good reminder of what a group dynamic can achieve. As a family, we also gained a complete new set of friends!

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All of the research resources were deposited in the local museum.

I wrote earlier of the notion of 'extension', the technique aimed 'to assist the participants to sustain the affect and effect of the drama'. In *Foresight*, after the last night party, all involved moved to the bank of the River Tale which bordered the field in which the performance was held. I dug a hole and the actors who played the teenage leads, Frankie and Joanna, placed in it the buzzard and cigarette case used in the play. Their actions were accompanied by 'Ah poor bird' – a moving song from the performance - sung by the whole cast. A new story was made, linking fact, fiction, participants and context, and which all who took part will remember.

## CONCLUSION

Around the world, the kinds of drama I deal with in this article are variously termed 'Drama as Social Intervention'; 'Theatre and Social Change'; 'Theatre for Change'; 'Applied Drama'; 'Applied Theatre' and 'Theatre for Development'. In each case there is an intention to achieve change by creating the circumstances in which people experience optimum conditions in which shifts of personal knowledge, values and attitudes can occur. In all cases there is an intention to excite change. Always, there is an intention to achieve the best possible levels of social efficacy and artistic merit. In the early stages of the development of *Foresight*, priority was given to securing social bonding and individual commitment. Once those qualities were achieved, those involved were more able to focus on the quality of the drama. Many of the



participants had not taken part in theatre of any kind and, consequently, some felt vulnerable in the early stages of rehearsals. Sensitive directing is necessary if one is not to 'lose' such contributors, but the ultimate satisfaction for all involved comes through knowing that the artistic product is of high quality. Knowing how to manage these two essential factors is perhaps the major skill needed in those directing a Community Theatre project, or working in any aspect of Applied Drama activity.

'Participant change' through drama is difficult to verify. Attitude change is reasonably well researched and documented; behaviour change less so.<sup>24</sup> During my long experience in this field, I have observed many individuals and groups which have found in drama experiences the conditions which allow productive change. To confound Leonard and Kilkelly's statement at the start of this article, every practitioner will tell you stories to illustrate that it happens and many dedicate their lives to its realisation. In the next decade, one major objective of my particular research community should be to draw together the relevant existing research evidence and to seek further verification of long-term attitude and behaviour change.

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<sup>24</sup> For attitude change, see Widdows, J., 'Drama as an Agent for Change: drama, behaviour and students with emotional and behavioural difficulties' in *Research in Drama Education*, Volume 1, Issue 1 February 1996, pages 65 – 78, Basingstoke, Taylor Francis. And Somers 1996 (op cit) and Catterall, J., 'Enhancing peer conflict resolution skills through drama: an experimental study', *Research in Drama Education*, Volume 12, Number 2, June 2007, pp. 163-178, Basingstoke: Routledge. Finally, see also the TIPP website <http://www.tipp.org.uk/tipp/>

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**John William Somers** is a Honorary University Fellow at University of Exeter. He is also the founder Editor of the journal *Research in Drama Education*, Founder Director of the Exeter international conference Researching Drama and Theatre in Education, and is Artistic Director of Exstream Theatre Company and Tale Valley Community Theatre. Exstream has been nominated for the 2007 Queen's Anniversary Prize. Together with collaborators, he has gained funding of around £250,000 to tour interactive theatre focusing on bioethics and mental health. The latter programme won the NIMHE Positive Practice award in 2005. He founded an MA Applied Drama at Exeter in 1999. He is the 2003 recipient of the American Alliance of Theatre and Education Lin Wright Special Recognition Award. He has published widely and frequently works internationally, most recently in Poland, Finland, Taiwan and Turkey.