Home is where the heart is: building, belonging and emotional engagement in anti-austerity performance.

In 2011, Reading-based theatre collective In Good Company devised an anti-austerity play called *The Pact*. The collapse of the sub-prime mortgage market as the backdrop of the 2007/8 financial crisis, and the impact on UK housing and homelessness of early policies of the coalition government, meant that themes of home circulated in the performance. Home also functioned in less literal ways in a production designed to agitate by voicing local dissent, and which attempted to build an activist network through rehearsals that were open to the public. Drawing on community organising theory, the article proposes that rehearsals provide a suitable home for political organising, where collaborators deconstruct and imagine worlds anew as they strive towards a common goal. It also acknowledges our emotional connection with home, and argues that strong feelings triggered by scenes in *The Pact* were integral to audience members' awareness of themselves in society, and that critical and emotional engagements offer a potent combination in activist theatre. As local councils across the UK face bankruptcy, and *The Pact's* alarming forecast looks conservative against impacts of social-spending cuts and accelerated privatisation in 2018, it is important to scrutinise effective activist practice to inform further activity.

Keywords: activist theatre; political performance; community organising; emotional and critical engagement; austerity; home.

Sound of heartbeat stops

Lights up

Performers call softly to each other, or to people in the audience, from wherever they have ended up within the crowd:

STU: So… um… if this is a party… … why are people killing each other, in bed, out of love?

LORI: What?

STU: In the richest country/in the world

MATT: I was going to ask that

Pause

STU: Why are their bodies without/houses

MATT: Why are there… um… ... dead bodies in houses… … …who love each other?...

Long pause … (someone starts sobbing)

This is an extract from a performance called *The Pact,* which I devised with the theatre collective In Good Company in Reading, in 2011. The extract refers to a couple in Houston, Texas, USA, who in 2010, overwhelmed with financial pressures and in the process of losing their home, took a suicide pact, in bed, leaving detailed notes, a list of family members to contact, and arrangements for their funerals to be found by police (KHOU-TV, 2010). We referenced this tragedy to show the devastating impact of the collapse of the mortgage bubble in 2007 and, more generally, of financialised capitalism on the lives of individuals and communities around the world. We placed it alongside examples closer to home to draw comparisons between the American system and our own, in an attempt to organise local resistance to early 'austerity' policies of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, who had been in office just over a year.

The government's accelerated programme of privatisation, budget cuts and reduction of welfare support was already being felt on top of the recession. Unemployment had reached a 17-year high, and leaked reports in the daily newspapers made for eye-watering reading as dire projected impacts of policies still in the pipeline clashed with those of record profits being pocketed by bankers and CEOs (Allen, 2011; Boffey & Helm, 2011). Poor and precarious housing conditions, rent arrears, and dislocation and homelessness escalated as the government accelerated the reduction of the stock and the subsidy of social housing, and further reduced regulation of the private rented sector (Lansley & Mack, 2015: 151-167). On the afternoon of our first rehearsal for *The Pact,* riots and looting spread through 14 London boroughs and then to towns and cities across the country, sparked by the fatal police shooting of Tottenham resident Mark Duggan. Austerity politics, in collision with late consumer capitalism, had ignited.

Founding In Good Company and devising *The Pact* formed part of my doctoral research, which asked how theatre can play a meaningful role in political organising and campaigning. It also developed from work myself and two other company members were involved with at the time, where we drew on methods of community organising to increase participation in local trade union and anti-cuts work. We saw potential in processes of collaborative theatre-making for fostering the kind of participation community organisers deem essential for motivating and sustaining the involvement of new activists, such as listening to what matters to a collective, pursuing activities that build skills and interpersonal

relationships, and working as a group towards an 'achievable goal' (Alinksy, 1969). In order to listen, we conducted interviews with people living locally on how austerity was affecting them, and continued similar conversations in rehearsals that were open to the public. These discussions influenced the devising process and were quoted verbatim in the final script. Interpersonal relationships and skills were fostered in rehearsals among visitors and company members, most of whom had little or no prior experience of theatre work. Our 'achievable goal' was the performance, and we hoped that new networks established during rehearsals would channel the energy that the performance provoked back into local activist initiatives to create meaningful and enduring change.

We created the performance in a disused town-centre pub, where we established atmospheric environments for the audience to navigate in promenade. Scenes populated by characters based on local people, who welcomed the audience into their homes or workplaces, were interspersed with dystopian scenes where sinister figures personifying political and economic systems, apparently unable to see the audience, would speak through them, or shrink away if anyone got too close. Politicians were also theatrically estranged: isolated in spotlights, caught in mock TV studios, or thrown onto the walls of the building in projected news footage. Theatrical effects were sometimes used to intensify rather than distance the audience's engagement with the action. For example, in the scene referenced at the start of the article, a red light shone intermittently through the blackout to the amplified sound of an irregular heartbeat. This created a disturbing, disorientating effect, and some performers and audience members responded emotionally to the scene. At the same time, we drew on techniques to emphasise the constructed nature of the performance, including direct address, multi-rolling, on stage costume-changes, and systems to signal the status of the script as it switched between verbatim and fictional material. In other words, no matter how affecting a scene, the dramaturgy held the audience in a dialogue that was critical, and which foregrounded the material conditions at the root of any emotional exchange.

Although it was staged eight years ago, artistic and political issues raised by *The Pact* are still relevant today. Through participatory processes based on community organising strategies and the combination of critical and emotional engagement in performance, In Good Company made inroads into increasing political activity locally, including the first-time involvement of community members with campaign groups, protest camps and trade unions.[i] At the time of writing this article, though, our worst predictions in 2011 turn out to have been conservative. Medical experts place austerity's UK death toll at over 20,000, life expectancy decreases at the fastest rate of any leading industrialised nation after the United States, and

suicide and homelessness hit record highs (Watkins et. al, 2017; Dorling & Giete-Basten, 2018; McVeigh, 2015; Mohdin, 2018). Over a million emergency food packages have been given to people in crisis in Britain since 2010, one in every 200 people were estimated to be sleeping rough or living in inadequate housing at the end of 2017, and more than a million households are at risk of becoming homeless by 2020 (Fitzpatrick et. al, 2018; Butler, 2017; Helm, 2017).

Resistance movements have developed in response to these conditions at the level of grassroots and industrial organising, while socialist policies propelled by member-led campaigns have entered the breach of the British parliamentary system whose subordination of objectives based on social justice to free-market neoliberalism had worn untenably thin. Meanwhile, the launch of the Labour Party's Community Organising Unit, or campaign group Momentum's media training initiatives, begin to formalise principles and practices of 'bottom up' organising in the domain of party politics in combination with an anti-austerity agenda (Parker, 2018; Waterson, 2018). Theatre companies old and new have made urgent political work in this context, referring to their productions as 'campaigns' or as a means to 'create activists' through collaborative working processes as well as the theatrical event itself.[ii]

However, the relationship between theatre and community organising has not been critically explored, and while scholars have discussed at length the connection between verbatim theatre, emotion and affect, relatively little attention has been paid to the way these forms and phenomena operate in the service of activist theatre. This article uses *The Pact* as a case study to instigate precisely these discussions. The first section considers the potential of rehearsals for community organising, taking into account the significance of the venue where we worked. The second analyses *The Pact* in performance, and how confronting the raw materiality of factual content through the ontological conditions of live performance produced responses from audience members that were at once emotionally charged, critically conscious, and politically efficacious. I go on to demonstrate how emotional engagement, rather than acting as a barrier to the kind of critical distance associated with epic theatre, can actually work to accentuate it.

The two sections of the article are prefigured and interspersed with a selection of critical perspectives on home, which work across or beneath the questions about political theatre at the heart of the article. Lack of affordable housing was an issue that surfaced repeatedly in conversations that informed *The Pact*, and incorporating these stories in the performance enabled us to trace a trajectory from personal experience to the complexities of

systemic injustice in a way we imagined would be broadly accessible and emotionally affective. Home has offered researchers a lens through which to analyse human behaviour and socio-economic systems, and Shelley Mallett (2004) explains that beyond being understood simply as a physical dwelling or shelter, home is a 'multi-layered phenomenon' that has been theorised as a state of mind, a feeling, encounter, a set of practices, and 'an active state of being in the world'. As such, home adds insight to an exploration of the connection between communal activity, place, politics and emotion in performance.

Spaces of building and belonging in rehearsal

'Being at home' stands for a profound connection, close to although not the same as 'being at one'. 'Home', meanwhile, has come to signify both the subject and that which she experiences, insofar as it is conceived as being 'physically inscribed in us' (Jackson, 1995: 86), 'an inalienable part of us' (Havel, 1992 in Tucker 1994), or 'the way in which you are, and I am […] on the earth' (Heidegger, 1993: 349). A sense of belonging, or feeling 'at home' in the world may be brought about through activity. Michael Jackson notes that we feel at home when we are empowered, and where our actions have consequence (1995:123). Home stands for a place of origin, where things are founded or invented, as well as the private dwelling, which may offer scope for regeneration, imagination and the nurturing of close relationships (Mallet, 2004).

In Good Company members had mostly grown up in Reading or nearby, and we all lived there while we were working on *The Pact*, doing call-centre jobs, raising children, or finishing college or university education. I remember a visitor to one of the final rehearsals stating that, for her, the strength of the performance was hearing people who were angry with issues affecting their community address their neighbours directly, imploring them to take action. Her comment reflects the fact that *The Pact* was ultimately about our home, and was propelled by our personal connection with Reading, and what was at stake for us and other people there. The building where we held our rehearsals and performances, known as the Coopers Arms, was also significant in terms of identity and place. A listed 17th century merchant's house, and pub since the 1960s, it is situated in the market square, round the corner from the train station and between shops, banks, pubs and clubs (Dearing, 2009: 48). The street outside is busy through the day and late into the night. Property developers bought the pub in 2008 with plans to turn it and the adjoining arcade into a 'classy mini-mall' (Cassel, 2008). However, since 2010 the pub and parts of the arcade became disused and boarded up.

We got access to the Coopers via a charity called 'Jelly' that fosters relationships with developers who own empty property in the town. Jelly use the spaces they gain access to as 'pop-up' art venues for local artists, and the Coopers Arms was the space I was allocated when I was put in touch with the charity's director. The building was a palimpsest of different owners and projects that had happened or were yet to take place inside. Quirky decorations and posters for upcoming events were stuck to freshly painted walls, next to falling down signs, closed off passageways, the empty bar and its decaying woodwork. The ghosted pub and adjoining arcade held significant implications for our rehearsal process, and for a performance that considered impacts of global systems of finance capital on local places and people.

For example, the words of a shopkeeper I interviewed, who had been forced due to rent increases to leave the adjoining arcade where he had worked for thirty years, resonated uncomfortably in rehearsal. After the first performance an old neighbor of mine fought back tears to tell me that after a series of unfortunate circumstances she had lost her home, and was now sleeping on the floor of a shared room in her daughter's house with no prospect of affording her own place. Our show had upset her, she said, because the same pub floors she had danced on in her 20s were now being used to tell the grisly tale of exactly the kind of insecurity she was trapped in. Another audience member reflected that in performance the venue became symbolic of the 'ebb and flow of a society where economic and governmental policies result in abandonment of not only places, but also people'.[iii] In fact, we found out that the arcade had become a site of dissent in 2006 when residents protested its sale to the same property developers we now dealt with by proxy, and whose building we afforded some cultural capital, while we helped prevent the rot from setting in (*Get Reading*, 6/06/06).

More positively, the pub's central location and history was helpful for connecting us with new communities. A point of intrigue and orientation, it seemed to make people relax, and feel entitled, somehow, to engage with what we were doing when we promoted the project at local events. 'Oh! The Coopers Arms! I know where you mean. What's happening with that place now? I'd be interested to see!' 'How did you end up working in there then?...' Meanwhile, the pub's street-facing façade provided us with a moving cyclorama of the town to work against, and those outside a window in, literally, on our creative process. People came in to ask what was going on, or, if they hadn't looked closely, to try to order a drink. Slowly but surely, our work began to merge with the day-to-day environment of the town.

The idea that a politically efficacious theatre should employ theatrical signs that engage with the lived experience of the audience resonates with a key principle of

community organising. In his book *Rules for Radicals*, which has provided a touchstone for generations of political organisers, Saul D. Alinsky cannot emphasise enough the importance of communicating 'within the areas of experience of his audience' (1969: 81). In order to relate effectively, he says, the activist may have to 'learn local legends, anecdotes, values, idioms' (70). She will know when a connection has been made when the other party's eyes 'light up' and they respond, 'I know exactly what you mean, I had something just like that once, let me tell you about it!' (81). In her more recent book *How Organisations Develop Activists,* Hahrie Han also acknowledges the importance of finding ways to mold 'social psychological factors, such as a sense of shared identity […] in ways that make participation meaningful and shape social interaction (2014: 61).

While pubs are by no means accessible for everyone, and not all pubs are welcoming all of the time, the Coopers Arms and the arcade might be compared with Alinksy's 'local legends' in so far as it had played some role in the lives and memories of people we engaged through the project. And, while the disused status of the venue signified a space of economic failure, it also signaled since its reoccupation a place of unexpected and nascent possibility, revivification and resistance. By making *The Pact* in the Cooper Arms, the 'everyday' architecture of the town was transformed, if temporarily, through the creative input of local people, and rehearsals became a home of sorts, where people's actions held political consequences.

Han contends that agency is also achieved through the commitment of new activists to one another, and that it is 'through relationships and autonomous collective action that peoples motivations are likely to change, grow and develop (16; 26). She asserts, furthermore, that in order to develop leaders for the long-term, organisers must 'cultivate and transform' people's interests through interdependent action, including one to one conversations, group activity and reflection (112; 116-7). Organisations that have achieved enduring participation from new activists have run social gatherings and celebratory events alongside more conventional campaigning activities like writing letters or phone banking, and regularly practiced face to face follow up with participants (100).

Theatre making, inherently social and often celebratory, is reliant on intensive collective work as well as autonomous decision-making from people with a range of skills. It is also conducive to the formation of close relationships between participants. Sarah Weston (2018) has compared the kind of caring and collective responsibility that can result from communities rehearsing political theatre together, to the kinds of bonds forged in sites of political struggle, including strikes and occupations. Perhaps this has to do with the

experience of inhabiting as well as constructing temporary environments that are also spaces of resistance.

Rehearsals also necessitate a critical engagement from participants. For Robert Baker-White, the rehearsal is ‘a site of the becoming of relations’ and ‘a process where things and their referents are not yet firmly attached’, where ‘the various aspects of production are *expected* to influence the development of others’ (1999: 58; 51). His focus is on how the experience of the rehearsing actor, who repeatedly influences and reencounters the construction of the dramatic scene, relates to the epic theatre model. He argues that spectators of epic theatre, because their relationship with the action is interpretative, function to some extent ‘as theatre artists’, behaving ‘as if they were in the rehearsal themselves’ (57). But the political efficacy of epic theatre has been influentially challenged. For Augusto Boal, the *‘as if’* that Baker-White attaches to the dialectical performance does not change the fact that in the epic theatre the dramatist, not the citizen ‘chooses the word’ (2008: xx). For Boal, the emancipatory potential of theatre resides in the act of the audience participating or ‘trespassing’ in the dramatic representation, and he is firm on the point that unless we trespass beyond our cultural norms ‘we can never be free’ (xxi).

Although *The Pact* was a promenade performance, we did not invite the audience to alter the action in a Boalian sense, or to practice their emancipation through role-play during the performance. Instead, in an attempt to rebalance control over the means of production, it was in the pre-production process and in our open rehearsals that we invited the public to engage, literally, in the ‘open-ended ethos of rehearsal’ (Baker-White, 1999: 50-51). It was here we engaged them in ‘the possibility (and duty) of assembling, experimenting and abstracting’, or in ‘choosing the word’, and offered them the chance to participate ‘not just in the fiction but also in [their] social reality’ (Boal, 2008: xx- xxi). To what extent, though, can a process in which aspects of production are *expected* to influence the development of others constitute an act of trespass symbolically, or literally?

Rehearsals may provide the possibility of a similar political transgression to the one Boal proposes, but through different means. Rather than rehearsing Spect-Actors to assert themselves over dominant and oppressive structures, In Good Company used rehearsals as a way of engaging our community in political discussion and creative activity, and working together to achieve a tangible result. We rehearsed being together rather than the contravention of someone else’s structure, shifting focus from the opponent to us as collaborators, and from moments of intervention to the processes and people behind them. As

in Boalian theatre, we engaged simultaneously in a fiction and in our social reality, but at a different point of the construction of that reality.

Because *The Pact* was conceived of as a community organising drive that could operate *through* a series of rehearsals and performances, as well as a series of rehearsals and performances with potential to lead people into organisation elsewhere, it was not only a rehearsal for action, it *was* the action. We questioned Boal's famous claim that the theatre itself is not revolutionary but is a rehearsal for revolution, by exploring how rehearsals in which people get to know each other, create fictional worlds and real communities together, and come to feel like they belong, may operate as the original point of sustained political action.

I have focused here on how In Good Company drew on community organising methodologies to achieve its political objectives through theatre practice without questioning those methodologies, or noting their strengths and potential pitfalls from our perspective. In fact, the centerpiece to David Cameron's flagship 'Big Society' initiative, as leader of the Conservative Party during our work on *The Pact*, was to set up an institute of community organising, no less, to increase active civic participation. Devised as a way of transferring responsibility from the state to the people, this was some sort of inadequate attempt at an antidote to the havoc wreaked by the cuts, or an impossible cover-up of the chasms cleaved by the government's neoliberal agenda. Community organising as a formula, emptied of an ideological agenda, has been utilised by organisations from across the political spectrum. The complexities of these issues warrant their own in-depth study, but I mention them here to raise the question of how collaborative and critical creative practices might feed productively into community organising strategies of the leftwing activist.

Radical actuality in activist theatre: an analysis of emotional and critical engagement in *The Pact*

From a phenomenological perspective, home has been understood as relational, affective, embodied, and performative (Mallet, 2004). Meanwhile, at least in the popular Western imaginary, home is discursively constructed as an emotional environment, associated with feeling states, such as love, intimacy, anger or depression (Gurney 1997). Alison Jaggar notes that within the Western philosophical tradition 'emotions have usually been considered potentially or actually subversive of knowledge' (1989: 151). As an interface between the

material conditions that surround us and our personal lives, home might be considered a threshold that resists the separation of reason from emotion.

Audience feedback suggested that one of the most significant features of *The Pact* in performance was audience members' relationship to one another, as they travelled through the pub to encounter transient stages that appeared for each of its 20 short scenes. This quantity of scenes packed into an hour and a half necessitated almost continuous movement. The way in which audience and performers shared and exchanged spaces blurred their different roles, while the cooperation it necessitated edged towards an embodied experience of mutual participation and community. Members of the audience were also, and always, in one another's line of vision. One audience member said that as she moved from space to space she became acutely aware of those around her, remarking: 'this responsibility of making sure my fellow audience member was comfortable and could see, was integral to the whole experience. I was conscious of myself'.[iv] Another called her experience of watching the performance 'a social one', where she 'had to give way and make room for others'. For this person, experiential dimensions of the performance reinforced her intellectual engagement: '*The Pact's* power is contained in an intellectual engagement that is experiential in nature and therefore more accessible'. She also asserted that intellectual and emotional affects of the performance were co-determined:

> The easiest way I can begin to describe my own experience is by highlighting my impression of the play's engagement with movement. [This] responds to a number of very significant processes and issues of the play, and the way in which its formal structures operate. The play *moves* people – literally and figuratively […]. It forces people to question their placement and movements within society. [v]

She refers here both to the physical movement around the space, and emotional responses of the audience to the drama.

As I have mentioned, emotional responses to certain scenes were strong. The scene quoted at the start of this article, which is called The Party, included several interwoven narratives. The account of the Houston couple was followed by testimony of a nurse who had recently treated a dying patient in an under-resourced hospital in Birmingham in the UK. Costume changes happened in front of the audience who gathered together in the back room of the pub, and Lori, who played the nurse, delivered her lines as direct address. Yet

something kept happening when it came to this scene whereby she, and often others too, began to cry.

Given that we were dealing with the real and recent passing of people it is unsurprising the scene was difficult to perform and observe. References to housing and healthcare perhaps accentuated the distress. The experience of being or feeling 'at home' is understood as identification with anywhere or anything to which the subject feels they belong This may include cultures, geographical locations, organisations and institutions, as well as particular experiences (Tucker, 1994; Jackson 1995: 123). If our emotional connection to home is strong, and if institutions can signify home, then perhaps it was too much to witness the dismantling of the NHS, the 'jewel in the crown' of Britain's disintegrating welfare system, and an organisation which for many in the UK oversees our wellbeing, and our passageway in and out of this world. Meanwhile, the theatrical effects I described earlier – the red light through blackout and the irregular heartbeat – as well as disorientating the audience, emphasised the physical vitality but also the vulnerability of people in the room.
We started to realise the impact of the scene when a young man visiting a rehearsal left half way through, telling us he 'didn't need to see this'. A performer whose family member was hospitalised in the last weeks of rehearsals also began to find the scene difficult. In Good Company had a number of conversations then as to the ethics and effects of coercing empathy, and facilitating the 'direct transplantation' of Lori's grief onto the audience (Brecht in Willet, 2015: 142).

Were our theatrical strategies 'barbaric', as Brecht would have it (306)? Did emotional acting manifest as a threat to the production's instructional value, undermining the changeable nature of the characters and their destinies (138)? Or were we right to exploit emotion, that adhesive of the neural passageways, to make the tragedies 'stick' in the minds of our witnesses (Bogart in Hurley, 2010: xiii)? Were we right to heed Alinksy's advice that 'it is only when the other party is concerned or feels threatened that he will listen', and that 'in the arena of action, a threat or a crisis becomes almost a precondition to communication' (Alinksy, 1969: 88-9)? We eventually agreed that any horror represented paled in comparison to the truth it signified, and if the performance could move people in however small a way to prevent further tragedies of this kind, then the means justified the end.

In her article 'The experience of immediacy: Emotion and enlistment in fact-based theatre', Lib Taylor charts a shift from theatre based on rational materialist argument, to the In Yer Face plays of the 1990s, which recuperated emotion 'not in the old Naturalistic modes, but in the emergence of disquieting and desolate, yet sensational forms' (2011: 226). She

explains that these playwrights 'risked emotion as a critical strategy', forcing the audience to 'feel the anger and frustration of late twentieth-century youth' – confronting them with how things were, if not suggesting how they might be different (ibid). She asserts that documentary theatre that proliferated at this time, despite its foundations in fact and characteristically austere aesthetic, relied on enlisting audience sympathy in a political environment broadly mistrustful of grand narratives where 'the emotional is cultivated as a primary means of marshaling and impelling action' (234-5).

In fact, for Taylor, immediacy, directness and the raw quality of the research in fact-based theatre function to 'heighten emotional engagement in the drama as much as to promote intellectual understanding' (224). Meanwhile, its agency resides neither in naturalistic representation or a return to materialist argument, but in its 'actuality' – in 'being present with the artefact' (226). The authentic frame of 'what really happened' replaces a pre-existing point of view, and 'raw' material is offered in order to engage audiences' sensibilities, while they make up their own minds. Realism appears here not as verisimilitude, but underwritten 'by the veracity of an experience, a recognition of a shared understanding that is at least partly found in an emotional response to a situation, which "feels" connected to the experience of the spectator' (228).

Her analysis chimes with scenes like The Party, which were disturbing because encountering the art also meant confronting raw reality, while, as we saw through the lens of home, the scene referenced institutions and events that the audience may have 'felt' connected to on a fundamental level. However, rather than replacing a materialist argument and pre-existing point of view with an authentic frame as in Taylor's examples, we combined these elements. Verbatim testimony was interwoven with news stories, statistics and satirical scenes, to construct a robust argument as to why grassroots action was needed. The audience did not empathise with characters because of their ill fate, but with people in situations that had, as a result of material conditions, actually come to pass. The occurrence of empathetic engagement in fact-based theatre does not necessarily mean that the audience becomes disempowered, or that the analysis is undermined as Brecht feared, because accounts that induce empathy may be presented as a *consequence* of material conditions to form an integral part of an analysis.

In fact, under certain conditions, emotional engagement may work alongside the kind of critical distance associated with epic theatre, and serve to accentuate it. Taylor explains that the spectator of fact-based theatre is: 'somatically moved by her/his moment-by-moment experience of the event in and as the present, and thereby feels connection to the incidents

and their consequences' (228). Experiencing the event 'in and as the present' was significant in *The Pact* not only in connection with real events depicted but also in terms of phenomenological and emotional experiences of the live performance. Lori's attempt to recount the death of the patient in the Birmingham hospital in front of an audience had a profound emotional impact on her and on others present. While she could not maintain the level of detachment required in the Brechtian theatre, her distress intruded with some force into the field of dramatic representation through a moment of real suffering. The actual threatened to engulf the fictional as Lori's performance became inconsistent and she couldn't finish her lines. This slippage did not unify character/performer – they remained separate – albeit in an uncontrolled rather than purposeful capacity. Meanwhile, in *The Pact*, the 'actuality' that for Taylor infiltrates theatrical play was symbolised and produced by spectators as well as performers. Each night during The Party scene the nurse and patient were framed by nearly a hundred audience members who pressed around them in every direction, facing one another across the stretcher. In this configuration they watched the demonstration of a real death resulting from policies really affecting their society, while they also witnessed, and were witnessed as, and by, real members of that society.

The 'authenticity' of the performance and its emotional impact was produced through a combination of the rawness of documentary material, mimesis, and by introducing 'real' or 'everyday' elements into the fiction. These were also the elements that intertwined to resist a naturalistic mode, and highlighted the constructed nature of the performance. Rather than 'believing in' the performance or empathising only or primarily with the characters as in the naturalistic theatre, the audience were encouraged to observe and empathise with the people that their neighbours, the audience, represented and embodied. In such a way, spectators were not 'fobbed off' as Brecht put it 'with an invitation to feel sympathetically, to fuse with the hero and seem significant and indestructible' (1994: 9). Rather, the performance asked the audience to view the horror and sadness of The Party in relation to themselves and one-another because they were dramaturgically foregrounded in the scene. The venue and the local performer-characters served to underscore this connection.

Herman Blau's observation that the performer who 'can die in front of your eyes; is in fact doing so' can also be applied to the radical actuality of the bodies of audience members in performance (1982: 83). The actuality of performance holds the possibility of affecting audiences emotionally, while the same deconstructive mechanisms that foreground this actuality and encourage from audiences a critical response can operate to foster a heightened sense of empathetic involvement *because* what is (re)presented in performance is

both the signifier and signified of the 'real world'. Emotion and reason are mutually constitutive, and an emotional response forms part of our self-awareness in society (Jaggar, 1989: 163; Hurley, 2010: 21). Audience members of *The Pact* quoted earlier considered emotional, analytical and sensate engagements engendered by the performance to co-exist symbiotically rather than operating independently or in confliction with one another. This suggests that an empathetic identification with dramatic action does not necessarily equate to uncritical identification, and asks for a softening of the Cartesian split between body and mind.

Conclusion

Driven by a political energy that has increased under austerity, In Good Company's approach differed in a few ways from the fact-based theatre that Taylor discusses. We sought to 'alarm [our] audience aggressively' in a way more in line with In Yer Face playwrights than fact-based theatre makers, but also combined community organising strategies with techniques recuperated from older traditions of political and community-based theatre, to connect participants with ongoing political campaigns and present audiences with a materialist argument and 'the comfort or enthusiasm of rallying audiences to a cause' (Taylor, 2011: 228-9; 234).

After a three-night run and one matinee at full capacity, In Good Company were invited to take *The Pact* to anti-cuts events and union AGMs, and performed an extract of the script at a strike rally in Reading at the end of the year. The company disbanded, however, having been brought together specifically to execute that production, and due to work commitments and other personal circumstances. A theatrical approach to community organising of the kind I begin to outline here demands huge commitment and resource – more than we were able to generate during our work on *The Pact,* where, actually, the performances should have been conceived as a pivotal point in a much longer process, rather than anything like the end of the work. *The Pact* galvanised energy and established connections between people and political organisations in Reading, some of which endured and were channeled into activist work. But many connections were still too tenuous at the end of our project and would have needed further encouragement to become effective in a quick or obvious way. This raises questions around support for activist theatre, where it comes from currently, or might come from in the future.[vi]

This article considers how 'home' was constituted by and represented in *The Pact,* to try to understand fundamental ways we connect with and live in the theatre, and the

implications this has for theatre that seeks to instigate political change. Aviezer Tucker (1994) observes the symbolic potency of the idealised home or 'promised land', which people may spend their lives searching for. Through collective creation and the radical actuality of performance, theatre offers ways to work together for places, or states of being, where things are better than they are in the here and now, and unique opportunities for engaging our critical, emotional and physical selves. Theatre can help us feel and know, in a powerful and fundamental way, what is happening in our world and what we can do about it, which is as important as ever in the current context. Intellectual recognition and practical nurturing are needed to support future activist theatre projects. That is to say, there is work to be done rebuilding the ideological foundations and material structures of a home for political theatre in the 21st century.

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[i] Claims based on audience and performer feedback post-event, 2011-2012.

[ii] See for example recent work by Red Ladder, Mikron Theatre, Theatre Uncut, Commonwealth Theatre, Salford Community Theatre and Take Back Theatre. As an example of groups 'creating activists', Steph Green, co-director of Salford Community Theatre has described how the company's 2016 adaptation of Walter Greenwood's *Love on The Dole* led to participants' increased political engagement and activity,
[ii] See for example recent work by Red Ladder, Mikron Theatre, Theatre Uncut, Commonwealth Theatre, Salford Community Theatre and Take Back Theatre. As an example of groups 'creating activists', Steph Green, co-director of Salford Community Theatre has described how the company's 2016 adaptation of Walter Greenwood's *Love on The Dole* led to participants' increased political engagement and activity,
including her own (Green, 2017).

[iii] Email exchange with an audience member, 2011.

[iv] Post-show discussion, University of Reading, 2011.

[v] Email correspondence with audience member, 2011.

[vi] Interesting initiatives in this regard include the GFTU's collaboration with the University of Exeter (see Hillman 2017); the South East Region TUC's Show Culture Some Love campaign: https://showculturesomelove.wordpress.com, and the work of the Future's Venture Foundation: http://www.futuresventure.org/manifesto/