



**HAL**  
open science

# Working with Shakespeare: The ethics of community engagement and participatory theatre

Janice Valls-Russell

► **To cite this version:**

Janice Valls-Russell. Working with Shakespeare: The ethics of community engagement and participatory theatre. 2019. halshs-02148427

**HAL Id: halshs-02148427**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02148427>**

Preprint submitted on 5 Jun 2019

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Copyright

## **Working with Shakespeare: The ethics of community engagement and participatory theatre**

Janice Valls-Russell, CNRS, IRCL, UMR5186, Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3

“Reality is the name of the game and there is nothing ‘worthy’ about it”. — Sam Beale (*apud Cardboard Citizens 25 Years*, nd [2016?]: 30)

In *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*, Terry Gillian’s long awaited movie, which was released in 2018, Toby Grisoni, an advertising executive played by Adam Driver, returns to the Spanish region of La Mancha where 10 years earlier he had made a film of *Don Quixote*, using a cast of villagers. Underlying the bittersweet comedy, and the metafilmic experiences of moving backwards and forwards in time and playing with different cinematographic techniques to explore the multiple facets of Cervantes’s novel, Grisoni’s return to the village, where he discovers the negative legacy of his artistic experiment, puts its finger on the ethics of community engagement. Young Grisoni is depicted as an idealistic, somewhat self-centred artist, bent on making what he thinks is a clever and novel film, and thereby using the community, not serving it. Yet even when one wishes to serve a community, good intentions can prove ethically slippery paving. As Lois Keidan wrote in *The Guardian*,

Socially engaged practices are a way of empowering the disempowered and including the excluded, and can achieve radical and remarkable transformations. But they are not quick and easy solutions to long-term problems. (Keidan, 2008: online)

Graeme Stuart, from the Family Action Centre at the University of Newcastle, Australia, who runs a blog on Sustaining Community, quotes Melinda Jurd, a speech pathology student doing

an elective on community engagement: “You cannot waltz into a community and fix the world... no matter how well you can dance”.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the results can be contrary to those that are initially sought, all the more so if one just waltzes out again, especially when working with young or emotionally vulnerable people. Such risks are put forward, for instance, in warnings published by international organisations against “orphanage tourism”, where volunteers spend a period of time with institutionalised children, taking away a feel-good experience that they share on the social networks yet leaving behind a feeling of loss, a sense of disruption liable to undermine, rather than enhance, resilience, trust in adults and self-confidence. Awareness of the risks attached to a high turnover of volunteers is one of the challenges non-governmental organisations (NGOs) face when confronted with major humanitarian emergencies, such as the 2010 Haïti earthquake, and the longer-term aftermath. One answer to this is the empowerment, through training and other forms of assistance, of people within the community.

Another danger is to trap people in the stereotypes associated with their community, reinforcing “them” and “us” divisions: Marina Henriques Coutinho and Marica Pompeo Nogueira note that “escaping the stereotypes of being ‘wanting’ or a ‘criminal’ has been a problem faced by the favela dweller” of Rio de Janeiro (Coutinho / Nogueira, 2013: 175). A related risk is that the practitioners or facilitators, coming usually from outside the community, are perceived, or even end up perceiving themselves, as “saviours”, thereby adopting, albeit unconsciously, a paternalistic attitude which “can end up helping to prolong [a] situation of exclusion” and a sense of inferiority (Coutinho / Nogueira, 2013: 175).

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://sustainingcommunity.wordpress.com/2014/08/27/bottom-up/>. Graeme Stuart’s blog, *Sustaining Community: Families, Community, The Environment*, offers introductions to concepts and practices relevant to working with families and communities, as well as reading lists and plenty more.

This essay explores forms of community engagement through the arts, more specifically through participatory theatre, and within that area, Shakespeare. The idea is to provide a brief overview of theoretical approaches to participatory theatre, review a few international instances of such work in connection with Shakespeare and close with the legacies of such experiences and their ethical implications. The hope is that this may prove useful to students in the humanities who might be interested in joining or creating participatory theatre projects or other forms of community engagement through theatre with schools, homes for the elderly, refugee groups, or other communities, but the issues discussed here may prove valid more widely for other forms of civic involvement. References in the notes provide suggestions for further exploration since, once again, this is merely an introductory contribution to “a rapidly expanding, diverse, and increasingly professional practice” and an invitation to tease out some of the ethical issues which “students hop[ing] to use their skills with the widening range of marginalized and vulnerable communities” need to address (Rifkin, 2010: 5).

The ethical dimension seems all the more important at a time when, in a number of European countries, economic, demographic and political tensions have further widened the range of those “marginalized and vulnerable communities” and exacerbated the risks of “them-versus-us” divisions. Situations of emergency, such as the arrival of migrants, many from Syria, Afghanistan and African countries, fleeing poverty, oppression and war, have reactivated latent tensions in receiving European countries. These tensions result from multiple factors, some of which have overlapped over the past three decades: the collapse of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and a search for renewed forms of identity and meaningfulness in a frequently aggressive, market-economy context; throughout Europe, an erosion of socio-economic wellbeing and expectations in the wake of the banking and

financial crisis of 2007–08; budgetary restrictions that affect the range and quality of health and social services, to the detriment of those who need them most.

### **A brief definition of participatory arts and their underlying principles**

Around the world, hundreds, if not thousands, of projects have emerged over the past three or four decades, in response to social and community needs, addressing shorter- or longer-term situations that impact vulnerable individuals, minorities and/or communities in different ways, places and contexts: poverty, homelessness, illiteracy, war, migration, education. Different forms of response include participatory arts, and more specifically participatory or applied theatre. A convenient definition, perhaps, is the one used by Frances Rifkin in *The Ethics of Participatory Theatre in Higher Education: A Framework for Learning and Teaching*:

the term “Participatory Theatre” (PT) is used to cover practices referred to variously as Applied Theatre or Drama, Community Theatre, Workshop Theatre, Role Play etc. The practice ranges between work with a performance focus to process – based work aimed at personal group and/or social development. It takes place in a wide variety of employment, political, social and community settings and practitioners come from a variety of backgrounds. Practitioners may be professional theatre performers and directors, dedicated trained facilitators, or professionals from other backgrounds e.g. social work or education. Participatory theatre is internationally associated with radical and popular theatre forms such as Theatre in Education, Young People’s Theatre, Forum Theatre (Theatre of the Oppressed) and Theatre for Development (Rifkin, 2010: 4).

Like so many participatory theatre projects around the world, the handful discussed here mostly build on the work of Paulo Freire, author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972) and Augusto Boal (1931-2009), author of *Theatre of the Oppressed*, which appeared in 1973 (the UK translation came out in 1976). Boal’s approach is based on Freire’s work: their pedagogy grew out of their work with people experiencing poverty, hunger, and illiteracy in Brazil and Peru respectively. The models they propose are underpinned by the need to reduce the gap between the privileged and under-privileged, and the principle that this can only be achieved by empowerment and agency through engagement with dramatic fiction, with practitioners

helping participants to take action and control the learning processes in a horizontal rather than top-down engagement. In a context of political oppression, Boal encouraged the emergence of a new kind of spectator, coining the term “spect-actor” to describe the dual role of those who observe but also create dramatic action, thereby moving out of the role of (mere) witness into that of protagonist. While Boal encouraged this initially in an attempt to help people break the cycle of oppression (Boal, 2005: xxiv), he considered more broadly that “all human beings are actors (they act!) and spectators (they observe!). They are spect-actors.” (Boal, 2005: 15). On and off stage, theatre thus offers a transformative space and process of joint exploration and creation. In *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* Boal proposes practical exercises for workshops, that have contributed to the development of community theatre practices worldwide. The Freire-Boal model is perhaps best summed up by this much-cited quotation from Paulo Freire, “No one frees another. No one frees himself. People free themselves together” (*apud* Coutinho / Nogueira, 2013: 170). The website of Parrabbola, a promoter of community theatre that is discussed below, rephrases this as “Community plays are theatre of the people, by the people, for the people”. Whether phrased in Marxist or non-Marxist terms, the perception of both the process and the goal is similar.

Another influence, especially in the United Kingdom (UK) and the English-speaking world, has been Dorothy Heathcote’s work in Drama in Education and Theatre in Education. Key aspects of Heathcote’s work that have informed practices in participatory theatre include the setting of boundaries, for instance “between the fiction of the stage and the space occupied by the audience or participants in their real lives”, the emotional safety of participants and confidentiality of the work, the empowerment of participants through the practitioners choosing to abrogate their cultural “power”, and a pedagogy based on questioning (Hare, 2010:30-6).

Equally influential in the UK, Theatre in Education worked initially with individual schools, promoting a culture of inclusiveness, fighting racism and other forms of discrimination, before moving also into the wider community: the idea was that theatre helped “to nurture and provoke change by a process of collaborative learning, accompanied by a commitment to the evaluation of and reflection on practice” (Hare, 2010:34).

The groups presented below offer instances of artistic, and more specifically theatrical, engagement with(in) specific communities. Unlike arts-based therapies, that involve specialised therapists and may be used with trauma victims, or as transformative practices in restorative justice, these participatory and community theatre models do not pursue specific health-related goals. Drawing on her work with young refugees at Oval House Theatre, “which has a long history of using drama and associated participatory arts to involve some of the most excluded and marginalised young people in South London”, Stella Barnes writes:

We are acutely aware that our project is an arts project – not therapy – and ensure that the delivery team understands this distinction. (We do however acknowledge the positive therapeutic results of the work we do.) (Barnes, 2009: 37)<sup>2</sup>

Barnes alerts to the dangers of theatre experiences centred on a personal traumatic experience, essentially for those narrating or re-enacting their experience as well for the audience, placed in a near-voyeuristic situation of acute discomfort:

Exploring young people’s personal trauma has more potential to damage than to empower, especially if not delivered by a trained art therapist (even then they tend not to work with real life stories but work through metaphor and symbolism). (Barnes, 2009: 40)

And that is where the classics, including Shakespeare, come in.

---

<sup>2</sup> See also Hayhow et al. (2016: online).

## Why theatre? Why the classics? Why Shakespeare?

Empowerment comes through words: words that allow people to explore the world and themselves – and perhaps save themselves. “Where words prevail not, violence prevails”, Thomas Kyd warns in *The Spanish Tragedy* – a favourite quote with Cicely Berry, director of text and voice for the Royal Shakespeare Company, who conducted workshops in prisons and with companies around the world, including Nós de Morro (see below). The French actor Richard Berry (unrelated) says much the same thing:

[As a teenager] I was rather inhibited, I lacked the words, when you don't have words, you become violent... I discovered, in the authors, I discovered the words that expressed what I wanted to say and didn't know how to say. Thanks to those words (from Corneille, Beaumarchais, Molière, Racine), I identified myself and I saved myself.<sup>3</sup>

Language enables happiness, self-esteem, empathy, says Cécile Ladjali, a teacher of French literature in secondary schools and university, whose novel *Illettré* (Illiterate), published in 2016, was adapted to the screen in 2018 by Jean-Pierre Améris.

Simultaneously, the words and plots of the classics offer a safe distance from one's personal experience, a secure space that is propitious to collective experimentation and exploration. In her work with young refugees, Barnes drew on folklore and myth:

We never require participants to draw on past experiences as material for the arts process, preferring to focus on the present or future if the work is related to reality; or on metaphor, symbolism, folk tale etc. as a way of protecting young people from accessing potentially painful memories. ...

When young people feel safe they may take creative risks and sometimes personal risks; they may explore and play out things that they cannot or have not yet worked through in order to begin to make sense of it. In this instance it is important to ensure the work is focused on fiction: fictional characters and contexts; so that the sharing of personal material can occur safely if the young people wish to share or explore it. ... We need to make the distinction between fiction and reality, between the literal and the symbolic or metaphorical, the specific and the universal. Metaphor and symbolism allow for a creative transformation. The process of transformation does not water down the work or under-value the real experiences of participants but rather gives them a powerful communication tool that both

---

<sup>3</sup> Richard Berry, interview, “Le Monde d’Elodie”, *France Info*, 16 August 2018, 10:53, “j’étais assez inhibé, je n’avais pas trop les mots, quand on n’a pas les mots on devient violent (...) j’ai découvert dans les auteurs, j’ai découvert des mots qui exprimaient ce que je voulais dire et que je ne savais pas dire. Grâce à ces mots-là (de Corneille, de Beaumarchais, de Molière, de Racine), je me suis identifié, je me suis sauvé.”



protects their potential vulnerability and gives them the means to communicate to a broad audience. The process is empowering and deeply creative. (Barnes, 2009: 37, 40)

The Greek classics and Shakespeare offer words and worlds that appeal to the imagination – from the right distance. The director of the Avignon Festival, Olivier Py, has staged Sophocles’ *Antigone* (in 2018) and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (in 2017) with inmates of Avignon’s high-security prison. The ongoing relevance and appeal of Shakespeare “on a cold evening” of a person or a community’s life, when the need is felt to “awake secret zones in ourselves” is aptly summed up by Peter Brook:

Shakespeare doesn’t belong to the past. If his material is valid, it is valid now. It is like coal. ... The meaningfulness of a piece of coal to us starts and finishes with its combustion, giving us the light and heat that we want. And that to me is Shakespeare. (Brook, 2017: 95)

The book produced by Cardboard Citizens to mark their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary includes a quotation from *King Lear* on the “poor naked wretches” with “houseless heads and unfed sides” and the attendant need for solidarity: “Oh, I have ta’en / Too little care of this!” (3.4.28-30, 32-3).<sup>4</sup> The speech in *Sir Thomas More*, which is believed to have been written by Shakespeare, on the “wretched strangers, / Their babies on their backs and their poor luggage, / Plodding to the ports and coasts for transportation” (6.84-5), has gone viral, quoted by diplomats, humanitarian workers and in protest campaigns against what many perceive as politicians’ “mountainish inhumanity” in the face of asylum seekers. It was one of the set pieces in *Whither Would You Go?*, a film created by Ella Smith and Emma West, and directed by Jamie Lloyd for a one-night fundraising gala event in 2017, in which leading actors performed scenes from Shakespeare alongside video testimonies from refugees (Martin, 2017: online).

Shakespeare is a recurring vector of inspiration and investigation in community programmes around the world, in response to a diversity of situations that may qualify, or be

---

<sup>4</sup> All quotations to Shakespeare are to Wells / Taylor (2005).

experienced, as crises – collective, local, global: some crises crystallise into emergencies, others are the aftermath of an emergency, others still become near-endemic, or chronic.<sup>5</sup> Programmes frequently choose Shakespeare, alongside other world classics, to probe community experiences and foster possible responses to challenges. Telling stories, through Shakespeare, engages a conversation about change – and may thus help bring about some forms of change, personal or collective.

### **Vignettes of community engagement through Shakespeare**

#### Nós de Morro (We From the Hillside), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil<sup>6</sup>

“Porque a vida levada pela arte é mais bonita de ser vivida” (Because life elevated by art is more beautiful to be lived): since 1986, the company Nós de Morro has been living up to its motto (which features on its website and which company members repeatedly quote in interviews), offering young people from the favela of Rio de Janeiro opportunities to experience culture, art and citizenship through theatre, film and the visual arts. It is the ongoing story of an encounter between the “long hairs”, a student and artistic community, living in the intermediate area between the lower edge of the favela and the more prosperous neighbourhoods, and youngsters from within the community, “the boys from the favela”, to borrow the phrases used by Coutinho and Nogueira. They note that while exploring the day-to-day life of the favela in plots that frequently draw on humour to avoid pathos and create the right distance, “the goal has never been to turn the stage into a space or forum to debate the problems of the community” (Coutinho / Nogueira, 2013: 174). The longevity of Nós de Morro is linked to its ability to create a loyal following within the favela with shows

---

<sup>5</sup> The phrase “chronic crisis” is used in humanitarian contexts, to designate one of three situations: emergency, chronic crisis and early recovery, as in UNICEF and UNESCO documents.

<sup>6</sup> Website: <http://www.nosdomorro.com.br>.

“produced by the community for the community” (Coutinho / Nogueira, 2013: 174). The twofold partnership, between those sharing a theatre culture and those within the favela, but also between performers and spectators, has been key to Nós de Morro’s success, a successful instance of Freire’s “dialogic model of interaction”.

Over the years, Nós de Morro has diversified its activity, inside and outside the favela, with, for instance, “Crescendo com Arte”, theatre workshops for children aged 7 years up, and reading circles (“Cirandas da leitura”). The group has also fostered the emergence of similar projects in other towns, based on their agenda, ethics and methodology.

Shakespeare is by no means the only dramatist whose works are performed by Nós de Morro, but he holds a special place. In 2006, ten members of the group took part in a co-production of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* in the Stratford-upon-Avon Complete Works Festival; the show moved to the Barbican in 2008, and was revived in 2013. The Nós de Morro cast played alongside a Birmingham-based youth group, Gallery 37. In this unique sharing of experiences across languages and cultures, “with a limited joint rehearsal time of only two weeks”, Katherine Bradley and Peter Kirwan write, “The Brazilian actors took the main speaking roles and the English speakers demonstrated an affinity with dispossessed people as they played the Outlaws” Bradley / Kirwan, 2007: 8). In 2014, Nós de Morro presented Franco Zeffirelli’s 1967 film *The Taming of the Shrew* in “Cine Shakespeare”.<sup>7</sup> Two years later, Nós de Morro pursued its engagement with Shakespeare in the context of the 2014-16 anniversary celebrations with a musical version of the play which was staged in 2015-16, *Domanda a Megera* [Taming the shrew], adapted by Luiz Paulo Corrêa e Castro, directed by Fernando Mello da Costa, composed and conducted by Gabriel Moura, in a

---

<sup>7</sup> Alexandre Barreto, “Cine Shakespeare estuda o filme ‘*The Taming of the Shrew*’ de Franco Zeffirelli”, 30 June 2018, <http://www.nosdomorro.com.br/~nosdomor/index.php/teatro/cine-shakespeare-estuda-o-filme-the-taming-of-the-shrew-de>

modernised text, with musical interludes (some 15 songs). The production staged two groups of actors, one of which is preparing to put on a conventional version of the play, while the other proposes a clowning version – thereby inviting a new take on the play-within-the-play structure through their rival versions and inviting a humorous debate on the relevance of the play today.<sup>8</sup>

In 2015, the Mostra, the group’s annual festival, focused on Shakespeare, with *Domanda a Megera*, *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Fátima Domingues for a cast of teenagers, and an adaptation of *The Tempest*, *Era uma Vez a Tempestade – Um Shakespeare para Todas as Idades* (Once upon a time there was a Tempest, a Shakespeare for all ages), directed by Cico Caseira.

#### Cardboard Citizens, London, UK<sup>9</sup>

Cardboard Citizens describes itself as making life-changing theatre with and for homeless people, refugees and asylum seekers through a participatory approach to the arts. The company grew out of a workshop led by Augusto Boal, and since its foundation in 1991, in the context of the housing crisis created by Margaret Thatcher’s Housing Acts of 1980 and 1988,<sup>10</sup> leading practitioners in the UK of the Theatre of the Oppressed method have imposed “their distinctive brand of socially and politically minded theatre” (Walton, 2007: 59), as

<sup>8</sup> Luciana Bezerra, “*Domanda a Megera* no Teatro do Vidigal”, 31 May 2016, <http://www.nosdomorro.com.br/index.php/agenda/domando-a-megera-no-teatro-do-vidigal>; L. Bezerra, “*Domanda a Megera* no Teatro Municipal Café Pequeno”, 19 May 2016, <https://www.nosdomorro.com.br/index.php/teatro/domando-a-megera-no-teatro-municipal-cafe-pequeno>; “Grupo Nós do Morro apresenta *Domanda a Megera* no teatro Café Pequeno”, 19 May 2016, *Ambrosia*, <https://ambrosia.com.br/agenda/grupo-nos-do-morro-apresenta-domando-megera-no-teatro-cafe-pequeno/>; Rodrigo Monteiro, “*Domanda a Megera*”, *Crítica Teatral*, 2 June 2016, <http://www.acriticatratral.com/2016/06/domando-megera-rj.html>

<sup>9</sup> Website: <https://www.cardboardcitizens.org.uk/>.

<sup>10</sup> Thatcher’s “right to buy” home ownership policy was revived by David Cameron during the 2015 election campaign: the topic of housing – and homelessness – has inspired a Cardboard Citizens cycle of productions, *Home Truths: An Incomplete History of Housing Told in Nine Plays*, directed by Adrian Jackson (2017).

Cardboard Citizens acquired a reputation for producing innovative, site-specific, forum theatre which is “performed on the stage, in the street, in hostels, centres and prisons”.<sup>11</sup> Productions have included Maxim Gorky’s *The Lower Depths*, Georg Büchner’s *Woyzeck*, *Pericles* (in a co-production with the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2003), and *Timon of Athens* in 2006-07. *Pericles* was produced in two versions, a touring one, for schools, with “five actors and two stools” (*Cardboard Citizens 25 Years*, nd [2016?]: 60), and another, performed in the multiple spaces of a hangar (The Warehouse), where the audience were received like refugees arriving at an asylum-processing centre and handed application forms; individual tales of real-life experiences of exile morphed into the plot of *Pericles*; settings in the different spaces included countless lines of washing hanging above the stage, where a row of washing-machines stood on wooden palettes. According to Kate Bassett, writing for *Independent on Sunday* on 3 August 2003, “Cardboard Citizens’ director, Adrian Jackson, makes the Bard’s meandering folk tale about the twice-shipwrecked, bereaved and beggared Prince of Tyre connect with the struggles of contemporary refugees” (Bassett, *apud Cardboard Citizens 25 Years*, nd [2016?]: 64). In 2006-07, Jackson – who translated Boal’s *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* – turned to *Timon of Athens* to highlight issues surrounding social exclusion and dispossession. Here is how Nick Walton remembers the performance he saw in Stratford-upon-Avon:

Video diaries by two homeless men were screened to break up the scenes of Timon’s self-exile in the woods and at intervals throughout the production performers related their own personal experiences of a harsh and heartless money-obsessed society. As a parallel to the scenes in which Timon’s servants look to raise loans from his friends, one of the performers spoke of his personal misfortunes and the complete lack of support from his friends when he fell upon hard times. Tales of this kind served to stamp this company’s sense of ownership on the play, and also served to smooth over some of the rough presentation of Shakespeare’s scenes.

The sound of waves underscored the final scenes and at the production’s finale the performers looked out to the audience as video footage of a man walking into the sea, and finally disappearing underneath the waves, played on the screen upstage. The final image suggested a modern moral tale

---

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.cardboardcitizens.org.uk/what-we-do>.



told not by an idiot, but by a drowning man; a fate we are all born into, it seemed to be suggested, if society does not offer a helping hand. (Walton, 2007: 61)

### Théâtre du Bout du Monde, Nanterre, France<sup>12</sup>

Founded in 1990 by Miguel Borrás, the French company Théâtre du Bout du Monde is based in Nanterre, on the edge of Paris, in a district with 85% of social housing and 30% unemployment. The company describes itself as a “collective of artists”. It works with local primary and secondary schools, and organises workshops with different local communities, including a shelter and day care unit of Nanterre hospital and the Emmaüs community. It takes part in local fairs with street theatre, and has carried out international projects with young people from different Mediterranean countries. Over the years, it has staged adaptations of Homer’s *Odyssey* (*Ulysse à l’ombre de l’olivier*, Ulysses in the shade of the olive-tree, 2012), Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (2012) and Euripides’ *Iphigenia*, reappropriated as *Notre Iphigénie* [Our Iphigenia, 2018]. In 2010, Théâtre du Bout du Monde created the world première of *The Snow Woman*, an opera by the Bulgarian composer Yassen Vodenitcharov, in a production directed by Miguel Borrás, with musicians and school children.

Théâtre du Bout du Monde has also produced *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, renamed *A May Night’s Dream* (*Songe d’une nuit de mai*, 2010 and 2011) and *Twelfth Night* (2014).<sup>13</sup> *Songe d’une nuit de mai* brought together participants from several local communities: Emmaüs, a retirement home, a shelter for the homeless, as well as primary and secondary schools. Children played fairies but also designed and created props – work on this was combined with a visit to the Quai Branly museum of indigenous arts and cultures in search of ideas. Théâtre du Bout du Monde invited the local population to attend rehearsals or the making of sets and costumes, and organised debates on participatory theatre. Isabelle

<sup>12</sup> Website: <https://www.theatreduboutdumonde.com/>.

<sup>13</sup> Website: <http://www.borrowers.uga.edu/969/show>.

Schwartz-Gastine traces how the production was adapted to the performers' individual situations and abilities:

The directors of this unusual *Dream* used the capacities of their amateur actors and helped them discover that physical or mental disabilities can be an advantage and meaningful. ... In so doing, they built the self-esteem of their amateurs and produced further insights into the meaning of the play. (Schwartz-Gastine, Fall 2013/Winter 2014: online).

A local social worker who occasionally performs with the company described the show as “making us want to go on fighting to rebuild a diverse humanity where people talk to each other and know how to laugh at themselves”.<sup>14</sup>

#### Compagnia Pippo Delbono, Modena, Italy

Pippo Delbono's productions usually grow out of his own ideas and scripts. One rare exception is his *Enrico V (Henry V)*, which he started working on in 1992, in collaboration with the university of Parma, before taking it more than a decade later on an international tour that included Avignon, Paris and Stratford-upon-Avon. Delbono led theatre workshops in the different towns the company toured with the play and incorporated the participants, who outnumbered his permanent cast of three actors, into the show.

Delbono's casts “are above all people, come from all horizons” (*Le Monde*, 12 Jan. 2017), whether a psychiatric hospital, the rom community or migrants on the shores of Italy. Encounters with people perceived as relegated to the margins of society have contributed decisively to his approach. In 1997, he created *Barboni*, which grew out of meetings with patients of the psychiatric hospital of Aversa (near Naples) as well as with street artists. The production received a special award for its research on the frontiers of art and life, and

---

<sup>14</sup> “Ce spectacle nous donne envie de continuer à nous battre pour reconstruire une humanité diverse mais qui se parle, et qui sait rire d'elle même”, Tristan Schoumaker. Website: <https://www.theatreduboutdumonde.com/archives>.

enjoyed international success. Delbono went on to create *Vangelo*, a show that deals with religion, suffering, beauty and love, and is strongly influenced by the figure of his mother. It draws on Pasolino, Saint Augustine and Led Zeppelin, pulling in sounds and voices heard in refugee camps, in the rom community, and music by Enzo Avitabile in a medley of comedy, melodrama, empathy and respect.

His adaptation of *Henry V*, *Enrico V* is his only creation based on an existing play and when it came to Stratford-upon-Avon in 2007, it was the only Italian production of a Shakespeare play to have been invited to perform at the Royal Shakespeare Company. As in Paris and Avignon, Delbono used local performers: “The Italian company brought just three performers and Delbono’s version of Shakespeare’s text gave space to the twenty-five performers who were at different times participants or observers” (Parsons, 2007: 8).

### Parrabbola, London, UK<sup>15</sup>

The twenty-first-century brainchild of artistic director Philip Parr and writer, actor and researcher Brian Abbott, Parrabbola works with communities in the UK and Europe. The needs of these communities can be varied, as indicated on the home page of their website:

- “celebrating and developing confidence and self-expression, whatever their age or background;
- sharing and commemorating a common heritage;
- searching for new direction, for example following the closure of local industry or major employers;
- building shared values and sense of place to create community identity;
- looking to develop their own expressive voice and talents”.

A member of the European Shakespeare Festivals Network, Parrabbola has produced three Shakespeare plays in Poland, including a community staging of *Pericles* in Gdańsk, *The*

---

<sup>15</sup> Website: <http://www.parrabbola.co.uk/>.



*Tempest*, and a staging of *The Winter's Tale*, for the festivals in Ostrava and Gdańsk. For the International Shakespeare Festival of Craiova, Parrabbola produced *Romeo and Juliet* in 2016 and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 2018. Combining these community shows with festivals ensures audiences, both local and incoming, and contributes to the festival spirit and ethos of taking shows outside the theatre walls. The group works with its own creative team as well as community actors. Productions are site-specific, often promenade productions, as with *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale* in Gdańsk and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Craiova. The shows are performed and directed so that all audiences can understand the action even if they do not understand every word. They are also multilingual, like *Dream* in Craiova. Everyone who volunteers is given a part, which means that the script, even though it is prepared before the rehearsals begin, is in fact constantly adapted so that everyone has a role, a name and some lines. The decision to perform in English or the community's language is also taken with the actors: this may depend on linguistic skills, the "feel" of a phrase or line in the original or in translation, and actors' individual wishes. Different issues are addressed according to place and circumstances. With *The Winter's Tale*, which was performed in three languages, themes explored included the outsider and surveillance. Promenade performances invite a new awareness, or rediscovery under a new light, of familiar – or not-so-familiar spaces: the promenade performance of *Dream* in Craiova moved from the formal building of the university down a main street through a residential district, past a church where a wedding was taking place and down a street lined with bridal shops.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> This production will be reviewed in *Cahiers Élisabéthains* 100 (November 2019), which will run a special section on the International Shakespeare Festival of Craiova. This and all subsequent quotations in this essay by Philip Parr and members of the cast are lifted from a recording made during a Q&A session organised at the University of Craiova. For this recording and all the wonderful exchanges, I should like to thank Nicoleta Cinpoș, Sorin Cazacu and the participants of the reviewing workshops that were organised during the Craiova Shakespeare Festival (23 April- 6 May 2018).

The goal is also to promote spectatorship for audiences with little experience of theatre-going: indications of the “success” of a show include whether there are more spectators at the end of the show than at the beginning and, as Parr puts it, whether there is a dog – someone out walking their dog who gets pulled into the audience and follows the show instead of returning home.

Theatre for a New Audience, New York, United States<sup>17</sup>

The educational program of Theatre for a New Audience, a non-profit theatre founded in 1979, is not strictly speaking participatory theatre, even though the agenda reconnects with the principles of participatory theatre since it works to overcome social, cultural and educational barriers, the founding principle being that “The language and scope of classic drama belong to everyone”, to quote the website. Shakespeare’s work holds pride of place, both for the theatre and the educational program: of the Theatre’s more than 60 productions in more than 3 decades, 28 were of plays by Shakespeare.

More than 2 000 students from New York City’s public schools are involved each year, more than 126 000 since the program began in 1984. It provides teachers with professional training, places artists in-residence in the classroom and brings students to matinee performances of the same award-winning productions seen by the Theatre’s adult audiences. Students are thus involved both as performers and spectators. A Council of Scholars advises the Theatre on ways of expanding and strengthening the Humanities programs it runs for adults in keeping with its civic role and mission to create broad public access to the arts and bond the diverse New York community through the language, pleasure and ideas of classical drama.

---

<sup>17</sup> Website: <http://www.tfana.org>.



New Faces essay collection, Janice Valls-Russell, May 2019

Incorporating listening, speaking, reading, writing, and critical thinking skills into the programs promote literacy and inspire students to read and to recognize the power of ideas, the beauty of language, and the benefits of engaging in language-rich activities: “Research shows that students involved in these applied learning activities have improved reading and writing skills”.<sup>18</sup>

### Dash Arts, United Kingdom<sup>19</sup>

Founded in 2005 by Josephine Burton and Tim Supple, this company is committed to thinking of the arts in an international perspective, bringing together talents in theatre, dance, music and other forms of performance from around the world. So doing, it does not engage in participatory theatre in the way *Nós de Morro* or *Cardboard Citizens* do, nor did it emerge in a context of political or social tension; but it seeks to promote artistic collaboration across national, religious, linguistic, cultural and social divides in a variety of ways, thereby addressing issues that are emerging from global, demographic challenges: tuning in to diversity in the United Kingdom, exploring contemporary Arabic identities with actors from the Middle East and North Africa, mastering theatre cultures from different regions of the world. Over the years, work has taken the company to Asia, the regions of the former Soviet Union and Mexico.

*As You Like It*, commissioned by Leicester’s Curve Theatre (2009), offered a journey into “another England” (Dash Arts website). As directed by Supple, Dash Arts’ production explored the contrasting facets of immigration, the harsh realities migrants are subjected to in an oppressive environment, and the dreams of hope they bring with them: this *As You Like It*

---

<sup>18</sup> Dr. Charlotte K. Frank, Regent, New York State, Former Executive Director of Curriculum and Instruction, New York City Department of Education. Website: <http://www.tfana.org/education>.

<sup>19</sup> Website: <http://www.dasharts.org.uk>.



took “as its theme the Englishness of the play but, rather than hearkening back to the nation’s rural past, used the text to draw attention to the cultural diversity of today’s England” (Kirwan, 1999, 86).

Dash Arts’ combined interests in Shakespeare, international cultural interaction and commitment to research come together in the *King Lear* World Theatre Workshops, an ongoing project launched in 2015 with Queen Mary University of London Collaboration Fund, Warwick University and Warwick Arts Centre. This project brings together theatre practitioners from a dozen or so performance traditions in residencies that have taken place in different countries around the world. The aim is to explore contrasting theatrical practices, modes of expression and emotional responses, in order to produce a multi-lingual, multicultural *King Lear* that should go on tour and be seen worldwide in 2019–2020: “The ultimate goal is a shared language of theatre, discovered through the riches of difference, resulting in a production of one of the world’s greatest theatrical myths of power, violence and family”.<sup>20</sup>

Two other projects, Eutopia and Out of Tune, explore what it feels to be a citizen of Europe today. Starting in 2018 and scheduled to last “as long as feels right – at least until 2020”, Eutopia embraces a wide range of events through which the company celebrates diversity within Europe as it searches “for an understanding of what Europe is now, how it got there and how the UK got to the point of leaving ... and what that means. As always, Dash Arts will ... confront generalization and encourage new insights and fierce debate.” Out of Tune involves “meeting and working with professional migrant musicians and artists now based in Europe ... searching for a shared understanding of what it means to be a citizen of Europe, how to embrace change and diversity and find a voice that gels with the

---

<sup>20</sup> Website: <http://www.dasharts.org.uk/events/kinglear.html>.



community's".<sup>21</sup> Through these projects as in the *King Lear* project, Dash Arts explores how different traditions and cultures can work together, integrate and foster a sense of togetherness.

## Legacies

Back to *Don Quixote*: Driver discovers the negative impact of his filmmaking experiment on the lives of several villagers and the community at large. Things are not quite what he expected – or rather, he had never paused to wonder what would happen after his departure. One of the risks of coming in with a project and then moving on is that of leaving people feeling “orphaned”, all the more so in contexts that may make them all the more vulnerable. In Craiova, one of the young participants in the 2018 community production *A Midsummer Night's Dream* wept when looking back on the experience, expressing a sense of emptiness that fellow participants shared:

We are like a family ... How's the family going to cope now the production has finished?  
Today we are all looking a bit sad, it's because of that, it's really special to come in and be part of people's lives for a month, you see them every day for 12 hours, it's very intense and then it's over, it's easy to get crying about it because it's very personal.

Albeit natural after weeks of close interactions with others on a joint project, such reactions are also a sobering reminder of the underlying risks. Hare recalls that Boal had raised early on “the question of the impact of the work on people's real lives” (Hare, 2010: 31). Florence March, a specialist of the Avignon Festival, pointed out to me that the Festival director, Py, his team and the staff of the prison are very much aware that the inmates may suffer from depression in the aftermath of the production. After rehearsing on a weekly basis for a year, a rhythm that intensifies as the performances draw near, after experiencing recognition, a sense of satisfaction with what they have achieved, they suddenly find themselves back in their cells,

---

<sup>21</sup> Website: <http://www.dasharts.org.uk/events/development.html>.

with no more theatre workshops for the rest of the summer – two very long, empty months to cope with. Specific support is provided by the prison staff, but quite often this is not enough.<sup>22</sup>

That is why practitioners like Parr take care to involve the members of the community at every stage of the project, and at every level, to have them working together on and off the stage, so as to foster collective and individual empowerment. Unlike charity fundraising events, for instance, community engagement is a two-way process and builds on community skills and experiences, working from a bottom-up perspective, “rather than coming in as external experts with all the answers”, to quote Stuart, who calls this capacity-building, so that the process of doing and learning can continue without the facilitators: “one leads best by stepping back”; “Rather than expert think of oneself as facilitator? A catalyst to encourage people to do their own thing”.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Parr insists that “the model is that gradually we should be able to withdraw”: “from the moment we come in, almost, we’re withdrawing ourselves” – a complex process since at the same time the facilitators are “embedded in the community” for the duration of the project. Hence a need for humility, Stuart writes, that entails respect. In a similar perspective, Parr insists that “Control remains always within the community: our role is to facilitate, bring to the process our creative experience, to put that at the service of community”. And he refuses to call the community members amateur actors: “we would never ever use ‘amateur’: everybody is a member of the community (whether they have been on stage before or not)”.

Stuart sees the role of practitioners as creating a “container”, “a safe, engaging atmosphere where participants are encouraged to experiment with new behaviours, consider

---

<sup>22</sup> I should like to thank Florence March warmly for providing this insight and inviting me to include it here.

<sup>23</sup> Website: <https://sustainingcommunity.wordpress.com/2016/09/27/7-principles-guiding-my-work/>,  
<https://sustainingcommunity.wordpress.com/2014/08/27/bottom-up/>.

new possibilities or explore different ways of seeing things”.<sup>24</sup> Luciana Bezerra, coordinator of Nós de Morro’s Mostra, considers that it is central to the group’s mission “to offer access to art as a transformative tool for the individual, through training, production and artistic diffusion”<sup>25</sup> and a window for the community to discover their work. This transformative potential, with outcomes such as renewed self-esteem and wellbeing resembles perhaps Peter Brook’s idea of what a fairy should look like, or be: “a human being who, by pure skill, demonstrates joyfully that he can transcend his natural constraints, become a reflection of pure energy” (Brook, 2017: 96). And perhaps that is what matters, especially in times of difficulties: that everyone should be allowed to go on believing in fairies – for instance through participatory theatre and Shakespeare.

One difficulty is also to convince stakeholders that fairies exist, when they ask project leaders for tangible results or to measure the impact of these projects on the participants and their communities. Among the youngsters for whom Nós de Morro has been a step to other things, the actor Diogo Sales has acquired visibility by being cast in Game of Thrones. Legacies may rarely seem spectacular from a funding body’s perspective, but they are there, as Parr explains:

When we’re talking in the UK, we’re asked about legacy, what will the legacy be, they want that quantified in numbers, I refuse to do it. My return argument is that there inevitably will be one, which you can’t prescribe in advance, you usually get it wrong. I give a few case studies as interesting legacy, not necessarily artistic or cultural, also around social change.

Among the examples he gives, is that of a professional photographer who came in to cover a project: “he photographed, trained other people to take other photos, they published their own book of the making of, their legacy was a photograph exhibition”.

---

<sup>24</sup> <https://sustainingcommunity.wordpress.com/2012/01/13/facilitating-workshops-creating-a-container/>

<sup>25</sup> “O grupo Nós do Morro tem a missão de oferecer acesso à arte como instrumento transformador do indivíduo, trabalhando a formação, produção e difusão artística” (Teixeira, 2015: online).

Perhaps the best way of moving forward is to withdraw, and to let some of the “Citz”, who have been involved with Cardboard Citizens, have the final say:

I’m looking to set up my own charity – a foundation for artists from non traditional backgrounds ... Working with the company has given me a sense of purpose and direction, so I’m not just meandering through life leaving a vapour trail of social destruction behind me! (Simon)  
 Encountering the company really changed my life: I now have an actual way of expressing myself, and through this I feel like I can become anything. (Miguel)  
 There’s something about being yourself, being creative, and communicating better, especially if you don’t know the language. Mine has improved because of Shakespeare – it’s all about Shakespeare baby! But don’t worry, I’ve still got African accent. (Yolanda)<sup>26</sup>

### Works cited

- Barnes, Stella (2009), “Drawing a line: a discussion of ethics in participatory arts”, in Stella Barnes (ed.), *Participatory Arts With Young Refugees: Six Essays collected and published by Oval House Theatre*, London, Arts in Education, Oval House Theatre, pp. 34-40.
- Boal, Augusto (2005), *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, trans. Adrian Jackson, Second edition, London, Routledge [1992].
- Bradley, Katherine / Peter Kirwan (2007), “Review of *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, directed by Guti Fraga for Nós do Morro and Deborah Shaw for Gallery 37, The Courtyard Theatre, 27 August 2006”, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, vol. 71, nr 1-sup., pp. 7–11.
- Brook, Peter (2017), *The Shifting Point: Forty Years of Theatrical Exploration, 1946-87*, London, Bloomsbury.
- Cardboard Citizens 25 Years* [introduction by Adrian Jackson] (nd [2016?]), London, Cardboard Citizens.
- Keidan, Lois (8 May 2008), “The ethics of socially engaged art”, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2008/may/08/theethicsofsociallyengaged> (last accessed 16 October 2018).
- Coutinho, Marina Henriques / Marica Pompeo Nogueira (2013), “The use of dialogical approaches for community theatre by the group Nós de Morro, in the Vidigal favela of Rio de Janeiro”, trans. David Herman, in Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston (eds) (2013), *The Applied Theatre Reader*, London, Routledge, pp. 171-7.
- Hare, Elizabeth (2010), “Appendix 1. Ethics of Participatory Theatre: A Literature Review”, in Frances Rifkin (2010), *The Ethics of Participatory Theatre in Higher Education: A Framework for Learning and Teaching*, London, The Higher Education Academy, pp. 29-36.
- Hayhow, Christina, May Maani, Naqibullah Salarzai & Leslye Womack (11 May 2016), “Participatory arts with young refugees”, uploaded to *Participedia* [updated 25 June 2016], <https://participedia.net/de/node/4375> (last accessed 16 October 2018).
- Kirwan, Peter (2009), “Review of *As You Like It*, directed by Tim Supple, for Dash Arts and Leicester Theatre Trust, Curve, Leicester, 3 March 2009, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, vol. 75, nr. 1, pp. 86-7.
- Martin, Andy, “Shakespeare told us about the plight of refugees 400 years ago – it’s time to revisit his works”, *Independent*, 21 October 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/shakespeare-refugees-play-whither-would-you-go-harold-pinter-theatre-martin-freeman-olivia-williams-a8012821.html> (last accessed 16 October 2018).
- Parsons, Elinor (2007), “Review of *Henry V*, adapted and directed by Pippo Delbono for the Compagnia Pippo Delbono, The Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 2 February 2007, side stalls”, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, vol. 71, nr. 1-sup., p. 7–11, p. 8.
- Rifkin, Frances (2010), *The Ethics of Participatory Theatre in Higher Education: A Framework for Learning and Teaching*, London, The Higher Education Academy.
- Schwartz-Gastine, Isabelle (Fall 2013/Winter 2014), “Performing *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* with the Homeless (and Others) in Paris”, *Borrowers and Lenders*, vol. 8, nr. 2, <http://www.borrowers.uga.edu/969/show> (last accessed 16 October 2018).

<sup>26</sup> These, and more stories, at <https://www.cardboardcitizens.org.uk/meet-citz>.





New Faces essay collection, Janice Valls-Russell, May 2019

- Stuart, Graeme (nd), *Sustaining Community: Families, Community, The Environment*, <https://sustainingcommunity.wordpress.com> (last accessed 16 October 2018).
- Teixeira, Rafael (24 July 2015), “Uma conversa con Luciana Bezerra, coordenadora da Mostra Nos de Morro, que nest ano enfoca Shakespeare”, *Veja Rio* (updated 25 February 2017), <https://vejario.abril.com.br/blog/teatro-de-revista/uma-conversa-com-luciana-bezerra-coordenadora-da-mostra-nos-do-morro-que-neste-ano-enfoca-shakespeare/> (last accessed 16 October 2018).
- Walton, Nick (2007), “review of *Timon of Athens*, directed by Adrian Jackson for Cardboard Citizens, 27 October 2006, Shakespeare Centre, Stratford-upon-Avon”, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, vol. 71, nr. 1-sup., pp. 59-61, p. 59.
- Wells, Stanley / Gary Taylor (gen. eds) (2005), *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works?* Second Edition, Oxford, Oxford University Press [1986].