PARTICIPATING IN COMMUNITY THEATRE PARTNERSHIPS: EVALUATING COMMUNITY, CREATIVITY AND WELLBEING

by

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Participating in community theatre partnerships: evaluating community, creativity and wellbeing.

Abstract

This thesis investigates the problem of how to holistically evaluate participation in community theatre practices. As a former community theatre practitioner, I was invited by theatre companies to investigate an adaptable framework for evaluation that could take the following into consideration: making space for holistic and individual responses from participants whilst providing a consistent approach that would be meaningful to different stakeholders.

This framework would therefore have a two-fold function. Firstly, community theatre companies would be able to evaluate their own practices and decision making with respect to how these could benefit their participants through enabling an equitable and agentic space to develop their creative identities. Secondly, data could be used to better communicate the value of the work to a range of stakeholders such as partner organisations. trustees and funding bodies.

Focusing on the benefits of participation locates this research within the current conversation around arts and health, where its purpose is to make a case for participating in drama within the provision of community-based arts. It will be argued that drama is adept at building communities by unpacking how lived experiences can be made into art and reconsidered and revalued through encounters with other actors. The research findings show improved wellbeing is a consequence of building social bonds through drama. Case studies of partnerships between theatre companies and community organisations, where participants were invited to join a project that would end with a performance in a theatre, were used to investigate issues of process and performance, instrumentalism and agency, and ethics and aesthetics.

The research was driven by the participants' own accounts of the benefits of taking part, which built a rich picture of participation, where the analytical categories for the qualitative research were co-constructed with the study participants throughout a longitudinal interview process, which revealed both positive and problematic aspects of participation. The results of their data focused on community building, creativity and health benefits. These results were then supported by literature on arts and health, theories of social representation, creativity, and aesthetics, to provide an in-depth discussion leading to an appraisal of the benefits of participating in community theatre.

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PART TWO: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

INTRODUCTION

The case studies that provided the data for the research will first be introduced, followed by the aims and research questions of the thesis. Then, definitions of key terms for the study, namely participation, agency, instrumentalism, and community theatre will be discussed. Other factors will then be set out, including my own core values as a researcher and some recent community theatre projects that shaped the beginnings of this research. This will be followed by an introduction to the methods for the case studies. As the research began during the Coronavirus pandemic, a timeline of the restrictions will next provide further context for the reader and explain some of the challenges to the process. Finally, the last section of the introduction will detail the structure of the thesis which will be subdivided into two parts. The first part focuses on the case studies and the proposed framework for participation, while the second is driven by the analysis of the study participants' data.

Aims and research questions.

The aim of this thesis is to investigate participation in the arts through community theatre, whilst taking account of the broader context of arts and health. Its purpose is to develop a framework for evaluating participation that can be utilised by community theatre groups and facilitate communication with stakeholders. Articulating the benefits of participating in community theatre should potentially make a case for the provision of drama within a community's arts offer. Evaluation is key for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is a reflexive process that enables a theatre company to look at the efficacy of their own practices. Secondly, it is a platform for participants to critically discuss their own experiences. Thirdly, the language of evaluative criteria can place community theatre within a range of discourses including the context of arts and health mentioned above. The proposed framework for

evaluation is built from case studies that investigated partnerships between community organisations, grassroots theatre companies and larger arts organisations. Amateur participants were invited to take part in a community theatre process involving workshops and rehearsals, that would lead to a co-created performance in a professional theatre space before a paying audience. The partnership organisations (which will be described in more detail below) were keen to evaluate the benefits of taking part in drama from the participants' points of view and invited me to facilitate that process as a researcher.

The research design – case studies

The research was designed around two case studies of community theatre partnerships. This will contribute to the proposed framework for evaluation by modelling how a community theatre company can use mapping to reflexively evaluate their own practices and how their decision-making can impact on participants. Two companies, namely Underground Lights Theatre in Coventry and the Marlowe Theatre in Canterbury, were about to embark on community theatre projects that involved working in partnership with other organisations. Underground Lights at the time were an 'Umbrella Company', assisted by the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry which provided workshop and performance spaces. They had been invited by the Coventry City of Culture trust to work with the Cardboard Citizens theatre company during the summer of 2021. Adrian Jackson (who then was the artistic director) and the late Terry O'Leary would direct *Cardboard Camps in Coventry*, a forum theatre performance in the Belgrade Theatre's studio theatre about experiences of homelessness and the efficacy of local policies in response to this (22-23rd July 2021). Participation would be determined through an auditions process with Cardboard Citizens, whilst facilitators from Underground Lights would play supporting roles by interfacing between the different companies. A community choir was also planned to participate in Cardboard Citizens' musical production *The Ruff Tuff Cream Puff Estate Agency* scheduled for 11-16 October

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2021 in the main auditorium. Alongside this partnership with Cardboard Citizens, the company was working on a drama project called *Digital Divide* with their own facilitators. These two projects revealed very different ways of working and raised important questions about community theatre practices in the context of partnerships.

The Marlowe Theatre was working in partnership with the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) on their *Shakespeare Nation* project. This project had been postponed due to the pandemic and was rescheduled to 2021, beginning in earnest in the summer when Michael Corbridge from the RSC led a series of workshops in vocal techniques. The core of the *Shakespeare Nation* company was to be recruited from the Umbrella Centre, a resource in Canterbury city centre that supports vulnerable adults who may have mental health issues, learning difficulties or disabilities, or who may be experiencing isolation. Additional members of the company were to be recruited through 'taster sessions' in the Marlowe theatre studio, which were one-off workshops organised by Ian Wainwright, the RSC's Participation Producer. Facilitators from the Marlowe Theatre's community outreach team, known as the Learning and Participation team (initially led by Associate Director Paul Ainsworth), would then continue the process through a series of workshops designed to build a company with the skills and expertise to co-create the performance. This company would also be supported by former members of the Marlowe's People's Company that Ainsworth described as 'champions of art' (the People's Company was a community theatre project that had recently come to an end). The rehearsals would later be taken over by a freelance director and designer who would be supported by the Marlowe's own production team.

I planned that small groups of up to five participants would share their data (which would be their experiences, reactions and emotions) through a series of interviews. Results from the qualitative interview data would then be co-constructed with the participants to reveal categories and themes to form the basis of a discussion on the benefits of taking part in

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community theatre partnerships. The process of co-constructing results differs from other qualitative methods where the researcher reviews the data independent of the participants, because the participants themselves take the lead in identifying important categories and themes which then make up the results of the study. This process would contribute to a broader conversation on arts and health, enabling community theatre companies to evaluate their projects to make a case for future partnerships.

The research questions

The research questions emerged through early conversations with the theatre companies who first agreed to participate in the study. Underground Lights and The Marlowe were interested in working with me to develop a framework for evaluation that would be supported by academic research and could in turn be adapted by other community arts groups. Although there is a substantial body of research on evaluating participation in community-based arts which will be discussed in the course of this thesis, these theatre companies were looking for a process that would be centred on the participants' points of view, rather than on a set of objectives that had may have been decided on in advance. Partnerships between different organisations often involve a number of stakeholders with different priorities and different ideas about evaluation, such as finding numerical outcomes for targets in the case of health-based organisations. The theatre companies were strongly interested in formulating a holistic process of evaluation that would take their participants' agencies into account, rather than instrumentalise their experiences (agency and instrumentalism will be further explained in a forthcoming section on key terms for the research). Thus, the companies were interested in qualitative processes that would potentially engage in an arts and health-based conversation.

This prompted the first research question: *How can community theatre practitioners enable agency for their participants within a framework of stakeholders including funding bodies and partnership organisations?*

The second question focussed on the participants: *What then are the benefits of taking part in a community theatre process, and how can these be evaluated?*

The final question asked *Are partnerships between arts and community organisations an effective way of enabling opportunities for taking part in community theatre?*

The response to these questions would then contribute to the purpose of this research, which is to make a stronger case for the inclusion of drama in a community's arts offer. This will be achieved by investigating the efficacy of partnerships between community organisations, arts organisations and theatre companies through an evaluative process that can communicate how their participants benefit from taking part in drama.

The setting and context of the research

The research is situated within the wider context of arts and health, specifically wellbeing (Williams et al., 2023). Consequently, the research questions address the benefits of taking part in drama and investigate how these might be evaluated. Arts and health is a broad spectrum, ranging from prescribed arts with specific health-based objectives, to projects that address a more general sense of wellbeing for their participants through providing opportunities to take part in creative activities. The discussion around arts and health moreover has presented opportunities for community-based arts organisations to gain project funding in the field, which has led to the publication of a substantial body of research that will form one of the chapters of this thesis. It will be argued that much research on the benefits of taking part in arts activities has encountered problems around evaluation, because of the differing interests of arts and health-based organisations. Evaluation based on

quantitative research that focuses on numerical outcomes, particularly with reference to reducing medication or responding to therapy, is fundamental to health-based research but is less easily applied to arts activities because outcomes can tend to be more nuanced and subjective. Arts-based evaluation therefore tends to feature qualitative mixed methods research that focus on (usually positive) testimonies from participants.

However, this implies another question about the value of such evidence. Is it valuable in its own right because it is participant-centred, or do power relationships between different stakeholders inevitably lead to evidences being used or instrumentalised to support objectives that may have been set in advance of a project? Hence, the research question on enabling agency for participants within a framework of different partners with different power relationships. Participation, agency, and instrumentalism therefore are key terms in this thesis and will be discussed in greater detail below, with respect to how these can relate to a process of evaluation.

Key terms: Participation, agency and instrumentalism

Defining participation

Traditionally, there has been an understanding that participating in the arts either (in the case of drama) as an audience member or a practitioner can be beneficial in some way: 'That participation in drama has a healing effect has always been recognized' (Grainger, 1990, pp. 11-12). This assumption has also been used since the earliest arts council documentation as a means of justifying public investment. There is a reference to serving the community in the following quotation from the Arts Council of Great Britain's first annual report (1945) respecting theatre, but this is qualified as educating communities and building audiences: 'The defined purpose of the Arts Council of Great Britain is to maintain the highest possible standard in the arts. The Council hopes to enlist in this policy the co-operation of theatre

companies which have before them the same ideals of service to the community; which are anxious to spread the knowledge and appreciation of all that is best in the theatre, and thus to bring into being permanent, educated audiences all over the country.' (The Arts Council of Great Britain, 1945). Notions of what would constitute the 'best in the theatre' in addition to the 'highest possible standard' have continued to resonate. Then, participation was seen in terms of people having access to theatre as knowledgeable audience members and as noted in that early Arts Council document, educational benefits were seen as theatre's main community function.

Later 20th century theatre practices, including community theatre initiatives, challenged the benefits of accessing 'the best in the theatre' by engaging with and participating in a broader cultural field that included popular and working-class theatre forms. In this sense, community theatre practices engaged in participating in collective, counter-hegemomic discourses that were associated with political or ideological agendas. Hegemonies are structures of power, where certain ideas become dominant and maintain their influence through a general agreement or legitimisation of how things should be done. Hegemonies can supress differences and silence dissenting voices (Rosamond, 2025), such as (in this context) alternative methods of making theatre and reaching different audiences. Despite this, these differences and dissenting voices cannot be completely silenced and are termed counter-hegemonies within that dominant narrative. Catherine Itzin, in the introduction to her history of twentieth century political theatre, described the counter-hegemonic process as 'develop[ing] new audiences, a new aesthetic, a new kind and concept of theatre.' (1980, p. xiv). This notion of a new aesthetic is important as it suggests a power shift respecting who has the power to decide what constitutes 'the best in the theatre'. John McGrath described 'the best' as 'universalizing [a] white, middle-class but sophisticated taste to the status of exclusive arbiter of a true art or culture.' (1981, p. 3). Broadening participation by shifting

power to new audiences whilst enabling a new aesthetic therefore was an aim of the alternative theatre platform that included community theatre in the second half of the twentieth century.

Participation and economic factors

This historical process will be further detailed in Chapter six of this research (which will be outlined later in this introduction), where changes to the political positioning of the arts over time will be discussed. In brief, by the end of the twentieth century, the economic value of the arts became central. Thus, participation in the arts became part of a strategy to grow the economy. The thesis will argue that this political shift towards economic values contributed to a move away from the collective action of alternative theatre's proposed new aesthetic, as articulated by Itzen and McGrath above. This ideological shift with respect to arts organisations being valued according to their economic contribution was arguably part of a de-politicising of the arts that coincided with the development of industries around creativity and (as will be discussed in due course) wellbeing. In addition, patterns of funding moved away from core to project-based funding, often with multiple stakeholders.

Agency

Agency is a key term with respect to both participatory drama practices and the research process itself. In its simplest terms, it is about decision-making and how individuals' capacity to make decisions for themselves can be impacted by their access to resources and power. Participants' agencies are central to the devised theatre and co-created theatre practices that feature in the case studies, because these were contingent on lived experiences that the participants themselves could decide whether to bring to the process. Chapters two and three will discuss these practices through an analysis of the case studies. The discussion will also

reveal consequences of the participants' agencies, particularly with respect to leaving and returning to the community theatre process.

For the research process, the study participants had agency over how they decided to take part in the interview process, including whether they chose to leave or return to it. Significantly, the process of co-constructing the interview data offered participants agency over how their data was organised into the results categories that would drive the analysis and discussion of the benefits of taking part in community theatre. In this sense, the participants' subjectivities are central to this research.

Instrumentalism

Instrumentalism comes from the philosophy of pragmatism, where ideas were considered to be 'tools' with their value dependent on their usefulness in a practical context (de Neufville, 2025). Drama practices can be said to be instrumentalised if their application in meeting objectives (such as contributing to the economic regeneration of an area or improving outcomes for health) is considered more important than the art that is being made. Community theatre partnerships tend to have a number of stakeholders who may have different priorities with respect to what they hope the work will achieve. More powerful stakeholders such as organisations who may be responsible for funding and resources can also promote their own interests with respect to a community theatre process.

Despite the centrality of participants' agencies to the process of making theatre, the increasing importance of stakeholders' objectives in a partnership situation brings instrumentalism into play. This is because the progress of individual participants could potentially be measured against these objectives in a process of evaluation. Arguably, this is a move from discourses of collective action within community theatre to a focus on the individual (this will be discussed in greater detail later), but it should also be noted that there

are different ways of considering this process. On the one hand, attention towards individual participants could be symptomatic of a political movement away from collective action that could be potentially disempowering. On the other hand, a focus on individual participants could counterbalance instrumentalism through the participants' own agencies within a network of counter-hegemonies, which is where this research is situated. In other words, the participants' own interests, priorities and decision-making with respect to taking part can produce a richer picture of a community theatre process than measuring the work exclusively against other stakeholders' objectives.

Evaluating individual experiences

For the organisations who engaged with this study, these possibilities with respect to their participants' agencies underpinned the purposes of evaluation within the case studies. If stakeholders' objectives were going to continue to be part of project funding for participatory community theatre, then instrumentalism could potentially be countered by an equitable evaluation of the participants' own evidences as in the first research question: *How can community theatre practitioners enable agency for their participants within a framework of stakeholders including funding bodies and partnership organisations?*

There are potential problems with respect to how these different evidences are to be weighted. If participation is utilised to support health-based quantitative evidence with respect to a particular objective (such as the number of participants whose medications may have been reduced), then a space also needs to be made for individual evidences within that evaluative framework. The setting of objectives moreover is an indication of the power balance in such a decision-making process because the objectives represent what is deemed important enough to be evaluated. Even if arts and health-based partnerships agree on what should be evaluated, measuring the specific contribution of participation in the arts remains

elusive, which was a concern for the arts organisations who took part in this study. In order to engage with this problem, would it then be possible for arts and health-based practitioners and stakeholders, including funding bodies, to be able to agree on a language for evaluation that could be equitable with respect to different evidences? This was far from a straightforward rebalancing however, as the research findings identified tensions that required careful unpacking. These tensions were arguably produced by the partnership aspect of the case studies, where theatre companies worked with community and other arts organisations, all with different expectations and priorities that the evaluative process had to take into consideration. These expectations became conflicted on occasions for the theatre companies involved in the case studies, where ethical considerations of care had to be balanced by the demands of making theatre. These different interests produced different evaluative criteria, such as aesthetic expectations around what the *theatre* aspect of the community theatre partnership should look like and how it should be experienced on the one hand by an audience, and on the other hand by the individual participants who were also expected to benefit from the process. Arguably, the potential for conflicting interests is thus inherent within the multiple layers that make up a community theatre partnership. .

Why community theatre?

Challenges and strengths

Community theatre has been widely considered as enabling positive change for its participants through a transformative process (for example Preston, 2009ii). Practitioners like Petra Kuppers moreover have stated that positive social change is a principal aim of community performance (2007, p. 5). However, the field is not without challenges. As will be explained, the case studies were problematic at times, particularly as some of these conflicts of interest became more apparent. Both the Marlowe and Underground Lights companies

were eventually caught between the expectations of their bigger stakeholders (The RSC and The City of Culture Trust), and the needs of their participants that they were committed to taking into account. This had been foreseen to some extent by these theatre companies because there was an acknowledged power imbalance between the different arts organisations based on reputation, influence and access to resources. Also, many of the participants did not have much experience of theatre but were nonetheless expected to step up and co-create the content which arguably increased pressure on them (there will be a more expansive discussion of co-creative practices in Chapter three following). For the companies involved, these risks were nevertheless seen as worth taking because it was an opportunity to stage community theatre. All parties agreed that it was of the utmost importance that it should take place. What then is particular about community theatre in the 2020s that made these organisations want to work with each other?

Firstly, a theatre's engagement with its community can be seen as a measure of its broader relevance. The RSC's *Shakespeare Nation* project was centred on their regional theatre partners, namely The Marlowe in Canterbury, Nottingham Playhouse, The Alhambra in Bradford, Hall for Cornwall in Truro, the Blackpool Grand Theatre, and Norwich Theatre Royal. The premise was that the projects would become a knowledge exchange between these theatres and their communities, rather than the RSC functioning as 'an exclusive arbiter of a true art or culture' (McGrath, 1981, p. 3). The Marlowe theatre's community offer was in the process of change, as they had wound up The People's Company project (which had been about sharing skills and facilitating performances with amateur actors) in order to reach out to community organisations like the Umbrella Centre, who became their partner in *Shakespeare Nation*. In Coventry, the City of Culture Trust had a dual approach to community theatre in terms of enabling events that were very specific to localities (though often facilitated by established companies from outside Coventry) and in creating opportunities for their own

grassroots companies. Thus, Underground Lights were partnered with the more established Cardboard Citizens Company to work on the forum theatre project *Cardboard Camps* (though as mentioned, these companies used very different community theatre practices that eventually became conflicted). However, there is a sense of a knowledge exchange being central to these different groups' ideas about community theatre, particularly as co-creation was frequently cited as a fundamental principle in my conversations with the theatre companies before the start of the case studies. These preliminary conversations will be detailed in Chapters two and three, which analyse the case studies.

My core values for community theatre

As a researcher, I have had a longstanding interest in community theatre. This began with taking part in street theatre and other community theatre projects in the 1990s and progressed to working as a drama workshop facilitator. This early work formed the basis for the core values that I retained throughout my practice and then brought into teaching, although I now recognise that these values also underpin my own researcher bias, which I had to reflect on whilst being involved in the case studies.

Despite this, I want to look at each of these values in turn and reflect on the experiences that formed them: 1) taking part in drama makes people feel better, 2) community theatre initiatives need longer term support to enable their participants to continue to benefit, and 3), that initiatives should be participant-led and inclusive.

The first and second of these values were fostered by challenges in my first opportunity to lead a community theatre project. I had been a participant with Solent People's Theatre (SPT) and was given an opportunity to lead a project through an initiative to build local community theatre networks. The aim was to equip participants with the skills and the access to resources they would need to organise their own grassroots community events. Terms like 'ownership',

'empowerment', and 'local voices' were popular at that time, predicated on an assumption that taking part would inevitably bring about change for the participants. Rather than political inclusion, these changes were about celebration and community cohesion including boosting local economies through producing art, as this is where community theatre was positioned at that time (these ideas still resonate through stakeholder objectives and will be talked about in Chapter six, which includes a discussion on the ideological positioning of the arts).

The project I led had some success, in that we performed at some local festivals and had largely good feedback, but it was not sustainable in the long term, and there were not sufficient opportunities for the participants to effectively share and embed skills. We had a time-limited partnership with SPT that was intended to get us started as an independent group. We had free membership of a materials resource known as the Scrap Store, and the limited use of SPT's rehearsal space for a few weeks. However, when SPT needed their rehearsal space back for their next production, we worked in back gardens because we were unable to rent an indoor space. We also began to lose participants during the autumn because of transport issues, worsening weather and lack of daylight. Opportunities for performing on the other hand were plentiful due to the City Council's regeneration and local economy drive, but it became increasingly difficult to provide a consistent product once our initial support from SPT had ended. Moreover, there was often an expectation that local groups would be happy to perform for free in exchange for the exposure. Finally, I was inexperienced in the knowledge and strategies required to access and negotiate funding, in the sense that although I had been given information about who to approach, I did not know *how* to approach them, nor what a good application might look like. Therefore, I learned that a longer-term programme of mentorship was essential for the sustainability and survival of a community theatre group.

What stayed with me despite all the challenges we had encountered was that the participants testified that they felt better, or happier, or more empowered for having taken part. At the time however, I lacked the experience to articulate and promote these benefits in order to sustain the group. This seemed a lost opportunity for the participants, as even though the work we produced was limited by time and resource constraints, the group had developed a sense of community that was missed when we were no longer able to meet regularly. From the start therefore, I understood that partnerships between different organisations including mentorship and resource sharing could enable opportunities for people to take part in drama and consequently benefit from this.

My third value, that community theatre should be participant-led and inclusive of what different people wanted from taking part, was formed whilst practicing as a workshop facilitator. This was part of a citywide initiative to encourage participation in the arts among unwaged adults over the course of a year, within a longer-term objective to build community cohesion and encourage regeneration in targeted areas. A local adult education centre provided workshop spaces for drama and dance in addition to resources for painting and drawing, ceramics, and creative writing. The drama workshops were to be tailored to what the participants wanted to gain from the group. Some members were keen to write and perform, which led to the group being focused on street theatre. As I was confident in leading street theatre, I based the workshops on improvising a number of sketches based on the local area. The subject matter was political (particularly about negotiating the benefits system) and featured strong language and often dark humour. I was confident that we could get an audience for these, but in focussing on street theatre I had to learn that not all the participants were as enthusiastic, and people began to drop out. I did not really know why, until a former participant explained that they wanted to enjoy doing drama rather than street theatre mainly because of the stresses of performing, and also because they did not feel comfortable either

with the politics or the humour involved. The challenge was to address my practice in order to include those who wanted to 'do drama' by keeping the games and workshops fresh, whilst giving the street performers space to work and also finding the time to give them feedback. I learned that not everyone wants to perform, that some people just want to 'do drama', and that accommodating the participants' different aims is challenging but needs to be addressed to mitigate dropping out. None the less, when the workshops came to an end, the participants expressed a similar positivity about how taking part had made them feel, in addition to a sense of regret that it was over.

Thus, the need for partnerships and mentoring to enable community theatre to take place, acknowledging the benefits of taking part in drama and facilitating work that is (as far as possible) participant-led are long-established core values. Also, when I made the decision to move to teaching (mainly due to the precarity of working in community arts), my approach to learning was derived from facilitating and enabling, which proved successful over the course of my career. These core values later came to inform how I approached the case studies as a researcher and (as mentioned) were also the origins of my own biases. I had to come to terms with these biases over the course of the research, and my reflective process will form part of the analysis of the case studies.

Background to the thesis proposal

The proposal for this thesis was originally underpinned by three concepts that reflected the core values talked about above: Community theatre initiatives should be sustainable so that the participants would have sufficient time to maintain their new creative communities; there should be an equitable valuing of knowledges; and the testimonies of participants should be given weight in terms of evaluating community theatre projects.

Objectives for evaluating community arts projects have long been a factor, such as in the local regeneration projects described above, where numbers of participants were used to measure the effect of a project on a local economy. Therefore, the participants were working towards an objective that was not primarily focused on benefitting them as individuals. Similarly, applied theatre initiatives have encountered well-researched contradictions around the role of external objectives within a participant-centred approach, which will be further discussed. For this thesis, I was interested in finding case studies where community theatre could be driven by its participants and take account of how drama could benefit them as individuals, in addition to being sustained by supportive partnerships.

Finding support for projects is challenging. Economic factors have increasingly restricted opportunities for community theatre to take place, particularly with respect to the then government's ideology of austerity (from the second decade of the 21st century) that made significant cuts to funding public services and the arts. Despite this, a conversation about arts and health was growing, suggesting different opportunities and possibilities for community theatre to take place. Within this conversation there might also be the potential to focus on the participants themselves and extend concepts of wellbeing to include creativity, aesthetics and community-building. Whilst accepting that arts and health could be a problematic conversation due to instrumentalism in health-based objectives, I believed that researching community theatre in the broader context of arts and health could possibly square the following circle:

1) Make space for holistic and individual responses from participants.
2) Provide a consistent approach that is meaningful to stakeholders in both arts and health.

Community theatre in this research context

As community theatre involves a range of practices, it will be useful to outline some of these in terms of how they will operate within this research. Community theatre is distinct in that it usually takes place within a single geographic area and welcomes participants who may or may not have experienced drama either as an actor or as a spectator. This research looks at practices where the participants are central to the whole process rather than being involved in an adjunct to a performance, such as a community choir that performs at certain points in a production, a play-within-a-play featuring amateur performers, or by local people joining a professional cast in a form of celebration.

This is because using aspects of community theatre in a professional production can shift its focus towards the product. Traditionally for community theatre, the process rather than the product has been central. Petra Kuppers preferred the term 'community performance' (2007, p. 4) rather than theatre, to include all aspects of participation in addition to a product that may be viewed by an audience at the close of the process. Thus, it is not just about 'theatre', as the process works to effect change for both the individual and their 'wider social structures' (2007, pp. 5-6), such as building a sense of community and fostering inclusion.

The 'theatre' aspect

Whilst accepting that Kuppers' exchange of 'theatre' for 'performance' enables her to focus on holistic aspects of the process, the term 'community theatre' is appropriate for this research. This is because the theatre aspect in the sense of preforming before an audience was central to the case studies. The importance of theatre within the process including production values and audience expectations then created challenges that will be discussed in greater detail in the course of this thesis. In brief, there were significant pressures around the performance attaining an expected standard that had been agreed in advance by the production teams. In this sense, there was sometimes an imbalance with respect to how the

participants' and production teams' knowledges came to bear on the performance. Arguably this is inevitable when there are specific skills such as technical skills that cannot be safely shared in a short space of time, but the question of how this is dealt with, especially in the context of a co-created or a devised process, has important ethical considerations.

Despite this, a theatre performance is advantageous for a community project. Firstly, it provides visibility. As short-term project funding has largely replaced core funding for arts organisations, sharing work with an audience at the end of a time-limited project can provide a celebratory return on its stakeholders' investments. Audiences can provide feedback that contributes to evaluating the project, whilst the participants themselves can be rewarded with visibility and validation for their work. Moreover, the work can provide opportunities for creativity that were previously outside the everyday experiences of many participants. Opportunities for change can arguably be produced by participating in community theatre, but the case studies will demonstrate that these operate within a range of discourses that reveal tensions around ethics, instrumentalism, and creativity.

Theatre companies and community theatre partnerships: recent practices

At the time I was putting together this research project (2017-2018), some well-established theatre companies were rethinking their community offers. These examples were important in my decision making as to what sort of case studies would be most useful, and how to approach researching them.

Neighbourhood Theatre

The Young Vic theatre had set up its Neighbourhood Theatre in 2016, to further embed the theatre's community role within its geographical area. Participation extends to residents of Southwark and Lambeth who are over the age of 25. The age limit is based on there being established youth theatres in the area, but very little provision for this adult demographic. The

Young Vic's Taking Part project for 16-25 year olds has been running for 25 years, offering free workshops, events and opportunities to make theatre, but as Alisha Arty, the Neighbourhood Theatre Producer remarked: 'There's a lot for young people here, but once you hit 25 you're out the door. There was nothing for them, so we had to provide that when we set up Neighbourhood Theatre.' (2022). Neighbourhood Theatre has a similar offer to Taking Part and includes an actor training programme with opportunities to perform with the company. In 2018, a production of *Twelfth Night* included a community choir to enhance themes of inclusion and diversity. It was seen as a critical success (Brooks, 2018), although the choir's participants were invited to take part in the production without being responsible for co-creating any of the content. Although Neighbourhood Theatre describes the status of its community offer as being 'at the heart of our work.' (2023), for this research, I was interested in devised theatre and co-creation as presenting a more genuinely equitable relationship between a theatre company and its participants (though as the research revealed, co-creation is a complex and contested term).

Public Acts

The Young Vic is able to sustain its community offer, but not all theatre companies are in the same position, which is where partnerships between organisations can play an enabling role. In 2017, the National Theatre set up Public Acts, an eight-years long initiative, to develop these relationships between organisations. Public Acts produced a musical version of *Pericles* that was performed in the Olivier Theatre in the summer of 2018. The production required such a large space because it featured a chorus of 200 amateur performers recruited from eight community organisations across London during a two-year partnership. Although the community chorus supported a small cast of local professional actors, they tended to be the focus of the action for audiences and critics, described as 'mesmerising…flood[ing]…swirling' (Gillinson, 2018). Writer Chris Bush, who adapted the

script described the production as representing the National Theatre's 'civic duty to serve its community' in addition to 'handing back ownership to the public in a real and tangible way.' Furthermore, participation is described as 'powerful, transformative…life-changing, especially for those who don't always feel they're given a voice.' (Bush cited in Thompson, 2018). What is significant about these words is the power that they attribute to community theatre practices. Although they are contestable with respect to that first production of *Pericles*, such as how far public ownership could feasibly extend beyond the specific groups that Public Acts was working with, in addition to whether it is appropriate to claim that theatre can give someone a voice, nevertheless there is a clear belief in the benefits of taking part in community theatre.

After reopening following the Covid 19 pandemic, in addition to its work in London, Public Acts developed further partnerships with theatres in Hornchurch, Sunderland, Stoke on Trent, and Trowbridge for its 2023 production of *The Odyssey*, which took place in four sections at these partner theatres. In its list of values, the organisation states that 'theatre making is a valuable form of community building and that 'everyone is an artist and has the right to artistic expression.' In addition, there is a commitment to exchanging knowledges: 'We do our best work when we learn from one another, as people and organisations.' (National Theatre, 2023). An organisation as well-resourced as the National Theatre is thus able to set up partnerships with other theatres in order to address its commitment to community building and facilitating artistic expression through exchanging knowledges and sharing resources. These, therefore, are some of the advantages that a larger theatre company could gain from being a stakeholder in a community theatre partnership.

A smaller organisation on the other hand could benefit from shared resources as well as a bigger platform for their own community offer. However, as mentioned above, there are

issues that need to be negotiated such as the respective powers of the organisations involved, and how they operate alongside the needs, knowledges and experiences of their participants.

On Top of the World

A means of addressing these potential power imbalances is to invite theatre professionals from partner organisations to negotiate a community group's spaces at the beginning of the project. Rather than inviting participants into a theatre space at the outset, the work begins in a community group's 'home' (this was how the Marlowe Theatre case study began, with workshops in the Umbrella Centre that then moved to the theatre's own spaces). I was particularly interested in how a long-term community theatre project titled *On Top of the World* used different spaces throughout its process (it was concluding just as this research was beginning). *On Top of the World* was a three-year devised theatre project by Manchester Royal Exchange in partnership with One Manchester Housing Association, a local housing provider. The script was devised through improvisation with the participants who were single occupants in four tower blocks, with the project aiming to 'enable residents to experience the benefits of art and culture, to enhance their daily living and improve wellbeing and life prospects.' (Royal Exchange Theatre, 2018i). The project ran from 2015 to 2018 and featured a radio play devised from workshops with facilitator Tracie Daley, which then became a sold-out stage play in the Royal Exchange studio theatre titled *Can You Hear Me From Up Here?* Community building through cultural engagement was its overall aim: 'a powerful creative platform on which residents who are at risk from social isolation can express their views, shed light on their experiences and build new communities.' (Royal Exchange Theatre, 2018ii). The objectives around building communities through devised theatre, in addition to the critical success of the performance, suggested how a community theatre partnership could potentially be successful on different levels if its participants were central to all aspects of the process.

Evaluating the process

Although *On Top of the World* benefitted from a much longer time frame than the case studies that feature in this research, its successes were informative as to how I could approach them (as far as possible) from the participants' points of view. This was a particularly useful aspect of how the project dealt with evaluation. Initially, the Royal Exchange theatre provided a list of bullet-pointed benefits for their participants on their webpage dated 2018, which included addressing loneliness, and increasing confidence and employability. This page is no longer available, as Tracie Daley, the project's facilitator, published a more detailed evaluation in 2019. Although the listing of employability in the first version of the evaluation initially suggested instrumentalism respecting the project's objectives, Daly's version revealed a different approach that took account of the participants' points of view and experiences.

Daley divided her evaluation into descriptions of the different stages of the project alongside some audience reactions, the impact on the participants and the impact on the project's partners. The main benefits for the participants were 'increased commitment' in terms of seeing the project through, 'skills development, particularly the use of digital communication, 'health and wellbeing' through 'arts and culture…which has helped to improve their mental well-being'; gaining access to support services; making connections and building 'a sense of community'; and finally, 'increased confidence and self-esteem'. Daly stated that engagement in the project had 'made significant improvements to [participants'] daily lives.' (2019) Thus, making a commitment to taking part had resulted in these significant improvements. Employability was addressed in a more nuanced way through the participants developing transferrable skills and increasing their levels of confidence. Furthermore, Daly explained how the participants' experiences of the benefits system had negatively impacted on their engagement (the requirements for receiving benefits and avoiding sanctions have become increasingly more stringent): 'interfer[ing] with the delivery of the project and affecting

residents' ability to engage was a genuine fear of loss of benefits, causing high levels of anxiety for residents involved.' (2019). Daly clearly states the situation from the participants' point of view, in that the demands of the benefits system were actually inhibiting them from making commitments, developing their skills and increasing wellbeing through addressing isolation and loneliness, despite these factors potentially improving their access to work in the longer term.

This was a bold approach that presented the situation from the participants' points of view, but on the whole, the evaluation of the project's impact on its participants was facilitator-led, supported by some selected comments from the participants' feedback. Where a negative comment was included that reflected on the theatre's role in the partnership, it was not fully unpacked: 'I think that the Royal Exchange should have been more supportive in the way that they engaged with us. It felt like a venue. I would have liked to have been more prepared for the rollercoaster afterwards and how to look after myself.' (2019). Daly picks up on this as a need for the theatre to support participants with the 'post show blues' (2019), but the comment is also about a lack of engagement, where the theatre felt like 'a venue' rather than a partner. Further information from other participants could have provided a richer picture of their own perceptions about engagement. Another factor that seemed significant was that the evaluation had been done by the lead facilitator, who may have been positively biased through being so closely involved in the process. I hoped that my position as an academic researcher would allow me to have sufficient distance from the process to address bias, but this was to prove more challenging in practice.

For this research therefore, I aimed for an evaluative process that took its impact statements directly from the participants' feedback. I considered how the impacts of a community theatre partnership could be decided on by the participants themselves in some form of a co-constructed process where they would play a decision-making role. Also, perhaps health and

wellbeing objectives could be nuanced if approached from the participants' point of view rather than instrumentalised with respect to an already-decided outcome. Thus, objectives and impacts could take account of participants' views in a more agentic process as in the research questions which (to reiterate from earlier) are as follows: 1) *How can community theatre practitioners enable agency for their participants within a framework of stakeholders including funding bodies and partnership organisations?*

2) *What then are the benefits of taking part in a community theatre process and how can these be evaluated?*

3) *Are partnerships between arts and community organisations an effective way of enabling opportunities for taking part in community theatre?*

Research methods for the case studies

To answer these research questions, I needed a method that would engage theatre companies and community organisations together with their participants. I decided on a case-study approach to foreground the participants' voices in the analysis of a community theatre partnership that would conclude within the time scale of the thesis. I would use a qualitative research method where the data would take the form of testimonies from the study participants. These would be collected in a longitudinal or long-term interview process that I anticipated would provide a rich picture of data on the benefits of taking part in community theatre. This in turn would be useful to both arts and health organisations with an interest in participation. I hoped to find up to three manageable case studies.

Setting up the case studies

In 2017, Coventry had been awarded City of Culture status for the year 2020, though this was to be delayed for a year due to the Coronavirus pandemic. Their successful bid had been based on 'inclusion and diversity through programmes and events that encourage activism,

civic participation and digital innovation.' (British Council, 2021). A three-year legacy programme was also part of the bid, but unfortunately the greater part of this will no longer be taken forward as at the time of writing, the City of Culture Trust had been placed in administration due to significant financial losses. When I was planning the case studies late in 2019, the future was promising as the City of Culture Trust was building partnerships around the West Midlands with civic, arts, and community organisations, including theatre companies. The late Hannah Barker, then the Co-artistic director of the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, and Kim Hackleman, the Community Embedded Producer at the Belgrade, were interested in taking part in the study through their 'Umbrella' organisation, which supports and shares resources with grassroots theatre companies. They suggested I meet Emma Ormerod, then the artistic director of an Umbrella Company named Underground Lights, who were talking to the City of Culture Trust with a view to a partnership. Barker and Hackleman were hoping that this study would also provide them with a rich evaluative picture of insights into their own community offer, in terms of wellbeing and community building. This presented an opportunity for me as a researcher to closely study a community theatre partnership between arts and civic organisations that differed in size, status, and availability of resources.

Having begun the process of establishing a case study with Underground Lights, there was a lengthy interruption due to the Covid 19 pandemic. The first lockdown was enforced between March 2020 and June 2020, and I was unable to meet the company until months after my initial contact with the Belgrade Theatre (I will provide a more detailed timeline of the Covid 19 restrictions in a later section to provide an overview of its impact on the research). When the first lockdown was finally lifted, I was able to contact arts organisations again. Although this proved to be a window of only one month before further restrictions were imposed, it was enough to establish another case study. Paul Ainsworth, who was then Associate Director

of Learning and Participation at the Marlowe Theatre, Canterbury invited me to include their *Shakespeare Nation* project as a case study. Again, this was because The Marlowe Theatre was interested in developing its approach to evaluation through formulating a nuanced and holistic approach to the benefits of participation. These case studies informed the framework for evaluation that will be presented in this thesis. As mentioned, this will be a twofold process consisting of 1) an 'in house' evaluation of the effectiveness of community theatre practices within the power structures of a partnership and 2) a participant-led evaluation of the benefits of taking part.

A method of knowledge exchange

The prospective case studies were underpinned by arts and health considerations, in terms of enhancing wellbeing through the benefits of creative community building. This will be made clearer during the analyses of the case studies. As I would be working with study partners that included arts organisations, facilitators and participants, I would need a research method that would enable me to talk to these different stakeholders. My early conversations with arts organisations established that this relationship would be a reciprocal knowledge exchange as my study partners hoped to gain something in exchange for their participation by looking at methods of evaluating their own practices and communicating with a range of stakeholders in a knowledge exchange. The theme of knowledge therefore became central to the research methods. In addition to input from arts practitioners, I intended that the local and particularised knowledges of all the participants should be central to the research in order to build up a rich picture of evidence that the theatre companies could then use in their own evaluations of their community theatre partnerships. If such a method of evaluation was found to be effective, it was hoped that it could provide evidence for stakeholders to support additional community theatre partnerships.

However, as mentioned above, the Covid 19 pandemic significantly disrupted the research, particularly as restrictions and rule changes continued throughout the case studies. As the pandemic is a theme throughout their stories, it will be helpful to provide a brief timeline of the restrictions at this early stage of the thesis as a reminder of some of the challenges faced by these community theatre partnerships.

Coronavirus restrictions and their impact on the research

A timeline of lockdowns

This research formally began in September 2019. The World Health Organisation declared the coronavirus known as Covid 19 to be an international health emergency on 30 January 2020, which was progressed to a worldwide pandemic on 10 March 2020. The first UK lockdown began soon after, lasting from 23 March to 23 June 2020, which resulted in the closure of schools, universities and all 'non-essential' businesses, including theatres. It was ruled that people had to stay in their own homes except for strictly necessary reasons such as food shopping or medical issues. People worked from home where possible and businesses including hospitality and entertainment were able to access a 'furlough' scheme where they could apply for grants to pay their staff whilst they were closed, although this did not necessarily help the arts, as so many workers in the industry are freelancers. Theatres were closed and the City of Culture trust put its plans on hold. Although it was announced that the national lockdown regulations would end on 23 June, just a week later local restrictions were again imposed on areas that still had high levels of infection.

For some areas in England, rules were relaxed between 4 July 2020 and 14 September 2020. Hospitality was reopened and gatherings of up to 30 people were allowed. At this point in the research, the case studies had been established, and it seemed hopeful that this study could finally begin in earnest. However, infection rates began increasing, and the rules changed

again. From 14 September to 31 October 2020, gatherings were limited to 6 people and restrictions were increased on a regional sliding scale known as 'the three-tier system', where rules could be different according to numbers of local Covid 19 infections.

Infection rates continued to increase despite these mitigations and a second, shorter lockdown was imposed on 31 October 2020, which again closed all non-essential businesses. The three-tier system was reintroduced on 2 December 2020 and was extended to four tiers in an attempt to avoid a third national lockdown, but this was eventually imposed from 6 January to 8 March 2021.

Impact on the research

Despite almost a year of lockdowns and restrictions, I was hopeful that the case studies would finally take place, as the groups of potential participants had stayed in contact and worked on online activities with their facilitators. Eventually, the availability of vaccines for Covid 19 began to have a positive effect and a phased exit known as a 'road map' out of lockdown began (UK Parliament, 2021). During the 'road map' period, I had online meetings with Emma Ormerod and members of Underground Lights, and Paul Ainsworth and Jack Finch-Harding from the Marlowe. I was eventually able to meet some of the participants in person from May 2021. Theatre buildings were finally able to open in July 2021, though with 'social distancing' regulations that included reduced audience numbers, the compulsory wearing of masks, the recording of regular Covid 19 test results, and the possession of valid vaccination certificates.

Overall, the pandemic impacted significantly on the research, as the case studies were delayed by a year and then continued to be affected by social distancing regulations during the 'road map' period. The case study with Underground Lights ran from May until July 2021. This was a period of uncertainty, as although social distancing restrictions had relaxed

sufficiently to allow drama to take place, the third national lockdown had ended only two months earlier. The case study with the Marlowe, the RSC, and the Umbrella Centre ran from July until November 2021, but due to infection rates increasing again, compulsory testing was required before using the Marlowe's spaces. A positive test meant that all recent contacts of an infected person had to self-isolate for ten days which would potentially have risked the production being able to go ahead. Also, there was an increased level of anxiety over the prospect of people again being alone and cut off from their social contacts. Thus, it is useful to remind the reader of the complexity of the situation and its impact on the research at this early stage.

Ethics approval

The thesis received ethical approval from the Faculty Research Ethics Advisory Group for Human Participants on 12th October 2020, as part of the University of Kent Ethics Committee (CREAG). Both participants and researcher would have equal ownership of the data because the results would be co-constructed by all parties. The participants' information sheets informed them of their agency to review their interview data in an iterative process that would allow for them to change their minds and also to decide whether they wanted to continue with or leave the research. This created some potential uncertainty, because the participants would have the final say on whether their data would be included in the thesis. As a researcher, I would have to adhere to this despite the risk of some potentially valuable information being removed from the research.

Another challenge was that although the participants were anonymised, there was the possibility that they could be identified by their facilitators because the theatre companies involved would be consulting the data as part of their in-house evaluations. It was imperative

to inform all participants of these possibilities before they decided whether to take part in the research.

Moreover, as the case studies feature drama practices that utilise participants' lived experiences, this thesis had to address questions around consent, in addition to wider questions about the potential exploitation of their knowledges. Keeping the participants' agencies at the centre of the research was a means of balancing powers within the process.

The structure of the thesis

The thesis is divided into an introduction, eight chapters and a conclusion. It will be formed of two parts. The first presents analyses of the case studies and models the proposed framework for evaluation, while the second is an in-depth discussion of the results driven by the participants' data and supported by different sets of literature. For this reason, a single literature review chapter will not be used. The following paragraphs will provide an overview of the structure before a more detailed outlining of the individual chapters.

Chapter one will build on the aims, research questions and context of the study introduced above, by discussing in detail both the chosen research methods for the case studies and the literature that supported this decision-making. Positioning a chapter on methods at the beginning of the thesis will also help to show how these methods were subsequently challenged by the realities of the case studies.

Following analyses of the case studies in the second and third chapters and the proposed framework for evaluation, the fourth chapter will detail some ethical issues that were revealed by the processes. As these were significant issues, they require a separate chapter for further discussion before the fifth chapter on the participants' co-constructed results.

The results of the participants' qualitative data will then be the focus of the chapters in part two of the thesis. The results are grouped into three categories which were coded by the

participants as 'family', 'challenge' and 'doing drama' as the experiences that were most valuable to them while taking part in the project. These categories are embedded in broader themes, namely community building, creativity, risk and wellbeing. Literature will then be used to generalise the participants' results in a wider discussion of the benefits of taking part in drama. Following this, an aesthetics of participating in community theatre partnerships will be explored.

Finally, the conclusion will make a case for community theatre partnerships by focusing on how community theatre is best placed to build communities among participants and how articulating these benefits can help to negotiate the aims and needs of multiple stakeholders. Amongst these, the participants themselves should be recognised as major stakeholders because of the challenging creative processes that they had to negotiate in order to benefit from taking part. A more nuanced and holistic attention to participants' experiences could provide a rich source of data that in turn could make a case for community theatre partnerships within a local arts offer.

PART ONE: THE CASE STUDIES

Part one of the thesis will analyse the case studies with a view to answering these research questions: 1) *How can community theatre practitioners enable agency for their participants within a framework of stakeholders including funding bodies and partnership organisations?*

2) *What then are the benefits of taking part in a community theatre process, and how can these be evaluated?*

Chapter one – Research Methods

The chapter will discuss the research methods for the case studies, how these methods were chosen and the literature that supported these choices. This was to be a qualitative research process, and I intended that the analytical categories of the research should be co-constructed

with the study participants themselves. This was to counter any possibilities of the research objectives being imposed on the participants in advance. I also hoped that a process of co-construction would mirror the co-created and devised theatre elements that would feature in the Underground Lights and Marlowe Theatre case studies, although in practice the positioning of co-creation within these community theatre processes became problematic.

Although co-construction was intended to be central to this research from the outset, research methods were required that would facilitate an equitable knowledge exchange between the different stakeholders within a community theatre partnership (including questions about what should count as knowledge) whilst maintaining the centrality of the study participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon of taking part in drama. Situational analysis (Clarke et al., 2007, 2019) is a development of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2016, p. 1). It is a reflexive method that can take into account multiple viewpoints and experiences of both researchers and participants, at an individual level and within a broader social context. Situational analysis seeks to achieve this by comprehensively analysing the factors that have influenced a situation (in this case community theatre partnerships) including participants' experiences, stakeholders' objectives and the responsibilities for resourcing a project. Adele Clarke describes situational analysis (SA) as follows: 'Making differences more visible and helping silences to speak (also often about difference) are two explicit goals of SA.' (2019, p. 32).

There were also phenomenological and epistemological questions central to the analyses of the case studies, particularly around questions of what counts as knowledge, hence the attention to epistemology or the theory of knowledge. I will outline how these theories are relevant to this thesis. Phenomenology is 'the direct investigation and description of phenomena as consciously experienced without theories about their causal explanation and as free as possible from unexamined preconceptions and presuppositions.' (Spiegelberg and

Biemel, 2025). In other words, it is about subjectivities, or individuals' lived experiences of phenomena (such as participating in drama). Related to epistemology are hermeneutics which is the study of interpretation. These three approaches are brought together in hermeneutic phenomenology, a research approach 'which seeks to understand the meaning of lived experiences. It combines phenomenology which focuses on the structure of experience with hermeneutics which focuses on the interpretation on meaning.' (McLeod, 2025). Hermeneutic phenomenology in bringing together the subjective interpretations and individual experiences of the study participants provided a philosophical framing for the situational analyses chosen to unpack the case studies and provide models for the evaluative framework.

During and after the case studies, the data was produced in the form of interviews with the study participants and by observations recorded in my research diaries. These results were co-constructed into codes ('family', 'challenge' and 'doing drama') and themes (community building, creativity, risk and wellbeing). In addition, facilitators' and practitioners' voices provided additional layers to a thick description. Situational analyses also facilitated the mapping of power structures and relationalities that would impact on the participants' experiences of the phenomenon of taking part in community theatre.

Theories of mess also informed the research methods for two main reasons, firstly because of the improvised aspects of making theatre that would feature in the projects (McNamara et al., 2011), and secondly, I anticipated that the qualitative research process would become messy over time, particularly respecting the data collection. Grounded theory methods like Situational Analysis can address this by taking account of messy processes (Law, 2007). The participants were invited to change their minds about how they felt about taking part and to reflect on the content of their interviews before their knowledges would be used in the thesis. This was made clear in the consent forms that were provided following ethical approval for this study from the University of Kent. A messy process moreover would enable the

participants to review and reflect on their data, which could reveal changes to perceptions about their experiences.

Chapter two – The Marlow Theatre Case Study: Practices and Power

The second chapter analyses the Marlowe Theatre case study. It aims to provide a rich picture of a community theatre process whilst modelling an evaluative framework that could be used by practitioners. The project was envisaged as a companion to the RSC's touring production of *A Comedy of Errors* where a company of amateur participants would devise a show based on themes from that play, hence *Shakespeare Nation*. The chapter utilises situational analysis (Clarke, 2007, 2019) as described above, in addition to observations and reflections from my research diaries. The chapter also shows how the research methods were challenged by the participants' own perceptions and experiences.

As the community theatre process was subject to the theatre's advertised performance schedule, time constraints began to exert a powerful influence that eventually compromised the core element of devised theatre. This was compounded by the power relations between the Marlowe Theatre and its partnership organisation, the RSC. Furthermore, ethical questions were raised about sustainability and about the demands of the performance being weighed against both the needs and the knowledges of the participants. These ethical questions will be discussed in the context of Clark Baim's practices (2002 and 2020) which set out how tensions between participants' needs and knowledges and facilitators' intentions can be addressed.

Chapter three – The Underground Lights Case Study: Co-creation and Managing Risk

The two case studies have certain factors in common as both presented a theatre performance to a paying audience. These performances were subject to time constraints due to their positioning in an already decided performance schedule and both featured elements of

devised and co-created theatre practices. That said, this chapter analyses a very different community theatre partnership. Firstly, Underground Lights is a well-established theatre company, with participants who share a strong sense of community. Secondly, they worked on two performances during the Coventry City of Culture year which are discussed in different sections of the chapter. The first was a series of co-created performances on the consequences of unequal access to digital technologies, whilst the second was a partnership with Cardboard Citizens theatre company on the subject of homelessness and the difficulties of accessing support.

Co-created practices are fundamental to how Underground Lights Theatre Company work. The tensions between these practices and those of their partner organisations produced an interesting and productive discussion on co-creation, which itself has become a contested term. Literature on co-creation (Horvath and Carpenter, 2020; Walmslsey, 2013 and 2019; Glasier, 2016 and 2024) will support this discussion. The projects also raised ethical questions over how risk was managed by the different companies and how the wellbeing of the participants was positioned in these approaches.

Chapter four – Ethics in Community Theatre Partnerships: art, agency and sustainability

This chapter builds on some of ethical tensions within the processes highlighted by the case studies including 1) the pressures of making theatre, including time limits and expectations that may lead to the needs of the performance taking precedence over care for participants, and 2) the responsibilities delegated to arts workers that can impact on safeguarding for everyone involved in a community theatre project. This chapter includes a discussion on emotional labour as a factor in facilitating community theatre. Emotional labour will be talked about in terms of work expectations as described by a drama facilitator in an interview.

As emotional labour is a contested term in its academic and lay usages, the chapter will clarify where this ethical discussion is positioned on that spectrum of meanings (Hochschild, 2012; Stulikova and Dawson, 2022).

Sustainability will also be foregrounded as an ethical issue. Testimonies from community theatre practitioners reveal how stakeholders' understandings of community theatre processes such as co-creation can impact on sustainability.

The chapter will also look at agency and how arts organisations work to enable agentic decision making for participants despite the expectations of often more powerful partner organisations. As participants did not greatly influence decision making respecting the productions featured in the case studies, agency for the Marlowe theatre's participants was on one level at least, restricted to being able to drop in and out of a process that was controlled by theatre professionals. With hegemonies of theatre-making in play, the chapter will also look at what can be learned from applied theatre practices (including recent practitioners like Selina Busby (2021) and critics like James Thompson (2009)) to facilitate a more reflective evaluation of the effectiveness of an arts organisation's community theatre practices. This will also take into account problematic issues that remain with respect to evaluation such as how participants should not be reduced to data points, not least because their knowledges should be weighted equitably. A knowledge exchange should not become purely transactional such as exchanging content in the form of lived experience for the opportunity to perform but instead should remain reciprocal. Clark Baim's practices (2002 and 2020) will underpin this notion of an ethical knowledge exchange.

Chapter five – Results from the Participants' Data.

The grounded theory framework from chapters two and three continues with the discussion of the results. The analytical categories were co-constructed by the study participants in

discussions with myself as a researcher. The participants decided on the areas that were most indicative of their knowledges with respect to their experiences within the process and picked quotations from the interviews that highlighted these. Interestingly, these individual analyses were largely in agreement, demonstrating that although the participants had the agency to change their minds about their experiences during the interview process, they remained largely consistent in their evaluations. This consistency suggested that these results were reliable and could possibly be generalised to apply to contexts other than these specific case studies and that this process could be supported by literature. To summarise, the codes from the interviews are 'family', 'challenge' and 'doing drama'. These categories were then mapped onto the following themes: community building; creativity; risk; knowledge; and wellbeing. However, they all intersect to different degrees, and this will be discussed in the chapters in part two of the thesis.

PART TWO: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Part two of the thesis will aim to answer the following research question: *What then are the benefits of taking part in a community theatre process, and how can these be evaluated?*

Part two will be further broken down into two sections. The first is a 'deep dive' into the participants' results, supported by relevant literature. This is part of the qualitative research process that looks for patterns and meanings in the participants' subjective experiences and evidences. The second is a closer look at ideas that could underpin a theory of participation in community theatre partnerships, namely therapeutic practices related to wellbeing benefits and aesthetics, which focus on the participants' experiences of making theatre.

Chapter six – Creative Communities: drama, knowledge and risk

This chapter analyses intersecting themes identified in the actor-participants' co-constructed results. 'Family', 'challenge' and 'doing drama' will be mapped onto broader themes of

community, creativity, risk, and knowledge. These themes will be investigated with the support of relevant literature, which reveal important intersections, such as creativity being identified as a social phenomenon. The discussion will be underpinned by theories of social representation and psychologies of creativity and play (for example Winnicott, 1971; Mosocivi, 2008; Jovchelovic, 2007; Glăveanu, 2010, 2012, 2014).

Next, the intersecting themes of creativity and community will be investigated with examples of creative communities (for example Doyle, 2016; Bernard, 2018; Elisondro, 2016, 2019; Lebedeva et al., 2019). Then, these intersecting themes will be employed in analysing the uses and applications of creativity, such as productivity and affect theory, including their applications in the workplace (Amabile, 1996; Amabile et al., 2005, 2012 and 2016). Creativity and its uses and applications are next explored through perceptions about the economic and political values of the arts (Gahan et al., 2007; Wayne, 2018; Wayne and Thomas, 2021). These functional concepts of creativity and their implications for patterns in funding for arts organisations will be considered with respect to their relationship to instrumentalism via evaluating outcomes for participants. This will be challenged by theories of counter-hegemonies (Williams, 1958 and 1977; McNamara et al., 2011; Wayne and Thomas, 2021); and Helen Nicholson's transformative practices and affective labour (2017).

Then, having looked at these broader social, political and cultural aspects of the intersecting themes, epistemologies of drama practices will then be considered in terms of producing knowledge and culture through a process of retrieving and externalising lived experiences. Looking ahead to the next chapter, it will be argued that risk is fundamental to creativity, but may have negative as well as positive outcomes, both of which can impact on wellbeing (Foregard, 2018). Wellbeing is a significant theme from the participant's results that embeds the discussion in the current conversation on arts and health.

Chapter seven - Participation and Wellbeing: discussions on arts and health

Wellbeing is a nuanced benefit of taking part in drama and can be challenging to evaluate, despite it being frequently named as a key outcome for stakeholders in community theatre partnerships, and in community arts in general (Devlin, 2010; Fancourt, 2017). For the study participants, wellbeing was talked about directly by members of Underground Lights theatre company as a consequence of long-term community building and of accessing opportunities for creativity. The Marlowe theatre participants' conclusions were similar, in that wellbeing was a theme closely related to their results categories of 'family', 'challenge' and 'doing drama'. Thus, a link is established between wellbeing and community building through participation.

The chapter will discuss literature on arts and health that aim to evaluate the health benefits of participation, beginning with recent research by Nucleus Arts, a community arts organisation with strong links to arts and health, including social prescribing. Other relevant literature will include a systematic review of arts-based programmes by Williams et al. (2023), reports by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, Inquiry Report (2017); and studies by Phillips (2018); Stickley (2018); and Redmond et al. (2018). Arts and health organisations tend to evaluate data differently, the former qualitatively and the latter quantitively. These reports mainly use qualitative data to evaluate the health benefits of participating in the arts but tend to be inconclusive due to a lack of quantitative data which would appeal to health-based organisations. Thus, they often conclude that further research needs to be done.

Also significant for this thesis is the role of social factors highlighted by some of these reports because it was not possible to determine whether health benefits were a result of the arts activities themselves, or whether were they were a consequence of social bonding. Rather

than being a weakness of these reports however, I would argue that this reflects the participants' data which connected wellbeing to community building. However, in addition to the social aspects of participating in the arts, the value of the arts in this process (particularly drama) needs closer attention if a case is to be made for community theatre partnerships.

Chapter eight – Towards a theory of the benefits of participating in community theatre partnerships

This chapter is in two sections, the first looks at wellbeing through 'therapeutic spaces' and the second considers an aesthetics of participation. Beginning with the study participants' identification of wellbeing as a benefit that can derive from some of the challenges of making theatre and building a creative identity, this chapter is about practices that have therapeutic aspects (without providing a *specific* therapy) and that can also accommodate risk. This will depend on a clear understanding of the therapeutic in this context as distinct from therapy, particularly in terms of accommodating agency and knowledges.

Clark Baim's practices (2002 and 2020) will be important here, as he argues that taking part in drama is therapeutic because it is about sharing personal stories, although this depends on the facilitators' experience and confidence, particularly in the context of sharing difficult or unresolved lived experiences. It is important to stress that the discussion of the therapeutic in this chapter differs in emphasis from that of Baim in that its focus is more on participants' subjective experiences than on the intentions and knowledges of their facilitators.

I came to this conclusion because the therapeutic and positive aspects of participating in community theatre were strongly and (for me as a researcher) unexpectedly articulated in the participants' results. These results indicated that the different benefits of participating in a community theatre partnership are participant driven and arguably intrinsic.

Ideally, participants' experiences supported by facilitators' intentions will constitute a therapeutic space, but the workspace itself is also an important part of their encounter. Spaces will be discussed both metaphorically and physically. The importance of physical spaces was revealed as a significant non-human aspect in the case studies and will be discussed in terms of creative geographies (Polanyi, 1996; Ingold, 2013). Early literatures on dramatherapy will then be used to trace how concepts of 'safe spaces' (for example Duggan and Grainger, 1997, p. 212) and 'brave spaces' became contentious in drama practices. The role of the 'stretch zone' as a solution to the dichotomy over spaces will then be discussed through an interview with artistic director Beth Fiducia-Brookes (2022). This interview also brought out elements of the unknowable which I have applied to therapeutic spaces. The unknowable aspect means that therapeutic spaces cannot be defined by objectives decided in advance but should be unpacked by the participants themselves, a process at the heart of this research.

The second part of the chapter will discuss the possibilities of an aesthetics of participation. The opportunity to take part in drama was the catalyst for the community building and the creative challenges that the participants identified as being related to wellbeing. How the process looked, felt and sounded moreover were identified as significant throughout the interviews. I hope to argue that an aesthetics of participation can be formulated predicated on a resilient creative community which underpins the wellbeing context of the participants' experiences and on an equitable exchange of knowledges. Texts by Isobel Armstrong (2000) and Gareth White (2015) will be used to discuss affect as knowledge. Armstrong's psychoanalytic modelling provides a useful metaphor of how affect as knowledge transforms into creativity. White also pays attention to the experience of beauty in encountering art, which the participants also noted in their interviews. I hope to argue that the consideration of such an aesthetics will contribute to the conversation on arts and health because it is specifically about how drama works for its participants in terms of wellbeing.

Conclusion

The conclusion will focus on some of the study participants who reflected on their experiences sometime after the community partnerships had come to an end. Their evidences focus on whether taking part in a time limited community theatre partnership has led to any sustainable participation in drama that could build on the benefits they identified in their results.

The second part of the conclusion will reflect on the research findings. Community theatre partnerships as a method of enabling participation in drama will finally be assessed in terms of both the research questions and the participants' experiences.

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PART ONE: THE CASE STUDIES

Part one of the thesis will analyse the case studies with a view to answering these research questions: 1) *How can community theatre practitioners enable agency for their participants within a framework of stakeholders including funding bodies and partnership organisations?*

2) *What then are the benefits of taking part in a community theatre process, and how can these be evaluated?*

Part one begins with the research methods which are based on grounded theories, particularly situation mapping. The second chapter and third chapters are in-depth analyses of the case studies using two different stages of situation mapping. This will also function as a model for an evaluative framework that could be utilised by a community theatre organisation engaged in a partnership with other stakeholders. Furthermore, mapping will enable stakeholders' priorities to be tracked, illustrate the distribution of resources, and evaluate the efficacy of practices within a community theatre partnership. In this way, factors that go on to influence a community theatre project should be better understood with respect to their consequences. This will be followed by a discussion of ethical issues that came to light during the analyses of the case studies. Finally, the participants' co-constructed results will be presented as evidenced by their interview data. These results will form the basis of the theoretical discussion in part two of the thesis.

CHAPTER ONE – RESEARCH METHODS

Introduction

This chapter will set out the methodology and the practical methods used to analyse the case studies in part one of this thesis. First, the research features descriptive case studies as defined by Gerring (2019), in that they were not organised around 'a central overarching causal hypothesis or theory.' (2019, p. 56). Instead, theory was built over the course of the case studies based on data from the participants' interviews. Second, in response to the case studies, it was important to introduce methods that could best approach the research questions, including whether the benefits of taking part in drama could be identified and evaluated, and if community theatre partnerships were an effective way to enable an agentic participation within that framework of different stakeholders. As agency was a key question, a method that could enable the co-construction of data via an equitable knowledge exchange between participants and researcher was required. Additionally, as this thesis proposes a framework for community theatre groups who may be interested in evaluating both their own practices and their participants' experiences, such a research method would have to be both replicable and adaptable to different situations.

To begin with, a diagram of the methodology below uses concentric circles to show three layers. Situational analysis for mapping the case studies is at the centre, followed by constructivist methods for gathering the data and analysing the results. Finally, the philosophical framework of hermeneutic phenomenology will be used to address epistemological questions around the equitable treatment of the participants' knowledges. I will deal with each of these areas in turn starting from situational analysis at the centre, as this proved to be a clearer structure for explaining the decision making around methods.

The research methods for the thesis
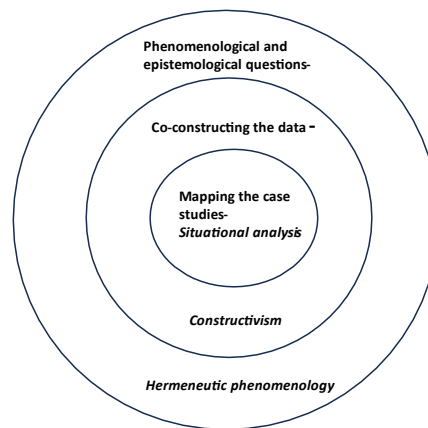
Situational analysis was eventually deemed a suitable method for addressing the case studies for a number of reasons including the scope for enabling analysis by visually mapping out situations. A detailed definition of situational analysis and its positioning within the development of constructivist grounded theories will follow. The background to these methods is important because it provides an explanation of how they work both in theory and practice, particularly with respect to the role of constructivism in gathering, analysing and validating study participants' data.

Situational analysis

In order to better understand what constitutes a 'situation' and how this relates to the process of mapping, John Dewey's definition is useful here: 'For we never experience nor form judgements about objects and events in isolation, but only in connection with a contextual whole…There is always a field in which observation of this or that object or event occurs.' (1938, p. 68). In the case of the community theatre partnerships at the centre of the case studies, different demographics of participants worked with facilitators who utilised a range of practices. The stakeholders included theatre companies, civic and community

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organisations, and their actions featured workshops, rehearsals and theatre performances that were influenced by non-human elements including different spatial localities and significant time pressures. Such a range of factors required a method that would be able to take account of them all, hence situational analysis. Mapping the different situations in the case studies also revealed shifting power relations between the different stakeholders involved in the partnerships.

Mapping is a threefold process in situational analysis, but for the purposes of this thesis, only the first two stages will be used to analyse both case studies. This is because stage three requires a thorough investigation of a broader context than that of the case studies featured in this thesis. To analyse this broader context, I would argue that further research would need to look at a much wider range of case studies of community theatre partnerships, including short- term projects. The following from Adele Clarke et al. (2019) describes all three stages which I have included to inform the reader of the full picture.

1. **Situational maps** specify all the major elements in the situation under study, broadly conceived. At the design stage, these maps help the researcher to determine what kinds of data to gather. Such maps enable you to *analytically* attend to what is in the situation as a whole, as well as to smaller facets. Later, in the research process, these maps are updated and used to examine the nature of relations among the different elements on the maps-called *relational* mapping.
2. **Social worlds/arena maps** are ecological cartographies of the major collective commitments, relations and slices of action in the situation. These maps lay out all of the major groups, organisations, and other collective actors, and portray their relative sizes and key relations.
3. **Positional maps** plot positions articulated, and not anticipated, in the major discourses in the situation (e.g., interviews, reports, websites, documents, media coverage etc.) about issues of contention. Positional maps detail core debates in the situation to reveal the full array of positions taken and not taken in the data. (2019, p. 104).

How these stages apply to the case studies

The case study that features The Marlowe theatre in partnership with the Umbrella Centre and the RSC will utilise situation mapping which is stage one of Clarke's et al. (2019) process of mapping quoted above. Maps of the different stages as they occur in the case study are known as situations and will show how relations between the different factors in the community theatre partnership (including the non-human elements) changed over time, and how these changes impacted on the participants' experiences, both positively and negatively. Finally, the '*gestalt*' of the theatre performance itself, or the aesthetics of the sum of its parts, was hugely significant in how the participants came to review their experiences.

Social arenas or social worlds mapping will help to unpack the second case study that featured Underground Lights Theatre, the Belgrade Theatre, Cardboard Citizens and the City of Culture Trust. This form of mapping will be particularly useful for providing insights into the sometimes very different perceptions and preoccupations of the stakeholders involved. Clarke at al. describe this stage of the mapping process by using Foucault's concept of the *dispositif* : a 'thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourse, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, administrative measures, scientific statements, propositions-…'. (cited in 2019, pp. 82-83). Whilst the rather more limited access I was afforded as a researcher was unable to provide such a detailed picture of this situation, I could however clarify aspects of the participants' social worlds that were set against expectations from Underground Lights' partner organisations and how some of these relations were 'enacted through concrete practices.' (ibid). Ideally, shifting the questioning from the pragmatist "*What* works?" to "*How* does it work?" should open 'possibilities for practical transformation – for social change.' (2019, p. 94). Chapter three will explore in detail how the organisations involved in this partnership were prepared to take risks to promote social change, but that there were profoundly different understandings of how risk was understood, enabled and managed within the different social worlds revealed by the case study. These

sometimes-problematic factors impacted on the *gestalt* of the performance including both the audiences' and participants' experiences.

A framework for evaluation

The case studies and their analytical methods will model the proposed framework for evaluating participation in a community theatre partnership by illustrating how practices, resource allocation, and power relationships were positioned throughout the process. This is particularly useful with respect to addressing 'why' questions. A spatial representation/illustration can show how different elements in an activity can become centred/decentred and why this may be happening. For example, amateur participants may start off as being at the centre of a situation map, but their positioning could be displaced by influential factors such as time, budgetary controls, or partnership organisations' own schedules, which became a factor in the Marlowe Theatre case study. An assessment of all these influencing factors in addition to participants' co-constructed data should provide a comprehensive evaluation of the process, or at least provide a clearer idea of why unexpected things may have happened during the process and suggest ways in which setbacks may be better anticipated. In addition to analysing what happened in the case studies, a method for analysing the participants' data was also required for the holistic process envisaged by the theatre companies involved in the research. Hence, a co-constructed process was chosen as this would enable the participants' knowledges to take centre stage.

Situational analysis and constructivist grounded theory

The gathering and co-construction of data is fundamental to this research and there are issues, particularly with respect to evaluation, that need to be addressed. Constructivism will be particularly useful in considering data gathering and analysis because constructivism places participants' subjectivities at the centre of the research process and can subsequently address

questions about decision-making and what counts as knowledge in an evaluative process. There is also a useful relationship between constructivism and situational analysis through the development of the constructivist turn of grounded theories.

Grounded theories

Clarke et al. described situational analysis as 'the extension of [*grounded theory*] GT.' (2019, p. 3), following what they describe as 'the interpretive turn'. In brief, this interpretive turn describes qualitative research that has opposed positivism and now encompasses postmodernist and poststructuralist theories on how knowledges are produced and understood. To this end, Clarke et al. focused on poststructuralism, utilising Foucault's critique of positivism and citing Richard Rorty on the need for research methods to take account of differences (1982, p. 204): '[Dewy and Foucault] agree, right down the line, about the need to abandon traditional notions of rationality, objectivity, method and truth'. These traditional notions 'routinely contain contradictory discourses (as do social worlds). It is through negotiating conflicting elements that an interim of stability is achieved – however temporary, elusive or conditional.' (2019, p. 80).

Articulating these differences that can potentially destabilise hegemonies of knowledge and power is key to Clarke's et al. earlier assertion that situational analysis has the capacity to enhance social justice: 'Making differences more visible and helping silences to speak (also often about difference) are two explicit goals of SA.' (2019, p. 32). This is significant with respect to the centring of participants within this research, particularly as the mapping processes in chapter two will show how external factors worked to eventually decentre them. The value of situational analysis in the context of an evaluative framework is that it can illustrate this process. Co-constructing the data was then the means by which the participants were brought back to the centre of the research process. Kathy Charmaz (2009, 2016) below

describes how constructivist grounded theory (which is a development of grounded theory) would work in the context of gathering and analysing data.

Constructivist grounded theory

Constructivist grounded theory is a development of the original grounded theory paradigm that was first published in 1967 by Glaser and Strauss. Grounded theory is so-called because its evidences, results, and theory-building are grounded in data. Therefore, it is an inductive process of comparative analysis that does not rely on 'a priori' assumptions, in other words, the investigation is based on experience and observation from the data itself rather than prior knowledges or theories (1967, p. 1). The authors were countering what they described as the then current trend in sociology for utilising research to verify existing or 'great man' theories (1967, p. 10). Moreover, they argued that qualitative research had tended to provide the groundwork for quantitative analysis by identifying relevant social trends that could then be measured and validated (1967, p. 16). Rather than argue for one form of analysis over another, Glaser and Strauss were looking at how qualitative analysis might be the most productive way to approach certain phenomena. Thus, grounded theory as a development of qualitative analysis would use data from a phenomenon to generate theory rather than serve existing theories by verifying them. As grounded theory is rooted in qualitative comparative analysis, this also enables theory building by a process of comparing the data from similar research studies. The authors argued that this process of generating theory would 'balance out' the then current focus on verification of existing theories (1967, p. 18).

Kathy Charmaz argued that without an attention to constructivism, researcher bias would remain a problem as the research would be subject to the power relations between the researcher and the represented participants: '…objective experts who assumed their training licensed them to define and represent research participants'. (2008, p. 400). She went on to

define how co-constructing meaning is key to gathering and analysing data: 'the researcher and the researched coconstruct the data – data are a product of the research process, not simply observed objects of it' (2008, p. 402). More specifically: 'Data are not separate from either the viewer or the viewed. Instead, they are mutually constructed through interaction.' (2009, p. 138). Finally, Charmaz identifies that 'Recogniz[ing the] co-construction of data shapes analysis' is one of the foundational assumptions of constructivist grounded theory (2009, p. 141).

Hence, Charmaz considers constructivist grounded theory to be a solution to implementing co-construction within a research process that has to take into account the relationship between researcher and participant. This became a significant issue with respect to co-constructing the data results in this research because on some issues, the participants' experiences conflicted with my own bias. Constructivist grounded theory provides a theoretical solution for this, but in practice it can be problematic for a researcher to unpack.

Constructivism: keeping participants at the centre

What counts as knowledge?

Ensuring that participants are central to an evaluative research process is fundamentally about knowledge, what counts as knowledge and how decision-making is subsequently utilised. To reiterate, the organisations who agreed to take part in the research had been interested in participating in an equitable knowledge exchange between different stakeholders, with a particular focus on participants' knowledges and how these should be valued within an evaluative process. This required a rebalanced knowledge exchange so that participants in a community theatre process could equitably exchange their knowledges within what can be seen as a hierarchy within partnerships, as some organisations are perceived as more powerful than others.

The question of what should count as knowledge is present in many examples from the literature on community theatre and applied theatre. Sheila Preston (2009i, p. 129) addressed the problematic status of participants' knowledges by unpacking hierarchies within avowedly dialogic applied theatre practices (as in making space for different voices or points of view), that could nevertheless privilege hegemonies at the expense of local knowledges. Helen Nicholson's concept of a 'relational ontology' aimed at rebalancing such an unconscious hierarchy by considering participants' own embodied and tacit knowledges in an attention to their lived realities within a participant-centred drama practice (Nicholson 2016, p. 252). Both Nicholson and Preston argued that facilitators should negotiate relationships with participants that would take into account local knowledges within the field of their lived experiences. These considerations are central to community theatre partnerships because there are inherent power relationships between different stakeholders within organisations and funding bodies that in turn, may create hierarchies of knowledge that impact on the ownership of a process and of any objectives that might be set as criteria to measure its outcomes. If these hierarchies need to be addressed, co-construction can present a solution to keeping participants at the centre of an evaluative process. However, participant-centred researches have been criticised with respect to the validity of their individualised, subjective evaluations.

Validation

Steiner Kvale's 'validation paradox' (1995, p. 323) is useful here. Data should be recognised as knowledge that has been created in a specific social world between researchers and participants. If, however, data from a specific context is not recognised as knowledge in the sense that qualitative accounts can be dismissed as overly subjective, this tends to result in more research being required to support the results at an increasingly greater remove. This will be evident in some of the conclusions to the arts and health research that I will look at in

part two of this thesis. Kvale instead supported a more constructionist process of validity in which the study participants would validate their own knowledges as data, which is consistent with a co-constructed approach. In this sense, validation would be written into the participants' decisions about what was valuable to them (which in the case of this research, refers to the benefits of participation), whilst also providing space for them to change their minds about their data. If participants validate their own evidences, then they also hold power within the evaluative process, which is a crucial point with respect to this research.

The validity of knowledges produced through research is also significant in Jeasik Cho and Allen Trent's notion of transactional and transformational validities (2006, p 320). The former refers to objectives, or 'truths' (p. 320), whereas the latter refers to social changes produced by the research process itself, which the authors describe as dependent on the relationship between the researcher and the researched (2006, p. 331). Stefan Koelsh (2013) described how Cho and Trent's validities are bridged by member validation (in the form of a 'member check' interview) because this would enable participants to give an account of any changes to their data produced in the course of the research. Similar to Kvale, Koelsh argued that the research can be validated by its effect on study participants and moreover, that it would be unreasonable not to expect a participant to change their mind in the course of the research (2013, p. 171). Thus, they become central to the process rather than serving its objectives which is another useful response to the 'validation paradox'. Rather than leave the member checking to the end of the research process, I aimed in this study to extend it into an iterative process where the study participants could reflect and make changes over time during the process of co-constructing data through interviews, thus holding power in that evaluative process.

Co-constructing data

I became aware of how co-construction works whilst working in education. It is a development of social constructivism, which was developed by Leo Vygotsky (1978). Vygotsky believed that learning was inseparable from its social context, because cognitive functions develop through social interactions. Thus, knowledge is co-constructed. Vygotsky explains this in a learning and development context as the class teacher facilitating peer interactions between children. The role of the teacher is then to assess when and how to move the learners towards independent problem-solving so that potential development becomes actual development: 'the level of actual development is the level of development that the learner has already reached and is the level at which the learner is capable of solving problems independently. The level of potential development…is the level of development that the potential learner is capable of reaching under the guidance of teachers or in collaboration with peers.' (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 85). A social constructivist pedagogy therefore became a core value for me as a teacher and a leader in education. Research and education however are very different processes, particularly where knowledge is concerned because in teaching, constructivism serves to facilitate the learning of pre-selected strands of knowledge within a curriculum. Co-constructing data on the other hand would not involve making these decisions in advance.

The construction site of knowledge

I found Kvale's 'construction site of knowledge' (1996, p. 42) to be a useful metaphor because it encompasses both the work and the social interactions that would be involved in a process of co-constructing data. A 'construction site of knowledge' is likely to be a messy, even a disruptive process. Tina Cook (2009) argued that mess is intrinsic to any research process because it operates in the liminal spaces between knowledge, its undoing and its reconstruction. (2009, p. 4), but risks being glossed over in an attention to what she described as 'the comfort of a single lens view' (2009, p. 6), which is similar to Clarke's et al.

explanation of why co-construction is a necessary solution to researcher bias cited above. Similarly, Cook uses the image of a kaleidoscope to describe how the 'messy turn' can switch between viewpoints to foreground the gaps, disjunctions and disintegrations between knowledges. She described this negotiation as 'co-labouring' (2009, pp. 7-8) within a messy space, similar to the messy processes of the construction site of knowledge.

Social constructivism and mess therefore emphasise the work aspect of knowledge-production. Work is undeniably part of any creative process, which can be problematic with respect to what should be expected from both participants and facilitators in terms of their affective labour. Participants are workers at the same time as being 'knowers', and if their knowledges are to be treated equitably, then so should expectations around what they might physically put into the field of knowledge-production. Thus, there are ethical issues with respect to affective labour and participation, which will be addressed in the forthcoming chapter on ethics.

Mess therefore is a useful concept with which to unpack complexities around knowledge-production in drama. Catherine McNamara et al. (2011) use mess as an opportunity to challenge theories and analyses of making theatre, because mess can take into account a process of 'decomposition' over evidence-based aims and objectives (2011, pp. 188-189). McNamara et al. were specifically talking about applied theatre here (applied theatre practices will be discussed in greater detail later in this thesis), but their notion of 'decomposition' is useful as a foil to the image of the 'construction site of knowledge' which I have been referring to in this section.

McNamara et al. suggested decomposition (or a demolition site of knowledge) as a deconstructive process that aims to restore centrality to theatre participants even at the expense of the facilitators' practices and research methods. The process is intentionally

disruptive, because McNamara et al. viewed mess as resetting power structures within applied theatre processes that had become associated with top-down objectives that would then go on to shape the evaluative process. Constructing and deconstructing, building and demolishing, can all be associated with producing knowledge or 'co-labouring' in a messy space, flattening and rebuilding the hierarchies of knowledge in making theatre. However, in the context of a time-limited community theatre partnership, questions remain about how hierarchies can be challenged and power redistributed in practice, as research methods in themselves are theoretical solutions that bring to bear broader epistemological questions. I will approach these by looking at a philosophical background that can accommodate both situational analyses and constructivism in this broader perspective.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

The interview process as a subjective encounter

Questions about what counts as knowledge, the subjectivities of participants, and the position of the researcher are central to the theme of an equitable knowledge exchange that needs to take into account the lived experiences of study participants. This prompted broader phenomenological and epistemological questions about knowledge, hierarchies, and what should count as knowledge in a research process that aimed to better understand the benefits of participating in community theatre (the introduction provides an explanation of these terms on pp. 42-44 above). I decided on hermeneutic phenomenology as an overarching methodology because it can take account of these phenomenological and epistemological questions in addition to the specific tasks of mapping and co-constructing data which will be addressed by situational analysis and constructivism.

I now want to focus on the interview processes and how these relate to these broader questions. Although I have looked at gathering and analysing data through co-construction,

the interviews themselves would be subjective and situated encounters that were planned as iterative dialogues within a longitudinal study that could offer opportunities for reflection, commentary, disagreements and for changing minds. The interviews therefore carried multiple expectations with respect to the research process. Their overall purpose was to gain an understanding of how the study participants benefited from taking part in the phenomenon of community theatre through this exchange of knowledges. The participants' responses would be necessarily contingent on how these subjects were positioned, or situated, with respect to their different social identities, experiences and knowledges. The research was therefore directed towards understanding how these subjects experienced community theatre and then drew conclusions about their experiences of the phenomenon. The importance of these subjective encounters indicated that phenomenology would be present in the philosophical underpinnings of this research.

Hermeneutic phenomenology and lived experiences

Susann Laverty (2003) provides a useful explanation of how hermeneutic phenomenology can operate flexibly and creatively within the structure of a research process. Significantly, she explains how hermeneutic phenomenology is a methodology as it 'is not a correct method to follow, but a creative approach to understanding, using whatever approaches are responsive to particular questions and subject matter.' Whilst accepting that I am at risk of being over-reliant on Laverty here, she nevertheless provides a clear description of how hermeneutic phenomenology focusses on the subjects' lived experiences of a phenomenon rather than on concentrating on the phenomenon itself and reducing it to an essential meaning. She explains this first by summarising Heidegger, in that individual knowledges are a product of consciousness, which is contingent on a subject's historicity or situatedness respecting their cultural context and experiences. The subject is consequently engaged in a continual process of constructing meaning through interpretation that is necessarily mediated

via language. These are iterative processes that are termed a hermeneutic circle because they eventually arrive at a deeper level of understanding. I hoped that the iterative interview process would similarly arrive at a deeper understanding of the participants' realities which I would be able to reconstruct through an interpretive research process. This should then lead to an authentic analysis of the experiences of taking part in community theatre that would take full account of the participants' status as 'knowers', whilst affording them power in the evaluative process.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the three areas that the research methods will address, namely the case studies, the co-construction of the data and the broader philosophical background to the research. The next chapter will begin with a situational analysis of the Marlowe Theatre case study that focuses on drama practices, and how these were resourced by the different organisations involved in the community theatre partnership.

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Introduction

The Marlowe Theatre case study will be analysed with situation mapping. This will model a framework for evaluation, the aim of which will be two-fold. First, to enable a theatre company's or arts organisation's 'in house' analysis of community theatre practices through mapping resource allocation and shifting power relationships; and second, to facilitate the gathering of participant-centred data, which in the case of this thesis will be used to drive an investigation into the benefits of taking part in community theatre. I would argue that it is particularly important for a community theatre organisation to evaluate their own practices in addition to feedback from participants, because these practices will likely have the greatest impact on how they experience a community theatre partnership.

The proposed framework for evaluation, I will argue, is sufficiently flexible to accommodate different community theatre practices and different partnership structures. For potential users, the framework should facilitate unpacking questions around '*what*' happened and '*how*' these things happened in their own case study situations, then support investigating reasons as to '*why?*' these things may have happened in the way that they did. Mapping, then questioning these changes should provide a critically informative background for the process of evaluation.

Introduction

Situation mapping (Clarke, 2019 and Clarke et al., 2019) was chosen as suitable for this case study because of the importance of the different spaces utilised by the partnership organisations, and how these spaces impacted on both drama practices and the participants' experiences. The three spaces were the Umbrella Centre, The Kit and the Marlowe Studio

Theatre. The discussion of each situation will be structured around the work of the partnership organisations involved, their influencing factors (i.e. the elements that have impacted on the situation (Clarke et al., 2019)), and the solutions that they resourced. These discussions will then be illustrated as situation maps, to show how influencing factors, resource allocation and drama practices were prioritised and how these priorities changed throughout the different spatial and temporal stages of the process.

These changes impacted both facilitators' practices and their participants' experiences, and were related to shifting power relations between the different organisations within the community theatre partnership. It should be noted that some of these influencing factors were identified by myself as a researcher through my observations of different responsibilities and practices. Other factors had been decided on in advance by the organisations involved, notably community building and mitigating barriers to participation, which will be discussed below then illustrated by means of a situation map.

<div align="center">

The first situation: the Umbrella Centre

</div>

Organisations operating in the situation.

The Marlowe Theatre Learning and Participation Team – influencing factors

At this early stage of the project, the team was led by Paul Ainsworth, the Associate Director of Learning and Participation, who was responsible for identifying the influencing factors that might impact on participation. However, he was soon to begin a new role with the RSC, so Jack Finch-Harding would take over the main administration and communication roles in his new post as Learning and Participation Manager. Facilitator *A* was responsible for the workshop content that would cement the process of community-building. Community-building was intended to empower the participants from the Umbrella Centre through fostering positive relationships and developing their improvisation skills, so that the group

could begin working with different theatre facilitators with a greater sense of equity, in addition to a strong commitment to the performance. Notably, the participants were central to the project at this point and drove the learning and participation team's decision-making processes around the positioning of influencing factors.

Mitigating barriers to participation

Mitigating barriers was named as a significant influencing factor from the outset. In an early meeting (2020), Ainsworth explained that the Marlowe team would be focusing on these. A core of potential participants had already been identified at this early stage, and despite a further enforced break due to the pandemic, the group remained interested when Ainsworth reintroduced the project in April 2021. These new timings would allow six months for writing and rehearsing the devised theatre performance that was scheduled to partner the RSC's touring production of *Comedy of Errors* at the end of October 2021.

With this time limit in mind, it was important to identify and find solutions for potential barriers at a deeper level. Some of these had been identified in consultations between prospective participants, Ainsworth, and supporting staff from the Umbrella Centre. In addition to any logistical and financial issues that the participants anticipated could impact on their commitment to the project, they were also invited to share concerns regarding their own mental and physical health needs. This indicated a strong level of trust between the participants and these two partner organisations, namely the Marlowe Theatre and the Umbrella Centre.

Potential solutions included organising transport to workshops and rehearsals, providing food and drink, enabling a supportive environment for developing new skills, and giving participants the flexibility to drop in and out of the process should they need to. Ainsworth was aware of the potential disruption that this might cause but argued that deciding not to

take part was a valid response that the company could potentially learn from. Additionally, these mitigations would need to be reviewed as the process moved from a workshop to a rehearsal format. There would be significant changes, not least that a freelance professional creative team would take over from facilitator *A* to build the theatre skills necessary for performing before an audience. Working with different facilitators therefore was an anticipated barrier to participation that would be mitigated by gradually introducing the new freelance creative team during the workshops at the Umbrella Centre. In addition, a process of community building would enable the participants to identify as a resilient community of drama practitioners, who would share their knowledges with a range of facilitators.

Community Building

The community building process was the second influencing factor for the Marlowe Learning and Participation team. In addition to developing beneficial community bonds between the participants, this would also become a creative community, fostering the beginnings of the participants' creative identities whilst developing confidence, resilience and a commitment to the production. The participants' data moreover would reveal how important an influencing factor this would become and will be discussed in detail in the forthcoming results chapter.

The community building process was based on the development of drama skills through a series of weekly workshops for regular attendees at the Umbrella Centre, in order to build a strong sense of identification with the community theatre process. The workshops were timed to follow a popular lunchtime meet-up on Wednesday afternoons, so that the drama group would not have to make an additional journey to the centre. It was anticipated that working in a familiar space combined with the supportive presence of well-known members of staff at the centre would promote their ownership of and commitment to the project. The workshops

were led by facilitator *A* and designed for those with little or no experience of drama, based on games and short improvisations to build confidence and skill levels.

The Marlowe Learning and Participation team had planned the early stages of the process around these two influencing factors of community building and mitigating barriers to participation. The participants were very much at the centre of the situation at this point.

The Umbrella Centre Staff and Resources – influencing factors

The Umbrella Centre provided a significant level of support to the influencing factors of community building and mitigating barriers to participation in the early stages of the project, not least by providing spaces for the community building workshops. The day-to-day activities at the centre (including wellbeing workshops and a Social Health café) moreover served to embed the community theatre project into the everyday experiences of the potential participants because staff members and volunteers alike were interested in it and talked about it. Anna Debrauwer, then the centre manager, promoted participation by encouraging members who had shown an interest in drama to stay for the workshops after meeting in the Social Health café. Furthermore, Debrauwer also supported Ainsworth in his meetings with participants to discuss any potential barriers to taking part that they may have identified. As some of these barriers included mental and physical health issues, she provided a familiar and trusted presence.

Below is a section from the Umbrella Centre situation map (situation map 1:1) that illustrates these factors and shows the supporting role played by the theatre company and the staff at the centre. For potential users of this method, I would advise drawing these maps in sections initially, as they can become quite complex, as will be seen when the map is shown in full (situation map 1:3). Breaking them down into sections by looking at organisations individually or in pairs makes the mapping clearer and potentially more useful. Here, the map

has been broken down into figures 1:1 and 1:2 and will be shown in full in 1:3 below. With

respect to the format of the maps, the influencing factors are shown in boxes, which are

further broken down into concept maps, the teams responsible for resourcing them are in bold

type, and the blue arrows indicate which organisations had responsibility for those factors. I

hope to show how mapping these stages of a community theatre partnership can better alert

organisations to shifting power relationships between different organisations, which in turn

will facilitate a more effective process of evaluation.

Situation map 1: 1– The Umbrella Centre

Influencing factors resourced by the Marlowe Theatre Learning and Participation team and supported by staff at the Umbrella Centre.

Introducing the Freelance Professional Creative team

Marlowe Theatre Learning and Participating Team

Transport

Community bonds

Physical and mental health

Building confidence

Mitigating barriers to participation

Support for learning new skills

Participants

Community building

Working with new facilitators

Developing skills

Costs such as food and drink

Building a creative identity

Agency to drop in/out

Time commitments

Communications

The Umbrella Centre Staff & Resources

Situation map 1:1

The RSC Learning and Participation team – influencing factors

Building the company

These influencing factors come from priorities outlined by the RSC Learning and

Participation team and discussed in a conversation with Ian Wainwright, the RSC's

participation producer, following a workshop on 28.7.21 (I will discuss this workshop in

greater detail later in this chapter). I then selected three main factors from these priorities,

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namely building the company, identifying as '*Shakespeare Nation*' and mitigating time pressures. These will be discussed in turn. In addition to delivering workshops on using Shakespearean language at the Umbrella Centre, the RSC Learning and Participation team had also organised events at the Marlowe Studio to increase participation from the wider community in Canterbury. These were two-hourly workshops named 'taster sessions' to introduce new participants to the process who may have a different drama skill set or greater experience of performing. In addition, should the agency to drop in and out of the process result in the loss of participants, then the RSC's additional recruitment process could protect the production. Arguably, the issue of future time pressures also motivated the need to build the *company*, which was an important shift from the Marlowe and Umbrella Centre's focus on building the *community*.

Although participants were still central to this stage of the process, the emphasis on building the theatre company is an example of how the powerful presence of the RSC could flip the project's priorities from focusing on mitigating barriers to participation, to mitigating the needs of the forthcoming production. In this case, the additional 'taster session' workshops could both increase the number of participants to address drop-out rates and also bring in amateur actors with more theatre experience than the Umbrella Centre's core group. The production therefore would be protected by building the company.

Identifying as *Shakespeare Nation*

That said, the core group remained central to this stage of the process and the RSC team had organised workshops on movement and verse speaking skills using key texts from *Comedy of Errors* and other Shakespeare plays, alongside *A*'s community building and improvisation work. In addition to the company building contingencies described above, it was important to ensure a level of equity among all company members with respect to their performance skills.

The workshop facilitators from both companies utilised contrasting practices which will be discussed in greater detail in a later section, but building performance skills by focusing on Shakespearean texts was a means for the company to identify as *Shakespeare Nation*. In this sense, the nascent creative identities of the core group could be pivoted towards being performers of Shakespeare, which was the ethos behind this national project.

Mitigating time pressures

The timings were inflexible because this community theatre production was embedded in the performance schedules of both the Marlowe and the RSC. As making theatre in this context became a linear process, there were points in the process at which content had to be generated, and rehearsals had to reach an agreed standard of performance. The company therefore needed a sufficient number of participants, with a baseline of performance skills that they could build on within that time frame. Again, this illustrates how mitigations began to pivot towards the needs of the production. The situation map below shows the influencing factors for the RSC Learning and Participation team, namely building the company, mitigating time pressures, and identifying as part of *Shakespeare Nation*.

Situation map 1:2 – RSC workshops at the Umbrella Centre and the Marlowe Studio

Influencing factors resourced by the RSC Learning and Participation team

Promoting the community theatre project

Enhancing performance skills

Participants

Building the company

'Taster sessions' for the wider community

Using facilitators from the RSC (both locations)

Working with Text (both locations)

Building confidence with unfamiliar language

Mitigating time pressures

Ensuring the company is large enough/robust enough to accommodate any drop out and keep to schedule.

Identifying as Shakespeare Nation

Movement

Teamwork/ensemble work

Situation map 1:2

The Umbrella Centre situation map in full

The map as a whole provides an overview of influencing factors and resourcing during this first stage of the community theatre partnership. I have shown the RSC Learning and Participation's factors in italics here as the map is quite crowded in its entirety, but I hope nevertheless that it will show how these influencing factors were prioritised and resourced during this situation, and the relationships between them.

SITUATION MAP 1:3 – how resources were distributed to address the main influencing factors

Community bonds

Introducing the Freelance Professional Creative Team

Developing skills

Marlowe Theatre Learning and Participating Team

Transport

Support for learning new skills

Community building

Building confidence

Building a creative identity

Physical and mental health

Mitigating barriers to participation

Working with new facilitators

Participants

Ensuring the company is large enough/robust enough to accommodate any drop out and keep to schedule.

Costs such as food and drink

Teamwork/ensemble work

Time commitments

Agency to drop in/out

The Umbrella Centre Staff & Resources

Mitigating time pressures

Communications

Using facilitators from the RSC

Enhancing performance skills

RSC Learning and Participating Team

Promoting the community theatre project

Building the company

Working with Text

'Taster sessions' for the wider community

Building confidence with unfamiliar language

Identifying as Shakespeare Nation

Movement

Figure 1:3

Looking at these priorities in full, there is a large number of factors which indicates both the level of planning that had gone into this partnership and the challenge for the organisations involved to keep track of them all. Notably, the participants were central to this stage of the process, and the influencing factors that supported them in taking part were well-resourced by both the Marlowe Learning and Participation team and the Umbrella Centre staff. Responsibility for the Shakespeare content was resourced by the RSC team which had a

different focus on building the company and introducing a specific skill set around performing Shakespearean language.

Although the organisations involved in the partnership may have had different priorities, this situation map illustrates a complex, but well-planned balancing of both priorities and resources with the aim of establishing a company of amateur actors with an equitable knowledge of performance skills. The discussion will now turn to practices, which will be unpacked by looking at some individual workshops that took place during this first situation.

Different practices for different priorities

I will discuss five workshops that took place during this stage of the process. They demonstrate a range of practices using improvisation, text and vernacular language, delivered by both the RSC and Marlowe practitioners for their own groups of participants. The different practices show how improvisation workshops for the core group at the Umbrella Centre would begin to focus more on text and language. The RSC's workshops or 'taster sessions' on the other hand usually began with Shakesperean texts and were most probably aimed at potential participants who may have had more acting experience. The exception is a stand-alone workshop with Kent Refugee Action Network (KRAN) where the RSC facilitator focussed on vernacular language and improvisation.

The process became messy (which was probably to be expected), but the interviews will reveal that some participants felt it became anxiety-inducing at times. It would have been beneficial for them to have had a means of discussing questions such as why Shakespeare was significant other than the fact that most people have at least heard of him, and what was the relationship of their own devised content to *Shakespeare Nation*. Two strands from Clark Baim's work (2020) on the uses of lived experiences and personal stories will be key to

suggesting how the workshop practices might have achieved a clearer structure for the participants and later, better accommodated decision-making with respect to risk.

The first is the Drama Spiral which provides a model of how to safely and ethically manage distance when working with the lived experiences of participants who may be vulnerable (2020, p. 118). A series of six 'rings' progresses the work from drama games, through 'one step removed' accounts that may relate to participants' lived experiences, to fictionalised versions of their stories. The next three 'rings' deal with personal stories beginning with positive accounts, then difficult stories that have been resolved, to the centre of the spiral that deals with unresolved experiences that may be potentially traumatic. Baim is clear that although appropriate training is required for facilitators working in that sixth 'ring', the spiral can be adapted as a flexible resource. Its structure allows the facilitator to make decisions about where to locate their practices based on their skill levels, how well they know their participants and importantly, where the participants themselves want to take the work (2020, p. 115). For this case study, elements of the Drama Spiral could have provided a focus for both participants and facilitators that was not always present in the workshops.

The second strand from Baim's work is integration, which manages distance by using stories in drama from different cultures, the past, and unfamiliar contexts. Integration works because the distancing functions as poetry, metaphor and myth; powerfully integrating devices that can bring participants and indeed audiences together because they can respond with their individual recollections and feelings to that same stimulus (2020, p. 210). The use of texts and themes from the poetry of *Comedy of Errors* would fit into this context and potentially have provided a framework for that whole ethos of *Shakespeare Nation*.

Improvisation on everyday lived experiences

The first workshop I am going to talk about took place at the Umbrella Centre (21.7.21). It was also the first I attended as a researcher, having been invited by Jack Finch-Harding from the Marlowe Learning and Participation team to introduce this research and invite participants to take part in the process of evaluation. I thought that I could best do this through using improvisation and retrieval skills as they would be familiar to the participants. Improvisation was used by facilitator *A* to enable participants to retrieve everyday lived experiences in preparation for the devised theatre element of the production. The participants' inputs were referred to as devised theatre rather than co-creation. Arguably this was in response to decisions that had been made in advance, such as the Shakespeare content that would inform the structure of the play. This meant that although the participants' agencies were limited in some respect, their lived experiences would remain at the centre of the devised content. These lived experiences would then be transformed into theatre through utilising performance skills and by referencing themes and texts from *Comedy of Errors*.

I introduced the concept of evaluation by asking 'what's valuable?' through a series of gestures that I hoped would embody a metaphor for evaluation. These gestures represented finding something, then holding it to the heart, followed by an opening of the hand. This was to represent the use of retrieval and externalisation skills that the participants would have used in their improvisation work. The finding and holding gesture symbolised the retrieval of valued thoughts, feelings or memories of objects, which I invited the group to share with me. The sharing, or externalisation was represented by the opening of the hand. I had hoped that embedding this notion of 'what's valuable?' through gestures would be the starting point for the interviews, so that the study participants could reflect on what had been valuable to them in the course of taking part in the project. Such a metaphor could work at Baim's first level of integration, that of 'mind and body': '…releasing metaphors aimed at connecting the imagination to embodied processes.' (2020, p. 204). Ideally, this gesture would begin the

process of finding 'what's valuable' and enhance the deeply personal responses that Ainsworth and Finch-Harding hoped would underpin a holistic evaluative process. My input ended by thanking the participants and distributing participation information sheets and consent forms.

I then joined an improvisation exercise on communicating an emotional register which was led by facilitator *A*. The work was initially structured by agreeing on a time of day as a starting point (in this case early morning). The participants were invited to choose a moment from their everyday lived experiences (such as opening curtains or hitting a snooze button) that they could build into a short scene. They worked in pairs and took turns to direct each other, focussing on enhancing emotional registers through voice and gesture. In this way, these brief everyday experiences could be transformed into drama by applying performance skills. I expected that this introductory process would go on to enable the participants to begin utilising more complex experiences through the use of emotional registers when devising content for the performance.

These early workshop practices could be located at the second 'ring' of Baim's Drama Spiral, that deals with fictional or 'one step removed' activities. The performances invited by *A* were generic rather than personalised, but could potentially have reflected situations that may have been significant to the participants (2020, pp. 20-21. As mentioned above, referencing Baim's model during the workshops may have thrown a better light on the process for both facilitators and participants, providing a pathway for approaching more personal stories of lived experiences and importantly, clarifying a discourse for moving on or stepping back.

That said, these improvised practices helped to place the participants at the centre of the process, as shown in the situation maps illustrated above. Drama practices were also used to promote the agency that should accompany this centrality by *A* explaining and demonstrating

some of their choices. For example, the participants were reminded that they had agency to choose whether to present their work to the whole group at the end of the session. I reflected that I had not done this in my 'what's valuable?' section, as I had assumed that people would automatically decide whether to share their work following my invitation. *A* explained that people who had lacked agency in aspects of their lives sometimes preferred to be reminded that they had the right to choose whether to take part in a workshop or to share their work. This would also protect them from feeling that they had to 'go along with things' even if they did not feel ready.

Three participants had shown a strong interest in being interviewed for the research, but I had hoped to recruit a total of five or six for the study sample. As recruiting participants was as much in the Marlowe's interests with respect to evaluating participation, *A* reassured me that more people would come forward over the next week or so and that they would be supported in reading through the participant information sheets. I was left with the impression of a group who were working to build a skill set for improvisation that would serve as a foundation for devising theatre because these practices modelled how to begin to retrieve lived experiences and turn them into drama.

These practices were focused on participants who had limited or no experience with drama, but as shown in the situation map above, the process was also aiming to achieve a balance with text-based practices, including verse speaking. These were the responsibility of the RSC learning and participation team but were taking place in a parallel series of workshops. The intention was to build two halves of a company that would be brought together in the second situation to share the different skills they had been practicing. At present, there was arguably a balance between the organisations' power and practices at this first stage of the process.

Text and language-based practices

Text-based practices supported the influencing factors prioritised and resourced by the RSC Learning and Participation team. As shown above, these were 'building the company', 'identifying as *Shakespeare Nation*' and 'mitigating time pressures' which were to be achieved through finding more participants and honing performance skills. With respect to the devised theatre format of the production, these text-based skills would shape a framing device for the participants' lived experiences which at that time were to be based on key texts from *Comedy of Errors*.

The RSC facilitators worked at two locations, namely the Umbrella Centre and the Marlowe studio, with a view to finally bringing together both the core group and any new participants recruited from the 'taster sessions' at the beginning of the rehearsal process. In this way, the RSC facilitators hoped to achieve an equitable balance of skills between the two groups before they began working together as a company. I will discuss some significant workshops delivered by the RSC to look more closely at how these practices were evolving, and importantly to assess the effectiveness of an equitable process.

A text-based workshop with the core participants.

This workshop that took place at the Umbrella Centre (28.7.21) was pivotal for two reasons. Firstly, for the core participants, it introduced a change in drama practice from improvisation to working with text, a significant element of two of the RSC's influencing factors: building the company and identifying as *Shakespeare Nation*. Secondly, new facilitators from the Freelance Professional Creative team were introduced, namely Atri Banerjee and Charlotte Espin (respectively the freelance director and designer). Introducing the freelance practitioners was part of the community building factor, but it also represented a future shift in drama practices, as the freelance practitioners would later take over the planning of the workshops from facilitator *A*, to focus on theatre performance skills. The naming of the team

as 'professional' was therefore significant but they attended this workshop as participants to get to know the core group and arguably to assess their current skill levels.

As mentioned, key themes and speeches from *Comedy of Errors* were intended to scaffold the devised theatre element of the community theatre production (though the structure became less clear as the process advanced). It was envisaged that the poetry of these texts would indirectly retrieve memories of lived experiences through empathy that the participants could then translate into art first through their improvisation skills and later through their performance skills. What was missing was a framework for the retrieval skills and empathy building that would feed into these developing performance skills. As noted, Baim's notion of integration cited above (2020, p. 210) would have been useful in providing a structure for positioning the Shakespeare content, that at this stage was envisaged both as a catalyst and a framing device for the participants' lived experiences. With respect to the Drama Spiral, the use of Shakespearean texts in workshop practices could be located further 'in' at the third 'ring', where for some participants, the themes of loss and reconciliation (which they identified during the workshop) may have come to represent fictionalised versions of some of their own lived experiences (Baim, 2020, pp. 20-21). Again, Baim's theories would have provided a useful platform for discussion, so that both facilitators and participants could have shared more about the process.

Chris White (Associate Practitioner and Director for RSC Education) had planned the workshop around Egeon's speeches in Act 1 Scene 1 (64-102), though other pressures meant that it was delivered by Ainsworth. With respect to practices, the participants would perform parts of the text in groups and then share their work with each other. The speech was first read aloud around the whole group to contextualise it and explain some of its challenging languages. It was then divided up into sections and assigned to different groups to perform, supported by Ainsworth and *A*. This practice was clearly less agentic than the improvisation

workshops because decisions had already been made about how to perform the text and there was an expectation rather than an invitation that the work would be shared.

As well as setting out the complicated pre-history of the plot of *Comedy of Errors*, this text focused on the play's potential for tragedy through the mandatory death penalty inflicted on travellers from Syracuse that Egeon had risked in searching for his missing family. These tragic elements therefore formed the participants' introduction to the play, probably because as mentioned, they facilitated empathy as an acting skill as well as functioning as a catalyst for retrieval skills. I would also argue that the speech modelled the transformation of lived experience into art as the character of Egeon was retelling his story through drama, which is what the devised theatre element of the production aimed to achieve. However, this was not unpacked or discussed with the participants at this stage because as mentioned there was no framework to do so. This may have been a lost opportunity, particularly as the concept of transforming experience into art caused some issues later in the process. For the moment, I observed that the participants were mainly enthusiastic about the poetry and the unfamiliar words, despite their challenges, appreciating how they conveyed a sense of loss and a need for reconciliation in addition to the powerlessness of being subject to such draconian laws. Three actor-participants, *Ca*, *W* and *P* (the study participants will be henceforth identified as either actor or facilitator-participants) offered brief feedback on the opportunity to use Shakespearean language.

W: Yeah, for sure the words, they're just great. Some of them are…well… difficult! I need a couple of goes but I'm up for it. Bring it on!

Ca: I'm dyslexic, so reading it all can be a bit difficult to say the least, but I just need a bit of time to work it out. Paul (Ainsworth) and *A* are great, really. They always help you when you need it.

P: I enjoyed it on the whole, yes, it was definitely a lot to read and perform, but its poetry, isn't it?

In addition to their interviews, some of the participants were happy to provide feedback which I could record or note down when possible. These conversations were useful because they were more spontaneous than the interviews and in this case, provided evidence that these participants had been inspired and challenged by the text workshop which could act as a springboard for devising theatre, its themes potentially inspiring the retrieval of lived experiences that could be developed through improvisation. I thought I could envisage how the process would develop at this stage, because the objectives of the decision-making seemed clear with respect to developing a level of performance skills although as noted, they were not shared in any detail with the participants. In addition, the expectations and input of the freelance professional creatives, including their own vision for the production, would also need to be taken into consideration as the workshops progressed into rehearsals. The careful balancing of this significant number of priorities became increasingly challenging, especially when unexpected developments had to be taken into consideration. The workshop described below will illustrate some of these challenges.

A vernacular language workshop with Kent Refugee Action Network (KRAN)

This was a stand-alone 'taster session' run by Chris White (RSC Education) in person. Focussing on vernacular languages, it utilised improvisation to explore the practice of transforming lived experience into art. KRAN's involvement in the project had not been talked about in my conversations with the Marlowe Learning and Participation team, perhaps because working with KRAN had been included in the RSC's responsibility for building the company. However, considering the potential impact of KRAN's involvement, particularly with respect to their sharing of lived experiences, it was surprising that just one workshop had

been planned at this stage. The reason for this was later explained by *A* (in conversation with myself on 29.9.21). KRAN had been invited to take part at the outset of the production but had scaled back their involvement due to severely increased pressures on their resources caused by the escalating crisis in Afghanistan. There was also frustration from KRAN at what they perceived to be a tendency for arts organisations to invite them into creative projects for 'box ticking'.

However, at the time of recruiting the Freelance Professional Creative team, KRAN members were expected to play a significant part in devising the project. Atri Banerjee had taken on the director's role with the theme of 'being in the wrong place at the wrong time', expecting to work closely with KRAN. The show already had a title: *Error Error Error*. Thus, there were different expectations with respect to the demographics of the participants when that team joined the process.

As a solution, a 'taster session' was organised for people who had benefitted from KRAN's support and who may have been interested in taking part in the project. It was attended by freelancers Banerjee and Espin, *A* and Finch-Harding from the Marlowe, and Wainwright from the RSC. Former members of the Marlowe People's Company were also invited to support the workshop participants in their anticipated role as 'champions of art', although the session proved very accessible in practice. As mentioned, White had planned a vernacular language-based workshop. The practice centred on retrieving and relocating vernacular expressions from home, then observing difference and disconnect by translating them into English or imagining them being spoken in an unfamiliar context. These expressions were then shared and used in short improvisations about crossing different kinds of borders. As well as exploring Banerjee's notion of 'being in the wrong place at the wrong time', there was a thematic link with White's earlier workshop on Egeon's speech at the Umbrella Centre. Thus, the potential of using the poetry of vernacular speech as well as Shakespearean

language could also have been shared with other participants to enrich their devised theatre, particularly for the less experienced members who were learning about transforming lived experiences into art. Links could also have been made with Baim's devices for regulating distance through fiction and metaphor in stories from the past, as noted above.

However, because this was a 'stand-alone' session, these opportunities ended with the workshop. These participants were unable to commit to the process, mainly because of work commitments that were often accompanied by the stresses of precarity and zero hours contracts. The planned early evening rehearsal schedule was unable to accommodate irregular working patterns, despite the Marlowe's commitment to mitigating barriers to taking part and enabling people to drop in and out of the process. The participants from KRAN therefore did not continue with the process which disrupted Banerjee's planning based on the theme of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. This early disruption continued to reverberate into the second situation, which will be discussed in due course.

A 'taster session' on speaking verse

The following is one of the RSC's taster sessions that were directed towards the wider community in Canterbury. This was part of the RSC's responsibility for building the company by recruiting participants with a range of theatre skills that they could bring to the process. This workshop (13.7.24) was led by Emma Manton and Ian Wainwright and used texts from a variety of plays including *Macbeth*, *Richard III* and *Romeo and Juliet*. The session explored the physicality of speaking blank verse, by breaking down a speech and enhancing meaning through the spaces indicated by punctuation. It was aimed at participants who may have had more experience of drama and was also attended by the Marlowe's 'champions of art' who were now being offered opportunities to take part rather than adopting a purely supporting role. Again, there was a marked enthusiasm for the poetry which

could potentially bring together these different groups because as yet, they were still working separately. Unless the commitment to an equitable sharing of skills was successful, I felt that questions could begin to arise about the statuses of these two groups when the company finally began to work together.

I did not attend all the RSC's 'taster sessions', but Wainwright later conceded that they did not have regular returners from previous workshops apart from the Marlowe's 'champions'. There was no certainty as yet regarding the eventual number of participants, nor whether the strategy of hosting these sessions had effectively worked in building the company. The 'champions' however were called on to increase the numbers rather than support the other participants, and they were enthusiastic about this contingency. One of this group (actor-participant *M*), asked to join the research process. As just three participants from the original core group had signed up for the research at this stage, I was happy to include one of the 'champions'.

A workshop on verse and physicality

This was one of the last workshops that took place at this stage of the process (4.8.21). It was led by Chris White and based on Act 1 Scene 2 (41-105) of *Comedy of Errors.* It featured an argument between two characters based on mistaken identities and utilised a different form of drama practice that focused more on physicality. However, it did not prove to be a good fit for all members of the core group. White explained that they were going to perform the speeches in pairs in the style of commedia dell'arte. They would use exaggerated voices and movements to demonstrate how the exchanges between the two characters became increasingly frustrated and violent. Two warm-up activities featured the participants moving around the space by exaggerating their walking and exclaiming in loud distorted voices. This was problematic for me, because several participants had mobility, cognitive, and hearing

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impairments which meant they were unable to access all the activities in the warm-up, but this was not mitigated for them. Performing the text was also problematic because the noise level was so much greater than they were accustomed to, resulting in some people feeling uncomfortable about taking part, as expressed in the quotations below. White nevertheless persevered with the workshop in that format, which suggested that it had been a tried and trusted element of his educational outreach work. However, I would argue that failing to differentiate the content suggested a disconnect with the Marlowe's influencing factor of mitigating barriers in this case.

The following are some reactions from the actor-participants who had agreed to take part in the research.

Ca: That was a bit of a double whammy for me! I mean I'm dyslexic and there's too much really for me to read and take in, and all that noise, stamping and shouting was, well my hearing aids… you know, it was really difficult! So me and *P* tried to do it a bit quieter.

P: I would have liked to have done that bit at the end here, when Antipholus is talking about 'soul-killing witches', the words were more interesting and I like that sort of acting better!

W: No, I had a laugh, I really enjoyed it.

Ca: Well, you would, wouldn't you! (laughter).

I asked White about his choices for the workshop. He explained he had been told that several people in the group had mild learning difficulties and that some had had IEPs (individual learning plans) in school, consequently he had thought it was pitched correctly. As a former teacher, I recognised that this workshop would have been ideal for students at Key Stage 3 (aged 12 to 14), but I did not agree that it was suitable for adults with such a range of different impairments, as not all could access the commedia input. Options for different performance styles would have better enabled the whole group to take part.

That said, some participants enjoyed the workshop. I would argue that its problematic elements were due to expectations about this group of participants, probably because although White had previously planned a workshop for them, this was the first time he had actually worked with them in person and may not have had a clear idea of what they had achieved so far. They had previously used improvisation to work on emotional registers, but the practice in this case was about accelerating the register for an arguably crude comic effect, thus not really stretching them. Also, their positive feedback on using Shakesperean language was not followed up. Possibly, White's expectations of mild learning difficulties within the group had dissuaded him from challenging them in their performance skills (although paradoxically the scripts were long and required a lot of reading), but this risk aversion had resulted in a reliance on a physical register that several participants were unable to access (there will be a more detailed discussion on risk to follow, including unintentionally negative consequences of risk aversion). Two participants with mobility and cognitive issues moreover decided to leave the process following this workshop which could have been a factor in their decisions-making. However, I am unable to prove this. In summary, expectations regarding the core group and what they could potentially achieve was a factor in the problematic elements of this workshop and would continue to impact throughout the process.

The Second Situation: The Kit

Organisations operating in the situation

The Marlowe Theatre learning and participation team, now represented by Company Manager *A* – Influencing factors

Mitigating barriers to participation

Mitigating barriers to participation continued to influence the second situation at The Kit, but there were significant differences with respect to resource allocation. There had been an assumption that the company would be established and ready to begin their devised theatre work by the time of the move, which influenced the decision-making over factors that had played an important role in the first situation, such as community building. The change of location also meant that the Umbrella Centre staff were no longer available to support the participants. In addition to their more direct interventions in their early meetings with Ainsworth described above, they had continued to support participants in the process by talking, by encouraging, and by *knowing* them.

The main impact of this was a significant increase in responsibility for *A* who was given a new role as Company Manager and was now the main designated resource for addressing these mitigations to participation (Ainsworth and Finch-Harding had less involvement with the production at this stage due to Ainsworth preparing to leave The Marlowe, and the demands on Finch-Harding of other learning and participation projects). *A* was no longer responsible for planning the workshops which should have made more time available for their new role, but in addition to organising communications, transport and sustenance, *A* became increasingly responsible for mitigating mental health issues that would come more sharply into focus during the rehearsal process. For the participants, there were fewer familiar and trusted individuals from the Umbrella Centre visible to them in the process, which arguably compounded the unfamiliarity of the new location. In this case, mapping these significant changes in resource allocation for the Marlowe Learning and Participation team may have served as a prior warning with respect to some of the issues that would come to light in the course of this situation.

The Marlowe Theatre Production Team – Influencing factors

Mitigating risks to the performance

The Marlowe Theatre had a strong presence in this situation despite members of the Learning and Participation team stepping aside. Firstly, The Kit was their space and secondly, two members of the production team, Ailish Erskine (assistant producer) and Sophie Allen (production assistant) joined the process. Their role was to support the participants' transition towards working with the technical side of making theatre, though they would also support the company in devising content. The shift in focus towards making theatre underpinned the production teams' influencing factor of mitigating risks to the production with the result that devising content moved to the centre of the situation mapping, despite the intention at the outset of the project that the participants would be central to the process throughout. However, the expectation that the company would have been established by now (and by implication that the participants would need less support with their initial barriers to taking part) combined with the growing influence of time pressures on the process led to devising content being prioritised.

Below is the situation map 2:1, illustrating the influencing factors for Company Manager *A* and the Marlowe Production Team, with devised theatre content now central to the process. A key change to the Situation 1 mapping is that (as mentioned) Company Manager *A* now had sole responsibility for resourcing the complex influencing factor of mitigating barriers to participation. This highlights the usefulness of mapping resource allocation in that *A*'s significantly increased workload may have been better anticipated and additional support put in place, or at least some of the responsibilities could have been shared with other team members.

Situation map 2:1 The Kit

Influencing factors resourced by Company Manager *A*, and the Marlowe Theatre Production Team

Support with devising content

Company Manager *A*

Costs such as food and drink

Transport

Devised Theatre Content

Introducing working with a production team

Supporting the transition to making theatre

Mitigating barriers to participation

Mitigating risks to the performance

Physical and mental health

Support with devising content

Communications

Agency to drop in/out

Marlowe Theatre Production Team

Working with new facilitators

Situation map 2:1

The Freelance Professional and Creative Team – Influencing factors

Mitigating risks to the performance

The RSC Learning and Participation team had moved on from Canterbury to work with another *Shakespeare Nation* project during this stage, but they would return to support performance week in the Marlowe Studio. The Freelance Professional and Creative team now had full responsibility for the acting and directing side of the forthcoming production. They were joined by Danae Paraskevopoulos as assistant director and Ioli Filippakopoulou as movement director. Their influencing factors included mitigating risks to the performance because they had to ensure that it would be of an aesthetic standard suitable for audience and stakeholder expectations, requiring an effective sharing of theatre performance skills and managing of time pressures. A significant addition to this influencing factor is that ethical decision making would come into play with respect to content. This presents a significant

increase in responsibility from the first situation that is reflected in resourcing, as two additional freelancers had joined Banerjee and Espin in the process.

The Company – Influencing Factors

Devising content from lived experience

Being actors

The participants have been renamed 'the company' because it was expected that both groups formed during the first situation would come together and utilise all their learned performance skills to devise the *Shakespeare Nation* production. The company's influencing factors for this second situation were as follows: devising content for the performance, and taking on the increased responsibilities of being actors, including managing mental and physical health issues to meet their commitments to the process, recalling and building on improvisations, learning parts and attending and participating in rehearsals. Devising content would also have attendant ethical issues such as confidentiality, the risk of revisiting trauma through retrieving memories and placing a high level of trust in facilitators and other company members. However, having agency to drop in and out of the process remained a mitigation for these increased pressures.

SITUATION MAP 2.2

Influencing factors resourced by the Freelance Professional Creative Team and the Company

Managing mental and physical health

Practicing theatre skills

Attendance

Freelance Professional Creative Team

Managing time pressures

Casting

Mitigating risks to the performance

Devised Theatre Content

Being actors

Agency to drop in/out

Sharing theatre skills

Ethical decision making on content

Audience and stakeholder expectations

Aesthetics

The Company

Memory

Devising content from lived experiences

Ethics

Retrieval skills

Potential trauma

Situation map 2:2

The Kit situation map in full

The below map (2:3) is crowded with factors (the company's are italicised for clarity), but there are less organisations involved to resource them than in the first situation, as the Umbrella Centre, the RSC and the Marlowe Learning and Participation team no longer feature. This emphasises the amount of responsibility left to *A* in their new role as company manager because they were the sole interface between the company members, the other organisations in the process, and their own increased levels of responsibility.

I should also note that ethics are not included as a separate influencing factor because when ethics had been talked about, it was entirely in the context of sharing lived experiences to devise content. For the company, this would mean seeing The Kit as a space where memories could be shared in confidence, including memories that may have been produced by past traumatic experiences. The Freelance Professional and Creative team was then expected take responsibility for decision-making around the content, though any consequences for the

participants in sharing challenging or traumatic issues would be *A*s responsibility. In the

previous discussion on workshops from the first situation, it was noted that there was no clear

framework in place for working with lived experiences, especially how to modulate distance

or move away from material that may recall trauma for participants. Hence, the importance of

Baim's Drama Spiral (2020) as a model for working in these complex areas. Consequently,

ethical issues came to be central to the process, so much so that they required a separate

chapter in this thesis. I would argue that this is another instance of the value of mapping

because the visual representation below warns that ethics had not at this point been treated as

a major influencing factor. Moreover, it can be seen that there were less organisations left in

the process to resource all its influencing factors.

SITUATION MAP 2:3 – how resources were distributed to address the main influencing factors

Marlowe Theatre Production Team

Company Manager *A*

Costs such as food and drink

Physical and mental health

Working with new facilitators

Transport

Agency to drop in/out

Communications

Support with devising content

Supporting the transition to making theatre

Introducing working with a production team

Mitigating barriers to participation

Devised Theatre Content

Mitigating risks to the performance

Support with devising content

Practicing theatre skills

Attendance

Casting

Sharing theatre skills

Aesthetics

Devising content from lived experiences

Potential trauma

Manging mental and physical health

Ethical decision making on content

Managing time pressures

Audience and stakeholder expectations

Retrieval skills

Being actors

Memory   Ethics

Agency to drop in/out

The Company

Freelance Professional Creative Team

Situation map 2:3

Practices for devising content and sharing theatre skills

Responsibilities and power

The process seemed well positioned at the beginning of the second situation as there were a company of actors in place and a planned structure for the play in which devised content would be framed by language from *Comedy of Errors.* Although as discussed, there had been indications of a lack of clarity around the process that would lead to problems in the future, hence my proposal of Baim (2020) as a solution. Additionally, the challenge for the directorial team (who had not yet led any of the sessions) would be to work equitably in bringing the company together, particularly regarding expectations around their different levels of acting experience. In other words, they would need to ensure that they did not begin to rely more on the company members that they perceived as having greater acting experience.

Evaluating practices requires a continual process of reflection, which can be particularly challenging to keep on track when working with different partner organisations, and power relationships moreover can be subject to change. Mapping in this context can at the very least provide an opportunity for opening a discussion around these shifting relationships. Here, decision-making on both practices and content became the responsibility of the Freelance Professional and Creative team although they did not yet know the participants well, because they had not worked with them. With most of the Marlowe Learning and Facilitating team stepping away from the process, there was a missed opportunity for them to have supported *A* in making clear what they had already achieved with the company at the Umbrella Centre, therefore enabling a better understanding for the new facilitators of where the participants were situated with respect to skills and experience. Consequently, they may have been able to review their expectations and push the process on more quickly. Instead, there was a something of a cut-off point respecting roles and responsibilities following the move to The Kit.

Some of the learning from the first situation was subsequently lost during the second, which increased time pressures that in turn, impacted on how successfully risks to the performance were mitigated. Practices changed to become more focused on theatre skills, but arguably, because the work done in the first situation was not joined up to the second, it was as if the process had begun again, and this increased the time pressures on the production.

A mid-point workshop

This workshop took place on 25.8.21, almost three weeks into the second situation. It shows a continuing reliance on certain practices that the participants enjoyed but were not always being used to move the process forwards, although they had the potential to do so.

'Passing through' was a movement/ensemble game in which a group of participants would move individually to music to begin with, imagining borders around themselves. They would then improvise a dance by spontaneously forming pairs or groups, splitting off and reforming. The roots of this game were the themes of border crossings and potentially of being in the wrong place at the wrong time that had informed Banerjee's earlier ideas about the project, when KRAN had been expected to be involved. However, in terms of developing movement and ensemble skills, this practice could have potentially been utilised for the performance, such as changing scenes or introducing shifts in register, especially as the company seemed to particularly enjoy the somatic work. At least no-one opted out of taking part. Arguably then, although the directorial team had a bank of potential resources, these were not specifically being tailored towards content. This is an example of the complex problem of utilising iterative practices within the linear process of making theatre. Increasing time pressures meant that it was not enough just to enjoy 'doing drama', because content had to be devised for a performance.

Moreover, the lived experience element had not been talked about in any depth, meaning that practices for turning experiences into art had not been addressed since *A*'s workshops that had ended several weeks before. I have emphasised how Baim's Drama Spiral and concept of integration could have been employed as a solution to bring the participants into the structure of the process which may have led them to feel some ownership. At least, a more detailed discussion would have been useful at this point to clarify the directors' intentions and plot a rough timeline order to counter the sense of stopping and starting that was now characterising the process. In addition, a significant tension was developing between the director's expectations that the theatre company would be firmly established by now, and the agency afforded to the participants to drop in and out. I would argue that this led to a perception that the process would not be able to begin in earnest whilst different people were attending each week. This was compounded by two company members (who were also study participants) taking extended time out from the process due to health reasons.

A prior conversation about the contingencies and flexibility necessitated by the factor of dropping in or out would also have been useful. Then, the Freelance Professional and Creative team could have been more prepared for the likelihood that the company would keep changing. However, because of the power afforded to that team regarding decision making, *A* later explained they had not felt that it was their place to begin such a conversation, even though they were becoming concerned about the pace of the project (*A* 25.11.21).

Turning lived experiences into art

A workshop on 8.9.21 was the first that specifically modelled a way for the company to turn lived experiences into art and at the same time cut down on unnecessary dialogue and scene-setting. Banerjee used as an example a memory recalled by Erskine, an assistant producer from the Marlowe who had been joining these sessions to support the company. Erskine's

memory was about taking the wrong cardigan home from primary school which she hid under the bed and worried about, until it was eventually found and returned to school. This was an interesting example because firstly it was about how these seemingly innocuous mistakes can cause anxiety in childhood. Secondly, the protagonist was an inanimate object. I then volunteered to use some less-demanding physical theatre techniques to represent the object strewn under the bed which began to take on a life of its own. For the company, particularly those who had less experience of theatre, the practice illustrated how an object can become the centre of a scene, that a couple of sentences can establish a context and dispense with unnecessary dialogue, and importantly, that other members of the company could present another's lived experience as theatre if need be. It also inspired another scene from a newer company member who noted that they were always missing buses. The company then created the bus, a driver and its passengers. *W* was playing the bus driver and worked hard to create different emotions and facial expressions.

W: I'm going to ask Atri [Banerjee] for feedback on how I did playing the driver. I think you got to make the most of every part you get the chance with. 'Cos I want to do this, you know, it's my dream. So I'm going to keep pushing… I want one of the lead roles in this!

Ca: Are you sure there's going to be enough room on the stage for everyone else plus your ego? (laughter)

W: At least my ego's famous! (*Ca*, *W*, 8.9.21)

Around this time, I gained a fifth participant, *Ch*, who had been an experienced amateur actor before giving up due to a negative experience. *Ch* further noted the following with respect to utilising lived experiences, perhaps as a catharsis: 'I'd like to say first of all that I hope doing this will help. I don't know if it will, but I hope it will. We all have so much baggage as

people, we drag it around with us, taking up space…it affects us. We have so, so much baggage.' (*Ch* 15.9.21).

Decision making on lived experiences

Thinking about the story of 'The Cardigan' again, the effect was comic overall, but Erskine commented that she although she could laugh at it now, she would never forget that sense of fear and anxiety. It could therefore be described as a story of resolved difficulties at the fifth 'ring' of Baim's model (2020, pp. 20-21). Importantly, this could also have presented an opportunity to discuss the kinds of lived experiences that might be appropriate for the performance, but this did not happen. Baim is clear that facilitators should only work at the sixth 'ring' of unresolved difficulties with appropriate training (2020, p. 116) which neither Banerjee nor *A* had undergone, but the model could have enabled them to manage the session that I will talk about below. In effect, the participants did not have a vocabulary to describe the resolved and unresolved statuses of their lived experiences, and the directors were unable to guide the session away from trauma.

This workshop took place on 22.9.21 and was the first and only session where participants were invited to bring a memory of their lived experiences to share with the group. It was organised as a circle discussion and participants were invited to choose whether they wanted to share their memories. I expected the session to begin with a discussion about mitigations for sharing potentially traumatic content, such as considering trigger warnings, taking a break, changing their minds about sharing, or choosing to leave the room. However, it did not, perhaps because trauma had not been anticipated. I also think that this amounted to a lack of preparation, possibly because the freelancers were all working on other projects, as were the Marlowe employees.

These individual stories will not be recounted here as told by the company members because some of them were traumatic. Interestingly, there were some common themes in many of the accounts that seemed surprisingly close to those brought out in the early discussions on *Comedy of Errors* such as loss, including loss of family; unwarranted blame; and partial reconciliations. What is significant at this point however is that decision making on content was subsequently informed by expectations of who was thought to be ready to turn their experiences into art and that this was the only time that the participants were invited to share their personal stories. Therefore, if a participant had shared a painful or traumatic story that the directors felt was not suitable to be turned into art, they were not invited to contribute a different lived experience.

In brief, a tragic, but resolved recollection was chosen to be used as content because of the perception that there was sufficient distance between these events and the individual's current situation, hence it was suitable to be turned into art. The other chosen narratives were comic experiences. This possibly mirrored the structure of *Comedy of Errors* itself which begins with tragedy before its tone shifts towards the absurd. The theme of *Error Error Error* (the performance title had remained the same throughout the process) became 'to err is to be human'.

In summary, decision making on the devised theatre content was predicated on considerations of who was thought ready to turn their lived experiences into art, and on the director's vision of the performance as a reflection of *Comedy of Errors*. It was also arguably driven by Banerjee's own expectations about what the company members would be able to comfortably achieve through utilising their theatre skills. The lack of a vocabulary for the participants to talk about resolved and unresolved difficulties and trauma, plus a lack of guidance from the directors on the tone of the content they were looking for meant that some participants missed out on their one opportunity to share their personal stories as potential content. Finally, these

expectations about who was ready to turn their lived experiences into art were also predicated on that very important influencing factor of mitigating risks to the performance.

The third situation: the Marlowe Studio and Performance week

Organisations operating in the situation

The Company – influencing factors

Being Actors

The influencing factors in this third and final situation were geared towards the central aim of making theatre, but this also meant the inclusion of the audience and their expectations. The composition of the audiences was to some extent determined by the communications shared by both the Marlowe and the RSC about the performance, and it was strongly expected that they would be supportive. Nevertheless, the presence of an audience was completely new for those company members who had little or no previous experience of theatre.

Costume fittings and lengthy technical and dress rehearsals also added to the pressures on the company, requiring demanding time commitments and stamina. At the beginning of performance week moreover, two company members returned to the process after being absent for personal reasons. Even at this late stage there was an expectation that they would be accommodated as no time limits had been set on the agency to drop in and out of the process. Throughout the process, honouring this had presented a risk to the performance but it was also proof of a strong sense of trust in that company members were reassured that they would be welcomed back, because the production team were expected to have put in place the necessary contingencies.

The Freelance Professional and Creative team – influencing factors

The script

Writing a script was a consequence of the time pressures that had built up during the second situation. The script was written at pace but was not finalised until the start of performance week, which was understandably a concern to the Marlowe production team because they were waiting on last-minute decisions to be made on costume fittings, building the set, and sound and lighting. Some of these late decisions were also a consequence of the Marlowe studio's availability being limited because of the theatre's performance schedule. However, Banerjee and assistant director Paraskevopoulos never pressurised the company over time factors, which on the one hand, suggests a duty of care not to cause additional stress to the actors, but on the other hand, perhaps protecting them was also underestimating their resilience to confront these pressures.

Contingencies – risk management

The writing of the script also required late-stage contingencies to be put in place such as understudying, so that any further absences could be covered by other company members. Although it was not the case that the original core group from the Umbrella Centre had taken comparatively more time out than others (there were numerous reasons for absences including mental and physical health issues and longstanding prior commitments), understudying would become the responsibility of the more experienced company members. This was because they had more confidence with learning lines quickly, which mitigated risks to the performance. Although this may have been done to protect some of the actors, it was nonetheless evidence of a different level of expectation for them and how they would respond to making theatre in the final stages of the process.

Company Manager *A*- influencing factor

Mitigating barriers to participation

This influencing factor had been *A*'s responsibility throughout the process and remained a factor even at this late stage. *A* had to communicate with absent company members to reassure them and ultimately persuade them to return to the process arguably because the performance needed actors, rather than because they might miss out on the benefits of participating in the performance. Therefore, it could be argued that this is evidence of the needs of the performance beginning to outweigh those of the participants.

The Marlowe Theatre Production team – influencing factor

The script

This organisation was now fully involved in translating the script onto the stage with a team of stage managers, sound, lighting and technical support. As resources, they facilitated Banerjee's decision-making, but some of the more senior members were openly critical at times, particularly with respect to the script having been finalised at such a late stage. Company members had also begun to share these anxieties amongst themselves which were subsequently revealed in the interviews, but I did not hear of any concerns until after the event.

The audience – influencing factor

Aesthetic expectations

Perceptions about the audiences' expectations drove the aesthetic considerations of the production. This was a factor because the audience would also include the RSC Learning and Participation team who were to be present at the dress rehearsals and at least one of the performances. There were standards that both the Marlowe production team and the professional and creative team were aware of and working towards. Although these considerations were not shared with the company, I perceived that they had a strong sense of where they fitted into the process of making theatre, which was to follow directions from

more experienced professionals and create something to engage an audience, who they anticipated would be generally supportive (although one participant had expressed anxieties about being judged by family members who might be in the audience).

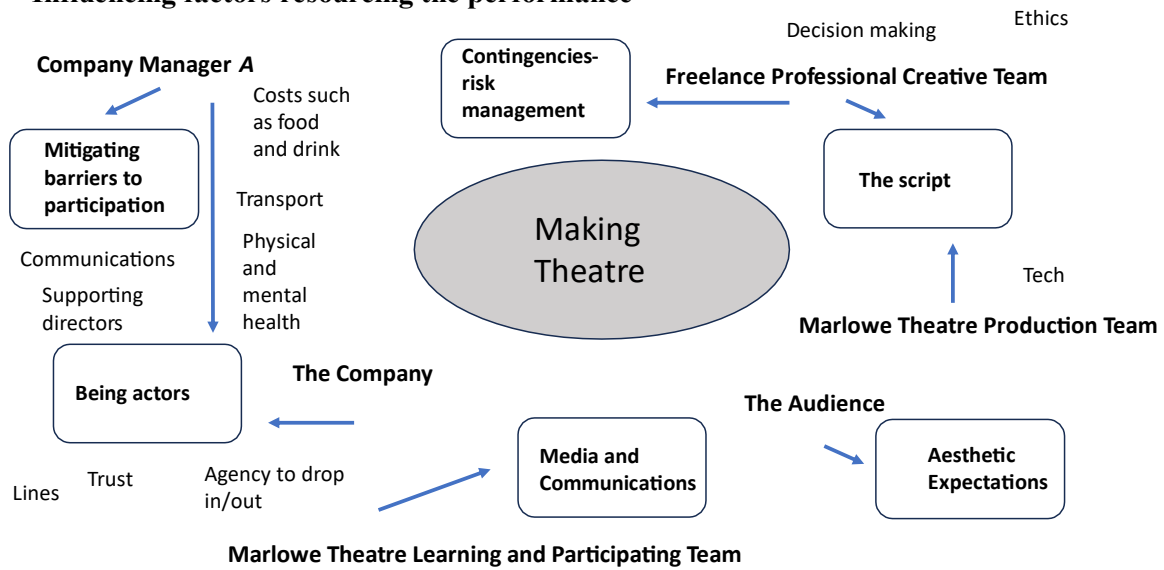**The Marlow Learning and Participation team - influencing factor**

Media and communications

Although they were not involved in making theatre at this stage, Jack Finch-Harding and Paul Ainsworth returned to sit in on the later stages of the rehearsals to create photographs, soundbites and videos for their social media and communications platforms. Having disbanded the People's Company, this presented an opportunity for the Marlowe to reframe its participation brief. Their materials would then feed into the RSC's national communications on *Shakespeare Nation*.

The Marlowe Studio situation map

I have included just one map for the third situation. The time span of the situation was much shorter (from 13 - 31.10.21) and it is relatively easy to read. Making theatre was well-resourced, but we can also see the consequences of time pressures with the late inclusion of the script as an influencing factor. Also, mitigating barriers to participation has remained in place as the responsibility of one individual.

Situation map 3 – Rehearsals and Performance Week at the Marlowe Studio
Influencing factors resourcing the performance

Decision making   Ethics

Company Manager *A*

Contingencies-risk management

Freelance Professional Creative Team

Mitigating barriers to participation

Costs such as food and drink

Transport

The script

Physical and mental health

Making Theatre

Communications

Supporting directors

Tech

Marlowe Theatre Production Team

Being actors

The Company

The Audience

Media and Communications

Aesthetic Expectations

Lines   Trust   Agency to drop in/out

Marlowe Theatre Learning and Participating Team

Situation map 3

In summary, situation mapping provides a visual representation of what is expected to happen with respect to resource allocation and time factors. Subsequent maps then provide a useful comparison with what might be happening in actuality, which could indicate whether a rethink, or a better conversation between the partner organisations may be required. For this case study, a flexible and more interchangeable structure for the performance would have been helpful from the earlier stages, but this would have depended on the Marlowe Learning and Participation team sharing more of the decision-making power that they had passed over to the freelance professional and creative team, in addition to a clearer structure and vocabulary for the lived experiences elements. To this end, I suggested Baim's Drama Spiral model and integration concept as a solution to support the partnership's drama practices. In addition, talking more about the consequences of dropping in and out of the process would have taken some of the pressures off the director and also *A*, who had been expected to resolve the company members' issues alone.

Both the freelance creatives and the Marlowe team members moreover felt accountable to the RSC because of the power relations between them. As it was unlikely that there would have been any intention from the RSC to increase pressure on the other organisations, better communication between them all would have benefitted both the employees and the participants of this community theatre partnership. At least, the managing of risks to participants, employees, and the scheduled performance could have been more productively discussed if facilitated by a visual resource like a situation map.

I want to reiterate that these visual mappings of resource allocation can give community theatre organisations an opportunity to review situations and redistribute resources if necessary. As this becomes more challenging as a process nears its end, mapping could provide an advance warning that plans may need to be looked at and readjusted. This could also provide the starting point for a discussion between the multiple organisations that may be involved in a community theatre partnership and encourage community arts organisations to speak out despite how they might perceive their weighting in the situation's power balance.

Conclusions

Expectations about the company

The third situation had a difficult beginning. A participant who was to have had an important role in the performance was asked to leave the process. The ethical implications of this decision-making will be discussed in the fourth chapter, but the first issue that had to be dealt with in terms of the performance was how to bridge that gap. This situation was then compounded by *Ch*, an experienced amateur actor, having to leave the process for personal reasons although it was hoped that they would return in time for the last rehearsals. This, in addition to the time pressures from the second situation where the process had slowed down, was the background to the performance being scripted late on. The company's lived

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experiences were directed as dramatic monologues and framed by Banerjee's own written reflections on the life of Shakespeare, rather than the earlier idea of using speeches from *Comedy of Errors*. The more experienced actors accessed the script first, because they had to learn the most lines.

Due to expectations driving the decision-making, some members of the original core group had less to do in the first few rehearsals because they were waiting for Banerjee to write their parts. Whilst accepting that there is probably bias in my perceptions regarding the study participants, I was concerned on behalf of *Ca* and *W* because I felt that they had been underused due to expectations about how their cognitive impairments might impact on how they would be able to deal with a script. Banerjee's solution was to write them a comic two-hander because they worked well together. I felt rightly or wrongly that they were being 'fitted into' the performance. I spoke to *A* about this during an interview (25.11.21) but they reiterated that both *Ca* and *W* had not been ready to turn their experiences into art.

The stories they had shared at The Kit were undoubtedly traumatic, but there was scope to think beyond that one very challenging session. This is why I proposed a flexible usage of Baim's model to support the decision making around the use of lived experience elements in the devised theatre input. The participants could then have been invited to talk about resolved positive stories (Baim, 2020, pp 20-21). *W* for example managed a football team who played in a local league and could perhaps have shared some football stories that would have resonated with the audience.

Ca on the other hand had turned their lived experience into art in a different way. They wore dragon printed t shirts and jewellery and their mobile phone ring tone was Katy Perry's 'Hear Me Roar!'. *Ca*'s story had been about the long-term traumatic consequences of not being listened to, but their choice of dragon imagery was evidence that they were using metaphors

to express how they were dealing with that past trauma. This could have been explored through drama without referring to the original traumatic story and therefore I would argue that there were further missed opportunities here.

In simple terms, the audience got to know the more experienced actors in the company better than some of the others. To be fair to Banerjee and the other professionals, they were motivated by a will to protect the company members that they saw as being more vulnerable (though mitigating risks to the performance probably played a part). However, this also had the effect of underestimating what they could achieve as actors, particularly as they had been in the process right from the very beginning and consequently had practiced a range of skills.

As a researcher, this case study was an immersive experience as I was present throughout the process from the first stages at the Umbrella Centre to the performance. The performance was considered a success. The acting and technical elements, including the lighting and sound, worked to produce a strongly aesthetic experience which the participants talked about in their reflective interviews. However, the process had been challenging. As a researcher, I found it problematic (as I discussed above) that some participants were given less to do than others. A longer process of improvisation and rehearsal would have benefitted them, but due to time pressures and the late-stage decision-making both on content and on the scripting of the play, this was not possible. Finally, the agency to drop in and out became a much more consequential factor than had been envisaged during that first situation.

Sustainability

Sustainability will be discussed as an ethical issue in a forthcoming chapter, particularly with respect to how sustainable are time-limited community theatre partnerships. The RSC Learning and Participation team had considered the sustainability aspect and were able to offer the *Shakespeare Nation* participants from their regional partners the opportunity to work

with them on *Rebellion*. This was the first of the Henry VI1 adaptations staged at the Royal

Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford on Avon between 1.4.22 and 28.5.22. Four of the actor-

participants went on to take part in *The Kent Rebellion*, so the RSC had evidently resourced a

unique opportunity to continue working as *Shakespeare Nation*. However, the cast had to be

available to spend time in Stratford for rehearsals and performances, so there were limitations

as to who would be able to take part. I will talk more about *The Kent Rebellion* in the

conclusion of this thesis that will look at how sustainable in practice were the benefits of

participating in this community theatre partnership.

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CHAPTER THREE: THE UNDERGROUND LIGHTS CASE STUDY: CO-CREATION AND RISK

Introduction

This case study is in two parts. The first part will focus on Underground Lights' co-created practices in the context of a performance entitled *Digital Divide. Digital Divide* was filmed for *Home Grown Film Night* during the Coventry City of Culture celebrations. The second part of the case study is a partnership between Underground Lights, the Coventry City of Culture trust and Cardboard Citizens Theatre Company. It consisted of a forum theatre performance and a musical that addressed themes of homelessness and precarious housing: *Cardboard Camps in Coventry* and *The Ruff Tuff Cream Puff Estate Agency.*

This case study was significantly different from the first not only because it looks at two performance projects, but also in terms of the access afforded to me as a researcher. I was invited to join Underground Lights in some of their workshops for *Digital Divide* which revealed how co-created theatre practices can embed drama into the communities and lived experiences of its participants. Access to the partnership with Cardboard Citizens on the other hand was limited and will therefore be discussed in terms of the debate around practices that reverberated after the event. The debate revealed points of interest to this research, which will be analysed by means of social worlds mapping, the second stage in the process of situational mapping (Clarke et al., 2019). *Digital Divide* will be discussed first in order to unpack social worlds in the context of community theatre and how co-creative practices can access community building to impact on the social worlds and consequently, the creative identities and wellbeing of its participants. These factors will be revealed in interviews with some of the members of Underground Lights that took place early on in this case study. The interviews will be featured first followed by a discussion on co-creation.

Part one of the case study – *Digital Divide*

The process that led to the interviews

As discussed in the introduction above, this process was lengthy and messy due to the pandemic, with its lockdowns and social distancing regulations. Following my first meeting with Emma Ormerod in October 2020 (then the artistic director and CEO of Underground Lights), it was not until March 2021 that I finally met a group of prospective study participants online. Facilitators Beth Fiducia-Brookes (who is now artistic director and CEO of the company) and Jessie Dutton also attended the meeting as gatekeepers. Ormerod had envisaged that several interviews with participants should take place throughout the three-week production process of *Cardboard Camps*, beginning with a baseline interview before the start and ending with a reflective process of co-constructed data following the performances, as a more in-depth process of evaluating participation in the City of Culture programme.

Following that online meeting, I was invited to attend an Underground Lights workshop later in the week (28.3.21) where I would be given time to talk more about the research and distribute the consent forms and participant information to any company members who were interested in taking part. The facilitators would support the reading and checking of the participant information sheets and then return any completed consent forms to me. Fiducia-Brookes and Dutton, in acting as gatekeepers, were practicing their company's duty of care to its participants.

It was challenging to explain the longitudinal interview process. Some of the prospective participants quickly ruled themselves out and explained that they would not be able to commit the time required for the interviews. I had aimed to describe the baseline interviews

as an opportunity for participants to tell their stories about what drama meant to them in their everyday lives whilst the subsequent interviews would evaluate whether this may have changed due to their involvement in the City of Culture festival. However, this did not spark the interest that I had hoped for. On reflection, I had not considered that these participants may already have had opportunities to tell their stories, particularly through the co-creative practices that I will discuss later. However, Ormerod suggested that taking part in the research would be an opportunity for the company to speak up for Underground Lights and that their testimonies might be shared with some of their funding organisations. Four participants then asked for the forms and information sheets, though I was concerned about the bias that this focus on promoting Underground Lights might bring to the evaluative process. Three completed consent forms were eventually returned.

In the end, the envisaged longitudinal interview process did not take place because one actor-participant successfully auditioned for *Cardboard Camps* and decided that being interviewed whilst devising and rehearsing the play would be an unwelcome additional pressure. The second was given the role of residency manager by Cardboard Citizens, which would involve communicating with the different organisations involved in the production and again, a significant additional workload, though they suggested they could share their blog if it would be useful. The third actor-participant was involved in media and communications for *Digital Divide* and asked if they could write more about their story at their own pace. However, these independent writings did not happen despite the study participants' intentions, possibly due to time constraints and/or additional commitments that may have been required.

Covid restrictions also played a part as the third national lockdown had not long ended. Cardboard Citizens were reluctant to include additional people into their rehearsal space, so I did not gain the required permission to attend. At this point I had to be opportunistic, so I

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asked if I would be able to attend any sessions for *Digital Divide*. Ormerod agreed, numbers and Covid infection rates permitting.

What had started out as prospective baseline interviews now had a new function in the research, as they would provide evidence of the role of drama in the social worlds of the participants. These social worlds were an extended notion of community involving everyday lives as well as the social bonds that can develop within a drama group. As the interviews did not go beyond these first conversations, they are situated at this point in the research rather than in the later results chapter because of their focus on social worlds.

As a researcher, I had at first been concerned that these participants might construct potential 'hero narratives' of being positively 'changed' by drama that could be utilised as a strategy to appeal to outside agencies, as in the uses of evaluation critiqued by Selina Busby (2021, pp. 7-8). However, such a reading would be deeply unfair to the study participants as it would have reduced their shared lived experiences of drama to a process of second-guessing their readers. As a researcher I was confronted by their subjective testimonies of their lived truths. Therefore, these interviews are treated as evidence of how sustainable, co-created practices can effectively embed drama into the social worlds of its participants.

The actor-participants' interviews: Social worlds, drama and community-building

These semi-structured interviews were very much on the actor-participants' own terms. I had hoped to conduct them face to face, but the three actor-participants (*N*, *H* and *R*) who eventually returned the consent forms opted for telephone interviews. *H* explained that they were now very busy in their new role with Cardboard Citizens, therefore a telephone call would be the best that they could offer. *N* explained that as they would be nervous in a one-to-one situation, a telephone interview would provide some distance, enabling them to think

more clearly. *R* had to limit travel for financial reasons and felt that a telephone call would be the best option.

These constraints also led to the interviews being semi-structured. I began with a general question about what drama meant to them in the context of their everyday lives. All three responded by strongly articulating the positive effects afforded by participation and the role that opportunities to engage in creative practices played in their sense of self.

Responses to the first question: 'How has taking part in drama helped you in your everyday life?'

N found the prospect of the interview stressful initially and had asked for frequent breaks to decompress and to take time to rehearse what to say. Their responses however recorded significant improvements in wellbeing due to taking part in drama.

N: 'I felt I was excluded from everything. I had no social contacts. I'm agoraphobic, and… autism, yeah…my partner is autistic too. I have a lot of mental health problems so… a positive impact.'

The social contact facilitated by drama was also a strong factor in N's improved sense of wellbeing, as that strong sense of community impacted in other areas of their social world.

'If I wasn't doing drama then I'd be stuck at home. Just stuck at home.'

'After a year with Underground Lights I'm confident enough to do more, like I can even go to the allotment on my own. It's being out in the open I suppose but I just do weeding basically! But I've really made progress in that year…yes definitely.'

'I'm learning too…learning more. I'm enjoying learning again...it's great…I'm doing great! I'm creative,… I can be creative in what I do.'

Here, *N* is clear that opportunities to practice drama and develop their creative identity have impacted on their attitude to learning, so from a place of fear where *N* felt 'excluded from everything' they are beginning to push through some of the constraints caused by their mental health and therefore meet challenges.

'That's about all… all I can say right now! I hope I've let you know a bit about what Underground Lights means, what a difference it's made.'

I then asked if there was anything that *N* wanted to know about the interview data before we concluded the conversation.

'While I've been talking about Underground Lights to you for the thesis, who exactly will see my data, I know you said you'd give me the copies, the transcripts, but who else will be able to read it?'

I explained that the thesis would be available via the university but that all input from participants would be anonymous, as stated in the participant information sheet. I asked *N* if they wanted to go through the information sheet again.

'No…yeah, thanks. I just wanted to check. I hope my data is going to help Underground Lights in some way!' (*N* 11.5.21).

Later, *N* contacted me to talk more about the impact of drama on their mental health and wellbeing because they had needed more time to think about what to say in that first interview. Again, these are strong statements about the life changing impact of participating in drama for this actor-participant.

N: It's definitely helped me with my agoraphobia, because obviously getting out…It's helped me with my depression, and I feel it's a lot of fun when we do the work. It's so different to everyday life, or rather its different to my old life. It's one of the best things in my life,

Underground Lights. I found out about it through MIND, I wanted to give it a go straight away, but I was so nervous making that first phone call. But I wanted to do it so much.'

'It meant going out and I hadn't been out for months. So it made such a difference. I'm still going up the allotment and we're planting stuff out now, vegetables as well. I think I'd be very poorly if it wasn't for Underground Lights. I'd given up on life. I've got the will to live now.' (*N* 29.6.21)

N had wanted to ensure that I understood as far as possible the genuinely life-changing effects on wellbeing and access to community that participating in drama had enabled. However, for *N* these benefits were also contingent on their continuing involvement with Underground Lights, which had also given them the confidence to audition for *Cardboard Camps*.

The second actor-participant, *H*, was clear about the opportunities offered by participating in drama. Again, they emphasised the positive changes to their social world that participating in drama had enabled. *H* had begun as a participant with the company and progressed to a trainee facilitator which had then given them the confidence to accept an administrative role in *Cardboard Camps*. *H* first asked me to clarify what was being asked of them as they were not sure if they would be able to commit to a longer interview process. I explained that it was up to them and that they could leave at any point.

H: 'Good, yeah, I need to know what you're asking of me because I would like to take part, it depends on my time though. But I'd be really happy to tell my story especially if it helps Underground Lights!'

'How has drama helped me?....Where to start?...Where to start?... Yeah, so much. It's completely changed everything... I'm doing much more with Underground Lights and I'm

going to be starting a new role. I'm excited but it's going to be a really big challenge. But I'm

up for it!' (H 12.5.21).

Again, *H* referred to participation changing their social world and enabling them to meet

challenges.

Similar to *N*, the third participant *R* had learned about Underground Lights through an outside

agency which underlines that there is a perception of a link between participating in the arts

and improving mental health. *R*'s answers were a powerful statement about the positive

impact that the opportunity to practice drama had had on their life which included improved

mental health, forming social bonds and the opportunity to initiate meaningful projects. *R*

also wanted to stress how the opportunity could easily have eluded them and focused on the

element of chance in their story, but the prospect of making social connections, being

persuaded, and then wanting to listen seem to have been drivers.

'It was a turning point. Since 2017, there have been so many changes in my life and really,

they're all down to Underground Lights. I got into it through Crisis, but I wasn't interested at

first. I was actually persuaded to listen. Emma was talking and I thought "what have I got to

lose?" Then I was hooked! Everything has happened as a result of Underground Lights.

Sharing skills, empowering… transformed, definitely! I'm not exaggerating when I say

Underground Lights saved my life.' (R 13.5.21).

Responses to the second question: 'How do you see yourself as a creative individual?

As these study participants were experienced in practicing drama, I asked them how they saw

themselves as creative people. Their responses arguably show how the social factors at the

heart of the group supported their creativity. *N* was enthusiastic in talking about the work,

with (understandably) less of the long pauses that had accompanied their references to

wellbeing and mental health. The following response reveals the uninterrupted flow of *N*'s

words and how their sense of joy and resilience in being creative compensated for the interruptions of the pandemic.

'I love doing this. I joined just before the pandemic and I even loved doing all the stuff on zoom. There was a lull because of that social distancing. Obviously we couldn't meet in person, but we still managed to do some creative work. We put on the Shadow Puppet play. We made our bits and they were recorded and then edited together. Then there was a showcase for the public. It was about one terms' work, but Oh God, yeah it could be frustrating. People have stuff going on and some people weren't turning up on zoom when they should and leaving us in the lurch. I think it's easier to meet in person, you get more commitment I think, yeah. In the pandemic we had to work in digital…we're doing Digital Divide, you know about it? So yeah, I love it, being creative! (N 11.5.21)

Retrieval skills were also important for *N* in that drama gave them the opportunity to remember what they had been good at in the past, despite the loss of their creative identity for a number of years. As they noted above, drama was also about learning more and improving on the skills they had previously learned.

'It's different doing drama here [with Underground Lights] than at Uni. It's completely different to Uni, it was movement, dance mainly at Uni. We didn't do many plays though we read them, so I like being able to perform. I can do more performing now and I like it better. Mind you I'd done improvisation before and was good at it….I AM good at it. It's that confidence…I'd had that skill once, but it had turned in on myself. When I joined, I could do it again, something that I was good at.. improvisation. And dance…yeah, performing. I love being able to do something I'm good at!'

We finished filming [Digital Divide] last week. I think it went really well and it was exciting doing it, we haven't shown it yet so watch out for it! So tired after it was all done and so

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relieved. It wasn't pressure so much, I really enjoyed it and I'm looking forward to the next thing we do. I don't know what it's going to be yet! There's the play I'm doing with Cardboard Citizens so when that's finished… (N 29.6.21)

H was motivated to take control of the interview process in that they wanted to tell their story on their own terms and in their own time.

'Being creative is so important to me, I suppose I'm a bit of an Underground Lights success story. When I joined, it opened so many opportunities. You know I'm facilitating now, I've been given that opportunity to work with other people and help them like they did with me when I first joined. So, my story is really important to me, I'd like to write a blog or a journal for the project that you're doing. I'd like to stay with it but there is so much happening with Cardboard Citizens and the City of Culture.' (*H* 12.5.21)

R on the other hand was more sceptical, focusing how creativity can potentially be used to embed inequality.

'The City of Culture thing, yes there will be creative opportunities, but it has a dark side. It's not just about including people. The Vagrancy Act will impact on it by excluding people from the city centre, like they did in Windsor, like they're doing in a lot of cities. Who is the City of Culture for, I ask myself and who will be allowed to take part? I've talked to people involved and it's an important question.'

For *R*, the question of who has the opportunity to create in an unequal society is fundamental.

'Theatre has a power of communication, to portray inequality and bring it to attention. But, have you made a change or just used people as material? That would be a wasted opportunity.'

R's creative identity focused more on improving access, which is also connected with their sense of wellbeing and having a purpose.

'I'm also a facilitator for the digital divide or a sort of digital ambassador, for people who don't have access to the internet and had to go through Covid alone. It's my mission right now, to help people to stay in touch.'

Similar to *H*, *R* was also motivated to take control of how they would tell their story, suggesting that they would prefer to move it from the context of the interviews. These actor-participants were keen to practice their agency, but it was also an indication that the interview process would break down in the Underground Lights case study.

'I'd like to tell my story, actually I would prefer to write my story from 2017 to show how my life's changed and all the things that I can do now are thanks to Underground Lights'. (*R* 13.5.21)

The positive, everyday life experiences that these participants focused on is evidence of how opportunities for creativity and community building had begun to embed drama practice into their social worlds. I hope to argue that co-creative practices were fundamental to this embedding (and sustainability) and will discuss how these operated in the context of the *Digital Divide* project. The next section is a discussion on co-creation from its earlier usages to recent practices, including strengths and limitations. This will function as an introduction to the case study itself, providing a useful unpacking of what co-creation means to practitioners and how these practices can contribute to embedding creativity and community building into the social worlds or everyday realities of their participants.

Co-creative practices, community building and social worlds impact

Definitions of co-creation

Co-creation is effectively a knowledge exchange. Its original usage came from business and marketing, which Ben Walmsley (2013) addresses in his investigation of audiences as consumers who have a stake in the product. In this respect, he relates co-creation to the growing popularity of immersive theatre events (2013, p. 108). Walmsley is specifically interested in audiences in this context and uses a drama festival as a case study, where audiences were invited to co-create through actively discussing performances of new drama as works in progress. Here, his work is very useful in unpacking concepts of 'inter-legitimation' which comes from Bourdieu's critique of 'taste' in cultural capital. A practitioner who was a study participant in Walmsley's case study noted that 'we are talking to ourselves', in that both the theatre companies and their audiences were self-interested groups engaged in 'an interminable circuit of inter-legitimation' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 53, cited in Walmsley, 2013, p. 113). Subsequently, the knowledge exchange breaks down. For Walmsley, the marketised approach to co-creation has a fundamental problem: 'if co-creation fosters neither democratization nor excellence, what purpose does it serve?' (2013, p.111).

Walmsley's solution to the inter-legitimation feedback loop is to invite audiences into a play-based forum: 'a safe space and a negotiable framework for productive and enjoyable co-creation' although this is contingent on 'the power dynamics (quite literally) at play.' (2019, p. 184). Co-creation is moving from marketisation towards a more strongly participatory concept for Walmsley because 'in the performing arts, cultural products take the form of collective experiences, whose meaning can only ever be fully elaborated in a collaborative way.' (2019, p. 185). Cultural capital remains an issue with respect to audiences, as Walmsley is concerned that powerful cultural norms may continue to be reproduced in collaborative forums. Therefore, how can genuinely 'collective meaning making' be facilitated? (2019, p. 188).

The problem identified by Walmsley is arguably evidence of why the discussion on co-creation moved from addressing audiences as consumers towards building a knowledge exchange by working with communities. Horvath and Carpenter's (2020) definition of Co-creation (the authors' capitalisation) is a response to the fragmentation and exclusion of communities which they describe as a consequence of neoliberal policymaking since the 1980s (p. 1). Co-creation as a genuinely equitable knowledge exchange can 'change the world by collectively reinterpreting it through a dialogue between different types of knowledge' supported by an ethics of care (p. 3).

With respect to the arts, the authors cite Chantal Mouffe who sees creative involvement as having the potential to 'open cracks in the system' and allow participants to engage in 'new experiences and to establish forms of relationships that are different from the ones we are used to.', hence a more equitable knowledge exchange is established (Mouffe, 2013, p. 97, cited in Horvath and Carpenter, 2020, p. 6), with the understanding that the creative process may be more important than the artistic output.

This leads onto a discussion of different case studies of co-creating with communities, but on occasions the artistic output has seemed to take precedence. This is reminiscent of what happened with respect to the theatre production in the Marlowe Theatre case study discussed above and underlines how power structures between arts organisations and participants can problematise a co-creative process. Carpenter discussed a case study that featured a musical collaboration in Vancouver, where the demands of rehearsals and the musical skill levels required led to the 'difficult decision' that some participants were asked to leave the process (p. 184). Carpenter summarised these tensions as operating 'between process and the product, between relational outcomes and object-based outcomes, is one that many Co-Creative projects grapple with while trying to bypass binary thinking that positions artistic outcomes against social ones.' (p. 184). Moreover, these tensions are about power inequalities.

Carpenter cites François Matarasso's warning that 'inequalities of power are created in the act of co-creation', which refers to a number of factors including decision-making and skill levels (Matarasso, 2019, cited in Horvath and Carpenter, 2020, p. 184). Carpenter accepts that co-creating performance has a 'limited ability to address 'deep seated societal challenges.' (p. 187).

Horvath and Carpenter view co-creation as having a greater potential to effect change when it consists of 'diverse acts all curated in a shared direction' (p. 220) rather than a theatre performance like those featured in this thesis. Even then, there is no guarantee that communities' voices will be listened to by those in power, which they see as potentially a betrayal of participants' trust in their facilitators (p. 293). Ideally, the situation should be reversed so that participants are able to reach out to the organisations they have themselves chosen to work with (p. 297). Although this could potentially solve some of the inherent inequalities and binary thinking around process and product within co-creation, I think that we are a long way from communities being empowered with their own budgets and the freedom to manage their projects.

Accepting that co-creation has inherent structural problems that, for Horvath and Carpenter, require further investigation so that it can reach its potential as 'an arts-based knowledge process' (p. 292), I want to move the discussion to where we are at present with co-created drama practices. Despite being the subject of much discussion in recent years, co-creation remains a contested term even for its advocates, like Matarasso and Horvath and Carpenter above. Arts Council England identified co-creative practices as significant to *Let's Create,* the Arts Council's strategy for 2020-2030: 'creating a country transformed by culture' (https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/lets-create). Aiming to reach some consensus about essential aspects of co-creation, Arts Council England had published a survey during the pandemic. The survey recorded responses from 59 community arts workers to a range of questions on

definitions, characteristics, outcomes and barriers to co-creation (2021, p. 17). The term 'buzzword' came up several times in the responses, for example: 'It's a buzzword in many funding agreements but there is a real lack of understanding of what it is and practical systems to support its application.' (2021, p. 18). Positive aspects included 'listening', 'responding', 'caring', 'adapting' (2021, p. 23), but ultimately, the conditions for effective co-creation were rarely met, with the survey participants citing 'unresponsive funding', 'lack of sustainability' and a need for 'time and space to allow trust and understanding to flourish.' (2021, p. 25).

Matarasso (2021) described in a webinar his scepticism about the current usage of co-creation as a strategy firstly, because the outcomes and the power relations between all the stakeholders involved in a project ideally should not be decided in advance. He argues that this may not be possible, given the financial and temporal constraints that these projects must operate within. Secondly, as in the citation above, not all stakeholders can realistically participate in all power relations when there is a division of skills and responsibilities involved at every stage of a project. His solution is to describe the process as aiming towards being equitable rather than equal, and to be clear about the power differentials that these constraints are likely to produce.

A symposium entitled *Can we all just agree on what co-creation is?* revealed that both definitions of and barriers to effective co-creation remain problematic. The symposium took place on 26.7.24 at the Belgrade Theatre, led by artistic director Corey Campbell. Campbell introduced the panellists with the statement 'The Arts Council want it, funders want it, so can we just agree to what we're being asked to do?' (2024ii). In an article for *The Stage*, Campbell defined co-creation as (ideally) a sustainably reciprocal knowledge-exchange, 'true co-creation is more than just collaboration, it is an interdependency between a theatre and its community.' (Campbell, 2024i), but there are challenges around how achievable such an

interdependency can be in situations where funding tends to be limited both time and resource-wise. Hence, the symposium aimed to discuss different co-creative practices, successes and failures, in order to take into account the limitations that community theatre organisations often have to work within. As Emma Ormerod had noted, co-creation had become something of 'a buzzword, which although it can be useful when flagging up what you hope to achieve when talking to partners and making funding applications, stakeholders and organisations do not always unpack exactly what they mean by this vocabulary'. (Ormerod, 1.3.22).

Similarly, the City of Culture trust predicated their entire programme on co-creation. Creative director Chenine Bathena claimed 'We've put co-creation at the heart of a £35 million major event.' (Bathena, 2023). Although collaboration and consultation functioned at the heart of the festival, arguably too much had been organised in advance to describe the events as co-created, particularly with respect to employing agencies and companies from outside Coventry. Bathena arguably used co-creation as a 'buzzword' here, but it is evidence of pressure on organisations to offer co-creation. In the case of the City of Culture trust, the enquiry that followed their financial difficulties would probably have significantly increased these pressures to retrospectively push the co-creation factor. Arts organisations therefore are likely to have to negotiate co-creation with their partnership organisations, despite the conditions around projects not always enabling an environment for sustainable co-creative practices to thrive as an equitable knowledge exchange.

Limits of co-creative practices in the context of making theatre

As Horvath and Carpenter noted, co-creation at its best will 'promote agency, collaboration between participants and alternate visions (2020, p. 292), but because it tends to be initiated by organisations from outside, or by groups from within an area who can access and

influence power, is 'affected by the positionalities of [its] initiators, whether they are artists, researchers or communities.' (p. 293). When co-creative practices are used in making theatre, the systems that enable theatre to take place, such as funding, performance spaces and the availability of arts workers have a significant impact on the process. Further to this discussion, Ned Glasier, former CEO and present consultant for Company Three young people's theatre was invited to the 2024 symposium to talk about the influence of these systems in provocations, challenges and failures in co-created theatre practice.

Using their celebrated production of *When This is Over* (2022) as a case study, Glasier was candid about the pressures of performance on young casts and whether a show will ultimately take precedence over its participants. Glasier's dilemma in this case was that the play had been delayed for a year due to Covid, leading to the cancellation of the scheduled performance at the Unicorn Theatre. The Yard Theatre had stepped in a year later, which in the published version of the script (2023) is presented as an opportunity: '[the play] had changed a lot from the version we (nearly) made for The Unicorn, because the cast had changed a lot. That's the beauty of the play – it's a record of who people are and who they might become, so it changes every time it is made and performed.' (Glasier et al., 2023, p. vii).

This process of change was much more problematic in reality. Creative and leading performer Allegresse Kabuya had convened a meeting where the cast explained that they had changed so much as people over the previous year, they no longer felt connected to the show they had co-created. The options were to cancel the show with all the repercussions that would ensue or to hope that the cast would reconsider their position and perform a play that no longer felt authentic to them. Glasier recalled a deep sense of fear at this substantial risk to the performance, hoping that despite his outward support of the cast's agency, they would

compromise. After the cast met again to discuss their options, they agreed that the show should go on following some late adjustments, leading to profound relief all round.

Glasier's point was that systems including funding and the processes of booking venues that enable theatre to take place are not set up for cancellations or significant changes that might occur if participants are afforded genuine agency. Moreover, the question of whether a performance would inevitably take precedence because of these external systems surrounding theatre was an ethical dilemma for which Glasier did not have an answer (I will return to these issues in due course in the next chapter on ethics). His solution was to accept that theatre creates an imperfect and compromising situation respecting co-creation. However, if practitioners must work within these external systems (which tends to be a condition of community theatre partnerships), co-creative practices can be used as a 'took kit' to generate content, build relationships or both (Glasier, 2024). This concept could be useful for community arts organisations, because it would enable them to negotiate using practices when appropriate or possible, without having to claim that the whole project would be co-created from start to finish.

Glasier's et al. 'Blueprint' (2023) sets out practices that could be used as a tool kit for facilitators. Firstly, the process must be ethical, 'done with care and safety'. They recommend a 'safeguarding and wellbeing plan' at the outset in order to plan for and resolve any issues that might come up when making theatre with peoples' stories (p. 6). I will talk more about these issues in the forthcoming chapter on ethics, but starting with a 'safeguarding and wellbeing' plan would be an essential first step.

There are ideas about generating content, or gathering stories (pp. 16-22), which can be done in pairs or small groups. Glasier et al. suggest using prompts for recollections along the lines of 'the other day, I..' which could end with a group discussion where participants could say

which stories they might want to hear more about (p. 17). Drawing timelines and recollecting through free writing are suggested as individual activities that could take the pressure off participants in terms of performing and receiving on the spot feedback from others (pp. 17-18). Simple affordances (interactive technologies) can also be used such as recording conversations and memories (p. 21). I would argue that activities like these would help to build a creative energy within a workspace. Looking back at the first case study where some participants left due to the physical demands of the workshops, affordances like recording or filming them talking about their lived experiences could have kept them in the process, so this is an issue that facilitators could think about from the outset. Significantly, Glasier also focuses on creativity and imagination in generating content, inviting facilitators to trust their participants and 'keep it joyful', and 'let it spiral' - allowing the participants' creativity and interests to guide a session where appropriate and giving facilitators permission to change their plans (pp. 11-12). I am also reminded of how the participants in the Marlowe Theatre case study responded imaginatively to poetry and where they might have been able to take this.

A successful toolkit for co-creation clearly depends on knowing your participants which feeds into the process of editing. Successful editing in co-creation would depend on a high level of trust between facilitators and participants because some stories would be chosen over others through a transparent decision-making process. Here, the needs of a theatre performance underpin the decision-making, but it can be done successfully with the participants' consent: 'Be tough when editing – working with real people's stories can make us sentimental about stuff that should really be cut.' (p. 28). Audience expectations, as one of the systems of making theatre can problematise a co-creative process, but Glasier et al. feel that a balance can be achieved in a situation where a script is required for a performance, again with the participants' consent: 'you will have spent enough time (and built up enough trust) to have a

go at writing things for them to say, but it's important you give them the opportunity to change what you write, or reject it entirely.' (p. 28). The use of a script therefore needs to be discussed at the outset rather than utilised as a late-stage solution as in the first case study. Trust and consent therefore ethically underpin co-created practices.

Power

The notion of distributing power equitably is also central to co-created practices (again, I will talk more about this in due course). Naomi Alexander, artistic director and CEO of Brighton People's Theatre shared a case study (the contributing speakers referred to case studies rather than gave titles to their talks) of how power can be exercised and negotiated among participants within a co-created theatre space. Alexander described performing as 'an absolute moment of power', that she came to understand through managing conflicts during rehearsals. In her case study, Alexander had introduced doubling to enable participants to co-create their roles with a partner. She anticipated that competition between the actors may happen and could be a valuable creative interaction, but it resulted in a difficult confrontation that had to be resolved. Alexander related how one participant had threatened to leave the process because they were reluctant to afford another actor the same power that they had experienced in generating and performing the content. This developed into an exchange of anger that made the other participants uncomfortable. In summary, they did not want to lose ownership over what they valued as their own creativity. Alexander's solution after negotiating the situation firstly in a one-to-one meeting and then with the whole company, was to introduce a process of 'gifting', whereby participants would offer their created content to the theatre company with the understanding that they no longer had sole ownership over it and that it may be subject to change. (Alexander, 2024).

What is valuable with respect to Alexander's contribution is that it addresses the complexities of distributing power, because power relations can exist between participants themselves (and their facilitators) as well as between organisations such as theatres and funding bodies. There are also issues around how responsibilities for dealing with anger and its inherent risks should be distributed, including implications for facilitators' safety (this is another ethical issue that I will discuss later). As Alexander did not raise this, I would hope that she had felt safe in the one-to-one meeting she talked about. This could be because she knew the participants well and was also aware of the significance of how the theatre company functioned within their social worlds. Moreover, Alexander would have needed to understand what might be at stake for participants in creating and performing content that was often deeply personal. This knowledge probably enabled her resolution, which was to negotiate an agreement between the participants to redistribute their power by 'gifting' their creative input.

Sustainability

Alexander's confidence in that knowledge of her theatre's participants is arguably a product of sustainability in co-creative theatre practices. Alexander could risk a confrontation and find a solution because these participants had worked together consistently over a long period of time and drama practice had consequently become a significant part of their social worlds. As noted in the Arts Council England survey cited above, sustainability was key to co-created practice, but that it requires time that is not always available within the funding systems that enable drama to take place. This remains the situation today. Interestingly, the panellists at the symposium did not arrive at a definition of co-creation beyond an agreement that practices can be considered as a spectrum, or in Glasier's terminology, a tool kit. Campbell et al. however were in agreement that ethical intentionality was fundamental to using elements of co-creation whether in a long or short-term project. Beth Fiducia-Brookes, who was among the panellists, noted that the work had to be done within an established 'ethics of care.'

(2024). For community theatre partnerships, this would suggest that co-creative practices could be utilised within the framework of making and performing theatre in partnership with stakeholders, but in the case of short- and medium-term projects, there would probably not be the time available to thoroughly embed sustainable practices. Hence, Glasier's tool kit approach would be useful in building an ethos of trust and community among participants in a time-limited project. For long-term projects like Underground Lights, sustainable co-creative practices ideally can foster an atmosphere where, as Alexander described above, nuanced power relationships can be discussed and redistributed, facilitated by the role that participating in drama plays in the social worlds of its participants. In the case of Underground Lights' practices, co-creation can foster a space where participants and facilitators can safely hold risk which will be described in the next section on the *Digital Divide* project. Furthermore, the embedding of these practices within the social worlds of the company members enabled resilience both in performing *Digital Divide* and in negotiating the challenging processes of *Cardboard Camps*.

Holding risk: co-creative practices in *Digital Divide*

This workshop for co-creating content took place on 14.5.21. *Digital Divide* was a series of sketches on digital exclusion that would be filmed for *Home Grown Film Night* during the Coventry City of Culture celebrations. The performances focused on lived experiences of loneliness and isolation during the pandemic and how these were impacted and exacerbated by a lack of access to communication technology. Francesca Robson, a dance specialist was facilitating alongside Fiducia-Brookes and Dutton. I was invited to take part and while filling in for an absent participant, worked on a sketch with actor-participant *R* that we provisionally titled *Hello Chatbot.* This was about the frustrations of being unable to exit a digital chatbot and communicate with a person when trying to resolve an online problem. We worked towards a darkly comedic atmosphere with a rising emotional register, ending in a cry of 'I

just want to speak to a human being!' This was a relatively simple sketch that could be improved on in subsequent sessions, but on reflection, although *R* had agreed with the content and direction of the piece, it owed more to my earlier street theatre practices than to co-creation.

Other pieces of work however utilised co-creation to enable some nuanced risk-taking with performing. Robson was working on two creative dance pieces. One was a solo with actor-participant *N*, and the other was a two-hander between older male participants. Actors of different ages, genders and body shapes were confident in trying both their own and Robson's ideas for translating their sketches into dance. Robson had suggested using reflections in different ways. For the first piece, *N* danced with the mirrors in the studio to retell pandemic loneliness, the joy at a telephone conversation shaded by the impossibility of meeting in person, with the mirrors seeming to represent both connections and separating walls. The second piece was performed by two older men who had experienced homelessness. It explored the very different experiences of having access to a phone with internet capabilities whilst homeless, both for human contact and because some agencies that could provide help were moving online. Robson and the participants rehearsed mirror images of movements to represent opposing experiences, using high and low registers to express the relief and positivity of online access compared to the frustration and despair of being unable to connect. The two different sides of the piece ended with 'Help me God' and 'Thank you God' because the participants had wanted to include a prayerful aspect without glossing over the difficulties of losing a phone, a phone being stolen, having nowhere private to make calls, and being unable to afford data.

These participants were prepared to take the risk of performing in dance which one of the participants stated that they had never tried before. This was an example of the interdependency of co-created practice that Glasier (2023, 2024) and Campbell (2024i) had

talked about in the symposium above, as the dance pieces could not have existed without the mutual trust between the participants and facilitator that enabled them to take risks with emotive subject matter and the challenge of physical dance/drama. Importantly, the work was taking place in a space that could hold the risks that the participants had chosen to take.

The filming for the City of Culture festival was scheduled for the following week after which the participants who had roles in *Cardboard Camps* including *H* and *N* would leave the process. The rest of the company would work on an expanded live version of *Digital Divide* that would include an interactive research-based forum led by actor-participant *R* on the effects of digital exclusion on people who may already feel marginalised.

Imperfect systems

Using Glasier's 'toolkit' notion, I have argued that co-creative practices can offer a reciprocal, socially embedded experience for participants. Therefore, participants who have access to an established community theatre like Underground Lights benefit from taking part in sustainable co-creative practices. However, as noted, not all community theatre partnerships can offer their participants sustainable access to a drama group beyond the time limit of a funded project. As discussed above, elements of co-created practice can be negotiated and utilised in time-limited community theatre performances, but these are, as Glasier argued, somewhat unequally balanced against the systems that enable theatre to be produced. Despite these inequalities, there are also positives that can be experienced in the imperfect systems of community theatre partnerships. The next section will look at *Cardboard Camps*, which like *Shakespeare Nation*, will be discussed as an imperfect system. A social worlds map as introduced on pp. 62-63 of this thesis and illustrated below, will focus on some of the different choices made by the organisations involved.

Part two of the case study – *Cardboard Camps in Coventry*

Introduction

Although as a researcher I did not have access to the rehearsals for *Cardboard Camps*, the performance itself and conversations with participants and facilitators that followed make it a notable example of an imperfect system that will also feed into the discussion on ethics to follow. The discussion has been framed around a social worlds map. As in the use of situational mapping in the previous chapter, this will present an example of how visual mapping can be useful to community theatre organisations. Social worlds mapping is being used here because drama featured strongly in the social worlds of the case study participants. In addition, the organisations involved have not shared many details of their priorities that could have been plotted as influencing factors. These more generalised social worlds factors reveal that different attitudes towards risk led to a challenging community theatre process that nevertheless was not without positive experiences for its participants.

The organisations involved in the partnership

As a reminder, Underground Lights' partnership organisations for this forum theatre production were Cardboard Citizens theatre company and the Coventry City of Culture Trust. Both had a mandate for social change. For Cardboard Citizens, this involved using Forum Theatre to open a dialogue with Coventry City Council about improving services for homeless and precariously housed people, whilst the City of Culture Trust was invested in a legacy to improve social cohesion by increasing participation in art and culture. The stakeholders in this community theatre partnership were prepared to take risks in order to promote their understandings of social change, but within their social worlds there were different concepts of how risk was understood, enabled and managed, which eventually had problematic results for the forum theatre performance. By utilising experiences of homelessness and precarious housing, Cardboard Citizens potentially took risks at the

expense of their participants, particularly if these had been recent lived experiences. These concerns were also expressed by the facilitators I spoke to after the performance. In terms of investigating community theatre partnerships as a system that can enable participation to take place, it is important to evaluate the whole situation by unpacking these differences, which an attention to social worlds mapping (shown here in a Venn diagram format) may be able to facilitate.

Intersections between social worlds

Social Worlds Intersections: Cardboard Camps in Coventry- a community theatre partnership between Participants from Underground Lights theatre company, Cardboard Citizens and the City of Culture Trust.
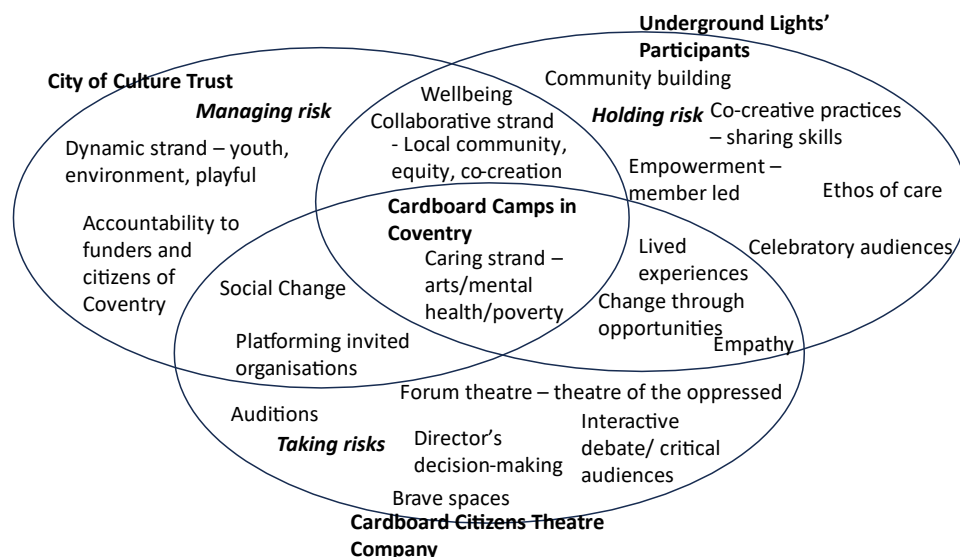
These are the systems and factors that enabled *Cardboard Camps* to take place. The factors within the intersecting sets can be referenced in the following websites: Coventry City of Culture Trust (2023). The Coventry City of Culture Trust Approach. *Evaluating Coventry UK City of Culture 2021* [Online]. Available from https://coventry21evaluation.info/city-of-culture-trust-programme/ [Accessed 11 August 2024];

Cardboard Citizens (2021). *Who We Are: Our Manifesto* [Online]. Available from https://cardboardcitizens.org.uk/who-we-are/ [Accessed 11 August 2024];

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'Managing risk', 'holding risk' and 'taking risks' (seen in bold italics on the above map) are factors from my own observations during the case study. Also, I should note that I have included Underground Lights and its participants in the same Venn diagram set because the theatre company is already embedded in the social worlds of its participants.

Cardboard Camps is at the centre of the map with the 'caring strand' from the City of Culture Trust's programme. Fiducia-Brookes (2024) had spoken about 'an ethics of care' being fundamental to Underground Lights' practices. 'An ethics of care' was first set out by Nel Nodden (2013): 'I want to build an ethics on caring, and I shall claim that there is a form of caring natural and accessible to all human beings'. It is important to note that Nodden's ethics of care is relational, based on reciprocity rather than any 'universalizable moral judgements (p. 26). Cardboard Citizens (2021a) meanwhile emphasised how their production would be 'a central part of the Caring City of Coventry strand of the festival.' The caring strand came from the festival's producing model and would have been one of the drivers for commissioning and making work. The strand broadly covered health factors, particularly mental health including loneliness and isolation, but also noted the exploitation of young people and highlighted the effects of poverty such as a lack of inclusion, community, and access to the arts. Altogether, the caring strand addressed a challenging brief with the help of

outside agencies (The City of Culture Trust, 2022). Caring therefore, was at the centre of this community theatre partnership.

Intersections between Cardboard Citizens and the City of Culture Trust include their commitment to social change mentioned above. With Underground Lights, the trust shared a commitment to co-creation and community through their collaborative strand. Cardboard Citizens and Underground Lights intersected with empathy and promoting change through opportunities: 'Together we create a world that we want to see, a world where you can challenge what the world said you should achieve and be, a world where art is seen as one of the most important things that we humans can create,' (Cardboard Citizens, 2021b). In this sense, these intersections suggest that Cardboard Citizens were an ideal fit for their partner organisations.

Performing Cardboard Camps

Cardboard Camps was a three-week long residency ending in two performances in the B2 studio at the Belgrade Theatre. Improvisation was used to devise two short plays based on lived experiences of homelessness and how some people, particularly vulnerable young adults, can fall through the cracks with respect to social care. *Circles* (featuring actor-participant *N* in a leading role) told the story of how a young mother became homeless. Family members ensured that her child was accommodated, but an increasing sense of shame and inadequacy exacerbated by 'sofa surfing' ended with her sleeping on the streets, where there was no provision for her as a single woman whose child was being cared for. *N* performed a deeply empathetic, quiet despair. The second piece, *Little Boy Blue,* charted how a lack of mental health support led to a young man becoming estranged from his family and friends and unable to cope with life in a hostel. This was very different in tone, with lively,

argumentative and often tragi-comic scenes. The pieces were based on, but not directly representative of the lived experiences of the cast.

Jonnie Barton (a local amateur actor who was the lead performer in *Little Boy Blue*) wrote a blog for *The Big Issue,* describing how the improvisation process had been challenging: 'idea development was stressful as everyone wanted their ideas to be included.' (Barton, 2021). The participants consequently welcomed the interventions of the producers and creatives to cut through the arguments. Terry O'Leary who was co-directing (and playing the 'joker' to facilitate the Forum theatre debates) had advised with developing the improvisations to make theatre: 'Luckily, Terry (our director) came in with some brilliant changes – she told me to tone down my character and suggested giving him some "friends" to cause some tension for him, too. My character, "Jonny", is the protagonist and his story is very much like what happened to me when I became homeless. I feel the emotion I portray is parallel to what he would be feeling.' (Barton, 2021).

Barton described how he brought emotion and empathy to the role, whilst the directors' decision-making had been crucial to the process, particularly in a time scale of just three weeks. As forum theatre, the project had objectives for social change that are close to applied theatre (I will discuss the contested term applied theatre in more detail in the next chapter on ethics). Cardboard Citizens moreover had a commitment to their cause and a long-standing status as a leading theatre company that led to them assuming a position of power. Fiducia-Brookes for example was in no doubt that the power in this partnership remained with Cardboard Citizens: 'there were definitely tensions between what our participants wanted and what the professional company decided on in both shows.' (Fiducia-Brookes, 12.10.21), but for some of the actors, the power of performing gave them a different perspective.

Different perspectives on performance

The audience and the legislative theatre panel

I was in the audience for the second performance of *Cardboard Camps* on 23.7.21, with Fiducia-Brookes, Ormerod, Dutton and the cast of *Digital Divide*. The pieces were very well acted, which in the light of a three-week production process was credit both to the cast and the creatives from Cardboard Citizens. The forum theatre aspect, which also featured online as well as physical participation from the audience members, focused on family relationships in *Little Boy Blue.* These interventions from the audience were empathetic in the main, but the legislative theatre element which followed descended into an unproductive argument that caused visible distress to one of the participants.

The legislative input was where Cardboard Citizens hoped to make significant social change. A panel featuring members of the City Council and homelessness support agencies took questions from the audience, with the cast members present on stage. However, representatives from Coventry City Council could not be persuaded that their policies needed to be changed radically, and the participants' often painful testimonies of their lived experiences were on several occasions met with a reaction that I recall as 'this must have happened some time ago, it wouldn't happen now.' Some of the participants on stage reacted with frustration and even anger. One cast member from Underground Lights became very distressed as they recounted their experience of suicide ideation whilst in precarious accommodation and in fear of returning to homelessness. This was extremely uncomfortable for many audience members, including the representatives from Underground Lights.

Adrian Jackson himself then came onto the stage and closed the show, announcing 'this is not how we hoped tonight would end', as the legislative theatre discussion was unable to reach a conclusion, tensions were rising, and time was running out. There had been an opportunity for some discussions to continue after the show with the company, the panel and their guests,

but for much of the audience who were unable to stay later, the show would have ended without closure.

Actors

My own perception was that there had been a risk of harm to the participants through revisiting traumatic memories in the context of a public debate. However, Barton (2021) did not record any of these problematic issues in his blog: 'It's been rather draining playing a story so close to home, but it's also been an excellent way to come to terms with what happened in my past and move even further on from it'. Moreover, his memories of the legislative theatre at that same performance were significantly different from mine. '…people throwing ideas for change at the panel. At the end, improvements to mental health streamlining and help within the housing sector were promised.' Commitments to improving these services could have been made in the general discussion for guests that had followed the show as I do not recall them myself, but Barton did not focus on the chaotic ending of the performance itself. I had noted his strongly emotional disagreements with some of the points made during the legislative theatre discussion, particularly towards 'it wouldn't happen now.', but this clearly was not the most important thing that he took away from performing: 'It has been an incredible three weeks, and I would happily go through it all again. It's been amazing to meet so many talented people and build new relationships. Hopefully, we all made a difference for homelessness in Coventry'. Although Barton may have been more positive in his report with respect to the fact that his reflections were to be published, he seems to have benefitted as a participant from that power of performance. Similarly, another cast member (who remained anonymous) remarked after the first performance: 'I feel like a movie star; I'm just walking down the street looking around and smiling!' (*Anon(a)*. 23.7.21). It had been difficult to gather a range of participants' responses however, as both *N* and *H* had not agreed to comment on their involvement in *Cardboard Camps* as they had specifically

wanted to talk to talk to me about Underground Lights. As a researcher, I had to accept that decision.

The power of performance is arguably a benefit of taking part in community theatre, but as Alexander pointed out above, it can be unequal. Her example centred around a leading actor's anger with their understudy, but there are other power differentials in the roles that participants might play in a theatre piece. The next example, the community choir in Cardboard Citizens' second production of their residency, looks at that hierarchy.

The Ruff Tuff Cream Puff Estate Agency – 'the choir with no name'

This production was a musical based on the story of a squatters' organisation in London who identified empty properties for homeless people to occupy. The roles were played by professional actors accompanied by an amateur community choir. Cardboard Citizens had the main auditorium (the B1) for this production. It is basically a proscenium theatre, but its size offers different opportunities for staging productions. This is important because of where the community choir was located. Although there was space available to accommodate the choir on the stage, it was located in the 1950s style boxes to the sides of the auditorium and separate from the stage. The choir was originally made up of participants from Underground Lights, but as Fiducia-Brookes (12.10.21) explained, there had been a high drop-out rate: 'It's been massively stressful with Cardboard Citizens. A lot of our participants dropped out of the choir because of the rigours of the workshops and rehearsals. I don't think that they were pitched right on occasions, meaning for people who are not professionals. There were heavy demands on time and pressures to perform, so there wasn't a choice. Either go with the process or leave.'

One of the choir participants who had stayed with the process later recalled how participating in the community choir had not been what they had expected because they felt excluded from

the action on the stage. It was significant that this was the impression that had remained with them after taking part in the show: 'It wasn't how I thought it would be. We were so far away… I don't know if the audience could really see us. Yeah, I have to admit it was a bit disappointing.' (*Anon (b)* 23.2.24). There could have been a number of factors behind the decision to use the boxes, so I am speculating here. Possibly Adrian Jackson (who was directing) decided that there would be less pressure on the participants if they were less visible, especially if the process had been challenging. Perhaps the choir had not reached an expected professional standard. Then again, as it was made up of people from Coventry who had experienced homelessness, perhaps the location was a means of bridging between the audience and the stage. The effect on me as an audience member was that there was a hierarchy between the company and the choir, either intentionally or otherwise.

In their own evaluation, Cardboard Citizens named opportunities to perform, be creative, and raise awareness to create change as the main benefits of participating in the project. Beyond raising awareness, I would doubt that there was much tangible change for homelessness services, particularly in the light of the City Council's restricted finances, though to be fair that could not have been foreseen at the time: '…the project included opportunities for people experiencing homelessness in Coventry to engage in creative activity, including being part of the show, as well as opportunities for public audiences to engage with homelessness services in Coventry to create tangible change.' (Cardboard Citizens, 2022, p. 12).

Communicating the themes and message of the performances are clearly most important for Cardboard Citizens, but as Glasier et al. explain in the 'Blueprint' for *Brainstorm* (2016, pp. 72-86), this can be done whilst keeping the participants' needs and wellbeing in mind: 'Only include content that helps the audience understand the play and the things we need to know about the cast. Try not to say the same thing twice. It would help if you and the cast agree from the start that any content that you cut is about the play rather than about them

personally.' (2016, p. 73). The themes of the play communicate how teenage brains develop in order to help parents and carers negotiate their changing relationships, and the 'Blueprint' makes it clear that this message is fundamental. Co-creative practices for generating content, such as those examples described in the 'tool kit' above, can be used to include all participants as having contributed to writing the play even if their individual contributions are not selected during the editing process. A balance can be achieved with respect to how participants are included in a performance, whether as actors or as members of a community choir if their role in the process is fully discussed and/or explained.

The community choir provoked different reactions from different audiences. The local paper gave the production a five-star review, describing the community choir as 'particularly poignant' because they had experienced homelessness. 'It was not a tokenistic use of their experiences, or didn't appear to be, and left you feeling challenged and reflective.' (da Souza, The Coventry Telegraph, 23.10.21).

I had found it challenging to see past the choir's physical separation from the actors and this scepticism was compounded by Fiducia-Brookes' reports of a difficult process for the participants. However, there was a sustainable aspect to the production. The community choir organisation The Choir with No Name (CWNN) had advised Cardboard Citizens during their Coventry residency. They also work with people who have experienced homelessness and set up a Coventry choir in April 2022, with funding for local opportunities including *CWNN Coventry's Extravaganza* in July 2024. Interestingly, Underground Lights recently revisited using a choir in their production *Lights Up!* (23.2.24). The choir was unexpectedly positioned in the studio theatre's galleries rather than on the stage. This could have been for purely practical reasons due to the number of participants in the choir and the small size of the stage in the B2 auditorium, or else it was a conscious exploration of how a choir can positively interact with both actors and audience even if they are not located in the same performance

space. That there was no discernible power imbalance between the choir in the galleries, the audience below them, and the actors on the stage is possibly a consequence of that embedded role that Underground Lights plays in the social worlds of its participants. If anyone made a mistake or forgot their lines, they could start their song again without judgement from the audience or their fellow performers because their statuses were equitable. Perhaps community choirs who are invited into a large-scale production inevitably face pressures because they are not 'at home' but nevertheless have that huge responsibility of representing the community whilst coming to terms with a very different and production-centred way of working.

Conclusions: Aspects of risk in different social worlds

Intersections between the organisations involved in making Cardboard Camps are illustrated in the social worlds map of the production on p. 147 above. To reiterate, they are grouped around aspects of care, from the City of Culture Trust's caring strand, Cardboard Citizens' commitment to improving services for homeless people and Underground Lights' work with vulnerable participants. I would like to suggest that the opportunity to reflect on a social worlds map after an event could contribute to understanding why the process (in this case of making *Cardboard Camps*) can be experienced so differently by the organisations and individuals involved. I understood these differences as related to aspects of risk and added these to the social worlds map in italics.

The City of Culture Trust were focused on ***managing risk*** because of their level of accountability. This included both their £35 million budget responsibilities and their commitment to enabling people of Coventry to engage in cultural activities, through providing platforms and financing visiting organisations. Cardboard Citizens were committed to ***taking risks*** with using lived experiences as content. I would also argue that their specific objectives respecting social change probably led to a stronger degree of concern for the issue

rather than the individual participants. Underground Lights on the other hand were committed to *holding risk* for their participants through their co-created practices. As discussed above, these practices enabled participants to risk new and challenging methods of performance as well as providing a space to explore lived experiences.

Emma Ormerod, reflecting on her perceptions about the *Cardboard Camps* partnership, was clear in her view that it had risked causing harm to its participants, particularly the incident that had caused visible distress. However, Adrian Jackson disagreed (as Ormerod related) there had been a substantial risk to that participant because the company believed that productive or 'a healthy righteous anger' was required to bring about change. Ormerod admitted to being cynical about productive anger because she saw it as a spectacle that benefited the theatre company rather than the participant and was consequently unethical. As an artistic director, she stated that 'transformation can happen for people, when lived experience is transformed into art, but there needs to be a certain distance between the event and the art.' (Ormerod, 10.12.21). This encapsulates the difference between the companies' practices. Whilst retrieving a traumatic lived experience during a live theatre event may help to bring home a political issue to an audience, for Ormerod it was an unacceptable risk for a participant because they would not have had the time or the opportunity to process those memories through appropriately paced co-creative practices.

Although I would agree that co-creative practices are distinct from production-driven methods of making theatre, and that time-pressured demands of rehearsing and performing can be both challenging and problematic for participants, this thesis argues that imperfect systems like community theatre partnerships can also provide opportunities for participants that they themselves can consider as benefits of taking part. This is not solely dependent on, but would be strongly enhanced by, an understanding of the ethical challenges brought to light by these different ways of making theatre to enable productive conversations between

organisations involved in community theatre partnerships. These will be discussed in the next chapter.

Finally, the series of situation and social worlds mapping featured in chapters two and three should provide a discursive model both for evaluating practices and framing conversations with partners. The next stage of the evaluation process, namely gathering data from participants, will feature in the results chapter, but because both case studies have brought out so many ethical issues, I would argue that it is appropriate to deal with these now.

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CHAPTER FOUR: ETHICS IN COMMUNITY THEATRE PARTNERSHIPS – ART, AGENCY, AND SUSTAINABILITY

Introduction

'Who is the work for? What are we seeking to achieve?' Nicola Shaughnessy (2016, p. 487) presented these two questions as fundamental to considering an ethics of participatory theatre. Citing Raanan Gillon (1994, p. 184), Shaughnessy identified 'autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice' as a framework for ethical drama practices that can also hold the risk-taking inherent in making art (p. 487), whilst remaining grounded in the contexts of the work (p. 490). Literature on participatory and applied theatre has critically addressed issues of agency, instrumentalism, transformation and social change that are relevant to the community theatre partnerships central to this thesis, including how these contested terms continue to impact on ways that we think about evaluation in the context of community theatre, through ethical questions such as whether participation should lead to 'change', and who has responsibility for making those decisions. James Thompson's broad definition of applied theatre is fundamental here, in that 'it is clearly focused on projects that claim they are focused on change, on issues of social justice and on the participation of those who are economically, socially or culturally marginalised, or discriminated against. Second, it is also about practice that is closely connected to particular sites…and attached to the interests of particular communities.' However, as Thompson makes clear, working with communities does not automatically produce social justice because of the particular conditions and circumstances of individual projects (2009, p.5). Context is similarly important to Selina Busby, who states that in her own applied theatre practice, 'ethics is involved at every step', referencing a social justice approach where the ethics of practices depend on a continual revaluation based on the contingencies of a particular project (2021, p. 15).

The notion of a continual revaluation is important to Baim (2020). Having established the ethical values of a project, it is important that these values are reviewed throughout so that facilitators do not lose sight of them when faced by unexpected and challenging situations which could include stakeholders' expectations. Conversely, values may need to be revised in response to a project. Baim notes that these competing demands can be challenging for practitioners (p. 97). Ethics are predicated on a knowledge exchange here, as Baim notes that there can be tensions between participants which need to be unpacked, though in some cases this can be resolved through the process of encountering each other by working together. Citing Freire (1974), such a process can lead to 'collective ways to overcome obstacles and pursue the promises of liberation.' (p. 101). It is important to be mindful of the challenges that maintaining this ethical knowledge exchange can present to both facilitators and participants. Bain refers to James Thompson to underline what can be at stake for all parties.

Thompson was acutely aware of the complexities of applied theatre projects and how these could combine to devastating results in the discussion of a tragic event from October 2000. A devised theatre project had been taking place in a rehabilitation centre in Sri Lanka for former Tamil child soldiers, some of whom had been forcibly conscripted. Increasing tensions with some locals ended in a massacre where 27 young people were killed in an attack described by a survivor as 'an incident…of cutting and chopping.' (2009, p. 15.). Whilst some colleagues did not believe that the devised theatre project which had used reminiscence practices was connected with the massacre, a Sri Lankan colleague asserted: 'Of course there was [a link] (p. 16). Thompson's investigation acknowledged that the use of applied theatre practices in sites of conflict was at stake here, questioning whether 'this is the place where it ends?' (p. 16). The complexities of the local, national and international situations were all inextricably linked with the violence and for Thompson, understanding these intersections was essential to unpacking the limits of applied theatre practices (p. 19). More recently however, Busby has

pointed out that despite this complex, ongoing discussion, vague objectives around changing

people through participation continue to recur (2021, p. 2).

Instrumentalism and agency – hegemonies and counter-hegemonies

Indeed, some of these limits of applied theatre practices have been discussed in detail for

several years, often in the context of how hegemonies can embed instrumentalism. Tim

Prentki had warned in 1990 that unless hierarchies of power within applied theatre

interventions were acknowledged and unpacked, they could continue to produce inequalities

and negatively impact on a community's ownership of the work. In other words, if theatre is

'imposed' from outside, its potential for social change will at best be compromised. Similarly,

Phillip Taylor (2003) noted that the main transformative principle of applied theatre was to

raise awareness, but that it should be 'an actively engaged, critical process (2003, p. 5).

Applied theatre is seen as having the potential to address inequalities and produce change by

attending to local rather than Western theatre practices so that the participants would have

some level of ownership and agency within the process (2003, p. 27). However, Andrea

Cornwall (2008) demonstrated that vague notions of ownership and participation in the

context of interventions have instead facilitated the implementation of 'top-down' objectives

from external agencies. Prentki (2009) was similarly aware that understanding a local context

required a meaningful dialogue between all stakeholders to avoid inequalities being

perpetrated, because imposing Western hegemonies on an applied theatre intervention

succeeds only in embedding discourses that result in passivity rather than active participation,

regardless of the drama practices modelled by the facilitators (2009, p. 182).

For Prentki therefore, failures of applied theatre were arguably due to the colonial

underpinnings of interventions imposed on a community to effect change. Similarly, Julia

Scharinger (2013) argued that even well-intentioned applied theatre projects based on Boal's

practices of providing a 'safe space' for participants to articulate their narratives (2013 p. 6) were doomed to failure because of the challenges faced by practitioners in taking full account of different community knowledges, particularly where longer term and localised investment was not an option. Scharinger argued that hegemonies were much more complex than a simple binary between Western practices and local knowledges, because a continued, in-depth process of dialogue would be required to unpack them. As Thompson described above, there can be a great deal at stake with respect to these intersections of knowledges.

Sheila Preston (2009) argued that whilst accepting that applied theatre can be subject to hierarchies of power relations and ideological narratives particularly when it is used to facilitate a specific agenda, theatre remains an intrinsically dialogic process. Firstly, it facilitates participation, enables discussion, disrupts hierarchies and may consequently lead to action (2009, p. 127), which Preston explains through theories of counter-hegemonies. She sets this out by first citing Gramsci's theory of hegemony to warn that participants of applied theatre could be induced to give their consent to dominant ideologies through the actions of taking part. In response, she cites Freire to note that participation can also counteract hegemonies as well as reproduce them (2009, p. 127). Preston uses Freire to explain that participation is not intrinsically radical but depends on a network of discourses that can either crystallise or facilitate creative transformation. Applied theatre can thus either reproduce or challenge hegemony according to the ideological intentions of an intervention (2009, p. 129). Therefore, Preston (like Prentki) notes that there are hierarchies within the processes of making theatre that must be negotiated. In order to enable 'democratic ownership' of the process, facilitators must build relationships with the participants (ibid). The relational aspect of the process is therefore key to countering hegemonies. This brings to mind Helen Nicholson's concept of a 'relational ontology' within her participant-centred drama practice in which she aims at rebalancing hierarchies by considering participants' own embodied and

tacit knowledges in order to authentically attend to their lived realities within an ethical, participant-centred drama practice (Nicholson 2016, p. 252).

How this applies to the case studies

This discussion of applied theatre practices has aimed to set out the complexities around ethical participatory theatre practices. Addressing instrumentalism through unpacking hierarchies of knowledges depends on a meaningful dialogue with local stakeholders that also takes into account the complexities around local knowledges and how they intersect. Theatre by its nature depends on encounters, but these can be unpredictable and even destructive without a deep awareness of the contingencies of a participatory theatre project. Recalling both Baim's process of reviewing ethical intentions (2020, p. 97) and Busby's social justice approach (2021, p. 15), an ethical practice requires frequent revaluation. To illustrate some of these issues, I will use specific examples from the case studies where in the first instance, an ethical judgement had to be made following an unexpected setback and in the second, how practices can ethically embody care for both participants and facilitators when working relationships become challenging. As I want to focus specifically on examples from the case studies at this point, it should be acknowledged that as mentioned in the introduction above, there are fundamental ethical questions around using lived experiences as content for theatre, relating to issues of consent and to wider questions about potential exploitation. Undoubtably both of the community arts organisations featured in the case studies had looked to prioritise and address these, from Underground Lights' positioning of co-creative practices that centre on their participants, to the decision-making about whether potential content was 'ready' to be transformed into art during the Marlowe theatre case study. I have talked about the decision-making respecting these ethical choices and how this may have led to missed opportunities for participants in Chapter two above, but in the context of utilising devised theatre content, the intentions were clearly to protect the participants. However, as Busby

further points out by citing Helen Kara, there are limits to focusing solely on doing no harm, and ethics should rather be considered as fundamental and as 'affecting everything we do' (Kara, 2018, cited in Busby, 2021, p. 15). An intrinsically ethical approach proved particularly challenging with respect to the Marlowe theatre case study, which brought out two main areas for discussion: 1) the pressures of making theatre, including time limits and expectations, that may lead to the needs of the performance taking precedence over care for participants, and 2) the responsibilities delegated to arts workers.

It was significant that these areas continued to have relevance for the symposium on co-creation discussed in the previous chapter (26.7.24). Firstly, in Glasier's talk about whether it is genuinely possible to challenge the 'systems' of making theatre if participants change their minds about the work, or does the show have to go on because of scheduling, ticket sales, the need for positive media attention, etc. (Glasier, 2024); and secondly, in Alexander's case study about a conflict between participants that she had to resolve by dealing with one individual's anger (Alexander, 2024). There are issues with respect to the responsibilities afforded to arts workers which I will argue have implications for safeguarding. A challenging incident from the *Shakespeare Nation* partnership will be used to highlight these issues and argue that safeguarding policies should be continually subject to evaluation for everyone involved in a process. Co-created practices will then be discussed as a potential solution to the ethical implications of sustainability whilst accepting that the realities of community theatre partnerships cannot always offer the time required for sustainable practices. Accepting that community theatre partnerships are often imperfect systems, issues of instrumentalism and agency will be reflected on in the context of evaluation. This is because any process of evaluation may be subject to instrumentalism if the aim of that evaluation is to provide evidence of something to a third party, as in the case of this thesis that looks at the benefits of

taking part in drama. This question will then prepare the ground for the results chapter that follows.

Dealing with challenging incidents: safeguarding, responsibility and emotional labour

Emotional labour

Emotional labour was named by facilitator and Company Manager *A* from the Marlowe Theatre case study in an interview about their increased responsibilities for the influencing factor of 'mitigating barriers to participation'. It is important to unpack what *A* meant by emotional labour in order to see where this might fit into an ethics of care, because it has become a contested term due to differences in its academic and lay meanings. Arlie Russell Hochschild (2012) named emotional labour as the commercialisation of human feelings in the service industries. In her preface to the most recent edition, she reflected on how listening to trainee air cabin crew being instructed to 'smile like you mean it' encapsulated the complexities of managing personal feelings and producing the required emotions at work in order to encourage a positive response in customers and clients. Hochschild then reprised the essentially Marxist underpinnings of her theory: '…the idea of emotional labor has been embraced by business advice gurus as an undiscovered resource and a means of competitive advantage, and by labor unions as a cause of burnout and deserving of financial compensation.' She attributed this growth in interest in emotional labour as a product of 'the most powerful economic trends of our time', including the downsizing of public services, privatisation and globalisation (Hochschild, 2012, p. 9).

Stulikova and Dawson (2022) noted that academic critical responses to Hochschild have focused on her use of Marxist theory and on gendered aspects of service industry work, although Hochschild wrote more about class than gender. Lay usages, such as magazine articles and podcasts on the other hand tend to focus on individual experiences from private

lives, which Stulikova and Dawson have identified as expressions of a neoliberal feminism through the marketisation of individual and home lives. This is because emotional labour in this context usually refers to the personal cost to women who address and organise the needs of partners, children and other family members. The solution is to redistribute an emotional labour that is seen as an inevitable factor of home life rather than to question the structures that have held it in place. In this sense, the concept of emotional labour has become stretched for Stulikova and Dawson into an 'easy way' of critiquing multiple gendered issues, or any kind of act that an author feels emotional about, because it has lost its original connection with paid employment.

That said, these lay usages of emotional labour offer a language to talk about lived experiences. For the purposes of this research, I will argue that reconnecting emotional labour to a context of (ideally) paid work in community theatre practice can provide a discourse for naming and discussing expectations about facilitating and about the positioning of boundaries at work. In this way, I hope to suggest how emotional labour at work can fit into an ethics of care that includes both facilitators and participants.

Participants' responses to a challenging incident

The following was retold to me by some of the study participants from the Marlowe theatre case study. It was one of the very few occasions that I was not present at the rehearsals as a participant-observer, so I am reporting the details that were agreed upon by those who were present and wanted, or needed, to talk about it. I am including these responses in order to show that there were differences of opinion among the participants ranging from frustration to sadness and anger. It happened on 14.10.21, just before the move to the Marlowe studio and two weeks before the technical and dress rehearsals were scheduled. Therefore, it was quite late in the process. One of the participants, a vulnerable adult who had been part of the

original core group from the Umbrella Centre, joined the session whilst under the influence of alcohol. Initially, this was not noticed by either company manager *A* or Banerjee. *Ca* later explained (16.10.21) that this participant had a history of using alcohol which they were aware of at the Umbrella Centre, but that the subsequent escalation in behaviour had been unexpected. This could partly explain why none of the participants who were aware of their colleague's usage had alerted the facilitators until it was too late to mitigate the situation.

Banerjee had organised the company into groups of three for an activity in which each would take turns to direct the others. The situation escalated into an argument between two participants over the directing task. *Ca* remarked in frustration: 'I was tearing my hair out because [the participant] just wouldn't be directed. Why? Why ruin it? I'm still tearing my hair out about it now!' (*Ca* 16.10.2021). The participant then reacted inappropriately to *A* who had intervened to calm the situation. Actor-participant *M* found it distressing: 'they were racist and sexist comments, angry comments… there is no other way to describe it or excuse it!' (*M* 16.10.21). *Ch* noted 'Someone really, really embarrassed themselves. Really showed themselves...You didn't want to see it. I'm glad you didn't…It was actually horrible'. (*Ch* 16.10.21).

The need for a discursive framework

Following a complaint from some of the other participants, the difficult decision was eventually made to exclude the participant from the process. This was compounded by the fact that there were different issues at stake. Firstly, the excluded participant had been a key member of the company, and their departure left a significant gap in the performance at a late stage in rehearsals. Representing the Learning and Participation team, Jack Finch-Harding (16.3.22) noted that 'the need to get the play on the boards' became more of a pressure due to time factors that were exacerbated by the Marlowe's relationship with their powerful partner,

the RSC. Secondly, there was a lack of guidance for both the learning and participation and professional creative teams in managing difficult and unexpected situations. Thirdly, the safeguarding of employees, including the risks attendant on increased levels of emotional labour could have been better considered.

The participants had agreed a set of workshop behaviours at the outset of the process, but these would have benefitted from being revisited and reviewed at intervals, an ethical practice recommended by both Baim (2020, p. 97) and Glasier (2023, p. 6) above. A reviewed safeguarding and wellbeing plan would have been particularly useful following the move to The Kit. This is because space was becoming a significant factor. The situation maps of the Marlowe Theatre case study showed how moving from the Umbrella Centre led to the loss of its employees' expertise. This in turn had resulted in a significant increase in emotional labour for company manager *A*, who was now solely responsible for resourcing the factor of mitigating barriers to performance. A continued dialogue with the Umbrella Centre on the other hand would have benefitted all the arts workers involved in a knowledge exchange to investigate ways to deal with unexpected and potentially harmful behaviours.

 As it was, there was no guidance at The Kit either for *A*, or for the professional creatives on making decisions about what to do if someone seemed to have abused substances, or indeed how to identify such behaviour. Behaviours can be due to medications and/or mental-health related factors, and the idea of labelling someone as having abused substances is uncomfortable. However, at the very least it would have been helpful to have discussed with all the participants that the same expectations of behaviour as in the Umbrella Centre's ground rules would also be applicable at The Kit. This would have provided the facilitators with a framework for opening a discussion on substance use, and may even have provided an opportunity for the excluded participant to have made a better decision about whether to attend the workshop having used alcohol.

Responsibilities and emotional labour

Excluding the participant was a management decision based on safeguarding, as a formal complaint had been made by some of the company members. However, the issue of safeguarding employees also needed to be addressed. I discussed how the Marlowe's own policies might improve this in a meeting with Jack Finch-Harding and *A*, on 16.3.22. Substance abuse and harmful behaviours towards employees were included in a section on audience behaviours, which had been a topic of concern following the pandemic. For example, a survey by the Broadcasting Entertainment Communications and Theatre Union (BECTU) revealed that from a sample of 1,500 theatre workers, '90 per cent of respondents reported having directly experienced or witnessed poor audience behaviour, and more than 70 per cent felt that the issue is worse post-pandemic. Nearly half of respondents said they had thought about leaving the industry as a result (BECTU, 2023).

It is perhaps unsurprising that audiences were foremost with respect to the Marlowe's safeguarding concerns, but I would also make a case for including the demands of emotional labour and its consequences for wellbeing under safeguarding. The Marlowe Learning and Participation team were driven by mitigating barriers to taking part, which as noted became *A*'s responsibility following the move from the Umbrella Centre. Keeping participants in the process was foremost in how the Marlowe Theatre management were considering the community theatre partnership. Therefore, *A* was asked to consider whether the excluded participants' behaviours were access issues (because they may have been symptomatic of trauma) and therefore *A*'s responsibility to manage, despite the fact that they had felt harmed by the racist and sexist language. In addition, repeated apologetic text messages from the participant led to feelings of guilt and upset. Boundaries had not been considered from a safeguarding aspect, as the participants had all been told that they were free to access *A* by telephone at any time, which again significantly increased levels of responsibility and

emotional labour. I would argue that if *A* had been expected to make and retain an emotional connection with the participants, then this should have been seen as part of their job and managed as such within specified working hours. Participants' expectations could then have been managed so that they understood exactly when they could access support from their company manager and facilitator (*A*, 25.11.21).

Again, there was no framework for a discussion of these issues, nor a clear pathway for the facilitators to deal with the events as they had happened. Input from the Umbrella Centre would have been helpful in devising such a pathway, particularly with respect to dealing with issues that arts workers may not have previously encountered, such as supporting vulnerable adults. Therefore, communication between all parties in a community theatre partnership, even those who may no longer be directly involved in making theatre, can retain invaluable experience during the process. Considering partnerships as a knowledge exchange would be valuable for all stakeholders, particularly in this context of ethical decision making.

To conclude, productive conversations could clarify how to embed ground rules such as those around substance abuse and provide employees with a clear pathway of how to deal with these issues should they occur. For community arts organisations who may be engaging in future partnerships, these knowledge exchanges should take place for the benefit of everyone involved in a project. Safeguarding policies and information should be evaluated to prevent any potential blurring between different interests, such as keeping people in the process, dealing with access needs, safeguarding everyone in the process and confidently negotiating the demands of making theatre with partners who may hold more power.

This 'blurring' of interests was an important issue as to why unpacking the ethics of different issues became challenging in this partnership, because it led to them becoming interchangeable to an extent. The Marlowe Learning and Participation team clearly intended

to share power with its participants through affording them agency and being prepared to make adjustments to enable them to stay in the process. However, in its simplest terms, keeping participants in the process by mitigating barriers also benefitted the performance because the play needed participants. Similarly, the agency to drop in and out of the process had a similar 'flip side' in that keeping the door open for participants to return meant that there was an open channel of communication to persuade them to return. As mentioned, three of the actor-participants, *M*, *Ch* and *P* chose to drop out of the process for reasons of health and wellbeing. That sense of uncertainty caused by the agency to drop in and out slowed down the creative process (as discussed in chapter two above) but also enabled a communication channel with those participants to remain open. Thus, although *M*, *Ch* and *P* interpreted this as kindness, it also benefitted the performance by opening participants to persuasion, because the production needed actors so that it could remain viable and meet the brief of the partnership organisations. The ambivalent nature of these factors therefore further complicated the unpacking of ethical issues.

Putting experience into practice – de-escalating situations

As discussed, the lack of a clear discussion on and ground rules for behaviours related to substance abuse was an important factor in a conflict between participants that escalated into a potentially harmful situation. However, power also played a part in that one participant had refused to take instructions from another. Power is a complicating factor that can be disruptive, as in Alexander's case study where she described 'the power of performance' (Alexander, 2024) and used her own experience and professional knowledge to resolve the conflict. I will illustrate this further by using use an example from *Digital Divide*, where the knowledge and experience of the Underground Lights facilitators were the primary factors for a better outcome in a problematic workshop situation.

It is important to mention that Underground Lights benefits from a range of professional expertise among its facilitators, including working in the probation service, facilitating drama in prisons, and supporting vulnerable families and young people in a social care context. Consequently, the facilitators seem reasonably confident in anticipating and dealing with situations should they begin to escalate. This example involved another group of participants where relations between the group members were affected by anger. In this case, anger was produced because a company member had brought a negative experience into a rehearsal with the intention of processing it through drama. The other members in that group agreed to support this rather than work on their existing material for *Digital Divide*.

The company member had recently had a negative experience at the Job Centre that they wanted to revisit and resolve. However, they played themself in the improvised scene and began to direct their unresolved anger towards the other two members of the group who were role-playing Job Centre staff. These actors in turn were trying to direct the improvised action towards a more positive conclusion, perhaps in order to present possibilities of a better outcome for a future visit, a process of repurposing lived experiences that the company members seemed familiar with. As the anger became audible, Fiducia-Brookes approached to intervene and suggested the group show what they had worked on so far, which brought in the rest of the company to support them and to de-escalate the scene.

It was clear that the actor-participants were reasonably confident at revisiting and reframing experiences as drama, but in this case the experience at the Job Centre was most likely too recent and raw. It was interesting that the facilitators did not interrupt the group to remind them they should have been focusing on their content for *Digital Divide*. For me, this was evidence of their level of experience, in that they were prepared to work around this group by accepting their agency to improvise a different scene in order to support their colleague. When the scene became uncomfortable for some of the participants, Fiducia-Brookes had

continued to treat it purely as drama by asking them to share the work. This enabled her to stop the improvisation and reframe the emotion as content, allowing the situation to de-escalate.

What was interesting to me as an observer was that the whole company could have a conversation about something that had made them feel uncomfortable (in this case loud and aggressive-sounding voices) in the context of whether it worked or did not work as drama. This deflected a sense of personal criticism and avoided any escalation, but it was really a skilful but temporary solution to get the session back on track. The personal relationships between the participants who had been working together were not so readily resolved, as the two company members who had been on the receiving end of their colleague's anger during that improvisation later said that they did not want to be in a small group with that person in the foreseeable future. However, it was significant that Fiducia-Brookes' management of a potentially difficult situation not only calmed the room but also enabled the work to continue for the whole company. The resolution, that these three would not work together in a small group again, was an acceptable if imperfect solution that at least meant they would be able to continue to share the same space. Thus, in agreement with Baim (2020, pp. 90-91), facilitators' levels of expertise and appropriate training are vital to manage relationships, deal with strong emotions and accommodate risk during drama practices based on lived experiences.

Communicating in imperfect systems

Fiducia-Brookes' identification of tensions and management of the situation above was a product of experience and of knowing the participants in an established and sustainable community theatre group. Managing conflict and responding to problems are arguably intrinsic to sustainability, in that these challenges can be more readily addressed during a

long-term community theatre project where participants and facilitators have worked with each other over time. As noted above, sustainability is not always an option for community theatre partnerships which tend to be time limited. Nevertheless, communication between partners can offer support. In the paragraphs above I talked about how the expertise at the Umbrella Centre, a sustainable resource with experience of supporting vulnerable adults, could have been better utilised in resourcing support for the participants in the Marlowe Theatre case study. Partnerships therefore can be supportive if they are considered as (and utilised as) resources in a knowledge exchange from the outset of a project. This should enable more effective communication and foster more positive social relationships between the parties involved. Gabriela Pavarini et al. (2021) argued that attention to different aspects of expertise, experience and approach is necessary when considering safeguarding at any level. They also went on to emphasise that this attention can enable power structures to be interrogated, which is essential when considering a participatory theatre project (p. 1651). It is important to be aware that these considerations require sufficient time for a meaningful conversation between all stakeholders and participants if a clear, ethical framework is to be effective. Although it is unlikely that all unexpected developments within a community theatre partnership can be anticipated, having such conversations early on is clearly a better solution than being reactive.

Sustainability as an ethical issue

I talk about imperfect systems above because they are probably an inevitable consequence of time limited community theatre practices, but as the results chapter will reveal, they can nevertheless be beneficial for their participants despite the problems outlined above. However, sustainability is a hugely important ethical issue in community theatre, from the time factors required by co-creative practices, to whether participants will still have opportunities to take part in drama at the end of a project.

Emma Ormerod (14th May 2022) talked about sustainability as key to Underground Lights'

practices but was concerned that the company's trustees and funding bodies did not have the

same understanding. Ormerod was hoping that the findings of this thesis could contribute to

the evidence base that she regularly presented to the company's trustees and used in

applications for funding. She explained that the strength of the group relied on the consistent

presence of drama in the everyday lives of its members, which as a researcher I agreed with.

However, in addition to longer term investment becoming increasingly hard to find, notions

of sustainability were becoming entangled with a focus on increasing the numbers of

participants. What this meant in practice was an expectation that Underground Lights would

potentially work with a different group of participants for each project, thus reaching a

greater number of people. Ormerod was resistant to this and argued that increasing numbers

did not equal sustainability because losing access to taking part in drama would have a

detrimental impact on the current members' quality of life, which the participants' interviews

had also made clear to me.

Ormerod could appreciate the trustees wanting more 'success stories' but communicating that

sustainability was not in fact equivalent to numbers of participants was challenging. This is

probably symptomatic of how co-created practices can be understood differently. For the

trustees, it could be argued that if everyone who engages with co-created practices

consequently benefits from the experience, then increasing the number of participants would

be the best solution for widening access to these benefits. But as mentioned, this would mean

Underground Lights working with a different group of participants for each project because

their funders were unable to finance the employment of additional facilitators. For Ormerod,

this would be unethical because losing access to drama would have a detrimental effect on the

original participants' wellbeing. A short-term involvement would also mean that new

participants would lose their communities at the end of a project with no further opportunity

to build on these social bonds. This is an example of co-creation and sustainability being imperfectly understood but nevertheless applied as a solution, which was a discussion point at the symposium on co-creation discussed above. This chapter has focused on the need for meaningful dialogue as the foundation for ethical practices, from critiques of applied theatre to an agreement about co-creation and sustainability, but the notion of a meaningful dialogue is also contingent.

What counts as meaningful dialogue?

As discussed earlier, Cardboard Citizens' intention to create a meaningful dialogue that would lead to social change became problematic during the legislative theatre section of *Cardboard Camps*. The decision-makers taking part in the panel discussion were reluctant to accept that they needed to make changes with respect to policy, leading to a negative exchange of ideas with actors and audience members. Although Barton (2021) perceived that some commitments had been made with respect to joining up mental health services with housing, this did not happen during the legislative theatre and the audience (myself included) were left with the impression of a chaotic argument that had to be ended by the artistic director himself. O'Leary had defended the production onstage stating that it had led to policy changes in some cities, but in Coventry, these applied theatre practices seem not to have worked in the same way.

As *Cardboard Camps* had been a means to an end, notably raising awareness and improving local policy, the message was arguably its most important aspect for Cardboard Citizens. This had ethical consequences for the participants in addition to the differences between Ormerod and Jackson regarding risk and 'righteous anger' mentioned above. Fiducia-Brookes commented: 'Partnerships can be a problem because groups have different needs and different ends. If stuff isn't really co-created, say, it's frustrating because the community

deserve a deeper level of engagement than they are expected to settle for. It should be more than an opportunity to take part or work with a certain company, like a reward. It's an opportunity but less of an engagement. They deserve better.' (6.5.22). This could also apply to the opportunities offered by *Shakespeare Nation*, namely the 'rewards' of working with the Marlowe and the RSC, with a tantalising future possibility of performing in a professional production in Stratford-upon-Avon. However, the fact that these opportunities were also temporary relates this 'deeper level of engagement' to Busby's comments about 'cultural capital and deficit thinking that comes with [making theatre] as baggage' (2021, p. 83). Being permitted to access a culturally significant space can ultimately reinforce participants' exclusion because they will no longer have that access when the projects have ended. Busby's attention to the 'baggage' that comes with applied theatre practices is a reminder that this all needs careful unpacking at the planning stages of a project. Ethics are contingent and as such, each project needs to be 'embedded social justice projects that occur within specific community settings.' (2021, p. 15). On the other hand, Busby is talking about a range of practices and as such, there is nothing 'inherently problematic with short-term projects'. (2021, p. 15). Ethically, participants should remain central to a community theatre project, but as I aimed to illustrate in the Marlowe Theatre case study, this can be compromised by other factors in a complex process with multiple stakeholders. The interests of these stakeholders moreover are related to power relations that can drive evaluative processes, revealing the ethical issues underpinning these discourses.

Evaluation

Instrumentalism and evaluation

Ethics is central to evaluation because not only can objectives be set in advance, but results tend to be utilised as evidence for something outside or in addition to the actions of taking

part in drama or making theatre, thus the dual process of objectives and evidences can be subject to instrumentalism. With respect to this thesis, the method of co-constructing data on the benefits of taking part in community theatre was chosen to develop an agentic and ethical means of analysing participation, although the processes of making theatre are also implicated by their stakeholders' priorities. This means that the potential for instrumentalism will have to be taken into account as these priorities and objectives can be included in the conditions of being able to make theatre within a partnership. In the case studies, particularly in the Underground Lights partnership, the partner organisations' priorities ranged from offering opportunities to make theatre in a professional environment to bringing about wider social change through raising awareness about precarious housing and homelessness. In fact, social change was fundamental to both the City of Culture Trust's Producing Team and Cardboard Citizens' practices, shown by the intersections in the social worlds map illustrated in the previous chapter. If stakeholders' objectives and priorities (no matter how well intentioned) continue to be part of community theatre partnerships, then arguably, so too will instrumentalism. Selina Busby talks about a troubling intention to 'change participants' (2021, p. 2) which she later relates to a 'deficit model' way of thinking. This ultimately reinforces existing power relations rather than promotes equity and social justice for participants (2021, p. 79).

It is significant that Busby underlines how objectives about 'change' continue to underpin much applied theatre practice, as critics have consistently focused on the problematics of instrumentalism and objective-centred practices. Applied theatre sets out to facilitate social change as discussed above, which as Petra Kuppers stated is one of the aims of community performance (2007, p. 5). However, social change needs to be considered in terms of power structures such as who is empowered to make decisions on and drive the need for change, who will benefit and how the anticipated results should be measured. Hence, Busby's

warnings about vague objectives relating to change and a deficit approach to results for participants that remain relevant (2021, p.2, p. 83), despite the depth of available research from practitioners like Thompson.

It is also worth considering that evaluation can be problematised by the different priorities of its stakeholders that can also include participants. Some writings on applied theatre have even been implicitly critical of uncooperative participants (Nicholson 2015; Woodland in Preston 2016; Prendergast and Saxton 2013). Preston's (2016) dilemmatic spaces address the problems that participants' agencies may contribute to an applied theatre process in that they may not produce the results that the stakeholders might have been expecting, but she does not discuss the possibility of a project failing as a consequence. Shaughnessy (2016) described a case study where a street theatre project for homeless participants eventually failed despite a promising beginning, because the participants left the project due to unfounded rumours that payment was being withheld from them. Shaughnessy had observed some of the workshops and noted that 'participants trusted the facilitator and were prepared to take risks by working in new ways with potentially sensitive material.' (2016, p. 491). Although the participants' agencies had seemed to be the main driver behind the project's failure, Shaughnessy identified that the range of different priorities from the organisations involved, which included academic assessment, had also contributed to the participants feeling 'used as objects to serve the needs of the student and academia.' (p. 492). Effective communication between stakeholders relates to Thompson's assertion that social justice within a project is dependent on a deep understanding of the social worlds and priorities of all the stakeholders that have interests in that situation.

An ethical evaluation

Ideally, an ethical evaluation would share power with participants, which was my aim in co-constructing the results of the interviews which will be revealed in the next chapter. Reflective processes of evaluation moreover have been suggested by some applied theatre practitioners. Phillip Taylor (2003) considered evaluation as a reflective, longitudinal process that would continue throughout an applied theatre project, rather than as a series of boxes to be ticked. Both the objectives for the project and the process of evaluating these should emerge from the field of participation in order to create a rich description that would provide a more complete picture of participation (2003, p.118).

Taylor however conceded that funding and commissioning bodies had to work within financial structures that would usually require some quantifiable outcomes. As a solution, he suggested an additional qualitative input in terms of interviews and testimonies from participants as a hybrid and by implication more ethical system of evaluation (2003, pp. 117-118). Similarly, Sheila Preston (2009) argued that evaluation should be a discursive and critical process (2009ii, p. 305) which would equitably value participants' responses. A reflective evaluation would arguably be a more successful ethical process because it could critically take into account the hegemonies written into the power structures of community theatre partnerships, whilst making space for their participants' reflections that may or may not contribute to the objectives set by partnership organisations. In this way, I hoped that the study participants' own evidences would become the holistic and individualised process that both Ainsworth and Ormerod had talked about at the beginning of the process. The participants' co-constructed data could then be considered equitably alongside the partnership organisations' own evaluative processes. As noted in Chapter one of this thesis, an equitable consideration of participants' voices alongside any other criteria are fundamental to a holistic evaluative process.

Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter has looked at the complexities around ethical community theatre partnerships, which can be contingent on the different priorities of the stakeholders involved, including participants and facilitators. The deep understanding of local contexts promoted by Thompson and Busby is relevant in all participatory theatre projects and as I argued above, the knowledges of different stakeholders can be utilised to build an effective ethical framework for a community theatre partnership. In effect, an ethical evaluation becomes a knowledge exchange between all organisations involved in a community theatre partnership including stakeholders, arts workers and participants. Evaluation moreover is part of a broader ethical framework that requires a consistent review and renewal process in order to keep it relevant and to anticipate forthcoming issues that may also be challenging. Maintaining the knowledge exchange between all stakeholders could potentially set up a framework for discussing challenges that would include a pathway for responding to them, thus contributing to the safeguarding of everyone in the process including arts workers, through a commitment to an ethics of care. This discussion is relevant to the chapter following that sets out the participants' co-constructed results and also to the second part of the thesis which will look again at the ethics of evaluation, particularly in the health-related context of wellbeing.

References - Chapter four

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CHAPTER FIVE – RESULTS – Participation: 'a risk worth taking'?

Introduction

These results are from the interview process with actor-participants from the Marlowe theatre case studies. With respect to the discussion on ethics above that included evaluative processes, I hoped that these co-created results would show that what was valuable to the participants would encapsulate *their* change rather than changes that the partnership organisations may have expressed through their own objectives and in-house evaluations.

Ca had stated that taking part in drama was 'a risk worth taking' (*Ca* 29.9.21). This was a significant evaluation, because it encapsulated the challenging and unknown nature of the process. For me as a researcher, the statement underlined the need from the theatre company's side, for a carefully thought-out ethical process that would include safeguarding to take account of the risks that the actor-participants knew they would be taking.

The interview process, expectations and researcher bias

The interviews were planned to take place on at least three occasions, ideally during the workshops, the rehearsal period, and following the final performance. In the event, some participants dropped out of the process for several weeks in some cases, for reasons including physical and mental health issues, or because of difficulties with meeting their commitment to the rehearsals. As a result, some actor-participants shared three interviews and others two, at different times during the production process. Therefore, they were not all commenting on the same thing at the same point in time. There were other unexpected factors too. As I was a participant-observer in this process, I was well known to all the study participants. The interviews however felt very different to the interactions and conversations we may have had during the workshops and rehearsals. This was possibly because they were conducted individually and there was less of a free flow of information than in the conversations and

remarks that I had managed to record. Moreover, on reflection, I had never asked the participants where they would like to be interviewed, even though I had intended them to lead the evaluation process. That would need to be a discussion point in the event of future research. For example, I had recorded *Ca*'s first interview in the garden at the Umbrella Centre but moved the next interview to the Marlowe studio because it seemed more convenient at the time. *Ca* however seemed uncomfortable with the change and asked, 'so we're doing [the interview] here then?' (*Ca* 25.10.21).

I had also expected the participants to be more critical of the process in their interviews. I perceived that *Shakespeare Nation* had been a difficult process, such as the late decision to script the performance which pressurised the participants to learn their lines very quickly. Therefore, I expected the interviews to reflect this. Instead, the data revealed a strong sense of consistency throughout, because the actor-participants did not opt to change their minds about what was valuable to them. Although there was one instance of criticism regarding the lateness of the script, it was evident from the interviews that these participants were mostly consistent in what they considered to be beneficial during an imperfect process. As a researcher, I was challenged by their positivity because it had seemed such a difficult process in many ways, but as noted at the beginning of this thesis, some of my expectations regarding the project were likely to be a product of my researcher biases.

That said, it was possible that the theme of the research could have encouraged that positive focus because it was about investigating the benefits of participating in a community theatre partnership, and I had initially posed the question 'What's valuable?' Instead, the actor-participants' clarity and conviction during the process of co-constructing their results suggested that their own experiences were more influential in their decision-making than any positivity that I may have inadvertently suggested. Subsequently, the priorities of the actor-participants proved to be very different to my own within the process which had focussed on

equities concerning the stakeholders' expectations, the needs of the forthcoming production, and an ethics of care for both the participants and employees who were delivering the production.

The co-constructed categories

Co-constructing the results took place after the final interviews. I would have ideally preferred a break between them to give the actor-participants time to reflect, but I had to consider their availability and the fact that they wanted to complete their commitment to the research. The process of co-construction was similar to a reflective form of thematic analysis. It involved a conversation, with myself acting as a 'sounding board' for the participants' reflections. Where it differed from thematic analysis was in the potential for participants to change their minds, such as they may have mentioned an aspect of participation frequently in an interview but then decided that it no longer felt so important. As noted however, the actor-participants remained consistent in what they felt was valuable throughout the process. From 'what's valuable?', three categories were established that I related to broader themes that would contribute to generalising the data.

The interviews concluded with the following co-constructed categories for evaluating the benefits of participating in drama. Among these actor-participants, *Ca*, *P*, and *W* were from the Umbrella Centre's original core group, *M* had been a member of the Marlowe People's Company and *Ch* was a former amateur actor who had joined the process later. These five actor-participants were unanimous in their decision-making on co-constructing their categories for analysis, which was especially significant because they had been interviewed individually. In the light of the question 'What's valuable?', the following emerged: 'family', 'challenge' and 'doing drama'. These categories were then mapped onto the following themes that will be discussed in depth in part two of the thesis, namely community building;

creativity; risk; knowledge; and wellbeing. It should be noted that these themes and categories all intersect to different degrees which will be evident when they are discussed in terms of the supporting literature. The quotations below are in chronological order and the dates are those of the interviews. The three categories of 'what's valuable' make up the titles and these are followed by significant quotations noted by the actor-participants during the process of co-constructing the results.

Family

Family is the category that equates with the themes of community, creativity and wellbeing, as the praxis of drama created social bonds that the actor-participants not only valued, but expected would endure, creating a sense of wellbeing. As wellbeing was predicated on community building, this is significant in the light of ethical questions about sustainability. Although this was a time limited project, these participants expected their community to endure because they felt 'at home' both at the Umbrella Centre and at The Marlowe. Although they did not have a permanent base to continue to practice drama, and not everyone in the company was able to join the *Rebellion* project mentioned earlier, their community bonds at this stage at least felt resilient. 'Family' moreover included the production team as well as the other actors.

Quotations from interviews with *Ca*

For *Ca*, family would include both support and challenge, which was consistent with their identity as an individual who had overcome trauma and adversity.

'The group is important, its banter, someone to give you a kick up the arse sometimes…it's like sparking off each other.'

Ca was very open about why they valued the opportunity of rising to a challenge, because they had felt defeated in the past. Performing with its attendant risks could model overcoming adversities, but Ca was also open about the need for support that underpinned their identity.

'I lost confidence in you know, performing with a group because my first husband… jealous… followed me everywhere, I couldn't even sing in the choir anymore. He was always accusing me of stuff. I had to give it up.' (Ca 22.9.21)

'Here, people know me, they know when I'm not being myself. They've helped me through some tough situations.'

'I wanted to meet new people too, and I felt encouraged to speak up and make changes to my lines. People from the Marlowe... they come to lunch at the Umbrella Centre as well, yes, they are supportive.' (Ca 25.10.21)

'Behind the scenes at the performances, we talked to each other and gave each other compliments and practiced with those books they gave us with all the words in.'

'So now it's over, it's been like a family, me and the others who were in it, we'll still meet up here.' (Ca 17.11.21)

Ca was clear about how taking part had created a community, but they were also aware that it depended on them continuing to share a space that had been significant to the building of those social bonds (the Umbrella Centre) so that the experience of taking part could retain its relevance to their everyday lives as part of the participants' social worlds.

Quotations from interviews with *W*

The following quotations are from *W*, who was always positive in the interviews. Positivity was arguably a strategy that *W* had consciously adopted. They had encountered past trauma that they sometimes talked about in the workshops, but always with a sense of positivity,

because *W* fostered a self-image of resilience and energy. Although other conversations revealed that *W* believed they had had more to offer with respect to the production, such as when they had asked about taking on a leading role (8.9.21), they did not refer to any sense of disappointment in the interviews and instead focused on trust.

'I'm a people person. I like meeting new people, it's just...I like working with new people.'

'I like to mingle, yeah, I've always liked that.' (*W* 8.9.21)

'In the show, the people totally listened to me, all the way through, it was trust. It was about trust. You have to go with the flow and trust the director.'

W's perceptions about community were very much bound up with reflecting that sense of positivity and importantly for them, an identification with theatre.

'Everyone was great! They helped me to perform.'

'The Marlowe cared about us, it was quite good...they looked after us, the actors. We're like the Marlowe family. A real community.' (*W* 17.11.21)

Quotations from interviews with *M*

Similarly, M valued the sense of a community that had enriched their everyday lives:

'I wanted to meet new people. I was so pleased, so privileged, so elated. Meeting people I would never normally have met. People in the industry I wouldn't have had the opportunity to meet. People from the Umbrella Centre, it's incredibly rewarding to see how they flourished week after week.' (*M* 29.9.21)

M was the only participant who spoke directly about safe spaces in the quotation below, but trust was an important part of everyone's account. *Ca* had mentioned trust in terms of '*they*

know when I'm not being myself" (25.10.21), *W* that they had trusted the director (*W*

17.11.21). Trust therefore is an aspect of community that was valuable to the participants.

'We were sharing stories in a safe space, it was about trust, respect, being brave.'

'When I had to drop out, they said please come back! How lovely to be welcomed back! It

was the best thing, the best thing that happened.'

'We will all keep in touch, we are determined, we shared so much and saw each other more

than our own families!' (*M* 10.11.21)

Quotations from interviews with *Ch*

Ch associated community with making connections and feeling valued.

'It's about family. It's about finding your family, like the song. I've found my family.'

'There were deep connections.' (*Ch* 29.9.21)

'When I had to drop out, they made me feel so needed, so wanted. I could come back in and

pick up where I was, the show would actually…it would fit around me. It was so important to

hear that. It made me want to come back and I could change the part that was written for me,

I didn't want all of that in, some things about my experiences with my own family, and it was

fine to cut bits of it out, so it was more like my own. Because of how I present, I think people,

audiences, expect me to tell a certain type of story, and I wanted to show them something

different!' (*Ch* 10.11.21)

Quotations from interviews with *P*

P out of all the actor-participants had found the process to be very challenging. I would argue

that as with *W*, there had been a tendency for them to be intentionally positive in the

interviews. *P* focused on being supported on their return and did not refer to the combination

of pressures that had made them drop out. Although I perceived that the actor-participants were being consciously positive (perhaps as a reaction to the more formal interview process), that positivity was nevertheless the strongest emotion that they took away from the process.

'Absolutely, I felt absolutely listened to. I felt my needs were important. This whole experience has been like a family to me, everyone, everyone from the Umbrella Centre and the Marlowe...Atri as well... I came back and it was so good, because when it was hard, everyone just supported me.' (*P* 10.11.21).

Challenges

Challenge relates to themes of risk and knowledge, but also wellbeing in the event of finding joy in overcoming a challenge. As a result, the actor-participants' perceptions of challenge tended to be mainly positive but, on some occasions, hinted at negative experiences. Out of all the participants, *Ca* focussed more on challenges throughout, intersecting with other categories including 'family' above.

Quotations from interviews with *Ca*

'I'm out of my comfort zone, I'm excited but scared.'

'I enjoy a challenge, but I've had my confidence kicked in the teeth in the past.'

 'Learning lines with dyslexia is a challenge but I know that nerves can be good, it's a risk worth taking. I get tongue tied with the words and I was nervous at first about making suggestions about my lines.' (*Ca* 22.9.21)

Ca was distinct about any barriers that they might have had with respect to performing. They also had a clear mission statement. It was interesting to see that their motivation to take part was less about enjoyment or creativity at this stage, but more about striving to overcome something they perceived as an adversity.

'I want to prove that people with mental health problems can do acting.' (*Ca* 22.9.22)

Moreover, *Ca* was clear about the difficulties they experienced at different stages of the process. They were also prepared to be critical and had the confidence to speak out during the rehearsals.

'I don't really know what to expect because we make it up as we go along!'

'I was nervous at first about meeting people from outside the Umbrella Centre because sometimes my anxiety kicks in when I don't want it to.' (Ca 25.10.21)

'Until we got the actual paperwork, the lines, my anxiety was sky high. I don't know what happened, but then it calmed down. I had to keep saying it over and over several times to get it stuck in my long-term memory, some words stuck out more than others.'

'The audience was slightly nerve-wracking but I went through with it'

'I don't know why but I'm more confident now. I don't want to say ego, but we put ourselves forward more'. (*Ca* 17.11.21)

That increased confidence *Ca* talked about was also a wellbeing benefit. They were also thinking in an evaluative sense, expressing specifically how that confidence had been increased by participating.

Quotations from interviews with *W*

The following extracts are from *W*, who was enthusiastic from the beginning about taking part: 'Whatever it is, I'll do it! I'm in!' (*W* 21.7.21). *W* had long-standing ambitions and goals with respect to acting despite setbacks and stressed how they were prepared to meet challenges.

'The pandemic, it was different obviously because when Covid happened we had to meet online and it was a screen, but meeting face to face, it's better that way, well for me it is, because on screen you can see the talking and stuff like that, I mean everyone talking all at the same time, but I think for me face to face, its perfect...yeah, some people didn't have computers so they couldn't get online.'

Similar to *Ca*, *W* saw challenge (or risk) as inevitable with respect to theatre.

'Being in the Marlowe theatre, I've done big plays at school before, I know what it's like. I've done two plays at school, and I know...obviously it's going to be a bigger audience now, a big audience and it's going to be fun, it's going to test me, if I can...if I've got the nerve, if I've got the nerve to do it.' (*W* 8.9.21)

'It's a bigger challenge because it's a bigger audience, it's testing. I promise you; I like challenges.' (*W* 25.10.21)

In their final interview, *W* acknowledged that some things went wrong, but again, there is a sense that risk is inevitable in theatre.

'I did maybe mess up a few times. Some of the words sometimes were difficult, I couldn't say them all properly, but I didn't feel too much pressure on me.'

'And I like new challenges as well. My challenge is the bigger stage. Bigger and bigger stages!' (*W* 17.11.21)

Quotations from interviews with *M*

M had been a member of the People's Company and worked at the Marlowe in a front of house role. Like *W*, theatre played a central role in their life, and they had ambitions to attend drama school in the future. English is not their first language, and they felt that this knowledge had enriched their encounter with the text. Similar to *W*, they had an emotional

connection with practising drama. The first two quotations refer to *M*'s initial role as a 'champion' before they were incorporated into the cast.

'Every week is a surprise. My role is supportive, my role is to stay on the sidelines and support the Umbrella Centre.'

'I'm part of a group, I'm not the focus of the audience, I'm not seeing myself in a lead part, I see myself as a reassuring presence, I can support with my enthusiasm.' (*M* 29.9.21)

'The play was about making mistakes, which was OK. It was about being human and sharing our vulnerabilities. I didn't get to tell my own story; I told Shakespeare's story which was OK. It was hard going at first, definitely hard. Some people dropped out, I had to drop out myself for three weeks for health reasons.'

'I'm sad it's over. I'm so sad it's over.' (*M* 10.11.21)

Quotations from interviews with *Ch*

Ch joined the process about halfway through. They explained that they had lacked the confidence to 'walk through the door' initially but was encouraged to take the risk after meeting and talking to *P* about the workshops (15.9.21).

'I had a very bad experience on stage once, I always wanted to act, I had done lots of different roles, but then I had this bad experience.'

'I've had some problems in my everyday life, with people and with my health, different things…a lot of stress and I've often felt I couldn't carry on with this, but I believe if it's meant to be it will be.' (*Ch* 29.9.21).

Quotations from interviews with *P*

Although *P* was one of the first actor-participants to agree to take part, they did not return the signed consent form immediately, presumably having needed more time to think about their decision. Like the participants quoted above, they saw challenge and risk as inevitable, but like *Ch*, was apprehensive of the anxiety that this might cause.

'Having an audience...there are some people coming who are critical of me, who will criticise if I make a mistake and they'll say "you missed that" or "you forgot that line", and I'm anxious about that.'

'I'm worried about improvising, that's not my...it's not me. I hope I don't have to improvise.' (*P* 29.9.21).

Like *M* and *Ch*, *P* dropped in and out of the process, referring to a number of personal issues. Although all the participants saw elements of risk as an inevitable factor in the challenge of making theatre, some saw dropping out as essential to self-care. This clearly meant that the Marlowe participation and learning team had effectively communicated the participants' agency to drop in and out of the process. The fact that a high proportion of participants exercised this agency suggests that it contributed to an atmosphere of trust that enabled people to come back when they were ready. Thus, in one sense, although the instability this created was potentially damaging to the production and put pressure on both the production team and the other participants, it could also be seen as a strength of the process as it fostered inclusivity and gave people space when they needed it. Although it could be argued that there was little choice but for *A* and the production team to go that extra mile because it was a small company that needed all its actors, the participants themselves had a very positive perception of the agency they were afforded and the welcome they received when they returned.

'After I had to miss out a few weeks, when I came back we were in the Marlowe studio. The costumes were something different! I really liked the costumes…but I didn't like waiting in the green room, waiting around on my own.' (*P* 10.11.21)

Doing Drama

The final category was the opportunity to take part in drama, which intersects with all four themes of community, creativity, risk, knowledge and wellbeing. One of the most common motivating factors for the actor-participants' involvement with *Shakespeare Nation* was that they had previously had some experience of taking part in and finding joy in creative activities, but for some, these experiences had been lost due to life circumstances.

Quotations from interviews with *Ca*

'I've never really done acting, I've enjoyed performing in choirs, I was a soprano, but I don't really sing now, because I'm more like an alto, when I tried singing, they said "here comes the cat's chorus", so…. but I like to keep my mind stimulated, so I thought "have a go". (*Ca* 29.9.21)

As *Ca* tended to focus on challenges, this context was one of the rarer occasions when they talked about enjoyment. Additionally, there is a wellbeing factor in being heard more clearly, as not being heard had been the cause of some of their past trauma.

'I felt encouraged, I found it was fun. I can project my voice now for when I'm doing reports [at work]. Everyone can hear my voice more clearly.' (*Ca* 25.10.21)

Ca clearly articulated how they hoped to be able to continue to take part in drama. *Rebellion*, to reiterate, was the RSC's 'reward' for the participants, or their sustainability aspect, where the regional casts of *Shakespeare Nation* would have the opportunity to perform on the stage at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. This was an exciting, but daunting prospect.

'If I could, I would carry on doing drama. I might be in Rebellion, yeah, I could do it, but then I might not, but there might be another opportunity for doing drama, or at least going to the theatre. I used to like going to the Pantomime at the Marlowe and if I'd got the money I'd definitely go more.'

'After the first performance, my anxiety calmed down more, I was doing OK... We've got the bug. We've definitely got the bug now!' (*Ca* 17.11.21)

Quotations from interviews with *W*

For *W*, drama was fundamental to their creative identity.

'It's my dream job. Drama, this is what it means to me. It was one of the jobs I wanted to do when I left school, but it didn't go that far. It's like my number one job because I just like entertaining people. Just like that. Drama means to me...getting into a different character, it just lets out my imagination.'

'I wanted to be part of it, when I heard they were going to be doing drama here. It sounded just about perfect.' (*W* 8.9.21)

'The rehearsals are going great, having the costumes makes me a different character. It's part of my acting, so I'm ok with all the changes. It's just practice.'

'I'm buzzing! The audience makes me feel my acting is better. People make me feel I'm a better actor. The audience will see what I can do! They'll know I'm there, making an impact. I'm here to make an impact.' (*W* 25.10.21)

'I hope to do more acting, I hope so. I've got the confidence for it now'.

'Now it's over, I want to move onto the next thing. At the end of the day, if you don't get picked there'll be another one. I'm going to grab every opportunity. There's the Henry VI

[*Rebellion*] *and there's a writing thing coming up at the Marlowe...I've done some writing, so yeah. I'm a Plan B sort of person, I always have a Plan B. I think ahead.'* (*W* 17.11.21)

Quotations from interviews with *M*

Similarly, drama was part of *M*'s creative identity.

'I've always loved drama. I looked for theatres and workshops when I moved here, I found the People's Company and the Marlowe changed my life.'

'I was intrigued by Shakespeare, as a professional interest, and I like fun, the fun in Shakespeare. I like silly… silly humour. It's very British isn't it…Python? Silly is what I like to do!'

'Here, we are all bringing our little pieces to the big picture. I'm excited by every exercise we do.' (*M* 29.9.21)

'The acting...the play was about us. The characters were us, but a Shakespearean version of us! Even the costumes, they have a history too. Some are even older than me... that history!'

'What have I always loved about theatre…? I'm easily moved, and I want to be able to do the same to others. It's powerful, transporting. My everyday life is very ordinary but with drama I'm transported to other places.'

'What's left after the process? I'm elated, privileged.' (*M* 10.11.21)

Quotations from interviews with *Ch*

Ch likewise emphasised the importance of drama in their everyday lives, but with a sense of urgency because of having lost the opportunity in the past. There was a sense of resolution similar to that expressed by *Ca*, in that they were both determined not to lose their access to creative activities again.

'I think I was always meant to do drama. I could always do certain parts that I was good at, I always got those parts. I was in theatre groups like musical theatre. I did all the comedy roles, the young romantic roles...But I believe that if my God intends it, it happens. This is so important, it's the most important thing that's happening to me.' (*Ch* 29.9.21)

The actor-participants all saw the audience as being important to their aesthetic experience, even *Ca* who had initially found it 'nerve-wracking' (*Ca* 17.11.21). The role of the audience is crucial in community theatre partnerships because they are also affected by what they see on stage. *Ch* recalled that connection and identification between actor and audience that enhances the experience for both.

'Being in a show is like being a cog in the workings of a clock. But you never get to see the face of the clock. Only the audience sees its face.'

'Sharing with the audience, when you share that knowing look, walking out on stage when they laugh with you.'

'If its right, if the time's right, I'll think about doing Rebellion.' (Ch 10.11.21)

Quotations from interviews with *P*

P had expressed anxiety about acting and learning lines because of the prospect of being recognised and judged by audience members. However, they were very conscious of the power of costume and its role in presenting an image. Like *Ca*, they used clothes to express personality and imagery. For both these participants, what they enjoyed wearing was part of a process of mediation, where worn images and objects can become metaphors for dealing with adversity.

'Doing drama again, acting as well as getting back to the group was important but putting on the costume felt real'.

As *P* had found both scripted and improvised theatre challenging, overcoming these challenges was a joyous process, where the audiences' laughter had them feel more confident, perhaps drowning out any anticipated criticism.

'I said I didn't want to do improvisation, but I did alright… I did it and not just that, I think I actually did it well! People laughed because they got that whole joke when we [P and Ch] kept coming on and wandering right across the stage explaining the plot!' (*P* 10.11.21)

To conclude this chapter, these are the results of the actor-participants' co-constructed results, where they decided the categories that had been valuable to them during the process, namely family, challenge and doing drama. My role as a researcher in the co-constructed process was to map these categories onto themes that will be discussed in depth in part two of the thesis: namely community building; creativity; risk; knowledge; and wellbeing.

Conclusion to part one of the thesis

Part one of the thesis addressed the first and second research questions: 1) *How can community theatre practitioners enable agency for their participants within a framework of stakeholders including funding bodies and partnership organisations?*

2) *What then are the benefits of taking part in a community theatre process, and how can these be evaluated?*

These were addressed through two main processes of evaluation, namely the case studies and the co-constructed results. The case studies featured an evaluation of practices based on situational and social worlds mapping. This was supported by a discussion of significant workshops and practical sessions during the processes which addressed how decision-making impacted on participants' agencies. The second research question was addressed by the participants' interviews and co-constructed results which revealed their own evaluations of the benefits of taking part in these community theatre projects.

The situation and social worlds mapping that visually represented the two case studies were presented as models that community theatre organisations could use to evaluate both their own drama practices and their relationships with other organisations. The longitudinal interviews and the process of co-constructing results also produced the participant-centred data gathering that the methods chapter underlined as being essential to the evaluative process. The results then prepared the groundwork for the theoretical investigation of the benefits of participating in drama that will make up part two of the thesis. Ethics was given its own chapter because it represented a significant area of analysis for both case studies.

The case studies also enabled a broader discussion of drama practices. If we consider the best co-creative practices as a standard for enabling drama to become a beneficial part of the social worlds of its participants, then we must also accept that for opportunities for community theatre to take place, these best practices, particularly the sustainable elements are not always possible. Community theatre partnerships were discussed as imperfect systems but despite so many factors being involved, including the interests of partnership organisations, participants were clear about the benefits they derived from taking part in a time-limited project. The fact that there was a surprising consistency in these individual testimonies (the relational aspects of community building, the enjoyment of being creative and practicing drama, and a growing confidence in dealing with challenges) indicates that a theory of taking part in community theatre partnerships could possibly be built. At the very least, a deeper understanding of these benefits of participation could be gained by looking at these results in general, in the light of literature that will both support and challenge these findings in the second part of this thesis. Further interviews with facilitators in part two will also contribute to a rich picture of the benefits of taking part in community theatre.

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References - Chapter five

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PART TWO: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Part two of the thesis addresses the third research question: *What then are the benefits of taking part in a community theatre process, and how can these be evaluated?*

This will be further broken down into two sections. The first is a 'deep dive' into the participants' results, supported by relevant literature. The second is a closer look at ideas that could underpin a theory of participation, namely 'therapeutic' spaces and aesthetics.

The research question will be addressed by a theoretical discussion based on the actor-participants' results, using their co-constructed categories of 'family', 'challenge' and 'doing drama' which were mapped onto related themes of 'community building', 'creativity', 'risk', 'knowledge' and 'wellbeing'. The discussion will be supported by literature, beginning with the benefits of social interactions through participation in the arts, or in other words, the theme of community building, which will intersect with the theme of creativity. Most of the themes will intersect to some degree. The risk factors of participating in creative communities will be discussed in terms of how the art produced and the participants' knowledges tend to be valued. Research on the 'uses' of creativity including the politicised aspects of the creative industries will take the discussion into a wider consideration of evaluation. This will address the question of whether aspects of instrumentalism are inevitably written into evaluation, which tends to be part of funding patterns and systems for arts organisations. Participants' agencies within these systems will then be considered with respect to theories of hegemonies and counter-hegemonies.

Recent research on arts and health will then look at the different ways that wellbeing aspects of participation have been evaluated. In the light of the discussion on counter-hegemonies, the chapter will investigate whether a participant-centred evaluation could be acceptable to both arts and health organisations and will feature recent research by Nucleus Arts.

This will lead into the possibilities of building a theory of participation around participants' aesthetic experiences and drama practices. These practices could facilitate 'therapeutic' spaces to foster the social, creative and health-based benefits of participation in addition to an encounter with beauty fostered by a creative community that is productive of wellbeing.

The conclusion will focus on how some of the actor-participants have continued to take part in drama which suggests that the benefits they identified in their results could be sustainable, at least if other opportunities to participate become available. Community theatre partnerships will finally be assessed in the light of the participants' experiences and the research questions as to whether they are an effective means of enabling people to take part in drama and access the benefits thereof.

CHAPTER SIX - CREATIVE COMMUNITIES: DRAMA, KNOWLEDGE,

AND RISK

Introduction

Chapters six and seven in this thesis will investigate the five themes I identified from the actor-participants' co-constructed categories, namely community building, creativity, risk, knowledge, and wellbeing. Literature will support the investigation in order to generalise the participants' results into a broader discussion on the benefits of participating in community theatre partnerships. These themes will intersect, as 'community building' and 'creativity' are brought together through the identification of creativity as a social phenomenon. I will then argue that creative communities can potentially hold the themes of 'risk' and 'knowledge'. This will operate through the challenges of making theatre and its associated risk factors, whilst keeping the participants knowledges at the centre of the community theatre process, including evaluation. The final theme of 'wellbeing' will be unpacked in Chapter seven following, which will expand the discussion into the current conversation on arts and health.

Here, concepts of hegemonies and counter-hegemonies will be looked at in greater depth to draw evaluative processes into the discussion, particularly with respect to discourses on the 'uses' of creative practices that remain inscribed with instrumentalism and intentionality. There are two strands to this discussion, the first being how instrumentalism may inevitably be inscribed within evaluative processes (however well-intentioned) because outcomes for participants are often measured against stakeholders' aims or objectives, which may set out to change participants and/or their environments in some way, as in the earlier discussion on applied theatre practices. As evaluation is an inevitable part of the funding systems that

enable community theatre to take place, the challenge (as this thesis has stressed) is to keep participants and their knowledges at the centre of the process.

The second strand will be about the economic evaluation of community projects, where the uses of creativity will be related to commodification. The commodification of creativity is arguably part of a historical process related to wider questions about knowledge, culture and power that has recently repositioned arts organisations as operating as businesses first and foremost. The economic value of the arts tends to be seen as a strength, but arguably it is also a limitation, because it can tie arts organisations to politicised objectives. From an economic perspective, community theatre groups tend not to generate consistent income streams particularly as they often do not have a permanent base or regular audiences. This can also make them less visible and as a result they tend to be positioned at the margins because they have to adapt the spaces that are lent to them. That said, operating at the margins can potentially be an advantage for community theatre organisations.

In summary, the participants' results, and their broader themes will drive this discussion on creative communities and evaluative processes. Marginalisation, commodification, and the uses and applications of creativity will be challenged through theories of hegemonies and counter-hegemonies. Issues of knowledge, culture and power in relation to participation will then be revisited in the final chapter of this thesis that will investigate possibilities of a theory of participating in the imperfect systems of community theatre partnerships.

Creativity as a social phenomenon

The interviews with the actor-participants from both case studies usually focused on positive aspects of taking part in creative activities, such as how participating in drama had enabled *N* to rediscover positive experiences by recalling what they had been 'good at' (*N* 29.6.21). A supportive creative community moreover was essential to this process of retrieval from a

knowledge base of lived experiences which, as we have seen, was central to the facilitators'

practices in Underground Lights, but was less successful as a strategy in *Shakespeare Nation.*

Firstly, there were few opportunities to share lived experiences during that process, and

secondly, the participants did not have any power over decision-making on content, nor did

the directors share their reasons for that decision-making. That said, 'family' was identified as

valuable to the participants, which shows that community building became a strength in that

imperfect process. I will argue that the results indicate that creative processes are

underpinned by community building because these practices are relational. In order to unpack

this social phenomenon of creativity, theories of social representation and psychologies of

creativity will be introduced, followed by examples of creative communities from the

literature.

Theories of social representation

Social phenomena of creativity are broadly located within psychologies of creativity and

theories of social representations which became current in the second half of the 20th century.

With respect to theories of social representations, Moscovici (1961) described how ideas and

values are assimilated by communities to enable them to be communicated via a 'consensual

universe'. New phenomena are 'anchored' and compared with the 'already known', thus

reducing the potential threat of the unfamiliar. Such a process could describe how ideas could

be evaluated, exchanged and agreed on within a creative community or another social

organisation.

Moscovici provides a model of a collective process of evaluation and decision making, but

some commentators have equated this potential threat of the unfamiliar with a key

assumption about creativity in that its products should be both novel and useful (Stein, 1953;

Barron, 1955). I will return to this in a discussion on the uses of creativity which will follow,

but at this point, I will focus on the social aspect of creativity and how creativity as a social phenomenon accommodates psychologies of creativity. Psychologies of creativity are important to this discussion in different ways. Here, they help to unpack creativity's social functions, but like Moscovici above, are also relevant to the forthcoming discussion on the 'uses' of creativity.

Psychologies of creativity

Vlad Glăveanu (2010) illustrated how concepts of creativity had shifted from the workings of an individual genius to products of social activities and decision-making. I will talk more about Glăveanu below, but at this stage I want to begin with the creativity paradigm. The discussion on psychologies of creativity will then move onto Winnicott's (1971) theory of play, and Barbara Rogoff's (2003) theory of how creativity is inscribed within different social contexts. Glăveanu's 'HE, I, WE' structure (2010) illustrates the main paradigm shifts concerning creativity. They progress from creativity being first regarded as a unique quality pertaining to a (usually masculine) subject as in post-Renaissance concepts of 'genius'. Secondly, creativity was seen as an individual character trait for responding to problem solving and innovation (as in research on the uses and applications of creativity that will be discussed later in this chapter). Thirdly, an understanding developed that creativity functions in a social context because it relies on interactions. In this sense, creativity is understood as socially constructed praxis.

Donald Winnicott's concept of play and transitional objects (1971) is significant in this third stage of Glăveanu's model because of the role of creativity in a social context. Children gain agency over objects in a safe space by assigning them interchangeable functions and identities. Winnicott saw play as a process by which children could creatively explore their identities within the norms of social organisations. In this way, he made the connection

between play and the social functions of performance and ritual, where the relationship between individuals and their external realities can be rehearsed and remade (Winnicott's theory will also support the discussion on drama practices later in this chapter).

Barbara Rogoff's description of creativity being inscribed within interactive social contexts also belongs in Glăveanu's third stage (2003, pp. 256-258). Note that by creativity, Rogoff means the process of thinking to consciously adapt to different social situations, as children adapt their behaviours at home and at school. Creativity in this sense is about adaptation. Recalling the discussion on constructivism in the methods chapter of this thesis, she also refers to Vygotsky's theory of how children learn their cognitive tools through their cultural community (Vygotsky, 1978, cited in Rogoff, 2003, p. 258). Here, cognition is about acquiring knowledge through experience, so Rogoff has taken account of the contextual nature of this psychological usage of cognition. Moving onto creative practices, she described how different cultures have different uses for literature and its role in developing cognitive abilities. Literature serves to 'facilitate particular forms of thinking' in the context of a community (2003, p. 261) and in doing so, producing literature becomes a creative act. Rogoff rejected the idea that thinking 'takes place solely in the skull' (2003, p. 271), as thinking involves numerous relationships with the environment and with others. Cognition therefore is distributed across communities. Rogoff understood creative writing in terms of sharing with present and future readers, with artists being involved in a 'kinship' with their predecessors; 'historical and future involvements with other people' (2003, p. 272), or discussions that seemed insignificant but on reflection were revealed to be central (2003, p. 273).

In the above paragraphs, I have talked about psychologies of creativity in order to support creativity as a social phenomenon, citing Glăveanu's creativity paradigms (2010) at the outset. Later, Glăveanu (2014) warned against using these paradigms unquestioningly. This is

because he noted that creativity often lacked definition in much of the psychology-based literature and was referred to in terms of product rather than process: 'a two-factor criterion of novelty / originality and value / usefulness / meaningfulness / appropriateness'. (2014, p. 14). I will return to Glăveanu's critique later in the discussion on the uses of creativity which will feature a range of psychology-based literature including Mark Runco (2015) and Teresa Amabile et al. (2005, 2012, and 2016). At this present moment I will stay with creativity as a social phenomenon, having looked at how psychologies of creativity have informed this concept. Next, I will move the discussion on to creative communities, which is where the themes of creativity and community building intersect.

Creative communities

This section will use examples from the available literature to investigate this intersection, particularly with respect to the importance of mutual support in creative communities. Many of these examples from the literature consider amateur and professional communities separately, and there is a tendency to see the former as being more concerned with providing a supportive environment whilst more demands are expected in a professional environment. This has implications for community theatre partnerships which aim to provide their participants with opportunities for accessing professional spaces and producing culture to a set of agreed standards, whilst also balancing a level of care and support for them.

Domain theory

The first examples from the literature use domain theory. Domain theory has been used to investigate whether creativity is either an individual or a transferable skill by evaluating its influence across a number of different domains, such as the arts, scientific investigation, or problem solving (Baer, 2016). Zorana Ivecevic et al. (2007) used case studies to evaluate whether creativity was domain specific. The authors provided categories of perceived

benefits that their participants might gain from engaging with creative communities, and the resultant case studies were evaluated by the respondents themselves. In summary, 'everyday' or amateur creativities were associated with 'wellbeing' whereas professional communities were associated with greater risk. Although these results corroborate the supportive nature of creative communities, their division into amateur and professional activities suggest that everyday creativities are safer, perhaps presenting a creative comfort zone. Similarly, Runco (2004) had invoked this hierarchical divide to argue that so-called 'big C' creativity was valuable because it was uncommon and consequently (I would argue) of economic importance through income generated by audiences that is eventually passed on to a limited pool of arts workers and producers. On the other hand, everyone would have the potential to engage with amateur creative communities that can 'afford' to focus on wellbeing.

Benevolence and 'everyday' creativities

For some researchers, wellbeing and 'comfort zone' creative communities have been associated with traditional arts practices. Nadezdha Lebedeva et al. (2019) conducted a qualitative study that aimed to investigate a general, although nuanced, factor of creativity through domains of professional and amateur arts practices in rural and urban settings. They used different personal values as categories to assess their respondents' perceptions of risk and wellbeing whilst engaging with creative communities. The authors had some expectations at the outset of their research, particularly with respect to their categories of tradition and benevolence. They had expected the values of traditional practices would be inhibiting for their participants, but this was not found to be the case. Benevolence meanwhile was a much more important category than they had expected, including within the domain of a professional theatre company in an urban setting, where they had expected that competitiveness would be more significant. Their findings revealed that benevolence, and by

implication mutual support, is a significant underlying category in both amateur and professional creative communities.

Charlotte Doyle (2016) also wrote about supportive aspects of professional theatre practice, taking note of both Mihaly Cikzentimihaly (1992) and Amabile (1996) in looking at the environmental factors that would foster positive affect in creative communities. Her aim was to investigate the role of social relations in theatre with a view to contributing to research on other domains of artistic practice. Like Lebedeva et al. (2019), she recognised benevolence as a factor for any creative community, with the difference that she saw this potential at the outset rather than at the conclusion of her research. However, with respect to this research, professional creative communities and their workspaces are not accessible unless they initiate an invitation to participants. There should therefore be an awareness of these potential power imbalances in these studies on supportive and benevolent aspects of creativity.

Agata Groyecha Bernard (2018) looked further at the category of benevolence. Her research is significant because it underlines how benevolence is not an inevitable consequence of creativity as it depends on environmental factors. Bernard's emphasis was different to that of Doyle (2016) and Lebedeva (2019) as she was not researching creativity as an end in itself, but as 'cognitive flexibility' that in the right environment could produce social change through empathy. She described empathy as a process of 'perspective taking' but noted that this depends on environmental factors such as fostering positive affect and resolving peer pressures and negative experiences. Significantly, Bernard recognised that empathy is a social process rather than a personality trait, underpinned by creative flexible thinking. Her research is also a timely reminder that notwithstanding the positive findings of many of these studies, a supportive community requires work from its members to build these relationships

With this in mind, Romina Elisondro investigated positive affect and empathy among creative communities in two significant qualitative studies. The first asserted that creativity was always a social process (2016), produced by a socially constructed, internalised knowledge base. She was probably influenced by Glăveanu here, as she evoked the 'WE' paradigm to support the social aspects of creativity (Glăveanu and centrality of the knowledge base will be returned to in a later section that looks more specifically at drama as a process of externalisation). She concluded that creativity is always contingent on support networks and environmental factors. This would suggest that some creative communities may be more supportive than others. It is important to consider this, because Elisondro's findings tend to be strikingly positive.

In her research on women's everyday creativities (2019), Elisondro noted 'a process of meta-cognition'; that involved cooperation, self-reflection, empowerment and identity building. This included recipients as well as makers of the work. She noted that the community had an evaluative culture, and that its individual members actively encouraged self-awareness and reflexivity in responding to their work. This combination of support and evaluation fostered positive affect but did not produce a comfort zone with respect to creativity. Elisondro identified an 'ecology of everyday creativity', where identities and social norms could be questioned and repositioned. In this respect, her findings are similar to Nicholson's ecologies of amateur theatre (2018). Her participants also reported negative outcomes, failures and frustrations, but as they were concerned with improving and making their work, Elisondro argued that the process was empowering and agentic. Finally, she concluded that as creativity was not domain specific, more qualitative research was needed in other creative ecologies. This is a familiar conclusion to qualitative research on participating in the arts, as will be shown in the next chapter, but in this case, as the investigated community is so positive and successful, I would agree that further research would be useful to uncover any potentially

problematic areas. However, if taken at face value, Elisondro's findings on her participants'

layering of self-reflexive evaluation and identity building could be applied to an established

community theatre group that supports its members whilst evaluating and improving its work.

This could be an example of a creative process of evaluation that would keep participants at

the centre.

The uses and applications of creativity

Literature on creative communities has revealed positive aspects of how the themes of

creativity and community intersect, but these themes are also related to the uses of creativity

which must now be considered. This will comprise two discussions. The first will look at the

uses and applications of creativity in terms of problem solving and increasing production in

the workplace. The second looks at the commodification and politicisation of creativity

through its economic value. The first discussion will return to psychologies of creativity and

how theories have been applied to a very different understanding of a creative community

(usually based in the workplace) where its evaluative function both considers and assimilates

creative products in terms of 'novelty / originality and value / usefulness / meaningfulness /

appropriateness'. (Glăveanu, 2014, p. 14). These criteria are variations on concepts of 'new'

and 'useful' which Glăveanu argues are long overdue a rethink: 'novelty and originality need

to be evaluated in relation to a socio-cultural background. And this is even more the case with

usefulness or value. Useful for whom and when would be the key interrogation here.' (p. 15).

Runco (2015) went further in his critique. He was sceptical about the social perspectives of

creativity, because he felt that they were limiting, i.e., the 'product' view of creativity became

inextricable from social perspectives because of these concepts of usefulness and validation

(2015, p. 23). This argument is relevant to the uses and applications of creativity, because

creativity should not have to prove itself to be 'useful', particularly as usefulness is both

contingent and subjective, as noted by Glăveanu (2014) above. Runco's main point, however, seems to be about the importance of individual creativity, and the value of laboratory-based psychology experiments in understanding creative processes (termed 'parsimonious creativity'). Social aspects on the other hand are 'side effects' (2015, p. 25), but as I mentioned at the outset, I do not think that the social can be extricated from the creative because creativity is a social phenomenon. Runco's interpretation of individual creativity moreover seems limited, because in his example of the Mona Lisa (2015, p. 27) he did not take into account the workshop practices of Renaissance art, nor the complexities around commissioning art that would have relied on religious and artistic communities and networks. He further argued that using creativity to create an individual identity, or 'self actualisation', did not 'require an audience' (2015, p. 28). Runco therefore takes an arguably limited view of the social perspectives of creativity, ignoring the fact that identities can often be validated by a peer or friendship group.

Although I agree that creativity is more than a product to be evaluated on criteria of novelty or usefulness, Runco's attention to the individual is arguably a reaction to the more limited interpretation of social factors in theories on the usefulness of creativity. That said, both Runco and Glăveanu agree that creativity is more significant than its perceived applications, regardless of their differences with respect to social factors and individual creativities.

Psychologies of use and application

Psychologies of creativity have played an important role in research on the uses and applications of creativity, particularly with respect to productivity. These studies are said to take a pragmatic view of creativity. Affect theory has been instrumental in taking account of the working environment and how social relationships at work impact on creative thinking. Similar to theories of social representations, this became current from the second half of the 20th century. Daniel Katz (1964) noted that creative behaviours were necessary for efficient

organisational functioning, because problem solving aspects of creativity were essential to an organisation's survival and hence, could be instrumentalised. Having recognised the importance of creativity as a survival strategy, there was a need to evaluate creative thinking in employees in order to maximise their potential, particularly around problem solving. The means of evaluating creativity in the workplace has traditionally been psychometric testing, but Teresa Amabile argued that individual testing did not address relationships within the working environment. This meant that social aspects needed to be considered (Jeffries, 2012, p. 212). She began working on the Consensual Assessment Technique (CAT) in 1982, which as its name suggests, took account of evaluation and assimilation with respect to new ideas. I would also mention that these connections between creativity and productivity at work are also related to arts and health (which will be discussed in the next chapter) because health-based outcomes are frequently connected with employment.

With creativity identified as a phenomenon related to improved productivity at work, creativity then required a means of evaluation, hence Amabile's research. Although the CAT became known as the 'gold standard' of creative assessment (Barth and Stadmann, 2020), the process focused only on current levels of creativity in individual employees (Baer, 2016). Consequently, Amabile became more interested in the role of affect theory in developing creative potential, having conducted a qualitative study on affect and creativity at work (Amabile et al., 2005). It was noted that fostering positive affect in the workplace could create moods and emotions that would promote productive working relations, which Amabile subsequently returned to in the process of her research. (Amabile and Pillemar, 2012; Amabile et al., 2016). This is also significant in that it demonstrates how Amabile recognised the centrality of social aspects of creativity, including the evaluation and assimilation of the criteria of 'novel' and 'useful' (Amabile and Pratt, 2016), which is linked to creativity as a social phenomenon discussed above. To conclude, Amabile argued that a productive

organisation requires a socially agreed set of criteria generated within a highly activated working environment that has made the best use of theories of affect. This is important because Amabile is clear that the criteria should be contingent to the individual working environment in order for it to benefit from positive affect, which suggests that this would involve a process of discussion and feedback, rather than an organisation bringing in a consultant as a short-term solution.

Positive and negative affect

James Kaufman (2018) significantly questioned whether creativity would always lead to positive outcomes. He pointed out that decision-making was key, with regard to who was permitted to evaluate and how they would choose to do this. He was arguing against making assumptions about the function of creativity as a problem solving or innovative tool in a work environment, which had become the basis for a consultancy industry. Kaufmann further argued that research should be grounded in real life case studies to evaluate whether an industry built around creative mind-sets would achieve its outcomes. He also stressed that evaluation would depend on the social context of the studied environment, or its balance of positive or negative affect. Similar to Amabile, social factors are key.

Social factors complicate a perceived linkage between creativity and positive affect in the workplace, and increased productivity. While fostering positive affect can be seen as providing an environment which attends to the wellbeing of staff through an attention to social factors, Kaufmann argued that this does not mean that the workplace necessarily becomes more productive. The impact of negative effect on productivity has begun to receive more attention, as researchers have recently turned to a more complex model that takes into account 'high and low activation' of both positive and negative affect. Hector Madrid et al. (2018) argued that negative affect does not necessarily diminish problem solving, as a

negative working environment may pressurise staff members into more efficient decision-making (although a negative working environment will likely have a high turnover of staff which could impact on productivity). A low activation of positive affect on the other hand can create a 'comfort zone' mood, which would be unchallenging and thus detrimental to productivity. Therefore, it is the level of affect that is significant rather than its positive or negative aspects. Low positive affect and 'comfort zones' will also be significant in a later section on perceptions about 'amateur' creative communities. The notion of a 'comfort zone' impacts on the expectations that both audiences, creative professionals, and funding bodies may have about the 'standards' of performance expected from participants in community theatre partnerships. These expectations and 'standards' will be relevant to the section below on the politics of the creative industries.

To conclude, the above discussion on Amabile's evaluation of creativity and affect theory in the workplace and some responses to this illustrates how creativity has become commercialised. The applications and usefulness of creativity have become embedded in concepts of productivity, which in turn have contributed to a thriving consultancy industry that arguably fails to acknowledge that measures of creativity are deeply contextual. Glăveanu's investigation of the psychology of creativity (2014) argued that creativity risked losing its relevance in a broader social context if it became limited to producing knowledge in a workplace environment: 'corporate training is full nowadays of pseudo-scientific conclusions and tricks of the trade coming from supposed creativity studies' that aimed to apply formulaic thinking to workplace problem solving and product development (2014 p. 25).

Arguably, these pragmatic approaches that focus on creativity with respect to productivity in the workplace are further evidences of how arts organisations became perceived as creative businesses. Peter Gahan et al. (2007) argued that this process was an ideological shift in that arts workers were increasingly expected to produce business models and generate capital which were becoming the criteria for their survival. In addition, the nature of project funding was increasing workloads and exposing arts organisations to the risk of their work being evaluated by their stakeholders in relation to their own priorities and objectives. These ideological aspects bring this discussion to wider questions of knowledge, culture and power in the context of participating in the arts.

The politics of the creative industries

The role of industry in theories of creativity will form a strand that will continue in the next chapter on participation and wellbeing through a discussion on how a significant industry has developed around concepts of wellness and wellbeing. I will argue that the wellness industry and its focus on individual responsibility for our own wellbeing is underpinned by the aim of keeping people productive at work. As discussed above, creativity has likewise become an industry, both in respect of utilising affect theory to maximise productivity in the workplace, and in expecting arts organisations to generate capital for their own survival. As Gahan et al. (2007) pointed out, the 'useful' aspects of the creative arts had been extended to their contribution to the economy. Mike Wayne further argued that the marketisation of the arts has become a method of control. Fiscal targets and checkpoints written into funding applications make arts organisations run themselves like businesses, which he argued has an ideological rather than a pragmatic purpose. Wayne described the marketisation of the arts as a part of a historical transition centred around 'New Labour's' uncritical approach to the economy. This was a consequence of the then government's ideological move away from social democracy to the marketplace as part of a strategy to remain in power. Although the marketisation of the

arts was nothing new, as Arts Council reports from the mid-1980s onwards will attest, Wayne made a useful point in arguing that celebrating the contribution of the arts to the economy throughout the 1990s went some way to earning the consent of arts organisations with respect to this ideological shift (2018, pp. 175-176). Wayne's model of a historical transition from social democracy to the dominance of the market is useful in the context of how community theatre has been positioned from the late twentieth century to the present.

Although Wayne does not write about community theatre specifically, Francois Matarasso (2019) traces its history along similar lines, but with an attention to participation. Historically, participatory arts according to Matarasso were at the forefront of the democratisation of culture, but subsequent attacks from the political right eventually succeeded in driving participation towards spectacle for its own sake, and to supporting the heritage industries (2019, p. 146).

This can be seen as part of a long process of depoliticisation and marginalisation, which had repercussions for both access to culture and negotiating power structures. Community arts leaders like Matarasso argue that participating in the arts means producing as well as accessing culture, because gaining the necessary skills is an empowering process (2019, p. 137), but in order to achieve this, participants need both time and the availability of resources. Producing culture through participating in the arts is a necessarily iterative process which current models of project funding cannot always provide due to time and resource constraints, similar to the ethical issues around sustainability that were discussed with respect to the case studies. Following on from Wayne (2018) moreover, there is arguably a shift or repositioning of the 'useful' creative arts from their economic contribution towards a more explicit instrumentalism. Matarasso's description of the reciprocity between a 'remedial' art which targets chosen groups with specific objectives and a culture of evaluation (2019, p. 156 and p. 161) is a useful reminder of where arts practices can find themselves positioned with

respect to stakeholders' priorities. Moreover, if the function of participatory arts is to be 'remedial', there are consequences for how its participants can access and produce culture. There could be expectations that the work produced may be 'less professional', especially if it is not presented to an audience and consequently marginalised as 'art'.

Low expectations around community arts are something that partnerships can address through the opportunities they offer to participants, such as accessing professional environments and performing to an audience. However, if participation is seen as an opportunity first and foremost, the knowledge-exchange between professionals and participants risks becoming unbalanced because the role of the professionals becomes directed towards 'polishing' the raw material of the participants' lived experiences to an 'expected' standard of theatre. As noted with respect to the case studies, the needs of the forthcoming production in the Marlowe studio combined with decision-making around what the participants were expected to be able to achieve impacted on their visibility. In effect, some participants had considerably more stage time than others.

It could be further argued that performing in a professional theatre space is inherently compromising to an equitable knowledge exchange between participants and creatives because of the pressures involved in making theatre over a limited timescale. Although the actor-participants' results were unanimously positive as discussed above, this study must also challenge these imperfect systems. To this end, there are opportunities with respect to operating in the margins rather than in partnership with a better resourced and more powerful organisation. Helen Nicholson's (2016) practices demonstrated how prioritising her participants' agencies can enable social and political change to take root through accessing creativity. Consequently, the participants produce their own knowledges that challenge traditional methods of practicing drama through a counter-hegemonic process.

Having investigated the first two themes of creativity, community and their intersections at length in a wide-ranging discussion, the remainder of the chapter will investigate the themes of knowledge and risk. Knowledge will underpin notions of agency and counter-hegemonies, while risk factors will be discussed in the context of the imperfect systems of community theatre partnerships and questions of who can access creativity. Finally, attention to the knowledge base that enables lived experiences to be externalised as drama will conclude this chapter.

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Transformation and agency

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Transformative practices in the margins

Helen Nicholson's research comprehensively investigates social bonds and affect within a participant-centred practice which she describes as a 'relational ontology' (2016, p. 252), or a deep engagement with her participants' lived experiences, knowledges and states of being. As Nicholson's research has developed notions of transformation in participatory theatre, her practices look to individual agencies, which differs from the notion of collective action within a political context of transformation. Emma Govan et al. (2007) described processes of creativity and political action that underpinned the participatory community theatre practices of the 1970s and 1980s, associating transformation with activism and agency. These practices produced a transformation termed as a subversive creativity, because it was associated with a rejection of social norms in favour of a more authentic presence (2007, pp. 29-30). These collective actions also tended to have an agenda which asked questions about power and decision-making in community theatre practices that aimed for democratisation of participation. However, the activism of these community theatre practices could result in the cause or political messaging becoming more important than the individual participants, which

is one of the issues I noted with respect to *Cardboard Camps*. Nicholson's practices aimed to address this through a deeply personal concept of agentic participation.

Both Nicholson and the earlier activist practices described by Govan share a position on the margins because as Leila Jancovich (2012) argued, notions of participation in an arts-based context usually remain centred around access to and knowledge of mainstream culture rather than cultural democracy. In semi-structured interviews with Arts Council staff and local authorities on decision-making with respect to participation in the arts, Jancovich's thematic analysis revealed the most commonly used terms to be hierarchical: 'legitimacy…raising awareness…educating participants' (2012, p. 6). Jancovich reported an additional barrier in an assumption expressed by some of her study participants that engaging communities in decision-making was too costly in a political climate of austerity, as the process required extensive groundwork (2012, p. 6).

For Nicholson, transformation is arguably more similar to an evasive or liminal (hence marginalised) quality, implying a more nuanced and personal experience for the participant. Nicholson has investigated reminiscence theatre practices with older participants in which memories are re-embodied through active listening and sharing (Nicholson, 2009). Although these practices are a different and less visible form of political engagement, this does not mean that they are less effective as a consequence. Freire had warned against a Neoliberal pessimism that is 'a systematic refusal of dreams and utopia.' ((1997, published 2004, p. 110). Inequalities are thus inscribed within the acceptance that as nothing can be changed, therefore nothing will be changed. Nicholson (2009) likewise argued that participation could produce change within a positive framework of individual gains. Her reminiscence theatre participants were placed in control of their own knowledge production by sharing their memories in an agentic process that produced action through reflection. These memories then became transgressive via their re-embodiment through dialogue (2009, p. 272). However, it is

not clear whether re-embodiment is always a transgressive process, or whether the participants' taking possession of their memories is transgressive because older people tend to be a marginalised group who have limited opportunities for agency, especially when their everyday lives can be closely managed. The following section will look further at the political advantages of operating in the margins.

'Activist' participation

In foregrounding connections and shared intersubjectivities rather than offering transactions such as opportunities in exchange for participation, Nicholson's relational ontology (2016) is a more nuanced version of her account of gifting or sharing applied drama practices, often from different cultural settings (2015). As mentioned above, the paradigm of creativity and political action that Govan et al. (2007) described as underpinning earlier participatory community theatre practices, had fragmented in the light of the political realignment and funding cuts of the 1990s. Consequently, participation was no longer perceived as inherently radical (2007 p. 249). It should also be noted that a distinction is observed, between 'activist and consumerist' forms of participation (ibid). Consumerist participation refers to some immersive theatre events, where the experience is part of a transaction, whereas for Nicholson, activist participation necessarily takes place on the margins, in small, decentred activities. Recognising the tendency towards self-surveillance promoted by discourses including social media, Nicholson posited a 'slower' process of participation (notably without the pressures of performance) which will allow space for reflection within an agentic social space (2016, p. 266). Jenny Hughes and Nicholson further defined evasiveness as part of a reflective ecology of practices which is an 'imaginative response' to fragmentary contemporary life (2016, p. 4-5 following Isabelle Stengers' (2005) model), which potentially eludes dominant narratives of mainstream social groupings.

However, if such a participatory drama operates in marginalised and liminal spaces at a slower pace away from the pressurised mainstream of making theatre, the subsequent lack of visibility challenges both funding patterns and processes of evaluation that depend on time-bound benefits. Evaluation moreover is necessary to the funding applications that most arts organisations must negotiate in order to survive, despite the risk of art becoming remedial as a consequence, which is how Matarasso (2019, p. 156 and p. 161) described such a culture of evaluation. Moreover, negotiating with partners and funding bodies that have more power and resources implies that community arts organisations may have no choice but to operate within these dominant narratives. This would be a survival strategy, but it may not inevitably result in instrumentalising participants' experiences. This is because dominant narratives are nevertheless inscribed with counter-hegemonies produced by the knowledges of participants within a context of cultural democracy.

Hegemonies and counter-hegemonies

At the outset, it should be noted that counter-hegemonies are never a 'catch all' formula for agency because of the potential for creating an unhelpful binary opposition. Although taking part in subsidised arts is not equivalent to enabling a dominant ideology any more than the presence of participants automatically creates a counter-hegemony, systems that enable community theatre to take place are inextricably involved with issues of culture and power that need to be addressed, not least because processes of evaluation can be politicised by these power structures. The imperfect systems of both case studies revealed power imbalances between the different organisations that resourced these community theatre partnerships. With respect to hegemonies and power structures within the arts, Raymond Williams' writings (1958, 1977) remain relevant and useful to the current discussion. As Williams' writings engage with lived experiences and their relationship to producing culture, they are relevant to this broader discussion on knowledge production, taking into account the

social and political implications of participating in community arts whilst being subject to evaluative processes. These include expectations about what sort of art will be produced, either 'higher' or 'popular' culture. This is another unhelpful binary that nevertheless remains influential, perhaps part of the baggage of applied and community arts practices that Busby mentions (2021, p. 83).

Williams (1977) asked the question of how to participate in cultural forms without being subsumed by the dominant ideology although he had already gone some way to addressing this in *Culture is Ordinary* (1958), an earlier work that challenged the aforementioned binaries around 'higher' and popular culture. Arguably, the question remains relevant, as so many arts organisations are now in partnership with larger organisations like the heritage industries, as noted by Mark Wayne in his conference paper (2021), and the implications that these power imbalances have for evaluative processes. If a partner organisation has low expectations of participants' work from the beginning, then evaluation will likely focus on 'remedial' gains because that work may not be deemed suitable to measure against the dominant critical standards of theatre as 'high' culture. Williams' solution was that there were always counter-hegemonies at play (1977 pp. 108-114), but as noted, this is not a 'catch all' for dealing with power structures. As Matarasso points out, it could create a potentially binary opposition which would fail to take into account the multiplicities and complexities of participants' knowledges. Matarasso consequently reframes counter-hegemonies as intersections (2019 p. 171).

However, Williams saw counter-hegemonies in terms of multiplicities that are always inscribed within disparate meanings, values and practices (1977 p. 115) of any agreed discourse which could include evaluating participation in the arts. Thomas (2021) explained that Williams had raised the question about participating in culture to open a debate around why culture seemed to have become separated from the materiality of the people and objects

that produced it, and to draw attention to those materialities of everyday lives that had produced works that were eventually agreed on as being culturally significant. The important point here is that lived experiences produce art and culture, therefore participating in the arts gives people the opportunity to participate in culture, which is as Matarasso stresses, a fundamental human right (2021).

Participants will produce their own cultural objects by working on their own lived experiences, and as actors by embodying the materiality of their work through the power of performing, even if their own knowledges have limited influence in decision-making processes. Whilst theories of counter-hegemonies should not be utilised as a simple solution to the effects of power structures and dominant narratives, the messy processes of making theatre are nevertheless porous, facilitating both agency and transformation to produce a performance as a cultural object.

Affective labour

Producing culture requires work. In the case of devising theatre, it requires externalising lived experiences to create content, which can become transactional within systems that facilitate participation in culture, such as opportunities to access and perform in cultural spaces. Helen Nicholson's (2017) writing on affective labours in cultural participation addresses this (I want to distinguish participants' affective labour from emotional labour discussed above, because in the context of this research I am associating emotional labour with paid work): 'participation…generates social networks, but as I have argued, the association between affective labour and neo-liberal knowledge based economies places relational art and participatory performance in a politically ambivalent position.' (2017, p. 125). This ambivalence is worth considering in terms of who benefits, particularly with respect to the tensions that underpin some of the notions about the separateness of professional and amateur

communities. Nicholson (2017) also looks at this in the context of the creative ecologies of amateur theatre companies, but the pressures on an amateur theatre company to produce a product for an audience can nevertheless make demands on the affective labour of its participants. Working to devise content, learn lines, rehearse and encounter audiences are among the risk factors that make up participating in creative communities. The next section will look in more detail at risk, its intersection with community, and how participants can be supported.

Risk factors

Intersections with creative communities

Arguably, a supportive environment that can hold risk may be more visible in community theatre, because the performance aspect is different. There are not always the same pressures with respect to product, but there are other issues including objectives and agreements with stakeholders and time constraints with respect to content, particularly if a performance is part of the deal. Both community theatre partnerships in the case studies started out as devised pieces based on lived experiences but were subject to the intentionalities of the production teams that worked to turn them into theatre. Audiences would validate the *Shakespeare Nation* project, whilst Carboard Citizens hoped for an impact on local policy making. In a creative community such as the one described by Elisondro (2019) above, the process of validation may ultimately be positive, but it depends on a high level of agency from the participants. One of the participants from Underground Lights remarked during a rehearsal for *Digital Divide* that 'you have to take control of your own lived experience. To do that, you need to have the confidence to know how far you want to take it.' (*Anon* (c), 28.5.21).

Without that level of confidence, there is a risk as to how a participant feels able to deal with ownership of their lived experience. The difference with the Marlowe theatre case study was

that these participants had not experienced that sustained and confidence-building involvement in co-creative practices like the members of Underground Lights. However, despite the risks inherent in recalling negative lived experiences which was certainly a factor in the memories shared by actor-participants *Ca*, *Ch* and *W*, this was not raised in any of the interviews which, as discussed in the results chapter, were largely positive. This suggests that their creative community of participants and theatre professionals had fostered a strong sense of positive affect and trust despite some of the problematic aspects of the partnership that were previously discussed. It is possible that the social bonds valued by the participants produced this positive affect, which could also imply that creative communities are robust when a process becomes challenging.

Communities can be powerful, and it could be argued that systems (and individuals) that enable participation can also function as gatekeepers because they have to be negotiated in order to take part. As such, people who might be perceived as presenting a risk could be excluded from accessing creative communities. I should make it clear that I am not making a comparison with the situation that led to a Marlowe theatre participant being excluded, because this was unforeseen and reactive. By gatekeeping I mean decisions that are made in advance about who should be able to access creativity in order to minimise risk and exert some control over unknowable factors that might 'negatively' influence a creative community. Decision-making on inclusion and exclusion is usually delegated to a few individuals who hold power within the organisation which potentially risks a problematic dichotomy of inclusion or exclusion. This will be further discussed in the context of who has access to creative spaces, and aesthetic judgements about what is acceptable as art in a community theatre organisation.

Although decisions are made about what is 'acceptable' in terms of expectations, particularly in the context of a community theatre partnership that is tasked with producing a piece of

theatre for a paying audience, this does not mean that aesthetic choices necessarily result in an assimilation of homogenised or risk-avoidant content. Sandra Jovchelovic (2007) described the potential for rethinking and reinterpreting these assimilated phenomena through social interactions that will bring difference into play, in this case the social interactions of drama practices.

Risk and exclusion

Responding to Kaufmann's questioning of positive and negative affect (2018), Roni Reiter-Palmon (2018) questioned why creativity was usually assumed to be a positive indicator. She argued that a creative mind set could lead to socially produced negative outcomes, using domestic terrorism as an example of 'bad' creativity, whilst accepting that the outcome may be seen as 'good' by the perpetrator's own community. She does not research any specific examples, however, as her main point is that context can determine whether creative acts are seen as positive or negative. Consequently, social contexts are key to questions on who has access to creative spaces because in some circumstances, being creative can present a risk.

Nick Crowson and Adrian Jackson (2021) addressed this in a webinar that focused on consequences of the Vagrancy Act in the West Midlands. This was also an area of strong interest to actor-participant *R* (2021), and the concerns they expressed in their interview about who might be excluded from the City of Culture events. Archival evidence about how the homeless were criminalised showed how people had to be creative in their survival strategies, but that this creativity was often deemed to be inappropriate, such as 'disrespectful' humour, or disturbing street singing. Court papers claimed that these people were 'frightening', because of their 'appearance' which located them in the 'wrong' social spaces. Being creative in the 'wrong' social spaces eventually led to them being criminalised (Crowson and Jackson,

2021). Important issues remain about the control of creative spaces, and who is permitted to access them.

Knowledge and drama practice

This final section of the chapter will look at drama practices, because less has been said about what makes doing drama and making theatre special in the light of the study's themes of community, creativity, risk, and knowledge which aimed to generalise the actor-participants' results into a broader discussion. Returning to these results, despite the unknowables, the risk factors and the problematic discourses that ran through their community theatre partnership, the participants all recalled positive experiences in response to the question 'what's valuable? As mentioned, this was unexpected because I had found the process to be challenging to the point of being negative on occasions, particularly the decision-making processes that had seemed to exclude them. Arguably there is something intrinsically powerful about drama that can make even a challenging process an ultimately positive experience, and I will suggest that knowledge is an important factor in this.

Knowledge is key to practising drama, as Matarasso asserted to participants: 'you are the world expert in being you!' (2021). The knowledge base belonging to each participant then acts as a crucible when it is accessed creatively. This is partly because knowledge includes the tacit, the embodied, or the intuitive, which Ai-Girl Tan (2015) argued, should be taken into account when considering how creativity works. Glăveanu (2012) placed the knowledge base foremost in his research into traditional arts practices in rural Romania. He was aiming to reevaluate the traditional folk-art forms that he was particularly interested in, in this case, painting eggs to celebrate Easter which had a long tradition based on a range of iconic designs. He argued that the works produced were not copies, but agentic responses to an externalising of traditional patterns. Having practiced them within their creative communities,

the artists would subtly reinterpret these patterns that had been internalised into their own knowledge bases. Glăveanu was aiming to formulate a theory to reposition creativity that did not differentiate between amateur and professional communities (2012, p. 10). The process of externalisation would then become an agentic reconfiguring of that internalised knowledge which would be accessed through retrieval skills. This is useful to a discussion about drama, particularly devised and co-created practices, because it articulates how the knowledge base can be accessed and creatively externalised to produce content, given that the participants have agency over how this is to be expressed. Glăveanu argued that existing research on creativity could be repositioned to articulate how externalising knowledge can produce creative identities (2012, p. 14).

Although I have described Glăveanu's model as useful for understanding how retrieving and externalising knowledge works with respect to drama, it does not take into account the intersubjective and embodied knowledges that come into play in a relational creative act. This relates to the theories of play introduced earlier and how this could contribute to understanding the process of internalising these social relations. Leo Vygotsky (1978, p. 57) argued that creativity develops in childhood to facilitate interpreting, challenging and discovering an identity and a role within existing social relationships. These social norms must be negotiated in a continual process of interpretation, as they tend to be revealed piecemeal and can consequently be misunderstood. It is worth recollecting Winnicott's concept of play and transitional objects (1971) in this context, as the process of assigning new roles and identities to playthings enables children to rehearse and perform identities and social relationships within a designated space.

Thus, creativity becomes central to negotiating interactions within a space between the individual and the social. This space can be described as a liminal, a stretch or a third space, but these different metaphors all signify places where making art takes place. Similar to

Jovchelovic (2007), Winnicott had also noted that children's agentic transactions within play are not necessarily about conforming to expectations and social norms, as they can also be chaotic and potentially subversive. However, play is not drama, because as a process of remaking social interactions, play can only be evaluated when tested in a 'real life' social environment. Drama does not usually have this level of real-life risk, but there is a risk nonetheless in stepping into a space where you may have to go somewhere new and different.

In its simplest terms, drama is a process by which a participant uses retrieval skills to access lived experiences from their knowledge base. This process of rediscovery becomes embodied as these knowledges and lived experiences are externalised. As to the retrieval skills that are needed for the process, I would argue that they are dependent on the social and environmental factors that make up the creative community. In a community theatre partnership, the process must also operate within constraints such as time, resources and relationships with stakeholders. There are also risk factors that again depend on the ecology of a particular creative community, particularly with respect to using lived experiences as theatre. This, as noted by the Underground Lights member quoted above (*Anon* (c), 2021) is contingent on the participants' agency and their levels of confidence in the process.

Conclusion

This chapter has investigated intersecting themes identified from the participants' co-constructed results which aimed to generalise these results into a broader discussion. Creativity and community intersected in creativity as a social phenomenon, then via creative communities to the uses and applications of creativity in the workplace, where productivity intersected with knowledge to investigate the creative industries and the operations of counter-hegemonies. Risk then intersected with creative communities to look at both positive and negative aspects of taking part. These included how creative communities can hold risk

for their participants, whilst decision-making by gatekeepers can impact on who is permitted to access creativity. Finally, the fundamental role of the participant's knowledge base in drama practice underpinned the retrieval and externalisation skills essential to making creative content. Community and its intersections with the final theme of wellbeing will inform the next chapter. Social factors will be shown as underpinning dialogues on arts and health, without losing sight of the fact that creativity as a social phenomenon is also fundamental to wellbeing.

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CHAPTER SEVEN – PARTICIPATION AND WELLBEING: DISCUSSIONS ON ARTS AND HEALTH

Introduction

Wellbeing was directly talked about by actor-participants from Underground Lights, particularly *N*: 'It's definitely helped me with my agoraphobia, because obviously getting out…It's helped me with my depression, and I feel it's a lot of fun when we do the work. It's so different to everyday life, or rather its different to my old life. It's one of the best things in my life, Underground Lights.' (*N* 29.6.21). For *Ca* from the Marlowe case study, wellbeing was also linked to challenge and visibility: 'I want to prove that people with mental health problems can do acting.' (*Ca* 22.9.22). I noted a tendency for the actor-participants from the Marlowe case study to link health-based issues with other categories such as 'challenge' above, which I would attribute to differences between the processes, particularly with the sustainability factor of Underground Lights. A longer-term engagement may have given participants from the Marlowe case study the space to think more about health-based issues and make connections, though it is also possible that as the Underground Lights members were aware of the health-based objectives of some of their company's trustees, they would be better prepared to talk about health to 'outsiders'. For whatever the reasons, *N*'s testimony of the impact of participation on their everyday life was powerful. For the Marlowe participants, their evidences of health-based benefits were more nuanced and intersected with other categories and themes of their results, but nevertheless locate this research within the current conversation on arts and health. Moreover, it is significant that the theme of wellbeing closely relates to community through the 'family' category. For example: 'The Marlowe cared about us, it was quite good...they looked after us, the actors. We're like the Marlowe family. A real community.' (*W* 17.11.21); and 'I felt my needs were important. This whole experience has been like a family to me, everyone, everyone from the Umbrella Centre and the

Marlowe...Atri as well… I came back and it was so good, because when it was hard, everyone just supported me.' (*P* 10.11.21).

This chapter will further investigate wellbeing through an arts and health context by looking at recent and past studies in the field in the light of the actor-participants' results. There are two main issues to which the literature will contribute. Firstly, fundamental differences between research methods and evaluation criteria used by arts and health organisations will be investigated and secondly, connections between health-based benefits and social factors will be made. This will build upon the previous discussion on evaluation particularly in terms of health-based research that tends to use quantitative data, compared to the qualitative testimonies usually produced by arts organisations.

As research on arts and health also reveals the importance of community building and social factors, this will include a discussion of the wellness industry, and how the commercialisation of health as an individual responsibility can be harmful and isolating. As in Nicholson's concept of 'relational ontology' mentioned in the previous chapter above, even radical individual actions should be nurtured within in a supportive community (2016, p. 252). Finally, the discussions will be brought together to introduce the theory-building section of this thesis that will follow.

Recurrent issues within the field of arts and health

The relationship between participating in creative arts and better health has been the subject of an increasing body of research. A significant earlier document was *Restoring the Balance: the effects of arts participation on wellbeing and health*, where Paul Devlin (2010) used case studies in the form of interviews with different stakeholders in the fields of arts and health in order to qualitatively evaluate the beneficial effects of participation. This also provided evidence of the different methods of evaluation utilised by stakeholders in the field of arts,

health and wellbeing. Daisy Fancourt identified key issues in her own comprehensive survey (2017), beginning with the absence of a 'standardized definition'. From the view of arts and health as occupying 'different sides' of a discourse, a gradual removal of these earlier boundaries has arguably offered 'limitless possibilities' for arts-based interventions. Nevertheless, in the context of health, some forms of categorisation as to the purposes of arts activities remain essential for Fancourt (pp. 72-73). The area of wellbeing within the context of arts and health, moreover, presents a challenge in that it is difficult to categorise its beneficial effects. On the other hand, Fancourt points out that as changes in public health have seen a gradual broadening out into everyday lives, this has also provided opportunities for arts organisations to operate in a context of wellbeing. She further notes that 'an increasing pressure on arts organisations to measure impact' has seen Arts Council England identify wellbeing as such an area of impact, leading to programmes that have been specifically targeted. As a result, this has raised the profile of the role of the arts in improving wellbeing in everyday life (pp. 80-81). Stephen Clift (2017) asserted that the range of available programmes has also led to the need for a diversity of approach. Similarly, Tatiana Chemi et al. (2023) aimed to '[go] beyond dualistic perceptions (on the one hand real science and on the other, opinions, anecdotes and "bad quality"), we attempt to build a platform for intellectual exchange between scientific traditions that would normally not communicate with each other.' (no pagination). Chemi et al. emphasised this by referring to 'narratives of artistic interventions' separately from these scientific traditions, acknowledging that divisions remain between these lay and scientific areas of how to talk about wellbeing. These have impacted long term on evaluating the role of the arts in promoting wellbeing.

In 2012, a comprehensive report was published by Richard Ings et al. that featured the benefits of participating in drama: *Be Creative Be Well: Wellbeing and local communities, an evaluation*. Paradoxically, this report remains significant because although it strongly asserted

these benefits through a comprehensive process of evaluation that was built on local knowledges, the reports' findings did not become a blueprint for subsequent community theatre initiatives. The report had aimed to measure wellbeing with an attention to environmental factors and social determinants, in addition to inclusion within wider social networks as a reaction to a perceived 'growing body of evidence' regarding the difference that participating in the arts could make to people's health and wellbeing. The report also advised as to commissioning work that would 'result in a more sustainable legacy' (2012, p. 6) and included recommendations to arts organisations working with communities (pp. 11-12). Three participatory theatre projects titled *Changing Places*, in collaboration with Arc Theatre, were performed together in a joint celebration that also contributed to building relationships across wider social networks. These community theatre productions were felt to have been the most effective model of building empathetic relationships through creativity. Sustainability was addressed through a realistic assessment of how local practitioners were best placed to maintain these new relationships through an in-depth process of building local knowledges. The authors had also used a robust method of evaluation, namely *5 Ways to Wellbeing* (2009), a thematic analysis of the work of 400 researchers producing these five themes: connect, be active, take notice, keep learning, and give (2009, p. 94-95).

As noted, despite the comprehensive nature of Ings' et al. report, wellbeing, sustainability and the need for robust evaluation are themes that have continued to recur, not least in the case studies in this thesis. As the evidence base has increased substantially, joining up these individual studies has been a necessary challenge undertaken by systematic reviews. The findings of a review by Emma Williams et al. (2023) and a longitudinal cohort study by the Social Biobehavioural Research Group at University College London (2023) will be looked at in the context of the wellbeing benefits of participating in the arts. These findings on the

participatory arts will in turn contribute towards theory-building on the benefits of participating in community theatre partnerships.

Reviewing the evidence base

Williams et al. surveyed 22 studies of participatory arts-based (PAB) programmes for children and young people (CYP) in non-clinical and community settings. Although these programmes were delivered by facilitators rather than trained therapists, they were nevertheless targeted towards improving mental health through and wellbeing 'through meaningful participation for promoting the well-being, social connection and agency of CYP' (2023, p. 1735). They are distinct from the community theatre partnerships discussed in this thesis in a number of ways including the younger demographic of the participants, but the review's findings are relevant to the results identified in the case studies.

Acknowledging a strong existing evidence base, the authors cited Fancourt's (2017) findings that reported the evidence base for improvements in CYP mental health was sufficiently robust to influence policy development. However, Williams et al. maintained that there were too many weaknesses and inconsistencies in methodologies, including gathering qualitative evidence from participants (p. 1736). Thus, the systematic review looked at finding robust evidence of the effectiveness of PAB programmes in addition to evaluating how socio-economic factors could affect mechanisms to improve mental health and wellbeing (p. 1737).

An interesting result showed that participants in the programmes found it challenging to engage with the evaluative tools. The authors summarised those standardised measures had associations with academic tests, leading to participants being concerned about providing the 'correct' results and in some cases showing resentment about having to do these tasks rather than spend all their time engaging in art. Some facilitators moreover lacked confidence in administering the measures, which led the authors to conclude that evaluation in this context required further investigations which I would agree should include productive conversations

between all parties involved in a wellbeing research project. Rethinking standard measures for evaluation should then encourage participants to willingly provide valid responses to questioning.

Two further findings are also relevant to this thesis. Firstly, engagement in participatory arts was seen to have a therapeutic effect on participants (p 1760). This will be significant in a later discussion of therapeutic spaces and their relevance to a theory of participating in community theatre partnerships. Secondly, engagement cultivated a creative community (p. 1760) which was identified as a valuable benefit of taking part in drama through the actor-participants' categories and themes.

The social biobehavioural research group from UCL conducted a number of longitudinal studies between 2017 and 2022 in the UK and USA, entitled *The Impact of Arts and Cultural Engagement on Population Health*. The cohorts included children, young people, adults and older adults. The studies with young people focused on positive impacts on behaviours and on increased wellbeing which the authors described as 'flourishing'. A 14-year long study revealed an association between participating in arts activities and 'increases in social wellbeing (meaning that young adults felt like an integral part of a positive community), and smaller increases in psychological wellbeing (meaning young adults felt increasing autonomy and personal growth).' (Social Biobehavioural Research Group, 2023, p. 10-11). The relationship between creativity and building social bonds is implicit here. A study of underlying mechanisms revealed building creative skills and developing and maintaining an interest (pp. 12-15) contributed to 'significant longitudinal associations with health, wellbeing and behavioural outcomes throughout adolescence' (p. 15). However, sustainability was also identified as a key issue because these wellbeing benefits diminished over time with cohorts who had ended their engagement with their creative communities (p. 12).

Improvements in mental health and wellbeing in adults were studied in cohorts totalling 23,000 people. Results found that 'Frequent arts participation and cultural attendance were both associated with better mental health (lower mental distress) and higher wellbeing (life satisfaction). Interestingly, the authors found that these results were maintained even after taking socio-economic factors into consideration, including previous engagement in arts and cultural activities (p. 19). A particularly interesting finding was that in respect to coping with mental health issues on a day-to-day basis, '*participation* was key for coping.' (p. 20). For example, participants in a virtual choir (some of whom had been diagnosed with depression) were mostly found to have improved their capacity for regulating emotions (p. 21). Two other studies that featured drumming and community singing revealed that participants had improved their resilience through 'shared experience, coping and confidence building; receiving social support and empathy from the group; experiencing wide-ranging emotions and identity development; and gaining skills' (p. 23). Thus, different participatory activities produced similar wellbeing benefits. For older adults it was found that maintaining their engagement in the arts could help to prevent depression, even after taking socio-economic factors into account (p. 27). Again, sustainability was found to be key respecting this cohort: 'This supports the hypothesis that we previously proposed in our work on children and young people: that cultural engagement may be a "perishable commodity", only continuing to show benefits if people maintain their engagement. For this reason, we are also exploring whether changes in people's lives could lead to disengagement from cultural activities and what impact this may have on health' (p. 29).

The report concluded with an investigation into inequalities respecting participation including socio-economic and demographic factors, because only10.3% of adults in the UK were regularly participating in the arts. This prevented the majority from benefiting from an engagement that should have been their right, as participation in the arts has been identified

as, and should continue to be, a human right (Devlin, 2010, p. 75). 'Although socio-economic position was a barrier to engagement, it did not prevent people from benefitting from the arts. In fact, we found that people from lower socio-economic backgrounds made greater use of the arts to regulate their emotions.' (Social Biobehavioural Research Group, 2023, p. 41). The reports' recommendations to address inequalities around participation included promoting arts education in schools, improving links between clinical and community care, engaging in preventative public health, improving access to the arts for poorer demographics to reduce health disparities and continuing with longitudinal and complex research projects (p. 50).

This is significant with respect to this thesis because not all community theatre partnerships can be sustained over long periods of time, which suggests that in order to maintain the benefits of taking part, partnerships could be extended to form engagement hubs where participants could find opportunities to continue to take part in arts activities. Some of the actor-participants from the Marlowe case study have continued to be involved in drama, but this was mainly a result of their own perseverance. Time-limited partnerships are of course constrained by economic factors due to funding patterns and resource availability, but there are also grounds for arguing that time limits may be a consequence of participation being considered as similar to a short-term medicinal dose, rather than a long-term lived experience. Research by Dr. David Stokes, the CEO of Medway, Kent-based Nucleus Arts has investigated solutions to fundamental differences between arts and health organisations that have persisted, despite the wealth of available research on the wellbeing benefits of participation.

Nucleus Arts: Communication and professionalism in arts and health

The research features a 2022 pilot study in partnership with Nucleus Arts and the Porchlight charity, named *Chat! Connect! Create!* that focused on participant-centred evaluation.

Nucleus Arts are a community arts network with strong links to arts and health organisations around Medway, including social prescribing. The research originated in Nucleus Arts' own experiences of working with a range of stakeholders who support participation in the arts but tend to utilise different methods of evaluating benefits for participants. So that their stakeholders would be able to share their communications and data more effectively, Stokes designed an evaluation project described below on the benefits of taking part in arts activities in order to trial methods of gathering nuanced quantitative data, including health benefits and social relations. The different ways of gathering data explored by this study (particularly quantitative data) should also be of interest to community arts organisations who may be developing their own evaluative processes to communicate their results to other fields such as arts and health.

The Nucleus matrix, as it is currently termed, is a framework to evaluate wellbeing that moves away from a 'box ticking' approach to objectives. This is achieved by mapping participant-centred, nuanced indicators across a stakeholder's broader objectives, such as improvements in health and social inclusion, in order to find points of contact between them. These points of contact will then be the basis for a more holistic evaluation of a project. The indicators are to be decided by participants and thus far have included 'acts of kindness', 'improved mood', and 'connecting with people', among others. Results and reactions to the indicators are recorded anonymously by participants in emoji form whilst attending sessions for *Chat! Connect! Create!* Following each session, the emojis are gathered and plotted on a curve by facilitators. In addition to analysing the participants' data, the facilitators' own observations are recorded in a 'lab book'. As the facilitators are paid to gather and record the data, this has had to be included in the project's costs. The recognition that evaluation can create an increased workload is particularly important with respect to facilitators' welfare.

Stokes outlined more of the thinking behind the project in an interview (22.10.21): 'We know that what we do works. We need to let others know about it!'. The pilot study had been delayed because of the pandemic but was scheduled to begin at the start of 2022. The priorities at this early stage were to combine nuanced categories of participation that could be quantified (as in the process described above), with a flexible scientific approach based on 'a pulling together' of evaluative approaches because otherwise, 'It makes stakeholders wary about investing in funding because they can't be clear about predicting results, such as 'what could be expected from a six-week course of digital arts practice at one hour per week, for example.' Stokes also hoped that the research would benefit providers and facilitators through an increased recognition of professionalism in the field of arts and health including improving career pathways: 'social prescribing is popular in Medway, they do put money in, but they don't use it to help out the providers. They expect a lot for very little, for nothing, really! You're supposed to do it for love!' (Stokes, 22.10.21).

There seemed to be multiple long-term aims attached to this time-limited pilot study including agreeing on a language that all arts and health organisations could share, and systematising a career path for arts and health workers. However, Stokes clarified that these broader aims were part of a longer-term project that would make use of the considerable amount of data that Nucleus Arts had already amassed. The expectations for the pilot study were that it would at least trial a participant-centred quantitative approach and open a dialogue about revaluing and systematising 'therapeutic, not therapy approaches for mental health delivery, because therapy is targeted. It targets a very specific trauma.' whereas with arts and health activities, 'participation's not like a dose, it doesn't work like that.' (Stokes, 22.10.21).

Stokes further explained these longer-term objectives in a public lecture on evaluation methods and best practice in arts and health. The 'Nucleus Matrix' (2.2.22) was introduced as

the product of his experience at Nucleus Arts in which he realised the gap in provision and the need for a common language to effectively share data with a range of stakeholders. Based on theory of change, it would ask questions about what actions were needed to improve lives through creativity. Trends could then be identified that would contribute to the longitudinal approach held by some of the centre's stakeholders around regenerative strategies of economic and cultural regeneration. From a broader perspective, Stokes argued that a global language would be required to share this knowledge in a minimal and applicable way, hence MIAHAI – Minimum Information about Health/Arts Interventions is currently being developed to facilitate connections with international studies (Stokes, 2022).

This future research has ambitions to considerably extend the scope of the Nucleus Matrix, but at present Stokes has asked questions that are grounded in current practices in the UK, identifying researcher isolation as one of the reasons for studies being duplicated. This is because although arts and health workers tend to deliver interventions to a range of organisations, they usually work alone and have limited opportunities to share practices in the absence of a local database of knowledges and practices that could include criteria like results, lessons learned, and practices. I would agree that the question of how to join up research, knowledge and practice is necessary at a local level because health-based interventions are usually provided by regional partners.

Stokes' second long term objective is to improve professionalism in the field of arts and health. He argued that this perceived lack of professionalism was partly due to the absence of specific formal qualifications required to enter the field as a practitioner, which was probably a consequence of therapeutic practices addressing a non-specific 'general wellbeing'. These broader fields of communication and professionalism are among the reasons why I would argue that Stokes' project is important in the field of arts and health. There is conceivably a link between perceptions of professionalism and specifically targeted interventions for health

issues. As arts and health activities in contrast address a 'general' wellbeing, it could follow that practitioners are consequently seen as not requiring formal qualifications. This in turn reinforces a sense that therapeutic practices are somehow non-specific and even unknowable. Participant-centred data could, if widely shared, contribute to a better understanding of the value of therapeutic practices in the field of arts and health, benefitting both practitioners and participants.

In a later interview (4.3.22) I asked Stokes to further explain some of the points made in the paper. I was particularly interested in what could be the first steps in professionalising arts and health in advance of formalising qualifications. Stokes stressed that it was first about taking ownership of the knowledge base. 'It tends to come from outside, the knowledge base, not from the arts as such [referring to objectives coming from other stakeholders]. The knowledge needs to be there so we can share it but how can we do this without a professional body? First you share experiences. You need to start with the core skills you need as a facilitator. What are the different styles, approaches? They're like teaching styles, it's like teaching practice for facilitators, that's how I'd see it. Core skills, observation and feedback but room to fail too. We need partnerships with organisations like universities to share cohorts of students. When we identify those core skills and share them, that's the start of [professionalism]' (Stokes, 4.3.22). I could appreciate that such a model may work well if it was trialled locally, particularly because as noted, health-based interventions are usually organised at that level. An awareness campaign could then bring in other organisations from different areas. At the time of writing, it was shared at Kent ArtsCon 2024 (an international conference based in Kent for artists, participants, audiences, and arts and education professionals) that the Medway Transformation Academy had agreed to develop the Nucleus Matrix as their evaluation framework for social prescribing, which they then planned to trial across organisations in their charitable sector. (KArtsCon, July 2024). Here perhaps are the

beginnings of productive and reciprocal conversations between arts and health organisations at this local level.

Evaluation and unknowability

Creativity can be problematic with respect to evaluation, partly because of its unknowable aspects. The research by the Social Biobehavioural Research Group (2023) discussed above was confident in dealing with nuanced benefits of participation in the arts, possibly because of the large numbers involved in these longitudinal studies. However, benefits like increased enjoyment and a sense of achievement (for example) are challenging to evaluate in smaller and shorter-term projects. Creativity and how it will work for individual participants has unknowable aspects that may be difficult to support with prior research. The following example is a report on the potential dangers of engaging in some forms of creative activities, arguably because the outcomes are difficult to predict and control. Thus, aspects of unknowability may be seen as detrimental to the wellbeing of participants.

Marie Forgeard (2018) investigated creativity and mental health, making a distinction between exposing participants to the potential dangers of demanding 'big C' or professional standard creativities (which is what the community theatre partnerships in the case studies aimed to do) compared to the recreational activities of 'little c' creativities. Forgeard argued that positive affect for participants is more likely to be provided by recreational or 'little c' creativity, but in citing Kaufman (2018), she takes her argument further and questions whether creative engagement necessarily leads to any positive outcomes. Forgeard had based her research on laboratory-based psychology studies but argued that the 'deep seated' social structures, social interactions and environmental factors within a creative community should be addressed to better understand the processes of creativity and positive affect in a mental

health context. This is because Forgeard could not disentangle the cognitive or affective processes that were taking place whilst her participants were engaging in a creative activity.

The unknowability of how creative activities will affect participants undermines instrumentalism, although this can become problematic for researchers who are tasked with uncovering the benefits of participation, because unknowability is also a risk factor. Perhaps as researchers we should trust our participants more in knowing what works best for them, but there could be a fundamental issue here in that health-based research continues to perceive them more as patients, which in turn feeds into processes of evaluation.

A comprehensive longitudinal research project by Mark Redmond et al. (2018) aimed to present a more holistic evaluation of participants' experiences in a mental health programme in partnership with the charity Artlift, that offers both visual and performing prescribed arts through a referral by a GP (https://artlift.org/what-we-do/arts-on-prescription/). Data from a cohort of 1,300 participants (2018, p. 233) drew attention to the varied, subjective nature of the participants' responses. The study covered seven years and evaluated the provision of arts within declining options for outpatient care whilst taking account of different political and socio-economic backgrounds (2018, p. 234). The research method was an open-ended questionnaire featuring 10 questions, beginning with 'what did you enjoy most?' with a focus on therapeutic outcomes (2018 p. 235). Thematic analysis was used by the researchers to identify categories. 'Being with others' emerged as a highly significant theme but there was also a strong focus on 'getting away', 'time out' and 'being apart'. 'Being with others' took into account relational aspects of community building, but in a different emphasis, the creative community could also hold 'being apart', as in choosing not to participate or by making space for individual creativities. The researchers identified 'being apart' as a space for change, or a 'threshold' (2018, pp. 237-238). This is interesting in that it represents a deeper consideration of the social aspects that Foregeard above had identified as essential to

unpack at the time of her analysis above. Redmond et al. concluded by looking towards therapeutic aspects, aiming for a hybrid approach to provision that is similar to Matthew Reason's suggested renegotiation of funding objectives to take into account 'the personal, the contextual and the embodied.' (2017, p. 32).

<div align="center">**Social factors as intrinsic to wellbeing**</div>

Social factors in arts and health reports

Contextual and environmental issues have been discussed in terms of social factors in the previous chapter. These continue to be intrinsic to the wellbeing benefits of participation because as argued, creativity is a social phenomenon, despite some researchers finding the relationship problematic when trying to identify specific health-based benefits for the purposes of evaluation. As with Forgeard's (2018) findings and *Creative Health*'s (2017) conclusions, this can result in a validation paradox about further research being necessary. Kate Phillips (2018) provided a response to *Creative Health*'s conclusion about the need for further research and more rigorous standards for evaluation where she discussed, then rejected various research methods. A systematic review for example was deemed inappropriate because of the subjectivity of the participants' responses (2018, p. 21). While accepting that qualitative evidence can be less uniform because it tends to vary across different reports, quantitative reviews on the other hand were found to be potentially limiting. She also accepted that existing tensions around instrumentalism have yet to be addressed, which I argued above could be a consequence of a health-based evaluative framework. Her solution to consolidating the evidence base was to propose what she termed a 'realist approach' which would take into account social as well as biomedical factors (2018, p. 29), viewing an attention to social factors as a point at which arts organisations and health-based evidences could meet.

In the same year, a joint report by the Welsh NHS confederation and the Arts Council of Wales also looked for common ground, viewing arts and health as mutually empowering. The report, entitled *Arts and Health in Wales: a mapping study of current activity*, aimed to consolidate some of the findings in a comprehensive survey about investment and value for money. 'Prevention, Wellbeing and Recovery' (2018, p. 6) were the criteria of measurement. The research used a case-study approach and there was a familiar call to health organisations to value qualitative assessment. The report also took external factors into consideration with a view to building a broader notion of participation that included spectatorship as an action of 'emotional support' (2018, p. 26). Furthermore, it was claimed that 'arts and culture can be used directly to improve clinical outcomes', but there was no agreement as to how the arts could be beneficial to health (2018, p. 3). Again, a lack of robust evidence was mentioned, particularly with respect to long-term outcomes (2018, p. 1) although the use of heart monitors in randomised control tests was suggested following the work of the *All-party Parliamentary Group on Arts Health and Wellbeing* (2017) as a means to quantify both enjoyment and activity (2017, p. 6). Significantly, social factors were recognised as being beneficial, with participation providing opportunities to 'create therapeutic benefits through social actions' (ibid). This was not further explored however, as the report was concerned with existing methods of evaluation and how these could be positioned with respect to arts and health.

Theo Stickley (2018) acknowledged that partnerships between arts and health-based organisations actually required a different methodological approach to the more familiar qualitative/quantitative evaluations, noting that health organisations had seemed less open to new methodologies (2018 p. 4). A few years earlier in 2010, Stickley had published a longitudinal study in which 11 participants in *Art in Mind*, a community-based mental health intervention, were interviewed 3 times over a year. At this stage, Stickley had found that

concepts of social inclusion were not universally agreed by arts and health organisations (2010, p. 32). In his 2018 report, notable differences in approach were still found, which again suggests that social factors are an area for discussion that could inform both creative and health-based approaches through these relational aspects.

Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt's investigation from a few years earlier also noted the relationship between wellbeing and social factors. Her research reviewed quantifiable medical evidence from Nordic studies on positive effects of participating in the arts on the immune system and on depressive illnesses (2015, p. 19). The research concluded that although health effects were amplified through engagement, it was difficult to determine whether it was the artistic experience or the social context that had produced the positive impact (2015, p. 42). This is a very important point because it underlines how creativity is fundamentally a social phenomenon. However, she concludes that more research on the impact of other social interactions on health would be required in order to present a more robust case for the health benefits of participating in the arts.

I would argue that the social factors underpinning creativity can be considered as health benefits. These connections do not make research less robust, as in the case of this thesis, connections with social factors were brought out in the actor-participant' results in the relationship between creativity, 'family' (or community), and the theme of wellbeing. This is supported by the literature discussed in the previous chapter on creativity as a social phenomenon. Consequently, participating in the arts is necessarily relational, underpinned by community and wellbeing. Consequently, the intrinsic relationship between wellbeing, community building, and engaging in creative activities should be repositioned as reciprocal rather than problematic.

Social capital

Theories of bridging social capital have been used by some researchers as a means to engage with the relationship between wellbeing and social factors, describing how power can potentially be democratised through social relationships in the context of 'grass roots' arts events. Allan Jepson and Alan Clarke (2012) agreed that local festivals had the potential to be inclusive and multi-faceted (2012, p. 2). However, they identified a range of stakeholders or gatekeepers that influenced decision-making through bonds of social capital based on access to sites of power (2012, p. 7). The authors concluded that further research was required to develop guidelines to democratise access to power and ensure social inclusion, so that festivals could be context-specific rather than homogenised products. That said, not all commentators agree that social capital is determined by gatekeepers or 'top down' decision making.

Tristi Brownett argued that communities could build 'strong bonds, relational ties and social capital' (2018, p. 3) through shared involvement or co-production in community arts festivals. Eight semi-structured interviews with festival organisers were subject to thematic analyses that produced five main themes: social capital (the most frequently mentioned), participation, self-efficacy, legacy, and emotional response (2018, p 6). The interview participants agreed that they had experienced bridging social capital, although it would be interesting to see what the individual participants meant by their usage of this term. Brownett argued that as organisers, the study participants were well placed to assess whether they perceived a greater sense of community ownership of the event. Testimonies however can be subject to bias, especially when the participants may have a vested interest in a particular event. Brownett recognised that this was a limitation of the study but argued that a lack of available research in community arts festivals made it worthwhile, nevertheless.

In their 2014 report, Trish Vella-Burrows et al. described how regeneration projects in Bexhill, Sussex, and Folkstone and Margate, Kent enhanced wellbeing through social capital

that bonded residents and decision-makers through their perceptions about the projects, even though significant 'top down' changes had been made to the environment. The authors' understanding of the relevance of social capital to health and wellbeing is centred on producing connections, in the sense of feeling connected to the regeneration projects (2014, p. 4). However, this is a very broad concept of social capital as 'community engagement' (2014, p. 38). The data was produced by a triangulation of qualitative testimonies from residents and literatures on social capital, arts and health, though Vella does not unpack her own understanding of how bridging social capital could be a measure of transformation leading to increased wellbeing (2014, p. 12). Although the report includes a few negative testimonies regarding the 'high culture' aspects of the Turner Contemporary gallery in Margate, the authors (unlike Jepson and Clarke) did not interrogate gatekeeping and decision-making (2012), but concluded that the research showed a tendency towards a positive engagement with the regeneration that also had a correlation with wellbeing: 'Public aspirations for improving future cultural offer in the three towns appeared tied to aspirations for improved wellbeing.' (2014, p. 38). The authors again acknowledged that more research was needed to turn these observations and tendencies into evidence, but this may leave future research open to the charge that studies from very specific contexts and environments would not produce the required generalised results. On the other hand, perhaps the usefulness of bridging social capital lies in its specificity to a community, an event or an organisation, but it describes rather than analyses community bonds and their relationship to wellbeing. Additionally, a democratising of power is difficult to evaluate without evidence of constitutional changes respecting gatekeepers and decision-makers. Despite this, one notable quality of participation, community and wellbeing is that it produces a sense of connectedness and opposes isolation. In contrast, the final discussion in this chapter will look

at how negative aspects of wellbeing (notably an uncritical attention to the 'wellness industry') foster isolation rather than community.

Wellbeing, wellness and the individual

The terms 'wellbeing' and 'wellness' are historically distinct but are sometimes conflated, particularly with respect to productivity and capital through a historical marketing of products. Sales are directed towards individuals who are compelled to take responsibility for their own health, so that they can continue to be economically productive individuals. Evidence for this argument is apparent from the beginning of the twentieth century history of wellness and wellbeing. In 1924, Mary Campbell published an article in the American Journal of Nursing entitled *Selling Health through Sanitoria.* Campbell perceived that patients were being viewed as consumers of products that were then cynically marketed as preventative therapies, particularly expensive residencies in sanitoria. This presents an early critique of the relationship between wellness and capital and its consequences for individuals and their levels of responsibility for their own health. To this end, preventative medication can be marketed as a means of regaining control over environmental factors such as work, and life experiences, through consumers/patients being actively well.

It should be noted that the term wellness was coined later in the mid-twentieth century by Halbert Dunn (1959). Dunn further promoted this notion of individual responsibility through presenting wellness as a proactive means of achieving a high-level of functioning. Dunn's theory of wellness was predicated on the individual being proactive rather than on any external measures relating to health-related goals. In addition, the lack of any robust evaluation of outcomes enabled the use of marketing to expand the potential client-base of the developing wellness industry. The quotation below further illustrates how Dunn used active language to promote the view that wellness was embedded in the praxis of an active

and fulfilling life: 'The state of being dynamically well involves the exploration and participation by the individual in the fascinating and ever-changing panorama of life itself" (Dunn, 1959, cited in Ames, 2009).

Wellbeing and productivity

Later literature on wellness demonstrate increasing evidence of its problematic relationship with productivity, capital and concepts of responsibility and blame. A resurgence of interest in wellness in the 21st century reveals that discourses of individual responsibility and productivity remain embedded in its narratives. Daniela Blei (2017) described wellness as a mainstream industry aimed at boosting productivity that parallels 19th century concerns about technological change, capitalism and job insecurity. Blei identified the beginnings of the paradigm in the 19th century school of 'life reform', which was promoted as a means of proactively regaining a sense of control through a health-based reaction against industrial society. Paradoxically, this reaction against industrial society also functioned as a means of remaining productive within it, through being 'not sick'. Rather than a driver of action and participation, wellness functions as a binary opposition of being sick and 'not sick', which has a somewhat negative emphasis compared to Dunn's original notion of being 'dynamically well' (Dunn, 1959, op. cit.). Daniel Wikler (1987) had earlier interrogated similar assumptions about personal responsibility in maintaining health at work. It was argued that the uncritical promotion of the individual employee's responsibility for being fit for work had consequently led to a culture of blame being embedded in health management policies. Meredith Minkler (1999) again contested the meanings implicit in 'personal responsibility for health' (1999, p. 121). She argued that it was necessary to recognise a broader social context that would take into account environmental factors that individuals were unable to influence or control.

It is significant that as the context of the workplace and the potential uses of creativity was important in the previous chapter, so these notions of increasing productivity through participation continue to be relevant in this arts and health context. In a broader sense, narratives of wellness and productivity are arguably inscribed throughout aspects of everyday life. Barbara Ehenreich (2018) traced the pervasiveness of capital throughout the wellness industry, which she describes as a futile attempt to avoid the inevitability of mortality. Moreover, the limitations of an individual's influence over the health-related behaviours of their body are illustrated by a model of her own research into hostile immune cells which are triggered to attack the body for reasons that are not fully understood.

The notions of turning against and turning inwards into the workings of one's own body to damaging effects was also explored by Carol-Ann Farkas (2010) in her analysis of the influence of wellness in popular magazines. Farkas again connected wellness and wellbeing with 19th century notions of bodily improvement but clearly unpacked the concept of action and participation that underpins the paradigm. Wellness is again considered in terms of a binary opposition of 'sick' and 'not sick'.

Farkas further developed the phenomenological aspect, as wellness was significantly identified with a move away from collective action towards 'a radical turning inward towards the goal of the transformation of one's own body, in contrast to a turning outwards to mobilise for collective action' (2010, p. 132). Farkas described how outward appearances then became indicators for physical and mental health, encouraged by illusory standards set by social media. Significantly for this research, Farkas delineated a reversal of the praxis that underpins Dunn's original claims for the benefits of wellness. Participation and action have become internalised to the process of working on one's own body, as opposed to actively working with the environment to effect health changes, suggested by words such as

'exploration', 'participation' and 'panorama' (Dunn, 1959, op. cit.), in other words an inward turn away from the praxis of working on the world.

Farkas' 'radical turning inward' (Farkas 2010 op. cit.) can be related to notions of blame and personal responsibility described above by Blei (2017), Wikler (1997), and Minkler (1999). The time span of these literatures shows that a problematic wellness had been interesting critics for some time. I would further argue that there is a relationship between these aspects of self-blame, personal responsibility and productivity and the depoliticised, economic re-positioning of the arts also discussed in the previous chapter. Wellbeing as a measure of productivity can also be a feature of evaluation, as in the original objectives for the community theatre project *Can You Hear Me From Up Here?* that I discussed in the introduction to this thesis. In summary, the Royal Exchange theatre had published (on their webpage dated 2018) a list of bullet-pointed objectives for their participants including addressing loneliness, increasing confidence, and addressing barriers to employability. These initial objectives were later removed and replaced by Tracie Daley's (2019) more detailed and participant-centred evaluation the following year. The rethink shows that evaluation was a work in progress with respect to this project, moving away from an early instrumentalism. Ideally, as a project develops, so its framework for evaluation should be subject to review, but this may be more challenging in some shorter-term projects.

Conclusion

To conclude this chapter, social factors have been identified as an important link that could perhaps form the basis for a more therapeutic understanding of participation. Williams' et al. (2023) findings for example noted the therapeutic effects of arts-based activities in addition to the building of creative communities (p. 1760). A further important point with respect to this research is that the health benefits of taking part in creative arts activities cannot be

separated from those of building social relations. This, and an attention to evaluation draw together the chapters in part two of the thesis. The different methods of evaluation used by arts and health organisations have contributed to issues of instrumentalism and to the problematising of unknowable aspects of creativity. Moreover, social relations tend not to be measured in terms of their health-based impact, despite the fact that community-building is often an important objective for community arts activities. These issues could be addressed by a greater attention to a participant-centred evaluation that repositions research towards what participants really find valuable. This was what this thesis aimed to do, and the actor-participants' results revealed generalisable themes that could be further analysed to indicate a theory of participating in community theatre partnerships. The next chapter aims to address this through looking at the possibilities of theory-building, in the hope that this can facilitate how the beneficial effects of participation can be unpacked and accessed.

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CHAPTER EIGHT: TOWARDS A THEORY OF THE BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATING IN COMMUNITY THEATRE PARTNERSHIPS

Introduction

The discussions on health and social factors from the previous two chapters will be brought together to look towards theory-building in this final chapter of the thesis. It will focus on two main areas: therapeutic spaces and an aesthetics of participation. Clark Baim's practices (2002, 2020) will be looked at first because his practices are avowedly therapeutic, but this chapter will have a different emphasis in its usage of the therapeutic. Baim is a leader in psychodrama and his practices with Geese Theatre enabled participants to build new skills with which to negotiate personal relationships and avoid re-offending (2002). Moving from a specific focus on rehabilitation to address a growing interest in the sharing of personal stories in drama practices, Baim argued for recognising a synergy between theatre and therapy so that therapists and theatre practitioners would better understand each other's work and engage in a productive dialogue: 'theater practitioners should have a clear focus and intention, as well as a basic knowledge of therapeutic principles and how action-based methods have historically been used to promote healing and integration.' (2020, p. 178). This chapter will aim to show how taking part in drama was therapeutic for the case study participants, but also (as mentioned) how this discussion differs in emphasis from Baim in that here, the focus is more on their subjective experiences rather than on the intentions and knowledges of their facilitators. This was made clear through the participants' results, which were unanimously positive in their recollections of taking part in what I had perceived as a difficult process where the decision-making did not always address their needs or their potential to make theatre. Although I do not want to lose sight of how facilitators' intentions are essential to ethical processes especially in the context of a therapeutic space, the actor-participants'

results indicate that the different benefits of taking part in a community theatre partnership are driven by participants' subjective experiences and are arguably intrinsic to the process.

Ideally, participants' experiences supported by facilitators' intentions would constitute a therapeutic space, but the physical workspace itself is also an important part of their encounter. Therapeutic spaces will be differentiated from the provision of therapy because as Stokes noted above, therapeutic outcomes are not clinical and targeted towards a specific outcome (22.10.21). Therapeutic or wellbeing related benefits of participation evolve during a process and are defined by participants rather than objectives from partners and stakeholders. This can be problematic because there would inevitably be scepticism of unknowable elements as opposed to targeted outcomes, but these are a characteristic of therapeutic spaces. Although therapeutic spaces would need to work within a framework of stakeholders' priorities and objectives because this is a system that enables participatory drama to take place, partners need to be aware that the results may differ from their original priorities, but in ways that may be surprising and productive. In summary, therapeutic spaces work because of what the participants eventually take away from the experience rather than what stakeholders hope that they will take away. The problem of evaluating wellbeing could be addressed by a hybrid approach such as that developed by Nucleus Arts, described above, or by a participant-centred approach to data modelled by the Marlowe Theatre case study.

Ethical concerns are central, particularly in how participants' affective labour and knowledges are utilised in an ethics of care which also must take into account the demands of a theatre production (Nicholson, 2017). The importance of accessing physical spaces will also be important and will be discussed through a lens of creative geographies (Polyani, 1996; Ingold 2013). Therapeutic spaces will finally be compared to 'stretch zones', which have this element of the unknowable that I have ascribed to therapeutic spaces. Practices within a 'stretch zone' can accommodate risk by working with facilitators' and participants' agencies

and knowledges. Evidence from Underground Lights' practices will be important here. Although therapeutic spaces are not dramatherapy, which is a completely different area of clinical practice, there are examples from early works on the tenets of dramatherapy that will be useful in defining therapeutic spaces whilst accommodating their unknowable and participant-centred factors.

The second part of the chapter discusses the potential of an aesthetics of participation in community theatre partnerships. Having focused on wellbeing for the first part, there needs to be an attention to what is special about drama that enables it to deliver these benefits whilst being different from other creative practices. The opportunity to take part in drama and make theatre was the catalyst for both the community building and challenge categories that the actor-participants identified as related to the theme of wellbeing. How the process looked, felt and sounded were also identified as significant throughout the interviews. Moreover, a sense of being valued by the theatre professionals was key to how positive the overall experience felt, more so than the audience's reactions to the performances. I saw this as an aesthetics predicated on an equitable exchange of knowledges, which was underpinning the wellbeing context of the experience. I hope to argue that the consideration of such an aesthetics will contribute to the conversation on arts and health because it is specifically about how drama works for its participants in terms of wellbeing.

There is a useful body of research on aesthetics in the context of applied theatre which provides a starting point for the discussion (White 2013, 2015). Isobel Armstrong's psychoanalytic modelling (2000) will also be a key text with respect to positioning aesthetics as a radical process rather than a consequence of privilege, that would include access to skills and cultural and social capital, among others. Importantly, what the participants take away from an experience is not dependent on the objectives and priorities of stakeholders, though these may impact on what facilitators feel that they are able to accomplish within that

framework. The participants on the other hand are not constrained by objectives in the same way, nor can their creative processes be controlled, until the point at which decision-making from theatre professionals might come into play, as in the Marlowe theatre case study. Even then, this element of control tends to lead to a negotiated process in rehearsals. Despite some tensions within that process, the actor-participants as we have seen took a positive aesthetic experience from their engagement. As a researcher, I had found this to be unexpected, partly because of my own bias as a researcher and a practitioner, but these unexpected results also suggested that an aesthetics of participation was a powerful process that I would need to unpack to better appreciate the actor-participants' results.

A therapeutic space?

Accessing spaces – creative geographies

This section will begin with a return to the case studies to look more specifically at the link between wellbeing and creative communities, which is an underpinning factor in therapeutic spaces. I will look first at physical spaces and how these need to be right for participants to be able to foster and develop their creative communities. A space can have a therapeutic effect not only because of the work done in that space, but also because of how it is inhabited and how it consequently feels. This section tracks how study participants processed between their more familiar environments to very different workspaces managed by the other organisations in the community theatre partnerships. The relationship between these different creative spaces illustrated how the participants negotiated this aspect of the community theatre partnerships. Moving between different spaces during the Marlowe Theatre case study for example had brought out unexpected tensions. Some of these tensions will be discussed in terms of creative geographies and how these might be useful in a consideration of therapeutic spaces.

Resilience in changing spaces

Facilitator-participant *A* had noted that their own emotional labour (as the interface between the participants and the production processes) had increased following the moves to different environments, indicating that the participants had found changing spaces to be challenging: 'Getting people into new spaces was definitely not straightforward!' (*A* 25.11.21). One of the advantages of the Umbrella Centre as a workshop space was its familiarity as a social, a learning and in some cases a workspace, which made getting to and from these sessions easier. Recalling the creativity of these early sessions in improvisation and speaking verse, there are grounds for suggesting that the work may have been informed by the familiarity of the space. Polanyi's notion of 'indwelling' (1966, p. 17) and Ingold's definition 'know for yourself' (2013, p. 1) are useful here in that the everyday lived experiences of the participants (whether in crafting groups, meditation sessions, or in conversations in the café) had informed their knowledges of how the space in the Umbrella Centre operated. This prompted a sense of ownership that informed the creativity of the first drama sessions. The group had already entered into each other's 'performance' (to paraphrase Polanyi (p. 51)) by using the space (which included *A* who was facilitating these sessions), so there was a readiness to 'have a go' at the different games and improvisation activities despite these practices being new to many participants.

When the company moved to The Kit, it was like a symbolic move away from the vernacular creativity of the Umbrella Centre. Firstly, this new space had to be located and remembered, which was an access issue for some participants from the core group (those from the Marlowe People's Company already knew The Kit as a rehearsal space, which may have contributed to the initial decision to u them to support the core group). Secondly, it had to be negotiated and inhabited. As Massey (2005) remarked, space is contingently related to

processes of living (2005, p. 134). Harriet Hawkins (2017) similarly described the process of inhabiting a space as 'micro geographies in the relationship between creating bodies and their environments.' (2017, p. 28). These processes of living eventually combined to produce the work done by the participants, but the new company took time to make the necessary connections and progress was slow, characterised by lateness and missed sessions. Although the company had been clear from the outset that they could drop in and out of the process at any time, there was a noticeable increase in lateness and non-attendance following the move, contributing to the decision-making that eventually led to the performance being scripted late on. The rehearsal times had been extended and changed to evenings to allow for work commitments, but in fact this led to further access issues and costs, because some participants were understandably anxious about using public transport in the evenings at a time of year when the nights were growing darker. *A*'s role as company manager had been designated as central to the Marlowe's ethos of care but became more about logistics and persuasion; booking taxis, contacting latecomers to make sure that they were going to turn up and reassuring people that they would get home safely: 'I spent so much time just trying to get people into the building, let alone make it to all the rehearsals!' (*A* 25.11.21). Similarly, Fiducia-Brookes noted: 'I think the physical space has elements of safety for people; different spaces can really change the dynamics. If its calm, uncluttered say, the session can start in a calm space and from that calm space you can stretch…Clutter brings distraction, and we've always noticed that moving into a different workspace is challenging' (6.5.22).

There are some reasons for these changes that are related to creative geographies. The Underground Lights participants experienced more disruption during their City of Culture work because the Belgrade Theatre's spaces were being allocated to other activities, which meant that their familiar workspace was not always available. For the Marlowe case study participants, the original core group were familiar with engaging in everyday creativities,

having taken part in activities at the Umbrella Centre. David Crouch (2010) described everyday creativities in a communal garden (this is also applicable to other spaces) as 'emergent…subtle yet complex performativities.' (2010 p. 140). They also depend on the relationality of a negotiated space, but moving spaces would mean that these negotiations would have to begin anew. Importantly, Crouch highlighted the slow pace of these relationships that would eventually become 'emergent creativities' (2010 p. 140). It could be argued that moving to different spaces and renegotiating them contributed to the slowing down of the creative processes, including reconfiguring the creative community (as I observed during the Marlowe Theatre case study) and may also have contributed to the increase in absences. Although the rehearsal schedule in the new space had additional time constraints, rather than galvanising the company to work more urgently within these constraints, the process actually slowed again. Alison Barnes (2019) described the process of inhabiting a space as 'homemaking', which is about materiality and mess (2019 pp. 138-139). In a similar way, the participants' community or 'family' had taken shape and they were beginning to feel 'at home' in their first workshop space only for that community to be renegotiated in the second. However, by the third move, the creative community had become resilient enough to collectively manage the challenges of the studio space, but it had taken time to get to that stage. Perhaps three moves were one too many, although there may have been other factors, such as costs, involved in the decision to move the process from the Umbrella Centre to the Kit, which was The Marlowe's own space. It should also be noted that space was not much alluded to directly during my interviews with the participants. The observations of the unsettled company and slower pace of the work were my own, but I would argue that they revealed tensions around moving to different spaces that interrupted the development of the creative community.

By the time of that third and final move to the performance space in the Marlowe's studio theatre, the dynamic had changed again because the participants' creative community or 'family' seemed more resilient, perhaps because as mentioned above, it had had the time to develop. The company's social bonding and the trust shown in the production team enabled the participants to be resilient when they were given very little time to inhabit either the script or the space. On reflection, the studio was remembered as an exciting space but my interview with *A* revealed where the barriers were, in addition to the emotional labour required to help the participants negotiate them. Once everyone was inside the studio then the production made progress, but getting into the building by operating the stage door tannoy, providing lateral flow tests for Covid, negotiating the lift, waiting in the green room for your call and managing props and costumes were access issues that the partner organisations had not even considered. In an interview, *P* having recently returned to the process found the green room uncomfortable: 'I didn't like waiting in the green room, waiting around on my own.' (*P* 10.11.21).

The company, however, had become a resilient creative community over time which contributed to them successfully negotiating the problematic side of accessing the studio space and according to the interviews, the work done had made the best memories for them and contributed to the 'challenge' category in their results. That said, even though the participants did not explain their feelings about the different spaces in much detail or their reasons for dropping in and out of the process, I would argue that moving to different spaces resulted in access issues that may well have increased anxieties that contributed to these decisions. For an arts organisation embarking on a community theatre partnership, it will be worth bearing in mind that changing spaces may lead to unexpected issues.

To conclude, the experiences of the case studies suggest that being at home in a space facilitates community building and creativity for participants. As some partnerships might

have to use different spaces, understanding or anticipating subsequent interruptions to the creative processes would be helpful. Creative geographies therefore can contribute to a theory of participating in community theatre partnerships through the relationship between practicing creativity and being at home in a space. In addition, the wellbeing factor associated with the participants' categories of 'family', 'challenges', and 'doing drama' suggest that these workspaces can become therapeutic spaces.

Risk factors in therapeutic spaces

A therapeutic space should be able to safely hold risk for participants, because risk is arguably a factor of practicing drama. *Ca* had stated at the outset that there would be risks: 'Learning lines with dyslexia is a challenge but I know that nerves can be good, it's a risk worth taking.', because it was part of their personal challenge: 'I want to prove that people with mental health problems can do acting.' (*Ca* 22.9.22). They reflected on the last-minute tensions of the rehearsals following the performance: 'Until we got the actual paperwork, the lines, my anxiety was sky high. I don't know what happened, but then it calmed down.' (*Ca* 17.11.21). This showed a high level of trust in the process because *Ca* clearly wanted to remain with it, despite anticipating risk and experiencing anxieties. Likewise, *P* had taken a risk in returning to a process that had also caused them anxieties: 'Having an audience...there are some people coming who are critical of me, who will criticise if I make a mistake and they'll say "you missed that" or "you forgot that line", and I'm anxious about that… 'I'm worried about improvising, that's not my...it's not me. I hope I don't have to improvise.' (P 29.9.21).

The agency to drop in and out of the process had caused problems for the production side of the process, but three of the five actor-participants had taken advantage of their right to do this. Whilst the Marlowe Learning and Participation team may not have anticipated the full

extent of the risks to the performance that consequently happened, some of the participants had used the option to manage their own risks, though there were would likely have been other factors besides the pressures of making theatre that may have had led to this overwhelm. The Marlowe had taken a significant risk in not including time limits on returning, but they had maintained what they saw as an important ethical stance. One subsequent difficulty for participants however was that they may have left the process in one space only to negotiate a completely different space on their return, such as the studio with its initial barriers to getting into the building. That said, the company played a part in reintegrating the returning members because as an established creative community, they had already negotiated a means of feeling 'at home' in that space. I found it significant that the returning members accepted the invitation to feel at home, rather than perceive that the rest of the company had moved on without them. As *P* and *M* commented: 'I came back and it was so good, because when it was hard, everyone just supported me.' (*P* 10.11.21); 'When I had to drop out, they said "Please come back!" How lovely to be welcomed back! It was the best thing, the best thing that happened.' (*M* 10.11.21). These spaces were eventually able to hold risk, but for the participants, this was more about their creative community's ability to negotiate risks including the risk-taking and challenges of making theatre that the participants themselves had anticipated.

The creative community is key to whether a space can effectively hold risk and operate as a therapeutic space. With respect to a theory of participating in community theatre partnerships, does it then follow that the drama practices chosen by the facilitators have less effect on the therapeutic status of a workspace than the strength of the company's social bonds?

Practices matter and facilitators can be strongly invested in them, but creative communities are resilient. As a former facilitator I felt that both *Ca* and *W* had not been given the opportunity to stretch themselves and use the skills they had learned. *A*, as their facilitator

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during the first workshops, agreed to an extent despite previously maintaining that some participants had not been ready to turn their lived experiences into art: 'The audience definitely saw a lot more of some participants than others!' (*A* 25.11.21). Banerjee had probably believed he was protecting *Ca* and *W* by writing a scene for them that focused on their strengths at comic two-handers. I found this problematic firstly because it seemed to be about 'fitting' the actors into the play rather than inclusion and secondly, because *Ca* had to learn lines despite their dyslexia. That said, both actors were enthusiastic about Banerjee's writing, the audience evidently enjoyed the scene and *Ca* later noted that getting the lines actually decreased their anxiety: 'Until we got the actual paperwork, the lines, my anxiety was sky high'. (*Ca* 17.11.21). Predicting how participants will react to different practices is complex and in making decisions about them, perhaps it is easy to underestimate resilience.

Likewise, the disagreements between Jackson, Ormerod and Fiducia-Brookes over forum theatre practices (10.12.21) were embedded in what these practitioners saw as the best methods to enable participant-centred work to take place and for Jackson in particular, for that work to be visible. Ormerod and Fiducia-Brookes on the other hand were understandably concerned that traumatic recollections should not simply be repositioned as 'righteous anger', nor that their own practices were 'mollycoddling' (Ormerod, 10.12.21). Having seen Underground Lights' work, I have observed their participants taking risks with performance, but perhaps they also took that resilience into the forum theatre project, engaging with the power of performance in front of a sold-out theatre, which Jackson, according to Fiducia-Brookes, saw as giving a local company a 'once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.' (12.10.21): 'I feel like a movie star; I'm just walking down the street looking around and smiling!' (*Anon (a)*. 23.7.21).

Dramatherapy, brave spaces and safe spaces

Jackson, Ormerod and Fiducia-Brookes' discussion had essentially broken down on a dichotomy about spaces, with Jackson positing 'brave spaces' against what he understood as a 'safe space' approach by Underground Lights. Safe spaces are a concept that originates from dramatherapy (for example Duggan and Grainger 1997, p. 212). Whilst I have aimed to separate the therapeutic from therapy, there are tenets from dramatherapy that are useful to theorising about therapeutic spaces, not least in unpacking 'brave' and 'safe' spaces as a false dichotomy.

On reading different examples of the literature on dramatherapy, I was interested in how the writing had changed over time, or rather there had been changes in the discourses employed in describing practices. I observed how the earlier literature used broad brushstrokes to describe dramatherapy, using examples from performance theory backed up by empirical observations from case studies, such as 'That participation in drama has a healing effect has always been recognized' (Grainger 1990, pp 11-12). Later, evaluation becomes more specifically linked to clinical outcomes as the field has become more professionalised and the research looks to evidence that will be acceptable to The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE). Nevertheless, there are notions that have persisted within a therapeutic or non-clinical context, such as 'safe spaces' mentioned above.

Safe spaces therefore have some theoretical baggage but can be used unquestioningly, leading to an unhelpful dichotomy with 'brave spaces'. Firstly, there is some controversy around the power dynamics implicit in who has made the decision that a space may or may not be safe for participants. Secondly, a 'safe space' may not produce meaningful work. The theatre company *Grey Box*, like *Cardboard Citizens,* actively reject the phrase in favour of 'brave spaces' because the creative process is inherently risky (Shenck, 2021). This however is ultimately a misuse of the term. In dramatherapy, a safe space is the start of a curative process, where transformation can begin through drama. Sue Jennings described the process

as 'the dramatic metaphor: the metaphor that is embodied, projected and enacted enables profound change to take place.' (Jennings 1992, p. 25). These notions from the original and non-clinical tenets of dramatherapy are rich in their description of possibilities. Duggan and Grainger (1997) developed the use of metaphor into their concept of 'as if', which is also intrinsically agentic and multiple: 'Dramatic metaphor, the metaphors used in dramatherapy…are intended to widen horizons rather than focus understanding…people are themselves and more than themselves' (Duggan and Grainger 1997, p. 29).

These descriptors from the beginnings of dramatherapy are useful to a concept of how drama practices can be therapeutic without tying the results to clinical outcomes. Although it oversimplifies the process, there is a lot that is useful in the idea of a 'safe space' being a starting point for a therapeutic drama process that functions by embodying metaphors in order to lead to a personal transformation for participants. Despite this, using terms from dramatherapy must be practiced with care because it has become a targeted, clinical process that is outside the field of community theatre. A 'safe space' is a starting point for recovery and perhaps should therefore be considered as such, rather than in its common usage as a starting point for creativity, even if that creativity can be therapeutic.

The therapeutic and the unknowable

Fiducia-Brookes argued that labelling spaces is unhelpful because too many assumptions can be made about how that space will function. In effect drama spaces have to be multifunctional or 'stretch zones', holding risk, enabling bravery, and allowing participants the option to step back from their work into a safer place. Fiducia-Brookes' conceptualising of a 'stretch zone' is useful with respect to a theory of therapeutic spaces, as there are similarities in how they might work, but what is probably the most significant factor is the unknowable aspect. The 'stretch zone' is a long-term co-created project that is still

developing for Underground Lights and provides the opportunity to experiment in making space to accommodate the unknowable. A community theatre partnership on the other hand tends to be short to medium-term in length, and unknowable aspects are arguably antithetical to some systems of evaluation. However, this is something that partners and stakeholders should at least consider, because even with extensive planning as with the Marlowe Theatre case study, a process can become unpredictable. Fiducia-Brookes notes that risk and by implication unpredictability are factors even in a well-established community theatre company: 'People take a risk in coming to the sessions, they take a huge risk sometimes in first making contact and then getting through the door. Taking that initial risk will feed into confidence. When we get new members, we hope that the group will gel but we don't know for sure. There are always elements of risk when people come out of their comfort zone into that stretch zone, where you can grow a little bit but take yourself back if you start to feel overwhelmed.' (Fiducia-Brookes, 6.5.22).

That knowledge of when to take something forward or back (which is fundamental to Baim's (2020) Drama Spiral described above) is also about sustainability. It reminded me of what one participant had said about co-creation: 'you have to take control of your own lived experience and to do that, you need to have the confidence to know how far you want to take it.' (*Anon (c)*, 28.5.21). Another example of the stretch zone in operation is the event described in Chapter three above, where a potentially difficult improvisation was brought back by the group from personal heightened emotions that manifested as anger, to a discussion of how the emotions worked as drama, thus enabling the participants to step back.

Fiducia-Brookes does not specifically discuss wellbeing probably because this is not the facilitators' responsibility within her organisation, even though it is important to some of its trustees. The company members on the other hand were prepared to speak about wellbeing as a personal benefit in their interviews quoted in chapter three above. The Marlowe theatre

participants on the other hand talked more about wellbeing as a theme, or an effect of their three categories of family, challenge and doing drama. The therapeutic space therefore works first by enabling social connections that can go on to produce wellbeing effects. This is the unknowable aspect of therapeutic spaces, because wellbeing depends on different factors. In the case studies, wellbeing was a factor in Underground Lights' long-term project and for *Shakespeare Nation* in the medium-term, so therapeutic spaces were operating in both of these cases for their participants. For short term projects, more evidence is needed because although therapeutic effects are strongly related to the establishment of a creative community which requires a sufficient length of time (as in the examples of the case studies), individual opportunities, or the joy of taking part in drama activities were also related to wellbeing in the participants' interviews. Therefore, further research on shorter term projects could include co-constructed data from participants to establish if wellbeing is also a theme for them and additionally, if a creative community can be well established in a shorter space of time.

The conceptualisation of the stretch zone merits further consideration in relation to the difficulties posed by the false dichotomy of brave and safe spaces. Fiducia-Brookes also makes the point that facilitators are part of the creative community. This moreover was recognised by the Marlowe participants who included the production team and creatives in their 'family'. Such an inclusion could potentially impact on the wellbeing of arts workers. As facilitators are pressured to deliver work including performances and evaluation, I would argue that it can be easy to forget about their need to foster their own creativity in the face of increased demands of emotional labour, as with *A* when their role became more of an interface between organisations than a facilitator. Being included may extend wellbeing benefits to facilitators as part of what Fiducia-Brookes describes as a 'creative contract' or 'agreement', where they could have a reciprocal share in the 'care for the group'. It should be

noted that the use of the term 'ritual' in the quotation that follows is specifically about mutual ownership of a space, as it can also be a contested term.

'The stretch zone is tied into the physical space, not into the work that you will do in that space. It's a bit like a ritual where you open and close the space and within that space the care for the group emerges. People can feel confident about doing more risky work because they can be heard, they know the creative group environment and they also know that we can manage expectations through a creative agreement we have. We do get things wrong sometimes, but we have that agreement. We can't control people, they have to make their choices about the work that they want to do, but opting in helps the space because it's about care for the group. You can bring things to the process, they might be risky, but there is always care for the group at the heart of things. When you facilitate it takes time to learn how to do things and learn how to respond to things, you are a part of that group too, that creative contract.' (6.5.22).

How therapeutic spaces work in a theory of participation

In summary, therapeutic spaces can produce the wellbeing evidences that many partners and stakeholders have an interest in. However, these benefits are often nuanced and challenging for participants to articulate, let alone be measured by health-based criteria. In addition, wellbeing seems from the participants' evidences to be predicated on the social factors that underpin creative communities. The unknowable factors implicit in how the creative community will establish itself add to the problematic nature of therapeutic spaces in the context of evaluation. Despite this, they were valued by the participants in this study, and I would argue that wellbeing would best be evaluated in future community theatre partnerships by participants themselves as in the co-constructed data model utilised in the case studies. This evidence could then work alongside or supplement a partner or stakeholder's own

health-based objectives. The next section of this chapter will look more closely at aesthetics not only because engaging in creative activities was included in the wellbeing theme, but also because this thesis needs to consider more specifically what is special about taking part in drama.

Towards an aesthetics of participation

'Being in a show is like being a cog in the workings of a clock. But you never get to see the face of the clock. Only the audience get to see its face.' (*Ch* 10.11.21). This quotation from actor-participant *Ch* usefully describes how being in a performance is different from experiencing other creative arts because it is immersive and time-bound. The product cannot be held, but rather holds, it is something you both make and power. In its very simplest terms, an aesthetics of participation is about being *in* something together, and how that experience feels. Participants in community theatre are more usually amateur performers, some of whom have never made theatre before, therefore taking part tends to be a novel experience that constantly remakes itself through workshops, rehearsals and performances into a container for the company's affective labours. The community aspect is essential to the aesthetic and as well as providing supportive social bonds, is predicated on knowledges. I will draw on two texts by Gareth White and Isobel Armstrong to further explain how both knowledges and affect operate in an aesthetic experience of participation. White has written about an aesthetics of participation in applied theatre and Armstrong's work is significant because she sees aesthetics as intrinsic, individual knowledges that are shared in social interactions.

Affect as knowledge

Armstrong's investigation is a revaluation of aesthetics in the light of post-structuralist deconstruction, which had resulted in 'effectively undermin[ing] aesthetics but refus[ing] to remake it.' Armstrong therefore aimed to remake aesthetic discourse in order to reveal its

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radical potential (2000, p. 2), using a psychoanalytic model to explain how affect/emotion becomes knowledge (pp. 116-124).

Armstrong's chapter on *Thinking Affect* (pp. 108-148) addresses a traditional enlightenment opposition between rational thought and emotion: 'How it is possible to dissolve the customary binary emotion/thought and where it would take us in a democratic "aesthetic education" is my concern' (p. 108). Psychoanalysis addresses both thinking and emotion, but as Armstrong goes on to point out, this tends to locate emotion as 'outside' language or as something that is contained and even constrained by language. Armstrong notes that psychoanalysis is 'not the only language one can speak' but (particularly in terms of the time at which she was writing) was the 'nearest one can get to affect' (p. 114).

Arguably, psychoanalysis was a key language for deconstruction because it could bridge between Marxist theories of hegemonies and Freudian analyses. In this way, psychoanalysis could be used to undo narratives of knowledge and power (including the interrogation of its own discourse), whilst revealing the operations and constructs of language. Armstrong however used these critical languages as tools to clarify her thinking rather than as deconstructive processes in themselves. Thus, she described how affect had been located in a traditional binary opposition between emotion and thought (or reason), which tended to value the latter at the expense of the former. Initially, affect/emotion was described as pertaining to pre-symbolic and consequently the 'unsayable' or (citing Lacan) 'the imaginary subordinated...the semiotic, waste product of the imagination which requires further repression.' (p. 117). However, affect/emotion is not beyond representation, which enables Armstrong to make the connection with knowledge, or the 'epistemic possibility' when '"what feels" becomes knowledge' (p. 121). Armstrong further clarifies this by referring to Vygotsky's assertion that not only is 'emotion…behind the need to think', but that 'emotion is always social.' (p. 138), which is an important point with respect to the findings of this

thesis. The social aspect necessitates communication, which is arguably creative because it has to be made: 'It is the space between thought and word, the gap in which thought and language do not *fit* which enables a process of translation for communication.' (p. 141). To summarise, affect/emotion produces thought, which in turn produces an aspect of creativity as knowledge, through the possibilities engendered in the gaps that ensue between thought and word. With respect to drama practices, the communication aspect is key to community-building, but this model can also be related to the praxis of narrating lived experiences in order to turn knowledge into art.

Knowledge

Affect as knowledge is central to the work of practitioners in the field of community theatre, as in the work of Nicholson and Matarasso which has featured several times in the course of this thesis. In the case studies, knowledge as lived experience featured in devised theatre practices, but I did not perceive that these knowledges were always treated equitably by the professionals in the Marlowe Theatre study. Opportunities were therefore missed, but significantly, the participants did not always remember events the way that I did.

In Chapter two above, I described how stories of lived experiences had been selected for the performance based on how the director and assistant director perceived they were ready to be turned into art. It was decided that some participants had more successfully mediated their stories because they could create a distance between themselves as actors and their experience. Or, to reframe this with Armstrong's model, they had mediated their affect/emotion into knowledge. As noted above, there were no further opportunities for participants to share their lived experiences, which seemed to be a missed opportunity. I had been concerned about this, particularly when *W* and *Ca* had been given challenging lines to learn which were not their own, but *W* recalled 'I didn't feel too much pressure on me.'; and

'In the show, the people totally listened to me, all the way through, it was trust. It was about trust. You have to go with the flow and trust the director.' (17.11.21). I had perceived that some participants had not been trusted to mediate their own knowledges, and this still concerns me. However, I also learned that I could not predict how the participants would experience the decision-making. There was a level of trust within that creative community (which included the professional arts workers) that I only learned through the interviews. To return to *Ch*'s analogy above, *W* had been happy to be a cog in the mechanism of the clock because they were creating art and again, the creative community underpins the aesthetics of participation. As *M* reflected, 'We were sharing stories in a safe space, it was about trust, respect, being brave.' (*M* 10.11.21)

Aesthetics of participation in applied and participatory theatre

Authorship

Gareth White (2013) discussed the aesthetics of participation by considering the participants themselves as embodied aesthetic material, which has some similarities with the decisions made around participants in the Marlowe Theatre case study mentioned above. From an ethical perspective, White aimed to achieve a balance between the possibilities of agency for the participants within the framework of a script based on frame analysis, which utilises an aesthetics of invitation through a 'procedural author', who inscribes spaces for participation within the text but limits the extent to which this can influence the action (p. 55). The practices that White is discussing here are not devised or co-created theatre but are more similar to forum theatre in which spectators can be invited into the action. In this sense, although the 'procedural author' process is not applicable to the aesthetics of participation as discussed in this thesis, authorship nevertheless became a factor. I had found the notion of utilising participants as aesthetic materials to be problematic with respect to privileging

knowledges, similar to Banerjee's decision to take on an authorial role in a devised theatre project. Moreover, this decision-making had largely been reactive, rather than a product of a theory like procedural authorship. *R* had also questioned the use of participants as materials: 'have you made a change or just used people as material? That would be a wasted opportunity.' (13.5.21). White's writings on aesthetics are important to the field of participatory theatre and I would argue should be considered in this context, particularly with respect to authorship, participation, and materiality, even if not directly applicable to the community theatre partnerships that are the subject of this thesis.

Beauty

Later, White (2015) wrote about the aesthetics of applied theatre to reclaim its practices as art and to provide a counter argument to instrumentalism. Firstly, he acknowledged that aesthetics means different things to different people and indicates that this contingency aspect is appropriate for the umbrella term of applied theatre: 'overlapping meanings' relating to 'overlapping practices' (2015, p. 1). What is particularly interesting about his account is that he considers the importance of beauty in an aesthetic experience and to 'recuperate' its power for 'progressive ends.' (p. 8). Shaughnessy (2016) cites both White (2015) and Thompson (2009) in a radical interpretation of beauty that enables risk-taking and 'move[s] us to an experiential domain of felt understanding' (pp. 484-485).

The evidence of the interviews revealed that beauty had also been important to the actor-participants. There was a sense of beauty, particularly in the costumes which were traditional Elizabethan dress lent by the RSC (made with the care and quality that can be afforded by their costume department), and also in the staging: 'The costumes were something different! I really liked the costumes… Putting on the costume, it felt real.' (*P* 10.11.21); 'Even the costumes, they have a history. Some are even older than me...that history!' (*M* 10.11.21);

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'The music, how it all had to be so carefully chosen, the lights…the fabrics that the light reflected on'. (*Ch* 10.11.21); It all looked amazing…' (*P* 10.11.21); 'The rehearsals are going great, having the lights, the curtains and everything, having the costume makes me a different character!' (*W* 25.10.21). Finally, there is this testimony to the happiness produced by an aesthetic experience from *M*: 'What's left after the process? I'm elated, privileged!' (*M* 10.11.21). Happiness moreover is wellbeing, produced by this sometimes-challenging community theatre partnership.

Similar to Armstrong, White's defence of aesthetics is partly a consequence of prevalent critical discourses. White points out that aesthetics had been associated with a sense of privilege because its cultural and historical underpinnings, usually taken from the philosophy of Kant, had been utilised in order to privilege a certain type of art (p. 21). Kantian aesthetics has tended to be cited in terms of the autonomous status of the artistic object. In addition, 'beauty' has been associated with 'good', in opposition to the 'sublime', which is traditionally seen as more transgressive. White therefore aimed to rewrite aesthetics as a potentially democratic discourse of heteronomy (heteronomy meaning to be influenced by factors outside of oneself) which would take environmental factors into account and make space for encountering the beauty of art (2015, p. 11-18). Although he is writing about theatre, White's theory of aesthetics is very individual and does not involve the creative community experience that was so important to the actor-participants. For White, encountering art is something that 'happens to us' and is grounded in experience. (p. 33), in other words 'an aesthetics that is personal.' (p. 65). Although these encounters constitute knowledges produced by lived experiences of art, White seems to be focusing on spectatorship. Art however is also rooted in praxis, because it is something that practitioners do. Making theatre, for the actor-participants moreover was a collective experience grounded in their creative community. White's reclaiming of beauty in encountering art is important,

but in the context of this thesis, the aesthetic experience is also rooted in a community that also holds space for individual knowledges. Therefore, an aesthetics of participating in community theatre partnerships is inscribed within a twofold process; namely accessing wellbeing through building community bonds and encountering beauty through the retrieval and externalising of knowledges, both held by the praxis of drama.

Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter looked at theory-building with respect to how participants benefit from taking part in community theatre partnerships. The theory is two-fold, firstly centring on nuanced aspects of wellbeing and how these are produced by creative communities. As a creative community establishes itself, the spaces where drama is practiced, or theatre is made become therapeutic spaces that can hold risk and challenge. Importantly, aspects of the unknowable mean that they cannot be subject to or controlled by outside objectives. Secondly, the theory looks to participants' aesthetic experiences of making and performing theatre within these spaces. These aesthetic experiences are individual knowledges, retrieved and externalised, that thrive in a collective experience held by a creative community which has its own power and cannot be controlled by external objectives.

As has been consistent throughout the findings of this thesis, community factors are fundamental to the participants' experiences. As noted, I had been surprised by their positivity regarding what had sometimes been a difficult process, but in this respect, I had to step back from both my researcher bias and my practices in order listen to the participants. This was the foundation of what I hoped would be an equitable knowledge exchange that would genuinely take into account their lived experiences. Evaluation must be genuinely grounded in the participants' own experiences, even if their results may be unexpected. As indicated by the phenomenological framework outlined at the beginning of this thesis, this

attention to individual subjectivities and their interactions in building communities aimed to respond to the epistemological question about what should count as knowledge in a research process that aimed to unpack some of the benefits of participating in community theatre. In its simplest terms, the key to understanding the benefits of participation is inscribed within that creative community. The social bonds and aesthetic experiences create encounters that can hold space between individual knowledges and the collective praxis of taking part in drama, a process that fosters wellbeing through challenge. These unique qualities therefore make a case for including drama within a community's arts offer.

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CONCLUSION - POSTSCRIPT

Sustainability

On the week beginning 16th May 2022, a group from the *Shakespeare Nation* project travelled to Stratford upon Avon as the 'Kent Rebellion', to take part in Act One of the RSC's *Rebellion*, the first part of their *Henry VI* adaptation, directed by Owen Horsley. Each *Shakespeare Nation* region had been allocated a performance week. Following a period of demanding, all-day rehearsals in Canterbury, the RSC had funded their weeks' stay in Stratford to dress rehearse with the professional actors and then appear in that weeks' performances. The group included actor-participants *M*, *Ch*, *Ca* and *W* with *A* reprising their role as company manager. Some had lines to learn, with *Ch* performing a comic scene. Others were in choreographed crowd scenes that had the additional pressure of being upscaled from The Kit to the comparatively vast space of the RSC main house. A coachload of supporters from the Umbrella Centre and the Marlowe theatre organised by Jack Finch-Harding made the trip to the first performance.

Although a few members had been unable to spend that length of time in Stratford because of work and caring commitments, the majority of the company seemed to have picked up where they left off six months earlier and with the support of Ian Wainwright's team, negotiated the challenges of the space, including the large professional cast and production team whom they had only recently met. It was an exceptional opportunity, as *W* and *M* noted: 'It's like it's our reward for being great!' (W 19.5.22). 'I never dreamed I would be stepping onto such a stage! Here! Where Shakespeare was born!' (M 19.5.22). *Ca* remarked how supportive the cast members had been: 'Lucy [Benjamin] has been great, I have to say. She's been brilliant. And Arthur [Hughes], you'll see him in in part two. And they're rehearsing the next one, its Richard III. We'll have to get another bus down here to see it!' (Ca 19.5.22).

As Selina Busby noted, *Rebellion* had been a similar opportunity for two groups of people who would never usually have met, to encounter each other on a more equitable footing, where (paraphrasing bel hooks) 'mere presence is resistance' (2021, p. 179). Though I also recalled Fiducia-Brookes (6.5.22) assertion that such a 'reward' for participants' affective labours ultimately sold them short (though *W*, quoted above, was happy with the idea of being rewarded): 'the community deserve a deeper level of engagement than they are expected to settle for. It should be more than an opportunity to take part or work with a certain company, like a reward. It's an opportunity but less of an engagement.' I would argue that both of these viewpoints are relevant in that the experience with the RSC was a unique experience with a leading professional theatre company. On the other hand, it was also the end of the project. The sustainability factors had to be found by the participants themselves, unlike the members of Underground Lights, who have the opportunity to perform up to three times a year at the Belgrade Studio Theatre or other local venues.

In the end, ticket prices prevented the company from returning to Stratford as a group and that creative community has now been fragmented. Some have left Canterbury (*M* to study drama), but others have found opportunities to perform. Contacts at the Umbrella Centre introduced *Ca* and *W* to The Really Promising Company (a local community theatre group) and the Canterbury Shakespeare festival. I have enjoyed seeing them participate in the Shakespeare Festival's productions of *Don Quixote* adapted by Mary Wills and Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* in August 2023 and 2024, both directed by Elliot Huxtable. At the time of writing, The Really Promising Company is rehearsing a musical by local writer Jane Jones titled *The Forgotten Man*, based on the life of a former Canterbury entrepreneur. It will be performed at Christ Church College in October 2024 as part of the annual Canterbury Festival. Although *Shakespeare Nation* ended with *Rebellion*, its participants did gain the confidence and experience to look for new opportunities to make theatre, although that is dependent on what

a local area can offer with respect to amateur and community theatre. As *Ca* remarked, 'I'm glad we did [*Shakespeare Nation*]. It was the start of this, the start of everything really.' (7.8.2024). For future community theatre partnerships, the sustainability aspect could be explored in terms of researching further local opportunities for participants to practice drama or make theatre, once a project has ended. However, opportunities with organisations that work towards being genuinely inclusive are limited to the level of support and funding that may have been secured. Sustainability therefore is a factor that needs to be discussed at the outset of a project with reference to the participants themselves.

The Research Findings

The research findings were driven by the participants' co-constructed results on the benefits of participating in community theatre. The participants' categories were 'family', 'challenge' and 'doing drama', which were mapped onto themes of community building; creativity; risk; knowledge; and wellbeing. These finding drove the second part of the thesis which was a deeper investigation of these results. The findings brought out creativity as a social phenomenon and how creative communities can be evasive and unknowable rather than be controlled by objectives. Communities can successfully hold risk and enable at least a greater equity with respect to participants' knowledges and facilitators' skills. Although this was not always successful with respect to the case studies, the creative community provided the support necessary for the participants' experiences to be positive and importantly, to produce wellbeing. Wellbeing was at the heart of many of the problems with evaluation brought out by the literature, because nuanced benefits are difficult to measure.

As the arts and health conversation is so important at present, evaluation remains a key topic. The solution proposed by this thesis was to centre evaluation around the participants so that they can co-construct their data to communicate what was most valuable to them about taking

part. These co-created results can further inform methods of objective-led evaluations in the interests of other stakeholders such as health-based organisations. The situation mapping framework proposed and modelled in part one of the thesis can further develop the evaluative picture by enabling a community arts organisation to evaluate their own practices and those of their partner organisations, track the distribution of resources and predict possible consequences or future problems. A fuller evaluative picture can potentially become a knowledge exchange between all parties involved in a theatre partnership, therefore facilitating communication with stakeholders. An example would be a debate around co-creative practices which could frame a conversation about sustainability. A community arts organisation would be able to discuss the limitations of a project with its partners, and using Glasier's definition (2024), present co-creation as a tool kit of practices rather than an overarching 'buzzword'. This could enable specific factors to be addressed within the limits of a project, such as devising content.

The research questions.

Finally, I will return to the research questions in the conclusion to this thesis. As mentioned, the research questions were devised at the outset of the research through initial conversations with the theatre companies who were interested in taking part.

The first question was about agency: *How can community theatre practitioners enable agency for their participants within a framework of stakeholders including funding bodies and partnership organisations?* This question was fundamentally about instrumentalism and power. Arguably, it was particularly relevant to arts and health discourses and the problematic issue of applying evaluations based on health-based outcomes to creative practices. The power relationships are real, but the participants themselves are not controlled by stakeholders nor by their objectives. Creative communities were found to be evasive and

resilient, with participants' agencies originating within themselves. Although agencies are facilitated by creative practices, they are not completely dependent on them. Projects that do not have the time or resources to be sustainably co-creative for example can still facilitate creative communities.

The second question focussed on the participants: *What then are the benefits of taking part in a community theatre process, and how can these be evaluated?* This was addressed through the longitudinal process of interviews and co-created results. The interview process was not without problems, as some of the participants found the situation to be artificial and they preferred open conversations and group discussions, but the co-created results were a success. Although conducted individually, the interviews presented an interesting consistency in what these participants found valuable in terms of taking part. This consistency allowed the results to be generalisable and provided the starting point for a theory about participating in community theatre partnerships. Although the co-constructed method had a consistency in this case that could be communicable to stakeholders, it should be remembered that participant-focused evaluation may not always yield similar results, particularly with respect to short-term projects that require more research.

The final question asked *Are partnerships between arts and community organisations an effective way of enabling opportunities for taking part in community theatre?* Partnerships are a valuable means of sharing resources and gaining access to funding. As practicing drama and making theatre are dependent on both people and spaces as resources, partnerships can assist with sharing these costs. Overall, the research aimed to make a case for the inclusion of drama within an arts organisations' community offer through the participants' own evidences. In its simplest terms, the case for community theatre is made because it builds communities that produce benefits including wellbeing, and it facilitates creativity through participants accessing and exchanging their own knowledges. That said, funding and resources make

community theatre partnerships a realistic means of enabling participatory drama to take place.

It should be remembered that partnerships are imperfect systems, as stakeholders often have their own objectives and methods of evaluation that they aim to apply to a project. There are undoubted issues of power and potential instrumentalism here, which will remain a concern to arts organisations, but co-constructed methods of evaluation can function alongside and potentially enrich stakeholders' criteria. Finally, making art is not compliant or manageable as the participants in this research proved, even when it seemed that they were absent from decision-making processes. This thesis therefore belongs to them and how they have articulated their own experiences of the benefits of participating in community theatre partnerships, modelling how participants should be at the centre of evaluative processes.

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