Background

Executive Summary

Evaluation is an essential part of community theatre practice companies are called upon to provide evidence of the artistic activities they engage in, and how those activities have impact on the communities within which they take place.

These imperatives, which often arise from the need to justify community arts projects to funding bodies, have tended to produce evaluations that are summative and predominantly focussed on outcomes, particularly in terms of social impact. This study was undertaken to investigate the potential to enrich and support these forms of evaluation via approaches drawn from scholarship on arts practices and the processes, as well as outcomes, they involve. Exploring the literature in the arts and humanities around aesthetics, memory, performance, heritage and place, the study sought alternative vocabularies which could contribute to an account of the impacts which community arts have. It suggested that there was a productive exchange to be set up between existing evaluative frameworks and these perspectives, which illuminated ideas of process, aesthetic experience and the interactions which take place between everyone, practitioners, participants and audience alike, within a community theatre project.

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Introduction

This scoping study was undertaken in response to the commonplace use of social science language and categories to evaluate community theatre projects, in contrast with the relative lack of perspectives drawn from the arts and humanities. The social science perspectives concentrate attention on social health and wellbeing in ways which foreground these important impacts, but can fail to connect them with evaluations of the specific artistic processes involved. The focus on impacts also directs scrutiny on the end “product” – the performance – whereas theatre practitioners believe the real effects of a community arts project are likely to be taking place throughout the process. We undertook an investigation of the literatures to provide alternative perspectives, from history, memory studies, performance theory and philosophy. These provide a vocabulary to render visible within the evaluation process what was already going on within community theatre, illuminating its impacts and benefits.

Once we had developed our findings, we organized a two-day workshop, inviting a number of community theatre practitioners. We were able to listen to how far they found the various categories useful in framing and illuminating their practices. It allowed us to nuance our understanding of how theoretical categories interact with past experiences to shape a practitioner’s approach to their activity.

Heritage

Community theatre projects are often situated in particular and strongly-defined communities, whether a rural village, an inner-city postcode “targeted” by policy makers, or a network defined by common interests and situation. The artistic activity often involves an engagement with the community’s sense of themselves and their connection (or lack of it) with their own past, and can even involve drawing on narratives or artefacts from that heritage in preparing the performance or artworks. This strand thus straddles the effects which will be felt by individual participants and the wider community. Lowenthal stresses the exclusive aspects of “heritage”, distinguishing it from “history”, which he sees as comparative, open and available to all. In contrast in his account, heritage “exaggerates and omits, candidly invents and frankly forgets” because “commitment and bonding demand uncritical endorsement and preclude dissenting voices. Deviance from shared views is not tolerated because group success, even sheer survival, depends on everyone pulling together” (121). On the other side of the debate, Samuel criticizes what he calls “heritage-baiters”, and insists on the value of the recognition over the last decades that historians did not invent history, that heritage is a “social form of knowledge” and an authentic way of engaging with the past as well as what it means for the present (259, 8). Both Pearson and Stewart illuminate the ways in which places and “sites” can be rich with meaning, how they are “storied” into being in ways that overlap with the construction of the past via “heritage” (A Space, 7). These conflicting perspectives could be productive for any practitioner working with “heritage”, to reflect on their own activities and how those intervene in the community’s ongoing heritage practices.

Nicholson draws on gift theory from both Mauss and Derrida, which at first encourages suspicion as to the motives of the practitioners, and then dissolves that
into an ethical model of generosity rather than exchange. Nicholson’s insights into community theatre practice as implicated in a system of implicit gift-exchange alerts us to the fact that practitioners are asking participants to “give” by putting part of their heritage and self-understanding into the project. Perhaps this could be the basis for reflections upon the ways in which theatre practitioners may need to make their own “heritage” and artistic tradition visible, framing the project as a series of exchanges between two mutually giving groups, rather than as something bestowed upon the participants for their benefit. This would also recognise the agency of the participants, and the extent to which they create their own aesthetic experiences and social impacts within the project.

**Embodiment and affect**

Within performance studies, the positive value of embodiment is articulated most clearly by Phelan, who finds an almost metaphysical significance in the situation and acts of live performance - “art with real bodies” (*Mourning*, 3). For Phelan it has an integrative, healing potential with enormous relevance in a cultural moment which is “buffeted on one side by the claims of virtual reality and electronic presence, and on the other by a politicised and commodified spirituality” (*Mourning*, 3). In *Unmarked*, she gives live performance complete priority over other forms of representation, and ontological security, defining it as “representation without reproduction” and insisting that it “implicates the real through the presence of living bodies” (146, 148). It is this which, for Phelan, makes live performance a powerful and positive site for resisting the cultural economy of exchange and reproduction which vitiates contemporary society, since it “honours the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value which leaves no visible trace afterward” (*Unmarked*, 149). This attitude is critiqued by Auslander, who directly takes on the ontological distinction Phelan sets up between “live” and “mediatized” forms and analyzes examples in an attempt to undermine that distinction and thus deny “live performance’s ostensibly curative powers” (4). For Auslander, these distinctions are not the result of some essential distinction, but rather the shifting positions of different modes of performance within a cultural economy over time. The energy of this controversy (like that over heritage) suggests that it is an essential part of accounting for what it happening during a performance where people are physically present to each other, and could inform any attempt to understand the practices of community theatre.

Turning to another perspective from memory studies, Callard and Papoulias record the increasing interest in “affect” alongside “embodiment” in the humanities, a turn which “explicitly denounces” the Cartesian mind/body duality and “moves beyond what it regards as a restrictive preoccupation with cognition and representation” (247). This development stresses immediate “engagement with the world” and “the specificity of embodied experience” which “exceeds the constructionist models of subjectivity” with the potential to “transform the social structures within which this subjectivity is otherwise mired” (247). Though there are differing definitions of “affect”, Callard and Papoulias distinguish between “emotion”, a structured and nameable state, and “affect”, the physiological experience which is processed and fitted into the category
of emotion: “an ‘affective event’ is not
consciously apprehended, but is, rather, what
happens to the body directly on the level of its
endocrinology, skin conduction, and viscera”
(247). Obviously “representation” in some form
is part of the end product of any community
arts project, but this perspective offers the
potential to make more kinds of experience
visible during the rehearsal and reflection
processes. These insights are strongly focused
on the participants, and exploring the way
movement may already be “encoded” into the
body through long use, and the relationship
between these physical affects and more
articulable emotions, could help participants
explore the richness and value of their own
experiences.

Time, fulfilment and craft

The study revealed potentially helpful
scholarship which frames art as a “fulfilment”
of time, and also sees art as a critique of
instrumentality in our culture. Gadamer’s
notion of “autonomous” time, experienced
for its own sake, sits alongside his idea that an
art work has an organic unity which does not
subordinate itself to “any particular external
purpose” (42, 43). Both emphasize the value
to be found in the aesthetic experience itself,
not in any product which may result from it,
but they also situate the aesthetic experience
within the stream of less autonomous time
and activity, to which it can offer a resistance.
(This situatedness connects to the notions of
embodiment explored in the previous section,
as well as the emphasis in Nicholson’s work
on “applied theatre” and its connection to
particular situations.) Another productive
perspective on time comes from Bakhtin,
whose conceptions of “festival” and “carnival”
time spread the focus of aesthetic experience
broadly, encouraging us to see it as something
in which a whole community partakes, not a
set of atomised individual experiences. Such an
account would stress the agency of participants
(also mentioned in our discussion of Nicholson)
and the value which they create themselves
through the activities of art.

These philosophers can be set in fruitful
dialogue with Sennett, a social scientist whose
work is also concerned with the arts. Sennett’s
work insists on “craft”, the physical practice
of learning to do one thing well and to make
objects outside oneself, as a resistance to the
instrumentality of modern capitalism and
the way it encourages workers to reshape
their sense of self to fit economic roles. His
statement that the craftsman represents “the
special human condition of being engaged”
could be enriched by an exchange with the
notions of time from Gadamer and Bakhtin
(Craftsman, 20). An account would emerge
of community theatre as a shared non-
competitive activity, which involves physical
practices which produce pleasure and worth,
whilst resisting the exchange value systems of
the corporation and the commercial sector.

Representation, recognition and
truth

The specifically mimetic aspect of community
theatre, the ways in which it relates narratives
and creates characters, could be explored via
notions of representation and recognition.
Fraser’s account of “recognition” states that
certain communities are disadvantaged by
having their identities, histories and ways of
life depicted in the larger cultural and social
sphere as if they were worthless or alien.
This then forms the basis for discrimination
and the denial of the right to participate
equally in social institutions and practices. This suggests a particular value to the way in which community theatre creates a space for stories and local knowledge to be valued and recognised as significant, eroding the sense of “difference” which other images of their community ascribe to them. It also points to the kinds of value potentially produced for audiences, and the community beyond the individual people involved in a performance.

The form in which those stories are presented could also be framed via accounts of “representation” drawn from performance studies. Brecht and Diamond both highlight the fact that no stage representation is ever literally “realistic”, even if it aims to reproduce reality faithfully, and that difference theatrical techniques may use the same story to produce different impacts. Any account of the impact of community theatre must consider whether seeing “their” past on stage made audience feel proud, angry or motivated to change things, as this will surely affect the larger social impact the performance produces. This will also help distinguish between the effects produced by being part of the representation, and those produced by being part of an audience watching narratives which intersect with their experiences.

**Delors: A Potential Framing**

The Delors Report, published by UNESCO, offers a framework for thinking about the goals of education, which we found persuasive in approaching the potential benefits community theatre may enable for participants. It categorises these goals in four “pillars”:

**Learning to know:** Developing the intellectual tools and framework for acquiring knowledge, encouraging intellectual curiosity and honing critical skills. Both acquiring the skills involved in learning and an appreciation of it for its own sake.

**Learning to do:** Acquiring “the competence to deal with many situations and work in teams”, as well as developing personal initiative and commitment (37).

**Learning to live together:** Developing “an understanding of others and their history, traditions and spiritual values”, respecting people and recognizing what we may have in common with them below surface differences (37).

**Learning to be:** Developing self-knowledge, self-awareness, judgement, independence. Building a sense of one’s own self, and one’s capacities, as well as how one might change.

These “pillars” offer a compelling set of categories with which to distinguish and consider the different purposes people might see in community theatre. Funders might frame their wishes for participants in terms of “knowing” and “doing”, or performers might articulate their experiences in terms of “being” and audiences might report an alteration in their sense of “living together”. Further investigation might reveal another way in which these pillars intersect with the accounts people provide of their involvement, in whatever role, with community theatre projects. We should note that these categories concentrate on the effects on participants, and they are likely to have less relevance to impacts on audiences or the wider community. However, they do allow an analysis of the possible changes participants may experience, covering both epistemological perspectives (likely to be interest to funders) and ontological attention to the nature of the arts (of more relevance to practitioners), allowing the kind of exchange and nuancing to which this study...
aspires. Thus this seems a flexible and strong framework within which evaluation and understanding of the processes and effects of community theatre could take place.

Conclusions and suggestions for further research

This scoping study has revealed a productive set of connections to be made between the perspectives different disciplines offer on the nature and impact of the arts. Though this discussion paper has only allowed us to refer to a handful of theorists, and sketch how their ideas might be brought to bear on the issues we have outlined, the bibliography gives a broader sample of works which have influenced our thinking.

It is clear to us that there is further research to be carried out into the way those involved in community theatre conceptualise the connections between social effects and artistic techniques, the categories and vocabularies which are made available for articulating people’s responses to art, and the various influences (from artistic self-understanding, funding bodies and policy imperatives) which shape how and when evaluation is carried out. We suggest that attention must be paid to the nature of the aesthetic experience itself, particularly when being it is undertaken outside the commercial artistic sector, and how it is affected by people’s reasons for becoming involved in a project. Applying the themes we have identified to particular projects in the field would allow further insights into how well they connect to the experiences of practitioners, audiences and participants.
References and external links


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The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

“to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities.”

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