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Performing Social Space: Theatre and Learning

Helen Nicholson



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ΔΙΑΒΑΣΤΕ ΤΟ ΑΡΘΡΟ ΠΑΡΑΚΑΤΩ
Read the article below

Το άρθρο αυτό μπορεί να χρησιμοποιηθεί δωρεάν για έρευνα, διδασκαλία και προσωπική μελέτη. Επιτρέπεται η αναδημοσίευση μετά από άδεια του εκδότη.

Performing Social Space: Theatre and Learning

Helen Nicholson

This talk is motivated and inspired by the sentiment that is articulated in the conference theme, The Bonds of Solidarity. In thinking through this talk, I was drawn to think about the symbolic implications of my journey here. In the taxi ride to Heathrow airport, near where I live, the driver and I talked about his recent celebration of Eid on 26th October, marking the end of a month of fasting – and we joked about the endless diet of energy drinks that he had been consuming last time on the last occasion he had driven me, during Ramadan. It was hard, he said, but we fast and celebrate the breaking of the fast to show common bonds across the Islamic world, ‘our brotherhood’, he said.

Crossing borders at airports is a necessary ritual, and when suitcases have been scanned it is my body that becomes the means of identification. My passport is scrutinised – it’s European, and scarcely warrants a second look. The official at passport control glances up. I must seem to fit. It is, quite literally, a politics of recognition. By being “recognised” as a European and as an individual whose picture more or less matches the photograph in my passport, I am allowed to cross the border. I never doubted that I would be prevented – but the ritual reminds me that this right that is, of course, unevenly distributed across the world – often limited to the already powerful – a point that I shall return to later.

On this visit, perhaps the moment that seemed to carry the weight of a symbolism was changing my currency into Euros. I am not here to make judgements about the economy and the Euro zone – even if I could – but as a theatre academic interested in cultural performance, it does seem appropriate to consider the cultural implications of this action. I find it interesting that this year, of all years, I have kept Euros in my wallet alongside my pounds since August – sometimes accidentally taking out the wrong note in a shop reminds me of a world beyond – and a global inter-connectedness that is often contested and conflicted.

So I am suggesting that just reflecting on my journey here opens questions about religious brotherhood, about nationhood and border crossing, about economic inter-connectedness, language – and how they are performed on a daily basis. Solidarity in the era of industrialised economies was often forged along class lines, worker to worker, but in this age of global networks and migrant populations, young people are more likely to feel solidarity along racial, ethnic or faith lines – sometimes with catastrophic consequences. Solidarity in itself does not promote a more equal, just and tolerant society.

My question is, therefore, what is the appropriate cultural and educational response to these new social bonds and transnational allegiances? And what are their implications for teaching drama? What is to follow is an attempt to grapple with some of issues, and is based on the premise that drama and theatre is both responsive to contemporary social concerns and opens new opportunities for social imagination. So why am I talking about space?

I think the political implications of space have been ignored in drama education – but I do think that the geographer of childhood Stuart C. Aiken is right when he says that the real contemporary crisis facing young people today is not primarily psychological or sociological, but spatial and temporal (2001). There are three reasons for this:

1. The world is increasingly globalised, yet with great divisions of wealth and poverty across the world, offering unequal opportunities to young people.
2. Young people are increasingly networked across time and space.
3. Spaces are increasingly regulated and disciplined, with young people often demonised or marginalised from public space.

I have called this talk Performing Social Space to acknowledge that because all performative encounters, whether in everyday life, in schools or in the structures of drama itself, are experienced as spatial negotiations between bodies, objects, environments. I don’t need to remind people in Athens that streets and other public spaces often are often the place where power is enacted and contested. But I would like to suggest something more than that – that space inflects our understanding of the world. It affects the way we understand cities, towns, villages, schools and homes. Space indicates where we feel we belong, how we shape our allegiances and sense of identity.

My suggestion is that, in this increasingly interconnected, globalised world we can no longer rely on the ideal of a common humanity, nor can we expect to achieve solidarity by uniting around one ideological position. Both are exclusionary and, as Chantal Mouffe has argued, create the conditions whereby dissent is driven underground. I am inspired by the geographer Edward Soja's call for a renewed concept of justice in spatial terms, who argues that social justice is written into the very streets and houses we inhabit. He argues that:

Justice and injustice are infused into the multi-scalar geographies in which we live, from the intimacy of the household to the uneven development of the global economy (Soja 2010: 20).

This connection between scale and social justice reminds me of Edward Bond's perception that "Each moment of drama contains both the kitchen table and the edge of the universe" (Nicholson 2009), suggesting that theatre can refract the political dynamic of scale between the domestic and the global.

Spaces and places also impact on learning in all kinds of ways, and artists often re-imagine space and place as part of their creative activity. More domestically, anyone who has lived with a teenager knows that power dynamics are often symbolised through domestic spaces; arguments about teenagers' untidy bedrooms, for example, are often a metaphor for their desire for increased privacy and greater independence. I am always struck by how many places in and around schools teenagers find to hide, and escape authority. Most alarmingly, I once when I found the entire cast of the school play hiding under the stage – reached through a trap-door and about a metre high – smoking in layers of dust and discarded exercise books.

This talk is structured in three parts. In the first section I shall raise some issues about space and learning. The second part is focused on pedagogy and disrupting its meanings, and the final section I shall begin to consider the relationship between social networks and the bonds of solidarity.

Social Space and Learning

I became interested in the relationship between learning and social space because I was searching for a way of thinking about theatre education that acknowledges that young people somehow need to metaphorically inhabit that den under the stage – at least temporarily – as well as in the public sphere. I was working with the idea that participating in theatre is about hiding and escaping – as part of creativity – and that drama can be one of the places where young people can find a productive balance between freedom and security. Pedagogy is always a political project, which legitimates, implicitly or explicitly, particular social relations of power and embodies possible futures with moral and political dimensions.

The US educator Elizabeth Ellsworth provides a helpful way of thinking about the significance of place to learning. She argues that when knowledge is packaged as a commodity, as something to be learnt and attained rather than something to be experienced and understood, it is dead. On the one hand, this rehearses the familiar idea that we all learn best by doing, but Ellsworth's emphasis on the centrality of place, bodies and movement also offers new ways of thinking about what she calls *sensational pedagogies*:

Learning never takes place in the absence of bodies, emotions, place, time, sound, image, self-experience, history. It always detours through memory, forgetting, desire, fear, pleasure, surprise, re-writing. And, because learning always takes place in relation, its detours take us up to and sometimes across the boundaries of habit, recognition and socially constructed identities within ourselves (Ellsworth 2005: 55).

This not only challenges deeply-held assumptions about the individualisation of learning that bind most Western education systems, it also suggests that knowledge is not fixed, but always mobile, fluid, created and re-created through dialogue and in spatial encounters with others.

It seems to me that we have paid little attention to questions of space in drama education, and how space disciplines social interaction in schools. What we do know is that drama offers the opportunity to transgress and change established meanings, and to disrupt conventional meanings of space. The French cultural theorist Henri Lefebvre, whose work is currently undergoing a bit of a revival, commented that in order for people to become recognised as social participants, they have to make space for themselves. Drama, theatre and performance, of course, unfixes and animates space – whether this is five-year olds turning corners of classrooms into shops for role play, or a teenagers making a den, or cutting-edge theatre companies turning a disused hotel or swimming pool into a theatre.

The example of practice that I've chosen to address the implication of space for learning is *Boychild*, a project that investigated place as both a metaphor and a physical location, and integrated scientific learning with more intimate and autobiographical reflections on identity.

Boychild was first performed on Father's Day, June 17th 2007, in the disused Admiralty Underwater Weapons building in Portland, Dorset. The choice of this date and this place was significant; it was the culmination of a year-long project led by performance artist Mark Storor and produced by educationalist Anna Ledgard

with over 80 men and boys from the local area. During workshops, groups of boys in primary and secondary schools, young men held in a young offenders' institute, fathers-to-be and older men from the local working men's clubs interrogated the science and art of masculinity, drawing on the expertise of practising scientists to provide information about the workings of the male body as well as working creatively to share insights into what masculinity meant to them as individuals.

Ledgard's account of the process, specifically analyses the project in terms of place. In the process of working on *Boychild*, boys and men were able to engage artistically familiar and unfamiliar places including, Ledgard lists: "school halls and classrooms, a science centre, a redundant Military building, a prison education wing, a hospital maternity class, a bakery, a working man's club and even an undertaker's premises" (2008: 48).

When I arrived at the disused Admiralty building on the day of the performance, I was immediately stuck by the eeriness of its emptiness. From the long, windswept arch of the drive I could see the sea, the redundant security barriers. Entering the building, the economy of the performance aesthetic was established. Audiences of ten people were greeted at a side door by the former caretaker of the building. Through the privacy of a head-set, we each heard his story, an intimate interweaving of his working years with a more personal retelling of autobiographical events in his life. He watched us listen in silence, isolated from each other by our headsets. A small boy beckoned us into the building, taking us to begin a journey through the building mapped men's lives, from birth, through puberty, adulthood, old age and death. Walking along the corridors, peeping into some rooms and lingering in others was an intense experience. In one room, for example, a teenaged boy lay in his pyjamas on beautifully lit mound of unwashed potatoes, carefully turning over one at a time as a recorded poem was played that described the imprisoned boys' experiences of their bodies in puberty:

Why do men's hearts give out before women's?

I dig my hands into the earth, fingers curl around unfamiliar forms.

As my body sprouts I am an oddly shaped potato.

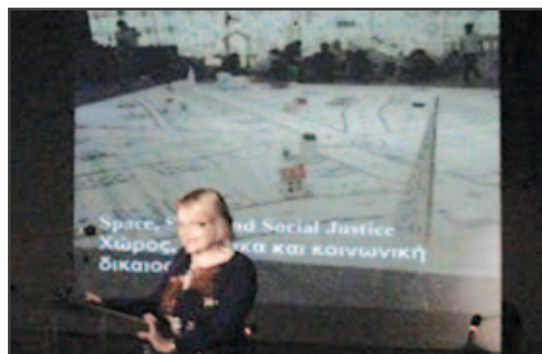
Connections between scientific questions (why do men's hearts give out before women's?) and the metaphor of the potato to illustrate the physical changes of puberty amplified how the learning process had encouraged the boys to make associations between scientific knowledge and their own emotional experiences. Another room similarly captured the complexity of the body through concise use of imagery; the room was empty except for figures and body-parts crafted from bread, the imagery of the physicality of life made by fathers and fathers-to-be who had worked with a master baker. The empty rooms and deserted corridors had become resonant with images and sounds. What was interesting about the space was it allowed the boys and men to hide. The space felt like a series of dens, each resonant with meaning as if the occupants had just left, or were about to.

The emotional power of the performance was in part due to the precision of the imagery, the clarity of metaphor and the quiet commitment of the young performers to the seriousness of the ideas and narratives they were representing. Throughout the process Mark Storer's artistic vision enabled participants to unsettle the meanings of familiar places, as Ledgard records:

Storer talks of the importance of transforming space, or "transgressing it", and a feature of all his workshops is the changing of the space from "literal" to "dramatic", from "expected" to "unexpected". This is done either by removing familiar patterns and arrangements of furniture, or by bringing in symbolic objects, such as the seven sets of vests and pants, from babygro to XXXL or the seven male overcoats laid out across the floor... It has the added advantage of creating an expectation or curiosity, and what Storer describes as "a disruption in the physiognomy of the people coming into the room". This "disruption" happens as the perception of space moves from literal to symbolic, having the potential to become the space for new kinds of thinking (Ledgard 2008: 42).

In this case, focussing on the performance of masculine identities across generations enabled the boys and men involved in the project to both affirm and disrupt meanings about their "place" in the world, and to build affective bonds as their relationships with people of different generations grew.

I think this project illustrates Ellsworth's suggestion that learning is practice which takes account of places and the senses. We are all familiar with the idea that drama is used to "make sense of experience" and that the



learning happens in dialogue, through reflection on action and with unpredictable outcomes. This is, for sure, important. But as creative teachers we know that places also have a dramaturgy of their own, a way of making us feel – and this is often perceived in terms of scale – feeling small often indicates a lack of power.

So, what difference might this make?

Making a difference – whether this is learning in schools or a broader motivation social change - is usually seen as a consequence of theatre, often because theatre is thought to represent or symbolise the “real” world “out there” beyond the theatrical moment. The world can change, it’s argued, because it is socially constructed. I am suggesting something different –an ecology of performance– that recognises that the experience of theatre is, in itself, a “real” experience in which young people create space for themselves. Geographers Ben Anderson and Paul Harrison suggest that a radical inversion of social constructivism allows for affective agency – learnt through the body:

We come to know and enact a world from inhabiting it, from becoming attuned to its differences and juxtapositions, from a training of our senses, dispositions and expectations (Anderson & Harrison 2010: 9).

It is in this sensory pedagogy that, I am suggesting, theatre-making draws attention to how the political can be re-animated. This links the sensory qualities of performance to learning – where theatre only not offers an alternative “third space” that represents the outside world, but recognises that the process of participation also provides a more ambivalent space in which new social bonds and relationships between people and places might be embodied, in the here and now of the event.

This way of thinking was underlined in the workshop I led, which was focused on a Japanese story called The Grateful Statues. Working on this story invites participants to create different kinds of environments, each experienced aesthetically. In this workshop story is given and predetermined, but what is open for interpretation is the ways in which it might be represented artistically. It aims to encourage a sensory pedagogy, not only encouraging participants to create the poetics of space for themselves. It is also a story that has travelled across time and space, inviting us to consider how its symbolic meanings are created and recreated in different spaces and places.



Transgressing Social Space: Dancing in a war zone

In the summer of 2011 I danced in a war zone. I am interested in the contribution theatre can make to the lives of people who have been affected by major international events, and on previous occasions I have had the good fortune to lead an intergenerational theatre project in the Hiroshima regional of Japan and to contribute

to an intercultural educational exchange between schools in Slough and the Cape Flat Townships in South Africa.

But on this occasion I was entering a conflict zone while the conflict was still happening. I had joined James Thompson from Manchester University, who has well established partnerships with theatre practitioners in places of war and has built a lively programme of cultural exchange with artists who work in situations of conflict. I was part of a small delegation of academics, film and theatre makers who travelled across Rwanda to the Democratic Republic of Congo. We were going at the invitation of an NGO called Search for Common Ground, an international organisation that works to address social injustices in situations of conflict. One strand of their work is applied theatre, and we had come to witness their rehearsals and performances, to learn from each other and share methodologies and practice.

I hadn't expected to dance. On two occasions, and in different spaces.

I am particularly mindful of the ethical complexity surrounding working in communities in the developing world, particularly at a time of increasing environmental consciousness. Miwon Kwon has described itinerant artists as "a glamorisation" of the Western ideology of "freedom of choice" which "does not belong to everyone equally" (2004: 165), and it was significant that the Congo event was missing colleagues from Palestine and India, who had been refused visas. I also tend to agree with Tim Cresswell's description of the metaphor of the nomad as "imaginative neo-colonialism" which implies a position of Western privilege and exoticisation of "the other" (2006: 54). This unevenness of power needs acknowledging; not everyone can cross borders as easily as I can.

But I've also learnt the limits of my geographical imagination - I have found it hard to understand globalisation without witnessing its effects on people in different parts of the world, and seeing its effects from another perspective - as human geographer JD Dewsbury puts it - "witnessing space" is an "intervention" that "moves thought by permanently unfixing and altering the perspective" (Dewsbury 2003: 1929).

In Goma we spend a few days rehearsing with the company before we went into the field. The performers taught us their approach, which followed a three part formula which is familiar in applied theatre. First, the company had visited the villages where they would perform to find out the pressing social question the community faced - secondly they dramatised a story that illustrated the issues - and finally leaving an unsolved dilemma that the audience would be invited to debate in a process known as "forum theatre". The performance is only part of the process - it is a means through which questions might be opened rather than resolved - and there are other structures in place to support the community further. As well as their live performances, Search for Common Ground actors take part in a radio soap that broadcasts public information - and this means that they are greeted in the villages as a celebrity cast. There is an on-going debate in the Congo the NGO about the cost effectiveness and impact of the live performance, which obviously reached much smaller audiences than the radio drama.

On my visit, the issue the community had asked the company to address was land rights. Thousands of refugees from the Rwandan genocide had fled to North Kivu, and the area had been badly affected both by the Second Congo war (which has killed 5 and a half million people since 1998) and the volcano in 2002 - this meant that people had been uprooted many times and rights over land are often contested. The story the company chose to dramatised involved a man who had refused to move when the volcano erupted, because he wanted to stay with his cat (apparently this was true). He had cultivated his neighbour's land in their absence, and on their return they wanted to claim it back. Who had rights over this land was, of course, the social issue for debate.

The volcanic plateau above Goma is an unforgiving area, coated in black ash, poor roads, few wells and, of course, no electricity. The people live in desperate poverty, and we got used to paying surprising new "tolls" as we bribed our way across local borders. As we arrived in the village the minibus was mobbed - the company was recognised immediately and we were greeted enthusiastically by crowds of people - including many children who were particularly amused to see some mzungus (white people) as part of cast - especially as their only previous experience of white people were wearing the blue helmets of the UN forces. The company defined a circular space for performance, and we began the show. And this is where the dance comes in. The Europeans had been talked into taking part in a dance and a song (in Bantu). The song used call and response to represent the cultivation of the land - and we got the easy chorus - Yaka na congo to Kata bilanga. It was a form of performance that was indigenous and familiar to the audience. The humour lay in seeing a lot of Mzungus dancing, and from the audience response, we were clearly very funny. The performance as a whole was met with attention and laughter, and - at the end - the audience were invited to participate in the debate.

I was privileged to witness a miniature snapshot of Search for Common Ground's work in North Kivu. So-

cial change is multi-agency, it depends on time and material resources. Abject poverty is not fixable by theatre, what theatre-makers can bring is a temporary re-ordering of the social space, a creative break from the grind of daily routines needed to stay alive in such an unforgiving environment. The affect of poverty was made even clearer to me when, as we left, one of the older women offered to sell me her granddaughter.

And after that, we decided to go clubbing. Saying that you are going clubbing in a war zone is rather an ambiguous statement. But I'd like to reassure you this was the sort that involved loud music and beer. Now I should just point out that I gave up clubbing before it even was called "clubbing", so the second dance was done purely in the spirit of research. I really wasn't sure what to expect. But having witnessed some of the worst poverty on the planet that afternoon, I was shocked by the display of wealth at the club. It was guarded by boys heavily armed with guns, uneducated and unable to speak French (as I discovered at about 3am when it seemed like a really good idea to talk to very heavily armed young men). There were rows upon rows of expensive cars that wouldn't look out of place in Chelsea, some of them UN badged, but many were local. There was a performance of wealth, in which the most obvious were the very affluent Congolese, and the full range of male and female prostitutes.

Most of us sitting here have a tiny piece of the Congo in our pockets or our bags. The mineral coltan is used in all our mobile phones, ipads and laptops, and the Congo is one of the few places where this is mined. Very small amounts of coltan can hold a high level of electrical charge, and this means that it enables digital products to be miniaturised. Illegal mining is extremely profitable, and it's funding the war and keeping the miners in horrific poverty. And we are all implicated. On a day in which I danced twice I had witnessed, at first hand, the ways in which "justice and injustice are infused into the multiscale geographies in which we live" - to borrow again Soja's words - on both a domestic and global scale; the deprivation in the North Kivu village, the wealth displayed in the overlarge cars parked at the club, and the miniature world of the iphone in my pocket. This is network, but how can it also be that most elusive of connections, a bond?

And just a few final thoughts

The people I met in North Kivu, DRC in 2011 had to flee for their lives in 2012. Between September and November, over 130,000 people in this area were displaced due fighting between the M23 rebel group and the Congolese army. My decision to bring together the work in the Congo with theatre education events in the UK in this talk is political, not sensationalist. Sometimes when Western scholars and artists travel their work can illuminate social injustice, but there is also risk that this ignores the deprivation in our own cities, the injustices in our own communities, the loneliness of people in our streets. We are globally networked, but don't always know our neighbours.

My own geographical narrative is inspired by the work of Kwame Anthony Appiah, who argues that one of the roles of intercultural dialogue is to "reveal to us values we had not previously recognised or undermine our commitment to values that we had settled into" (1998: 30). A statement that brings me back to questions of value and learning. We may have networks, but no bonds, and no solidarity. This vision of equality depends not on privileging the local over the global but on understanding how human experience might be more equitably conceived. Appiah envisions this in terms of scale, as interlocking circles:

It is because humans live best on a smaller scale that we should defend not just the state, but the country, the town, the street, the business, the craft, the profession... as circles among the many circles narrower than the human horizon, that are the appropriate spheres of moral concern (Appiah 1998: 94).

My contention is that drama education has the potential to elucidate these "spheres of moral concern" in the aesthetic of performance and the everyday spaces of encounter. It is through artistic practice that social meanings of space might be witnessed, recreated and unfixed, and this process has cultural, moral and political implications. Thank you.

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Helen Nicholson is Professor of theatre and performance at Royal Holloway, University of London where she specialises in contemporary theatre, including applied and educational theatre. She is the co-editor of *RiDE: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, and author of several books, including *Theatre & Education* (Palgrave, 2009), *Theatre, Education and Performance* (Palgrave, 2011), and co-author of *Making a Performance* (2007) and *Learning to Teach Drama* (2007). She continues to work as a practitioner in many different settings, including Japan, South Africa and London.

