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Living beyond our means: meaning beyond our lives Theatre as Education for Change

David R. Pammenter, Tim Prentki

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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.

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David R. Pammenter, Tim Prentki

Preface

This paper was designed to introduce the central elements of the conceptual framework of our work and was freestanding for those who could only participate in the paper presentation (Athens Conference 23/11/2012) which was interspersed with participatory audience questions, perspectives, discussion and dialogue between each section of the spoken text. It also was the doorway into the experience of a short piece of theatre for those who were able to undertake the full six hour workshop which was spread over two days and led to three performed, devised pieces of theatre. The introductory play was titled WITNESS. The theatre piece focused on and explored the underpinning questions of identity, the personal, the social and the political through an exploration on the life, times, lived experience, and death of the pharmacist Dimitris Chrisoulas (1935-2012) who shot himself in Syntagma Square Athens Greece in April of 2012.

The performance of the play led directly and immediately into the workshop. WITNESS was performed by three English speakers and three Greek speakers and was accompanied with music, still pictures and film, raising the central question: "Who am I?" This in turn dealt with the questions of the personal, the social and the political and focused on devising theatre pieces drawn largely from the lived experience and analysis of the participants, their personal histories and those of their families drawn from the last three generations.

State of Shock

In her book, *The Shock Doctrine* (Klein 2007) Naomi Klein charts the strategic use of disasters, both man-made and natural, by neoliberal regimes across the world from the coup against Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973 to the present day. Her analysis predates the banking collapse of 2008 and the subsequent use of the strategy of "austerity" to undermine the remaining vestiges of social democracy but these recent events fall entirely within the paradigm which Klein laid out. Under the doctrine of austerity governments, once elected on the premise of being responsible for the welfare of all their peoples, now abdicate that responsibility, sometimes freely, sometimes under coercion, in the name of debt reduction. The state, having failed to regulate capitalist entrepreneurs who made themselves rich at the expense of others and thereby supervising an exponential rise in economic inequality, now sponsors an escalation of that phenomenon by requiring those who work in the public sector who did not incur this debt, to bail out the gamblers who laid their ill-advised bets with other people's money. This is casino capitalism with a twist: when these punters lose, instead of being thrown onto the mean streets of Las Vegas or Macau, they are invited to have another flutter, this time using the wages of the casino staff, stolen by the management, as their chips. Last year U.S. manufacturing and sales of arms amounted to sixty-six billion dollars. Thirty-eight per cent of that country's population live in poverty.

The re-financing of the banking system by neoliberal Western, so-called democracies, is therefore being done at the expense of the peoples of those nations, rather than at the expense of the transnational corporations whose behaviour on the international stock-markets enabled the current crisis. In practice this means that we are being asked to accept lower standards or no standards of health care, education and social security. These erstwhile rights are now re-categorised as commodities for sale to those who can afford them. In this way the "disaster" of the banking collapse, like all previous such disasters since 1973, has been turned into a means of expanding the reach of the market at the expense of states which attempt to represent their people. In Britain we see the Government withdrawing state benefits in areas such as unemployment, housing and disability. Piecemeal privatisations are intended to destroy the National Health Service and the introduction of privately sponsored academy schools serves to undermine both the principle of comprehensive secondary education and the role of Local Education Authorities. In Greece such measures must seem trivial beside the wholesale destruction of the social fabric, yet they are all part of the same global agenda: the commodification of all aspects of human relations to conform to the neoliberal definition of the market. In the field of education which is our particular concern today, the neoliberal paradigm gives further impetus to capitalism's desire to educate a work force to the level where it can serve its needs and no further. As in every other area of civil

society, so in education, there is a stark divide between neoliberalism's rulers who pay for an education for their offspring, and the rest who merely receive job-training that masquerades as state education. This training manifests itself in an emphasis upon literacy and numeracy and an obsession with examination and grading at the expense of the development of the whole student.

In such a context, what hope is there for establishing drama within the curriculum as a means of developing criticality, imagination, and a capacity to challenge the neoliberal status quo? To echo the question of Comrade Lenin: "what is to be done?" The importance of theatre as a means of stimulating personal, social and political change is that it can be used to create a space in which changes can be rehearsed and analysed, provided that the starting point for the devising process is real: personally real; socially real; and politically real in line with Brecht's dictum that "taught only be reality, can reality be changed" (Brecht 1977: 34). The subversive potential of theatre is located within the dialectical interaction between lived experience and the creative imagination. If we cannot imagine change, what hope is there for the billions oppressed by neoliberalism? But such a change will be mere fantasy unless it emerges from an analysis of reality informed by the lived experience of those who are hungry for such change.

Theatre as Personal Change

Change is not some abstraction which will roll around in due course, provided we are patient and do as we are told until it arrives. Change begins with us. Typically when a contradiction in our lives becomes intolerable, for example the contradiction between our income and the cost of feeding our children, we do something about it. Depending upon the action there may be personal, social, or political consequences, or perhaps all three. Many projects offered under the label of Applied Theatre claim personal change as their intended outcome. By building self-confidence and capacity in the participants through the mutual support and decision-making opportunities of the theatre workshop process, changes may occur which enable them to cope better with their situations. Most of such projects are undertaken with society's victims: the homeless, refugees, prisoners, drug-addicts, those at risk from domestic and sexual violence, etc. Those whom society has failed will be helped to adjust to their oppressive conditions through exposure to a dose of theatrical medicine.

Whilst the attempt to use theatre in support of personal growth is not, in itself, reprehensible, too many such projects suffer from a failure to connect the personal with the social or political dimensions of change, together with a willingness on the part of the facilitator to cast herself in the role of a therapist in the service of the funder. Although the facilitator may not adopt the therapeutic role consciously, the function is essentially the same. Within this paradigm the participants are deviants from the social norm as conceived by the funding agency. The value of the Applied Theatre process resides in its ability to turn the participants into useful members of society. Therefore the outcomes are measured in terms of social benefit: how many prisoners ceased to reoffend? How many participants gave up their habits of substance abuse? How many children stopped truanting from school? In the therapeutic model the problem is located with the participant who wilfully acts against her own interest. The system is never to blame and so the system is never challenged, still less changed. The consequences of separating the personal from the social are vividly illustrated in the number of projects addressing the issue of domestic violence in many countries throughout the world. For instance, it is a commonplace on the Indian sub-continent to encounter innumerable NGOs dedicated to raising the consciousness of oppressed females. Those which employ theatre workshops typically offer programmes that encourage the participants to lay claim to their rights and to assert themselves in the face of violent behaviour from their husbands. However, the stress upon personal change through behaviour modification entirely ignores the social realities by which the lives of these women are all too often bound. As a consequence these newly empowered women are released back into their own homes where no other change has occurred. The focus upon the oppressed person, following the prescriptions of Forum Theatre, fails to take account of who actually has the power to change the social dynamics of that situation. Rather than sponsoring sustainable personal change, the Applied Theatre process in these instances merely puts the women at greater risk of violent abuse than before the intervention.

We are not suggesting that theatre cannot be used in the service of personal change. On the contrary, we regard it as a vital ingredient in encouraging the individual to explore ways in which changes might be made to personal circumstances in order to enable that person to operate more effectively as a social agent: to transform herself from the object into the subject of her own development. The life-map process, for instance, is aimed at this kind of transformation. However, if this approach to personal change is divorced from its broader, social implications, it is likely to result in the individual being contained within an unchanged, oppressive and violent social construction. The participant feels better for having enjoyed the communal pleasures of a well-conducted workshop process even as she might a glass of vintage wine or a satisfying sexual encounter.

But rather than changing anything, we have merely been supporting the participant in making the best of life within a failed system. The facilitator of personal change through theatre must, therefore, be very clear about her intentions for the process and its limitations. Cognitive behavioural therapy, the staple method of prison theatre, for example, may restore some personal agency but it will not change the world unless it is allied with other, more socially engaged processes.

Theatre as Social Change

Theatre is not, of itself, an agent for social change. For it to become a means of “conscientisation” – to use Freire’s term – there must be co-intentionality between the facilitators and the participants. The two stages described by Freire – the raising of consciousness, followed by the taking of social action – are only achieved if they are purposes shared by all who engage in the process. As we have seen, all too often the process of personal change does not progress beyond the raising of consciousness, leaving the participants vulnerable to the dissatisfactions which arise when they can do nothing with their newly acquired state of consciousness. The second stage in the process requires a particular set of knowledge and skill on the part of the facilitator in whatever context the work is occurring; this type of facilitator may be a theatre professional, a teacher, a NGO worker, even, God help us, an academic. What is important is that this person is committed to using theatre as a site for an encounter between the participant and the wider social world inhabited by that participant with all its history and contradictions laid bare. For this role Augusto Boal’s idea of the “difficultator” (Boal 1995: xix) is a useful starting point. Rather than making the process smooth, easing the negotiations of the devising process, this kind of facilitator puts the obstacles of reality in the path of the participants. She constantly offers provocations, questions and the understandings that proceed from the wider knowledge and research she has conducted into the situation being devised. Facile solutions are blocked; participants sent back to try again, taking account of a deeper understanding of the prevailing social conditions. This is not an expert’s role for the facilitator proceeds by listening to the experiences that come from the participants as the starting place for the work. It is an artist’s role in which the artistic decisions of the participants in turning their lived experiences into theatre are subjected to analysis according to whether they are truthful/real in relation to the way the world is run and to whether they communicate effectively as art to their intended audiences. The core of the shared intention between facilitators and participants is an understanding that theatre becomes the practice of direct democracy. It becomes a re-imagining of the ways in which democracy might be practised in the world in which our young people find themselves. The act of engaging in theatre places *direct democracy* at the heart of political and social transformation, leading to the development of political “actors” both individually and, more importantly in the face of social fragmentation, collectively. The politicisation of this collective leads, via shared social action, to political transformation.

In our current context this means that facilitators cannot do their job properly unless they have a basic understanding of the ways in which the societies of their participants are organised. If we are working with “victims” of social organisation – and today in Greece that is likely to cover most people – as facilitators we must offer more than sympathy and support. To children we must be able to explain why their curriculum contains some things and omits others; why their schools lack essential learning resources and why their teachers are inadequately supported by the state. With refugees we need to understand both why they abandoned their native countries and why they are received and perceived as a danger in their chosen destinations. It is not an act of God or a force of nature that has brought Albanians to Greece, for example. Humans took decisions which had the effect of creating large-scale displacement. What were those decisions and in whose interests were they taken? Given that we are now all living under neoliberal regimes, facilitators who claim to be working within the field of social change cannot begin their activities without making an analysis of how neoliberalism operates. The IMF, the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation, the G20, the European Central Bank, the European Commission, to name but a few, are not remote organisations of interest only to students of international relations and career politicians but rather the instruments that account for the immediate social conditions in which we live. For instance, the “conditionalities” under which governments accept loans from these bodies account for the loss of jobs, the collapse of health provision and the privatisation of education.

As facilitators and participants we can tell dramatised stories about what is wrong with our lives until the crack of doom but this is not a process of social change. It is a celebration of misery. The action of Applied Theatre takes place in the moment of understanding between actors and audience. Therefore a key function of facilitation is the identification of the appropriate target audience for the devised performance. For example, if you are developing a TIE performance around an issue to do with the design of the curriculum, who are the people responsible? Who needs to see the performance? Who is in a position to respond through action to the questions raised? How do you get such people into your audience? Asking these questions is part of

the “difficultating” process without which talk of social change is empty. We are not negating the power of so-called “ordinary” people to create social change. Indeed social change rarely occurs without grassroots pressure of some kind. However, effective, sustained social change needs to be the product of practical and theoretical analysis of the discourses which have led to the present situation. This is the process described by Brecht as “historicisation”. Applied Theatre conducted without attention to this analysis is merely an attempt to apply sticking plasters to the wounds inflicted by a vicious and self-serving system. “Taught only by reality, can reality be changed.” It is the responsibility of the facilitator to ensure that the full dimensions of that reality are grasped by participants and, in grasping them, a viable route to social change is mapped out. This journey of facilitation is only completed when the shared understanding and its communication through theatre is owned by all the participants. In other words, when they have become their own facilitators.

Theatre as Political Change

The third stage in the process of using theatre as a means of provoking change concerns its application in the political arena. Here again the role ascribed to the facilitator will be of central significance. One of the features of the twentieth century has been the way in which regimes have generated a political class increasingly removed from the concerns and interests of “ordinary” people. In the Soviet Union this class was characterised as The Party and served its interests at the expense of the general population. The growing divide between Party members and the rest was a major factor in undermining confidence in state Communism. In the West the parallel process saw politicians of all persuasions becoming representatives not of the people who elected them but of the business interests which funded them; in the phrase coined by President Eisenhower “the military-industrial complex” which he foresaw in the 1950s would rapidly become more powerful than governments. This insight was a reprise of earlier US President, Abraham Lincoln’s vision of the nightmares to come:

I see in the near future a crisis approaching that unnerves me and causes me to tremble for the safety of my country... corporations have been enthroned and an era of corruption in high places will follow, and the money power of the country will endeavour to prolong its reign by working on the prejudices of the people until all wealth is aggregated in a few hands and the Republic is destroyed (Lincoln in Basler 1953).

During the last sixty years we have witnessed the ascendancy of the transnational corporations and the banks which enable their transactions, to a place where they exert unregulated influence over our lives. Neo-liberalism is the latest and most extreme form of capitalist power without social responsibility. It is the paradigm that has promoted the recent economic “disaster” as a means of extending the commodification of human relations to all areas of life. What is to be done? How can theatre be used to intervene in this political and environmental catastrophe?

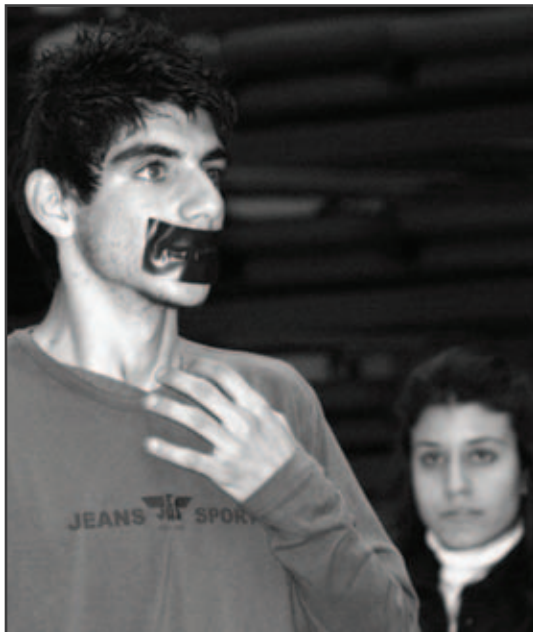
The teacher and the child are both constrained within the dominant cultural norms and values which have been synthetically constructed in order to stimulate fear and develop and impose the cultural, social, personal and collective culture of systematic despair. The way we see, hear and perceive are conditioned and ideologically cleansed with the incessant brain-washing of communication systems run by oligarchs such as Ted Turner and Rupert Murdoch, lest any subversive ideas enter the portal of our closed world to disturb our sense of isolation, fear and consumer addiction. The other, the human in all its fullness and complexity, must always remain outside this glossy, endlessly self-renewing wall of consumption that imprisons us in the envy of false dreams. In such a world the division of teacher and taught, of artist and audience, of truth and lie, of action and inaction, is necessary for the separation of our self from the other in order to ensure that the interconnectivity of life’s pathways is prohibited. This is essential to maintain the values, ethics and rights permitted for our benefit to ensure our complicity with the synthetic reality which is continually reconstructed to guarantee our willing participation within its frame-works.

In such a world, as teachers and learners, as citizens and future builders, we must cut the ropes of complicity which bind us and liberate ourselves and each other through the creative action of constructing our futures. We must create a curriculum and a coherent plan of co-intentional action with our children which answer the crying questions of why the world is as it is. How was it constructed and in whose interests? Why is my placid in this world as it is, and what is to be done? The curriculum must be rooted in human need, my needs, our collective needs and the needs articulated by our children. The historical patterns of cultural, social and political constraint must be set aside. We must own and control our systems of education and learning and teaching, both their form and, crucially, their content, and if that places us in a position of opposition to the inflicted systems of the dominant, so be it. Liberty is a hard-won truth not a negotiated commodity.

We must stop participating as functionaries building the road to hell simply to stay in our jobs as domesticated servants serving the death culture of our masters. We must stop attempting to safeguard ourselves

through our complicity in their anti-human agendas. With our teachers and students in OUR schools, colleges and universities we must seize back the power and control of OUR places of labour and control of OUR lives and OUR institutions and put in place a people-centred curriculum based on our mutual, collective and co-intentionally constructed articulation of our needs and wants. Failure to do so is to reject our ownership of ourselves and our institutions.

There was a wonderful moment in a performance created by young people in Cyprus (part of the mPACT work when, at the end of the performance having applied gaffer-tape stickers over their mouths as a metaphor for their experience of the education system, in the presence of the representative of the Ministry of Education, he “with great generosity” asked them to remove the gags and speak. They did and very coherently answered his question about why they had shown this. They did not stop speaking! This was in turn seen as a rude attack by some of the more nervous teachers who wanted to intervene to silence them, lest they be held responsible. As facilitators we prevented this abuse of power and the exchange went on until the children and man from the Ministry were finding ways of coping with this new situation (mPPACT manifest: 100-101).



Self silenced or system silenced? The personal speaks



Speaking the unspoken. The self meets in dialogical action with the other as the personal becomes social.



Collective co-intentional cultural actions opens the door to political transformation.

The man from the Ministry promised to continue the debate after the event was over by inviting the young people to come and make their case to him and his peers. This was the potential and actual beginning of theatre as an agent of social change.

However impenetrable the system appears, it must be remembered that it is operated by fellow members of the human race. Their immersion in the system may have brought about a complete loss of human, social values but they must not be so “othered” by us as to be thought beyond the reach of the theatre processes which we endorse with the rest of the race. The challenge for Applied Theatre in the coming years is to find ways of working with the politicians and other power-brokers in our societies; to draw those who are in a position to take action into the orbit of our processes in order that they may rediscover values and relationships which predate the current economic model. A particular barrier to overcome when working with senior professionals is the protective shell which their position, the office, affords them. These are people who have occupied places in fixed systems for so long that their very identity depends upon the recognition by others of their expertise: Mr President; your Honour; Honourable Member, Professor, etc. Where is the human being to be found behind these costumes and rituals? King Lear at the height of his apparent madness teaches the blind Gloucester a lesson in status:

Lear: Thou hast seen a farmer’s dog bark at a beggar?

Gloucester: Ay, sir.

Lear: And the creature run from the cur? There thou mightst behold the great image of authority: a dog’s obey’d in office. Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand. Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thy own back; thou hotly lusts to use her in that kind for which thou whip’st her. The usurer hangs the cozener. Through tatter’d clothes small vices do appear; robes and furr’d gowns hide all (Shakespeare 1951: 1104).

A dog with an official function is worth more than a man without one. It is important to remember that at this point Lear is no longer King Lear in anything but name and that he has arrived at this state of consciousness as a result of taking upon himself the functions of the Fool who has disappeared from the stage because his function now resides within Lear.

Here in the figure of the Fool lies a vital clue about how we might go about working with the powerful; telling truth to power through irony and contradiction. Long before the advent of neoliberalism, even before the advent of capitalism, societies all across the world discovered the need to create or invent a Fool in order to challenge their most sacred assumptions.

If trickster stirs to life on the open road, if he embodies ambiguity, if he “steals fire” to invent new technologies, if he plays with all boundaries both inner and outer, and so on – then he must still be among us, for none of these has disappeared from the world. His functions, like the bones of Osiris, may have been scattered, but they have not been destroyed. The problem is to find where his gathered body might come back to life, or where it might already have done so (Hyde 1999: 11).

Without folly systems become fixed and the functionaries of those systems have no questions to answer about their conduct. Monarchs become tyrants. Bankers become greedy. The state which should be the people’s protection from tyranny and corruption, is itself stolen from us:

The country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it. Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing government, they can exercise their constitutional right of amending it, or exercise their revolutionary right to overthrow it (Lincoln in Basler 1953).

The very founding myths of our societies depict figures who seek to undermine the power of the gods: in Greece such a figure is Hermes who commutes between gods and men, both wilfully and innocently misreporting the desires and actions of one party to the other. Where order is corrupt, his element is chaos. He thrives on contradiction, producing folly from wisdom and understanding from foolishness.

This is our third stage: the stage of facilitation for political change. Now the facilitator has moved from therapist to “difficultator”, to Fool. As Prentki has shown in his book, *The Fool in European Theatre*, there is a long history, both in societies and in the theatre, of the Fool as agent of social change. One of the defining features of the Fool wherever he is depicted – medieval theatre, Shakespeare, Brecht – is the capacity to operate, like Hermes, in two worlds simultaneously. He belongs both to the world of the stage fiction and to the reality of the auditorium. This too is a key feature of facilitation. The facilitator at once immerses herself in the devised action as director, dramaturg, critic, but also abstracts herself from the process to present the participants with difficulties in the form of contradictions and ironies. At the same time, from her semi-detached position on the edge of the fiction she keeps an eye and an ear on the audience to check that the arrows fired by the actors are hitting their intended

targets and perhaps, depending upon the chosen form, enabling the targets to talk back to the archers.

Though frequently travestied in the execution, this is the intended function of Boal's Joker. The choice of name is not accidental or casual. This figure is called a Joker – in Italian *il matto*, the name of the character created by Dario Fo in *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* – because, like his namesake in a pack of playing cards, she disrupts the established hierarchy by defying the normal rules that govern the organisation of the game. Status is ignored or inverted, leading to sudden changes to the anticipated outcome. Similarly, the Forum Joker facilitates a theatre process aimed at social change. We propose that the Forum Theatre method be extended to work not only for the victims of social oppression but also for the perpetrators of political oppression. Oppressor and oppressed are all alike human beings and we all occupy both roles at different times in our lives. Why should those who are already oppressed be the only ones expected to take on the task of social and political change? As processes of humanisation and re-humanisation our methodologies must be applied both to those who have been marginalised and those who are privileged to be in a position to make change happen in both the social and the political spheres. They too are potential agents of the necessary transformation towards collective growth and development. Let us fool them into a separation of office from person that they may remember why they are on earth and therefore co-intentionally change the world that it may be fit for human habitation. This becomes an essential process in the creation and re-creation of a people-centred democracy.

A World Beyond Shock

Klein concludes her analysis of the decades of disaster capitalism which have brought us to the point where a human being has no value or significance beyond a role as labourer or consumer by trying to identify some means by which we might survive in the rubble:

...people's reconstruction efforts represent the antithesis of the disaster capitalism complex's ethos, with its perpetual quest for clean sheets and blank slates on which to build model states. Like Latin America's farm and factory co-ops, they are inherently improvisational, making do with whoever is left behind and whatever rusty tools have not been swept away, broken or stolen. local people's renewal movements begin from the premise that there is no escape from the substantial messes we have created and that there has already been enough erasure – of history, of culture, of memory. Radical only in their intense practicality, rooted in the communities where they live, these men and women see themselves as mere repair people, taking what's there and fixing it, reinforcing it, making it better and more equal. Most of all, they are building in resilience – for when the next shock hits (Klein 2007: 466).

To achieve more than sporadic, grass-roots resistance, there have to be systemic changes to the running of our world and for those changes to happen we, as citizen artists, have to engage the makers and enforcers of those systems in our processes. The challenge is immense in all walks of life. For teachers the tasks are especially daunting. The core principle to establish, both at the macro level of UNESCO, governments and NGOs, and at the micro level of head-teachers and school governors, is the notion of education as a right due to all children. Education in this moment must relate to the lived experience of the children and their families as a means of making meaning and sense of their realities. This is a revolutionary way forward which educationally, personally, collectively engenders the necessary change and transformation. Theatre as education constructed by the children with the support of the teacher/actor is a form of popular cultural action which can contribute to the building of resistance and the taking back of ownership of the state.

By education we understand a process of learning, grounded in the work of theorists such as Lev Vygotsky and Paulo Freire that enables our young people to develop all the creative and imaginative capacities at their disposal. We are not talking about those national curricula that speak of education when they are in fact meaning the schooling or training of our children as slaves to neoliberalism: graded, tested and set against each other to ensure their suitability for employment on the death star. It follows from this principle that all children must have access to drama and theatre as meaning-making processes that enable them to participate in the learning and generation of new knowledge which evolves from the meeting of lived experience with imagination. Nothing less will give our young people a hope for a different tomorrow.

The American biologist Jared Diamond in his book, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive*, identifies the two core factors that determine whether a particular society goes down the path of failure or survival:

Two types of choices seem to me to have been crucial in tipping their outcomes towards success or failure: long-term planning, and the willingness to reconsider core values. On reflection, we can also recognize the crucial role of these same two choices for the outcomes of our individual lives (Diamond 2005: 522).

Both these choices can be addressed, played with, rehearsed, and finally owned by our children through the action of socially engaged theatre. We are not saying: “wouldn’t it be nice to have such provision for our children”. We are saying that the building of a more just world, a world capable of surviving without destroying the planet depends upon it. In the words of Lincoln:

The philosophy of the school room in one generation will be the philosophy of government in the next.

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