

Hope with Dirty Hands: Community Theatre Participation as Activism in *Everything is Possible*

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ABSTRACT

How might the forces at work upon artistic production, its contexts, and the circumstances of its making, exert dynamic influences on artistic processes and on participants engaged in them? Might they inspire participants to view themselves as activists?

Everything is Possible, performed by 200 community actors, told the story of the suffragettes of York (UK). Created in 2017 in the aftermath of US and UK elections, it addressed issues of female enfranchisement, democratic engagement and violent protest, the concerns of 1913 resonating with and framed by the contemporary landscape. This paper considers the extent to which the making of theatre can foster a debate that is both internal as well as external; where the intended effect on an anticipated audience results also in unintended consequences in terms of participants, artists, makers and institutions.

This paper considers the relationship between individual, community and institutional approaches to activism in pursuit of social

change, examining the processes of practice by discussing the commissioning, development and writing of the play from the perspective of the playwright. Finally, it considers whether participation may become a form of activism in itself.

LONDON, 1907

On April 16th 1907, the actor Kate Frye wrote a diary account of seeing *Votes for Women!*, by Elizabeth Robins at the Court Theatre (now the Royal Court) in London. She writes of the convincing characterization, the cleverness of the play, of being “beside myself with excitement” at parts of it. And then she addresses the question of whether “it would have any effect on people,” and concludes “I can’t tell—people are not so easily influenced, I fear, except in isolated cases” (Frye, 1907).

This question of influence—of theatre’s capacity to affect the thinking or behavior of its audience—has become one of the measures by which we assess what it can do. According to Joe Kelleher, its job—in the case of political theatre—“is to oppose the current state of consensus by provoking disagreements of various sorts” (2009, p. 7). Less often considered is the extent to which the work of making theatre can foster an internal as well as external debate, where the intended effect on an anticipated audience results also in unintended consequences and even disagreements between participants, artists, and institutions. There is, however, a growing understanding of the influence of material factors,¹ and a recognition that “labour has become visible in performance work” and “artistic processes have become an important part of the artistic production” (Klein and Kunst, 2002, p. 1). I shall be considering the ways in which we might turn Klein and Kunst’s observation around, examining how forces at work upon artistic production, its contexts, and the circumstances of its making, might exert influences of change on artistic processes, and on participants engaged in them.

¹See Knowles, R. (2009). *Reading the Material Theatre*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press

YORK, 2017

The subject for this proposition is *Everything is Possible—The York Suffragettes*, a large-scale community production staged in July 2017 by York Theatre Royal and Pilot Theatre. These two organizations functioned as producers for the show. There were two directors, and I was the playwright attached to the project.² I'll be considering the journey that the show took from theatrical statement to rallying cry, and of many of the participants from actors to activists. I'll be examining this in the context of the dialogue between a planned artistic endeavor and the incursion of global events, considering the dynamic impact of a shifting political landscape on production and participants. Finally, I'll be presenting some transformative effects—Peter Brook's indicator of immediate theatre: "theatre which does create change—either in individuals or communities" (1968).

York's history of community participation in theatre goes back to the medieval Mystery plays. This ancient tradition continues to this day, but alongside it, the city has developed a recent and thriving culture of community performances, telling the stories of the city and its people. These are created and produced by professional theatre organizations within York, working with local professional artists and performed by large-scale community casts, including one or two professional actors. The casts are made up of people of all ages (on *Everything is Possible* the ages ranged from 6 to 82), and while the shows inevitably attract regular participants and people who are culturally engaged, each production also seeks to extend participation.³

As Soyini Madison points out, "a public space is a promise of a democratic space, and a public performance becomes an open invitation to participate and (or) witness how democracy can be variously conjured and re-imagined" (2010, p. 6). Another feature of these performances—and part of the democratization that they represent—is that they have often been performed in non-traditional spaces: on the streets, or in museums and parks.

² For the purposes of this account 'we' refers to this core creative team of three people.

³ On *Everything is Possible*, we worked with a local charity supporting vulnerable women, some of whom became involved both as performers and in technical and design roles.

FIRST THOUGHTS TO FIRST DRAFT

The initial impetus for *Everything is Possible* grew out of a recognition that while most historically-based York community plays had told stories that were overwhelmingly male,⁴ the vast majority of the volunteer cast was female. So there was clearly a need to find stories about women, or that turned the lens onto the part played by women in times largely dominated by men. It was planned as part of a season “programmed...by an all-female group of actors and theatre-makers, looking to address the imbalance in women’s roles in both theatrical work and the industry as a whole” (Cruden, 2017).

It is worth noting that the primary goal was not Anthony Jackson’s “radical change in the social order,” nor even his less ambitious aim of producing “a change in action, behavior or opinion, or even just attitude” (2007, p. 12). It was more to do with a reclamation of space within the public domain, and with placing the female voice within that space. The central story was untold, put a clear focus on the actions of women, and would mark the forthcoming centenary of the 1918 franchise in which the first raft of women in the UK received the vote.

The theatrical intention was to create a dramatically effective play; a piece that, in Jackson’s articulation of aesthetic theatre “values entertainment, the artistry and craftsmanship that are associated with resonant, powerful theatre, and the aesthetic qualities that—by definition—will appeal to our senses” (2007, p. 27-28). In considering the social effects, there was undoubtedly a conviction - founded on the experience of previous community plays – that there were broad social benefits to participation. For Augusto Boal’s poetics of the oppressed, the “main objective” is “to change people” from “passive beings” into “subjects, into actors, transformers” (1979, p. 97). But while we certainly hoped that we might highlight women’s history within our community, and raise interest in political engagement, we weren’t expecting to effect profound and long-term change in our participants’ actions. This was partly because we were telling the historical story of a protest movement that had—ostensibly at least—achieved its objective. We aimed to remind people of the value of what had been won, and to raise awareness around broader ongoing battles of social justice and rights

⁴ For example, the previous community play, *In Fog and Falling Snow* (Foreman & Kenny), had focused on the mid-19th century building of the railways.

for women in particular, but there was no single or simple rallying cry in 2017 to match that of “Votes for Women!” in 1913.

After a period of collaborative research and development, I started work on a first draft, focusing on telling the local suffrage story in a way that could encompass a cast of over 150 community actors. The shared intention of everyone involved at both an organizational and creative level was that—despite its period setting—the play should speak to our contemporary situation. Exactly how it would do that—in dramaturgical rather than thematic terms—remained unclear.

Following the custom established by earlier community plays, the directors wanted to start the play in the streets. Partly this was instinctive; a gut-level understanding of Peter Handke’s assertion that “committed theater these days doesn’t happen in theaters (those falsifying domains of art where every word and movement is emptied of significance)” (as cited in Cohen-Cruz, 1998, p. 7-10). It was also a way of forging a material connection with the street protests of the suffragettes. Nevertheless, following a prologue, the intention was to take the audience into the 18th century auditorium of York Theatre Royal for the majority of the play. This proposal presented not only considerable practical challenges, but also the dis-spiriting prospect of embodying in one show Christopher’s Balme’s account of the rise of modern drama in “transform[ing] the theatre from a rowdy, politically explosive gathering into a place of concentrated aesthetic absorption” (2014, p. 3). Merely locating a part of the play on the streets was not going to generate a performance that acted—in Soyini Madison’s words—as “a subversive tactic to win hearts and minds in their efforts toward a more humane and democratic society” (2010, p. 1). Even the aim of creating an opening for the show that involved audience members as participants would not necessarily result in deeper engagement. As Peter Boenisch has pointed out, Jacques Rancière has “debunked the fashionable vogue of an interactive and participatory ‘hyper-theatre’ that wants to transform representation into presence and passivity into activity” (as cited in Fisher and Katsouraki, 2017, p. 84). Activist Jodi Dean goes further, criticizing artistic products for “buttress[ing] capital as they circulate political affects,” with the result that “spectators can pay...to feel radical without having to get their hands dirty” (2012, p. 11). This armchair activism was the exact effect we were determined to avoid. In the words of Annie Seymour-Pearson (the central character) at the start of *Everything is Possible*, what she is looking for is hope. “But

not the kind of hope that's just some distant wish. I want hope with dirty hands. I want hope that rolls up its sleeves and gets to work. Because that's what real hope looks like: hard work" (Foreman, 2017).

However, in spite of the play's call for action, its subject matter presented our audience with an account of a battle that had been won, and although we could argue in development (and we did) that many remain excluded, worldwide, from free democratic participation, or that the wider cause of women's rights was one that still demands our energy and attention, there was nevertheless a risk that the overwhelming tone of the play would be one of commemoration. But what happened during the latter stages of the play's development was to pull the project into focus in a way none of us could have anticipated.

SEISMIC SHIFTS

The international and national political landscapes shifted dramatically: first, in November 2016 with the election in the US of Donald Trump, then with the announcement of a general election in the UK to be held on 8th June 2017, just twelve days before the opening night of the show. Both elections delivered political upset, proving that the electorate could still surprise and be surprised, and that the voice and the vote are powerful forces. A global wave of women's protests followed the US election, resonating with the protests of the suffragettes: thousands of women marching, banners aloft, demanding gender equality. The connection was potent, and at a late stage in the play's development, this provided a dramatically powerful entry point, propelling the 1913 action through a contemporary frame and into a new dimension. For both actors and audience this was a way of engaging with the past as an act not of interest, but of necessity; of stepping into the shoes of an earlier generation, as described by Virginia Woolf in 1937:

We cannot understand the present if we isolate it from the past. If we want to understand what it is that [we] are doing now...[w]e must forget that we are, for the moment, ourselves. We must become the people that we were two or three generations ago. Let us be our great grandmothers.

The start of *Everything is Possible* cast the audience as participants in

a street protest, standing alongside agitators at a 2017 women's march, in the shadow of York's medieval Minster. As the audience arrived, there were protest songs and chants, placards were waved, there were genuine petitions being signed by audience members and information about actual charities that support women and girls being distributed. A woman stepped up to a microphone and started to speak. The exact moment at which the play began was difficult to identify. For participants, the line between their presence as individuals and as actors was extremely blurred until a soundtrack kicked in, and a crowd of 1913 suffragettes, also protesting, appeared through a cloud of smoke. Having initially joined a 2017 protest, the audience now stood shoulder to shoulder with the militant suffragettes of 1913.

This was not simply a theatrical device enabling us to step back in time, but an embodied statement of what Solga describes as the "(very feminist) notion that the past and the present are never separate" (2016, p. 59), and an invitation to audience members to self-identify as participants rather than spectators in the action that followed.

In 1907, director Harley Granville-Barker had employed a similar - and highly radical - device in the staging of *Votes for Women!*. The second act large-scale protest could not be accommodated on the small stage at the Court Theatre. Granville-Barker turned the onstage crowd to stand with their backs to the audience, breaking the fourth wall (along with 19th century conventions of stage realism) as the speakers addressed the crowd—and therefore the audience—directly. According to the lighting plot, only the speakers were lit, with the on-stage spectators and the audience in the auditorium sharing darkness. The result, as experienced by St. John Hankin, reviewing the show in *The Academy*, was that "WE were the real crowd and it was to US that the speeches...were addressed. We it was, who, sometimes following the stage crowd and sometimes leading it, laughed or cheered or dissented" (as cited in Shalson, 2017, p. 46-47).

CONFLICTS AND CREATIVITY

At the same time that the nature of the prologue to *Everything is Possible* was becoming clearer, the soft intentions of the play were growing harder in the changing political context. As Boon and Plastow observe, "what funders usually want is issue-based theatre...which is contained within clearly defined parameters" (2004, p. 5). The shifting parameters

challenged such containment, opening up a space in which an unforeseen debate was forced to take place. The commissioning companies resisted anything that appeared to commit them to any one political standpoint, and this playing into the shibboleth that neutrality is a function of legitimacy meant that—at their insistence—the opening protest had to be re-written without a party-political “position.” I resolved this by re-working the prologue so that it expressed frustrations with large ‘P’ politics, and with a socially disconnected political system, resulting in a protest where a sense of perceived (if not actual) disenfranchisement served as an effective connection with the suffrage protests of 1913.

In *Votes for Women!*, “the political awakening represented onstage through the character of Beatrice Dunbarton was one that those in the audience who were curious but not yet personally involved may have experienced as well” (2017, p. 47). Similarly, *Everything is Possible* charted Annie Seymour-Pearson’s journey from politically-disengaged housewife to York’s only suffragette to be imprisoned for her actions. She moves from passivity to action to activism; a construction of identity which, as Eve Katsouraki points out is “precisely part of the radical processes and practices of antagonism” (Fisher and Katsouraki, 1917, p. 290). In the words of Lois Gibbs (housewife and activist), “radicals and students carry signs, not average housewives” (as cited in Fisher and Katsouraki, 1917, p. 290).

For Annie, the challenge to reinvent her identity comes with a call to militancy; an issue that divided the suffrage movement, and that the play—through Annie—grapples with. In the final stages of rehearsal, two major terrorist attacks exploded this historical theme of violent engagement into the contemporary debate of the play. The bombing of the Manchester Arena on 22nd May in which twenty-three people died, and the knife and gun attacks on London Bridge on 3rd June, in which a further eight people were killed, thrust the issue of militancy to the foreground, and made it visceral.

RISKS AND RESPONSIBILITY

The directors were now seriously concerned about how the materiality of the opening street protest opening might play out, with its sound design, chanting and shattering glass, and were nervous of anything

within the play that appeared to endorse violence. Jenny Spencer has acknowledged the uncomfortable fact that—especially in our 24-hour televised, live-screened age—acts of terror can become their “own kind of political theatre,” and can raise “unfortunate comparisons to performance art” (2012, p. 1), while Jenny Hughes observes that “those engaged in war and terrorism have turned to the language and practice of performance and theatre...to legitimize and enact expansive powers” (2007). This understanding of the power of performance was one that the militant suffragettes employed to devastating effect. It was the attempt at a public, performative act that led to the death of Emily Wilding Davison under the feet of the King’s horse at the Derby in 2013—arguably creating the most shocking imagery of the struggle.

Faced with the possibility that the opening of the play might in some way legitimize acts of terror,⁵ the directors (under pressure from the producers) proposed abandoning the suffragettes’ chant of “Deeds not Words!”, in case it was interpreted as inciting violent action, and also insisted that slightly lumpy qualifying statements be inserted into the text clarifying that for the suffragettes, militancy was only to be employed against property and never against people. As has been indicated by Fern Riddell and others, the fact that there were no deaths as a result of suffragette militant action is most likely the result more of accident than design (Riddell, 2018). However, any historical ambivalence that the play might have reflected was being airbrushed by the re-framed terms of the present, as they were defined by the institutions involved. I argued that we could not erase “Deeds not Words!” from history—it was, after all, the most iconic motto of the entire suffrage campaign. But while this was conceded, it was clear that the changing landscape had also shifted the parameters within which decisions were made, and concerns which might at one point have been regarded as artistic were now being cast rhetorically as issues of accountability and even public security.

In order to mitigate against any possibility of confusion between performance and genuine, violent conflict, the 2017 protest developed into a tightly-choreographed flashmob-style movement sequence, and

⁵ There is an argument that the militant suffragettes were simply terrorists. “The combination of high explosive bombs, incendiary devices and letter bombs used by the suffragettes provided the pattern for the IRA campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, the first terrorist bomb to explode in Northern Ireland in the twentieth century, at Lisburn’s Christ Church Cathedral, was detonated not by the IRA, but by the suffragettes in August 1914” (Webb, 2014, Introduction).

the more disorderly action was rooted firmly in 1913, and performed by actors in period costume (including period police uniform). In the decisions that resulted from this debate, and in the apparent safety of the institutional position, we can see at work Sam Haddow's assertion that strategy that is "responsive" and "non-ideological," "precludes the capacity for a committed engagement with its subject" (2015). As the prologue became increasingly stylized, it felt as if its intended bite had been institutionally de-fanged. But the participants were not subject to the nervousness being shown by the producing companies.

HOLDING HANDS WITH HISTORY

While any perceived message of the production could be mediated at an institutional level, the experience of individuals could not. It was becoming clear that while external events were affecting the process, structures, and working practices of the project, a confluence of internal and external events was impacting participants, igniting a sense of possibility. The dialogue between global events and our theatrical intervention was revealing Alain Badiou's concept of a "'sequence,' an interrelated chain of historical occurrences that open up the possibility for radical change by historicizing the present and affirming that things are not only as they are now; that this is not the only way to be" (Haddow, 2015).

Through rehearsals, participants had inhabited the experience of people on all sides of the 1913 conflict. The physical experience of grappling with policemen, of struggling against force feeding, or of restraining someone in order to feed them, the sense of solidarity in linking arms and standing up to violence—even in re-creation, these acts exerted power. In Boal's poetics, the spectator "trains himself for real action...No matter that the action is fictional; what matters is that it is action!" (1979, p. 98). Boon and Plastow assert that theatre that challenges power and asks unsettling questions is "direct action [that] is at least a rehearsal for revolution" (2004, p. 10). Many participants started to conduct their own research and chose names for their characters in order to personalize their engagement. A few could even trace relatives who had been suffragettes—and took on their names, re-forging the inter-generational connection. One commented: "Being involved in the play made me feel close to my ancestors...I felt their

ghost or spirit marching alongside me as I marched the streets of York shouting ‘Votes for Women.’” What she and others experienced is Haddow’s “coalescing of past and present events into a congruent trajectory” (2015). This was undoubtedly awakened by the historical story of the suffragettes, but the daily ferment of political events—what was reported on the news and fed onto social media—carried participants forward into a deep engagement with the play’s contemporary horizon. Framed by the formal construct of a theatrical performance, participants projected themselves and their own concerns through action and character, opening up Lynette Hunter’s “moment of making difference” in which “the possibility for effective action becomes imaginable” (as cited in Lichtenfels and Rouse, 2013, p. 4). That ability to imagine the world as different to the way we experience it drives activism. The ability to imagine ourselves as drivers is what transforms us into activists. And participation in theatre equips us to make that imaginative leap.

FROM ACTORS TO ACTIVISTS

Lara Shalson has written of how *Votes for Women!* involved the audience in an act of political protest “by introducing theatrical techniques that blurred the boundaries between the world of the play and the world of political action beyond the play...For the uninitiated, such experiences had the potential to be a galvanizing force that could lead to action outside the theatre as well” (2017, p. 53).

For participants in *Everything is Possible*, it was among the “uninitiated”—those for whom participation in theatre was a new experience—that the impact was greatest. Confirming Shalson’s assertion of the power of the “fictional realm” to facilitate actions with “genuine political relevance,” one cast member wrote: “Being involved with *Everything is Possible* really did make me feel as if I was taking a stand about hugely relevant issues in society.”

Others concurred: “The play had a powerful and lasting impact on me...I do feel more of a feminist...more empowered to stand up for what is right as well, remembering all that women have gone through in the past.”

In effect, participants describe the act of participation as amplifying their understanding, and prompting a movement from knowledge into action and activism.

This newness to being involved in a play made me very inquisitive and open to what was going on, taking it all in. I took the script seriously and to heart.

I felt that these women in the play are talking through history, through this play to me and they are saying something important.

Anecdotally, it appears that for many cast members, participation in the play constituted a form of activism, albeit one that was facilitated by the event itself. It created a sense of empowerment, and it prompted action beyond the theatre in people who were new to activism:

I visited and joined the front line of the anti-fracking camps. There were obvious parallels with *Everything is Possible* and the peaceful protests of the suffragettes, but I was no longer acting...here I was really face to face with the police.

Boenisch has written of a powerful “interstice between performing, spectating and living” (as cited in Fisher and Katsouraki, 2017, p. 83). In making such direct links between her acting and her activism, and the fact that one led to the other, this woman expresses the experience of many participants, pointing to participation in theatre as both an end in itself—an act of activism—but also a means by which the practice and habit of activism may be ignited.

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