

The Neighbourhood Watch

Theatre, Audiences and the Good Night Out

BY MADDY COSTA

Maddy Costa is a theatre and music writer who worked with Fuel over three years, from 2013-2015, to develop an alternative to the post-show Q&A and open up space for audience discussion around the work Fuel toured during that period. She also developed a blog that forms a public record of the New Theatre in Your Neighbourhood touring research project.

The Neighbourhood Watch: Theatre, Audiences and the Good Night Out

In 1971, the same year he co-founded 7.84, John McGrath was writing plays for the Everyman in Liverpool with the specific intention of attracting a new, working-class audience to a building that was playing to less than a third of its capacity. Of his first attempt, a collection of five shorts called *Unruly Elements*, he later said:

The plays, and the actors and director, created a sense of excitement about the theatre within the community; and encouraged by a determined publicity campaign, by the price of the tickets, by the informality, lack of middle-class bullshit about the theatre, and by the fact that you could get a decent pint of ale before, during and after the show, some young working-class blokes came with their wives for a night out. They enjoyed themselves and sent their friends. As the theatre is near the university, quite a few students from there and the Poly began to take an interest. ... The way was open to a new kind of theatre.

That “new kind of theatre” is the one McGrath went on to describe in *A Good Night Out*, six lectures delivered at Cambridge University in 1979, and later published, which argue that a popular theatre should use working-class forms – music, comedy, variety, direct address – to build a working-class audience with

whom it forms a genuine relationship. It’s easy to fixate on statistics – *Unruly Elements* doubled the audience figures at the Everyman, and McGrath’s next show tripled them – but I’m more interested in the atmosphere McGrath describes. Its informality. The fact that people weren’t punished for wanting a drink (or, presumably, a pee) during the show. A sense of excitement, encouragement, enjoyment among the locals. It’s partly these qualities that led to me adopting the phrase “a good night out” while working on Fuel’s touring research project, *New Theatre in Your Neighbourhood*.

For McGrath, the “good night out” was a political construct: his lectures relate it to class dialectics and Marxist ideology, and everything in theatre – “the location of the event, the kind of publicity available, the price of admission and the behaviour of the box office staff” – fundamentally affected whether plays might be received and perceived as working-class or bourgeois. It’s possible that in using the phrase I fall into the camp identified by blogger Andrew Haydon, who in 2013 confessed his surprise that so many people claim the book to be influential, because he could identify: “barely a single theatre, company, or -maker who show the slightest sign of ever having read, let alone

understood this book”. But I do use it with some anti-capitalist intent, to describe a night in which the “transaction” between theatre and audience isn’t one of product offered for consumer purchase made, but part of an ongoing process of communing with and through theatre, in which each performance is a social event: one that begins with feeling welcomed at a venue and ends with conversation, as people gather to share a drink, some eats, and their thoughts about the show.

My appropriation of McGrath’s words reminded me and Fuel that *New Theatre in Your Neighbourhood* wasn’t happening without a historical context, and not to acknowledge that precedence would be a disservice to those ground-breaking ideas and the people behind them. Hence this essay: a brief(-ish) and highly selective survey of how others – be they small independent theatre-makers or big institutions, directors of touring companies or directors of buildings – have approached the questions of how to form a community with audiences through contemporary theatre work.

What I’ve put together is in no way comprehensive: there are just too many companies, with too much history. Although I’ve spoken to some academics, I haven’t done much reading on the subject, partly because most specialist theatre texts are not easily accessible to non-academics like me, partly to avoid weighing readers down with footnotes. Almost everything I’ve written draws on a series of interviews, and heaps has been left out: Nicola Shaughnessy’s descriptions of the theatre salons in which Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf’s plays were performed and discussed; Nadine Holdsworth and Helen Freshwater celebrating the communities built around amateur theatre; Stella Duffy mourning the lost sacred traditions of theatre; Vicky Featherstone’s discussion of class in the 21st century and the ruinous effects of NT Live. I’m publishing that extraneous material instead in a series of transcripts on the *New Theatre in Your Neighbourhood* blog, which documents all three years of activity on this project: my attempt to build a public record of the latest chapter in an ongoing story.

A DIG THROUGH THE ROOTS

Nadine Holdsworth, professor of theatre and performance at University of Warwick, traces a clear line back from McGrath and his contemporary, Peter Cheeseman, through Joan Littlewood and Theatre Workshop to the Unity theatre movement that proliferated in the 1930s and 40s. Mid-century attempts to shift the relationship between theatre and audience were “aligned to politics of the left”: Unity in particular was linked to the British communist party, and focused on trade unions when building its audiences. Littlewood followed suit: “Theatre Workshop used to do an awful lot in terms of sending out letters to major employers and industries within the locality, trying to get liaison people that were working in particular industries locally, and trying to get political activists in.” Always the point was to convince workers that, even if they didn’t think theatre was for them – because theatre meant posh people in lounge suits – then they would be persuaded by a visit to their local canteen from a community liaison person, who would point out: “Look, they’re talking about the issues we’re concerned with. Politically and socially this is part of a broader movement, so we should support it.”

Socialist politics made the work itself different, too. Unity pioneered devised and improvisatory work (to the chagrin of the Lord Chamberlain, charged with approving texts for performance); Littlewood invited working people to write plays from their own lives; Cheeseman, based in Stoke-on-Trent, constructed the first theatre-in-the-round, and (building on his own experience with Theatre Workshop) created “documentary dramas” – the forerunners of verbatim theatre – from interviews with local people. These stylistic innovations closed the gap between theatre-maker and audience within the auditorium;

outside, other shifts were happening. Cheeseman, says Holdsworth, routinely insisted that his performers: “get back in their denims and into the bar” after performances. He recognised that: “That was a really important part of opening up conversations, making it more accessible, breaking down that hierarchy.” Stella Duffy, whose work with Fun Palaces has significantly revived the spirit of Joan Littlewood, suggests Theatre Workshop were more sociable still: touring the circuit of working men’s clubs, “they would sit and chat and get pissed and go home with people”. (The problem with today’s strategic touring missions? “We’re not shagging people enough.”)

These were the foundations McGrath’s company 7.84 built on, when it took work to community venues, advertised its performances in trades union newsletters and football magazines, and worked with its extensive network of local contacts not only to spread the word but to build up its knowledge of each community, the better to demonstrate sympathy with and relevance to it. 7.84 continued working into the 1980s, but as Thatcher reshaped British politics and society, says Holdsworth, their “political impetus became less legitimate”. The work of building new audience relationships didn’t end, she suggests, but passed to theatre companies whose focus wasn’t class but “identity politics”.

THE PERMUTATIONS OF IDENTITY

“For me, the idea of a ‘good night out’ is very much linked with the politics of a particular kind of theatre,” says Anna Reading, professor of culture and creative industries at King’s College London. In 1987 she co-founded Strip Search Theatre, a feminist company based in York, whose work was often (but not exclusively) performed in non-theatre spaces such as pubs, discussed issues such as rape and child sexual abuse, and built post-show conversation into the fabric of the evening, which would include passing on information about new support groups such as Rape Crisis. “Those conversations were a really important part of the process,” says Reading. “I feel very strongly that theatre is there to entertain but it’s also there to provoke, and if you provoke you have a responsibility to enable people to have the next set of tools that they might need to do something about it. That is part of a good night out, this sense of empowerment.”

The invitation to stick around after the show would be listed on flyers and programmes, and Strip Search performers: “took their costumes off and became themselves again in front of the audience”, which Reading likens to “a process of cleansing”, sloughing off the show in readiness for discussion. Paul Heritage, who worked as a director in the 1980s with companies such as Gay Sweatshop, says that in his experience it didn’t matter whether or not the actors took part in that debate: “The discussion wasn’t something we staged, the discussion was already happening all around us.” In the 1980s, in the midst of the Aids crisis, gay theatre companies were a vital source of information; Gay Sweatshop attracted audiences by creating a sense of “complicity with that act of theatre. That happens when people need and want to be together, to discuss things that are important in their lives.”

Similarly, when Sudha Bhuchar set up Tamasha in 1989 with her friend Kristine Landon-Smith, it was clear to her that Asian audiences wanted to “see themselves reflected on stage”. And not just in a “general Asian stereotype. Within the Asian community there are specific identities: what do the Sindhis think of the Gujaratis; what do the Gujaratis think of the Punjabis? There is a nuance that people within the communities understand.” As a teenager and young adult she had spent weekends with Tara Arts, whose work grew from specific lines of inquiry related to these communities, and Tamasha continued this practice, in such a way that “from the beginning we were seen as audience developers as well as artists”. For one work they met the Sindhi diaspora in India and the UK; “so there was a buzz around the Sindhi community that there is going to be a show about us, and who has ever been interested in us before?” For another they spent time with the owners, chefs and waiters of Birmingham’s Balti restaurants: “and of course all the restaurant industry wanted to see the show about them”. A third was interested in caste within the Gujarati community: “so by the time you’ve researched and set it up, all the Gujaratis are waiting to see the show about them”.

“It’s not some great secret,” says Bhuchar, that this approach is successful: not only do the communities being reflected form “a big part of the audience”, but they feel a “sense of ownership” in theatre. It troubles her that gains of the past were not built on by venues: “We’re still asking, where are the brown bums on seats? I have filled middle-scale theatres with our shows: we know that it’s possible. But companies can’t do it on their own.”

PEOPLE POWER

In 1998, audiences for the Fierce festival were around the 2000 mark. And when they didn't shift over the next couple of years, artistic director Mark Ball quickly grew frustrated. "In a city as youthful and dynamic and diverse and interesting as Birmingham, I fundamentally knew that a bigger audience, if they were exposed to the work, might find it challenging but they'll find it of interest." To solve the problem, he began to think about "the journey of experiencing a piece of work, what is it that makes a good night out" – and, more importantly, to ask the people who weren't coming to tell him how those things could be done better.

Through a series of conversations facilitated by specialist marketing agencies, he discovered that there were two strands to the problem. The first was an array of practical issues: people complained about the price, the timing of the event, the incomprehensibility of the marketing copy, the fact that they didn't know anyone else going. "With all of those challenges," says Ball, "we tried to address them head-on, with a series of very practical solutions. For a couple of years, we had a rule that no ticket will cost you more than two pints. To communicate the social experience, we said we're not going to use show images in our brochure, we're going to use images of our audience, so when people open it, they'll see people generally having a good time. We also started all of our shows earlier, at 7pm, so people felt they could go for a meal afterwards, or to the pub. And rather than accept show copy from companies, we brought in a music journalist to write it."

The second strand, for Ball, "was more interesting in the longer term: people said they felt excluded from institutions that are the arbiters of taste, and decide what's interesting; they felt they didn't have any agency in that, and actually

they'd like some". It was the beginning of a new conversation with Fierce's potential audiences, "about what was going on in their communities, what was important for their communities, what they were interested in seeing in terms of content". Working with two focus groups, one defined by age (17-25 years), the other by ethnicity, he decided to commission more site- and issue-specific work. And then, at his last festival as artistic director, in 2008, he handed over commissioning almost entirely to audiences: from a selection Ball had made of 30 solicited submissions, prospective audiences voted for the 10 works they most wanted to see. "There was a huge amount of resistance," Ball admits. "A lot of established companies felt I was pandering to audiences and dumbing down. But what I found really interesting is that audiences selected by and large the most conceptually difficult work. And all those shows sold out, because the people who were invested in selecting the work came and saw it." The numbers tell the story, too: audiences for Fierce that year stood at 40,000.

Building those relationships, Ball argues, requires: "a commitment to really talking to your audience, and that means investing quite a lot of time and quite a lot of resource, and thinking about doing it in quite a smart way". He's put a lot of that Fierce learning into practice again since joining LIFT as artistic director in 2009: through market research, he's discovered that the festival has a potential audience of 748,000 people – but "the bad news is, they don't like theatre. On the one hand, you think: I despair of the human race. On the other, you've got to go to where your audience wants to be. But that absolutely does not mean diminishing the artistic value of the content, or making it less difficult. Fierce really vindicates that approach."

HOLDING HANDS WITH TRADITION

Growing up in Indonesia, Julia Taudevin, actor and playwright, shared the same idea of the ceilidh as most people: associating it specifically with dance. It was on visits to her maternal grandfather on the Isle of Lewis that she discovered its true meaning: "A community gathering – whether that be a family gathering or a wider thing – to share stories or songs and music. Dancing might be part of it, but that's not the express aim. It's a space where you bring your voice, you bring your turn." In the run-up to the Scottish independence referendum in 2014, this was the form Taudevin and many other artists turned to, as they travelled the country to discuss the state of the nation and the potential of each vote: not just among themselves, but with entire communities.

It's a tradition that appealed to Vicky Featherstone as she began the work of creating the National Theatre of Scotland in 2004. Her ideas about theatre had already been transformed by reading *A Good Night Out* as a student at Manchester University; Scotland's geographically dispersed population, she realised, would require her to put many of McGrath's ideas about place into practice, reaching different people via the spaces where they congregate, not just big theatres but village halls and multi-purpose community centres. "Finding the right place for the right piece of theatre really excited me," she says. "It's about the context. And then the question: how do the audience then own that piece of theatre when it comes to them? How does it challenge and provoke them – all those words that we use so easily around theatre – but also mean something to them?"

One answer was the unifying factor of story: "If you are going to be taking work to people, they can have a difference of opinion but they need to be unified in some theatrical moments. And story unifies people, whereas a fractured narrative or

form doesn't." Another was to recognise the necessity of speaking to different age groups differently: "In our first and second year we created a village hall touring circuit called the Ensemble, which took a piece of work for adults, a piece for young adults, and a piece for children, and tried to have a conversation across all those aspects of the community." That conversation was greatly aided by the economics of the village hall: "If it was paying for you to perform, they would also have the bar open from an hour and a half beforehand, so people could socialise, then the bar would stay open afterwards and people could stay and talk. Often the reason conversations don't go on in conventional theatres is because we can't afford to keep the bar staff on. So it's really interesting when you go into a more held community, where the ecosystem is much more symbiotic, and the environment enables that. It becomes a good night out for everyone: for the people who run the bar and village hall, for the theatre-makers, for the audience."

The key thing Featherstone learned at NTS was: "not to parachute in with a show and not come back. Instead it was about how do we create long-term, meaningful relationships with these communities." That conundrum was never quite solved: through its Transform project, NTS visited 16 different localities for a year each, time spent building up relationships and helping people create their own work; but a year wasn't long enough, even though Featherstone prioritised return visits to those places. In 2012 she became artistic director at the Royal Court in London and Transform has had a direct effect on the Court's relationship with other communities in the city. Specifically, Featherstone ended the annual, parachute-style visits to Peckham and replaced them with three-year, full-time projects in Tottenham and Pimlico, which involve

finding local ambassadors, presenting work – and not just Royal Court plays – that might appeal to those communities, and ultimately making a big piece of theatre with them. “It has to be really long term and it has to be constant,” says Featherstone. “There have to be people there who are prepared to completely connect, to make a different relationship.”

OF PLACE AND PARTICIPATION

To catch a glimpse of John E McGrath’s influences in forming the National Theatre of Wales, you just have to look at its first production, 2010’s *A Good Night Out* in the Valleys: an evening of “live music, bingo, a raffle and theatre” made with and for specific south-Wales communities, which established the company’s credentials as a theatre without a home. Where McGrath moved beyond his namesake and Featherstone was in positioning NTW immediately as an online social network: “That continues to be an incredibly vibrant forum for a whole range of people who are interested in creativity in Wales. We’ve always had a big project: anyone can become part of the National Theatre of Wales team. It’s a network of people who are interested in what we do, and we very much support them in setting up their own projects. That open network has been absolutely crucial.”

NTW’s dedication to community means that the company takes very seriously its responsibility to make work with and for specific places. “Often as a company we’ll decamp – sometimes even the whole organisation – to the place where we’re working. We very, very rarely create work in a rehearsal room and take it somewhere: we’re almost always making it in and of the place it’s going to be in, then we might take it on somewhere else. That intensive engagement with place becomes very central to the company and in some ways unique to the company.”

In part this builds on what McGrath

perceived to be the specific strength of the theatre scene in Wales: “There was a strong history of site-specific work, and a strong history of participation in the arts in general. It’s a different relationship to the arts to that in England: people are less disenfranchised from the idea that you would participate artistically, and probably more disenfranchised from the idea that you would pay to go and see a professional show. There wasn’t a strong history of regional repertory theatre here.” And yet, the emphasis on place and participation resulted in much higher audience numbers for building-based work. “We’ve consistently found when we make work in a place and spend time there, that people do come and buy tickets and spend time in the theatre, because it’s no longer about a product that has come to town that they should buy: it’s something that they’ve seen grow up or heard about growing up or talked to the people that are involved in growing it, and therefore it feels natural to find out what happened.”

McGrath was also building on his prior work as artistic director of Contact in Manchester: a building that sat between several clashing communities, and managed to unite them in a single space. The key to that was simple, says McGrath: “I wanted people to be able to come to that theatre, see a show that they really hated and go home and say, I had a fantastic night at Contact. So the bar was always open until midnight at least, and there was always music playing. Going to see something you didn’t like should be exciting as well: obviously I prefer it when people love everything, but actually that shouldn’t be the defining thing: it should be about the energy of being around a group of people that you wouldn’t end up with in any other place.”

THE SOCIAL CLUB

Since having the whimsical thought early in 2013 that it would be nice to celebrate the centenary of Joan Littlewood’s birth by revisiting her idea for a Fun Palace, Stella Duffy has travelled the UK (and further) encouraging people to: “join in. Join in doesn’t say start a new thing, it doesn’t say do my thing: it says do your thing.” That inclusivity, and recognition of local knowledge, she argues, has been key to the growing success of the Fun Palaces movement, and the communities that have been forged within it. “I don’t feel we’re building on the arts as we know it,” says Duffy. “We’re building on communities.”

It’s a sentiment Simon Casson might well recognise. He has been running Duckie since the late-1990s, and his description of it bears an unexpected resemblance to the new kind of theatre celebrated in *A Good Night Out*. “We’re constantly messing around with the art form of the nightclub, and the social space. We put in the popular forms – music, comedy and dance – but we make it interesting as well, make it about something or make it have some intellectual content.”

Before he started Duckie, Casson was an actor with gay theatre companies; he was performing an Aids play in Brighton when the director said to him: “‘In the pub afterwards, that’s always the best bit.’ I think what I’ve always tried to do is cut out the boring bit and just have the best bit.” The bit of theatre that happens in the midst of a Duckie club night isn’t a disruption but “a consolidation: it’s why we’re all here. People want to have a pint, talk to their mates, see something mercifully short and terribly exciting, and then talk about it for two hours and have a dance. Rather than sit through something for two hours and talk about it for 10 minutes.”

When Casson says he’s drawn to clubs rather than theatre, he means nightclubs,

but he also means social clubs. “I’ve always been a clubber, I’ve always been someone who’s into tribes and subcultures, rather than being a consumer.” Over the past few years Duckie has extensively expanded: apart from the weekly club for “middle-class queers”, it now has more socially engaged clubs for groups including young people, pensioners, and homeless and alcoholic people. “I think what Fuel are trying to do is create a club,” he says: and that feels exactly right.

HOMES AND TRANSPORTATION

“I see touring in the same light as migration,” says Jatinder Verma, co-founder and artistic director of Tara Arts. “For any migrant, you’re coming to a new space and you are looking for opportunities and very grateful when you get them. Essentially you’re in a dependency relationship. After a while, like with any migrant, you say: I want a house of my own. You start to think about building relationships with particular houses you’ve been to that might be more responsive to that extended relationship. Then you begin to feel something is missing: a more in-depth relationship, where an audience can grow with me and I can grow with an audience. It seems to me that the ultimate logic of that is where we are at now.”

Tara Arts are one of many companies, like Fuel, taking advantage of Arts Council England’s Strategic Touring Fund scheme to push at questions of audience engagement. It’s a sign of how much has changed in the past 40 years, that whereas McGrath and 7:84 worked out with the mainstream, the values he championed are now subsidised by public money and widely practised – even at the level of national theatres.

And yet, in other ways the rate of change feels painfully slow. Black Theatre Live, the scheme awarded a Strategic Touring Fund grant that is led by Tara Arts, is a

partnership of theatres committed to touring BAME work over the next three years: it describes itself as pioneering, and yet in some ways it is remarkably similar to the Eclipse initiative led by Nottingham Playhouse and Wolsley Theatre, Ipswich, over a decade ago. As Bhuchar remarks, we're having the same conversations now about audience-building that people were having back in the 1980s and 90s.

It's easy to feel dispirited by such realisations, but as Reading points out, that would be to give in to the very ideology that McGrath was resisting. "Capitalism is so much about deadening people to become machines in what we do," she says. "Fringe theatre is part of that whole trajectory since the 1980s to depoliticise and disempower people. But theatre is about enlivening us, enabling us to feel. It's more important than ever to carry on with that struggle."

I'd like to end with Dawn Walton, artistic director of the Eclipse theatre company – which she founded in order to ensure that the Eclipse initiative might have some legacy for black theatre artists – because her model appears to me exemplary, and full of hope. Her first move on establishing the company, she says, "was to declare that Eclipse was about audiences": the existing audience, and those who think theatre is not for them. Her methods are like a best-of compendium of grassroots development activities, and rooted in the belief that: "if you want someone to come to your party, you go and meet them".

For every production it tours, Eclipse staff will visit each town or city well in advance and recruit ambassadors, whether by approaching council staff or community organisers or by walking the streets and asking who those pivotal neighbourhood figures are. In particular, they make friends with the people who run community radio stations, because local radio is "really, really important" for spreading

information. A month or so before the show is performed, they put on an ambassador's evening: "We'll spend a few quid in the supermarket on a couple of bottles of wine and some Twiglets. Somebody from Eclipse will tell them about the company and the show, but most of the time is spent understanding who they are and what they're interested in." Eclipse ask venues to commit to programming a show every year, and for a full week, to allow time for word-of-mouth to build during the run. And because they tour only one production a year, they maintain relationships with people online, particularly via Eclipse TV, a presentation of original and curated drama content on their website. The result of all this activity is a 32% new bookers rate across an Eclipse tour.

Apart from the web bit, Walton insists that nothing she's doing is new. "This practice comes from black and Asian touring companies of the 1980s and 90s: the Posse, Tamasha, Yellow Earth. All those companies did it, those were the people that I got those ideas from. The relationship with cultural ambassadors comes from the Hackney Empire: they had a group of elders who would work on the buses and tell people about the shows, really wonderful innovations. I'd like to say I invented this, but all the components existed already. There was a wheel there, another wheel there, a steering wheel here – and I built a car."

It's a glorious analogy for how the knowledge of the past can be used to carry theatre into the future. And so, a question: where are we driving next?

FURTHER INFORMATION

John McGrath's A Good Night Out is published by Nick Hern Books, price £7.99
www.nickhernbooks.co.uk/Book/103/576/A-Good-Night-Out.html

Nadine Holdsworth has written introductions to McGrath's Plays for England, University of Exeter Press,
www.exeterpress.co.uk/en/Book/288/John-Mcgrath-Plays-For-England.html
and Naked Thoughts That Roam About, Nick Hern Books
www.nickhernbooks.co.uk/Book/514/Naked-Thoughts-That-Roam-About.html

Andrew Haydon on John McGrath
www.postcardsgods.blogspot.co.uk/2013/01/marxism-and-theatre.html

Anna Reading's Archive
www.annareadingarchive.com

A brief history of Gay Sweatshop
www.gayhistory.wordpress.com/2014/08/01/gay-sweatshop-02

Tamasha Theatre Company www.tamasha.org.uk

Fierce www.wearefierce.org

Mark Ball and Fierce contributed to an Arts Council England research document, Not for the Likes of You, which aimed to remove barriers to arts attendance
www.takingpartinthearts.com/content.php?content=508

National Theatre of Wales, through which can be accessed the NTW Community
www.nationaltheatrewales.org

National Theatre of Scotland www.nationaltheatrescotland.com/content

Royal Court's My Tottenham www.royalcourttheatre.com/whats-on/tottenham

Fun Palaces www.funpalaces.co.uk

Duckie www.duckie.co.uk

Tara Arts www.tara-arts.com

Black Theatre Live www.blacktheatrelive.co.uk

Eclipse www.eclipsetheatre.org.uk

Unfinished Histories, a source of information on alternative theatre companies of the 1980s and 90s
www.unfinishedhistories.com

Fuel www.fueltheatre.com

New Theatre in Your Neighbourhood blog www.newtheatreign.wordpress.com

