PUBLIC SPACES, PUBLIC WORDS:

Contextualising Pro-Localist, Site-Local, New Writing and its roots in a community's history, culture and people.

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Abstract

This thesis which accompanies the public works is a reflective analysis of my creative practice as a playwright, and argues that the plays submitted form a coherent body of work, demonstrating a consistent and meaningful synthesis of predominant themes and practice. In this statement I contend that the originality of the works lie in the exploration and practical application of a localist-focused arts praxis towards new writing and performance. This approach promotes and actively seeks out the use of unorthodox and/or local performance spaces, employs a 'mixed economy' of young and professional performers, dramatizes and celebrates local culture, with the aim of creating a theatre that is rooted in a local neighborhood's social, economic and cultural fabric.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my Supervisors, Dr Kene Igweonu and Dr Pedro De Senna. I am indebted to them both for guiding me through the final stages with confidence, humour and sensitivity. Thank you also to Dr Maggie Butt for starting things off and going the extra mile for me.

Contents

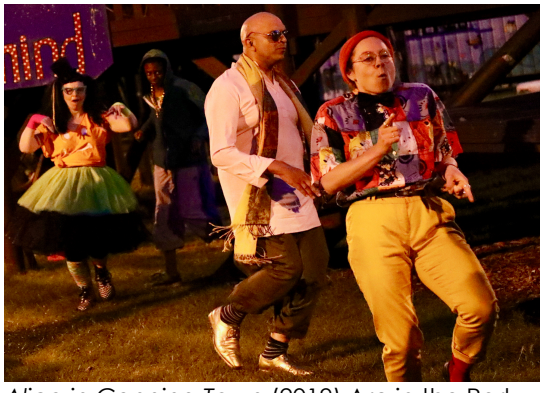
The Royal Docks Trust (London) **Area of Benefit**

Projects for which grant is sought must provide benefits for communities within the Trust's area, i.e. for those communities south of the Newham Way (A13) - *Beckton, Canning Town, Custom House, North Woolwich, West Silvertown, Silvertown.* **Revolution Farm** was performed in *Beckton,* and both **A Splotch in Red** *and* **Alice in Canning Town** were performed in *Canning Town.*

When Chaplin Met Gandhi (2012) Kingsley Hall, Bow

Revolution Farm (2014) Newham City Farm, Beckton

A Splotch of Red: Keir Hardie in West Ham (2016) Canning Town/Newham Libraries



Alice in Canning Town (2019) Arc in the Park, Canning Town

Public Works for PhD:

Alice in Canning Town

an exclusively East-End reimagining of a fantasy classic

Arc in the Park, Canning Town

12th August – 18th August 2019

Awarded Main Programme Funding from Royal Docks Trust

A Splotch of Red: Keir Hardie in West Ham

Community Links and Newham Libraries

22nd August – 28th August 2016

Awarded Main Programme Funding from Royal Docks Trust

Revolution Farm

Inspired by George Orwell's Animal Farm

Newham City Farm, Beckton

19th August – 24th August 2014

Awarded Main Programme Funding from Royal Docks Trust

When Chaplin Met Gandhi

Kingsley Hall, Bow

8th August – 12th August 2012

Awarded Main Programme Funding from Royal Docks Trust

A Personal Foreword

When I was a child, in a well-intentioned but ultimately doomed attempt by my family to impose some order and self-discipline on my wayward, distracted young self, I was sent to my Grandmother each week to learn to play the piano. I hated the idea. Nothing could be more boring. Piano was for old age pensioners in bow ties. The grown-ups came up with a cunning plan though. The only way my Grandmother could get me down there was to lay on an extravagant tea for me to devour. This meant cakes, crisps, biscuits, chocolate and more chocolate. But there was a catch. In return for gorging on sponge cake and chocolate fingers, I would agree to spend some time learning to play the piano afterwards. It was a deal. Except that I reneged on the deal. Despite heroic efforts by my Grandmother, I quickly developed an insane hatred for crotchets and semiquavers. They bored me to tears. And I couldn't care less about something called *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*. I would last about 10 minutes and then become surly and bad-tempered.

It was at this point my Grandmother would retire to her green recliner armchair and read to me, and it was as if all was well with the world again, and I'd sit still, very still, listening. Years later I discovered that my Grandmother had been something of a leading light in an amateur dramatics society and had played many leading roles, from Shakespeare heroines to witty and well-dressed Wildean society hostesses. Which accounts for her delivery of lines with perfect diction. So when the piano lessons were invariably aborted, she simply read to me: Shakespeare, Tennyson, Wordsworth, even, I recall, that pivotal work of modernist poetry, T.S.Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The content and meaning, of course, went over my callow, unformed head, but my Grandmother's voice was a wonder to listen to. Mellifluous, soothing, calming.

I sat still and remained still for nearly an hour, I think.

I didn't know then, of course, that what I was responding to so intently was the musicality of language/words, which I think all writing with genuine power and force is inherently imbued with.

And now decades later, it makes sense to me when I write a play, I say that I cannot 'see' it, that I can only hear it. All the stage directions in my plays are minimal and I never have pictures in my mind when I write. Instead, I have sounds, rhythms, beats to guide me. *Johnny Song* and *Gob*, inspired by my immersion in rave culture, were verbal and textual equivalents of house and techno's propulsive rhythms, in all but name. And rhythm and flow is important in The Newham Plays, whether it's *Revolution Farm's* staccato exchanges, or *A Splotch of Red's* punchy, direct address technique to the audience.

I judge the success and effectiveness of dialogue in my plays on whether the words have a rhythm or flow. Detecting and recognizing it in the pages of my script is done largely instinctively, intuitively. But I don't think it's pure instinct all the time. I think some of it must come from those weekly tea times at my Grandmother's, listening to her reading a Shakespeare sonnet or a Wordsworth poem, which was like music to my young ears.

Introduction

The four plays submitted in this exegesis, which I will refer to as collectively The Newham Plays series, present a stylistic, formal and technical coherence. All four plays were commissions or grants awarded by the Royal Docks Trust[1] with conditions attached and written to a specific brief. They all featured a 'mixed economy', or volunteer cast, with local people acting alongside professional actors. The plays were embedded, performed and produced in a specific urban community/neighbourhood (London Borough of Newham), whose demographic is the most ethnically diverse district in Britain and Wales, yet experiences significant problems with poverty and inequality and is within the top 32 most deprived areas in England (i.e. the 10 percent most deprived authorities), as identified by the 2019 IMD.[2] They were produced and performed outside of a traditional and mainstream theatre context, and were performed instead in public buildings or spaces that placed the emphasis and focus on accessibility and inclusion in the community. They attracted both a traditional theatre audience and a non-theatre-going audience, one which does not normally travel to theatre auditoria to watch plays.

The Newham Plays have achieved results in three research areas: (1) how to give local youth living in a community usually considered a "cold spot" for arts performance and education opportunities for creative expression and Summer School-type coaching and training; (2) how to put a local area and its community spaces on the map for the wider public, benefitting local

[1] Established and registered as a charity in March 1995, the Royal Docks Trust (RDT) works to provide community benefits to the Docklands part of Newham between the A13 and the River Thames. The RDT has awarded Major Programme and Minor Grant funding to all four plays submitted here.
[2] London Councils, Indices of Deprivation 2019, The English Indices of Deprivation, 2019 Communities and Local Government, accessed 4 October 2020, https://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/members-area/member-briefings/local-government-finance/indices-deprivation-2019

organisations, raising awareness of Newham's sites/venues and the heritage/history of the borough; (3) how iconic literary classics and historical drama/biography can be 'remixed' and 'localized' to reflect a sense of a place, people and culture., e.g. the 'hoodie' *Revolution Farm*, the multicultural *Alice in Canning Town*.[3]

I will explore how The Newham Plays have addressed and examined recurrent themes and subject matter, such as revolution, rebellion, and social change. I will contend that all of the works have at core a central or unifying theme, which draws in both political and personal interests, the desire/quest for change, transformation, reconstruction, and the concomitant search/quest for building better societies. The theme of revolution might be an actual, physical uprising, such as the animals' revolt in *Revolution Farm,* or a revolution in attitudes or a way of thinking, as in the replacement of suspicion and fear with trust and openness between different tribes in *Alice in Canning Town*. It is this desire, need or zeal for change/upheaval that drives the action of the story forward in the plays, and it is often led by one charismatic individual, whose force of character or ideology acts as a liberation for others' need to escape their unhappy mental or physical environments; the idealistic Hero in *Revolution Farm* insisting on the need for education; an impassioned Keir Hardie fighting for workers' rights in *A Splotch of Red*. But change in the plays can also be led by the desire to change from within, to win hearts and minds, as in *Alice's* exhortation to the warring party tribes to put aside their prejudices and come together and 'party like mad under one roof'.

[3] The use of the words 'hoodie' and 'multicultural' in our publicity and the reviews quickly became a shorthand to describe the adaptations.

My characters are all on fire with something to say and they want to be heard.

> I want everybody to get up and make some noise. I wanna hear some revolution out there. Make some noise! Make some noise! Brothers and sisters I wanna hear the revolution out there. I wanna hear some noise. Are you ready! Are you ready!
>
> Hero, *Revolution Farm, (*p.11)

I have included a short chapter about my early plays written in the '90s, and although they have not been submitted for formal consideration in this exegesis, *Gob* and *Johnny Song* provided a template and inspiration for recurrent themes and stylistic concerns that were to resurface in the Newham Plays.

The central focus in this exegesis is my role as writer of the Newham Plays, but it may be helpful to clarify my additional role of Producer in this series of plays. Over a period of ten years whilst living and working in Newham, I have invested in initiating, developing and nuturing creative and productive relationships with the stakeholders and partners of The Newham Plays. These include developing close ties with local primary and secondary schools, local grassroots organisations, Middlesex University, and Royal Docks Trust.

My producing role is essentially twofold in nature: first, raising funds for productions via grant applications to funding bodies, for example, the RDT; second, sourcing/selecting local sites for performance spaces, such as Newham City Farm, Neighbours Hall. The day-to-day, general management of each Newham show is overseen by Middlesex University's Senior Graduate Academic Assistant, who has acted as Show Producer on three of the Newham Plays.

This context statement consists of four chapters: 'Conceptual Roots and Practitioner Theory'; 'Research Methodology': 'Pro-Localism in Newham Plays'; 'Early Works/Pre-Newham Plays'; and 'Analysis and Contextualisation of each Play'. In Chapter 1**: 'Conceptual Roots and Practitioner Theory'**, I identify and explore three seminal contemporary British theatre visionaries who have emphasized the importance of localism in the arts and placed communities at the very heart of their creative practice and beliefs. I explore the work and influence of English theatre director Joan Littlewood and her championing of a locally-led culture at the heart of community. I compare and contrast the pioneering work of playwright and director Ann Jellicoe and her development of the concept of Community Plays in Dorset in the 1980s with my own practice of writing plays which dramatize key historical events in a community's history, and involve a mixture of professionals and local people. Consideration too will be given to British playwright and theatre theorist John McGrath's influential manifesto on popular theatre, *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form* (1981), as a visionary example of localist-centred, inclusive and politically engaged entertainment.

In Chapter 2, '**Research Methodology: Pro-Localism'**, I discuss the origin and application of a methodology for creating and sustaining a Pro-Localist theatre practice in Newham. I explore and define the concept and practice of Pro-Localism in my artistic work, how the methodology was developed and refined over the course of four theatre productions, its wider significance in the community, and how this approach to theatre-making may be developed and taken forwards. The chapter includes a reflection on further potential involvement by current pro-localist stakeholder, Middlesex University's Media Department, and a consideration of how the aesthetic of

local playmaking in Newham is fused with an economic and social impact, notably helping facilitate wider access to cultural participation and increasing diversity in the arts.

As an introduction to my genesis and development as a playwright, Chapter 3: '**Early Works/Pre-Newham Plays'** briefly cites the key formative influences of other contemporary writers on my playwriting, such as Steven Berkoff, Jim Cartwright, and Philip Ridley. Special emphasis is given to the dynamism and energy of Berkoff's heavily stylized language, which provided a template for my foundational plays, *Johnny Song* and *Gob*. The privileging of expressive and non-naturalistic dialogue/speech by these playwrights marks out the writing as uniquely 'theatrical', which has been the aim and intention for my own writing, and I explore how liveness and theatricality feature in my work.

I explore the use of heightened/elevated language and an anti-naturalistic aesthetic in *Johnny Song* and *Gob,* and how the plays proved formative in my development as a writer, providing a creative template, both stylistically and thematically, which still resonates in my Newham Plays series. This includes a revelling in language and words; an emphasis on theatrical, stripped-back miminilism; protagonists 'on fire with something to say'; even a precursor to Pro-Localism, as the early plays were already 'local' in a broader, London sense.

I explore the non-literary, but nevertheless important, contemporary influence on my writing of the phenomenon of Rave Culture and Acid House[4]

[4] Luke Bainbridge, "Acid house and the dawn of a rave new world", *The Guardian*, 23 February, 2014, accessed 11 August 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/feb/23/acid-house-dawn-rave-new-world. 'In the mid-80s, the UK embraced acid house, together with the new drug, ecstasy, with gusto. A new scene grew up around it that changed the social and cultural habits of a generation. It was the biggest youth revolution since the 60s…'

subcultures in the 1990s. *Johnny Song* and *Gob* explored how new forms of electronic dance music, such as techno and acid house, could seep into creating a vibrant, propulsive 'theatrical' language, incorporating rhythm and beats, attempting to capture something of the energy and excitement of raves. Both these dramatic and subcultural influences are still present and discernible in my public works, in the non-naturalistic dialogue and rhythmic, metronomically-driven dialogue in plays like *Revolution Farm* and *A Splotch of Red.*

In Chapter 4, I focus on the '**Analyses and Contextualizations'** of the four plays in detail. For ease of analysis and thematic coherence, this chapter is grouped into two sections. The first section, 'Exit the Proscenium Arch'**,** explores the origins of the establishment of a Pro-Localist approach to theatre making in Newham, notably the use of a 'mixed economy' cast and development of an infrastructure of local and professional partnerships supporting the plays. I discuss my burgeoning interest and involvement in performing outside and beyond conventional theatre spaces, and draw chiefly on the work of site-specific theatre pioneers Brith Gof, and the notion of overlaying sets of architecture ('host') and ('ghost'), to arrive at a clearer definition of the role of my theatre work in community and local spaces in Newham. I clarify my preferred use of the term, *site-local,* which I have chosen to more accurately define and describe the physical performance environment of my plays and its meaning and impact on local audiences. I investigate the notion of historical accuracy, biography, and interpretation in the biographical/local history plays, *When Chaplin Met Gandhi* and *A Splotch of Red,* and the delicate balance between fidelity to the truth and

the need to tell a good story. I also include a brief discussion of the ethical dimension of representing real people in drama.

In the second section, 'Remixes and Re-edits', I explore the writing, production and performances of *Revolution Farm*, and *Alice in Canning Town*, and argue that these plays were not straightforward stage adaptations of literary classics, but 'remixes'of the original source material, and new plays in their own right. I investigate the notion of literary adaptation as being analogous to a DJ remix or re-edit; appropriating and changing other materials to create something new. I discuss the terms *movement of proximation*, and *sustained appropriation*, and how these elements and theories of adaptation were applied to the methodology and creative process behind adapting two canonical texts for the stage. I feature extracts from a research journal/diary I kept during the writing and production of *Alice in Canning Town*, which documented in detail the creative process behind the writing of *Alice,* and serves as a personal commentary/reflection on the challenges of adaptation.

I argue in this chapter that the use of non-theatre spaces to re-energise and reconfigure an audience's preconceptions of the parameters of conventional building-based performance, discussed fully in 'Exit the Proscenium Arch', is a consistent feature across all of the Newham Plays, perhaps reaching its apotheosis in *Revolution Farm*, where an inventive use of performance space, allied with a unique physical environment, gave this classic tale of greed and exploitation a power and resonance arguably beyond the reach of mainstream theatre.

In the **Conclusion,** I contend that my original contribution to knowledge lies in the nurturing and development of a Pro-Localist

infrastructure of partnerships and stakeholders, which helps support new writing practice that embeds the life of a play in the town, place or community in which it is being written, rehearsed, and performed, a practice that takes as its source, inspiration and creativity, the culture and history of Newham, both past and present, and aims to explore, investigate and celebrate its character through use of public spaces as performance auditoria and mixed economy participation of professional and local talent.

The purpose of writing for the stage for me has been to create plays that exploit the strengths of the medium, chiefly theatre's 'liveness', and its reliance on an audience's power of imagination, which at best results in a work that retains a sharp sense of its own originality and identity. This credo has not changed since I began writing plays nearly two decades ago, a mission or belief in theatre's 'exercise of the imagination' (Alfreds 2013, 29), that began with my 'verse-plays' *Johnny Song* (1998) and *Gob* (1999). The subject matter I write about, and am drawn to, has not changed significantly since those early plays. What has changed is where the plays are performed and who the audiences are. What has emerged since foundational texts like *Johnny Song* and *Gob* is a live performance style that has attempted to mark out its distinct theatrical territory by making a virtue of the absence of all that is most commonly associated by the public with institutionalized spaces of theatre, e.g., lighting, seats, stage.

The 'physical, material aesthetic'[5] in the productions of the dramatic works submitted here is minimal, raw, austere even. In the absence of a literal, representational world on stage, as well as a rejection of conventional

[5] By 'physical', I refer here to set design, costume, props.

theatre stages, the ambition is to harness the audience's imaginative empathies, provoke them into filling in the gaps themselves, and, by doing so, offer a strongly imaginative experience that rejects the passive nature of television watching, and asks the audience to become more actively involved in what they are processing. It is a performance style that rids itself of the excesses, or hyperrealism, of mainstream theatre, such as lavish costumes and intricate sets, and instead prioritizes the physical and mimetic skills of the actor aided only by minimal props. I acknowledge the debt my early writing owes to Berkoff's physical and richly expressive verbal theatre in Chapter 3, but if the quest of my theatre making has been an attempt to answer the question, *what is special about theatre, and what can it do that film and television cannot?*, then perhaps its roots lie in Grotowski's concept of 'poor theatre':

> By gradually eliminating whatever proved superfluous, we found that theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc. (Grotowski 2002, 19)

I address and explore the ontology of live performance more fully in the final chapter, and how it applies to my own writing, with a focus on the essentially ephemeral and evanescent nature of the Newham Plays, an illustration of theatre's unique live qualities.

Chapter 1

Conceptual Roots and Practitioner Theory

Appropriately enough for a playwright whose theatre work is embedded in culturally diverse, localist practices, I live just a few tube stops away from Theatre Royal Stratford East (TRSE), famously associated with Joan Littlewood, and home of the legendary Theatre Workshop Company. The theatre became famous because of productions such as *Oh, What a Lovely War!* (1963) and *A Taste of Honey* (1958), and its commitment to representing culturally and socially diverse communities in the work it makes. This inclusive, localist-influenced ethos continues in a vibrant and energetic form today, as the first sentence in the About Us section on the TRSE website makes unequivocally clear: 'Stratford East makes theatre both for, and inspired by, our community in Newham, East London' (TRSE 2020).

It hardly needs saying that Littlewood and Theatre Royal Stratford East's championing of the community and its diverse cultures is on a considerably larger scale than my own practice, but the Newham plays have the same spirit as some of her pioneering initiatives. Littlewood wrote to potential backers, when she was seeking funds to transform the blighted area around the theatre building in Stratford, and provide drama activities, educational and recreational classes for local children and young people, who, she feared, might otherwise become socially alienated:

> Pleasant, temporary structures to house these activities can be erected on the old debris instead of giving it over to dumping and dirt. When rebuilding starts, the structure can be moved on. Meanwhile, we may find out how to enjoy ourselves and even enrich ourselves a bit more. The talent, which in the old days seemed to belong only to the 'stars' in society, is in each child. It just needs cherishing. (TRSE Archive, Holdsworth 2006, 38)

'The talent…is in each child', resonates with the practice of 'mixed economy' casting in my plays, and chimes with the cultural opportunities the plays provide for young people to access in their local area. There are several young people who have been with the Newham Plays from the start. For example, one of the young performers has performed in a variety of acting roles in *Revolution Farm, A Splotch of Red*, and *Alice in Canning Town*. The parts he has played have increased in size and importance with each successive show, and in *Alice*, he played a major role as a not-very-good grime rapper MC Turtle with depressive tendencies, and received glowing praise from the critics:

> The play allows its young cast to shine – each character has their moment. Particular favorites include MC Turtle's heart-wrenching struggles to become a grime star (rapping nonsensically about mice in warehouses). (McLeod, 2019)

Although considerably more Brechtian in her approach to modern theatre than my own practice, Littlewood's groundbreaking work in community and political theatre for Theatre Workshop and Theatre Royal Stratford East, was rooted in creating theatre accessible to audiences across the social spectrum, and elements of my own work seek to enable young people, their families and public to access and participate in cultural/creative opportunities that exist within their community.

The conceptual origins and thinking behind my artistic practice, however, may lie a little closer perhaps to the visionary theatre-making and ideology of popular theatre of 'willing outsiders' like Ann Jellicoe and John McGrath.[6]

[6] I describe Jellicoe and McGrath as 'willing outsiders', because they both turned their backs on success early on in their careers, to forge their own distinctive theory and practice of theatre-making.

Playwright and Director Ann Jellicoe pioneered and originated the concept of plays that take their inspiration from a community's history, and which actively seek the participation in the play of the community. She set up the Colway Theatre Trust in 1978 to explore the concept of Community Plays, and thereafter was responsible for a series of very successful community shows exploring this form of theatre. Jellicoe's own book about community theatre*, Community Plays: How To Put Them On* (London: Methuen, 1987) is still the definitive manual for anyone wishing to get involved in this kind of theatre.

At the start of the writing of the Newham plays, I did not know a significant amount about Ann Jellicoe and Colway Theatre Trust's pioneering work as founders of the Community Play genre, nor, I admit, did I fully understand the concept of writing plays for and about a specific community. But in retrospect, the work of Colway Theatre Trust and its philosophy of placing community at the heart of their theatre making process, is one that bears more than a little resemblance to my own practice of writing and producing plays which celebrate and explore East London's rich history.

There are important differences too and chief among these is the scale and profile of Jellicoe's theatre work in the community. Her community plays involve substantial proportions of the population of Dorchester, moving her base of operation from town to town each year. She has commissioned high profile UK playwrights like David Edgar[7] and Howard Barker[8] to create specially written community plays. By contrast, the Newham shows involve between ten and fifteen local young people in the cast, and are supported

[7] *Entertaining Strangers*, Dorchester 1985.
[8] *The Poor Man's Friend*, Bridport 1981.

by a local network of schools, colleges, charities, funders and the local Council. They are mainly performed in Newham, the exception being *When Chaplin Met Gandhi*, which was performed in Bow, Tower Hamlets, as this is where the play's venue, Kingsley Hall, is situated. Whether the work is small-scale or large-scale community-based theatre, I contend that the philosophy and vision informing the principle of this kind of work is the same: to explore and celebrate local culture, history and identity, and a belief in the enduring power of the arts as a force for change, enriching people's lives and communities.

But there may be a more important difference than just scale. As noted in the Introduction to this thesis, Newham is among the most deprived boroughs in the UK. A 2017 report from Trust for London stated that Newham 'experiences significant problems with poverty and inequality. More than half of children (52%) are judged to be in households in poverty, compared to 38% in the typical London borough'.[9] The borough has been euphemistically identified as a 'cold spot' by Arts Council England, meaning there is very little engagement and participation by its residents in arts and culture activities.[10] There is perhaps a greater and more acute need for community-based arts projects in this kind of borough than there is in less economically disadvantaged or more cohesive/homogeneous communities. Jellicoe herself acknowledges this argument:

> It's far easier to mount a community play in a good community. There are far more energetic and enthusiastic people, who know how to work together without fuss. Lines of communication are already open. They will know who can do a particular job: who

[9] "Newham Overview", *Trust for London Tackling Poverty and Equality, 2017,* accessed 8 October, 2017, https://www.trustforlondon.org.uk/data/boroughs/newham-poverty-and-inequality-indicators/.
[10] Out of 326 local authorities, Newham is the 13th lowest local authority for arts engagement. Arts Council England, Active Lives Survey 2015-17, accessed 8 July, 2020, https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/participating-and-attending/active-lives-survey - section-2.

> can be relied on; has money, time, or special skills. However, bad communities *need* a community play. It offers an opportunity for communication across ages and backgrounds. Time and again, people say they love doing these plays because 'I made lots of new friends'; 'I met people I wouldn't have otherwise.' (Jellicoe 1987, 46)

I have my own enthusiastic testimonies from young people involved in the Newham plays, confirming the benefits of getting involved in the shows and in particular their enjoyment of meeting new people and forming new friendships:

> I think that working with the young people made the build up to the performance more enjoyable, it allowed me to become more confident around people I did not necessarily know and also helped me to make new friends.[11]

> Being in a room of people of a similar age to me with similar aspirations was quite interesting, as we all were starting fresh and constantly learning new things from the adults but also learning things about each other and what elements make us as individuals stand out.[12]

None of the young people acting in the shows have had what one could fairly call, I think, the privilege or luxury of a drama school training or drama club, yet they have plenty of talent and potential. (Which was Littlewood's earlier point about the 'talent in each child': it often goes to waste in poorer, deprived communities) And despite coming from socio-economic backgrounds where a career in the arts is often ruled out, many have expressed the ambition to become professional actors. If we accept a broad definition of a 'bad community' as including the kinds of statistics quoted above (ie areas with high percentage of low-paid work, poverty and little cultural and civic engagement), I contend that more than anything else, a 'bad community' *needs* aspiration, ambition and for everyone to have

[11] Questionnaire, October 7, 2018.
[12] Questionnaire, December 7, 2018.

access to opportunities to realize their potential fully. In 2015, Julie Walters added her voice to the row over the number of privileged artists in the arts, lamenting the lack of working-class voices in contemporary drama: "People like me wouldn't have been able to go to college today. I could because I got a full grant. I don't know how you get into it now. Kids write to me all the time and I think: I don't know what to tell you." (Guardian, 2015)

At a recent screening of a film recording of *Alice* at Stratford Circus Arts Centre, produced by partner Middlesex University's BA Film graduates, local MP Stephen Timms paid tribute to the power of the arts in giving a community a sense of pride and ambition[13]:

> I think it's a really powerful way of building up our community, developing the sense that we all belong to our borough, and as well as celebrating the history and heritage of our community. I don't think we get enough of that in Newham, so I'm really grateful to James Kenworth's work in doing that. And as well, of course, he's bringing forward a whole host of bright new talent and who knows where that's going to go in the future. (*Alice in Canning Town* Film Screening/Q&A, 2020)

Jellicoe's vision of theatre-making in a specific locality mirrors my own creative, pro-localist practice in one very important respect. Topicality is important in the kind of theatre-making that embeds its artistic process in the community and Jellicoe advises would-be community-based playwrights that they should avoid simply adapting classic novels and write their own original play for the community: 'It will mean that you have a contemporary

[13] RDT Trustee Director Steve Nicholas echoed Timms' views when he cited the Newham plays' promotion of pride in community as an outcome that is 'fully within our strategies and reason for existing as a charitable company that reports to the Charity Commission. The specific plays covered subjects that were well worth considering in their own right as well as genuinely enhancing and promoting a sense of worth and achievement and significance for the region. There could be genuine pride in being a child of a region that is often despised or dismissed by outsiders.' (Steve Nicholas, A Testimonial – The Newham Plays, email message to author, September 26, 2020)

statement written for our times. This will be so whether the subject is historical or not. It is impossible to write a play, even one set in the remote past, which is not actually about the present' (Jellicoe 1987, 121).

For example, *When Chaplin Met Gandhi*'s topicality was a result of its fortuitous timing, as its performances ran alongside the London 2012 Summer Olympics. The Games were centred around the Olympic Park in Stratford, East London. Kingsley Hall, in Bow, the play's venue, was literally around the corner from the Olympic Park. As the biggest international multi-sport event in the world, the Olympics organisers had promised a legacy of long-term benefits and investment for East London. I thought it would be interesting to hear Chaplin and Gandhi's thoughts on the subject of the Olympics, since they had clashed heatedly at their meeting in 1931, with Chaplin insisting that modernization was a force for good, while Gandhi was concerned the human element was missing in Chaplin's utopia of mass production. In the play's final scene, in which the 'ghosts' of Chaplin and Gandhi revisit a so-called newly regenerated East London, their positions appear to be reversed, or is it perhaps that Chaplin has come round to Gandhi's way of thinking?:

> **Gandhi** *(mischievously)* Ah Charlie, I am delighted to see that the East London I love very much is at last sharing in the wealth traditionally enjoyed by its more prosperous, suburban neighbours.
>
> **Chaplin** You are teasing me.
>
> **Gandhi** Am I?
>
> **Chaplin** You know you are.
>
> **Gandhi** But here's your progress.
>
> **Chaplin** Progress?
>
> **Gandhi** Yes, modernisation.
>
> **Chaplin** *(cynically, wildly)* A city in the skies! Built by the Gods! Wealth! Ambition! Power! Modern life for all! *(turning to* **Gandhi***)* Yes, indeed Bapu – a brand new world. *(Pause)* But are the people now more happy? Are they now more truthful? Are they now more free? Who is asking that question?

(p.70)

I was asked by the show's Press Officer to write a brief note about the play for the Press Release, and could not resist the opportunity to puncture what I saw as the grandiose ambitions of our corporate neighbour in it: 'I am delighted to be able to present the play at Kingsley Hall, its rightful home in many ways: being right on the doorstep of the Olympics, we invite visitors to find the "real" East London and explore its fascinating heritage.' (Kenworth 2012)

In my reworking of Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the reviews picked up on the contemporary parallels and resonances of the new version; global social upheavals such as the Arab Spring and Syria, but especially breakdowns in social order much closer to home, namely the London Riots of 2011. Vicky Taylor from *thepublicreviews* 'imagined' correctly when she wrote:

> Orwell was inspired by the Soviet Union and Stalin, but you can imagine that James Kenworth drew his from the Arab Springs, Syria or even the London Riots.[14]

The researching and thinking for *Revolution Farm* had been influenced by popular social upheavals such as the London Riots of 2011,[15] especially the question of whether the police had lost control during the riots, as was suggested by several media commentators at the time:

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[14] This is a reference to an online review at the time, which was added to the *Revolution Farm* Press Pack, but has since been lost/deleted. However, I thought the comment was relevant as it captured some of the spirit of the piece, and so included it. The full review can be accessed/read in *Revolution Farm* Press Pack in appendices

[15] Riots in London and around the country saw widespread looting and buildings set alight. Dozens were left homeless after a night of riots on the streets of Tottenham after a peaceful demonstration on 6 August over the death of a man who was shot by police turned violent. Mark Duggan, a 29-year-old British man, was shot and killed by police in Tottenham, North London on 4 August 2011. The Metropolitan Police stated that officers were attempting to arrest Duggan on suspicion of planning an attack and that he was in possession of a handgun. Duggan died from a gunshot wound to the chest. The circumstances of Duggan's death resulted in public protests in Tottenham, which led to conflict with police and escalated into riots across London and other English cities.

> The Metropolitan police's embattled public order unit, CO11, once prided itself on being the world leader in containing disorder. At 3am yesterday, its exhausted officers slept in police vans lined up in Enfield town centre, bruised, exhausted and, for the second night running, entirely out-manoeuvred. (Lewis and Quinn 2011)

What if the London Riots had not been stopped, just what would a revolution by lawless young people look like? These were some of the questions that fed into the writing of *Revolution Farm*, and I deployed a language in the play that was brutal, raw and stripped down in order to explore Orwell's political message in today's context of social unrest and austerity. When the animals return victorious from terrorizing the farmer off the farm, the younger ones start up a chant that mimics the explosive and violent potential of the widespread urban unrest only a few years before in 2011:

> SMASH 'EM UP! BREAK THEIR BONES! KICK THEIR HEADS IN! SMASH 'EM UP! BREAK THEIR BONES! KICK THEIR HEADS IN! SMASH 'EM UP! BREAK THEIR BONES! KICK THEIR HEADS IN!

I think Jellicoe is right to insist on community theatre's topicality and contemporaneity in order to make it urgent and relevant, even though I disagree with her advice to avoid adapting classic novels, because as I will explore later on, it is perfectly possible to create an original and radical new play from source material that reflects a sense of local community and culture.

De-centralizing and democratizing the arts by foregrounding localism as the inspiration of the creative process is a key factor in my theatre making, and the roots of the development of a popular localism in the arts lie in a seminal textbook by John McGrath: *A Good Night Out* (1981). John McGrath pioneered a form of popular, accessible, entertaining theatre for working-

class audiences with the radical touring theatre company he founded, 7:84,[16] and although McGrath was a more overtly political writer than myself, aiming to fulfil 7:84's ideological impetus to communicate a socialist agenda to working-class audiences, my own work has a similar and parallel interest in developing work for non-traditional theatre audiences.

McGrath lists 'Localism' as a fundamental difference when discussing the 'demands and tastes of bourgeois and working-class audiences': 'Working-men's clubs in the north of England depend on this sense of locality, of identity, of cultural identity with the audience.' (1981, 58). McGrath contends that '…the best response in working-class audiences comes from character and events with a local feel. Localism not only of material, but also deriving from a sense of identity with the performer.'(ibid)

Substitute working-men's clubs in the north for libraries in the East End, and I contend the same sense of cultural identification is at work in the shows in Newham, notably *A Splotch of Red's* tour of local libraries. It wasn't just that performing the play in local libraries meant it was celebrating the town's history/heritage, but it was celebrating this in a personal and de-centralized way with the community. The libraries, the story, and the young performers were all local to residents. The play's writer and director too, it should be noted, lived locally in Beckton and Stratford, respectively. And by performing in a core community service, like a library, some of the cultural, social and economic barriers facing those who feel excluded or alienated from the arts, were removed.

Daniel Schulze, in *Authenticity in Contemporary Theatre and*

[16] The group was founded by John McGrath, his wife Elizabeth MacLennan and her brother David MacLennan in 1971, and operated throughout Great Britain. In 1973, it split into 7:84 (England) and 7:84 (Scotland).

Performance: Make It Real, acknowledges the liberating effect of non-judgemental, spaces when he writes, 'the term 'site-specific theatre' itself 'privileges place' and removes theatre from the ideology of the theatre building and the (negative) associations that accompany it.' (Schulze 2017, 133). It is this potential of non-traditional theatre spaces to democratize/demystify the arts that Jellicoe and Colway Theatre Trust deployed in their 'theatrical revolution' in Dorset in 1979, when they used a public space for the performance rather than a conventional theatre:

> Those who were either unfamiliar with theatregoing as a social habit or uneasy with the idea of entering a building whose use is associated with the narrow cultural preoccupations of the educated middle class, did not have to negotiate a social ritual with whose conventions they were unfamiliar. (Reynolds 1992, 87)

I contend that what John McGrath writes about elitism and the arts in *A Good Night Out* still holds largely true today:

> The working class has been told for so long that theatre is not for their likes, has been so put off by the middle-class's appropriation of theatre, indeed of all art, that it resents, at least heavily distrusts, the whole idea. (McGrath 1981, 75)

But McGrath's analysis of culture appears to put the blame wholly on class, when it is often more than that. It is about money too. Who can afford it? Who can't afford it? How much should it cost? The *Guardian* theatre critic Michael Billington makes this point in his post-war study of British theatre, *State of the Nation*:

> Enjoyment of high culture in Britain is determined as much by money as by class or education. Where art is made freely available, as in our national or civic galleries, there is ample evidence that it is enjoyed by a cross-section of the public. It is only when a high price-tag is put on it, as in most of our major opera houses, that it becomes uncomfortably elitist. (Billington 2007, 336)

But is subsidy the all-conquering answer? I think if I was convinced that a wide cross-section of residents attended the Newham Plays, particularly those new to theatre, then I would describe the kind of subsidy scheme we used in *Splotch*[17] as successful. My instinct, however, tells me that for the main part, those already in work, and those already familiar with theatre, came to see the show. In other words, it was perhaps the middle-class taking advantage of a subsidy that was not designed for them.

[17] A special free offer for the library performances was made available to Newham residents, supported by Newham Council.

Chapter 2

Research Methodology: Pro-Localism in Newham Plays

Both Ann Jellicoe and Michael Billington challenge the cliché of plays in the community as being worthy, important, but artistically banal or second-rate:

> The idea is to create a work of art in terms of the community. It's no use doing a self-indulgent, sloppy community play just because it's a community play. It has to be as good as you can make it. And that's important in point of view involving people. Because once they see that it's extremely serious, not necessarily solemn, but extremely serious, they work amazingly.[18]

After five decades as a critic, Billington has seen many changes in British theatre, not least the increased diversity on stage, and welcomes 'a theatre that represents the infinite variety of the British public, but is convinced 'no amount of outreach, community or educational activity will be of any use if the work itself is not first-rate'(The Guardian, 2020).

Taking an approach to community theatre which leans away from addressing a particular issue and has a specific intention or impact (e.g., theatre in prisons, theatre in education), what constitutes or qualifies as a 'Newham Play' starts with a question about the 'character' of the community, its unexplored narratives or the reconfiguration of local spaces; in other words, what are the interesting stories in Newham and where would be an interesting location or site in the community to tell them? The early research and development process actively seeks out local material which has a surprising, original or unexpected quality to it, such as Gandhi meeting

[18] *Arena: A Play for Bridport*. Produced by Alan Yentob. Documentary which looks at the production of *The Poor Man's Friend* by Howard Barker by the Colway Theatre Trust in Dorset.

Chaplin in Canning Town, or the birth of The Labour Party in West Ham. A local space/location might present itself as a singular and unique environment for a reimagining of a literary classic, e.g., transposing Orwell's classic satire of an animal uprising to an actual inner-city farm in Beckton; a multicultural Alice in an adventure playground in Canning Town.

A 'Newham Play' needs to illuminate or unearth a 'hand in glove' congruence between physical site/space and subject matter. It should be apparent to an audience, especially (although not exclusively) a local one, why the play has a resonance, relevance and significance to their lives and for their community. The principal investigation behind the Newham Plays lies in exploring the question: how can iconic literary classics and historical drama/biography be reimagined and 'localized' to reflect a sense of a place, people and culture? How do plays set in the past hold up a mirror to the present, to make a 'contemporary statement written for our times'? (Jellicoe 121)

It is the development of a methodology of Pro-Localism that has enabled me to shift my interests in making theatre in the community, away from an overtly 'worthy', or primarily issue-led approach, and create an infrastructure of support in which to produce unconventional and unusual local stories for and about Newham.

I employ the term Pro-Localism in this thesis to describe the interrelationships between professional expertise/experience and local young talent, one that extends beyond the primary nexus of young people performing alongside professional actors. I have previously described the model of actors and young people working side by side in this thesis as a 'mixed economy' approach, and I use it to focus on the benefits of using

performing arts to give young people a wider, rich learning experience. But if we broaden the approach to include the relationship of funders, partners and stakeholders we can say confidently that there is a wider and richer nexus than originally envisaged.

All four plays submitted here are partnered and supported by well-known, local, grassroots organizations and charities, which have substantial roots and ties in the community: The Royal Docks Trust, Community Links[19] and Ambition, Aspire, Achieve.[20] The two other significant partnerships/stakeholders are the local primary and secondary schools in Beckton and Custom House, and Middlesex University's Media Department. The development and promotion of partnership/stakeholder building that I have invested in supports the infrastructure of the shows and impacts on its participants in four important ways; (I) **research;** (II) **local talent;** (III) **project management** and (IV) **documentation; training and employability.**

Research. The Gandhi Foundation's[21] support and advocacy of *When Chaplin Met Gandhi* at Kingsley Hall significantly augmented the research process regarding the meeting between the two men. Based at Kingsley Hall[22] in Bow, where the show was performed, the Gandhi Foundation's office has various research materials regarding Gandhi. Their library/archives

[19] Community Links is a social action charity, rooted in East London, providing support and opportunities to thousands of people every year. They have been transforming lives for over 40 years and are founded on two principles: to find new solutions to old problems and to deliver them with the whole community. Accessed 3 March, 2017, https://www.community-links.org/.

[20] Ambition Aspire Achieve (AAA) was founded in June 2016 by Kevin Jenkins OBE, because of a longstanding desire to provide opportunities for children and young people in the London Borough of Newham and surrounding areas. Accessed 5 March, 2017 https://www.theaaazone.com/about-us.html.

[21] Gandhi Foundation is a United Kingdom-based voluntary organisation which seeks to further the work of Mahatma Gandhi through a variety of educational events and activities. Accessed 9 March 2017, https://gandhifoundation.org/.

[22] Founded by sisters, Doris and Muriel Lester, as a 'people's house', Kinsgley Hall has a radical 90 year history as a centre of peace activitism, progressive ideas, social justice and community engagement. Gandhi visited England in 1931 to discuss constitutional reform in India with British politicians. While in London he stayed at the community centre, Kingsley Hall.

includes Muriel Lester's[23] account of Gandhi's stay at Kingsley Hall in 1931, *Entertaining Gandhi (1932)*, which proved indispensable in finding out more about his stay in East London.

I was able to draw on the specialist knowledge of the Foundation's Executive Committee and Patrons (including former Bureau Chief of BBC, New Delhi, Sir Mark Tully) to advise me on Gandhi's life, politics and philosophy, extending even to a valuable piece of script consultancy. For example, in an early draft of the script I had Chaplin reverentially addressing Gandhi as Mahatma ("Great Soul") at their meeting, and I was advised by the Committee that Gandhi was not keen on the appellation, because he thought it was dramatic and self-important, and he would have preferred Chaplin to use something else. I did not know what term Chaplin might have come up with, but Committee members thought it was more likely Gandhi would help him out, and suggest Chaplin calls him 'Brother Gandhi'. What was originally a rather flat, pedestrian scene, was now enlivened by Gandhi gently teasing a palpably nervous Chaplin for putting him on a pedestal.

> **Chaplin** Mahatma Gandhi, it is a great honour-
>
> **Gandhi** Oh no no no, please, no, Mr Chaplin.
>
> **Chaplin** *(alarmed)* What have I done?
>
> **Gandhi** I do so dislike Mahatma.
>
> **Chaplin** But you are a "Great Soul"!
>
> **Gandhi** Yes, I know I am being awkward, but such a dramatic title to live up to – let the Kings and Queens have their titles.
>
> **Chaplin** Then how should I address you?
>
> **Gandhi** How about Brother Gandhi?
>
> **Chaplin** Are you sure?

[23] Muriel Lester was a close friend of Gandhi, an international peace campaigner and founded community centres in the deprived areas of Bow and Dagenham in East London.

> **Gandhi** I should be delighted. *(with a twinkle in his eyes)* We shall keep it to ourselves. Our little secret.
>
> (p.48-49)

For *A Splotch of Red*: *Keir Hardie in West Ham*, I was assisted by the staff and management[24] at Community Links who advised me on the history and background of the building, including details of Will Thorne and Keir Hardie's speeches and political campaigning in Neighbours Hall, where the show was performed.[25] The history of the building records the galvanizing effect on Thorne's burgeoning trade union activist career of the introduction of a mechanism by the gasworks called the 'Iron Man'. The 'Iron Man' increased the stoker's speed and could be operated by two men instead of four, but frequently broke down, which caused the management to expect 18 hour shifts per day. Thorne challenged the management, organising the workers in a protest, and I used the incident in the play to dramatize how 'a 18-hour shift an' the walk back home 4 miles', meant that 'stirrer-uppers'[26] like Billy were able to say, 'Yeah, Mr Thorne, we was ready for your union ideas by then.'

I was given access to Newham Archives and Local Studies Library by Newham Council,[27] which has a range of local archives about the history of Newham and its people. Their archive of local newspapers was invaluable for

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[24] In particular, David Robinson, Co-founder of Community Links and currently Senior Advisor.
[25] *A Short History of 105 Barking Road* (1993), a Community Links publication, provides a very useful overview of its varied and fascinating history.
[26] 'stirrer-uppers': agitators, union activists and supporters. Like the majority of the enfranchised working class in West Ham, they were originally apathetic and disengaged from politics, and had little interest in big theories or grand ideas. This was partly due to a lack of education and fear of being 'out of their depth', and partly due to a stark fact of life: their lives were often so hard they simply didn't have time for politics. Hardie and Thorne's powerful campaigning on behalf of worker's rights ignited a flame of anger in skilled and unskilled workers alike, and they developed a new consciousness about their class and its exploitation by industry bosses. (Kenworth, *Splotch of Red*, 2017)
[27] Archives and Local Studies Library in Stratford provide access by appointment to a range of local archives to find out about the history of Newham and its people. Information sources include: Local newspapers; Historical local maps; Books and printed leaflets on local history; Photographs and illustrations.

research, notably editions of the *Borough of West Ham and Stratford Express* in 1892, which reported Hardie's campaigning in West Ham and his historic election victory. It was amusing to note that the local papers called the political duel between the wealthy, blue-blooded Major Banes and working-class, uneducated Keir Hardie, 'the major versus the miner', but it was also a useful way of summarising the inherent conflict between the two men in the play. When Major Banes invites Hardie for an informal meeting at his house, the ideological positions between the two men are laid bare:

> **Banes** A miner, is that right?
>
> **Hardie** That is correct.
>
> **Banes** Unpleasant work I should imagine.
>
> **Hardie** Very unpleasant.
>
> **Banes** Glad to be shot of it I suppose.
>
> **Hardie** It was the making of me.
>
> **Banes** How so?
>
> **Hardie** It showed me men will be exploited, men will be oppressed, men will be crushed, all in the name of the worship of Mammon, and that it is not a good system when men must perish for the sake of profit for the few.
>
> **Banes** Capitalism red in tooth and claw eh? I'll grant you it's not a perfect system by a long shot. But you know what bothers me about your alternative? It's naïve. Men will take advantage. The exploited will exploit, if you catch my drift. You're an idealist, Mr Hardie, and that's a very noble thing, but politics is a practical job don't you think?
>
> **Hardie** I confess I think it's entirely practical that men and women would wish to subscribe to a fairer and more equal society. I couldn't think of anything less idealistic and more sensible than such a common sense proposal.
>
> **Banes** Bloody good job the miners do though. The country's very grateful I'm sure. Even though you fellas do go on strike quite a bit!
>
> (p.141-42)

Local talent. I have developed and maintained a successful and fruitful, long-term partnership with three schools within the RDT's area of

benefit[28], who support the plays and encourage their pupils to participate in acting roles in the shows: Gallions Primary School[29], Kingsford Community School[30], Royal Docks Academy[31].

The schools' drama teachers have been essential in helping identify talented and enthusiastic pupils keen to gain professional drama experience. We organised visits to their drama classes to run workshops and auditions to gauge interest among pupils. Each show has been followed by a series of free drama workshops offered to the schools, using drama techniques like improvisation, games, and role play to explore the themes and issues of the plays. Fully resourced, documented and professionally printed Education Resource Packs feature pupils and staff from schools who took part in the drama workshops.[32]

The Resource Packs provide a historical, social and cultural context for each play, and contain a series of workshop exercises which explore in a stimulating and creative way, the issues and themes arising from the play, notably themes that are relevant to today's young generation. For example, the *Revolution Farm* workshops explored the idea of revolution as a voice for the dispossessed and marginalized, and drew on current topics such as widening inequality, social unrest/violence, 2011 London Riots, Arab Spring. *(see appendices for Resource Packs)*

[28] The Royal Docks Trust specifies the Docklands part of Newham between the A13 and the River Thames as its Area of Benefit, and its grants/funding are conditional on activities/purposes that directly benefit communities within that area. This includes Beckton, Canning Town, Custom House, Royal Docks.
[29] Gallions Primary School opened in 1999. They are a community school for boys and girls aged 3 to 11 years.
[30] Kingsford Community School is an innovative, diverse and unified co-educational secondary school with an International School and Confucius Classroom status in Beckton, East London.
[31] Royal Docks Academy (formerly Community School) is a purpose built, mixed, community comprehensive school for pupils aged 11 to 16 in Custom House.
[32] The drama workshops and Resource Packs have been regularly funded by the RDT's Grants Programme for Minor Grants and were produced in association with Middlesex University's Media Department.

A strong indication of the benefits for the young local talent involved is provided by feedback given after participation in the performances and workshops. Analysis of Pupil Evaluation Forms[33] revealed that more than half of the pupils felt that their self-confidence had improved as a result of the activities done in the *Splotch of Red* workshops, while 98% of them answered positively about the workshops being an enjoyable experience with only 2% being unsure. Nearly 60% of the pupils in the *Revolution Farm* workshops felt that they had learnt new skills with 40% of them asserting this strongly. Overall summaries of Pupil Evaluation Forms demonstrated that the most consistent benefits and skillset development for young participants included: working with others (collaboration/team building); boosting self-belief/confidence levels; being taken out of their comfort zone (challenges of promenade/site-specific theatre); learning about specialised performance skills (breathing, projection, vocal exercises); making new friends/meeting people.

Project management and documentation. One of the most consistent and productive partnerships of the Newham Plays has been with Kevin Jenkins, Co-founder and former Director of Community Links, and currently Founder and Director of Ambition Aspire Achieve (AAA). Kevin Jenkins is a well-respected and well-known community figure in Newham, and as Co-founder, Director and Senior Advisor to Community Links, has raised millions of pounds for a large number of projects and schemes providing support and opportunities for children and young people.[34]

[33] See appendices for full Analysis Report.

[34] He was awarded the prestigious annual £30k Beacon Award for his work with the children and young people of Newham and is just one of six recipients of the 2008 Beacon Award, joining the ranks of previous Beacon winners such as Sir Bob Geldof, Jamie Oliver and environmentalist, Zac Goldsmith who have all been recognised for their charitable work through what has become known as the 'Nobel Prize of the charity world', first coined by Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

Kevin Jenkins wanted an opportunity to promote both the organisation and the particular sites concerned in both its immediate catchment area and wider afield in Newham and East London.[35] His invitation to stage plays at Newham City Farm[36] and Arc in the Park[37] offered me the chance to radically 'remix' two canonical texts of English literature, and have them performed in unique, local spaces/sites, thereby raising the profile of my work and providing a seedbed for the growth and development of my vision of a 'pro-localist' new writing theatre practice.

As well as the offer of local spaces/sites for performance environments, Kevin arranged with Community Links for their finance department to manage, audit and administer all payments to personnel and suppliers for *Chaplin/Gandhi* and *Revolution Farm*. The administrative management by Community Links relieved me of the significant burden of attempting to organize and manage the projects myself, as I had done previously.[38] Successful funding applications, such as the Arts Council's Grants for the Arts,[39] which secured a grant of £15,000 for *Revolution Farm*, benefitted from having a local, grassroots organization like Community Links listed as a Lead Activity Partner in the application. Kevin's longstanding contacts with

[35] As principal partner/stakeholder in the Newham Plays, Kevin Jenkins had no doubt about the value of *Revolution Farm* and *Alice in Canning Town* in raising the profile of AAA venues in the community and beyond: 'An opportunity to promote both the organisation and the particular site concerned in both its immediate catchment area and wider afield in Newham and East London, bringing new children and young people, potential future volunteers and general supporters to the organisation'. (Kevin Jenkins, The Sustained Impact of Newham Plays, letter to author, May 2020)

[36] One of London's longest established city farms, Newham City Farm provides the local community with free access to animals in a countryside oasis which offers a unique learning experience.

[37] AAA's flagship adventure play, sports and youth hub running, projects all year round. The Arc provides a Newham-wide delivery and resource base for young people with disabilities and/or additional needs and their families and is an inclusive neighbourhood play and youth hub for children and young people living in Canning Town.

[38] In 2006 I took my plays *Gob* and *Polar Bears* to Edinburgh Fringe Festival. I was Writer, Producer, Administrator and Book-Keeper on both these shows. With *When Chaplin Met Gandhi*, I was responsible for *merely* administering payments to actors and creative team.

[39] Arts Council England's open access funding programme for individuals, art organizations and other people who use the arts in their work. It offers awards from £1,000 to £100,000.

journalists and reporters from the local newspaper, *Newham Recorder*, garnered important publicity via features and reviews of the shows.[40] As an elected Councillor for 28 years,[41] Kevin facilitated introductions to Councillors, Newham Mayor's Cabinet Team,[42] and the local MP,[43] all with an interest in or a responsibility for children and young people in Newham. Councillors and Cabinet members now regularly support the shows.[44]

My employment with Middlesex University[45], initially as an Hourly-Paid Academic, and currently as a full-time Lecturer in Media Narrative[46], resulted in the development and cementing of another important, mutually beneficial partnership for the Newham Plays. As University staff were going to be involved in the making of the shows, including the Head of Media Department,[47] and Graduate Academic Assistants,[48] The Royal Docks Trust funding applications for *A Splotch of Red* and *Alice in Canning Town* were processed and recorded through the University's Research and Knowledge Transfer Office.[49]

The Media Department oversaw the administrative and project management of the productions. In particular, the importance of the role of the Senior Graduate Academic Assistant, Nayomi Roshini, as Producer of both *Splotch* and *Alice* shows cannot be over-estimated, acting as a crucial liaison

[40] Sophie Morton, Newham Recorder Chief Reporter, has conducted several interviews with me for the paper.
[41] Kevin was elected in Greatfield ward, Newham in 1986, 1990, 1994 and 1998. In 2002, 2006 and 2010 he was elected in East Ham South ward.
[42] Cllr Sarah Ruiz, Custom House Ward, Cabinet Lead for Children and Young People's Services.
[43] Stephen Timms, MP for East Ham since 1997.
[44] In an email to me, Sarah Ruiz wrote an endorsement/review of the show, 'Not one moment did the cast not engage, and we the audience were transported through marvellous scenes. Alice in Canning Town delivered in all levels.' (Ruiz, Aug 2019).
[45] 2015, HPA, Media Department, School of Media and Performing Arts.
[46] 2017, Lecturer in Media Narrative, Media Department, School of Media and Performing Arts.
[47] James Martin Charlton, director of *Revolution Farm, Splotch* and *Alice* shows.
[48] Nayomi Roshini, Senior Graduate Academic Assistant, Producer of *Splotch* and *Alice*. Max Harrison, Graduate Academic Assistant, Graphic Design and Photography, *Alice.*
[49] The RKTO provides a specialist service across all research and knowledge transfer activities. The office enables academics to be successful in their activities to increase the research and knowledge transfer income of the University.

between the creative team and our partner schools. Having a staff member as Producer meant significantly more time and resources could be directed at holding auditions at the schools and in the community to source young talent for the shows. With more young people coming along to auditions, we had a wider and richer pool of local talent to choose from.[50]

The creative input of Graduate Academic Assistants was important too for publicity. Prior to *Alice*, flyers and posters for the shows had been regularly designed by a graphic designer and printing company.[51] But this had always been a struggle. Limited funds meant we paid suppliers less than the market rate, and being a small client meant we were not a priority for them. With *Alice*, I made the decision to take the design and printing process 'in-house'. One of our Graduate Academic Assistants, Max Harrison, designed an image and 'look' for *Alice* that became the house style for flyers, posters, internet advertising and book publication. Additionally, CDS, the University's communications agency, provided a quick and easy printing service for our publicity.

The Media Department also provided high-quality documentation of the projects. *Revolution Farm, A Splotch of Red,* and *Alice in Canning Town* performances have all been filmed, edited and finished in post-production by Middlesex University BA Film graduates.[52] The films are high-quality productions, using film and sound equipment from the University's purpose-built £80 million Grove building, a media facility that is 'recognised as one of

[50] Following informal, pre-audition, introductory talks at schools, over twenty young people attended the auditions at Beckton Globe Library for *Alice.* For previous shows, the number of young people attending auditions has rarely exceeded ten.
[51] Prodeepta Das, writer and photographer for corporates, education and development.
[52] Film BA Honours is a single flexible degree course, exploring all the stages of the film-making process, covering a range of production roles, conception and development, post-production, script writing, cinematography, and direction.

the best in the country' (Middlesex University London Arts and Creative Industries facilities).[53]

Training and employability. The nexus of partnerships of local and professional organisations that provides the infrastructure for the plays enables and facilitates increased exposure to educational and vocational opportunities for young people. The shows provide a unique opportunity for participating young persons to build personal confidence, develop core life skills and grow natural talent and abilities – enhancing their future attainment and achievements personally, socially and educationally. And because the shows are fully documented, participants have a permanent and physical record of their involvement. For example, the filmed performances of the plays directed by Middlesex Film graduates are transferred to DVD and made available online, and stakeholders, partners and participants benefit in the following ways: the actors and young people are given DVD copies which can be used as promotional showreel material; graduates enhance their CVs and employability in the form of trailers and archive filming, demonstrating skills in filming, editing and post-production; funders and charities have a professional, high-quality documentation and archive of projects they have supported; and schools have a record of their pupils' success in a professional theatre show.[54]

[53] The benefit to students/graduates of such 'on-the-job' training is apparent in this testimonial from Ben Robertson-Kay, who graduated in BA Film in 2019 and edited the filmed performance of *Alice in Canning Town*: 'Editing Alice in Canning Town was a fantastic opportunity for me to practice editing my first long-form video at over an hour long. Furthermore, being filmed on two cameras simultaneously allowed me to experiment and familiarise myself with multicam editing, another invaluable skill which has helped increase my employability'. (Ben Robertson-Kay, email message to author, January 7, 2021).

[54] Filmed performances of the Newham Plays can be viewed here: https://vimeo.com/user74032868

I am keen to encourage further involvement by the University in future Newham plays by partnering with MDXworks Employment Hub,[55] especially its Unitemps and Placements and Internships programmes. Both these schemes enable students to gain 'earn while you learn' experiences and provide invaluable opportunities to learn and develop new skills, enhance their CV and increase their graduate employment prospects. The Newham Plays could offer students and graduates opportunities for part-time work and placements in specialist areas such as arts management/marketing, dramaturgy, journalism and design. Moreover, a long-term, continuing Pro-Localist strategy could help facilitate increased diversity in the arts, not just among local young performers, but to include young people in Higher Education, and as one of the UK's most diverse universities, Middlesex is well-poised to take advantage of this approach.[56]

It is in the fusion of the aesthetics and the economic and social impact of a Pro-Localist approach that a small but significant space might be found in widening access and deepening participation in the arts among young people from low or under-represented socio-economic backgrounds.

[55] 'We offer tailored support, advice and guidance - working with students to identify your aspirations; your strengths and potential, your lived experiences, talents and passions. We do this via a menu of co-curricular and work-related activities that develop and nurture the new skills for your future.' Middlesex University, MDXworks, Tell your Story/Shape your Career (online) (cited 19 October 2020); available from https://unihub.mdx.ac.uk/employment/mdxworks

[56] Middlesex University has over 19,000 students studying at its main campus in North London. Of these, over 12,000 are UK undergraduate students. In terms of the composition of our UK undergraduate intake, 73.8% come from London and 66% are from black and minority ethnic groups (source: HEIDI+). A large majority of our young first degree students (98.3%) come from state schools or colleges (source: HESA T1a). Over half of our students join us with either comparatively low or non-tariff entry qualifications and over a quarter come from non- standard entry routes (source: internal data). Middlesex University, Access and participation plan (online) (cited 19 October 2020); available from https://www.mdx.ac.uk/about-us/policies/access-agreement

Chapter 3

Early Works/Pre-Newham Plays

I experienced a kind of theatrical epiphany at the Donmar Warehouse in 1983 when I saw *West*[57] by Steven Berkoff. Up to this point, my theatre-going had consisted mainly of standard theatre fare: trips to the West End, [58] starry revivals, The Royal Court's *Tom and Viv*,[59] the latter because I studied Eliot's impenetrable *The Waste Land* for A-level English Literature, and optimistically thought it might illuminate the poem for me (it didn't - it was about Eliot's tormented marriage). I enjoyed these shows in the main, but they were never truly memorable or special, they didn't seem to me to be differentiated sharply enough from a TV or film viewing experience, which I thought was the point of a live art form: that it should exploit and promote the strengths/advantages of its medium.

Plays like *Another Country*[60] and *Shirley Valentine*[61] had expensive and intricate realistic sets and appeared to want to recreate a kind of kitchen-sink 'tele-realism' on the stage. But I wanted to go to the theatre and have an experience I could not get by watching a TV drama or film. If these mediums were going to be largely an identical experience, but with theatre always coming off second best because of TV/film's superior technical capacities, why bother with theatre? Why not just stay in and watch TV? I saw little point in theatre competing with film and television's superior technical ability to recreate 'real life' for the viewer. Especially if it was to survive against the

[57] *West* premiered at the Donmar Warehouse, London, in May 1983.
[58] I recall seeing *Another Country* by Julian Mitchell in the West End, with a young, fresh-faced Kenneth Branagh.
[59] Tom & Viv by Michael Hastings, premiered in 1984 at the Royal Court Theatre. Based on the real life of T. S. Eliot and his wife Vivienne Haigh-Wood Eliot.
[60] By Julian Mitchell, Queen's Theatre, 1982. Premiered at the Greenwich Theatre in 1981 (same production).
[61] By Willy Russell, Vaudeville Theatre, 1988. Premiered at the Liverpool Everyman in 1986 (same production).

onslaught of the increasing dominance of TV in the 80s, e.g., Sky TV.[62]

In *West*, Berkoff created an utterly unique stage voice through the fusing together of mock-Shakespearean pastiche/parody with "low" cockney slang and swearing. The play's opening lines are a statement of intent; language as verbal fireworks:

> **Les:** Breathless, I was aghast when I saw/standing between the full moon and the blinking lamplight, this geezer/all armed a certain aim he took/and felled the swarthy git from Hoxton with a deft and subtle chop/I never witnessed Mike I swear such venom and gross form in leather stacked.
> (Berkoff 1994, 49)

The Berkovian playwriting aesthetic of an expressive and muscular use of language chimed with my aim to embroider and propel the dialogue and words in my plays with a rhythmic intensity, to have a melody or beat of its own, an attempt to invest language with a vitality and dynamism equal to a rock song or dance tune in a club. I rejoiced in playwrights who embraced the verve and musicality of the *theatricality* of language, who used words like poets, or musicians or DJs, who used their love of music to take you on a thrilling journey through the night.

After the revelatory experience of discovering Berkoff as a much-needed antidote to the undemanding, commercial West End fare and regular Royal Court social realism I was enduring, there was Jim Cartwright's *Road*[63] and *Too*[64], plays in which ordinary people were given freedom and license to speak differently, bizarrely, poetically even. 'It's poetry as speech'

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[62] Director Mike Alfreds makes this point forcefully in his investigation of the art of telling stories for the stage, *Then What Happens*, that theatre's limitations are in fact its very strengths, 'A story invites our imaginations to take wing, so I really don't appreciate having mine grounded by an overwhelming bombardment of effects. An empty space is the greatest stimulus to dramatic resourcefulness. Storytelling goes hand in hand with an empty space. An empty space is the visual equivalent of 'Once upon a time' '. (Mike Alfreds, *Then What Happens?: storytelling and adapting for the Theatre*. (London: Nick Hern Books, 2019), 48.

[63] The play was initially performed at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, in 1986.

[64] *Too* was first performed at the Bolton Octagon on 23 August 1989.

said Neil Dudgeon, who appeared in the original production of *Road* in 1984. (Love 2017). The director of *Road's* recent revival at The Royal Court (2017), Huddersfield-born John Tiffany, highlights the dignity the play gives to the Northern dialect: "You grow up thinking you've got an accent great for comedy! But not necessarily intelligence or lyricism or poetry – and that's still the case." (Williams 2017) Cartwright uses 'poetry as speech' because it dramatizes vividly and poignantly his characters' wish for something beyond themselves, a life less dull and ordinary; 'Spray me wi' somethin' sweet, spray me away', 'I want my life to be all shine'id up'. (Road, 83)

I was enraptured too by the darkly intoxicating world of playwright Philip Ridley, where for Ridley language is the thing that makes the difference between magic and mundane in theatre: 'I really stripped everything back so it's a play where two actors sit at either end of a bare stage and that's it. It's pared-down and rests on words and performance and when that really works I think it's a thrilling thing.' (Hodgson 2013). Probably my most vivid and intense night at the theatre was watching Ridley's controversial *Mercury Fur*,[65] which prompted regular walkouts from shocked and outraged audience members. *Mercury Fur* argued with feriocious conviction that theatre is the natural home for a heightened style of language and imaginative power, and the fact that words still had the power to shock only seemed to me prove Ridley's point.

I marveled at Tony Harrison's verse play *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*[66] at the National Theatre, his use of verse and rhythm to create a uniquely

[65] Menier Chocolate Factory, March 2005. The play became a theatrical cause célèbre when it premiered, with at least 10 walkouts reported each night of the show's original run, and even Ridley's publishers of ten years, Faber and Faber, refusing to publish the text.
[66] *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus'* had a unique one-performance world premiere in the ancient stadium of Delphi in 1988. During 1989 it was performed at the National Theatre, London.

theatrical voice that exploited the very essence of theatre itself: its reliance on an audience's imagination. What these singular, bold, theatrical voices have in common is democratizing the poetic and lyrical and putting it in the voices of characters you'd perhaps least expect to hear it from. Like Cartwright, Harrison was determined to find 'poetry in the vernacular': 'I tried to reclaim great poetry in northern English. It was written in an alliterative style, for being outside in the street, in places like Leeds market, where I worked.' (Clavane 2013)

Clog-dancing Satyrs with gargantuan erect phalluses, poverty-stricken inhabitants in a derelict road in Lancashire, gangs of youths in a post-apocalyptic East End, not somewhere perhaps where you would expect to find lyrical expression, but these marginalized and frustrated voices expressed themselves in a shockingly unpredictable and unconventional way: they were being articulate, expressive, creative. They wanted to be heard.

In his highly personal and comprehensive survey of contemporary drama, *The Full Room*, Dominic Dromgoole inadverdently links these four very disparate and distinctive playwrights together, when he praises Berkoff's 'lingustic richness' (26), describes Cartwright as 'The King of the wordsmiths' (49), Harrison as a 'vernacular virtuoso' (134) and writes about Ridley's *Pitchfork Disney*: 'It is purely theatrical[...]setting off on flights of surrealist fancy that are impossible in any other medium' (241). What emerges from these brief descriptions is a unifying or common aesthetic, a style of theatre making I was striving for in my own work: a style (or even ideology perhaps?) that could be described as theatrical in the sense the work eschews spectacle and design, and revels instead in lingustic boldness and freedom, using sometimes just a bare stage, an empty space, to ingite an audience's

imagination. These plays argue for using theatre as a 'vehicle for the imagination' (Dromgoole, 241), their self-evident disinterest in technology, effects or the minutiae of social realism positioning their work as an experience which could not be done in any other medium and still retain its maximum imaginative power. Their natural home is the theatre. Theatre scholar David Lane writes about Cartwright's *Road*, 'The writing insists upon the application of an audience's imagination in the theatre space if it is to achieve its aims' (Lane, 148). This was the kind of play I was seeking to write. Dispensing with scenic elements (and later even with lighting in the Newham Plays), and relying instead on the audience's willingness to engage imaginatively, it would valorize lingustic richness and actors' storytelling prowess to create an experience designed to exploit what makes live theatre different from TV or film.

The burgeoning rave culture and free party scene[67] of the 1990s was spreading across the UK and had already taken hold of me, and as I delved deeper into the scene, I became fascinated with the subculture's use of tribal rhythms and beats, in particular house music's popular four-to-the floor rhythms.[68] In Simon Reynolds'[69] seminal account of rave culture, *Energy Flash*, it is this fierce, pulsating tribal beat that gives house music its power: 'The stomping four-to-the-floor kick-drum would become the defining mark of house music.' (Reynolds 1998, 18) Punchy, energetic, rhythmic dialogue was

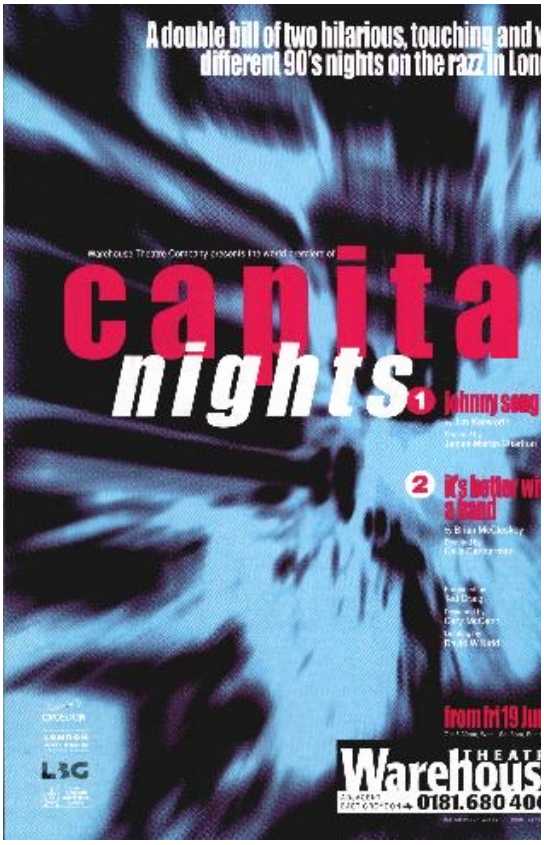
[67] 'Scott Oliver, "Celebrating the enduring legacy of '90s rave culture," 17 July 2017, accessed 23 November, 2018, 'While the history of free parties – get rig, find site, play music, cavort, clean up, disappear – extends back to the countercultural flowering of the First Summer of Love, their modern incarnation in the UK can be pegged to the 1987 arrival of ecstasy – first synthesized by Alexander Shulgin (for therapeutic purposes) in the late 1970s.' http://www.huckmagazine.com/art-and-culture/music-2/rave-on/

[68] Four-on-the-floor (or four-to-the-floor) is a rhythm pattern used in disco and electronic dance music. It is a steady, uniformly accented beat in 4/4 time in which the bass drum is hit on every beat (1, 2, 3, 4) in common time.

[69] English music journalist, critic, and author.

going to be my kick-drum, my beat, my floor-to-the-floor.

Inspired by the syncopated rhythms of Berkoff's verse plays, and by house and techno's propulsive and metronomic beats, I was determined to write in a way in which words were transmogrified into beats and rhythms, and where an audience might get caught up viscerally in a midnight journey through London's streets, pubs, clubs and bars. As an avid clubber/raver and restless, inveterate night-walker in my early 30s, I freely conversed with a heady mix of often odd, eccentric and colorful characters, a fraternity of 'night-animals', bound together only by their hatred of the light/day, (ravers, partygoers, travelling people, vagrants, street poets, addicts) each with their own distinctive and engaging speech patterns, and it was in this maelstrom of expressive voices, that I found 'poetry in the vernacular'.



Johnny Song (1998)

Gob(1999)

Following a successful showcase of my first play, *Johnny Song*[70], at Warehouse Theatre's International Playwriting Festival in 1997, the theatre commissioned the play and *Johnny Song* received a full production at the theatre the following year. The play dramatized the exploits of down-at-heel street poets Johnny Song and Drummer Boy, two self-styled 'Sonneteers of the Street' as they set out on a journey through a hectic Saturday night. Everyone they encounter hears Drummer Boy's beats and the words of Johnny Song, as the two sonneteers distribute their poetic gifts to the people of the capital.

I made my two main characters street poets,[71] who declaimed their

[70] *Johnny Song* was first performed at Theatre Warehouse Croydon on 19 August 1998, as part of a double bill entitled *Capital Nights*.

[71] Both Johnny Song and The Liberator from *Gob* were in my mind direct descendants of the orginal "punk poets" of the late 1970s, John Cooper Clarke and Attila the Stockbroker.

urban sonnets on London's streets with verve and swagger, so I could experiment with rhythm and melody, and,to celebrate the power of words to evoke and elicit worlds in the imagination. I set out my stall early in the play, the very first lines to be precise:

> **Johnny Song** I've heard it said the city's on fire tonight:
> Burning, burning in red and orange flame.
> The flame licks its way across the river and sends its roar down every street with a message of blood and pain.
> And the message is this:
> Tonight's London's in darkness.
>
> (p.1)

The aim was to envelop the audience in a heady, visceral trip through London's nightlife, as if they were personally caught up in Johnny and Drummer Boy's quest to bring poetry to the jaded, the unhappy and the lost on London's streets. I wanted the audience to be present, in the centre of London, following Johnny and Drummer Boy as they 'darted down Shaftesbury Avenue', 'ducked and dived down Charing Cross Road', and 'bobbed and weaved down Tottenham Court Road'.

The use of rhythm and rhyme in the way the protagonists expressed themselves gave the language a dynamism and propulsion that mirrored the frantic and febrile atmosphere of big cities at night, especially at the weekend, with its long, sad litany of pub fights, drunken violence and drunken, drugged-up carousers. This rhythmic effect was further enhanced by the use of short, clipped, staccato verbal exchanges between Johnny and Drummer Boy, as when the 'Two Sonneteers' first break the 'fourth wall' and 'introduce themselves' to the audience:

> **Johnny Song** Me an' 'him. Partners in Rhyme.
>
> **Drummer Boy** Yeah, that's us.

Johnny Song The Two Sonneteers.

Drummer Boy The Lennon 'n' McCartney of London Town.

Johnny Song The Jesse James an' Billy the Kid of street poets.

Drummer Boy Fastest guns in town.

(p.2)

Additionally, the use of a bongo drum by the actor playing Drummer Boy to accompany Johnny's poetry with beats gave some of the poetic speeches in the play a tribal and incantatory feel, and ramped up the energy of the piece, so the effect was something more akin to the atmosphere of a rave or poetry slam:

Johnny Song O, City of London, mad, up for it, City of London;
Guide me through your twisting alleyways,
Winding streets, roaring traffic and
Mighty, pumping Clubs, Pubs and Bars.
When I am lost, falling down, and starless
In the dark, let me hear a beat calling me;
Let me hear a solid beat like the cavalry,
And, yeah, like the movies, let 'em arrive
In the nick of time.

Drum roll off. Enter **Drummer Boy** *banging drum.*

(p.2)

Gob[72] was like an older brother to *Johnny Song*; wised up, more focused, venomous; both sprung from the same artistic and creative impulses, especially in regard to my interest in rhythm/beats, and use of a verse/prose hybrid as a theatrical and dynamic language for the stage.

Gob scabrously imagined a scenario where that bastion of culture and good taste, London's South Bank Centre, was invaded mid-performance by the arrival of The Liberator and Hard Man Les, two mighty verbal warriors, intent on proving themselves the equal of any of London's smooth and

[72] First performed at The King's Head, Islington 16 March 1999.

golden-tongued poets. What begins as a call for revolution and social upheaval, ends in a quiet, unexpected realization that personal liberation is perhaps more achievable than badly organized attempts to overthrow the bourgeois on a Saturday night in the West End.

I was immersed in rave/club culture and fascinated by its pioneering styles of electronic, futuristic music, chiefly house and techno, and these obsessions fed into the writing of *Gob*, especially with regard to integrating beats and music within a conventional, three-act structure narrative model of writing. Rave was founded on groundbreaking electronica and innovative DJs, such Ron Hardy[73], DJ Pierre[74], Richie Hawtin[75]; Pied Pipers of the dance floor, who were able to take their followers on a mind-bending and thrilling aural ride through the night and into the early hours of morning.

The aim was to create a mercurial, changeable atmosphere/ ambience, one-minute exciting, thrilling, exhilarating, as when the 'Gob Warriors' charge through the streets of London amassing an army of London's dispossessed to the accompaniment of a pounding techno beat:

> **The Liberator** THUD! BOOM! CRASH! Off we thunder, steaming into oncoming traffic, bolting over the roofs of cars, knocking bewildered tourists to the ground, our ranks ever swelling with new, enthusiastic recruits as the underbelly of the city gets a whiff of summin' in the air and joins us with open arms.
>
> (p.25)

…or hushed, soft, quiet, as when a dreamy, ambient piece of music is used to create atmosphere for The Liberator's paean to speaking from the heart:

> I say this:
> Poetry, comrades, is on everybody's lips.
> Try it yourself,

[73] Chicago DJ and producer of early house music.
[74] American DJ and performer of house music.
[75] Canadian electronic musician and DJ and three-time DJ Awards winner.

Surprise yourself,
Amaze yourself,
But best of all, liberate yourself.
Go on, forge pearls from yours, his or her lips,
Sprinkle diamonds off your tongue,
Sweet and silver-coated,
Tender like first love,
Or a stay-with-you-forever dream.

(p.37)

As with *Johnny Song*, the use of heightened language[76] was at the forefront of the piece, a hybrid that fused the demotic with the lyrical, the profane with the poetic, where the play's main characters weave in and out of a 'mash-up' of poetic images and slang, and enjoy playing a game of verbal fireworks with each other:

The Liberator Hard Man Les!

Hard Man Les That's me!

The Liberator You alright?

Hard Man Les Sweet as the morning sun when it glides across your face on a glorious Spring day. What about you?

The Liberator Shit.

Hard Man Les Not so good, then?

The Liberator Well spotted.

(p.2)

Gob was a 'hit', both critically and commercially. It was *Time Out* and *What's On* Critics Choice and received positive reviews in *The Observer* and *The Guardian*. In a radical and subversive departure from his boyband

[76] By 'heightened language', I mean here as a purposeful reaction against the centrality of social realism and naturalism in new writing. Aleks Sierz identifies the preponderant influence of this style when writing about Philip Ridley, 'In the context of new writing, where the hegemonic style is that of social realism and naturalism, Ridley's work was innovative because it opposed this aesthetic' (In *Modern British Playwriting*, 111). Berkoff, Cartwright, Harrison, and Ridley, it could be fairly said, all use a variation of 'heightened language' in their plays.

image, former Take That star Jason Orange, played the lead role of a 'homeless techno revolutionary in crustie combats and a grubby Che Guevara T-shirt', causing an unholy co-mingling of over-excited Take That fans and serious theatre-goers in the intimate space of The King's Head Theatre in Islington.

Impassioned idealists and dreamers like *Johnny Song* and *Gob's* The Liberator were the prototypes and templates of the visionaries and leaders in the Newham Plays, who inspire, provoke and agitate for change in society. These 'Sonneteers of the Streets' and 'Gob Warriors' would eventually morph into *A Splotch of Red's* more hard-nosed, morally enraged Keir Hardie in the fight of his life to become Britain's first socialist MP, or *Alice in Canning Town's* sassy, unfazed and clear-sighted Alice overcoming prejudice and bigotry so that everyone can come together and party in harmony in an inclusive East End wonderland.

There was to be a gap of thirteen years until I wrote *When Chaplin Met Gandhi*, the first in the series of Newham Plays. Needing a regular income to pay off mounting debts, I signed up with temporary recruitment agencies and took a short-term contract with Newham Council as a member of the Core Administrative Team for Social Services Department. When the contract came to an end, reluctant to part with the benefits of a regular salary, I applied for a permanent position with the Council, and for the next decade I would work in an administrative capacity for Learning Disabilities, School Management, Customer Relations Team, Culture and Adult, Community and Leisure. It was a relatively undemanding job and one that would allow me the time and energy to continue to write plays in my spare time.

But it was the heightened language/style and rhythmic experiments of

Johnny Song and *Gob,* that laid the foundations for a style of writing that I returned to in the Newham Plays series, and with it a renewal of interest in exploring themes of social change and revolution.

Chapter 4

Analysis and Contextualization of Newham Plays

Exit the Proscenium Arch: *When Chaplin Met Gandhi (2012), A Splotch of Red: Keir Hardie in West Ham (2016)*

When Chaplin Met Gandhi (2012), Kingsley Hall

When Chaplin Met Gandhi was the first of my collaborations between professional theatre artists and East London secondary state schools, involving a professional director, designer and actors, working alongside drama students from schools in Tower Hamlets and Newham. Since 2009, I had been working on a freelance basis with Theatre Venture, a community theatre organization based in Newham, who had produced selected scenes from *Gob* and an early draft/version of *When Chaplin Met Gandhi* at the LIFT Festival in Canning Town in 2010, but in 2011 their arts funding from the London Borough of Newham was abruptly withdrawn. Although Theatre

Venture protested vigorously against the cuts in their funding and drew support from the local community about the importance of its theatre programmes in schools, youth clubs and community centres, the company folded, and it meant a proposed full production of *When Chaplin Met Gandhi* was left without funding.

Theatre Venture were in part funded by The Royal Docks Trust (London), a charity providing community benefits to the Docklands part of Newham, whose Trustees already knew my work as a local playwright; therefore when Theatre Venture closed, I applied for Main Programme Funding from the RDT's Grants Programme in an effort to salvage the production of Chaplin/Gandhi. Because I had been closely involved in Theatre Venture's work with school pupils and young people from the local area, the RDT priority area of service I was applying to provide was Children and Young People. My application was successful, and it was the start of a long-term relationship with the Royal Docks Trust, who have awarded both Main Programme and Minor Grant funding to all four Newham-based plays.

But the RDT's grant still did not cover all the costs of a full production. An altogether surprising and unforeseen source finally enabled the production to go ahead at Kingsley Hall. A freelance photographer colleague who documented my creative writing projects in schools and the community, and provided editorial and corporate photography for the Indian multinational steel-making company, Tata Steel, attracted their interest in the play, and a sponsorship deal was secured from them. This was entirely fitting as Gandhi received considerable support from Sir Ratan Tata, younger son of Jamshetji Tata, founder of Tata Sons, to assist him in his non-cooperation movement in the fight for the rights of the Indians in South Africa:

> 'In all humility I may say that I have come here also as a friend of the capitalists - a friend of the Tatas. And here it would be ungrateful on my part, if I do not give you a little anecdote about how my connection with the Tatas began. In South Africa when I was struggling along with the Indians in the attempt to retain our self-respect and to vindicate our status it was Sir Ratan Tata who first came forward with assistance.' [77]

When Chaplin Met Gandhi was the first time I utilized a 'mixed economy' cast, where professional actors were supplemented and supported by young people playing a range of smaller roles. From the outset, dedication and reliability is something my creative collaborators and I have insisted on when casting local young performers. An Assistant Director is employed on each show with a special responsibility for rehearsing and directing the young performers. DBS-checked Chaperones, acting *in loco parentis*, are recruited to ensure the safeguarding of children/young people.

The insistence on professionalism and integrity among the young people paid off on two levels. Firstly, the theatre reviews praised the talents of the young people in the play, the British Theatre Guide commending director Matthew Xia for 'an excellent job in getting committed performances from his young supporting cast drawn from local young people' (Loxton 2012). Yin&Yang described the ensemble of young people as 'brilliant and working fantastically together to portray the forever moving, energetic atmosphere of Kingsley Hall and created a strong sense of community among the residents.'[78]

Secondly, the Pupil Evaluation Forms the young people completed at

[77] Extract from Mahatma Gandhi's speech delivered at Jamshedpur on August 8, 1925. Gandhi, Essential Writings, 11.

[78] Like *thepublicreviews* write-up of *Revolution Farm*, this is a reference to an online review at the time, which was added to our *When Chaplin Met Gandhi* Press Pack, but has since been lost/deleted. However, I thought the comment was relevant as it captured some of the spirit of the piece, and so have included it. The full review can be accessed/read in *When Chaplin Met Gandhi* Press Pack in appendices.

the end of the performances at Kingsley Hall seemed to confirm that the professionalism of the show was something they benefitted from. Sprinkled throughout their responses are comments like 'a challenge in life is always good', 'the teamwork was amazing', 'most useful thing was how to work with a team of new people to present something great', 'I feel like one big family', 'I learnt about having a motive, once you know what you are going on stage for you will understand your character more', 'teamwork is harder than it seems'. It was to be a model of theatre making in the community that I returned to in successive plays, developing and refining the collaboration between professionals and local young talent with each new show.

But a 'mixed economy' approach to casting wasn't the only new experience for my theatre practice. *Chaplin/Gandhi* was the first play of mine performed outside of a conventional theatre building, and it heralded the beginning of a commitment to exploring local sites/space as alternative performance auditoria, and working towards a theatre practice informed by local history and culture and community spaces.

The practice of using public urban spaces as an alternative to mainstream or conventional theatre auditoria, and as a tool for widening access to the arts, has chimed with the resurgence and increasing popularity of site-specific and immersive theatre. Companies such as Punchdrunk, dreamspeakthink, Dante or Die, Secret Cinema, and LIFT Festival have pioneered, and indeed popularised, new ways of utilizing non-conventional theatre spaces, and the use of non-theatre environments has enjoyed something of a renaissance in the UK recently. The attraction of this kind of theatre has been that it offers audiences a model of live theatre that not only provides a radically different experience to TV, film or radio, but a very

different experience to that of conventional/mainstream theatre itself. Punchdrunk's founder and Artistic Director Felix Barrett is adamant about the distinct virtues of immersive performance:

> When an audience goes into a regular theatre, they know what they're getting – seats, a programme, ice cream, a stage, two halves – and as a result they slump, switching off three quarters of their brains. I wanted to create productions where the audience is physically present, so that they are driven by a base, gut feeling and making instinctive decisions. (Kelly 2015)

The standard label for the kind of theatre I was starting to make with *Chaplin/Gandhi* is site-specific, or site-responsive, but I had little idea at the time just how to define it. Initially, it wasn't exactly clear what this kind of theatre entailed:

> site-specific theatre' [is] a term already cloudy with imprecision. It sort of meant 'theatrical things taking place in unusual, often unoccupied locations with the audience up on their feet, playing a participatory role', but didn't always involve a cast-iron commitment to the space's ambience or history. (Cavendish 2013)

It is a term that has appeared to evade scholars and practitioners too. In his study of Site-Specific Performance, Brith Gof[79] co-founder and site-specific pioneer Mike Pearson writes, 'Although the search for a practicable, encompassing definition of site-specific performance has long claimed scholarly attention, it remains slippery.'[80] That said, Patrice Pavis offers the most convincing definition for me:

> This term refers to a staging and performance conceived on the basis of a place in the real world (ergo, outside the established theatre). A large part of the work has to do

[79] Founded in 1981 by Mike Pearson and Lis Hughes Jones, theatre company Brith Gof pioneered the development of large-scale, site-specific performance events in Wales.

[80] Perhaps the most straightforward description is given by Andrew Haydon in a chapter on 'Theatre in the 2000s' in *Modern British Playwriting: 2000-2009*: 'site-specific theatre is theatre which has been, well, specifically made for a specific site (be it for reasons of the site's particular interest or resonances, its unique architecture or layout), site-sympathetic theatre is similar, except it could theoretically be moved to a different site without significant damage to its integrity.' (Rebellato 2013, 54)

> with researching a place, often an unusual one that is imbued with history or permeated with atmosphere: an airplane hangar, unused factory, city neighborhood, house or apartment. (Pavis, 1988, pp. 337-8)

Because of Kingsley Hall's extraordinary rich cultural legacy[81], it is undoubtedly 'imbued with history or permeated with atmosphere', and it was this aura that gave the audience a sense of watching a special piece of East London history being reenacted. But I think there is a more accurate and germane term for the work I was starting to make. In her survey of site-specific performance in Britain, Fiona Wilkie identifies several types of site-specific theatre: *site-sympathetic* (an existing performance text physicalized in a selected site); *site-generic* (performance generated for a series of like sites); *site-specific* (performance specifically generated from/for one selected site). (Wilkie 2003, 150). I am not fully convinced, however, that these categories accurately and fully describe my theatre practice in Newham. I propose the term *site-local*, as a more appropriate definition of how I embed performance in the physical locale of the community. I define site-local as live performance produced for a specific non-theatre location in the local community, in which the history, ambience or character of the site engages with and informs the localization of the play's themes and subject matter to offer audiences a double-layering effect in the performance space, e.g., Orwell's themes of greed and exploitation contemporized by *Revolution Farm's* setting of an inner-cty farm in one of the poorer parts of the UK. Or *Alice in Canning Town's* inclusive adventure playground setting mirroring the play's themes of multiculturalism and inclusivity, in a borough noted for its

[81] As well as the place Gandhi lived and worked at for three months in 1931, Kingsley Hall became home to one of the most radical experiments in psychology of the time. In 1965, the building was used by counterculture anti-psychiatrist R.D. Laing as an alternative community for treating people affected by mental health crisis.

commiment to building community cohesion and promoting diversity. Site-local is site-specific in the sense that the non-tradtional performance space is selected on the basis of the fit or match it offers the creative material, but seeks too to underpin this congruence between site and material with a use of local or community identity to inform the final performance. Evidence of its pivotal role in the Newham Plays lie perhaps in reviews of the shows which identified it as a unique feature, e.g. 'Newham is an area not often synonymous with the arts but it was an inspired place to perform a play that considers the themes of power and corruption in society.' (everthing theatre) 'Set in a sprawling inclusive adventure playground in London's East End [...]the audience enters into a twisting, towering playground that lends itself perfectly to a site-responsive adaptation of Carroll's classic.' (The Upcoming)

The performance environment for shows like *Chaplin/Gandhi*, (Kingsley Hall), were deliberately selected on the basis of the connection, or 'fit', they offered to the play's roots in East London's history, culture and people. And it is this notion of a natural or local fit that Brith Gof's Cliff McLucas has described as one of the relationships that may be at work in site-specific performance: 'techniques of congruence (hand in glove relationship between event and site)' (Brith Gof Archive 1995.) It was this 'hand in glove' pairing that gave *Chaplin/Gandhi* an edge over a conventional staging of the play, and fuelled my burgeoning interest in utilizing local environment and place as a starting point to put localism at the heart of my creative practice.[82]

[82] Eastlea Community School had the benefit of being situated only a few minutes from where Chaplin and Gandhi's meeting took place. This could be viewed as perhaps another kind of 'hand in glove' congruence that characterized the play's symbiosis of history and place.

When Chaplin Met Gandhi was performed in the Hall where Gandhi lived and met with the community of Bow, because I instinctively felt the venue's historical aura would add an authenticity and ambience to the play's dramatization of real historical events, which might be beyond the reach of a conventional theatre. To have the Kingsley Hall audiences know that some of the events in the play took place in the actual space they were sitting in was an attractive idea. The publicreviews' theatre critic Suman Buchar recognized this mutuality of subject matter and site when he wrote about the production: 'Performed in Kingsley Hall, the place where Gandhi stayed for 12 weeks during his trip to London for the Second Round Table Conference in 1931 – the aura of history surrounds the place and the audience are transposed back in time'. (Buchar 2012)

As one example of 'transposing the audience back in time', the play recreates the time when Gandhi invited the children of Bow to the Hall to meet him, and gives them an impromptu lesson in his philosophy of peace and non-violence, by persuading the boys to teach each other football rather than fight among themselves:

> **Gandhi.** Then why don't you teach him?
>
> *The boy is nonplussed at this.*
>
> I was very bad at spinning cloth at first. O my wife would despair. She'd curse and shout at me and I became nervous and made many mistakes. But I asked her to show me and to take her time with me and I promised I would learn. She was very patient, and watched me day and night, and corrected all my mistakes, now we do not argue at all and we are more in love than ever. What does that tell you?
>
> **Rose.** *(cheekily)* Mrs Gandhi's a very patient lady.
>
> **Gandhi.** Yes - and Mr and Mrs Gandhi do not want to break friends because we like each other very much, and it is sad to lose a friend isn't it?
>
> **ALL.** YES!!!
>
> **Gandhi.** So what should we do?

ALL. MAKE FRIENDS!!!

Gandhi. Why should we be friends?

Again, the children are unsure of what their response should be, and **Gandhi** *fills in for them.*

Because we are all one family.

(p.31-32)

There is of course no reason why this scene should not work just as effectively in a conventional theatre auditorium, it's an uncomplicated scene and its strength lies in Gandhi's wily, but clever manipulation of the children to raise consciousness of non-violent protest. The key thing here is audience awareness or consciousness of space and local history. The play's director, Matthew Xia, talks of a 'reverence for space', when exploring what was unique about performing *When Chaplin Met Gandhi* at Kingsley Hall:

> I think the dynamic between audience and performance was one of reverence for space, and the happenings we were replicating and exploring through theatre. The audience knew that Gandhi had stood and sat and spoke to children in that very room. They knew that Muriel had stood there and spoken to Gandhi in a fashion akin to our presentation. I think presenting the work in the location that had actually held these events ultimately helped to reduce the artifice of the theatrical event. At moments it was a fictionalised re-enactment. (Matthew Xia, email message to author, October 4, 2017).

To make the audience aware of Kingsley Hall's rich historical background and significance, a summary of Gandhi's connection to the area and Hall, and a potted history of his time in Bow, East London, was included in the theatre programme. When purchasing tickets, theatre goers were encouraged to arrive early to visit the current exhibitions at the Hall and thereby learn more about its history before going on to watch the show. The director's decision to open the play by having Muriel Lester welcome the audience who were gathered in the Hall's Garden area, and usher them into

the Hall, while ad-libbing information about the Hall and its illustrious 'guest' Gandhi, reinforced the sense of a 'fictionalized reenactment' of true events.

> For the actors I think there was a similar degree of reverence for the space and the characters they were inhabiting. These are real people who existed in this real space. I struggle to think of an event like it whereby real historical characters are presented in the spaces they existed in - which supports an audience in the suspension of disbelief. (Xia 2017)

It was not only a 'reverence for the space' the actors felt; they felt a sense of responsibility and commitment to playing 'real people' too, a phenomenon Mary Luckhurst calls 'ethical stress'. She argues that 'specific forms of ethical stress are manifested by actors in relation to their representation of real people, as opposed to their representation of fictional characters'. (2010, 135) She cites the example of Ian McKellen, who wrote to John Profumo about his intention to play him in the film *Scandal* (1984), believing that 'One major difference with playing a real person is the responsibility you feel towards the individual. You want to do the right thing by them.' (ibid, 137) This sense of responsibility, Luckhurst argues, is significantly greater 'if the subject has/had an iconic or celebrated status.' (ibid)

Though the cast understood and accepted that my play was a 'fictional reenactment' of the meeting between Chaplin and Gandhi, there was a desire to do 'the right thing' by them. Divian Ladwa, who played Gandhi at Kingsley Hall, was physically appropriate, being Asian, and of a slight build, but more crucially perhaps, agreed to the director's request that he shave his head for the part. During rehearsals, Divian told me he had prepared conscientiously for the role, watching YouTube clips of Gandhi, learning body language and perfecting the British Indian accent. Our Chaplin, Mark Oosterveen, researched his part no less assiduously, noting how

Chaplin's accent could veer effortlessly between his native cockney and a 'posh', or RP accent.

But to return to the origins of the play's bizarre encounter, what brought Charlie Chaplin and Mahatma Gandhi together for a friendly meeting in the East End in 1931? In 2009, whilst working as a Support Officer at Newham Council, a press release from the Council's Communications Department caught my eye. The headline read: WHEN GANDHI MET CHARLIE CHAPLIN – IN NEWHAM EAST LONDON. It told of the bizarre, but true story of when Charlie Chaplin met Gandhi in Canning Town in 1931.

It was an astonishing piece of East London history. And it seemed few people knew about the meeting. It was a hidden story about Newham's history that deserved wider recognition, if only to shed light on the reasons behind why such an unusual encounter took place. Writer and BBC's former South Asia correspondent Sam Miller believes Gandhi's years in London have been skated over, or deliberately ignored.

> They are entirely missing from the celluloid, Richard Attenborough version of his life, a film that sadly seems to provide the modern world with its canonical depiction of the Mahatma. Some of his hagiographers seem a little uncomfortable with Gandhi's antics in London, that he showed so little interest in Indian nationalism, or in politics in general – and that he took dancing and violin lessons, that he professed a desire to be 'an English gentleman', that he flirted with young women. (Miller 2015)

During the course of my research about the meeting between Chaplin and Gandhi, I visited Kingsley Hall, an East End community centre in Bow, where Gandhi stayed and lived for twelve weeks in 1931. One look at the centre's main hall convinced me the play should be performed at Kingsley Hall, in the very space where Gandhi entertained and educated local children about his philosophy of non-violence. My reasoning was that

knowledge of the 'ghosts' of Gandhi and his hostess Muriel Lester in the hall would bring an atmosphere, or sense of occasion, to the spectator experience that would be beyond the reach of a conventional theatre space/building.

David Baker, Kingsley Hall's long-serving and dedicated Centre Manager, gave me a guided tour of the building, which included a memorable moment stepping into Gandhi's 'cell' up on the roof of the building, where the Indian leader ate, slept and prayed for three months in 1931, and is still preserved today. The Gandhi Foundation has its headquarters at Kingsley Hall, which includes a Peace Library of books and papers dedicated to the work and philosophy of Gandhi. David helpfully singled out a book for me, *Entertaining Gandhi* (1932), by Muriel Lester, a detailed and illuminating account of Gandhi's stay at the Hall by his friend and hostess.

Gandhi's 'antics in London' found their way into the early drafts of the play immediately. For example, in order to fully immerse himself in the community of Bow, Lester recounts Gandhi's habit of exploring the streets early in the morning and knocking on doors and asking the women if he might look around: 'In and out of the houses he went, on both sides of the street. The women were inordinately proud. They had no idea he was coming; some were at their ironing, some cleaning, but all were ready to display every corner of their little domain for him to inspect, to ask about and to admire'. (Lester 1932, 69) Or the day the local children were invited into Kingsley Hall to meet Gandhi and received an impromptu lesson in the philosophy of non-violence from the Mahatma: 'All their attention was riveted on the white-clad figure with the kindly brown eyes, seated among them, and eagerly they followed his arguments "When a boy hits you, what do you

do? What happens then? Is there a better way?"'(Lester 1932, 91)

The early drafts of the play featured plenty of factual material from Lester's book, notably, that the meeting between the two men nearly didn't happen at all. On receiving a telegram from Chaplin who was in London for the premier of his new film, *City Lights* (1931) and wanted to meet the Indian leader, Gandhi had no idea who Chaplin was and his secretaries merely explained that 'he's only a buffoon, there is no point in going to meet him'. (Lester 79) However, Lester intervened and insisted he meet him: 'Charlie Chaplin! He's the world's hero. You simply must meet him'. (ibid 79)

Other sources I consulted for information about the meeting included the British press reports of the time[83], but as it was a closed meeting and no one else was present, the papers were largely only able to speculate what was discussed between the two men. It was clear though from these reports that there may have been fundamental disagreements: 'Gandhi and Charles Chaplin met at the house of an East London doctor and talked for a long time concerning the use of machinery in India, to which Gandhi was opposed. Chaplin argued that the heritage of mankind was to make work easier and the world brighter' (Daily Express, 23 Sep 1931). Chaplin's autobiography[84] mentions the meeting only in passing, allotting two pages to it, merely revealing that they disagreed about the use of machinery, and that he felt awkward when Gandhi invited him to watch him and his entourage sit cross-legged on the floor and pray. Gandhi's autobiography[85] does not mention the meeting with Chaplin at all.

But it seemed to me that I was stockpiling an abundance of historical

[83] *The Daily Express* (23 September 1931) reported the meeting.
[84] Chaplin, Charlie, *My Autobiography.* (London: Penguin, 2003).
[85] Gandhi M.K. *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. (London: Penguin, 2001).

detail in preparation for the writing of the play, and while I knew these 'facts' would be interesting from a historical perspective for an audience, if merely strung together and presented faithfully and literally on stage, the play might lack dramatic interest. In Stephen Jeffreys' highly practical guide to playwriting, he warns of the dangers of an over-emphasis on the rational, organizational side of thinking in the writing of plays: '…a play that is beautifully organized but has no driving metaphor, no inner life, will be received by audiences as being very efficient but very dead'. (Jeffreys 2019, 3)

What was absent from early drafts was an interpretive or imaginative view of the encounter between these two icons of the Twentieth Century. 'The great challenge facing the storyteller and the historian alike is to get inside people's heads' (Frayn 1998, 99) writes Michael Frayn in the postscript to his acclaimed play, *Copenhagen*.[86] It is a play with a similarly speculative or interpretive approach to history, based on an event that occurred in Copenhagen in 1941, a meeting between the physicists Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg. 'The central event in it is a real one. Heisenberg did go to Copenhagen in 1941, and there was a meeting with Bohr...The question of what they actually said to each other has been even more disputed, and where there's ambiguity in the play about what happened, it's because there is in the recollection of the participants'. (ibid, 97)

Despite extensive research undertaken by Frayn, he believes what was said and happened at the meeting is ultimately unknowable and the writer's

[86] It premiered in London in 1998 at the National Theatre, running for more than 300 performances and opened on Broadway at the Royale Theatre on 2000 and ran for 326 performances. It won the Tony Award for Best Play.

job is to conjecture, interpret, imagine what was going on 'inside people's heads': '…to stand where they stood and see the world as they saw it, to make some informed estimate of their motives and intentions – and this is precisely where recorded and recordable history cannot reach. Even when all the external evidence has been mastered, the only way into the protagonists' head is through the imagination.' (ibid, 99)

The solution to bringing the play 'alive', and getting inside Chaplin and Gandhi's heads, was to be found in the fact that no one else was present at the meeting, which I rather brazenly concluded, gave me license to 'reimagine' events and 're-present' whatever I liked on stage. However unlikely, unrealistic, or even fantastical my interpretation, ultimately nobody knows the 'truth' of what went on behind the closed doors of Dr Katial's[87] house at Beckton Road.

American crime fiction writer James Ellroy bluntly dismisses an over-reverential approach to historical accuracy when it comes to writing fiction:

> The idea of absolute factual fidelity interests me not a whit. We know the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on Dec 7th 1941. When I did the research before *Perfida*, the book that precedes *The Storm*, I saw that the early days of the grave injustice of Japanese internment were quite dicily described in the newspapers, the information was ambiguous. That was nothing but good for me, it gave me latitude to fictionalize. (iplayer 2019)

Dramatically speaking, it was fortunate for me that Gandhi and Chaplin's meeting was private, behind closed doors; it felt like I had permission to 'fictionalize'. I could depart from the story's historical record in

[87] Originally from the Punjab, Chuni Lal Katial came to London in 1929 and ran a medical practice in Canning Town. A friend of Gandhi, he facilitated the meeting between the two men at his surgery. Katial later became the UK's first South Asian mayor in 1938 when he was elected Mayor of Finsbury.

order to propound an argument or theory about the impact of the meeting on the two men. In a meeting early on in the writing process with the play's director, Matthew Xia, we had watched the famous impassioned speech against tyranny from Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940), and remarked how similar it felt to Gandhi's teaching and philosophy. I was starting to think of the play in terms of an imaginative and empathetic journey between these two men, not merely a historical record of their encounter.

'For the purposes of story', writes Aristotle in *Poetics*, 'a convincing impossibility is preferable to an unconvincing possibility'(Aristotle Book XXIV). The exhortation to privilege an imaginative approach to storytelling, over a more realistic, but ultimately duller or safer method, became a mantra for the speculative nature of *Chaplin/Gandhi's* writing process.

I knew the facts of the meeting well: it took place 22nd September 1931, in Beckton Road, Canning Town, East London. The meeting was arranged by the Indian physician Dr Katial, a doctor friend of Gandhi's. Hundreds of East Enders turned out to cheer the two famous men. The meeting lasted about 45 minutes. It was a closed meeting, no one else was present. While Chaplin was in sympathy with India's aspirations and struggle for freedom, the two men disagreed about the value to mankind of the rise of the machine age and mass production. The meeting made the front pages of the newspapers.

But a play presenting on stage nothing more than a mere historical record, arguably nullifies the need for an audience to suspend their disbelief, and denies entry into an imaginative or emotional relationship with the story. In The Reith Lectures 2017, Hilary Mantel argues 'the dramatic reconstructions inserted into history programmes now look so earnest, we can see it's low

budget impersonation and we refuse to suspend disbelief. In the theatre we seldom refuse, as long as the event we're shown has emotional truth' (Mantel 2017).

I was seeking to excavate the 'emotional truths' that pursuing a freewheeling, but imaginative 'convincing impossibilities' approach to the meeting might reveal.

Conjecture/hypothesis No.1: Gandhi can speak cockney rhyming slang.

> **Chaplin** Yes – but I have come a long way. I hear some say I am not a Londoner anymore – I speak differently, dress differently, act differently - they say, 'O there goes millionaire Charlie Chaplin sticking 'iz nose up in the air, and look at his fancy whistle an' flute'-
>
> **Gandhi** Your suit. *(Pause)* Am I right?
>
> **Chaplin** *(taken aback)* You know cockney slang?
>
> (p.50)

Gandhi knew London well, he studied law there in 1888, and was back again in London in 1931. 'Did you know I was here in London forty years ago? – as a law student – ah such changes, such changes'. (*Chaplin/Gandhi*: 50). While training to be a barrister in London, Gandhi made a concerted effort to adopt what he viewed as 'English' customs, including taking dancing lessons. Gandhi said himself in an interview with The Daily Express: 'I know every nook and corner of London where I lived for three years'. (1942) At the very least, Gandhi would have been aware of cockney slang, and possibly picked up a phrase here and there on the streets of London, particularly since walking was his preferred method of travel, much to the frustration of his security detail, who often had trouble keeping up with his quick walking pace.

Conjecture/hypothesis two: Chaplin performs his "Little Tramp" for Gandhi.

> **Gandhi** *(Pause)* Mr Chaplin, I have an embarrassing confession to make…I have not seen your films…not one…you'll forgive me…the struggle for Indian independence is a very time-consuming business…and your British Government are so very slow…they tell me your films identify with the plight of the poor?
>
> **Chaplin** *(theatrically, with a flourish)* I present for your delectation and delight, Mr Gandhi – The Tramp, or "The Little Fellow", as I call him. My little fellow would dearly love to be a gentleman – to behave with the dignity and manners of that esteemed class of sophisticates – alas he is a vagrant, and forever getting into scrapes – the little man against the odds.
>
> **Chaplin** *launches into a demonstration of his most famous character; The Tramp, including pratfalls, etc.* **Gandhi** *is highly amused.*
>
> **Gandhi** This is indeed a poor man – the rich never fall like that – they have their servants to do it for them!
>
> **Chaplin** *(with a flourish)* For all the little downtrodden people in the world who have no voice!
>
> (p.51)

Unsurprisingly, I think, Gandhi had never seen any of Chaplin's movies, but is intrigued by his hostess Muriel Lester's comment that 'his art is rooted in the life of the working people, he understands the poor as well as you do, Bapu,[88] he honours them always in his pictures'. (Lester 1932, 79). Gandhi is curious about Chaplin and his films, especially their identification with the poor and downtrodden. Chaplin is a famous movie star, he lives to perform, entertain, show off, he's a natural born exhibitionist. But my Chaplin is also quite nervous at the meeting and doesn't think he'll be able to hold his own in a discussion with Gandhi. What better way to break the ice, he thinks, than to give Gandhi an impromptu demonstration of his most famous creation, the iconic Little Tramp? The 'emotional truth' I was seeking to illuminate here was how surprisingly similar the two men were:

> **Gandhi** *(laughing)* You are the Little Tramp – I am the Little Leader. We have something in common then, Mr Chaplin – we are on the side of the people – the many not the few – I think we will be good friends.
>
> (p.51)

[88] Bapu is a word for "father" in many Indian languages. Gandhi was officially honoured as Bapu (Father) of the Nation of India.

The third and final 'convincing impossibility' is the most significant in the play: that the meeting changed Chaplin, influencing the increasingly politicalized direction his movies were beginning to take in the 1930s. The historical records show that the meeting was brief, and while it was a cordial and polite engagement, the two famous men disagreed fundamentally on the role of modernization in society. Yet Chaplin's movies become more politically engaged and critical of modern society after 1931, e.g., including *Modern Times, The Great Dictator*.[89] The surprising thing is that *Modern Times* pits his Little Tramp character against the soulnessness of the industrial and mechanized world. The film is undeniably a satire on industrial society: yet modernization was something that Chaplin said he was all for in his conversation with Gandhi: ''After all, if machinery is used in the altruistic sense, it should help to release man from the bondage of slavery, and give him shorter hours of labour and time to improve his mind and enjoy life'. (Chaplin 2003, 336)

In *The Great Dictator*, Chaplin wrote what has been called by some the greatest speech ever written, where he speaks movingly about the need for kindness and peace in an increasingly machine-led world. It's a film, and indeed a worldview, that mirrors Gandhi's philosophy, offering nonviolent resistance to Hitler's growing aura of power. If you close your eyes while listening to the speech, you could quite easily visualize Gandhi delivering this to a rapt and entranced world audience.

And perhaps Gandhi's influence on Chaplin is starting to gain traction

[89] *Modern Times*, a 1936 American comedy film written and directed by Charlie Chaplin in which his iconic Little Tramp character struggles to survive in the modern, industrialized world. *The Great Dictator*, a 1940 American political satire comedy-drama film.

and wider exposure. In an ongoing series of reassessments of the greatest films of all time, a recent issue of film magazine *Empire* reviewed Chaplin's *Modern Times*, positioning its origins in unambiguous terms:

> The genesis for the film – about two characters who simply can't catch a break, no matter how hard they try – came from a conversation with Mahatma Gandhi, when the Indian civil rights leader explained to Chaplin his opposition to machinery. Soon a searing creed against industrialization and early consumer capitalism began forming in Chaplin's mind, couched in his trademark physical comedy. (Empire 2019)

Of course, none of the things I fictionalized in the two men's encounter may have taken place. Which is beside the point I think. In an attempt to dramatize the play's 'inner life', I was more interested in presenting a case for 'convincing impossibilities', than I was in sticking faithfully to the historical record.

A Splotch of Red: Keir Hardie in West Ham (2016), Neighbours Hall, Community Links

A Splotch of Red: Keir Hardie in West Ham celebrated a local event of significant historical importance. The play dramatized the Labour Party's founder and greatest pioneer's historic battle to win the seat of West Ham in Newham, East London and become the first ever Labour Member of Parliament. An illegitimate and wretchedly poor son of a servant, Hardie had worked in the coal mines from the age of ten, but he took on the formidable might of the Conservative Party candidate, the wealthy and blue-blooded Major Banes, and actually won the election in West Ham and become Britain's first socialist MP in 1892.

I chose Hardie and his historic victory in East Ham as a subject matter because it was a celebration and recognition of East End local culture and heritage. As with *Chaplin/Gandhi*, it was a piece of local history that was not well known, even among the community itself. Although a primary school

and an estate have been named after Keir Hardie in Newham, its museum[90] closed its doors 25 years ago and was not replaced, and there are no commemorative plaques of Hardie or significant historical markers of his groundbreaking election victory. Considering Newham's long and proud socialist history, I imagined that the story of The Labour Party's origins would perhaps be given more prominence.

Having already written two site-local shows in Newham (*Chaplin/Gandhi*, 2012, *Revolution Farm*, 2014), I was keen to develop and extend my interest in specially adapted locations, and sought a site-sympathetic space to perform the play in. I originally envisaged using a Council Chamber in Newham's Town Hall. For a play about local politics, performing in the Council Chamber in East Ham, where local councilors and elected officials make decisions on behalf of Newham residents, was an ideal environment.

However, it was not possible to get permission from the Council, and so I turned my attention to Community Links' Neighbours Hall in Canning Town, which I knew about from my long-term association with Kevin Jenkins.[91] The Hall was where Keir Hardie spoke at one of his many election rallies in Newham, and as a centre for social change, Will Thorne[92], Bertrand Russell[93] and Sylvia Pankhurst[94] were all to speak, or work, from there. As with previous site-local spaces like Kingsley Hall and Newham City Farm, the Hall would provide a symbiotic and interdependent relationship between site-history and

[90] The Passmore Edwards Museum was a museum in West Ham, Newham. It closed in 1994, and its collections were transferred to Newham Heritage Service and other museums.
[91] Co-creator of Community Links, Co-Producer of *Chaplin/Gandhi, Revolution Farm*, and *Alice in Canning Town.*
[92] British trade unionist, activist and one of the first Labour Members of Parliament.
[93] British philosopher, logician, mathematician, historian, writer, social critic, political activist and Nobel laureate.
[94] English campaigner for the suffragette movement.

subject matter, and give *A Splotch of Red* an authenticity, credibility and 'realness' that it perhaps would have not had in a conventional theatre space.[95] The building itself added to this sense of 'realness': it's a former town hall, built in 1894, and inside, the staff are dedicated to helping some of the most marginalized and disadvantaged in society. Its political and historical credentials are impeccable for a play about Britain's first socialist MP: the Public Hall was "built by the people, for the people". (Robinson 1993, Introduction)

Theatre visionary Peter Brook famously wrote: 'I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged' (Brook 1968, 3). Alongside Grotowski's *Towards A Poor Theatre* (1968), if there was another pioneering text that provided a historical antecedent to the kind of theatre I was starting to make in Newham, it was Brook's *Empty Space*, insisting that anywhere, indoors or out, was a 'theatre'. Neighbours Hall is just that: an empty hall. It is a model of empty-space theatricality. Everything in the play would need to be conjured up by the power of the actors and language, and the complicity of the audience's imaginations taking flight. Challenged, yet inspired by the wide open freedom of the Hall (it lacked even the 'pretence' of a recognisable performance space), I was able to go beyond a merely historically and naturalistic accurate portrait of a giant of the Labour Party and the trade

[95] In a letter of congratulations to myself and the cast/creative team from Newham's Cllr Rokhansa Fiaz OBE, who attended one of the performances at Community Links, she wrote that the experience was 'all the more potent in light of Keir Hardie's personal use of the venue for meetings all those years ago'. (Fiaz 2016) Rokhsana Fiaz was elected Mayor of Newham in 2018.

union movement, and treat the source material in a more imaginative and dramatic way.

I wanted to employ a direct address technique to the audience that I first utilized in *Johnny Song*, as a way of breaking the fourth wall immediately, and dispensing authoritatively with any suggestions of social realism or kitchen-sink naturalism on the stage:

> **Drummer Boy** Wotcha, Johnny Song!
>
> **Johnny Song** Wotcha, Drummer Boy! (*to audience*) Right. Now you know our names, let's get on.
>
> (p.2)

It's a technique Berkoff uses frequently and energetically in his plays, and *East* was where I saw it first, and was excited by its immediate and thrilling declaration of theatricality:

> **Les** Donate a snout, Mike?
>
> **Mike** OK I'll bung thee a snout, Les.
>
> **Mike/Les** Now you know our names.
>
> (p.7)

I was less interested in the literal minutiae of biographical representation, and more concerned with getting the audience's attention from the very start, hence Hardie and Thorne open the play with a direct address technique that quickly relayed who they were and moved on with the story.

> *Two men walk onto the stage. They salute each other with clenched fists and embrace warmly.*
>
> **Keir** Comrade Will Thorne!
>
> **Will** Comrade Keir Hardie!

Keir *(to audience)* And now you know our names.

Will Let's get on with the show.

(p.119)

Inspired by Berkoff's intoxicating hybrid of slang/cockney and Shakespeare in plays like *East* and *West*, I gave myself licence to experiment and be playful with Hardie and Thorne's speech in the play. Using the conceit that Hardie and his fellow visionary, Will Thorne, have been 'resurrected' by the astonishing rise of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour Leader,[96] and capitalism's crisis across the globe, and have now returned in spirit guise to proclaim that history is on their side, Hardie and Thorne's 'voices' weave in and out of a mix of old fashioned formality and modern-day slang:

Keir Ah those were the days.

Will And nights.

Keir We were unstoppable

Will Well, there was so much to change

Keir Democratic government!

Will Justice to labour!

Keir Fair rents!

Will Work for the unemployed!

Keir We smashed it, comrade!

Will Nailed it, my friend!

They stare each other, puzzled.

Keir A strange choice of words

Will It appears it is involuntary

Keir A peculiarity of resurrection I fear

Will We seem to be both past and present.

96 Jim Pickard,"The unlikely rise of Jeremy Corbyn", *Financial Times,* 6th June 2017, accessed 7 December, 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/5511f4de-46be-11e7-8d27-59b4dd6296b8

Keir Are we relevant again?

(p.120)

The fusion of vernacular and period speech is not just confined to the primary historical characters in the play, Hardie and Thorne. Like *Chaplin/Gandhi* and *Revolution Farm*, *A Splotch of Red* employed a unique 'mixed economy' cast of professional actors and young people from the local area, but this time with a crucial difference; where previously the young performers played children or teenagers, in *Splotch* they played adult roles. They were Hardie and Thorne's 'stirrer-uppers', the 'awkward squad of West Ham': agitators, union activists and supporters. When Hardie and Thorne conjure up the ghosts of gas stokers, dockers and casual labourers past, and asks them to 'help tell our story', their supporters inadvertently point to the decline in union power through a peculiarly modern choice of language:

Billy I dunno, Mr Hardie**,** I'll have to think about it.

Freddie Not being funny, but things have changed, mate.

Harry We an't what we used to be.

Lizzie Maybe it's best to keep our heads down.

Billy Don't rock the boat, like.

Rose O my days, am I gonna be famous? Y'know, on TV, like?

(p.124)

Newham Council were keen to host the play in their local libraries, as they felt it was 'a really important subject matter and coincidentally very contemporary considering the current political landscape'.[97] At the time of writing the play in 2016, Jeremy Corbyn's wholly unforeseen victory as Labour

[97] Mohamed Hammoudan, Head of Delivery, Community Neighbourhoods, Strategic Commissioning London Borough of Newham, e-mail correspondence to author and play's director, James Martin Charlton, July 4, 2016.

Leader in the recent leadership elections, (the largest mandate ever won by a party leader) the hard left's resurgence as the dominant force within Labour's top ranks, and Corbyn's popularity with young voters, meant that there was an opportunity for a play set in the past to hold up a mirror to the present, to make a 'contemporary statement written for our times'. (Jellicoe 121) Was capitalism in crisis, as predicted at the time?[98] Was the country ready for a new political direction? Was the Labour Party on the verge of a seismic breakthrough, analogous perhaps to Tony Blair's landslide victory in 1997?[99] Though I had accumulated a wealth of research from books and articles on Hardie/Thorne and the new union movement, I felt that these were all much more interesting questions for me to explore. They informed the research and development process behind the play, encouraging me to go beyond 'a list of facts', and explore instead, some of the 'bigger questions' of Hardie's victory in West Ham.

Reviewing James Graham's television drama *Brexit: The Uncivil War*[100], The Observer's TV critic Euan Ferguson wrote that for him, 'the key word was "drama", and James Graham gave us a cracking one, concentrating not on minutiae but on overarching truths, wherever he could find them, as a playwright surely should'. In *A Splotch of Red*, I was searching for 'overarching truths' and if this meant experimenting with chronologically inconsistent speech patterns, for example, then it was for 'dramatic purposes'. This was a play I was writing, not a newspaper article. It had to come to life on the

[98] The Guardian newspaper ran a series of articles in 2009 and 2010 about the financial crash in which its writers and contributors asked 'where we go from here and what we can learn from the crunch and the downturn'.
[99] The final result of the vote on 2 May 1997 revealed that Labour won a landslide majority, making a net gain of 146 seats and winning 43.2% of the vote, whereas the Conservative suffered defeat with a net loss of 178 seats, despite winning 30.7% of the vote.
[100] Starring Benedict Cumberbatch, a compelling drama about one of the most controversial referendums in modern British history. It aired on Channel 4 in the United Kingdom on 7 January 2019.

stage. Hardie's struggles wouldn't be as compelling if conveyed with facts or biography only; they had to be dramatized or imaginatively reconstructed.

A major theme of *Splotch of Red* could accurately be described as idealism versus pragmatism, and one such example of an 'overarching truth' I was keen to explore in the play. General Secretary of the General Federation of Trade Unions, Doug Nicholls, in his introduction to *Workers' Play Time*[101], an anthology of plays inspired by the trade union movement, in which *A Splotch of Red* is featured, writes this about the play:

> The two men represent a classic political opposition - Hardie the idealist and orator, Thorne the tactician, willing to compromise and deal with other politicians, including those of the other parties, if it meant attaining power. The dilemma they faced remains a central one in politics, particularly among those who wish to change things: is it possible to alter the system from within, or is it better to remain ideologically pure, even if this means, as the play's Hardie puts it, 'sitting on the sidelines'? (Nicholls 2017, 9)

It could be convincingly argued, I think, that in recent years, Jeremy Corbyn is the labour leader most closely aligned with the spirit of Keir Hardie and the most 'ideologically pure', but he was also responsible for the on-going schism in the party between purity and power, and for promoting 'an underlying anxiety on the left that the compromises required to win are a betrayal of the true socialist cause.' (Sylvester 2019)

This enduring schism is played out between the two Labour pioneers when Thorne tries to persuade Hardie to reach out for the liberal vote, despite his ideological hatred of the party:

> **Keir** Then I have to make nice?
>
> **Will** Yes!

[101] Nicholls, Doug, ed. *Workers' Play Time Vol. One: Seven scripts from seven struggles* Oxford: Workable Books, 2017.

Keir How nice?

Will Don't mention the word *Socialism.*

Keir Then I might as well recant my whole life.

Will Yes, and you might as not well stand either.

(p.139-40)

The tension between compromise and principle, pragmatism and purity in politics is one that Thorne recognised only too well, and it could be argued that without his understanding of the importance of establishing a 'broad-based appeal', there might not be any Labour Party today. As I currently write, following the recent election of Keir Starmer as Labour Leader, the process of the Labour Party moving back towards the centre has begun, but perhaps it is still unknown whether it is the end of Corbynism, or whether the hard left might once again retain their grip on the party.

As well as performing *A Splotch of Red* in Community Links' Neighbours Hall, we were also invited by Newham Council's Community Neighbourhoods Strategic Commissioning[102] to perform the play in Newham's Libraries,[103] as part of the libraries' ongoing hosting of cultural programmes, and a celebration of an important political event in the borough's history. This was a perfect fit for the play as Hardie was a great believer in self-improvement through reading and the value of books, and Newham has a strong record in hosting a range of cultural programmes from theatre, film and performing art in its libraries.

A regular feature of the library performances was the presence of the public/residents who had not come to watch the play, but were simply browsing bookshelves and Council services information, and found

[102] In Community Neighbourhoods, Newham's community lead councillors work with volunteers and residents to run activities and events and to make change in the area.
[103] The play was performed at Beckton Globe Library, Stratford Library, East Ham Library and The Gate Library.

themselves drawn in by the show. In effect, there was an inner circle of spectators in their seats and an outer circle of curious library users. At the set-ups in each library, a small crowd would often assemble around the cast and production team and ask questions about the play. The double-layering effect of this conscious/unconscious spectator relationship reflects some of the unique strengths of site-local practice, notably in democratising access to cultural practices, and dissolving traditional bourgeois power structures present in conventional theatre buildings and 'great cultural centres'.[104] An evaluation report written by Newham Libraries about *Splotch* listed access as a major benefit of the play for local people:

> Community theatre has also been at the heart of Newham with Joan Littlewood's theatre workshop and the Theatre Royal, Stratford East being at its core. However, many residents are still not able to access good quality theatre. The libraries are much more accessible for the majority of Newham residents and therefore bringing quality theatre into these spaces allows residents to access this medium and to whet their appetite for further cultural experiences. (Deborah Peck, email message to author, October 12, 2020).

Brith Gof Theatre designer Cliff McLucas describes a revelatory process of 'layering' that happens in site-specific performances, one that echoes my own experience of working with this kind of theatre at a local level. Mike Pearson, co-artistic director of Brith Gof, writes that McLucas understood:

> Site-specific performances as the coexistence and overlay of two basic sets of architectures: those of the extant building or what he called the *host,* that which is *at* site – and those of the constructed scenography and performance or the *ghost*, that which is temporarily brought *to* site. The site itself became an active component in the creation of performative meaning, rather than a neutral space of exposition or scenic backdrop for dramatic action.(2010, 70)

Brith Gof's and McLucas's understanding about the site itself having

[104] '…the custom was to choose the theatre of the 'great cultural centres' as a model and goal. The public at hand is rejected in favour of a distant public, of which one dreams. The artist does not allow himself to be influenced by those around him and dreams of the so-called 'educated' or 'cultured' spectators.' Boal, Augusto, *Theatre of the Oppressed*. (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 151.

the potential for meaning, power, and resonance was something our audiences could relate to. If we accept the assertion that 'the milieu which surrounds a theatre is always ideologically encoded' (Bennett 1997, 2008), and that a re-ordering of performance space 'challenges accepted notions of high culture' (Bennett, 160), then I posit that a play about working class political representation and the birth of the Labour Party, performed not in a mainstream or traditional theatre, but in a library which helps 'build stronger and more resilient communities',[105] signals a valorising of the grass-roots, the local, the communal for audiences.

Instead of a 'neutral' or a centralized, depersonalized space, performing a localist-centred theatre text in local libraries illuminated the interdependence and mutuality of 'host' and 'ghost' site, where the two 'sets of architecture' were a natural and comfortable fit for each other.

A Splotch of Red consolidated a performance style that had begun with *When Chaplin Met Gandhi* and continued in *Revolution Farm*, marking out its distinct territory by making a virtue of the absence of all that is most commonly associated with conventional theatre auditoria: proscenium arch, lights, box office, bar etc. The dominant aesthetic was minimal, raw, austere even. The *Morning Star's* theatre critic appeared to confirm this in his review of *Splotch*: 'Using just a few wooden crates in a stripped-back space, this agit-prop style production…is precisely what community theatre is all about'.[106]

I think the *Morning Star* was right to compare the play's performance aesthetic to the Left-wing agit-prop theatre style that was popular in England

[105] Cllr Ken Clarke, "Libraries play a key role in Newham's communities", *Financial Times*, April 8, 2016, accessed 28 December, 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/413619f0-fa7e-11e5-b3f6-11d5706b613b.
[106] *Morning Star* 24 August 2016.

in the 1970s, with small-scale political theatre groups like 7.84, Portable Theatre and CAST[107] taking theatre to new working-class audiences, often with a revolutionary socialist message for the workers. If the theme of foundational plays like *Johnny Song* and *Gob* was personal liberation, the same theme of liberation was addressed in the struggles of a disaffected, 21st century young generation in *Splotch*, but this time the 'liberation' or 'awakening' to be achieved or sought, is overtly political.

Essentially the play is proselytising for a disenfranchised and disempowered young generation to rise up in 'Hardie-esque' anger at exploitation by the powerful and greedy, and become more politically active and engaged. In the play's finale, Lizzie, one of Hardie's original 'stirrer-uppers', who's discovered a defiant and articulate voice she never knew she had, metamorphoses into her contemporary equivalent in 2016, and declares her intention to run for Young Mayor of Newham[108], apt of course for a play set in Newham:

> **Lizzie** Nah! I'm not goin' anywhere. I'm staying. I have a voice! And I got things to say. You get me? It an't my time to go, trust me.
>
> *She starts to swap her 'rags' for modern, new clothes.*
>
> My name is Aisha Khan. I'm fifteen years old. And I come from Newham. I'm opinionated. Determined. And a little bit feisty.
>
> *She puts on earrings and make up.*
>
> That's 'cos there's lots of things to fix and make better. Food banks, zero hour contracts, the gap between the haves and have nots, these things should died out a hundred years ago!
>
> We need to stir things up. Stir 'em up.
>
> I'm standing to be the next Young Mayor of Newham. Vote for me!
>
> (p.156)

[107] Three key collective socialist theatre groups, whose area of work was political and engaging working-class audiences.
[108] Newham Council is one of a handful of local authorities that runs a Young Mayor scheme, offering young people an opportunity to get involved in issues that affect them and shape local policies.

Remixes and Re-edits: *Revolution Farm (2014), Alice in Canning Town (2019)*

Revolution Farm (2014), Newham City Farm

Linda Hutcheon's seminal adaptation studies text, *A Theory of Adaptation*, provides a compelling description of adaptation that resonates with my experience of adapting two canonical, literary classics for the stage. Hutcheon argues that adaptation should offer 'repetition but without replication, bringing together the comfort of ritual and recognition with the delight of surprise and novelty' (2013, 8).

'Repetition but without replication' is a process that I view as analogous to remixing and re-editing in music, notably applied and used on contemporary electronic and dance records. 'Remix' and 'Re-edit' are terms most commonly associated with a DJ/Producer, the essential idea of remixing being to take an existing recording and change its fundamental parts to create a new interpretation of it.

The most successful remixes are generally considered to add something new and interesting to the original. 'There's no point making a remix if it isn't going to give the listeners, in the club, in the car, or at home, something new, something different.'(mn2s 2017) Andy Weatherall,[109] responsible for the one of the most iconic and influential remixes of all time, Primal Scream's 'Loaded',[110] has stressed the need for a dual approach to the art of the remix: 'You should put your own identity on it, but also capture the spirit of the song' (MOJO 2020). This was the process and thinking informing the 'remixes' of *Animal Farm* and *Alice*: respect the original, but add something different/new of my own.

I approached the process of adaptation with a keen sense of seeking to culturally update or recontextualize both of the source texts. Orwell's fable of power and corruption repositioned and relocated to a modern, urban, austerity-gripped, disenchfranchised Britain. *Alice in Wonderland* reworked and revamped as a paean to multicultural East End London. But the extent of the degree of reworking differed markedly between the two adaptations and I explore these differences in this chapter.

When Chaplin Met Gandhi's partner and project manager, the East London charity Community Links, managed and ran Newham City Farm in Beckton, one of London's largest and longest established inner-city farms. In 2010, Community Link's co-founder Kevin Jenkins, arranged for me to be a

[109] English musician, DJ, songwriter, producer and remixer. His production work on Primal Scream's album *Screamadelica (1991)* adding samples, loops and creating a revolutionary mix of hard rock, house and rave, helped the record win the first ever Mercury Music Prize in 1992 and become one of the most celebrated albums of the 1990s.

[110] 'Loaded' is a song by Scottish rock band Primal Scream, released in February 1990 as the lead single from their third studio album *Screamadelica*. Mixed and produced by Andrew Weatherall, it is a remix of an earlier song titled 'I'm Losing More Than I'll Ever Have'.

Writer-in-Residence at the Farm for a month, to utilize the farm as a creative stimulus and encourage visitors, especially families and young people, to engage in a series of creative writing exercises designed to celebrate the farm and its work.

By 2014 the Farm had invested in a new performance space in the shape of a freshly built Play Barn, an open-sided oak-framed barn with a high roof. Kevin had invited me down to take a look at it with a view to performing a play on the Farm. The Barn was bigger and roomier than I expected and clearly had potential as an interesting performance space. But it wasn't just the Play Barn that the Farm had invested in. There was a new outdoor covered learning space too. And a play area complete with ride-on toys.

Looking around at the cows, horses and sheep, there was only one story that came to mind that would provide a perfect symbiosis between site and subject matter…Orwell's *Animal Farm.*

Newham City Farm sits in the shadows of Canary Wharf, home to many of the world's banks and is a symbol of global wealth and power. It was born out of Margaret Thatcher's free-market revolution and a trickle-down economics theory that promised wealth would eventually trickle down to everyone else, a claim broadcaster and journalist Giles Fraser rebuts in a recent walk he made from Bethnal Green to Canary Wharf: "Tower Hamlets is proof positive that it doesn't. If anything, it flows the other way. Have a walk around Bow and Whitechapel and Bethnal Green. Then go to the great glass towers of Canary Wharf, still in the borough but in all other ways another world completely. No, wealth is sucked upwards, it doesn't trickle down" (Fraser 2012).

The subversive potential of the farm was irresistible. I would write a

contemporary, urban version of Orwell's classic tale of greed and exploitation, with one of the UK's main financial centres as its backdrop. The aim was to take Orwell's satire on greed and corruption and give it a distinct whiff of Austerity Britain[111] by setting it on an inner-city farm in one of the poorest parts of the UK. Newham is a borough with serious inequalities, and as previously noted, an area of low engagement with the arts and one of the Arts Council England's' 'cold spots', parts of the country where involvement in art and culture is significantly below the national average.

These statistics and facts about Newham would give the play's performance environment a politically resonant context, and even if very few of the audience would be in possession of this information, it was impossible for visitors/spectators not to recognize that Newham City Farm and its surrounding environs belonged to one of the most deprived areas in the country.

The aim of my new adaptation of Orwell's classic satire was to give it a fresh, contemporary twist or resonance, injecting its timeless tale of a revolution that went wrong with a gritty, urban, MLE-infused argot[112] perfectly suited to being staged on one of London's longest established and largest inner-city farms, Newham City Farm.

Despite (or perhaps because of?) this being my first stage adaptation, I made a conscious decision at the outset to employ a tabula rasa approach to adapting *Animal Farm*. I wanted to treat the source-text fresh or newly

[111] Following the financial crisis of 2007–2008 a period of economic recession began in the UK. The austerity programme was initiated in 2010 by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government, a deficit reduction programme consisting of sustained reductions in public spending and tax rises, intended to reduce the government budget deficit and the role of the welfare state in the United Kingdom.
[112] Multicultural London English (abbreviated MLE) is a late twentieth century sociolect of English, spoken authentically by mainly young working class people in London. Speakers of MLE come from a wide variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and live in diverse inner-city neighbourhoods such as Brent, Lambeth, Newham and Hackney.

minted, as if I was reading it for the first time. Therefore, I deliberately ignored other adaptations, including the National Theatre's much-acclaimed dramatization first seen in 1984.[113] The less I knew about other versions, I reasoned, the more radical/daring I might be with my own. 'Ignorance sheer ignorance', eulogized Orson Welles, 'there is no confidence to equal it. It's only when you know something about a profession that you are timid or careful.'[114]

Talking to the NME in 2011about his remixes on Primal Scream's *Screamadelica*, Andy Weatherall confessed that, 'After 'Loaded', I just carried on [remixing 'Screamadelica'] in my bumbling, ignorant, up-myself kind of way. Looking back, my arrogance makes me wince, but I would never have had the confidence to do it if I didn't have that kind of attitude.' (NME 2011) Kneehigh Theatre's founder Emma Rice is similarly candid about adopting an instinctive approach to the company's adaptations:

> When I decide to do a story, I don't tend to go and read or watch it, I tend to work on what my cultural memory of it is, because that's my truth … my foundation will be my memory. And I'm sure that's one of the reasons why I do adaptations - I want to work with that emotional memory. (Lilley, "Kneehigh's Retellings, 7)

While I did not want to produce something 'barely recognizable from the original', wholesale fidelity was not something I was interested in either. Mere replication would be like a bloodless, anemic remix that was barely distinguishable from the original recording, or a cover version that brought nothing new or surprising to a classic song. 'It is usually at the very point of infidelity', notes Sanders, 'that the most creative acts of adaptation and

[113] Adapted by Peter Hall. Lyrics by Adrian Mitchell. Music by Richard Peaslee.
[114] *OrsonWelles*. Monitor. (13 March 1960: BBC). Welles talks about *Citizen Kane* in a 1960 interview from the BBC Monitor series.

appropriation take place' (Sanders 2014, 20).

But I would be disingenuous if I was claiming that I was relying purely on a 'confidence of ignorance' approach to adaptation. My new version of *Animal Farm* made creative use of a key ingredient in adaptation, a method described by Genette in his study of 'hypertextuality', as 'a movement of proximation', the purpose of which is to 'bring it up to date (*the source material*) and closer to its own audience (in temporal, geographic, or social terms.' Sanders considers Baz Luhrmann's 1996 *Romeo + Juliet* to be a useful example of proximation:

> updating Shakespeare's early modern Veronese tragedy to a contemporary North American setting, Luhrmann retains the playtext's sense of urban gang feuding but accords it a troublingly immediate and topical resonance. Famously, the much-mentioned swords and rapiers of Shakespeare's playscript become in Luhrmann's vividly realized Verona Beach the engraved monikers for the modern era's weapon of choice, the handgun. (2006, 20)

Similarly, *Revolution Farm's* use of hoodies and modern, inner-city, urban demotic gave the show a hard-edged contemporary relevance, hinting darkly at fears of knife crime and urban lawlessness. And the inner-city farm location in a deprived borough among the least safe in East London, reinforced perhaps a sense of recognition of the growing gulf between rich and poor, the haves and have nots, the powerful and the powerless in society. Genette's 'movement of proximation' was deliberately used in *Revolution Farm* to provoke unsettling thoughts of a contemporary social malaise close to home, something *The Independent's* critic highlighted in his review:

> The unique selling points of this version – which resounds with troubling echoes of our own predicament today in Britain – are not just the in-yer-face modernity of the

> language and attitudes, but the fact that it unfolds as a promenade performance in the precincts of a genuine inner-city farm (Taylor, 2014).

My early drafts, it soon became painfully clear, adhered too closely to the book. It felt like I was merely mimicking Orwell, and badly too. I was being too timid or careful. Confronted with a very real writer's block, and a fast-approaching deadline, I found myself returning to my early plays for inspiration and a way forward. As discussed in Chapter 3's Pre-Newham Plays, *Gob* was written in an expressive, stylized and theatrical language, and laid down a template for recurrent themes in my work, i.e., revolution, renewal, change. I wanted my version of *Animal Farm* to employ some of *Gob's* verbal trademarks; the fusion of heightened language with slang and street vernacular; the metronomic, rhythmic, staccato-effect of short, clipped lines.

Returning to the writing style of *Gob* gave me freedom to invest the farmyard animals with an expressive, lyrical, mode of speaking, that belied their uneducated and docile backgrounds. When veteran pig Old Boy gathers together the persecuted animals in the barn and tells them of his dream of a free and liberated life, he uses lyrical and imagistic language:

> But thing is, I keep havin' dreams, they won't go away, they haunt me, an' everyone of these dreams says: you was free once, Old Boy, you was free. And I have a picture of you, my friend, and you too sweetheart, running round them big fields, gentle breeze in your happy faces, blue sky above ya, pretty as a picture, no hunger, no starving, no beatings, yeah that's right…no humans…
>
> (p.4)

Newly emboldened by the switching of styles of writing, I next targeted and reworked some of *Animal Farm's* most iconic lines in an attempt to begin to impose my stamp on Orwell. I began with *'FOUR LEGS GOOD, TWO LEGS BAD.'* (Orwell1989, 24) As my version was going to be staged on an inner-city

farm and its visual aesthetic informed by 'hoodies and trackies',[115] the language of slang, vernacular and the demotic of urban London was going to feature heavily in the play. A useful resource was the Urban Dictionary,[116] a crowd sourced online dictionary for slang word and phrases.

I replaced the words 'good' and 'bad' with 'badass' and 'wasteman'. It's worth looking at those slang terms in detail. The Urban Dictionary defines 'badass' thus:

> A badass isn't someone who wears ripped leather jackets, a badass isn't someone who breaks stuff to look tough, and a badass isn't someone who fights for the fun of fighting. That's the definition of a poser. A badass does not try to be a badass or look tough. A badass simply is a badass.

Synonyms include, the Urban Dictionary adds helpfully, 'ultra-cool' and 'motherfucker'. 'Wasteman' is described by them as:

> Insult - someone who does nothin with their life (or nothing much)
> eg Jimmy drops out of skool and has no job and claims benefits for 5 years an still lives at home with his mum an has dirty clothes- Jimmy iz a wasteman.

The idea was straightforward: being a 'badass' is 'cool' and being a 'wasteman' is most decidedly not. Therefore Orwell's famous line was updated/modernised to, "Four legs badass, two legs wasteman".

Arguably, the most iconic line in *Animal Farm* is, 'ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL, BUT SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS' (Orwell 1989, 97), that deadly skewering of the hypocrisy of governments who call themselves a 'People's Government', but give power and prestige to the elites. The only word that needed dropping was the slightly old-fashioned feel of 'equal'

[115] In the UK, hoodies have been the subject of much criticism; some shoplifters have used the hood to conceal their identities from CCTV cameras in shopping centres. The hoodie became a popular clothing item by the 1990s. By the 21st century, it had gained a negative image, being associated with trouble-making, intimidating teens and anti-social behaviour.
[116] The website was founded in 1999 by Aaron Peckham.

which could be replaced by a more instant, accessible and everyday equivalent: '*All animals are the **same** but some are not so **same** as others*'. I was gaining in confidence in 'remixing' Orwell and I was about to take an even bolder step than reworking some of the book's most famous lines.

Writing about her prequel to Kipling's *Jungle Book*, *Into the Jungle*,[117] and the struggle to retain the brilliance of the original, but reinterpret Kipling for a new generation, Katherine Rundell recounts a well-known anecdote about the Disney animated version of *The Jungle Book*: 'Walt Disney famously gave one of his screenwriters a copy of the book, saying: "The first thing I want you to do is not to read it."'(Rundell, 2018) I thought Disney's advice made sense. The less I knew about *Animal Farm*, the more freedom I might enjoy with my own version.

I relied instead on a cartoon at the back of a popular educational book, *GCSE English Animal Farm Text Guide*, essentially a comic strip of the book complete with speech bubbles. As long as I knew the basic series of events in the story, which the GCSE guide summarizes swiftly and with a minimum of fuss, I could sidestep Orwell and start to create my own inner-city, farm-themed version.

Playwright Steve Waters describes the process of adapting Giles Foden's acclaimed novel about Idi Amin, *The Last King of Scotland*,[118] as having 'some skin in the game'. In other words, it wasn't enough 'just to

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[117] "Into the Jungle", *Waterstones*, accessed May 18, 2018, https://www.waterstones.com/book/into-the-jungle/katherine-rundell/kristjana-s-williams/9781509824601 'Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, first published by Macmillan in 1894, is one of the most enduring books of children's literature, delighting generations of children. Katherine Rundell has taken this as the basis of her new and enchanting tale, sharing the early years of favourite characters and informing the creatures they become in Kipling's classic.'

[118] This stage adaptation by Steve Waters premiered at the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield, in September 2019.

extract the dialogue and turn the rich prose into spare stage directions'. As the play took shape, 'it travelled away from its source and became its own reality'. (Waters 2019)

'Becoming its own reality' was what was starting to happen to my new version of *Animal Farm*. I sensed momentum was gathering, and I made some more significant decisions. Out went the cruel and heartless Farmer Jones and out went the other humans in the story too, the farmers Mr Pilkington and Mr Frederick and the lawyer Mr Whymper. Partly this was a practical issue; we had a small cast. But more importantly, we were creating a piece of theatre, and as such, I wanted to exploit its unique strengths, what Ann Jellicoe calls 'the very limitations of theatre, the way it must rely upon the audience's acceptance and imagination' (Jellicoe 1987, 46). Here are the opening lines from *Revolution Farm*. The cruelly treated animals have called a secret meeting in the dead of night to plot the revolution: a sheep and goat check on Mr Jones first before they start.

> **Goat** We good?
>
> **Sheep** We good. He's drunk
>
> **Goat** What, again?
>
> (p.3)

I hope our audiences at Newham City Farm did not have to try too hard to conjure up a less than flattering picture of Mr Jones from this brief exchange.

Changing the names of the main characters was as important to me as changing the book's most iconic lines. It would give me a stronger sense of ownership of the book, more 'skin in the game'. When the animals chase Mr Jones off the farm and victory is theirs, they mock the names given to them and sense the revolution isn't quite complete yet.

> **White Pig** I still got a scum name. You still got one. We all still got scum names.
>
> **Stallion** Joey? Don't mean nuthin' to me.
>
> **Mare** April Babe? Wot is that??? Yuk!!!
>
> **White Pig** Freckles. That's the worse.
>
> **Mare** So let's change 'em. Let's get rid of 'em!
>
> **Stallion** Nice, I like it.
>
> (p.12)

So naturally they give each other new names.

The revolution's visionary and instigator, Old Major, became Old Boy, a nod to the play's East London roots and setting, where this expression is still in use to denote a wise old man. Snowball became *Hero* to signify his noble intentions regarding the revolution. Napoleon's mouthpiece, Squealer, gets called Smoothy, as befits a consummate oily PR/propaganda operator. The big and strong, but gullible and loyal Boxer, is called Warrior. The friendly and maternal Clover turns herself into Lil' Monster, because she's tough, feisty and speaks her mind. Napoleon self-names himself Daddy Love. This was a tyrant, a despot, a psychopathic megalomaniac with an insatiable appetite for power, but hidden, of course, behind a façade of unity and harmony, a 'Father of the Nation', or cult of personality figure. The name was a nod to the propensity of notorious real-life dictators' to bestow titles upon themselves, e.g. Mobuto Sese Seko[119] of Zaire's titles include 'Father of the nation', 'The Guide', 'The Messiah', the 'Sun President'.

In the supporting rationale accompanying my new version that was sent to the Orwell Estate's agents for approval, I highlighted the participation

[119] Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa Za Banga was a Congolese politician and military officer who was the President of Zaire (renamed from the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1971) from 1965 to 1997.

of local young talent, and their exposure to English novelists like Orwell and his powerful support of social justice and opposition to totalitarianism. I explained that I was particularly keen to introduce a new generation of inner-city young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to Orwell's work.

Keen to ensure the Estate's approval, I offered to give my version a new title. As this was a brand new adaptation, and one that was being performed on an inner city farm, I asked the Estate if they would be happy with the following re-titling: *Revolution Farm*. The Estate approved the new version and new title, but in view of my radical reworking, they required an "*inspired by*" credit. The full title credit read: *Revolution Farm by Jim Kenworth Inspired by George Orwell's Animal Farm.*

I felt vindicated that I had foregrounded the participation and involvement of young people in the play, when in her review of the show, journalist and BBC presenter Libby Purves singled out the presence of young people in the play as a high point for her:

> I have to say that the greatest pleasure was seeing those splendid, spiritedly performing Newham children getting an excellent political education about power, politics, and the need to keep asking questions.[120]

I have viewed the adaptation process of *Revolution Farm* through the lens of a remix or a reimagining, because while I introduced new elements to the source text, I stayed close to the original plot or narrative. The back-cover blurb on Penguin's Modern Classics *Animal Farm* (1989) describes the story thus, 'Orwell's simple, tragic fable, telling what happens when the animals drive out Mr Jones and attempt to run the farm themselves, has since

[120] Libby Purves, "Revolution Farm - City Farm, Newham/Orwell Goes Gangland", *theatreCat*, 23 August, 2016, accessed 31 Dec, 2019, https://theatrecat.com/2014/08/

become a world-famous classic'. That is what happens in my version too. The cultural updating of *Animal Farm* may have meant that for an audience it resounded 'with troubling echoes of our own predicament today in Britain' (Taylor), achieved chiefly by a modernizing/updating of the source text's language/dialogue, but it retained the essential plotline and main characters of the original.. Even the credit that the Orwell Estate required on publicity beneath the new title – 'Inspired by George Orwell's Animal Farm' – would suggest so. This was in stark contrast to the approach taken in my next adaptation, *Alice in Wonderland,* and I explore this further on in this chapter.

It is worth now briefly exploring the opportunities and challenges that the site-local environment of Newham City Farm posed for the play. In Richard Schechner's seminal book about his pioneering of environmental theatre productions in the 1960s, *Environmental Theater*, he describes two ways of understanding a theatrical environment:

> First, there is what one can do with a space and in a space. Secondly, there is the acceptance of a given space. In the first case one *creates* an environment by transforming a space; in the second case, one *negotiates* with an environment, engaging in a scenic dialog with a space. (Schechner,1994, xxx)

Certainly, *Revolution Farm* had to initially negotiate with the Farm in a commonsensical way: there were certain parts of the Farm that were off-limits, and the animals were locked away nightly, away from the public, in enclosures at the other end of the Farm. Aside from these conditions, we were free to engage in a 'scenic dialog' with the section of the Farm that was designated the performance space.

With a variety of spaces to set the action of the play in, all in close proximity, the decision was made early on in the production/design process

to make it a promenade-style performance, with the audience following the thread of the story around the Farm. Each farm 'space' was individually 'negotiated' with. The Barn was blacked out with tarpaulin and sprayed with graffiti/slogans to emphasize the clandestine, subversive nature of the animals' plot to overthrow the farmer and also served as a 'death-chamber' for the killing of so-called 'traitors'. The outdoor learning space became a makeshift classroom where the guileless animals are indoctrinated into the 'new rules' of the Farm. The horses' paddock served as a North Korean-style military parade signaling the abject failure of the revolution, when at the end of the play the 'new soldiers' of the revolution salute and cheer their rulers with the chant: 'All animals are the same but some are not so same as others!'

The use of urban demotic speech together with the cast dressed in hoodies gave the play an unmistakable contemporary relevance, but it would have been possible to achieve this effect just as well in a conventional theatre auditorium. What was unique and original about *Revolution Farm* was its setting and the Farm's surrounding environs that gave the production a genuinely troubling and disconcerting edge. Taking the audience out of their theatrical comfort zone is something the play's director, James Martin Charlton, capitalized on, consciously playing on the audience's preconceived notions/fears around Beckton:

> Audiences who walked from the tube or parked in an area previously unknown to them were greeted by the sight of youths hanging around in the farm – youths in hoodies, that favourite nightmare figure of the tabloid press and media, made into figures of terror by news reports of stabbings and gang membership. My intention was not to alleviate an audience's anxieties about Beckton and inner-city youth but rather to bring their fears into the open – what if the hoody hanging around on this Beckton farm turned to them and revealed an animal snout? (Charlton 2016)

Online theatre reviewers *everything theatre's* critic seized on the subversive nature of the inner-city farm's location right at the start of her review:

> Newham is an area not often synonymous with the arts but it was an inspired place to perform a play that considers the themes of power and corruption in society. It's one of the most deprived areas in the UK but is just a stone's throw from Canary Wharf, workplace of many of the most powerful and affluent people in the UK and home to many of the world's banks. (Woolgrove 2014)

This was theatre stripped away of all its usual niceties, no seats, no curtains, no lights, no ice creams. All that was required was a willing suspension of disbelief that an inner-city farm could be the battleground for a violent overthrow of power and privilege, and that its message of revolution might be closer to home than we think.

Alice in Canning Town (2019), Arc in the Park

In 2019 Kevin Jenkins asked me to come and have a look at a new space his charity was running. This was Arc in the Park, an inclusive adventure playground in Canning Town, East London. Managed by Kevin's new charity, Ambition, Aspire, Achieve, the Arc provides a Newham-wide delivery and resource base for young people with disabilities and/or additional needs and their families. Featuring tree houses, swings, trampolines, rope bridges, giant slides, teepees, the site was immediately captivating and striking. It had the feel and look of a Heath Robinson contraption/invention: eccentric, unusual, odd. Kevin thought Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* might be interesting in the space, but there was something surreal and rather otherworldly about the place. It appeared hermetically sealed off from the paraphernalia of inner city life that surrounded it: the nearby council estates, an A13 quadruple carriageway, a 24hr/nonstop McDonalds. Almost as if it was its own world, hidden, underground, and waiting to be discovered by the curious and the imaginative. I would not have been surprised had there been a rabbit hole in

the playground to fall down into. The space was perfect for a new version of *Alice in Wonderland*, reconfigured specially for the Arc's 'trippy', surreal environment.

I had not read Alice since I was a child and I did not find it as interesting or captivating as I remembered it to be. Yet *Alice* is one of those rare works of fiction that appeals to both adults and children alike. But the thought stubbornly remained, I found *Alice* a little boring. From a contemporary perspective, the dialogue and speech is inevitably archaic, stilted and creaky. And to compound matters, there appears to be no universal or definitive agreement on what Alice's adventures all add up to.

My experience of 'remixing' *Animal Farm* was, *thematically speaking*, a relatively straightforward process. The novel's theme is unmistakable: the corruption of ideals. *Alice*, in contrast, has a bewildering myriad of interpretations, so much so that each generation invents its own meaning and explanation to suit the mood of the time. With its hookah smoking caterpillar, mysterious liquids, body-altering mushrooms, and new interpretations of time and space, the impact of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* on sixties' counterculture, for example, is undeniable. The swinging sixties reinvented Alice as a psychedelic masterpiece, complete with its own iconic trippy theme tune: Jefferson Airplane's 'White Rabbit' ('One pill makes you larger and one pill makes you small').[121]

In the '90s, the hugely successful and influential science fiction action film *The Matrix (1999)* clearly references *Alice*, when the main character Neo is offered his own version of Alice's choice of 'pill' by rebel

[121] 'White Rabbit' is a song written by Grace Slick and recorded by the American rock band Jefferson Airplane for their 1967 album *Surrealistic Pillow*.

leader Morpheus: "You take the blue pill, the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes". (IMDb)

Recently, question marks have been raised over the propriety of Carroll's relationship with the inspiration for Alice, 12yr old Lorina Liddell. The BBC documentary *The Secret World of Lewis Carroll* (2015) explored the controversy surrounding Carroll's friendship with children and his obsession with photography.

What does the current age make of *Alice*? What might the book say to a Post-Truth, Post-Brexit generation? What lens are Alice's adventures being viewed through in 2019? The answer was I did not know. And I was not sure it even mattered. The problem remained; I could not tie Alice down. It resisted thematic consistency. If I applied a 'movement of proximation' approach to the adaptation, updating its world but keeping it essentially the same, for example, Alice's plotline (such as it is!), its theme/meaning would still evade me, and perhaps more worryingly, an audience too. I started to move away from proximation and towards a more radical, daring approach. It is a creative approach Sanders describes as 'sustained appropriation' (2014, 26). Sanders distinguishes between the creative processes of adaptation and appropriation by describing adaptation as signaling:

> a relationship with an informing source text or or original; a cinematic version of Shakespeare's Hamlet, for example, although clearly reinterpreted by the collaborative efforts of director, scriptwriter, actors, and the generic demands of the movement from stage drama to film, remains ostensibly Hamlet, a specific version, albeit achieved in alternative temporal and generic modes, of that seminal cultural text. On the other hand, appropriation frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain. (Sanders 2014, 26)

Sanders notes that theorists have stressed 'a sense of play' as central to the adaptive instinct. Paul Ricoeur has written of appropriation as 'the "playful" transposition of the text, and play itself' (1997: 87). Sanders argues that political and ethical commitments to radical revisions of literary appropriations should never 'occlude the simultaneously pleasurable aspects of reading into such texts their intertextual and allusive relationship with other texts' (7). Embracing the rich possiblities of an adaptation that was both part-rejection and part-playful homage, I navigated towards taking unignorable, wholesale liberties with *Alice,* employing a radically 'playful' approach, re-presenting Carroll's iconic characters in new guises, but retaining a sense of the madness and playfulness of the original, and in the process releasing myself from the dangers of being 'over-faithful' to the original or attempting to offer up a definitive theory of *Alice*

I would still need something similar to a Text Guide, like the GCSE English Text Guide I used for *Animal Farm*, even more so than Orwell, because of *Alice's* complicated and dense plot. I found what I was looking for in a local Waterstones bookshop: a Ladybird Classics version of *Alice*.[122] The story had been abridged and retold for children with plenty of illustrations in it. The result was brutal: there's almost nothing left of Carroll's voice. It was just what I was looking for.

I conducted a review of the numerous *Alice in Wonderland* films and TV productions. Up to this point, I had only seen two film versions: Jan Svankmajer's *Alice* (1988), and Jonathan Miller's television play, *Alice in Wonderland* (1966). Svankmajer's version, combining live film action with stop motion animation, was a dark and unsettling adaptation, highlighting the hallucinatory and nightmarish elements of Alice's journey. It's a highly original, distinctive and singular vision of *Alice*, miles away from the saccharine 'Disneyification' of Carroll. Miller's adaptation, where most of the Wonderland

[122] An abridged retelling of the classic story, suitable for younger readers.

characters are played by actors in standard Victorian dress, including a real cat employed to represent the Cheshire Cat, signified for Miller a return to the story's roots or essence: 'Once you take the animal heads off, you begin to see what it's all about. A small child, surrounded by hurrying, worried people, thinking "Is that what being grown up is like?"' These visionary adaptations were exemplars in demonstrating how to transform original material until it becomes a new work in itself.

A research diary I was keeping at the time of writing *Alice* records my early ideas or thinking for the play:

> I've got a couple of ideas 'percolating' or bubbling away like a witch's cauldron in my mind. One is using the idea of a 'rave' or 'underground party' to frame or contextualize my 'new Alice'. So DJ Rabbit is late because he's looking for 'Da Underground', a top secret rave, so secret that no one knows where on earth it is, which as any outdoor rave aficionado in the late '80s will tell you, was often the case.[123]

It was my experience of participating in underground rave culture in the '90s that had inspired the writing of *Johnny Song* and *Gob*, and it was the memories of the egalitarian, yet anarchic illegal free party scene[124] that brought me closer to how I would re-imagine *Alice*:

> In the mid-Nineties, I met a girl called Khush. She was a stalwart of the London free party scene. She took me to a rave in a disused bingo hall. We've been best friends ever since. The underground party movement was my education in non-exclusiveness. Travellers, squatters, ravers, ex-punks, older free thinkers. Anybody, absolutely anybody, was let in. And when in, it was no rules, no fear. You did your own thing. The individual element was embraced. The spirit of punk, even the idealism of the Sixties, lives on in these parties. As the Liberator Collective DJ's say: "We'll live or die on the quality of the music – not how much money is made on the door"[125]

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[123] *The Alice Diaries, A Year in Wonderland (with some heavy rain)*, unpublished journal 2019, p.12. January 10.
[124] In the early Nineties, while the UK's growing house and techno culture slowly sold itself out to the mainstream, a new scene was emerging which had nothing to do with this – fuelled by sound systems and partygoers linked more to the alternative festival/traveller/squat lifestyles than to commercial rave culture.
[125] Programme, *Gob*, King's Head Theatre, Islington 1999.

I began to sense a creatively fertile connection between Alice's strange, 'trippy' adventures underground, and the labyrinth, maze-like nature of warehouse/squat parties, where each new room you entered would bring strange and exciting adventures:

> The second thing 'percolating' in my mind is the crusty old raves/squat parties I used to go to in deserted warehouses, old Mecca bingo halls, and derelict cinemas, where the distinguishing feature was a seemingly never-ending array of sound systems under one roof. Which meant of course you could take your pick from any number of music styles: happy house, hard house, drum n bass, jungle, chill, techno, nosebleed, gabba. I loved that, going from room to room, in a dark and cavernous old building, and experiencing a completely different vibe/atmosphere because of the style of beats/music. (January 10th, 2019)

I had already made the decision to localise *Alice* by setting it against a background of an ever-changing East End. Localism is central to my theatre writing practice, so the title for my new version came quickly: *Alice in Canning Town.* So too did the subtitle*: an exclusively East End reimagining of Carroll's fantasy classic*. Although not originally from the East End, I knew this part of London very well, having moved to Newham in the early '90s, and lived in the borough ever since. I was interested in the East End's constant reinvention of itself, from surviving Hitler's blitz to becoming a leading light in multicultural Britain, and the fact it had birthed several highly influential subcultures and trends in music and arts, including rave culture, drum 'n' bass, jungle, grime.

Two key influences gradually emerged in my approach to reworking Alice for a localized space and contemporary audience: rave culture and East End creativity and innovation. All I needed now was a theme. My diary entry of June 15th, early on during the researching and thinking about the play, records me writing:

> I have a feeling my Alice will bring people together and everyone will be partying like mental under one roof. Like a good old-fashioned squat party in Hackney playing filthy acid techno all night.

I thought of the egalitarian, inclusive and non-elitist nature of the free party scene (no set entrance fee, just spare change tossed into a bucket), and how a derelict office building or warehouse became a 'home' for all sorts of free-spirited, party tribes: ravers, crusties, punks, hippies, travelers, MCs. It quickly became apparent to me that the open-mindedness and inclusive optimism of underground rave and sound system culture provided me with an interesting '*what if*' scenario to work with: what if you were only allowed one sound system in a party, one type of music, one type or record, how would you choose…?

Despite the promised benefits to the whole community by being one of the six East London boroughs to host the 2012 London Olympics, Newham still experiences significant problems with poverty and inequality.[126] Yet Newham is the most diverse local authority in the UK with more than 200 dialects spoken. And as a place that rightly celebrates its multicultural make up, it has been largely successful. It has avoided the kind of toxic racial and religious segregation seen in towns like Bradford[127] and no one ethnic group

[126] "State of the Borough 2021", *Newham Council*, accessed 28 July 2021, https://www.newham.info/state-of-the-borough/. This report by Newham Council states, 'Although Newham has made great strides in tackling deprivation since 2015, it is still ranked amongst the most deprived in England. Over a quarter of our neighbourhoods are in the 20% of most deprived neighbourhoods in the country. Over a quarter of our residents are paid below the London Living wage. Our residents are the most over-indebted in London. We have the highest overall level of homelessness in England'.

[127] Halliday, Josh, and Pidd, Helen, "One city, two cultures: Bradford's communities lead parallel lives", *The Guardian*, 19th June, 2015, accessed 3 February, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/jun/19/bradford-one-city-two-cultures-communities-lead-parallel-lives. 'In a Home Office report written soon after the riots, Ted Cantle said: "Separate educational arrangements, community and voluntary bodies, employment, places of worship, language, social and cultural networks, means that many communities operate on the basis of a series of parallel lives. They do not touch at any point, let alone overlap and promote any meaningful interchange."'

dominates, resulting in a genuine multicultural openness.[128] This is a complex and important political debate, involving assimilation versus integration, diversity, and other problematic concepts, as a recent article by Afua Hirsch in The Guardian demonstrated.[129]

It was this 'unprecedented pluralism' that I saw mirrored in the free party scene, its non-judgemental, non-elitist, broad-minded, and progressive spirit, that provided the core theme/approach of my new *Alice*. In *Johnny Song*, I had sent my intrepid 'Sonneteers of the Street', Johnny and The Drummer Boy, on a wild ride through a frenetic Saturday night on a mission to convert clubbers and partygoers to the cause of poetry. With *Alice*, I wanted to send her on an equally strange and wild journey through an East End, whose council estates once spawned a skinhead subculture, yet became one of the most multicultural places in the UK, even if the impact of immigration and the concomitant "white flight" of "their own kind" is still an issue for places like Newham.[130] And Alice herself would be in the vanguard of this journey. She would be its leader, its young spokeswoman.

I created East End equivalents of Carroll's characters, who would reflect the changing, evolving face of the East End. *Rabbit Rabbit*, a Cockney, born within the sound of Bow Bells, supplanted the original White

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[128] John McDermott, "Diversity and cohesion in Britain's most mixed community", *Financial Times*, 14 October, 2014, accessed 2 November 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/71d04768-63af-11e5-9846-de406ccb37f2. 'But whereas other parts of London, such as Tower Hamlets, have come to be associated with a particular ethnic group, in that case people of Bangladeshi origin, Plaistow and the borough of Newham in which it sits have attained perhaps unprecedented pluralism. It is at the forefront of a broader trend. Diversity in the capital is no longer defined by pockets of large, isolated ethnic groups but by more mixing and less segregation.'

[129] Afua Hirsch, "We have to avoid 'integration' becoming another form of racism", *The Guardian* 13th September, 2019, accessed 3 December, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/sep/13/integration-racism-assimilation-britain-heritage. 'Research has shown that income inequality, not the extent of ethnic or religious diversity, is the most significant factor associated with lower levels of trust within a society.'

[130] *Last Whites of the East End.* A documentary which aired on BBC One on 10 June 2016. It documents the London Borough of Newham, a part of the East End with the lowest percentage of White British people in the country, due both to immigration and the migration of long-time residents, particularly to nearby Essex.

Rabbit. The Caterpillar was updated to *Ali Handsome*, an ex-Bollywood movie star and Shisha bar owner. This was a nod to the success of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi culture in the East End, such as Brick Lane[131], Green Street[132] and Boleyn Cinema in Newham.[133] The 'loved-up', all-party-mad Ms Hatter was a homage to rave culture of Hackney and Dalston, the latter home to legendary Dalston clubs like Labyrinth[134]. Pandora and Zeberdee, 're-edits' of Tweedledee and Tweedledum, were reincarnated as a couple of pretentious, achingly hip/cool Shoreditch hipsters, forever on the lookout for what was 'in' and what was 'out'.[135] The diffident, melancholic Mock Turtle metamorphosed into MC Turtle, a would-be-but-not-very-good grime MC, acknowledgement that East London was the birthplace of grime.[136]

The philosophy of unity, openness and free spiritedness that I experienced in the free party rave scene inspired the plot of *Alice*, and became Alice's goal in the play: to unite the warring tribes. However, a word of caution must be sounded here. Asserting one's autonomy and independent voice in the adaptive process by employing a tactic of staying away from the source material, and avoiding reading/watching other adaptations of *Alice,* has its own pitfalls, as my diary entry of June 18th ruefully

[131] A street in the East End of London, in the Borough of Tower Hamlets. It is the heart of the city's Bangladeshi community and is known to some as *Banglatown*. Famous for its many curry houses.
[132] A road in the London Borough of Newham. In the 1990s, a large amount of Asian people moved into the area which gave it the nickname *Little India* with its bustling Asian stores.
[133] Asian cinema with three screens showing the latest Bollywood releases, some of which are subtitled.
[134] It pioneered the early indoor Rave scene during the days of Acid House music in the late 80s.
[135] Andrew Anthony, "Shoreditch: is hipster heaven now falling prey to 'cultural cleansing?", *The Guardian*, 22 July, 2018, accessed 11 June, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/jul/22/shoreditch-east-end-london art-hub-big-business-gentrification.'It is the home of hipsterism, the birthplace of a thousand bushy beards, but has Shoreditch outgrown its cool? Has it become an urban victim of its commercial success? It's a familiar cycle: a neglected inner city neighbourhood is colonised by artists, a cafe culture flourishes, new businesses move in, then rents go up, and the original inhabitants who gave the place its character are priced out of the area.'
[136] Dan Hancox, "A history of grime, by the people who created it", *The Guardian,* 6 December, 2012, accessed 11 June, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/dec/06/a-history-of-grime. 'At the height of the economic boom a decade ago, while futures, champagne and bad debt swilled around Canary Wharf, the sounds emanating from tower blocks barely a mile away served notice that there was more than one east London. Long before *The Sun* ever talked about "The Brrrap Pack" and Tinchy Stryder scored two No 1singles, his fellow teenage producers, MCs and DJs from Bow E3 – mostly school-friends – created a sound that has stood the test of time.'

records, when I handed in an early draft to James Martin Charlton, the play's director:

> *Alice* is unlike anything I've ever done, (and this includes taking on the canonical *Animal Farm*), it's very difficult to impose, however gently, sensitively or imaginatively, a unifying or even mildly coherent theme on an essentially nonsensical/surreal story, and it's been painful trying to assert my 'authority' over Carroll, without losing sight altogether of why it's a stone cold classic of fantasy literature in the first place. From what JMC is saying, I've clearly reduced Alice to an underground rave play complete with copious references to recreational drugs.

Following some pertinent dramaturgical notes from Charlton and a 'step back' from *Alice* for a few days, my diary entry of June 21st records a much clearer way forward:

> The second draft needs to do two things: broaden Alice's world out, reduce the focus on rave, and ironically, go back to the original, and inject a little bit more of its unique and spellbinding madness into my version. I say ironic, because by this time it's abundantly clear to me that the approach/methodology I used with adapting *Animal Farm*, which was basically, (scandalous as it sounds), give it a quick read and never open it again, is not going to work. And now I find myself leafing through Carroll's Alice in a much more conscientiously and obedient manner.

In Alice's new world underground, all the characters she meets are alone, isolated, suspicious, and when they throw a party, they don't want anyone to come who isn't their 'kind', and no one can offer a rational explanation why:

> **Alice** Can't we invite a few of the others? Please?
>
> **Rabbit Rabbit** It ain't right, it just ain't right.
>
> **Alice** What's not right about it?
>
> **Rabbit Rabbit** Like I said, it just ain't right.
>
> **Alice** That doesn't make sense.
>
> **Rabbit Rabbit** Who said it had to make sense?

Alice It has to make sense.

Rabbit Rabbit Why does it have to make sense?

Alice Because otherwise it's mad.

Rabbit Rabbit That's jus' the way things are.

(p.59)

When Alice brings them all together at a hastily convened 'tea party', pandemonium breaks out when she asks everybody to 'just get along please', and then suggests they have 'one big party':

Zeberdee Yeah, but no tunes. Old fashioned, dude. Let's be in on at the start of something new, right bredren?

Ali Fools! Everybody enjoy themselves at party. Lots of singing and dancing. Bring out the beautiful girls eh? Enough to go round isn't it?

MC Turtle Nah, no singin' an' stuff, blud, jus' spittin' bars, ya get me?

Ms Hatter Got to be a little bit cheeky, little bit saucy, little bit naughty, mysterious, devious, delirious, wiv a little sunny 'hello' on the side.

Rabbit Rabbit Now hold on everyone, can't we all jus' have a straightforward party?

MC Turtle *(kissing his teeth)* Old school shit, knees up Mother Brown

Pandora Well, if we did it in a self-consciously ironic and sub-parodic way…

Zeberdee We could call it Shite Rabbit Party.

(p.65)

Inevitably the party breaks up and everybody bleakly retreats into their solitary, lonely worlds again. But they are quickly hauled before a kangaroo court by the despotic and 'anti-fun' Ministry of Parties, who have decreed that there shall only be one party at a time, and suspect that this law is being flouted:

Big Chair Now you know perfectly well that it's only one party at a time. Which means of course, someone is having an illegal party. Bring the traitors in!

(p.72)

They all have to make a representation and present a convincing case for the right to hold their own party. Ms Hatter is determined they can't stop her from partying all night long, but the Ministry have already created a special law for her:

> **Clerk** *(reading off a list of regulations)* 'The Ministry of Parties shall have the powers to remove persons/strange animals/talking bunny rabbits attending or preparing for a party. This law applies to a gathering on land in the open air of 100 or more persons/strange animals/talking bunny rabbits (whether or not trespassers) at which amplified music is played during the night (with or without intermissions) and is such as, by reason of its loudness and duration and the time at which it is played, is likely to cause serious distress to the inhabitants of the locality. "Music" includes sounds wholly or predominantly characterized by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats.
>
> (p.77-8)

This was a deliberate parody of the infamous Criminal Justice Act's demonising of rave culture,[137] by attempting to outlaw certain alternative lifestyles, and even a particular type of music, namely, house music.[138]

The Ministry of Fun's Big Chair gives them all an ultimatum:

> I'm a fair chair. You can have a party. But only one of you.
> Only one party. Hurry up and decide. Come on, we
> haven't' got all day.
>
> (p.83)

Predictably, no one can agree whose party it should be. Alice has an idea. If they can only have one party, why not have 'lots of little parties. Under the

[137] The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 (c.33) was an Act of the Parliament of the United Kingdom. It introduced a number of changes to the law, most notably in the restriction and reduction of existing rights, clamping down on unlicensed rave parties, and greater penalties for certain "anti-social" behaviours.

[138] "The new ravers/Repetitive Beats/Rave music is back – but the underground has gone mainstream", *The Ecomonist*, 17th August, 2013, accessed 19 May, 2020, https://www.economist.com/britain/2013/08/17/repetitive-beats 'As passages in Britain's statute books go, Section 63 (1)(b) of the 1994 Criminal Justice Act is one of the odder ones. It gives police officers the power to remove people from events at which music "wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats" is being played. The phrase was a draconian attempt to define and derail the illegal raves that first appeared in 1988 in post-industrial parts of London and Manchester, where house music from Detroit and Chicago collided with ecstasy pills from the Netherlands.'

same roof. Everybody together.' She's greeted with murmurs of disapproval. She turns on the doubters:

> **Alice** Well, alright go home and be all on your own then. In the dark. In the corners. Out of the sunshine. All alone. Empty…
>
> *She stares hard at them.*
>
> …or like…
>
> *Eyes blazing.*
>
> …party like mad under one roof…ya feel me Canning Town?
>
> (p.84)

Alice's impassioned plea for unity and coming together works. The partygoers tentatively drop their guard and reach out to each other, until they are all joining in with Alice's defiant, uplifting, celebratory chant:

> UNDER ONE ROOF! UNDER ONE ROOF! UNDER ONE ROOF!
>
> (p.85)

Galvanised and united, they break up the hearing and chase away the terrified Ministry of Parties. Alice has won her battle. Wonderland is finally inclusive.

As previously noted, *Alice in Canning Town* is an example of what Sanders describes as a 'more sustained reworking of the source text which we have identified as intrinsic to appropriation' (28). Like *Revolution Farm*, it clearly utilized elements of 'movements of proximation', via the modernising of its main characters, but it went beyond the standard definition of adaptation, by dispensing with the existing plot altogether and replacing it with an entirely new narrative and theme. It became a new play in its own right, a 'wholesale rethinking of the terms of the original.' As already noted, a 'wholesale rethinking' towards *Alice* felt permissible, and indeed desirable,

because the source-text resisted a uniform thematic interpretation, its meaning or significance mutating with each generation re-inventing Alice to suit the mood of its times. Director Julia Bardsley argues canonical works of literature can withstand such radical reinterpretation:

> If you're using classic works from the canon, which have a particular strength and robustness, they can take quite a lot of being mucked about with, and it's their classic status that allows them to be pillaged and plundered in a particular way.
> (Laera 2014, 110)

But this did not necessarily mean that Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* was extinguished or invisible to an audience. John Ellis suggests that 'adaptation trades upon the memory of the novel, a memory that can derive from actual reading, or, as is more likely with a classic of literature, a generally circulated memory'. (quoted in Sanders: 25) There is no question *Alice in Wonderland* is a 'classic of literature', and there is no disputing either, that it is a widely known and much-loved fantasy story for children and adults alike. Even if they had never read *Alice*, audiences would already have some kind of connection with the material. For example, the White Rabbit and the Mad Hatter are some of the best-known and memorable fictional characters in English literature. And the phrase, falling 'down the rabbit hole', has become a popular shorthand or metaphor for a surreal or bizarre state or situation.

Reconfigured specially for the East End and given a multicultural makeover, the new *Alice* superimposed 'herself', as it were, over Arc in the Park's audience's 'generally circulated' memories of the original, to produce what Hutcheon memorably calls the 'doubled pleasure of the palimpsest: more than one text is experienced – and knowingly so'. (Hutcheon 2006, 116)

One audience member emailed me to say how much she and her friend (and grandsons) had enjoyed the show, perhaps inadvertently alluding to the 'double pleasure' nature of the adaptive experience when she recognised the effect of the 'localisation' on the original to create a 'new play':

> They were thoroughly enchanted by the play, and loved its interactive aspect. When asked which character they liked best, Ashton, the youngest said ''The Rabbit'', whereas Jamie said that he had loved all characters! Julie, their grandmother has also loved your adaptation - actually, it was more like a new play altogether - and because she's born and bred Eastender, she was particularly impressed with the local dimension of the play, the East End characters from her childhood, and the multicultural aspect of the play.[139]

A final note here on how *Alice's* performance environment continued the aim of the Newham Plays to create a 'hand in glove' congruence between physical space and story. Arc in the Park's unusual and unorthodox space provided a plethora of creative and exciting opportunities to stage *Alice*, and the 'playground' element of the Park was something director James Martin Charlton was keen to exploit in his staging:

> If the rabbit needs to disappear, they can do so down a slide. If Ms Hatter and her friends need to freak Alice out, they can swing her between them. If we need somewhere for our hipster Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum to live, why not on the play-boat which lies moored on the grass of the Arc? The Arc gives us, Alice and the audience a Wonderland to explore. (Charlton 2019)

As with *Revolution Farm's* promenade staging, each scene of *Alice* was performed in a different area of the park: a climbing frame; houseboat; trampolines; rope bridges; giant slides. With its multi-positioning of the audience, some scenes had the audience facing them, some had the

[139] Email message to author, August 16, 2019.

audience around them, some had the audience looking up or looking down, this presented its own unique staging challenges, as well as engendering a realignment of the actor-audience relationship. The unorthodox choreography of the space, however, proved a boon not only in understanding the appeal of the fantasy classic, but in the imaginative power of live theatre itself perhaps:

> But the bonus is that we are falling down the most extraordinary rabbit hole, and the audience getting used to each new staging convention mirrors Alice getting used to the new colorful character she is meeting. The space turns each audience member into Alice! (Charlton 2019)

The critical and public response to the show was uniformly positive, and it was gratifying to see recognition for what could be justly described by now as my signature-style of making plays in a community environment: celebrating and democratizing a neighbourhood's cultural and historical legacy through community involvement and use of local space as performance environment.[140] A Newham councillor described the setting as a 'totally surreal and engaging experience. Set in an adventure playground we promenaded from one set to another, up wooden structures and along skateboard ramps.'[141] Ambition Aspire Achieve's trustees were impressed with the 'mixed economy' casting, as well as use of local venues for performance: 'The professional actors were clearly skilled, and some of the student actors

[140] Media coverage of the plays took the area and its venues and organisations to a wider audience, e.g British Theatre Guide said of *Revolution Farm*: 'If like me you have always meant to visit Newham City Farm then Revolution Farm [...] presents the perfect introduction'; and Broadway World's coverage of *Alice Canning Town* emphasized the unique performance space, highlighting its staging in the 'vibrant Arc in the Park, an inclusive adventure playground in Canning Town [...] featuring tree houses, swings, trampolines, rope bridges, giant slides, teepees.' (Stephi Wild, "ALICE IN CANNING TOWN Comes To Arc In The Park Adventure Playground This August", Broadway World, June 17, 2019, accessed July 2, 2019, https://www.broadwayworld.com/uk-regional/article/ALICE-IN-CANNING-TOWN-Comes-To-Arc-In-The-Park-Adventure-Playground-This-August-20190717.

[141] Cllr Sarah Ruiz, Custom House Ward, Cabinet Lead for Children and Young People's Services. *Alice in Canning Town*, Press Cuttings Pack, 2020.

were amazing. An unusual activity for AAA to support but clearly well worth it.'[142] And *The Upcoming's* review perfectly captured the play's theme and approach, 'Kenworth's script draws laughter and warm smiles from the notably diverse, promenading audience. It's true, Canning Town is a melting pot of multiculturalism.'[143]

[142] Haydn Powell, Trustee, AAA, *Alice in Canning Town*, Press Cuttings Pack, 2020.
[143] Daniel McLeod, *The Upcoming*, 2019.

Conclusion

This thesis contends that the theatre practice I have originated, developed and sustained in Newham for over a decade is a coherent body of research, investigating and revealing meaningful ways to embed the life of a play in the town, place or community in which they are written, rehearsed, and performed. My theatre texts explore and respond to local history and culture, built on by the productions discovering ways to negotiate the relation of these texts to specific local sites. Through methodologies of adaptation/appropriation, historical research, dramaturgy, and site-responsive production techniques, my work takes as its wellspring the culture, history and present community of Newham in order to investigate creative ways of valorising and privileging area and community, via the use of public spaces as performance auditoria, and the mixed economy participation of professional and local talent.

The research contends that a localist and grassroots approach is the most effective way of empowering wider access to the arts. It argues for an increased emphasis on performance in local spaces rather than in mainstream auditoria. The plays/productions have marked out a distinct territory by making a virtue of the absence of elements most commonly associated with conventional theatre spaces, e.g., a stage, scenery, lighting, seating. The research practice has harnessed the audience's imaginative empathies, provoking them into filling in the gaps themselves, and by doing so, offers a strongly imaginary experience that rejects notions of passive spectatorship, asking the audience to become more imaginatively immersed in what they are watching.

To return to the ontology of live performance that I raised in the Introduction, and features which mark out my texts and productions as having exploited territories unique to theatre, differentiating them markedly from a more literal medium like film and television, I would like to introduce this section by using an extract from my *Alice* research diary. The following comes at the end of the diary, when the production has finished, and I am reflecting on what I have enjoyed about making theatre in public spaces:

> Whenever I go on my numerous, flaneur-style walks in London, I find I can't help but be conscious of sleeping structures and inert spaces; waiting, waiting, waiting to be transmogrified. To be alchemized into something more than just where people merely eat, sleep and work, to be given 3-dimensional life, fleetingly, hauntingly, transiently, if only for an hour, a day, a week, to say to you, if you would like to listen; *what you thought you knew is not what it is now*; look again. That's what I think theatre in the physical city, and outside of the mainstream, can do at its best; *look again, there might be surprises, a new way of looking at something that was always there.*.

'*What you thought you knew is not what it is now*'.[144] A phrase that perhaps points to theatre's power to make more room for the imagination when it is at its least literal or real. A Council-run, inner city farm in Beckton becomes a symbol of resistance and revolution, and a sober lesson in how the ideology of hope can quickly be replaced by the ideology of fear. An adventure playground in Canning Town is transformed into a multicultural, modern day, East End-flavoured wonderland. It is this privileging and championing of the power of individual imagination that I have striven for in my theatre work. Shared Experience founder Mike Alfreds calls the process 'the essence of pure theatre: the shared imaginations of actors and audiences conjuring up

[144] (*Alice* diary, 2019)

characters who really weren't there: bringing the non-existent into existence.' (Alfreds 2019, 28)

Theatre's other unique, singular ontological quality, is of course is its liveness, as Peggy Phelan has written in her influential *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, 'Performance's only life is in the present. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology' (Phelan 1993, 146). And while I share, up to a point, Philip Auslander's sceptism towards Phelan's definition of theatre as a kind of pristine, untouched liveness, in 'doubting very strongly that any cultural discourse can stand outside the ideologies of capital and reproduction that define a mediatized culture', (Auslander 2008, 45), I would argue that perhaps some 'stand outside' more than others.

I contend that non-institutionalized theatre in community, site specific and localized environments can offer a greater resistance/indifference to commodification or mass reproduction than mainstream or commercial performance. It is precisely the evanescence of this kind of theatre, its ephemerality, that provides or proves its own justification or meaning, without the need to validate itself by entering the 'economy of reproduction'. When Howard Barker was asked how he felt about the response from outside the community to his play for Jellicoe's Colway Theatre Trust, *The Poor Man's Friend*, 'in other words, how people, how critics react to it, or whether you think it's important?', perhaps he was inadvertently alluding to the value of ephemerality in this type of theatre-making in his reply:

> I don't think it's important at all, it's quite likely they won't like it, but I don't think it matters, I'm not terribly interested in whether it goes on anywhere, or whether it's printed or reproduced or anything, it belongs here, all the references are local, and that's it, I don't think it needs a further life. (Arena 1982)

Auslander acknowledges that Phelan has described 'another ostensibly ontological quality of performance when she refers to its continued existence only as a spectatorial memory'(2008, 128), and Patrice Pavis too connects theatre's state of empherality with intimacy and individual memory: "The work, once performed, disappears for ever. The only memory which one can preserve is that of the spectator's more or less distracted perception" (Pavis 1992, 65). Each one of the Newham Plays, I maintain, contains the hope of giving the audience an individual 'spectatorial memory', *precisely* because of the shared or collective recognition that the night (performance) cannot be easily mass-reproduced or repeated, and that there might be value in being offered a fleeting, yet personalized and intimate glimpse, of a community celebrating itself and 'holding up a mirror' to themselves. At its best, the experience should be artisan, local, individual; an antitode to the corporate, the faceless, the homogenous.

In an increasingly digitally-saturated world, where advances in technology are negating the need for face-to-face human contact, the 'analogue' experience of a small group of people in a non-corporate, localized setting, watching a play, on a bare stage, or on a farm or adventure playground, with just a few props, some indicative costumes, becomes almost an act of subversion, and suggests more than a hint of an oppositional stance towards the big-budget, lavish dramas pumped out on an alarmingly regular, if hugely popular, basis by the streaming giants.[145]

[145] 'The nearest the theatre has come to being mass-industrialized is in the phenomenon of McTheatre. This is an unflattering term used to refer to the series of global musical theatre hits that include *Cats* (New London Theatre, 1981), *Les Misérables* (Palais des Sports, Paris, 1981), *Starlight Express* (Apollo Victoria Theatre, London, 1984), *The Phantom of the Opera* (Her Majesty's Theatre, London, 1986), *Miss Saigon* (Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, 1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (Palace Theatre, New York, 1994), *The Lion King* (New Amsterdam Theatre, New York, 1997), and *Mamma Mia!* (Prince Edward Theatre, London, 1999). These are sometimes referred to as

It seems fitting then that I end this thesis with the closing words from my *Alice* diary, in which I feel I have come somewhere close to finally understanding the attraction and value of the Newham Plays as a writer and theatre maker. Part of the appeal, I realize, is to do with their natural resistance to much of the standardization and homogeneity of the economics of mass reproduction. It is not a pre-meditated subversive, rebellious strategy on my part, far from it, it is more that it is simply a default position. The plays can be no other way, if they are not to lose their claim to providing a radically different spectatorial experience to that of watching TV, film and mainstream theatre.

Following the last performance on Sunday, when the actors and crew had packed up, said their goodbyes, and everybody wished each well, I went for a walk and thought about what had been achieved in the last seven days.

> As I was walking along Strait Road, an odd part of Beckton, a road where you could almost fool yourself you're in the country, it's so quiet, tranquil and lined with an abundance of trees on either side, the only thing that gives it away are the abandoned ASDA shopping trolleys and the smashed windows of the solitary, graffiti-strewn bus stop, and amongst this almost holy peace and quiet, I thought this final thing about *Alice,* our audience and our wonderful cast and creative team, and it may be just wishful thinking, but here goes… *it was 10 performances, just a week, in a part of East London nobody knows about, or would ever dream of visiting, but I like to think maybe we did something special there. It was for once only yet I hope it will stay on in your memory. And each memory will be the same, but different. The same because you were there together, different because you brought something of yourself along. You brought your individual imaginations. It's not repeatable, and much as I personally would like it to go on, find somewhere else for it, it was there now, only there, once only, a fleeting, strange, beguiling moment, not forgotten too quickly I hope…yes, not forgotten… that's good enough for me.* (August 18th, 2019)

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Appendices

Johnny Song and *Gob* are unpublished texts, but electronic and physical versions are available in Word or PDF documents on request.

An analysis and summary of completed Pupil Evaluation Forms for performances and school workshops of *Revolution Farm, A Splotch of Red* and *Alice in Canning Town* was produced by Middlesex University in January 2021. Available on request.

Electronic and physical versions of the Education Resource Packs for *When Chaplin Met Gandhi, Revolution Farm* and *A Splotch of Red: Keir Hardie in West Ham* are available on request.

Filmed performances of the Newham Plays can be viewed on my Vimeo account: https://vimeo.com/

For further information about my work as a playwright, see my website www.jameskenworth.co.uk