

# Public Spaces, Public Words: Towards the Making of a Pro-Localist Theatre in the Newham Plays

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## Abstract

This essay 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 Newham Plays series have marked out a distinct territory by making a virtue of the absence of elements most commonly associated with conventional theatre spaces, such as a stage, scenery, lighting, seating. 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” (Phelan).

**Keywords:** Newham, site-specific theatre, new writing, pro-localist, young people

**Newham**

The London Borough of Newham (population 353,134) experiences significant economic and social challenges, with more than half of children (52%) are judged to be in households in poverty, compared to 38% in the typical London borough (Newham/Trust for London). It is euphemistically referred to as a “cold spot” by arts organisations, an area where cultural engagement is significantly below the national average.



*When Chaplin Met Gandhi*; playwright: James Kenworth; director: Matthew Xia; company: Eastlea Theatre Company; venue: Kingsley Hall; actors: Eastlea Community School, Divian Ladwa; premiere: 8 August 2012. Photo: Prodeepa Das

### **Newham Plays**

The Newham Plays are a series of localist-focussed plays, rooted in Newham’s history, culture and people, that I have created, produced and written over a 12-year-long period, whilst living in Newham. Performed in site-specific and site-sympathetic locations in Newham, East London, they feature a “mixed economy” casting of young people and professional actors. The series has originated an approach to cultural engagement that I describe as *Pro-Localist*, in which the plays are partnered and supported by a nexus of local funders, partners and stakeholders. It has given 250 young people living in Newham and from diverse backgrounds the opportunity to engage in the arts and enhanced cultural provision in the area; playing a role in addressing historically low levels of cultural engagement in the borough. Participation in the plays and associated activities has

developed the skills of the young people involved, built confidence and boosted self-belief. Additionally, the plays have benefited local organisations, raising awareness of key sites/venues in Newham and the work of local charities.

The central focus in this essay 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 nurturing 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 Royal Docks Trust; 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.

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 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, such as lighting, seats, stage.

Each Newham Play production has presented its own opportunities and challenges. *When Chaplin Met Gandhi* (2012) told the true story of Gandhi meeting Charlie Chaplin in Canning Town and was performed at Kingsley Hall, a community centre in Bow where Gandhi lived and stayed for three months in 1931. *Revolution Farm* (2014) was a new, contemporary Orwell adaptation performed on an inner-city farm in Beckton with the special permission of the George Orwell Estate; *A Splotch of Red: Keir Hardie in West Ham* (2016) dealt with local political history and toured Newham Libraries and Community Links' Neighbours Hall, where Hardie spoke at one of his many election rallies in Newham, and as a centre for social change, Will Thorne, Bertrand Russell and Sylvia Pankhurst were all to speak, or work, from there. *Alice in Canning Town* (2019) brought a new, multi-cultural, East End flavoured version of Lewis Carroll to a unique and unconventional accessible adventure playground in Canning Town. The plays have featured a hybrid casting of professional actors and local young

people, and they have fully integrated both sets of casts in the texts and productions, fusing contemporary physicality's and language, as drawn from and reflective of the young performers of Newham, with historical materials, adapting existing narratives/stories to the sited, locally specific, contexts.

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, building on the productions and 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 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 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—for example, the “hoodie” *Revolution Farm*, the multicultural *Alice in Canning Town*.

The use of the words “hoodie” and “multicultural” in our publicity and the reviews quickly became a shorthand to describe these adaptations. I will focus primarily on the first two research areas, as the third, the localization of literary classics and Newham history, involves an in-depth analysis and contextualisation of the four Newham Plays and is better fitted to an article of its own.

### ***When Chaplin Met Gandhi***

*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 public reviews' theatre critic Suman Bhuchar 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.”



*When Chaplin Met Gandhi*; playwright: James Kenworth; director: Matthew Xia; company: Eastlea Theatre Company; venue: Kingsley Hall; actors: Mark Oosterveen, Divian Ladwa; premiere: 8 August 2012. Photo: Prodecepta Das

### ***Revolution Farm***

In 2014 Newham City Farm, one of London’s largest and longest established inner-city farms, 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. One of the principal Newham Plays partners, the East London charity Community Links, managed and ran the farm. Community Link’s co-founder Kevin Jenkins 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, sheep, and in particular, Alfie, the Berkshire pig, who appeared to elevate wallowing in mud to an art form, 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." 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 U.K.'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 by setting it on an inner-city farm in one of the poorest parts of the U.K.



*Revolution Farm*; playwright: James Kenworth; director: James Martin Charlton; company: Community Links; venue: Newham City Farm; actors: Kevin Kinson, Katie Arnstein; premiere: 19 August 2014. Photo: Prodeпта Das

### ***A Splotch of Red: Keir Hardie in West Ham***

Having already written two site-local shows in Newham (*Chaplin/Gandhi*, *Revolution Farm*), I was keen to develop and extend my interest in specially adapted locations and sought a site-sympathetic space to perform *A Splotch of Red* in Community Links' Neighbours Hall in Canning Town was where Keir Hardie spoke at one of his many election rallies in Newham.

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 subject matter, and it would give *A Splotch of Red* an authenticity, credibility and “realness” that it perhaps would have not had in a conventional theatre space. 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.”



*A Splotch of Red: Keir Hardie in West Ham*; playwright: James Kenworth; director: James Martin Charlton; company: Middlesex University London; venue: Beckton Globe Library; actors: Abubacarr Samba Bah, Georgina Ponge, Michael-Junior Roberts, Tyrone Ferguson, James Dallimore; premiere: 22 August 2016.

Photo: Prodecepta Das

### ***Alice in Canning Town***

Arc in the Park, an inclusive adventure playground in Canning Town, East London features tree houses, swings, trampolines, rope bridges, giant slides and teepees. It has the feel and look of a Heath Robinson contraption/invention: eccentric, unusual, odd. There is something surreal and rather otherworldly about the place. It appears hermetically sealed off from the paraphernalia of inner city life that surrounding 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 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*. 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.



*Alice in Canning Town*; playwright: James Kenworth; director: James Martin Charlton; company: Middlesex University London; venue: Arc in the Park; actors: Georgina Ponge, Amy Gallagher; premiere: 12 August 2019. Photo: Max Harrison

### “Hand in Glove”

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 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. For instance, Orwell's themes of greed and exploitation contemporized by *Revolution*



*Farm's* setting of an inner-city farm in one of the poorer parts of the U.K. 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 commitment to building community cohesion and promoting diversity.

Site-local is site-specific in the sense that the non-traditional performance space is selected on the basis of the fit or match it offers the creative material, but it 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; for example, "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" (Woolgrove). "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" (McLeod).

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)" (2). 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.

The Newham Plays series have addressed and examined recurrent themes and subject matter, such as revolution, rebellion and social change. 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." My characters are all on fire with something to say and they want to be heard.

**Hero:** 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!

*Kenworth, Revolution Farm 11*



*A Splotch of Red: Keir Hardie in West Ham*; playwright: James Kenworth; director: James Martin Charlton; company: Middlesex University London; venue: Community Links Neighbours Hall; actors: James Dallimore, Samuel Caseley; premiere: 25 August 2016. Photo: Andrew Roberts

### **“Eliminating the Superfluous”**

The “physical, material aesthetic” 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 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 and rivals the passive spectator experience of primarily visual/literal mediums like television 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 freely acknowledge the debt my early writing owes to Steven Berkoff's physical and richly expressive verbal theatre, 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." (19)



*Alice in Canning Town*; playwright: James Kenworth; director: James Martin Charlton; company: Middlesex University London; venue: Arc in the Park; actors: Abubacarr Samba Bah; premiere: 12 August 2019. Photo: Max Harrison

## Cultural Participation

A key motivation of developing and staging the plays is to increase access for young people to cultural and creative opportunities within the borough. I have a near decade-long relationship with three local schools who have worked in partnership on the Newham plays: Gallions Primary School, and secondary schools, Kingsford Community School and Royal Docks Academy. Approximately 30 pupils have worked with professional actors to develop the plays during intensive 3-week periods during their summer holidays since 2014. There is a fluctuating cohort of local youngsters selected from auditions; some newcomers to each production, whilst a few have been in several of the plays, progressing from small to major roles.

Following each production, the schools participate in a series of free drama workshops delivered for approximately 200 pupils over a one-week period (accompanied by resource packs—*Revolution Farm/A Splotch of Red*). The benefit to participating students is evident in comments from teaching staff which highlight the “engaging approach,” the use of the “compelling medium” of theatre and drama “for education and exploration,” and the “far-reaching” value of the experience for the young people involved; alongside the opportunities it gives for students to “engage in the artistry of the drama” and “gain and develop new skills.” Overall summaries of recent Pupil Evaluation Forms for the Newham Plays 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 (Roshini).

Working in partnership with Newham Council, who were keen to promote the play and celebrate the borough’s socialist heritage, *A Splotch of Red* (2016) was staged in libraries across of Newham. A special free offer for the library performances was made available to Newham residents, supported by Newham Council. Deborah Peck, Library Development Officer, Resident Engagement and Participation notes the “teamwork” in bringing together “this ensemble piece in which each young person’s contribution creates ‘the whole’” and the benefits for participants of “working alongside professional actors, in a play written by a local author, locally funded and produced,” in terms of understanding that “the arts is a viable career path.” She also highlights the importance of the young actors being “from diverse backgrounds, portraying a representation of the borough’s demographic. In a society in which representation and diversity is currently being addressed this production trail blazes but without a hint of tokenism.”

*Revolution Farm* and *A Splotch of Red* were developed in collaboration with principle Newham Play stakeholders/partners Community Links (a social action charity, rooted in East London), and *Alice in Canning Town* partnered with Ambition, Aspire, Achieve (AAA), a charity that works to provide opportunities for the children and young people of Newham. Co-founder of Community Links and Founder of AAA, Kevin Jenkins OBE notes that for the children and young people involved, the plays provide “a unique opportunity to build personal

confidence, develop core life skills and grow natural talent and abilities—enhancing their future attainment and achievements personally, socially and educationally.” He continues to reinforce the importance of demonstrating to “children and young people, especially those not previously involved in the arts, that the arts are accessible to them, they can participate in and enjoy such activities, they have much to give to such activities and they can grow as an individual as a result.”

This sense of possibility and creative potential realized was reinforced by the widespread media coverage attracted by the productions including: *Revolution Farm* being “Highly recommended” and described as “a terrifically powerful update” in *The Independent* (Taylor), as well as being one of *Time Out’s* Top Ten Shows to see in August (Time Out Theatre Team), and *A Splotch of Red* receiving a 4-star review in *The Morning Star* (Wakefield) which highlighted the contribution of the young cast members.

Coverage in the *Newham Recorder* of *Revolution Farm* further drew attention to the role of the young actors, “School children shine in re-imagining of Orwell classic” (Barnett), and featured a profile of one of the pupils from Gallion’s Primary School and his ambitions to become an actor. *Newham Recorder’s* preview of *A Splotch of Red* observed, “Young Newham actors enjoy rare experience in Keir Hardie play” (Burns), noting the benefits to young participants. It reported that for “Demy Joseph, 20, the play . . . is his first experience of acting. ‘This is helping me improve my life,’ Demy, who lives in Victoria Street in Stratford, said. ‘I’m not working now because my daughter Inayah was born 12 days ago—but I would like to write.’ . . . ‘It’s an experience that not many people get,’ Abubacarr Bah, 13, who plays three roles in the show, said” (Burns).



*Alice in Canning Town*; playwright: James Kenworth; director: James Martin Charlton; company: Middlesex University London; venue: Arc in the Park; actors: Deborah Griffin, Abubacarr Samba Bah, Rian Perle, Georgia Wall; premiere: 12 August 2019. Photo: Max Harrison

### **Exit the Proscenium Arch**

The staging of the plays in specific locations throughout the borough is a key feature of the series; *Revolution Farm* at one of London's longest established and largest inner-city farms, Newham City Farm; *A Splotch of Red* at Newham's libraries and Community Links' Neighbours Hall in Canning Town; and *Alice in Canning Town* in The Terence Brown Arc in the Park, an adventure play, sports and youth hub run by Ambition Aspire Achieve. The plays have "reimagined" the use of local sites for cultural programmes and raised awareness of venues and organisations involved. Kevin Jenkins (Community Links/AAA) in crediting the "sustained impact" of the plays, writes that the staging of the dramas not only had benefits for the young people involved, but "brought on-going positive benefits for the host organisation" as it enabled them "to promote both the organisation and the particular site concerned in both its immediate catchment area and wider afield" and "increase awareness of the organisation's work." This allowed them not only to strengthen existing relationship with funders, partners and stakeholders but also "to reach and engage new funders, volunteers and supporters." AAA Trustee Haydn Powell watching *Alice* fully supported the charity's involvement in the show: "An unusual activity for AAA to support but clearly well worth it. Do feel free to pass on my positive comments to the team that put on the play. So original, creative and a great opportunity for the young people to gain valuable experience."

Media coverage of the plays also took the area and its venues and organisations to a wider audience. Examples of this are given by *The British Theatre Guide*'s coverage of *Revolution Farm* which said: "If like me you have always meant to visit Newham City Farm then *Revolution Farm* . . . presents the perfect introduction" (Butler); and *Broadway World*'s coverage of *Alice in Canning Town* 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, tepees" (Wild).

Reflecting on the subject matter of the plays, Steve Nicholas of the Royal Dock Trust notes that they have a role in "genuinely enhancing and promoting a sense of worth and achievement and significance for the region." *A Splotch of Red* dramatized and contemporized Keir Hardie's historic election victory in West Ham, raising awareness of Newham's rich social heritage, and its contemporary relevance for the region. Rokhsana Fiaz OBE, Councillor for Custom House Ward, Newham, (elected Mayor of Newham in 2018), attended a performance of *A Splotch of Red* at Community Links in Canning Town, a venue used by Hardie himself for meetings. In writing to congratulate the team behind the production she wrote how this staging had made the experience "all the more potent," highlighted the enduring relevance of the issues that Hardie campaigned on, and expressed her hope that involvement would inspire the young cast's "ambitions as well as civic engagement."

Further support for the importance and relevance of this heritage to local residents is given by the MP for West Ham, the Rt Hon Stephen Timms writing the introduction to the educational resource pack produced to accompany *A Splotch of Red* workshops, where he draws attention to the modern day relevance of many of Hardie's causes, adding that he hopes that the resource pack "will play an important part in keeping alive the memory of Keir Hardie and this fascinating period of Newham's history."

Schools and pupils participating in the workshops have recognized and applauded the value of celebrating Newham's past in the plays too. Kingsford Community School's Head of Drama, Andrea Downer, enthused in *A Splotch of Red*'s Education Resource Pack, "Exploring the political history of their local area and the work of Keir Hardie, proved to be both fascinating and eye opening for students." In an interview with local newspaper *Newham Recorder*, one of the young local actors in the play talked about how much he had learnt from the play's subject matter, "We should be proud of Keir Hardie. If he didn't surface, who knows where we would be? Work would still be painstaking" (Burns).



*Revolution Farm*; playwright: James Kenworth; director: James Martin Charlton; company: Community Links; venue: Newham City Farm; actors: Katie Arnstein, Andreas Angelis, Kevin Kinson, Samuel Caseley, Nicola Alexis; premiere: 19 August 2014. Photo: Prodepta Das

### **“Not What It Is Now”**

To return to the ontology of live performance that I raised at the beginning of this essay, 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 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.

*The Alice Diaries; 18 August 2019*



“What you thought you knew is not what it is now.” 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 characters who really weren’t there: bringing the non-existent into existence” (Alfreds 28).

Theatre’s other unique, singular ontological quality is, of course, 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” (146). And while I share, up to a point, Philip Auslander’s scepticism 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” (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, which 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 Ann 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*

Auslander acknowledges that Phelan has described “another ostensibly ontological quality of performance when she refers to its continued existence only as a spectatorial memory” (128), and Patrice Pavis too connects theatre’s state of ephemerality 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 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 antidote 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. Signalling, covertly or overtly, consciously or unconsciously, 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 uber-dominating, streaming giants. According to Rebellato (40), 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 “megamusicals.”

It seems fitting then that I end this article 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 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.

*The Alice Diaries; 18August 2019*

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