

Farms, Libraries and Adventure Playground spaces for Orwell, Hardie, Carroll and Fry. James Martin Charlton's Site-Responsive Productions of James Kenworth's Plays in Newham

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Abstract

From 2014 to 2022, I directed a series of site-specific plays by James Kenworth in East London's Newham borough, funded by The Royal Docks Trust. Each production was staged at a non-theatre site. My role as a director was to facilitate productions that respond to the site's possibilities and uncover congruencies between the site and the content of the text. My process is site-responsive, using Wilkie's taxonomy of site-based theatre; it involves exploring the site, allowing its form to meld with the story and text of the performance, and creating a deep synergy between site and text to create a unique meaning.

The productions were *Revolution Farm* (2014), *A Splotch of Red: Keir Hardie in West Ham* (2016), *Alice in Canning Town* (2019), and *Elizabeth Fry: The Angel of Prisons* (2022). *Revolution Farm* was a promenade production at an inner-city farm. *A Splotch of Red* toured community halls and libraries, while *Alice in Canning Town* was a promenade production over a vast children's playground. *Elizabeth Fry* was staged in a library space that aligned with the play's prison settings.

This paper offers a case study of my practice in staging these plays in these environments, drawing on public and critical reactions and theories of site-specific, community, and immersive theatre. I argue that as a director, it is my job to imaginatively excavate and collaborate with the sites to reveal a production which has always potentially been there, awaiting discovery. In this way, these sites become the site of a rough magic, which a responsiveness to space and its ever-existing potential as theatre can reveal.

Keywords: Theatre, site specific, drama, directing, Newham (London).

The Newham Plays

From 2014 to 2022, I directed four productions in an ongoing project with the playwright James Kenworth, The Newham Plays, performed at non-traditional sites and venues in the London Borough of Newham, funded by the Royal Docks Trust. The plays were *Revolution Farm* in 2014, a free adaptation of George Orwell; *A Splotch of Red: Keir Hardie in West Ham* in 2016, about Labour Party pioneer Hardie's campaign and victory in the 1892 West Ham South by-election; *Alice in Canning Town* in 2019, freely adapted from Lewis Carroll; and *Elizabeth Fry: The Angel of Prisons*, on the 18th century prison reformer. For Kenworth (2022), these plays put into practice what he defines as a pro-localist approach to production:

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 (p. 42).

The plays have been produced with casts that mix professional performers with local young amateurs. They have been performed at a variety of spaces within Newham, none of which was ostensibly designed for or had previously been utilized as a performance space. Whilst Kenworth's practice has been around the development of spaces for "access and deepening participation" for local young people, my own practice as director on these productions has been around opening access and participation in and for the local spaces chosen for performance. I have worked to reframe these spaces, for the period of production and performance, as performing spaces. Given that the plays used this mixed economy casting and the funding model has meant that they have needed to be rehearsed in only two weeks, I have been required to develop a practice which both allows optimum collaboration with and within the spaces alongside a disciplined schedule to achieve a professional level of performance. These are theatre productions which have been reviewed favourably in such UK national publications as *The Independent* (Taylor, 2014), *Morning Star* (Wakefield, 2016), and *The Spectator* (Evans, 2022). This paper gives some account of the practice, with an emphasis on my collaboration with these spaces.

Wilkie's Taxonomy

It is useful here to remind ourselves of Fiona Wilkie's taxonomy of site-specific theatre which draws a difference between three types of Site-specific production, which can be summarised as "site-sympathetic (an existing performance text physicalized in a selected site); site-generic (performance generated for a series of like sites); and site-specific (performance specifically generated from/for one selected site)" (Wilkie, 2002, p 150 quoted in Pearson, 2010, p.8).

Revolution Farm at Newham City Farm and *Alice in Canning Town* at Arc in the Park in Canning Town would, by this set of classifications, be site-specific. The *A Splotch of Red* tour of Newham libraries and the Community Links Hall in Barking Road made it more appropriately categorised as a site-generic production. Elizabeth Fry, performed solely within the Elizabeth Fry Room at Canning Town Library, was once again site-specific. For artists operating in a series of sites across a borough over several years, and on productions with different content – two literary adaptations, two historical biographies – flexibility of approach is required. There is never a one-size fits all. The importance is always to be responsive to the site, which is why I personally would prefer to call all of my practice site-responsive. This chimes with Eclipse Theatre Company's definition of the term, "Site responsive is when you find a space and have it reflect what story it wants to tell. It is allowing the architecture of the space to inform you of what should be experienced" (Eclipse Theatre Company, 2018).

Revolution Farm

The first of my Newham Play productions was *Revolution Farm*, performed at Newham City Farm in Beckton. The venue had been chosen by Kenworth and Community Links (a local charity which both produced the production and at that time managed the farm) before I became involved. They had originally envisaged the play as taking place entirely in the large barn on the site. This would have made it a conventional black box production stuck in the middle of a city farm for novelty effect. When I visited the farm, I immediately saw that the area – including the barn but also including a children's playground, a fixed table tennis stand, a small open-air classroom, a field and a hut – offered possibilities beyond merely recreating a black box theatre-space performance in the Barn itself.

After visiting the site, I realised that this had the potential to be a promenade production, with the audience following the action around the various spaces in a performance area which was happily and usefully corralled from the rest of the farm by a fence. No animals were harmed or in fact used in this production, although the occasional sound of mooing and clucking came in useful as an aural backdrop.

This corral was not only practical, in that it delineated the performance site within the farm site, but also metaphorically useful. The audience, like the revolting animals in the story, were fenced within the performance space, as citizens of the former Soviet Union were fenced within a figurative iron curtain.

At the beginning of the play, the production put the audience into the barn as witnesses to a meeting in which the animals plotted the revolution. The revolt then 'happened' outside this barn, with the audience still in the dark inside but hearing various bangs, crashes, shouts and other sounds of violence in the world beyond. The human audience were immersed in the

situation of the humans on whose farm the animals were revolting. One critic wrote, “(...) the animals turn on the humans, branding us, ‘scum’, and confining us to the barn as they revolt, chanting and hitting the walls aggressively, with our imaginations left to rampage (...)” (Ginger Hibiscus, 2014).

Later in the play, I staged the exit of the play's Boxer character, renamed Warrior, as a long retreat along the pathway out of the farm towards the public road. The other animals waved him goodbye as the Clover character, Lil' Monster, shouted a warning that “they're taking you to the knacker's yard” (Kenworth, 2014, p. 63). Here the space allowed a long, distant retreat which compounded the poignancy of the situation.

Adjacent to the corral was a large field, which outside of performance time held a cow. We used this field for the building of the windmill, a contraption with a design inspired by some lines of William Blake:

...cruel Works

Of many Wheels I view, wheel without wheel, with cogs tyrannic,

Moving by compulsion each other

(Blake, 2004, p. 662).

Later the field was used for the play's final scene, an athletics event for which I drew some inspiration from North Korea's Arirang state-sponsored games in which individuals are reduced to specks in a mosaic celebrating worker's revolution whilst the tyrant looks on are a betrayal of individuality. The idea of a revolution which comes full circle and ends in a situation as bad if not worse than the starting place underpins William Blake's poetic image of the Orc cycle in his epic poems (Frye, 1947). In summary, the figure of Orc in Blake's mythic poems is the image of revolutionary energy. State-sponsored games in which individuals are reduced to specks in a mosaic celebrating worker's revolution whilst the tyrant looks on are a betrayal of individuality. The promising sunrise of the revolution, designed to free each individual animal, had failed. By happy coincidence, the final of the evening performances of our production coincided with the sun's decent in east London, thus making the farm not only a performance space by the site of the re-enactment of myth, a ritual space.

Alice in Canning Town

This same principle of letting the site shape the production came back into play when we used an adventure playground in Canning Town, Arc in the Park, as the site for *Alice in Canning Town*.

The Arc in the Park is dominated by large play structures. As a director, I realised that these offered unique opportunities. If the rabbit needs to disappear down a rabbit hole, he can do so down a slide. If a Hatter needs to freak Alice out, she can sway her on a rope swing. My

own favourite piece of staging was an argument between Alice and the Rabbit, set high on a structure at the end of a rope-bridge, the audience experiencing the shouting from a few feet below – the experience of many an inhabitant of east end apartment tower blocks, listening to the arguments of their neighbours. Alice and The Arc gave to us as creatives, to Alice as a character, and to the audience as promenaders a wonderland to explore.

Alice's encounters in the Canning Town wonderland were mirrored by each audience member's personal encounters with the various spaces within the Arc. The Arc is a site where children play, learn and socialise – precisely the things Alice does on her adventures. So, the Arc as site collaborated with us to tell the universal story of Alice, a child exploring, getting an education and finding out about others. The play on the Arc site offered a route for audiences to explore, encounter and get a brief education in different types of East End culture – cockney, bhangra, rave, grime, etc.

At the end of the play, we staged a council meeting, based on Carroll's trial scene, in which the various characters asserted their right to hold their kind of party. The rope swings and various levels allowed us to make this into a crazy bedlam of a council chamber, from which the idea that many different parties can exist in the same time and space emerged – the many times and spaces of the site mirror the many cultural times and spaces of the east end, all of which exists in the one time and space which is the performance at the Arc, Alice's Canning Town.

For *Farm* and *Alice*, the production planning began with a flâneur-like exploration of the space. For Federico Castigliano, "the flâneur craves a revelation that might change his life and destiny. He seeks to capture and eventually to preserve, through artistic or literary expression, a new form of beauty" (Castigliano, 2017, p. 17). I wandered, scrambled, explored, and intensely noticed every inch of the space, allowing it to speak to me as I thought about how the text might be manifested here, creating a production with its own sense of beauty.

A Splotch of Red and Elizabeth Fry

The tour of *A Splotch of Red* demanded a different approach. The play was a piece of re-enacted East End history. The venues were disparate in terms of shape and size. The venues did, however, have one thing in common: the Newham libraries and the Community Links Hall were repositories of Newham history. The libraries contained books and archives about local events and people, including the 1892 by-election; the hall was a venue in which the play's main characters Keir Hardie and Will Thorne both spoke (Community Links, 2020).

On this occasion, I worked with the designer Maria Terry to create a production in which the performers would enact the tale using the simplest of means. Sets and locations would be created from a number of wooden crates, signifiers of the kind of menial manual labour carried out by the workers whom Hardie strove to represent. These crates would symbolise the cast,

as spiritual heirs of the voters of 1892, carrying the story of the by-election into the local spaces, retelling and reliving for contemporary audiences the history, politics, and working-class culture of the area. The crates became factories, dock yards, pubs and, of course, political soapboxes.

The venue for our most recent production, the Elizabeth Fry room at Canning Town library was, on first viewing, a distinctly uninspiring municipal meeting space. As I explored the room, the librarian guiding me explained how this Elizabeth Fry room, which opened into the larger Daisy Parsons room, could be closed off by means of an electric partition wall which slowly, mechanistically, sinisterly cut the space in two on the turn of a key. Given I was producing a play about a prison reformer, with scenes inside Newgate prison with turnkeys as characters, the opportunity to enclose and lock the audience in the play's space was ideal. The audience each night was marched from one room to the other, the wall close on them, and the play unfolded. It created the ideal claustrophobic site for the production. The Elizabeth Fry room had been waiting for this Elizabeth Fry play.

Conclusion

These productions have allowed the spaces in which they were performed to shape and give meaning to the performances. The sites on each occasion seemed to be waiting for these productions, which emerged from exploration of and dialogue with the sites. The art historian Antony Blunt writes that, "For Michelangelo the essential characteristic of sculpture is that the artist starts with a block of wood and cuts away from it until he reveals or discovers the statue in it" (Blunt, 1962, p. 73).

For myself as a director, these productions have given me the knowledge that my job is to reconnoitre the sites in order to reveal the production which has always, in potential, been there, waiting for our rough magic to awake their sleeping, secret promise to be the performing spaces of these plays.

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