

The Politics of 'Community'

in community theatre practice: the case of
Manaton and East Dartmoor (MED) Theatre.

A partial history of the community arts movement

- ❁ Owen Kelly's *Community Art and the State. Storming the Citadels* (1984) presents a critical history of the community arts movement.
- ❁ Without a clearly articulated critical programme, the movement veered from cultural activism to pseudo-social/community work.
- ❁ Kelly highly critical of the Association of Community Artists (ACA). Their 'determined pragmatism' led them to pursue a 'strategy of vagueness' in order to secure government funding of their activities (Kelly 1984: 22-23). It reduced the movement to "something with the status of ameliorative social work for what are pejoratively called disadvantaged groups" (Watt, 1991: 56).
- ❁ Watt – Kelly needn't be so hard on the ACA. Community difficult to define for sociologists let alone an organisation formed to advocate on behalf of community artists (located across the (a)political spectrum).
- ❁ Deep pragmatism – cultural activism

The end of community arts?

- ❁ Dominant narrative of community arts - rise and fall (Bishop 2012; Crehan 2011).
- ❁ Crehan – after the 80s – community came to be defined as ‘areas of deprivation’ (p81) and “community art retained legitimacy as a form of social welfare” (p86)
- ❁ Tight knot between community, (non-)participation and marginalisation across social and cultural spheres.

Participation in arts and social impact (1990s and 2000s)

- ❁ 'Government through community' (Rose 1999: 176)
- ❁ Merli contra Maratasso's *Use or Ornament* (1997): while community arts was "a spontaneous movement, its revival is a device "offered" by the government... the aim is the restoration of social control using the same tools, although otherwise directed. (Merli, 2004)
- ❁ "participatory arts as a form of governance, under the heading of promoting social cohesion" (Merli 2004)
- ❁ New Labour/Social Exclusion Unit - subsidised cultural sector "expected to deliver on basis of social and economic policy targets that relate to social inclusion and local economic development strategies already in place" (Belfiore in Mirza 2006: 24).

The original impulse behind what came to be community arts had been the desire for a liberating self-determination through which groups of people could gain, or regain, some degree of control over some aspects of their lives, and the parallel realisation that an artistic practice could itself be a form of cultural activism.

The way in which this practice was established, however, meant that it was, in many areas, likely to lessen the self-determination of those people with whom we worked. We were arriving more and more, not as activists, but as quasi-employees of one or another dominant state agency. We were, in effect, inviting people to let one branch of the state send in a group of people to clear up the mess left by another branch of the state, while at the same time denying that we were working for the state (Kelly p. 29-30).

(Re-)defining community: Social Welfare vs Cultural Democracy

- ❁ Part 1 – partial (critical) history
- ❁ Part 2 and 3 – redefinition of community and programmatic goals.
- ❁ Kelly situates critical programme of community arts in context of long tradition of British socialist thought (Williams, EP Thompson, Richard Hoggart).
- ❁ Takes EP Thompson's notion of class – “a class is not a thing, but a relationship which ‘happens’, and can only be defined dynamically and historically” (in Watt p. 61)
- ❁ Same could be said to be true of community: “the interactions within a group of people who choose to see themselves as a community continually alter the nature of that community so that it is always in a state of becoming and therefore growing and thus avoids the status of a thing to be serviced” (Watt p. 61).

Static vs dynamic community

- ❁ “Static notions of community are seen as impositions, usually categorisations, by a dominant culture concerned to maintain itself as monolithic by exercising its power to define and subsume subgroups.”
- ❁ “Dynamic notions of community ... allow the creation of purposive communities of interest which, by the process of self-definition, resist being thus subsumed and can retain an oppositional integrity. This autonomy introduces the possibility of internal negotiation as a basic mode of social interaction, and they are consequently potentially democratic and alterable. The commitment to democracy as a principle is then seen as leading to the possibility of broad alliances between autonomous groups working to undermine the dominant culture through an insistence on common access to the process of creating meaning and value within the culture”

(Watt 1991: 64).

Case Study: Manaton and East Dartmoor (MED) Community Theatre



❁ *The Badgers 1980*

❁ *Badgerland 2015*

- ❁ Since 1980 (*The Badgers*), MED has been producing performance on Dartmoor about Dartmoor by/for people who live there.
- ❁ Not a nostalgic retreat to community grounded in place (after Tönnies).
- ❁ MED's work explores the challenges of living in an environment protected and preserved as 'countryside' within a national infrastructure of recreational facilities.
- ❁ It aims to be 'provocative without antagonizing to the point of building barriers' and to act as a 'catalyst for getting people to think in a social forum' (Beeson and Stobart 2010).

- ❁ *The Badgers* (1980) - “a satire on preservationist ethos prevailing in National Park thinking at the time, as well as protest against the gassing of Badgers by the Ministry of Agriculture” (Beeson 2015).
- ❁ Gillian Rose (1997) has written about the complex use of the term ‘community’ by community arts workers (in Edinburgh).
- ❁ According to Rose, community arts workers radicalize the notion of community in the naming of a community as marginal in relation to the (spatial) actions of power.
- ❁ Critical anti-essentializing move.

- ❁ *The Badgers* took issue with the treatment of human and non-human inhabitants of Dartmoor by the national park authority. It was felt that the prevailing policy of preservation of the 'natural' environment (countryside) for park users, typically drawn from outside park boundaries, outweighed the interests of humans and non-humans living within the park itself.
- ❁ This apparent absence of care or concern for park inhabitants created a central (interior) zone void of power. MED community theatre through its very formation (as well as cultural production) actively addresses this positioning of the centre as marginal to power.
- ❁ Marginalisation is not an essential quality of place-based community but is produced through play of power difference.
- ❁ Active deployment of community as marginal carries a critical edge – a way of naming that which is disempowered/disenfranchised, as a way of arguing that these communities lack what they should have (Rose 1997).

- ❁ MED Theatre reprised *The Badgers* in 2015 as *Badgerland*
- ❁ In the inaugural play two archeologists accidentally fell into a badger sett and had to cooperate with them to dig an escape route before they were all gassed. In the 2015 production the same two archeologists accidentally fall into a badger sett. This time they are made to front the badger clan's bid for political independence.



Analysis of 'spatiality of power', place (Dartmoor) and political community.

- ❁ Dartmoor as nowhere (young people)
- ❁ Dartmoor as thoroughfare (re-routing railway from coast to across Dartmoor)
- ❁ Dartmoor as somewhere – (global) tourist mecca
- ❁ Dartmoor as a network of places connected via a public (underground) transport system (utopian).

The end

