

**Brunel University**

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**M.Res Social Anthropology**

**EXPERIENCING UNCERTAINTY,  
LIMINALITY AND CHANGE:  
Cross-case study of Community  
Theatre Projects in London**

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## **Abstract**

In this dissertation I use the narratives of applied theatre practitioners and workshop participants to explore how drama practices can subvert existing power structures and mould new ones, which may prove more appropriate to the local social context.

For a period of 6 months, I conducted participant-observation research in three community theatre projects, which offered drama workshops to the Chinese community (aged 25 to 65 years), to mental health patients (aged 30 to 50 years), and lastly, to young refugees aged (aged 15 to 25 years) in the London area. Whilst taking different roles in these theatre projects, sometimes as co-facilitator and other times as trainee, I was able to interview practitioners and participants in a semi-structured way about their experiences, perceptions and values. In addition, I was involved in several public theatre performances and travelled with one of the groups to attend a one weekend residential workshop in Kent.

The emerging core themes throughout were the differing perceptions of what the theatrical space, often theorized as the liminal space, brings into one's life and how one steps into it, inhabits it, and results changed by this experience. This potential transformative effect of drama practices is foregrounded in community projects and various roles or 'personae' are created, by practitioners and participants, to inhabit the new space, which is governed by new power structures.

Theoretically, I draw upon three major perspectives: liminality (Turner, 1969), transitional space (Winnicott, 1971), and 'front stage' and 'back stage' personae (Goffman, 1959).

In conclusion I argue that the liminal space created in drama practices is shared and negotiated between practitioners and participants, and both communities benefit and seek experiencing it and benefiting from the emotional support and social capital that ensues from this politically charged sphere.

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## Background – Applied Theatre

Applied Theatre or Applied Drama is a term that denotes the wider user of drama practice in a specific social context and environment. It distances from traditional drama and brings its focus on the processual and participatory nature of its practices. Applied Drama is said to be a therapeutic medium, using narrative and both real and imagined story as a tool to examine shared experiences through a dramatic framework. It uses symbols, role play and improvisational theatre to allow a point of entry to the “psyche” of participants, and as a vehicle for exploring the relationship between knowledge and action.

Applied Theatre has historically been labelled with a number of terms, such as grassroots theatre, social theatre, political theatre, radical theatre, etc. and throughout the years various methodologies have been developed depending on the purpose and context where it is to be used. The latter are often classified in the following categories: Theatre in Education (TiE), Popular Theatre, Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), Theatre for Health Education (THE), Theatre for Development (TfD), Prison Theatre, Community-based theatre, Museum Theatre, Reminiscence Theatre, etc. I’ll start by giving a quick overview of the most widespread of these practices before outlining the core differences between applied drama and traditional drama.

### Theatre in Education

**Theatre in Education (TiE)** is a type of interactive drama that aims at emotionally engaging the audience to address a particular social or curricular issue. TiE deals with a particular topic that is relevant to a specific audience and is performed in their own environment, be it a school setting, juvenile detention centre, or community space. TiE seeks to challenge the audience and the performers. It uses drama techniques as the catalyst for discussion and the activities provide structure for the exploration (Downey, 2007, pp. 99-109).

A primary goal of TIE is to motivate the audience to explore the complexities of the issues at hand. It is the scenes in the drama itself that draw the audience into the issues emotionally and give the conflict a sense of urgency and reality that a rhetorical discussion may not. Theatre-in-Education is acknowledged to have started as a separate art form and educational activity at the Coventry Belgrade Theatre in 1965. A group of actors, teachers and social workers were brought together to create a community outreach team to establish the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry. The late 60s and 70s saw the flowering of the participatory form of TiE, but also the beginnings of its decline.

## Popular Theatre

**Popular Theatre** is described as an adult education method in which different kinds of performance (drama, puppetry, songs, and dance) are used “to engage people in more active and more aware participation in community affairs” (Kraai, 1979). Popular Theatre is different than traditional theatre because rather than mirroring and mimicking culture, it shows the contradictions, leaving the audience with unanswered questions upon which to reflect. Its goal is to develop critical awareness of participants’ situation. Thus, art is used in a deliberately functional sense –not as an end in itself but as a medium of social transformation.

The use of African drama in adult education traces its roots to colonial times in Ghana if not further back to pre-colonial theatre practices. In a 1957 article on "Village Drama in Ghana," A. K. Pickering wrote:

“It has been an axiom since mass education commenced in Ghana in 1948 that the creation of an atmosphere of good will in villages is essential if serious teaching is to succeed. It was in this connexion, with recreational physical training, boxing, games for the young and not-so-young, community singing and simple craftwork, that village drama, by a happy inspiration, was introduced. Plots were borrowed from old mystery plays, from short stories, fables and local legend, plays were woven around them and enacted in the simplest of rural settings. [...] Not infrequently a member of a village audience, having grasped

the drift of the play, would join in and take part –a gesture which always evoked great enthusiasm. By 1951 three mass education teams were operating in Ghana and village drama was a widely established and popular favourite both with staff and audience.” (Pickering, 1957)

It has often been referred to as people’s theatre, “speaking to the common man in his language and idiom and dealing with problems of direct relevance to his situation” (Kavanagh, 1985, p. 221). It is considered ‘popular’ because it attempts to involve the whole community, not just a small group determined by class, status or education level. It focuses on awakening the latent capacity of the people to take part, make their own decisions and organize themselves for common action. It aims at fostering social changes and encouraging the solidarity of the people by the means of shared experiences and interchanges provided by realistic, critical and free theatre performances. Better defined by its goal of fostering personal and social transformation, than by the various forms it may take, Popular Theatre uses participants’ experiences to collectively create theatre and engage in discussion of issues through artistic means. (Conrad, 2004, p. 4)

## Theatre of the Oppressed

**Theatre of the Oppressed (TO)** is a method created in the 1960s by the Brazilian director Augusto Boal, greatly influenced by the work of pedagogue and theorist Paulo Freire. His method uses theatre as means of knowledge and transformation of the social and relational reality. It was born from “simultaneous dramaturgy”, where actors or audience members stop a performance to change the outcome of what they were seeing, very often some kind of oppression. His method was clearly inspired by Brecht’s work in the 1930s Germany where he looked for ways to break the theatrical “fourth wall” that separates audience and actors.

Simultaneous dramaturgy evolved into Forum Theatre where the audience members are invited to step in the performance and enact the changes they want to see occurring in the play, transforming hitherto spatial meanings of on and off stage in theatre. Consequently, it

undid the audience/actor split and a new form of political theatre was created. Inviting audience members to become part of the performance he created a new theatre role, that of 'spect-actor'. The latter concept became a dominant force in his later work which encourages the audience to not only imagine change but to actually practise that change, reflect collectively on the suggestion, and thereby become empowered to generate social action.

**Theatre for Development (TfD)** is another variant of applied drama which was a clear purpose of fighting underdevelopment and poverty. Some authors highlight the participatory nature of TfD while others identify it with "modes of theatre whose objective is to disseminate development messages, or to conscientise communities about their objective social political situation" (Mda, 1983, p. 48). It may take the form of scripted plays performed to live audiences or broadcast over the radio lacking people participation or may be improvised and fully participatory (Nogueira, 2002).

Theatre for Development is often considered as the counterpoint to Popular Theatre. Some authors, such as Byam (1999) understand the former as the most participatory, while others, like Penina Mlama identify Popular Theatre as a reaction against the development process, which is based on people's genuine participation.

"A popular theatre movement has emerged in Africa as a conscious effort to assert the culture of the dominated classes. [...] It aims to make the people not only aware of but also active participants in the development process by expressing their viewpoints and acting to better their conditions. Popular Theatre is intended to empower the common man with a critical consciousness crucial to the struggles against the forces responsible for his poverty." (Mlama, 1991, p. 67)

This opposed interpretations of what TfD —as well as other applied theatre methods— can bring to communities prompt us to address the politics of performance; this is, its role in the creation of national and cultural identities, as well as its role in resistance and social change (Drewal, 1991, p. 25). On one hand, traditional theatre confers to the director the power to



impose on the audience his or her own perspective of reality through the theatrical techniques of staging. Thus, unequal power relationships arise between the director, the actors and the audience, which are explicit and tolerated for aesthetic purposes. However, this power imbalance may also be instrumentalized and used purposefully to legitimate prevailing hegemonic discourses. In traditional theatre, "the power remains with the person who organizes the spectator's view, in this case the director rather than the viewer" (p. 25).

On the other hand, applied theatre which can be as instrumentalized as traditional theatre, proposes in most cases "a problem-posing theatre, [and] dialogizes audience and performers as a grass-roots approach to development" (p. 25). By attempting a participatory, dialogical theatre, the theatres of resistance strive to overcome institutionalized mechanisms of production and transmission of knowledge, meaning and power relationships. In both cases, drama techniques are instrumentalized to address power relationships, either to legitimize or subvert the existing power structures, and in the latter case, also creating in new ones.

Applied theatre cannot be defined in any one way some scholars argue. It is sometimes defined as a normative discursive practice in constant dialogues with other theatrical practices. "The social utterance that we conceptualize as applied theatre arises from and constantly interacts with other modes of social discourse. It is never in an exclusively privileged position and thus constantly negotiates and renegotiates its own articulations in the larger societal context" (Desai, 1990, p. 5). These articulations involve the domain of the theatrical content as well as the realm of theatrical practices and methodologies. It is the processual, ever-changing and uncompleted nature of the relationship between the discursive practices of applied theatre and those of the larger society that empowers the theatre as a political act and keeps it from slipping into a passive redundancy. "This relationship makes the theatre a [*potentially*] active interpretive and socially volatile process." (Desai, 1990, p. 5) in the best case scenarios. Thus, analysing the discursive practices associated with any specific applied-theatre project as well as those of its theatrical practices may provide some insight on the political significance of the project.

Other scholars may define applied theatre by identifying the common elements to most of its practices which are considered "integral to the fabric of applied theatre, as an engaged, social, artistic phenomenon" (Prendergast & Saxton, 2009, p. 11). The following is a non-

exhaustive list of the common characteristics of the widespread applied theatre practices.

Applied theatre practices,

- focus on multiple perspectives: the director's, the actors' and the audience's,
- show disregard for sequence as fundamental to effective structure, as opposed to Aristotelian drama where plots must follow a clear structure: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution (Freytag, 1983 [1863]),
- often have endings that remain open for questioning,
- tend to explore communicating non-verbally through movement and image, rather than relying on a fixed script,
- frequently rely on improvisation
- often show a direct reflection of actual life, with a clear political agenda to raise awareness and foster social change
- include some kind of participatory process where participants reflect on their reality and come together to produce the content of their performance; supporting in this way participants to become aware and capable of change.
- address issues of local importance that may or may not be transferable to other communities.
- include the audience as a key participant in the creation of understanding and action.

It must be noted that applied theatre was born in a very specific socio-political and economic context, the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which was influenced by events and ideological revolutions such as the fall of the Berlin wall, feminism, post-modernism, and the rise of the individualism and of individuals ready to question authority. Thus, applied theatre may be seen as an offspring of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's ideological shifts and changes in power relationships, and its underlying driving force which keeps questioning the existing power structures and prevailing hegemonic discourses in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Theoretical Framework

In the following, I will give a brief description of the key concepts drawing on performance theory and studies with reference to the phenomenon of individual transformation, ultimately aiming to construct a more precise delineation of the analytical framework utilized in the interpretation of my ethnographic material.

### Dominant Performance Perspectives

Since the early 1900s human action has been theorized using dramaturgical paradigms and metaphors. Some of the most influential authors include: Kenneth Burke (1945), American literary theorist and philosopher, who used a performance-oriented theory in the study of rhetoric and aesthetics and undoubtedly had a strong influence in anthropology, sociology and folklore studies; Victor Turner who proposed various models of social drama (1957) and the ritual process (1969), where he introduced the now widespread notions of liminality<sup>1</sup> and communitas; Gregory Bateson whose work on metacommunication in performance and play illuminated the politics of communication<sup>2</sup> (1958); Erving Goffman who developed a dramaturgical model of the presentation of self in everyday life (1959), as well as 'frame analysis' (1974), which seeks to explain how individuals recognize different types of interactions that may be occurring at the same time in a given setting<sup>3</sup>; Clifford Geertz

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<sup>1</sup> I will extensively use the latter notions in this text, and will compare the different kinds of liminal spaces and sense of community created by the two community projects I studied.

<sup>2</sup> The concept of metacommunication refers to shared, but usually unstated, taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of communication itself. It is communication about communication. He defined metacommunication as the level of communication where "the subject of discourse is the relationship between the speakers" (Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*, 1972). Since applied theatre aims at addressing this unstated, embodied and often unconscious assumptions about the relational world, his work is of great interest to this study.

<sup>3</sup> In his dramaturgical model, social interaction is analyzed as if it were part of a theatrical performance. People are actors who must convey their personal characteristics and their intentions to others through performances. As on the stage, people in their everyday lives manage settings, clothing, words, and nonverbal actions to give a

(1980), who introduced the concepts of thick description<sup>4</sup>, deep play and blurred genre and shed light on how behaviour, deep play, and performance often embody the network of social relationships that govern participant's lives. Turner, Geertz and Goffman never researched drama per se, yet their works have been deep shaped research on performance (Drewal, 1991, p. 6).

Stemming from another domain of expertise speech act theory, strongly influenced by philosophers of language and sociolinguistics, has also greatly influenced current research on performance. Prominent scholars, particularly ethnographers of speaking (Labov, 1972; Gumperz and Hymes, 1964, 1972; Bauman and Sherzer, 1974; Hymes, 1962, 1974, 1975) have influenced folklorists, anthropologist and others. This work, combining sociolinguistics and folklore, privileged language over an historic approach and developed a more "multidimensional analysis of form-function-meaning interrelationships for studying the discursive constitution of social life" (Drewal, 1991, p. 7), and has been very influential on oral performance researchers (Ray, 1973; Bloch, 1974, 1975; Peek, 1981; Barber, 1989; Hale, 1990; Murphy, 1990). However, I've chosen not to base my research on the works of latter, but rather take a more psychoanalytic approach, using Winnicott's notion of transitional phenomena<sup>5</sup> to illuminate the intricacy of liminal experiences (1971).

I'll now go back to Turner's notions of liminality and *communitas*, which are among the core concepts used in this text to study the space and interactions created by the community theatre projects studied in this research. This discussion will eventually lead to a shift from "static, synchronic analyses to diachronic, processual ones" (Ortner, 1984, p. 159) as proposed by Turner's processual anthropology and orient us us towards the works of action

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particular impression to others. Goffman makes an important distinction between "front stage" and "back stage" behavior. "Front stage" actions are visible to the audience and are part of the performance. People engage in "back stage" behaviors when no audience is present.

<sup>4</sup> According to Geertz, the ethnographer tries to order the chaotic world in which theory and praxis are entangled. He argues that this could be accomplished by thick description. Faced with "a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit," (1973, p. 10) the ethnographer must attempt to grasp and interpret them, in order to understand how and why behaviour occurs in such a way, instead of in another way.

<sup>5</sup> In human childhood development, a transitional object is something, usually a physical object, which takes the place of the mother-child bond.

(or practice) theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1990), Michel de Certeau (1984), and Anthony Giddens (1979, 1982, 1984).

## The liminal and communitas

The concept of liminality, from the Latin word *limen* meaning "a threshold", was coined by Belgian anthropologist van Gennep in *Rites of Passage* and later further developed by Victor Turner (1969). It implies a state of being betwixt and between. Van Gennep describes the concept of people going through "a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another" (1960 [1909], pp. 2-3). Each transition is "accompanied by special acts" or rites of passage. He defined the roles of the rites of passage as, "to ensure a change of condition or a passage from one magico-religious or secular group to another" (1960 [1909], p. 15).

Van Gennep described rites of passage as having the following three-part structure: separation, liminal period and assimilation. The initiate is first stripped of the social status that he or she possessed before the ritual, inducted into the liminal period of transition, and finally given his or her new status and re-assimilated into society. Having crossed the threshold beyond one status or identity while not yet having crossed into another, the initiate was neither here or there; beyond normal, everyday socio-cultural categories, beyond normal conceptions of routine identity, and also the conceptions of behaviour, rule, time and space that accompanied identity (Rapport & Overing, 2000, p. 230).

Although it may be argued that liminality, as theorized by van Gennep, is a zone of socio-cultural non-identity and non-existence, where individuals are often spoken about "as dead or dissolved into amorphous, unrecognizable matter [...] and often treated as unclean and polluted to those still going with their everyday lives" (Rapport & Overing, 2000, p. 230), it may also be seen as the "transitional space" where infants play and explore the world, a zone that enable us to *experience the unknown*, a zone where adults have aesthetic or religious experiences (Winnicott, 1971). It is a zone where identities can be shed, shaped and reproduced, where profound transformations may take place, inner psychic ones which will affect the outer social world and vice versa.

Along with the concept of liminality comes along the notion of *communitas*, which was first used by Turner (1969) to describe a sense of heightened togetherness which people might feel with one another once the superficial clothing of age, status, occupation, gender and other differences had been removed; an antithetical, indeed primordial modality of relationship characterized by total communion. From the point of view of the structural, such *communitas* appeared anarchic because it was marginal and unclassified in terms of everyday criteria. According to Turner, both modalities of human relationship were necessary for societal continuity. In *From ritual to theatre: the human seriousness of play*, he wrote:

“equally, individuals needed to alternate between the two experiential states. For, the creative power of *communitas* fashioned the being of individuals and communities in liberating, potentiating ways, while routinization of this creative togetherness into norm-governed distinctions and relations afforded a stability conducive to taking stock and taking action.” (Turner, 1982)

## Transitional experience

Stemming from child development and psychoanalytic theories, object relations theory draws on the notion of transitional objects to explain how "things", usually physical objects but can also include (songs, smells, and other sensory experiences), take the place of the mother-child bond. Common examples include dolls, teddy bears or blankets. Transitional objects (such as teddy bears and comfort blankets) are a way for the child to maintain a connection to the mother while she progressively distances herself. According to Winnicott (1971), this experience is marked by anxiety and it is important for the child to have an object as a defence to this anxiety. The child clings to the transitional object as it transitions between the two phases, while they find a balance between their own subjectivity and accommodation to others.

With ‘transitional’ Winnicott means an intermediate space between the psychic and external reality, the middle ground between objective reality and subjective realm, a zone “that is intermediate between the dream and the reality, that which is called cultural life” (1965, p.

150). Thus, transitional experiences lie in an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute, a zone between the self and the real world, a zone where the subjective and objective coalesce, where the inner and outer realm fuse together, characterized by fantasy, ambiguity, paradoxes and uncertainty, where "no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual" (1971, p. 2). Cultural life is, according to Winnicott, the adult equivalent of transitional phenomena of infancy, wherein communication is not referred to as subjective or objective (1965, p. 184).

By introducing the concept of transitional space, Winnicott undoes the duality subjective-objective reality, and introduces an area of "illusion, that which is allowed to the infant and which in adult life is inherent in art and religion. [...] In so far as the infant has not achieved transitional phenomena I think the *acceptance of symbols* is deficient, and the cultural life is poverty-stricken" (1989, p. 57). This area of illusion, an area of "deep play" and source of "blurred genres" –using Geertz's words–, an area of creative symbolism where cultural objects are produced, shaped and re-created<sup>6</sup>; cultural symbols that play an important role in one's inner psychic reality, symbols which embody the complexity of the social, cultural and relational world out there.

The key to have a culturally rich life, according to this theory, is not to be surrounded by teddy bears, comfort blankets, or fetishes. The answer lies in the process of handing the transitional object over and "opening out the ongoing transitional space of the third world - the space of play, creative symbolism and culture" (Young, *Mental Space*, 1994, ch. 8). This intermediate area, where symbols, objects, relationships and other elements of one's external reality are regularly created, rehearsed, and reshaped, before they are put to the test in the real world, is the arena where political negotiations with the outer world, and its actors, take place. Homi Bhabha, post-colonialist theorist, defines it as a zone of cultural hybridity, a "hybrid moment of political change. Here the transformational value of change

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<sup>6</sup> In Fernandez's *Persuasions and Performances: The Play of Tropes in Culture* (1986), performance is seen as a figurative argument of any sort, including his own, involving the play of tropes. He analyzes how we play, create and transform symbols and meanings which he calls "tropes", and studies how individuals argue with images and play tropes to construct their identities (Drewal, 1991, p. 10). He sees this process as "essentially a play of mind within domains (by metonym principally) and between domains (by metaphor principally)" (Fernandez, 1986, p. 8), the play of mind being fuelled by social situations.

For Fernandez, performance theory needs to analyze the relationships between metaphors and the transformations from one to another, that is, how individuals create images and metaphors, put them into operation and then, through performance, "men become the metaphor predicated upon them" (1986, p. 43).

lies in the rearticulation, or translation, of elements that are neither the One, nor the Other, but something else besides, which contests the terms and territories of both” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 22). Argenti (2001) goes even further describing this transitional experience “not as a simple imitation of the incommensurate worlds currently colliding, [...] but the imitation of a possible future which does not yet exist” bringing to light the fact that this transitional space is where potential alternative realities come to reality and the potential of human beings unfolds (Gebauer & Wulf, 1995:111; Ohmann, 1971; Schwartzman 1978:329).

## Ritual and theatre

Early anthropological texts looked at ritual in order to describe the realm of religion, myth and magic. Later, social functionalists considered religious ritual practices as a major source of information regarding the nature of social relations (Moore & Myerhoff, 1977). Durkheim (1915) was the first to explore ritual in the category of individual experience. He argued that only through rituals individuals experience social solidarity and gain insight into his or her social roles.

There are two main approaches to ritual, which deal with the phenomenon of individual transformation: one which draws mainly on van Gennep and Turner’s notion of liminality and another one which draws on Bloch’s concept of rebounding violence (Kovatz, 2007).

According to van Gennep (1960 [1909]) whenever individuals face changing contexts of space, time or social status, or more generally whenever they cross boundaries of cultural categories, they experience processes of transition. As discussed above, they occur in three stages: separation, the liminal phase and aggregation. The shared experience of liminality develops a strong bond between participants, which has an existential quality by placing the whole being of an individual in relation to the other whole beings (Turner, 1969, p. 128).

Bloch (1992) offers a different perspective on ritual, placing violence at the core of ritual transformation. He argues rituals represent a frame of action in which violence and aggression are legitimate and open for the participants to deal with and to conquer. This is an empowering experience, which enables the participants to transcend their mundane condition, turning them from prey into hunters.



Rituals are not static plays, but more importantly they are involved in changing the personality, status, power relationships and capabilities of the individual (Heald, 1999). Through the shared experience of *communitas*, liminality engages the “ontological dimension of a person, having the power to reshape the existential ground of an individual” (Turner, 1969, p. 162). Both Turner and Bloch argue in favour of a pure symbolic efficacy. Their works suggest symbols may have the power to directly structure the behaviour of individuals and elicit change, as a matter of particular cultural symbols acting in a concrete situation. These semiotic approaches which focus on metaphors and as mental constructs, “the play of mind” rather than the play of body, “minimizes the agency of performers, their embodied practices, and indeed the bodily basis of metaphoric imagination” (Johnson, 1987).

Other scholars (Csordas, 1994; Jackson, 1977) move away from symbolic interpretations and place the body at the centre of ritual transformations. Csordas develops a paradigm of embodiment, arguing that culture itself is grounded in the body. Similarly, Jackson’s perspective is clearly against pure semiotic interpretations and calls for consideration of the lived body. Taking a phenomenological perspective on ritual, he allows insight in the ongoing and immediate experience of human existence, and argues for a reduction of ritual to body practices, given that “human experience is grounded in the bodily movement” (1977, p. 5). This approach suggests that bodies, as well as subjectivities —why still insist in this dualism?— are part of a permanent process of transformation; psychic and bodily experiences which are indifferently moulded by formal actions structured in van Gennep’s three-stage model.

Finally, it must be said that ritual and theatre share not only structural but also functional similarities. Both ritual and theatre, Schechner said, employ “repetition, simplification, exaggeration, rhythmic action, the transformation of ‘natural sequences’ of behaviour into ‘composed sequences’” (1977, p. 136). “For it is the basic function of both theatre and ritual to restore behaviour” (1985, p. 113). He argues ritual and theatre should be considered alike, instead of one (theatre) a derivative of the other (ritual), somewhat distilled and less archaic. Both, through their liminal processes, hold the “generating source of culture and structure, of social transition, [...] whereby groups and individuals adjust to internal changes and adapt to their external environment” (Turner, 1967, p. 20).

## Methodology

I was first drawn to applied drama because of its expressive nature and the freedom it offers to explore veiled dimensions of one's self. I then learned that applied theatre shares quite a number of structural elements with rituals of traditional societies, and that its efficacy is to a greater extent determined by these structuring elements and dispositions. Interested in deepening my understanding of how these theatrical practices —or modern rituals— were originated and how these so-called transformative spaces are recreated, I contacted a wide group of applied theatre practitioners and expressed my interest in observing their work. Some groups work with youth at risk, others in prisons, or with homeless people, mental health patients or with illegal immigrants and refugees. I gained access to three groups: one which works with mental health patients, another one which works with young refugees, and a third one which works with the Chinese community.

Aware my interest in training in applied theatre<sup>7</sup> might prove counterproductive, I was faced with the dilemma of reaching “a sense of strangeness and estrangement in the fieldwork” (Coffey, 1999, p. 21). My personal interests in acquiring the artistry of applied theatre could impede my progress of making the unfamiliar, familiar (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Nevertheless, my experience of training in applied theatre in Belgium prior to this research, and my knowledge of performance theory provided a distinct advantage in already understanding their behaviour and discourses. By participating in three very different projects I hoped to gain insight into the various applied drama practices and how these may change from group to group, and context to context.

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<sup>7</sup> During the past ten years, I've been unconsciously and somewhat obsessively looking for spaces of inner transformation. I've tried traditional psychotherapy, hypnosis, shamanistic Ayahuasca rituals, new age spiritual groups, yoga, Tibetan meditation and been trained in Reiki, EFT and TAT (Meridian Energy Therapies). Partially disappointed by the complexity of these belief systems and their limited efficacy, from my limited experience, I turned to applied theatre. Let me leave the details of my personal quest for later, only to say that I seem to share much of this restlessness with the people I've met in applied theatre projects, both facilitators and trainees.

Two of the projects I decided to study based their work in a form of improvisational theatre, Playback Theatre<sup>8</sup>, in which I had recently been trained. Being trained in this theatre form, I was able to train with True Heart Theatre<sup>9</sup> (THT) during twelve weeks, participate in a few of their public performances and actively engage in discussions that led to the different themes and content of the performances. They rehearsed fortnightly and performed monthly addressing the Chinese community in London, aged from 25 to 50 years, in most cases.

My role in the theatre project with mental health patients, which I will call **Arts and Mental Health (AMH)** to assure anonymity, was rather unclear. Even though in the beginning I was invited to join the group of drama practitioners to help facilitate the sessions, my role was then limited to that of a “standard member” or service user, and very little communication regarding the project took place with the facilitators. I attended their two-hour weekly sessions during 6 months and was charged for this as any other service user was.

In the third project, which I will call **Refugee Theatre (RT)**, I participated as a voluntary youth worker and actor helping in the facilitation of theatre workshops for young refugees, aged from 15 and 25 years. The project started in June 2009 meeting weekly, and they had three public performances in November 2009. We rehearsed weekly for 3 hours and spent a weekend in Kent in October in a residential workshop, where the actors, musicians, dancers and costume designers came together to “give life” to the play.

There were many rehearsal cancellations and the attendance was very erratic. Nevertheless, participants actively contributed in the whole process of the play, reflecting on the content, writing the script, making the costumes, as well as managing the whole project. Even though I had chosen to actively participate in the project rather than taking a distant role and observing them interact (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 3) my background, bodily and clothing appearance kept me from blending in as another participant.

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<sup>8</sup> Playback Theatre is an original form of improvisational theatre, founded in 1975 by Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas, in which audience or group members tell stories from their lives and watch them enacted on the spot. Fox was a student of improvisational theatre, oral traditional storytelling, Jacob Moreno's psychodrama method and the work of Paulo Freire. Playback Theatre is sometimes considered a modality of drama therapy. The Playback 'form' as developed by Fox and Salas utilises component theatrical forms or pieces, developed from its sources in improvisational theatre, storytelling, and psychodrama.

<sup>9</sup> They directly asked me to use their theatre company name in my research document, even when I suggested to keep anonymity (ASA guidelines 1999).

Moreover, the theatre project at RT was just one of the activities that this charity organized for the group of young refugees that came to the centre every day. Unfortunately, I couldn't always stay after the rehearsals to have dinner with them, or join them in their activities the days there were no rehearsals; thus, my involvement was a bit irregular, "on and off" compared to theirs. I was not always seen as one of the "regulars" —the other volunteers who came every day. Being more present, more regular, and more available would have helped me to build a stronger bond with them, in a shorter period of time.

Gaining their consent to be interviewed was not an easy task, even after having formed a friendship with them. Most of them agreed to be interviewed at first when asked in public, but were visibly hesitant when I asked them to sit down in a closed room and record the interview. One may think that people may feel recognized when asked to be interviewed — at least from my privileged middle-class point of view— but many of these teenagers have gone through lamentable situations with the police, the Home Office and other state institutions and law enforcement agencies, where similar interviewing processes have been undignifying and sometimes even humiliating<sup>10</sup>.

Therefore, sitting down in a closed room while recording our conversation, carries strong connotations of the power imbalance they experienced, in which they were the object of power abuse by immigration authorities. This may have hindered the atmosphere I was trying to create, where my informants could feel open and frank without fear of being overheard. However, most of them were quite relaxed a few minutes into the interview, and shared with me rather personal experiences and emotions. I waited till the very end, January 2010, to conduct semi-structured interviews with both facilitators and participants, since I didn't feel I had gained enough trust and confidence to address questions related with their personal experiences, some of them which were rather distressing, and not easily shared. I still attend THT and RT performances and workshops and have made good friends among their members, and may participate in their further projects.

On the other hand, conducting interviews with the members of AMH was not possible. The facilitators did not want to participate in this stage of the research, though they did not

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<sup>10</sup> This was one of the issues the play *Becoming a Londoner* aimed to address. Their testimonies spoke of feeling treated like animals, treated with no respect or concern of their situation, stripped of their dignity and humanity.

oppose to the idea; also, the members did not want their experiences to be shared outside the group or published in an academic text. However, I became friends with one member, who invited me to join another drama workshop she wanted to attend. After the sessions at this workshop outside AMH, we had the opportunity to sit down and share our experiences in various drama workshops and also our mental health issues.

I found it more difficult to learn about their lives when we all, the service users, sporadically went for a cup of tea in a coffee shop in the Dalston market. These occasions were insightful and allowed me to better understand their interactions as a group, and in the group, which were quite charged with anxiety and a bit chaotic. I found it quite difficult to create an atmosphere of trust and intimacy in this setting and took a rather passive role, listening to their conversations and observing their behaviour, as opposed to taking an active role in the conversation (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 3). It was an interesting opportunity to focus on the behaviour and interactions between participants. A more in-depth long term observation of this group is deemed necessary, in order to produce consistent data about each participant, and its interactions within his or her social network.

This research is clearly limited in this aspect. Furthermore, it is the uncompleted product of my interpretation of the observed phenomena, an example of how my individuality and self has tried to put order to the chaos and complexity (Geertz, 1973, p. 10), witnessed during the participant observation. Bringing to light the addition of myself to the text, aims at revealing the subjective and interpretative nature of my account, which tries to be as evocative as factual and truthful and cannot represent 'others' in any other terms than my own (Van Maanen, 1988).

“The boundaries between self-indulgence and reflexivity are fragile and blurred. There will always be the question about how much of ourselves to reveal”  
(Coffey, 1999, p. 132)

## Ethical considerations

To protect both facilitators and participants, I have altered the names and organizations I worked with. Words and experiences told to me by the residents however are verbatim. Before conducting participant observation in all three projects, I wrote to them explaining how I would conduct the research and what my objectives were. This, to assure anonymity and consent would be individually sought before the interviews were conducted.

### ***Cover or Overt Observation***

As mentioned earlier, my role in AMH was unclear and although the facilitators and directors of the theatre project initially showed great interest in my research project, this would change with time. My participation in the group was never clearly explained to the service users, and at some point, the facilitators suggested I should not write about them, despite the fact they had agreed to it in the very beginning.

Although I'm fully aware covert observation is very rarely justified or acceptable, and prohibited when public funding is used to support research (Punch, 1994), the necessity to receive the consent of each one of the people observed might prevent many useful projects. As Punch observes, "a strict application of codes will restrain and restrict a great deal of informal, innocuous research in which [...] explicitly enforcing rules concerning informed consent will make the research role simply untenable" (p. 90). However, a distinction must be made between informed consent and deception regarding one's purpose. Deception is sometimes used when an ethnographer embarks on research intended to expose corrupt practices or to advocate for reforms. Researchers disagree on where and when to draw this line. "The benefits of particular kinds of knowledge might outweigh the potential or actual harm of methods used to obtain that knowledge, according to some researchers" (Cramer & McDevitt, 2004, p. 136). Most scholars agree that the rights of subjects take precedence and should guide one's moral calculations.

Therefore, even though I had written consent to conduct participant observation in this group, the participants of this theatre workshop were not fully aware of my role, intentions and objectives of the research project. I therefore let time go by, waiting for the facilitators

to choose the right moment to inform the participants about my objectives. To my surprise, this never happened and I decided to present myself as a service user, who experienced mental health problems as they did<sup>11</sup> and later on told them I wanted to write a bit about my experiences with them. They were very hesitant and queried me about my project. Although I attended this workshop for 6 months, I did not feel there was enough trust and confidence between us. Thus, I decided not to interview them or to include participants' experiences in this text, rather to limit myself to my experiences and to those of the facilitators, who clearly gave me their consent.

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<sup>11</sup> I have for the past ten years consulted therapists of various kinds and consider myself to have dealt with mental health problems in the past.

## **Ethnographic Account**

“While they told their stories and we took turns to perform them, I felt much closer to them and for a moment forgot about the stigma that labelled them as ‘health care users’ and me as a ‘non-user’. I felt their stories as being normal and real, and didn’t judge those stories, or at least not as much as before, as being the result of their condition. I felt that we shared more as peers than what I initially thought was possible, and that I could eventually have things in common with them, and not only pretend that I had. For a short while, I felt I was considering them as peers and not as lesser human beings than myself. Were their experiences similar to mine? Did they feel more connected to the group and less judged by their peers as I had felt, or was all this just a movie I was playing in my mind?” Fieldnotes (AMH, July 2009)

Participating in applied theatre workshops is fun, because in most cases you are surprised by what arises in the sessions. According to Turner’s adaptation (1969) of the Weberian dialectic of routine versus charisma, into a universalising theory of structure and anti-structure, the anti-structural is “prior to and creative of the structural while remaining antithetical in character and embroiled in a continual struggle for individuals’ loyalty” (Rapport & Overing, 2000, p. 140). Unfortunately, for ritual specialists or theatre facilitators, holding the space for the ‘anti-structural’ to bring the ‘structural’ to life is not only challenging, but also a big risk and sometimes even a baffling experience. Not all theatre projects have a profound effect on its participants as facilitators and ritual experts often claim and some prove to legitimise the power imbalances they claim to be addressing (Desai, 1990).

### **Playback Theatre – creating a safe place**

Many theatre workshops start with physical exercises, either just warm-ups to loosen up joints and muscles or other types of sensory and muscular exercises, visualisations and relaxation exercises that bring one’s awareness to the body. Throughout the workshops, there is quite a lot of work on the body, that is, on one’s body and on how it relates with the



space, other bodies and objects through movement. As one facilitator said, “we work on the body to push and define the boundaries of space. This engages the viewer through various aspects of performance” (AMH Facilitator, June 2009).

The work of the body comprehends different elements and exercises that encourage participants to work and reflect on their relationship with each other. In order to do so, an atmosphere of trust, confidence, acceptance, support and intimacy must be created for participants to take the risk to wander outside their comfort zones and dare to interact in different modes than the ones that rule their everyday lives; to enter liminality and experience a sense of *communitas*. That’s the biggest challenge for facilitators: to enable participants to jump into the unknown and support them while they are playing in this puzzling zone. Through the exercises, participants are invited to seek and accept physical contact with others, to stare into others’ eyes, to be silly, funny, sing songs, behave like a child, or even in a boastful and politically incorrect manner. “After all, it’s only a game, we are all performing”, it’s not our real self who is at stake, “it’s just a fictitious character we have invented who is acting like a fool” (RT Facilitator, July 2009).

Working on the body and how it relates to the world seems to be a powerful tool to create new modes of perception and communication among actors and with the audience. Comments from Playback audiences seem to suggest there is an unspoken physical aspect of performances that often speaks to the audience at a deeper level than the actual words used. Playback, being improvised re-enactments of audience members’ stories<sup>12</sup>, can never achieve total accuracy with regard to the events, dialogues and emotions that have been told (Rowe, 2007, p. 21). However, despite many factual inaccuracies in the playing back,

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<sup>12</sup> The Playback 'form' as developed by Fox and Salas utilises component theatrical forms or pieces, developed from its sources in improvisational theatre, storytelling, and psychodrama (Rowe, 2007). In a playback event, someone in the audience tells a moment or story from their life, chooses the actors to play the different roles, and then all those present watch the enactment, as the story "comes to life" with artistic shape and nuance. The re-creation of stories is often non-naturalistic; actors often use metaphor, narration, chorus, genre, movement and song.

For audiences, the active performers can seem preternaturally gifted, as they create their performances without a script or score. Indeed in some playback performances, the actors are chosen for their various roles, wait some moments while the musician improvises an introduction, and then begin performing without any consultation among themselves prior to beginning the story.

The role of conductor, by contrast, can seem relatively easy, involving as it does conversing with the audience as a group or individually, and generally involving no acting. However it is recognised within the community of playback performers as perhaps the most difficult role to fill successfully (Rowe, 2007, p. 56).

audience members often assert they feel heard and acknowledged, and usually refer to the quality of movement and bodily expressions as the elements that best capture the “essence of the story”.

“The way [the actor] was shaking was not what I was doing that day, but was exactly how I was feeling ... nervous, frightened, and with no one to ask for help. It was quite touching to see him in that situation, and also sad; it was like seeing me from the distance.” (Audience member, THT Performance Nov. 2009)

The embodiment of the audience’s emotions seems to be a crucial element in blurring the boundaries between the audience and the actors in creating this transitional space where audience members can experience a sense of *communitas* and explore their emotions in a different way. The evidence suggests the phenomenological approach (Csordas, 1994; Jackson, 1977), which places the body as the locus of human experience, and which proves to be useful in elucidating how the transitional space is created and cohabited by actors and audience members without them needing to share the same physical space; there is still a visible boundary separating the stage and the off-stage. Csordas’ argument for the reduction of ritual to bodily practices, given that “human experience is grounded in the bodily movement” (1977, p. 5) seems to be supported by the evidence presented in this research.

Another key element that applied theatre workshops aim at developing among participants is trust. Various exercises put participants in slightly vulnerable situations where they must rely on their partners to carry out tasks. Some of these may be: walking blindfolded in a room full of obstacles only guided by one’s partner; playing blindfolded with objects that one’s partner chooses (some of them might be unpleasant and others very pleasant to touch); improvisation exercises where one’s partner makes up a story while performing for the others and then swapping roles; or mirroring and being mirrored by the whole group (movements, sounds and facial expressions).

## Power relationships

As opposed to rituals, where strong bonds are created when dramatic, painful or challenging situations are experienced as a group, where violence and “rebounding violence” (Bloch,

1992, pp. 85-91) mould and re-structure social reality, in applied theatre violence is rarely used, at least during the training, to create the state of liminality. The discourse of practitioners is that it is a safe place for participants to play and explore performance in ways not permitted in the socially regulated world “off stage”, a place where participants can trust others and rely on them in case they need support.

However, the theatrical space is also a regulated space which obeys rules of interaction among participants and facilitator. I saw clashes between participants only on very few occasions, but I did witness how the relationship practitioner-trainee had some tense moments. It seems that for participants to explore the “liminal”, they must first become subordinate to the authority regulating this space – the facilitator. On several occasions, when querying fellow trainees about their experiences in other workshops, some of them, the most bold and outspoken, would comment on how the facilitator was not as gentle, polite, or skilled to deal with delicate situations as they expected. There seems to be an implicit agreement between practitioners and facilitators, in which the former must engage in all proposed activities, showing enthusiasm and enjoyment. If this is not the case, practitioners may show some feelings of unsettlement.

It seems that the lack of engagement of participants in the activities is a rather sensitive issue for facilitators. Either it may be perceived as a lack of respect for the authority and expertise they represent, or as revealing the inappropriateness of the proposed exercise in that given context and setting, which can be interpreted as revealing a lack of expertise. This seems to suggest that participants’ respect for the facilitator’s expertise as validation of his or her authority is as effective and necessary in this context as it is in organisations with a clear hierarchy and rigid structure like those studied by Presthus (1960).

“I had perceived the tension between Richard and the therapists, but on the third session it became more evident. During a short interruption, he suggested that we as a group should produce a musical, such as *Oliver*. Unfortunately, his proposition was not well received by the therapists, and he was told that “this was a fantasy” and a “too grandiose idea” that was far from reality and completely unfeasible. He was asked to value the theatre exercises we were doing and to limit himself to the activities that were being offered by the therapists. What was quite surprising and a bit disturbing to me was not the fact that his suggestion was not accepted, but the fact that it clearly upset Claire, and that she couldn’t help herself from insisting on the fact that what Richard had

said had no sense whatsoever –was a complete fantasy– and that he was not valuing the work the group was doing.” Fieldnotes (AMH, Oct 2009)

It seems that on this occasion, the liminal space, the sacred space or “inner exploration” that applied theatre is supposed to offer was not accessible to all participants in this group. Trying to be fairer with the therapists, one may argue that this space that was offered to all participants alike, cannot always include all participants’ desires of exploring their needs, and that they must subordinate their desires and needs to the facilitators’ desires or to what they can handle. Otherwise, some tension and frustrating situations for both participants and facilitators may arise, where the former are often in a disadvantaged situation due to the power imbalance created in the theatrical space. There is clearly a power imbalance in theatre projects, argues Drewal – “the power remains with the person who organizes the spectator's view, in this case the director rather than the viewer” (1991, p. 25), which may dissolve only if the facilitator decides it so.

Power imbalances, hierarchical roles and rigid expectations sometimes found in theatre workshops suggest that, during rehearsals, individuals –trainees as well as facilitators– constantly oscillate between periods of structure and periods of anti-structure (Turner, 1969); thus, liminality seems to coalesce and dissolve intermittently for short periods of time during theatrical practices as individuals change from one mode of experience to another. Also, it follows from these oscillations that during theatre practices, practitioners and trainees may at times find themselves experiencing the liminal space together and a sense of *communitas*, and at other times experiencing separateness and clashes due to conflicting interests which stem from what Turner calls the ‘structural’, the multilayered divisions of the hyper-structured social world. This may explain why the theatrical space seems to be an area where not only participants’ subjectivities play, dance, clash and sometimes negotiate the various meanings and roles they may want to take on at a given time, but also a place that facilitators use to explore their own inner psychic world in relation to the content and subjectivities that participants bring into light, while negotiating with the latter the space they all share.

Applied theatre projects in Africa have been the subject of intense research for their use as tools to address power relationships and imbalances (Bennett, Mercer & Woollacott, 1986; Byram, Etherington & Kidd, 1978; Chifunyise, Kerr & Dall, 1980; Desai, 1987; Etherton, 1982; Eyoh, 1986; Gramsci, 1972; Hope & Timmel, 1984; Hunt, 1976; Idoye, 1982; Kidd, 1982; Kidd & Byram, 1978; Kidd & Colletta, 1980; Kohler & Mackenzie, 1976; MacCabe, 1986; Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1986; Ogunba & Irele, 1978; Ogunbiyi, 1981; Steadman, 1986; Youngman, 1976). The theatrical space may be seen as a training ground for people interested in understanding the politics of emotions, of relationships and of the social world, meaning that it is the playground for participants, as well as for practitioners, to train themselves in establishing new dynamics of power with the individuals sharing the space. In the following section I will focus on the role this space of "inner transformation" may have for the facilitators.

### Front stage or back stage - that's the question

"After I completed the first training course in Playback Theatre called the "Core Training", I was invited to attend monthly public performances of True Heart Theatre. I was not yet conducting observation in THT and was quite enthusiastic about my beginnings in Playback Theatre and the smooth entrance I had 'achieved' into the world of applied theatre in the UK. At the second performance I attended, I met the members of a Finnish Playback Theatre company that had come to train with Veronica, the coordinator of the UK School of Playback Theatre and co-founder of THT.

They —the Finnish company and UK School of Playback Theatre—had had a week of co-facilitated workshops and had been invited to THT's monthly performance, where they performed with THT members in English, Chinese and some Finnish for an audience of mainly Chinese people, the 'regulars' of the Camden Chinese Community Centre. After the performance we all went to have dinner and I had the chance to meet and chat with the practitioners. Most of them were drama therapists or related professionals, as most Playback practitioners are. Throughout the dinner we shared our interests in using applied theatre as a therapeutic and social work tool.

On leaving the restaurant, both groups of practitioners took considerable time to say goodbye, thank each other for the wonderful week they had spent together and made ample invitations to meet again for another gathering of Playback 'aficionados'. Despite the fact I had only met them that day and had not trained with them during the week, I was included in their invitations and warm expressions of affection and friendship. I then understood that the international network of Playback Theatre not only offers workshops to support local and

somewhat disadvantaged communities, but also provides a considerable structure for practitioners, who often have to juggle two or more professions” (Fieldnotes, THT May 2009).

This was one of the very few occasions where I could see ‘behind the scenes’, into the everyday lives of the practitioners. Of some disappointment was the lack of opportunities to observe and meet these ‘back stage’ personae, or maybe more time was needed to build a different relationship with them to be invited into the world of practitioners. For as much as I could see, I observed there was a visible distinction between the “front stage” and “back stage” personae, as theorised by Goffman (1959), and I did not often see much of the latter during the rehearsals and performances.

Even though I consciously tried to create situations where practitioners could opt to do what in theatrical terms is called *breaking character*<sup>13</sup> or in Goffman’s words, *breaking frame* (1974, 1986), I witnessed that this was not easily achieved, even in a completely different setting as informal and conducive to socialising as a pub, and under the influence of alcohol. This solid and well-defined boundary between the public and private sphere, and the different personae we adopt to communicate in the different settings show how the audience for any personal performance plays a central role in determining the course it takes. This is confirmed by the fact that it has taken me almost a year and many pints of beer to form a solid friendship with my fellow members of Domino Playback<sup>14</sup>, one in which I have seen our ‘front stage’ personae when rehearsing and working towards the goals of the company, and also a bit of our ‘back stage’ persona when more intimate experiences need to be shared<sup>15</sup>.

I must note here that because of my young age compared to that of most practitioners, I may have been excluded from this sphere, which is, at least in London as opposed to Finland, inhabited by mainly female practitioners, aged 25 to 60 years. Further research is necessary to better understand the semi-private sphere of Playback practitioners, the role

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<sup>13</sup> *Breaking character* is a theatrical term used to describe an instance when an actor, while performing in character, slips out of character and behaves as his or her actual self.

<sup>14</sup> Domino Playback is a young Playback Theatre company founded in 2010 by participants of the Core Training module in Playback Theatre that I did in March 2009.

<sup>15</sup> After sharing a couple of beers in a pub, a much less sanctioned space of social interaction, and thanks to the stimulating effect of alcoholic drinks, I was able to see the less politically correct personae of my fellow actors, which seemed to me to be more authentic and less stiff, ‘polished’ or contrived.

the international Playback network plays in their lives, and to the establish the quality of interactions found among the 'diaspora of playbackers'<sup>16</sup>.

### Refugee Theatre – I'm a survivor

My experience in Refugee Theatre was rather different. The 'front stage' and 'back stage' personae I saw there were diametrically opposite to the ones in Playback performances and True Heart Theatre company. This refugee theatre initiative stemmed from an action research project which led to the publication of *Becoming a Londoner* (RefugeYouth, 2009); a text which documents the struggle and issues of young refugees in London. It summarises the key issues affecting young refugees in six main categories as follows: losing our childhood, leading a double life, 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, age dispute, criminalisation and living in a limbo (Table 1).

Knowing that this publication would have no impact whatsoever unless there was some kind of outreach, marketing strategy on mediatisation of its contents, the youth workers thought that making a play would be an effective way to convey the message. The idea was to make the whole theatre production as participatory as the research, editing and publication of the book had been. In the latter, the youths had been responsible for designing and conducting interviews with other refugees about their experiences and also actively involved in the design and layout of the book.

Unfortunately, it proved to be rather difficult to engage the youths in the writing of the play from the beginning of the production process. This may have been due to various reasons: a) traditional (and applied) drama, as art forms, were not well known to them at that moment, although they were used to playing drama games for team-building purposes; b) they were quite inexperienced with creative writing, despite the conspicuous lyrical talent of those interested in music and rap; c) a tendency towards immediate gratification as opposed to long term projects.

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<sup>16</sup> I have consciously chosen to use the term *diaspora* in this context, which usually refers to a population sharing national or ethnic identity, to emphasise the cohesion observed in this community, the expressed feelings of belonging to a 'big family', and the shared discourse of using the Playback Theatre form as a social work tool and ideology, which coalesces altogether into a form of identity.

# Key Issues for Young Refugees

(RefugeYouth, 2009)

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## ***Losing Our Childhood***

If we come to the UK alone ...

- we have to deal with everything ourselves, lawyers, Home Office papers, court rooms and legal jargon.
- we can feel lonely and depressed without support, advice or guidance.

If we come to the UK with family ...

- we often have to take responsibility for our whole family.
- it's left to us to translate, interpret and figure out how the system works.
- family rolls become confused and family and community relations can break down.

## ***Leading a Double Life***

- there is conflict between generations: our parents want to preserve their culture and protect their children.
- we are trying to live in two cultures.
- the result is that we end up not fitting anywhere; we are trying to grow up and figure out who we are amongst all this.

## ***18th Birthday***

- we are frightened to grow because everything changes.
- we are in danger of losing our status, benefits, education and housing.
- we fear the '3 Ds' – Dispersal, Detention and Deportation.
- we are suddenly considered adults and support is taken away from us.

## ***Age Dispute***

- many of us have are age disputed, either by the Home Office or social services or both.
- the process of age assessment is inhumane and degrading.
- those of us here alone whose age is disputed get no support from social services.

## ***Criminalisation***

- refugees are portrayed as criminals by many sections of the media and many politicians.
- prejudice and discrimination towards refugees has become legitimized as a mainstream viewpoint.
- the asylum system criminalises people, promoting a culture of disbelief and treating refugees as guilty until proven innocent.
- we don't have the family, community and friendship networks that people who are born where have.
- we don't know the systems here, and neither do our families.

## ***Living in a Limbo***

- many of us are living in uncertainty waiting for the Home Office to make a decision – sometimes for years.
- with no papers, many of us are unable to travel, work or study.
- it's impossible to plan the future. we have no control over our own lives.
- we are always waiting for someone else to make a decision.
- we become dependent on limited beliefs, when actually we have ambition and the skills to work.
- we are not able to follow our dreams or gain qualifications or employment experience.
- sometimes we are forced into illegal work or criminal activity in order to survive.



Contrary to what was observed in Playback workshops and in True Heart Theatre performances, the youths who participated in the Refugee Theatre project and other activities organised by the charity organisation, were not keen on sitting down and sharing with the audience and actors their everyday issues. They were more into living the present—or at least giving the impression as is common for youths from disadvantaged backgrounds—they are seizing the moment, taking advantage of the few opportunities available to them, and making the best of their precarious situations (Argenti, 2007). During the interviews I conducted with them, they frequently expressed how they did not like to think about their past, and the experiences they had endured prior to their arrival in the United Kingdom. Their coping strategy is one of ‘moving on’ and ‘letting go’ of the past, while Playback communities tend to rely on ‘sharing the past’ as a means to healing the past. Taking into account the reduced kinship network of refugee communities in London, it should not be surprising that relying on kin for emotional support is not an option.

Their front stage persona is what I would call the ‘I am survivor’ persona, which foregrounds aspects of their personality related to having fun, enjoying life, being resilient, courageous, spontaneous, creative and in control of life and decisions. Their ‘back stage’ persona on the other hand reveals vulnerability, need of support, disorientation and confusion regarding the decisions that will determine their future.

While their ‘front stage’ persona is one of a ‘survivor’, and vulnerability is left for more intimate contexts, the participants of Playback workshops show their vulnerability quite easily, making it their ‘front stage’ persona, and keep the eccentric and creative one for close friends and less socially regulated settings. Although Playback has already been used in projects with refugees (Rea, 2007, 2008; Yuval-Davis & Kaptani, 2008), the evidence presented in this research suggests that some necessary changes would be needed for this group of practitioners to work with the community of young refugees in order to have a considerable positive impact in their lives, taking in to account the very different personae, rather opposite, that each project creates and invites to inhabit its theatrical space.

## Discursive Practices - True Heart Theatre

With front stage and back stage personae come normative discourses which are instrumentalised to legitimate one's acts and intentions as part of what Goffman would call 'impression management' (1959). This process of legitimation encompasses an ongoing dialogue with all individuals, micro and macro agents, and other discursive practices in relation to the theatre project in question, embedding the latter in a network of power relationships and discourses with all concerned social agents (Kidd and Byram, 1982: 103). Therefore, while applied theatre projects attempt to subvert prevailing hegemonic discourses, they do so by introducing new power discourses that they consider to be more appropriate, more inclusive, or more open to change, to name just a few possibilities. Therefore, analysing the discursive strategies of the studied theatre projects in this research may prove to be valuable and possibly shed some light on the nature of the power relationships they introduce into the social world, through their work.

During the interviews conducted with THT members, some of them expressed some uneasiness regarding expectations on each other and the way in which decisions were being made in the group. It may seem there are some conflicting opinions about the objectives and goals of the company and how these goals should be achieved. The founders seem to want the younger members to take more initiative, that is, to take a more active role in the decision-making process and begin steering the company. However, some of the younger members expressed feelings of frustration regarding the passivity of other young members, the way key information was not being openly shared, and how decisions were being made.

The founders seem to be encouraging the younger members, particularly those members born in the United Kingdom, to take ownership of the project. This seems to be one of the main assessment criteria to evaluate the level of achievement of this social project<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Playback Theatre as a form, inscribes itself in the more global frame of Theatre for Development drawing on concepts such as social change (Hosking & Penny, 2000; Fox H., 2007), social healing (Ellinger & Green, 2008), reconciliation (Hutt & Hosking, 2004), social reconstruction (McKenna, 1999), social justice (Kiely, 2004), social awareness (Meer, 2007), social activism (Park-Fuller, 2003), social intervention (Pearsons, 1997), and social development theory (Fox, 1973).

“Our goal with [him] is that he one day brings his family to his performances.”  
(THT Wing Hong, Jan 2010)

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“We want the British-Chinese members to take over “the world”. That’s why eventually I can hear from Lap, that Lap is more active, more willing to give out his thoughts. But Julian, I still need some time to ... because I know Julian so well, we’ve together from three years. He is more conscious, he is more clever [...] I think that one day he’ll feel very comfortable and then he will take over loads of stuff to help to develop the company.

Eventually, people will start managing their own projects. For example, we went for the European fund but we failed. Originally the idea was that if we got it, I don’t want to know what it is. I want to see rather than know about it and [...] was going to handle that.” (THT Wing Hong, Jan 2010)

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“[We] have made a big commitment, you know [he] is one of our hardest nuts, because he is not naturally artistically clever, but because of my commitment to Playback and my commitment to Playback as a vehicle for personal development not just to myself but to everybody who is involved with Playback, [...] we are committed to having [him] grow and find his creative potential through us.”  
(THT Veronica, Jan 2010)

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“I want us to see ourselves as an umbrella where the collective skills that we have within our group can be expressed” (THT Veronica, Jan 2010).

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“I really do want to see THT growing into a really strong theatre company that has the capacity to deliver very high quality Playback Theatre performances in all three languages (English, Mandarin and Cantonese) for the British community in this country and not only for the British-Chinese.” (THT Veronica, Jan 2010)

Empowering individuals and supporting their own initiatives is clearly one of the principles very present in their discourse and their work<sup>18</sup>, but unfortunately within THT, the group dynamic is not achieving the expected results yet. Following Desai’s approach in his essay *Theater as Praxis: Discursive Strategies in African Popular Theater* (1990), where he studies various theatre projects in Africa and their discursive practices, it may be useful to identify any assumptions, which are not currently being questioned, that may be stopping this project from picking up more momentum and engaging its members more actively.

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<sup>18</sup> This is confirmed by the support they have provided me during the setting up of Domino Playback and Teatro Espontaneo en Londres, two young Playback Theatre companies, the former performing in English and the latter in Spanish.

Desai points out that one main reason for drama practices failing to address the main issues of local communities and engage its members in the reflection and production of theatre performances is preconceived ideas about the social context and power structures, and of ready-made ideas regarding the outcome of the project. “Rather than being self-reflexive and self-critical, the educators [...] allowed themselves to be immersed in a given discourse which they did not attempt to critique” (p. 74). This often leads to what Kidd and Byram called, “an inadequate understanding of the power structures within which [the project] is working” (1982: 103), which may hinder the achievement of common goals and the efficacy of the theatrical enterprise (Desai, 1990, p. 72). He also identifies theatre practices that resist closure, “especially a cathartic closure which aims at the pacification of the audience through the purgation of emotions” (p. 84) and lead “to a call for action, unity, and revolution —a call which is to be answered not within the confines and security of the theatrical frame, but in the more volatile and larger frame of human experience and social struggle”.

Very aware that the Playback community does not aim to foster violent revolutions, it can be argued that Playback practitioners —at least in their discourse— seek to cultivate social changes, justice and awareness, which would, to my understanding, be virtually unattainable unless this ‘resistance to closure’ is achieved in performances and practices. In Desai’s words, “the power of the process of theatrical codification is in the very rupture of the theatrical frame, and it is the efficacy of this rupture which marks the educational and political success of the theatrical practice” (*ibid.*).

THT founders seem to have a clear picture of what they want the company to be and what to expect from its members, while at the same time aiming to work with the community and encourage them to engage with the company’s artistic journey. Evidence suggests that the company, with its various projects (scripted performances, Playback workshops, and Theatre-in-Education performances) is being run from the top down, although discursively it invites non-trained actors to join in and help to develop the company from the bottom up. This may be the source of tension within THT, where founders and participants find themselves not knowing which discourse (and power structure) to use when interacting with other members and striving to achieve the goals they have all committed to.

## Discursive Practices - Refugee Theatre

Drawing on participatory action research methodologies, Refugee Theatre embarked on creating a play to address the key issues affecting young refugees in the United Kingdom which would also include as many 'users' of the charity as possible in a collaborative, creative way. As mentioned previously, it was rather difficult to engage all the youths in the writing of the play, and even though this was foregrounded as part of the participatory methodology used, the script was mainly written by Poncho, a young refugee Colombian theatre director. In order to simplify the theatre training of the youths, a story of animals migrating through different kingdoms was chosen<sup>19</sup>.

Since the report *Becoming a Londoner* (RefugeYouth, 2009) already described a wide range of complex social issues affecting their lives, it was a great challenge and a big risk to write a play that would captivate the interest of this community, while maintaining the interest of potential audiences (social, youth and refugee workers, Home Office officials, charity organisations, theatre practitioners, teachers, academics, etc). Moreover, although the research leading to that publication was carried out by young refugees, most of them were not available to participate while the play was being created, and the actors in the play did not fully understand the origins, process and result of the research, nor the complex issues described in the report.

The youths' participation in the play was successfully elicited thanks to the relationship that Poncho had established with them through previous activities within the organisation, and to his invitation to them to contribute whatever skills they had (music, rapping, face-painting, dancing, costume-making, etc.) to the play,

"Poncho called me and invited me to join the play. It sounded like a fun project and I wanted to improve my English. So I said yes." (RT Farshad, 2010)

"When Poncho called me, I didn't know much about the play. He said that there would be some rapping in the play, I said yes right away. I wouldn't miss that, no way" (RT Mohamed, 2010)

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<sup>19</sup> This made it easier to choose characters for all participants, to teach them to embody their animal-human personalities, and to make the costumes, all on a very limited budget.

The theatre rehearsals started out without much emphasis on the final result, and the focus was placed on the creative process, in which participants would choose what they felt most comfortable doing. “The whole performance will go organically, from the theatre rehearsals, art and music workshops that we have organised around the themes in the book” (RT facilitators, 2010). The participants were all invited to scriptwriting sessions, some of which I attended, and even though Poncho did most of the writing, his ideas and suggestions were discussed within the group prior to putting them down on paper.

In the beginning, some of the male participants did not find the animal story very appealing, because “it sounded a bit childish”, they said. They may have expected a different storyline where they could have played a role that would resemble more visibly their identities of creative youths, rappers, and ‘survivors’. These comments were politely ignored and the scriptwriting went on, following the suggestions that Poncho brought to each session. Even though the actual scriptwriting was not fully participatory in nature, it seemed to grow organically week by week, and was organised in a way, or should I say “staged in way”, that made the participants feel they had been taken into account, that it was an open space for everyone to participate, and that there was a place in the play for each of them, although in reality it was actually not fully true.

Some of the male youths who had expressed discontent with the script decided not to participate in the performance but stayed around ‘orbiting’ the project, attending the rehearsals, and either engaging in the exercises or just watching the others rehearse. This passive attendance was not only the result of the interest generated by the project, it was also due to the fact that no alternative activities were offered by the charity organisation during these timeslots, which meant they would have to go elsewhere without the company of their peers.

### A liminal space for refugee workers and young refugees

The charity organisation had one full-time staff, two part-time youth workers, a handful of facilitators paid by the hour, and a few volunteers and ‘anthropology and community work’

students working as interns. In an open office space of about fifty squared metres, workers, facilitators, interns and youths would come together to chat, drink tea, play drums, surf the internet, work, and record music on a computer in a small recording studio located in a private office.

Following their slogan “Food, Fun & Friendship”, they provide a space where young refugees can meet informally, learn and have fun. “Learn & take action” is what they aim to inspire in the youths.

“We **take action to bring about change** then reflect on our experiences to **learn and develop** what we do, as we believe that only in such a way can sustainable processes of change and **empowerment** be made, in a fluid way that changes and grows with all of us.

We are **action catalysts!** By assisting and encouraging young people around us to take initiatives that will improve the quality of all our lives and the lives of others like us.” (RT website, emphasis not added).

Drawing on a similar discourse to THT’s about empowering the local community and the youths, fostering social awareness and bringing about social change, the charity organization is also a space for facilitators, interns and students to rehearse their roles as youth workers, and get training and experience for the youth work industry. It is a work and play space that enables young refugees to gather, share and learn, and also offers the opportunity to future potential youth workers to practice their skills and roles, learning how to perform their ‘front stage’ persona in front of their peers.

Since the creation of this charity, there has been quite an important involvement of youth workers who had experienced similar experiences of forced migrations<sup>20</sup> as the young ones had, and with the years, it has grown into an “open door” for youth workers with a refugee background to step into the youth work industry. This was quite striking during the residential workshop I attended in Kent, where all staff (facilitators, volunteers and interns) and young refugees gathered together to work and make the theatre performance come to life. The two communities (staff and refugees) were visibly sharing a space that offered

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<sup>20</sup> Some of the founders of this organization were Latin-American adult youth workers with a refugee background.

them the opportunity to create their identities and build a network of relationships that would help them deal with the demands of adult life in London, as long term immigrants. For the staff that did not share the refugee or migrant background, it also provided an opportunity to build a 'persona' and social network that would provide emotional and career development opportunities for the most determined.

This 'by-product' of the project, is not listed nor overtly communicated as one of the objectives in the organization's mission statement, but definitely plays an important role in the lives of those working with young refugees towards their empowerment and realization. It can be seen as addressing the emotional and career development needs of adult refugees with an interest in youth and social work, and may be theorized as the 'backstage persona' that is only seen when "no one is around" (Goffman, 1959).

Similar to the 'social glue' or social capital created by the gatherings of the international community (or 'diaspora') of Playback practitioners, this network of refugee youth workers may be understood as a, perhaps dormant, resource that exists through informal social networks, "a shorthand for the positive consequences of sociability" (Portes, 1998). Although, applied theatre practitioners not often foreground this sphere of their professions, nor applied theatre projects mention it in their funding applications<sup>21</sup> or evaluation reports, the evidence presented in this research suggests that drama practices, and other performative exercises where power structures are subverted and new ones are created, are as appealing to and as empowering for practitioners<sup>22</sup> as participants, and arguably more so for the former than the latter.

It may prove useful to analyze the 'front stage' and 'back stage' personae of practitioners as career strategies artists develop in order to benefit from an economic system they often

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<sup>21</sup> Social development project descriptions and evaluation frameworks mainly focus on addressing the needs of the local communities, and very rarely take into account the needs of practitioners to be addressed, assessed and considered as part of the project evaluation criteria.

<sup>22</sup> Besides the emotional support that practitioners may seek in applied theatre networks and organizations, there is the financial aspect of artistic professions that prove to be extremely challenging, to say the least, even for the very skilled. Menger (2009) analyses why artists choose professional careers that frequently do not deliver fame, success and financial freedom, but which however provide satisfaction and a sense of achievement. Drawing on sociological risk theories he attempts to explain how artists cope with uncertainty throughout their careers, and why they choose these lifestyles that are so demanding on their abilities to come up with strategies for gaining financial freedom.



reject, which mainly rewards career choices which minimize the risk and potential for financial uncertainty, as suggests Menger (2009).

## Conclusion

“There is third zone of experience, that is intermediate between the dream and the reality, that which is called cultural life [...] except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual” (Winnicott, 1971).

This study set out to address four major questions:

- How the body is trained and used in drama practices to create ‘the liminal space’?
- How is this space inhabited and negotiated between participants and facilitators differently from one project to another?
- How are ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’ personae construed in function of the practices used?
- How are these personae related to the wider social context (off stage) in which participants and facilities are inscribed?

Exploration of these key themes shows how Csordas’s paradigm of embodiment (1994) proves very useful in understanding how actors embody audience member’s emotions to create a psychic shared space, a liminal space, while actually being separated by the boundaries of the theatre stage.

During the rehearsals, through various physical and emotional exercises applied theatre trainees are invited to wander outside their comfort zones, dare to interact in different modes than the ones that rule their everyday lives and step into liminality and experience a sense of *communitas*. While various scholars (Bloch, 1992 ; van Gennepe, 1960) have pointed out how violence play a crucial role in the creation of the liminal space, in the drama practices observed in this study the experience of liminality was rather triggered by an atmosphere of trust, confidence, acceptance, support and intimacy among participants; what Winnicott (1971) would call a ‘good-enough mothering’ environment, source of

moments of “illusion”, located in a zone that is “intermediate between the dream and the reality” (p. 150).

However, rather opposite to the pure Winnicottian transitional experience, the evidence presented in this study suggests that in drama practices, the liminal space is inhabited and negotiated between practitioners and participants, both groups taking advantage of it for different purposes and often addressing personal needs. In this new space, governed by different power structures than the ones ruling our everyday lives, a wide range of ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage personae’ (Goffman, 1959) may come to life, corresponding to the new power structures in place and in close relation with the wider social context in which the drama practices are inscribed. Thus, this space becomes a rehearsal space for ‘identities under construction’ that will then be put to the test in the tangible and highly normative and regulated social world. It follows, that these ‘identities under construction’ are profoundly determined by the socio-economic and psychological background of individuals, drawing the contours of these personae and therefore, determining the development of one’s potential.

Finally, the analysis of the discursive strategies put in place by both facilitators and practitioners, suggests that these can be seen as ‘survival’ or ‘career strategies’ individuals develop in order to benefit from an economic system they often reject, which does not fully support them towards self-realization and fulfillment (Menger, 2009). This suggests, that theatre practitioners communities may be theorized, based on the financial hardship they often endure and the strategies they put in place to cope with financial and professional uncertainty throughout their careers, as a disadvantaged community in need of emotional and social support; a rather similar situation to that of the ‘fragile’ or ‘impoverished’ communities they aim to empower.

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