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To cite this article: Helen Nicholson (2020) Labours of social inclusion: amateur, professional, community theatres, *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 40:3, 303-308, DOI: [10.1080/14682761.2020.1807207](https://doi.org/10.1080/14682761.2020.1807207)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682761.2020.1807207>



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Published online: 07 Jan 2021.



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Labours of social inclusion: amateur, professional, community theatres

Helen Nicholson

Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, UK

ABSTRACT

This article is offered as a provocation into debates about how cultural hierarchies between amateur, professional and community theatres continue to resonate in contemporary British theatre. Building on research with amateur and community companies, this article presents a case for wider cultural recognition of the work of people in different sectors. It argues for greater reflexivity about the ways in which judgements of taste are played out, and asks who or what is legitimated, included and excluded in today's theatre. It asks how far there remains a link between distinctions of taste and divisions of labour, and what this might mean for theatre workers in the future.

KEYWORDS

Creative labour; amateur; community; professional theatre

There is a moment towards the end of Kieran Hurley's (2018) brilliantly provocative play *Mouthpiece* that sets a challenge. The play is a two-hander, recounting an unlikely friendship between Libby, a middle-class playwright who is struggling to write, and Declan, a gifted artist who lives in poverty without opportunities to develop his talent. Set in different parts of Edinburgh, they are separated by many sociological indicators: class, age, education, dialect and the habits of culture. In the first production in 2018, both were played by white actors, and Lorn Macdonald's sensitive portrayal of Declan drew attention to the emotional effects of economic disadvantage experienced by white working-class men. By the end of the play, friendship cooled, Declan finds his way to the theatre to see Libby's play, *Mouthpiece*, which he knows is based on recordings of their conversations about his life. He is uncomfortable in the theatre, but stays to the post-show talk where Libby describes her creative vision. The audience is largely made up of 'industry people':

Libby: I say I wanted to tell a story that would make people take notice. How I wanted to respond to the way the world really is. How theatre can be a tool for empathy. (2018, 64)

When I read this line to a similar group of theatre professionals, I heard a quiet murmur of agreement. It is a familiar sentiment: theatre is a place to tell and witness stories that are unheard. Declan's response is cutting:

Declan: Cause it's all fucking very well wanting tae be a voice for the voiceless eh. Until you find oot that voiceless have a fucking voice and mibbe they might want to use it.

[...]

Nine grand, that's what you get for writing a play, that's what you said. My story. My words. You just said it. So I'd like some money please. (2018, 66-67)

Hurley's play is more subtle and complex than this short description allows. But it does illustrate the theatre's positionality and opens important questions about cultural gate-keeping, equality of opportunity, who is paid for their labour and whose work is legitimated as art.

Questions of legitimation lie at the heart of debates about theatre and social inclusion, and link judgements of taste with patterns of labour. The contemporary cultural landscape is broadly defined according to three inter-related but distinctive divisions of labour, each of which has their own history and occupies a slightly different space in the cultural economy: professional, amateur and 'community' theatres. Definitions are slippery, but broadly speaking professional theatre-makers are trained and usually paid. Amateur theatre-makers, who often sustain a life-long passion for theatre, stage productions in local venues such as village halls, community centres and small local theatres, and work for love rather than money. Community-based theatre (or applied theatre) has a social mission, and it is usually led by paid professional theatre-makers who choose to work with people considered 'hard-to-reach' or marginalised, often in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. These distinctions took root in the long twentieth century, echoing the history of ideas that legitimated the arts according to their civilising, humanising, or transformative powers.

What is important here is not a detailed reading of the history of Western thought that harnessed the arts to social improvement and personal transformation, but in the ways in which, despite good intentions, inequitable divisions of labour remain upheld. The professionalisation of the artist in the Romantic era is well-known – and has been subject to extensive feminist and post-colonial criticism.¹ Equally relevant here are the ways in which artisans and craftworkers were defined in contradistinction to the artist's heightened imaginative powers. Raymond Williams captured this history in *Keywords*, where he charts how industrial capitalism set up distinctions between artists, craftworkers and artisans which, he argues, were based on 'various kinds of human skill' (1976, 42), and notes how artisans came to refer to skilled manual workers 'without intellectual or "imaginative" or "creative" purposes' (1976, 42). Craftworkers are less clearly defined by Williams (since William Morris craftworkers have occupied an ambiguous political territory for Marxist commentators), but Richard Sennett has observed that craftmanship (sic) brings together a high degree of skill with emotional connectivity to the process of making (2008, 20). Although this language may seem dated, and new forms of participatory and relational arts are redefining performance/ audience relationships, discrepancies between the specialist skills of craftworkers and the manual skills of artisans are more difficult to shake off. These graft neatly onto distinctions between professional artists, amateur theatre-makers and 'community' or non-professional participants.

Contemporary community or participatory programmes are designed by professional theatre-makers to be inclusive. In an attempt to erode hierarchical distinctions between community and professional theatre-makers, participants are all described as artists, differentiated as either 'trained' or 'untrained'. There is, however, an aesthetic double bind here. The untrained body on stage is sometimes integral to the aesthetic of cutting-edge performance, and the participation of 'real people' is taken as a marker of authenticity.

There is, however, an understandable impulse to harness the power of theatre to make a difference, and increasingly major theatres across the UK are developing programmes that encourage people from diverse community groups with limited experience of theatre-making to take part. The National Theatre's Public Acts programme serves as an example of this trend. Public Acts, led by Emily Lim, began working with eight community organisations across London in 2017. At the end of the first year, an inclusive company of over 200 performers from across London performed an adaptation of *Pericles* on the Olivier Stage, directed by Lim with a small cast of professional actors (Ashley Zhangazha, Ayesha Dharker, Kevin Harvey, Garry Robson and Naana Agyei-Ampadu). Technically, the community company was supported by voice coach Hazel Holder and stage manager Cynthia Du Berry, as well as a team in the costume and wig department who not only added to the company's confidence but also ensured that religious and cultural preferences were addressed. Public Acts is one example of community-based theatre programmes that are designed to serve social or communitarian agendas, sometimes invoking familiar refrains about the redemptive or transformative powers of the arts, albeit articulated in twenty-first-century terms such as increasing wellbeing, employability or improving mental health. Often funded by philanthropists, they have an important social function and significant impact on the lives of individuals, but their aim is not to train people in the kind of skills needed for a working life in the theatre.

Debates around the boundaries between professional and non-professional artists turn on theatres' remuneration policies. Some theatres – including the Young Vic and the Almeida in London – have at different times come under scrutiny for how they pay performers, particularly where the unpaid labour of 'community choruses' has been integral to long-running successful productions. These are important and justified debates. Yet some well-meaning criticisms – usually from the liberal-minded salaried professionals – fail to take account of the economic realities experienced by people living on benefits; most people from low-income backgrounds would simply be unable to take part if it meant a loss of benefits and having to reapply for universal credit after a short period of employment. This is a systemic barrier to employment in the arts, particularly affecting people in precarious jobs without the security of economic privilege. On the one hand, these productions can provide welcome opportunities for people outside the theatre profession to take part but, on the other, there is also a risk that such participatory work masks the uneven opportunities for skill development and recognition across and between people in different sectors. Taking Part programmes reveals the ethical complexity of cultural gatekeeping, particularly when the social agendas of the programmes, however clearly communicated, are at odds with the aspirations of community performers who hope to be talent-spotted. Lauren Berlant's cautionary words come to mind; there is always a risk that community programmes, however well intentioned, represent a form of cruel optimism to aspiring performers if a 'good-life fantasy' is ignited by the experience but remains unattainable (2011, 43).

Contemporary interest in participation has extended to Arts Council England's funding strategies, which have incentivised making art by, with, and for local people. According to ACE deputy chief executive Simon Mellor, large parts of communities have 'lost all confidence in what they view as an out-of-touch establishment' (quoted in *The Stage*, 8 April 2019). This has led to calls for increased diversity in governance and leadership, and a new focus on ensuring that publicly funded arts are 'relevant' as well as

high quality. The Creative People and Places scheme funds the arts in areas with low cultural provision outside the metropolitan centres. Partnerships between arts organisations, local councils and health authorities have attracted funding, but to date, there has been little appetite to engage local amateur theatres in these schemes. Funded projects reveal judgements of taste as well as quality; the ambition to make art more ‘relevant’ to local people is more likely to include pop-up beach-art or participatory installations in shopping centres than an amateur production of a popular musical. These inspirational schemes can open people’s eyes to new kinds of participation and often involve local people in planning, but they rely on the creative vision of professional artists and are rarely designed to open career opportunities in theatre. There is further work to be done on how participatory programmes and professional training might be brought into alignment, and how they might both generate wide local interest and also incubate the talent of people from all backgrounds as one approach to diversifying the workforce.

It is worth observing, perhaps unsurprisingly, that theatre professionals are often more interested in working with people who have experienced socioeconomic disadvantage or exclusion than engaging with the thriving amateur theatre sector. This begs questions about how questions of the cultural hierarchy are being played out today. This is, of course, familiar territory to readers of Pierre Bourdieu, but there has been little self-reflexivity in the academy in recent years about how his discussions of taste continue to resonate. Bourdieu argued that there is a need to understand the social conditions in which artists’ work is legitimated and warns against hierarchical judgements based on the aesthetic tastes of the cultivated intellectual (1984, 82). In part, this debate is articulated in *Mouthpiece*, in which it was implied that the tastes of the liberal theatre-going public for plays about social inequality enable them to witness stories of people they would be unlikely to meet in their everyday lives. My point here is that judgements of taste still serve as models of legitimation in the academy, and although community arts and socially engaged performance have become highly valued and tastes have evolved, Bourdieu’s argument that distinctions of taste uphold cultural hierarchies cannot be dismissed as dated and irrelevant.

A closer look at amateur theatre in the wider cultural sphere serves to illustrate how principles of legitimation are played out. As Nadine Holdsworth, Jane Milling and I observed in our book *The Ecologies of Amateur Theatre* (2018), amateur theatre-makers are often proud of their status as amateurs and wish to gain recognition for their work. Almost all amateur companies stage pre-written scripted plays or musicals (rather than developing devised work or performance art). But it is less widely known that amateurs often produce the second productions of new cutting-edge plays and that the amateur market quietly sustains the careers of many playwrights, musicians, choreographers and so on (2018, 286–303). The formal disconnect between the amateur and professional theatre sectors also means that amateurs have limited opportunities to extend their knowledge of theatre craft by learning from and alongside professionals. One exception was the Royal Shakespeare Company’s Open Stages programme, which was primarily focused on skills-development in acting and directing Shakespeare. Ian Wainwright, producer of Open Stages and a strong advocate of the amateur sector, described the distinctions between amateurs and professionals in the following terms:

It's like the difference between elite athletes and amateur runners. They can both run marathons, but with different degrees of knowledge. They (amateurs) are really very good craftspeople, and at the RSC we are artists. (Interview with Ian Wainwright, 7 June 2019).

The opportunity to learn from world-class professionals was taken up with enthusiasm, demonstrating amateurs' interest in staging high-quality productions. As Molly Flynn (2017) observed, amateur theatre-makers gained confidence from the cultural recognition that their association with the RSC gave. Open Stages and its sister project Dream16 ran from 2010 to 2016, but the collaboration with amateurs has not received ongoing funding. Perhaps it is easier to fund programmes with more overtly social agendas. But amateurs are often quietly fulfilling social agendas by making a major contribution to place-making, serving as cultural hubs in towns outside metropolitan centres and providing creative opportunities for local people from different backgrounds. Given that the Brexit vote revealed intense feelings of disconnect between towns and the city-based establishment Simon Mellor invoked, there is an increasingly pressing social and political case for including amateurs in cultural policy.

So where would Declan and Libby find themselves in this landscape? My guess is that Declan would be considered hard-to-reach, and he might find himself involved in a local project designed to increase his wellbeing and employability. If he were lucky, someone might recognise his talent and support him in developing his artistic skills. Libby's play would have a successful professional run and a tour, and its life might be extended by amateur and youth theatre productions. This is a start, but would not be good enough to change the social demographic of the arts. In theatre, my suggestion is that finding ways for amateur, professional and community participants to learn from each other would be the first step towards a more socially inclusive profession. Furthermore, breaking down stereotypes might erode barriers and lead to an increasingly diverse workforce based on equal recognition and respect. This not only requires greater access to the arts and new modes of participation, but a more radical change of attitude towards the creative labour of amateur, professional and community theatres.

Note

1. See, for example, Marilyn Butler. 1981. *Romantics, Rebels and Revolutionaries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; A.K. Mellor. 1993. *Romanticism and Gender*. London: Routledge; Elizabeth A. Bohls. 2013. *Romantic Literature and Postcolonial Studies*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council under Grant [AH/R012962/1].

Notes on contributor

Helen Nicholson is Professor of Theatre and Performance at Royal Holloway, University of London. She was PI for two AHRC-funded research projects on amateur theatre, and she has published widely on applied theatre and community-based theatre. From 2017-2019 Helen led the research for Public Acts, the National Theatre's new initiative for community participation.

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