“Epic, Easy, for Everyone”
Public Engagement and the National Theatre
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Introduction
The Royal National Theatre is one of the UK's largest performing arts venues and has entertained audiences at its home on London's South Bank since 1976. However, the inclusion of the word ‘national’ in its title, coupled with the abundance of public funding it receives, implies a reach that extends beyond the capital’s middleclass demographic and into the nation. Further, the presence of a building an “exhausted ideological construct” and ultimately restrictive to a company aiming to represent ‘the people’. With this in mind, this research poster presents the difficulties faced by national arts institutions and argues that they would benefit from a more inclusive and accessible approach to theatre making.

For Jen Harvie, national identities are always “pervasively felt and [remain] socially potent forms of identity” (2005, 1). As such, can an individual production, set in a defined town, village or city, accurately reflect a community? Can a play really engage with the public from which it derives? To what extent is a nation best reflected by its inhabitants?

Through extensive interviews with local residents, Alecky Blythe and Adam Cork’s London Road transformed a real life murder trial into an innovative piece of musical theatre. In retaining the speech patterns of the interviewees, the production portrayed a community in turmoil in song, with every ‘um’ and ‘ah’ intact. Such stark reactions were not altered and their diverse opinions were permitted, in want of a better word, to sing.

“The news and the press just hype it all up ya know. Cos it's Suffolk, nothing ever happens in Suffolk. If it happened in London no one would care. Cos everyone gets stabbed in London every day. Isn’t that right?”

However, in not leaving London, is this production a successful example of public engagement? Since it was only enjoyed by an arguably middle-class audience, can it ever represent the diversity of participants from which it stems? Whilst verbatim theatre performs the public’s ‘authentic’ responses, in remaining within the closed walls of an auditorium, this musical does not embody nationhood. In this case, The National Theatre remains detached from the community it so desperately seeks to represent.

Case Study #2 – Black Watch (2006) – The National Theatre of Scotland
The defining feature of the National Theatre of Scotland is the fact that it has no permanent residence: no concrete evidence of its existence, no bookshop, no adjoined coffee house, nowhere for the tourists to visit. But with this decision comes opportunity, empowerment and autonomy. With no set home, the National Theatre is free to explore the nation, taking in and exhibiting all that Scotland has to offer.

Premiering in Edinburgh in 2006, Black Watch went on to be performed throughout the country, before embarking on an international tour. To date, Black Watch has been seen by tens of thousands of people, cementing the National Theatre of Scotland’s worldwide reputation as an eminently touring theatre.

“We have no bricks-and-mortar institutionalism to counter, nor the security of a permanent home in which to develop. All our money and energy can be spent on creating the work”

Further, this idea creates the opportunity for the entirety of Scotland to experience its National Theatre’s productions, regardless of location, reaching out to the audience instead of expecting the audience to come to them. Such adaptability in form also affords no restrictions when it comes to producing work, allowing the National Theatre of Scotland the luxury of matching the space with the work as opposed to the other way around, as so often is the case in other venues. All of these elements contribute to what Scotland exemplifies a new, progressive National Theatre ideology.

Research Questions
• What is the purpose of a national theatre?
• Can theatre ever accurately represent a nation?
• Is it a theatre’s responsibility to engage audiences outside their traditional demographic?
• Is a national theatre building a help or a hindrance?
• Is verbatim theatre the only authentic way of representing a nation and its inhabitants?
• Should a national theatre promote nationalism?

“What a pity it is that some measure of interest can not be turned in the direction of the launching, say, of a National Theatre” – Winston Churchill

“I will it be seen that the Theatre [...] would become absolutely – the property of the nation” - William Archer and H. Granville Barker

Final Thoughts...
The Royal National Theatre in London presents a varied programme of work from across the globe. Its lacking of touring, however, restricts the audience that it reaches, rendering its work anything but national. The shunning of a building by the National Theatre of Scotland, for instance, points to a policy that is more concerned with reaching the nation. Its lack of consideration for work with routes outside its borders presents an overly nationalist viewpoint.

“The National Theatre is dedicated to the constant revitalisation of the great traditions of the British stage”

The proliferation of verbatim theatre seems to suggest a level of public engagement which extends beyond the reach of other theatrical forms. Although London Road is set in Ipswich, in reality, it never reached the stages of Suffolk and failed to impact the communities you might expect. Had the Royal National Theatre considered an approach more akin to the National Theatre of Scotland, the potential impact could have been far greater.

Further Reading