

“Meanwhile use”: pop-ups, temporary spaces and the politics of scarcity in ‘do-it-yourself’ theatre-making

A provocation by Linford Butler, University of Lincoln, given at the Theatre and Performance Research Association postgraduate symposium, at the University of Leeds on Friday 3rd February 2017.

Abstract: This paper considers a ‘do-it-yourself’ politics and practice within contemporary theatre-making, one which “implies (and exploits) more rudimentary, accessible, tools and media, and promotes being more self-reliant” (Daniels, 2014, 11), in order to interrogate how the interplay between temporary performative spaces, artists, collectives and making a “virtue of having less resources” (Barker, 2014) constitutes the “political act of democratising art-making” (Daniels, 2014, 8).

It considers how DIY artists, “working with anything they have in frugal ways as a political and philosophical *modus operandi*” (Daniels, 2014, 8), have co-developed and enabled pop-up theatres, theatre festivals and other temporary performative spaces, such as Forest Fringe, by applying aesthetic, structural and economic scarcity as a model for producing artwork.

It evaluates how temporary artistic communities catalyse the development of work “born of a place and community, and which offers a distinct alternative to the monoculture that thrives on top-down structures” (Nicklin, 2012), and how scarcity becomes a mode of political expression, a “political act [...] that circumvents the normal restrictions and structures of theatre” (Gardner, 2014).

It finally mediates on how such spaces “embrace the temporary, the irrationally unsustainable” (Field, in Gaughan, 2015) in pursuing “radically independent and politically driven” (Daniels, 2014, 7) alternative modes of artistic expression, and how “in times of financial hardship or when buildings and programmers act more like gatekeepers than midwives” (Gardner, 2014), DIY politics and practice can challenge the establishments and which prevent cultural diversity and accessibility by embracing risk, temporariness and unsustainability.

“Is it about bits of cardboard strewn around to make a set?” (Judd 2014)

In Clive Judd’s report from a Devoted & Disgruntled roadshow in 2014, those words strike me as being the most interesting and provocative. They stand, from my perspective as a practitioner of the contemporary performance practice that has become known as ‘do-it-yourself’ or ‘DIY’ theatre, as almost an affront; reductive and overly simplistic. Yet, with a more critical hat atop my head, I recognise that what Judd does with a mere twelve words, is to efficiently summarise the prevailing attitude towards DIY theatre-making. Far from my apprehension of DIY as the “political and philosophical *modus operandi*” (Daniels 2014, 8) which DIY advocate Robert Daniels describes, DIY is commonly seen as at best “inexpertly crafted” (Gardner 2014), and at worst “purposely do[ing] it ‘badly’ or without care for quality” (Daniels 2014, 8).

Even DIY artists themselves riff on this common conception of DIY as fundamentally an 'anti-quality'. The DIY company GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN's contribution to Daniels' influential curated book of artist reflections on DIY theatre-making reads:

"DIY is a load of crap that is easy to get a hold of. It is a temporary fix for a deep structural problem. It is cheap and it is simply not good enough."

(GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN, in Daniels 2014, 60-61)

The piece is, of course, an irony; but that being the accepted understanding, what value is there in considering the DIY ethos in any sort of critical or academic discourse? And why, as I set out to do in this paper, is it worth discussing pop-up theatres as an expression of DIY? To return to Judd, if DIY is "bits of cardboard strewn around to make a set", is the pop-up anything more than 'bits of furniture strewn around to make a theatre' – and not a very good one at that?

In this paper, I assert DIY theatre-making as a fundamentally politicised practice motivated towards the emancipation of less privileged artists, collectives and audiences from the "sycophantic commercial hegemony" (Daniels 2014, 11) of commercialised industries of theatre production and presentation. I specifically address the proliferation of pop-up theatres as a response to the impetus Nicklin articulates when she writes:

"Let's urgently revise: the means of production (and who can access them); the places of production (and who can access them); the communities that join maker and audience (and who can access them)." (Nicklin 2015)

I'll interrogate how pop-up theatres are recognisably DIY, through their impetus to reclaim spaces lost and taken, the opportunities they offer and engender for democratising the production and presentation of art, and their embrace of unsustainability and temporariness. I'll then offer some thoughts in conclusion on how the DIY artist might most meaningfully apply the pop-up theatre model to "enable other artists, audiences and institutions through the spirit of generosity" (Gardner 2014).

It is worth noting that published scholarship on either DIY or the pop-up theatre are scarce, and what this paper is therefore not able to do is to make any conclusive statements about the complexities of DIY practice, the pop-up and its cultural and artistic impacts, or the nebulous and still-developing interplays between the two. Instead it intends to contribute to the development of this area of scholarship by offering some initial ideas and provoke further discussion around these uncharted areas of contemporary performance practice.

James Baker of Bootworks identifies the democratisation of theatre's production, presentation, places and praxis as a foundation of the DIY ethos, describing it as finding "creative ways in which hegemonic power structures can be manipulated and shaped to benefit the small artist/collective" (Baker in Daniels 2014, 11). Theatre activist Donovan King articulates the

same notion when describing Infringement Festival, the grassroots DIY festival he co-founded:

“Our message was that we didn’t need the entrenched system of auditions, producers, money and hierarchy to create theatre – we could do it ourselves, in our own way, on a shoestring budget, and then invite others to share in our controversial and unconventional artistic utopia.” (King 2012)

King describes the festival context, and to a great extent, festivals – from the ethos of the emerging Edinburgh Fringe in the late 1940s, to micro-festivals such as Forest Fringe, Pulse and NEAT today – can be as equally read as ‘pop-up’ as the venue-based spaces we might impulsively associate with the term. But no matter whether festival, pop-up or artwork: where the DIY ethos emerges, it generally manifests as a “political act of democratising art-making” (Daniels 2014, 8). The pop-up then – a symbol of DIY both materially (rudimentary physical materials) and entrepreneurially (assuming agency) – can be similarly seen as a democratised space.

Jen Harvie, in her volume *Fair Play*, discusses how the pop-up serves to physically democratise art-making, identifying:

“Pop-up arts venues are often more dispersed within the city than much other cultural provision that tends to be concentrated in privileged city centres. They are therefore potentially more available to a greater social range of audiences, including in areas of greater deprivation.” (Harvie 2013, 123)

To this extent, then, the pop-up theatre is a powerful tool in the DIY artist’s toolkit for the opportunity it provides to diversify accessibility. By removing art from traditional theatres, pop-up theatres represent “creative interventions that are temporary, tactical, multiple and dispersed - and often deliberately social” (Harvie 2013, 123), provides an opportunity for the DIY artist to “leave behind these palaces, these cathedrals to art” (Nicklin 2012).

Pop-ups, like other forms of DIY practice, can also be seen to democratise art work through their application of rudimentary materials. I like to describe DIY artists as theatrical wombles by whitt of their “making good use of the things that they find, things that the everyday folk leave behind” (The Wombles, 1974). In “working with anything they have in frugal ways” (Daniels 2014, 8), DIY artists symbolically communicate – to other artists, audiences and institutions – that the perceived exclusivity of art-making is a falsehood. I revisit Judd here, because I recognise I’ve proven him right: DIY sometimes *is* about bits of cardboard to make a set. The importance here is that it isn’t *just* cardboard; that DIY’s aesthetic is a symbol of its ethos, communicating accessibility. Unlike DIY performances, constrained by the moment and location of its live happening, pop-ups have a markedly greater profile and visibility, often by their nature as a physical space or structure, and are therefore an important vehicle for this communication of ethos.

However, it is not merely the impetus of democratisation which DIY enshrines and the pop-up applies; but a broader rejection of the modes of neoliberal capitalism itself. In particular, it is the “transient temporality” (Boyle 2016, 71) of the pop-up which indicates DIY’s embrace of the “irrationally unsustainable” (Gaughan 2015). Boyle, in his article *Container Aesthetics*, describes the proliferation of the shipping container as a pop-up venue in recent times:

“Container architecture is performative architecture; it announces what it enacts - impermanence, flexibility, and interchangeability” (Boyle 2016, 71)

It is not merely shipping containers, though, in which this can be observed; other pop-ups, such as the shed in which I read the Chilcot Report aloud during last year’s Edinburgh Fringe, can be equally seen as performative architecture in the sense Boyle uses. Jen Harvie describes how pop-ups operate as importantly temporary locations, using Hakim Bey’s notion of the Temporary Autonomous Zone:

“Pop-ups thus operate as [...] Temporary Autonomous Zones (TAZs), temporary sites of activity (or inactivity) which challenge conventional structures and practices and encourage alternatives to emerge” (Harvie 2013, 124)

In this sense, pop-ups can be used in DIY to challenge the obsessive pursuit of neoliberal capitalism towards growth, scalability and profit, and the coarse and non-nuanced measure of value that is monetary currency. DIY is instead, as Andy Field, co-organiser of Forest Fringe, puts it:

“interested in celebrating smallness and independence, in resisting the idea that success is tied to growth, in recognising that resources are finite and growing ever-more so all the time, and we still believe that owning your own venue or your own office or even your own photocopier does not have to be the logistical progression” (Field, 2014)

It is important though to note the contradiction between the routine marginalisation of both DIY and the pop-up form by what might be called the ‘mainstream’, at the same time as those same establishments appropriate them. As Daniels puts it:

“we’re so locked into an archaic system that even when the odd happening bursts to life and galvanises a sense of place and progression in the homogenous mainstream it is quickly dubbed ‘alternative’, ‘fringe’ or worse ‘experimental’ (to say the least) and elitist: we are quickly ostracised and marginalised.” (Daniels 2014, 12)

It constitutes a powerful tactic for established authorities – national theatres, venture investors, property developers – to ensure DIY’s political interventions only ever remain, and are only ever considered, transient novelties: “cultivated exceptionalism” (2013, 126) as Harvie puts it. It’s a tactic which by design ensures the “grit runs out, and the talent is worn down” (Nicklin, 2015) amongst the grassroots who galvanise the engagement in the first

instance, leaving the style open for appropriation and the area free for development, once the pop-up has proven the commercial and cultural viability of an area.

So, to summarise: the pop-up can be seen as an expression of the DIY ethos in its resistance to hegemony, through its democratisation of access to theatre and theatre-making, through their shared application of the rudimentary and imperfect, and a recognition of alternative modes of value. So how might one best apply the pop-up in a true application of the DIY ethos? I think the answer lies in a recognition of the social responsibility of the artist in inaugurating a context for work which exceeds that which is necessary when merely making work. The DIY artist should recognise the risk they introduce to a community when they embark on a pop-up enterprise; that in doing so, they might inadvertently draw attention to an area, prove its commercial viability and set in motion a process of gentrification that could do more damage than good. A belief therefore that, on balance, one does more good with a pop-up than damage is important. Moreover, I believe the DIY artist should recognise their responsibility to the contingent community that surrounds their pop-up extends beyond even its closure. The artist, collective or theatre company that instigates a pop-up should continue to engage with the community meaningfully, make further opportunities for that community to participate in its work, make further political and artistic interventions to continue to address local issues, and – perhaps most importantly – participate actively in local resistance to gentrification where it occurs, particularly where the pop-up could have been seen to precipitate interest.

I have in this paper attempted to begin to articulate some of the resonances between the DIY ethos and the pop-up theatre space. In doing so, I have recognised the difficulty in unpicking important areas of tension between the two, and with complex social, economic and political infrastructures. I hope the ideas in this paper have provoked new resonances for you, and I look forward to continuing the emerging scholarly conversation around these emerging areas. To sign off:

“Theatre should belong to nobody, everybody” (Nicklin 2012)

Biography

Linford Butler is a theatre-maker and postgraduate student, based in Lincoln, UK. He obtained his undergraduate degree in Drama at the University of Lincoln in 2015, where he is currently working towards an MA in Contemporary British Theatre. He intends to begin a PhD in late 2017, studying DIY politics and practice in contemporary theatre-making.

He is co-artistic director of theatre company Wooden Warehouse, and chair of the Student Performers' and Artists' Creative Exchange (SPACE), a national network for student and emerging graduate performers to advocate for and support art making within student contexts across the UK. Outside theatre, he works in higher education, with a particular interest in student engagement and work to enhance the student experience.

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