

Keep Theatre Live

In the early 1980s the Musicians Union ran a campaign 'keep music live'. No self respecting musician or band would be seen dead without a sticker on their guitar case or the rear window of their battered Bedford van. I guess the idea was to remind people of the special-ness of the experience of live music. I have often wondered if we should do a similar campaign for theatre, not only as a reminder to our audience of the surprise theatre can offer but to remind us of what we do best - live, real time events with the audience and artist in the same place at the same time.

I have just returned from East Sussex, where I saw, Paddock Productions new musical by Orlando Gough played out in an old warehouse with local people and professional opera singers. The story revolves around the care and respect that the people of Lewes showed to a number of Finnish prisoners held in the town during the Napoleonic wars. But what elevated the piece as theatre was that we, the audience, witnessed the same thing happening live, in real time - as the town embraced not prisoners but 8 extraordinary singers from the Finnish National Opera. Had the singers been community participants or from an English opera company we would have been merely watching a historic drama. We were watching real dramas.

So new work is being created across rural England in unexpected ways for appreciative audiences, through a surprising range of partnerships.

This work doesn't call itself 'radical' or 'experimental' because in rural areas, like anywhere, these terms scare the audience. But freed from the restrictions of conventional theatre buildings and the infrastructure they demand, artists can experiment with form, style and content, create work that questions the relationship between artist and audience and renew the language of contemporary theatre. Indeed, I'm convinced that the future health of our theatre lies, in part at least, in the opportunities for artists and audiences in rural England.

Firstly, working in community spaces demands a partnership that relies as much on the audience as on the performers. The promoting, box office, front of house and marketing is usually undertaken by the community in their space. It is the company who are the visitors. These partnerships are exactly the model being championed by Government and would be the envy of many large cultural organisations. And they are happening, quietly, everywhere.

Secondly, much of the work in rural communities is necessarily broadcast rather than narrowcast because the 'arts' audience tends to be small, so companies develop theatre that has the potential to attract the whole community. This search for convivial, inclusive events is one of the greatest strengths of our work. It sees all audiences as 'new' and does not require them to come with an existing knowledge or mastery of etiquette. That does not, however, imply any less commitment to quality – poor initiatives always fail. Instead it demands that we remember that popularity and artistic integrity are both critical components of good art. As the new Secretary of State for Culture, James Purnell, says 'the choice between excellence and access is false'.

If we are to take seriously Purnell's claim that 'the arts hold the ring of our national conversation' then we must rediscover our art form's capacity to develop a new participative culture. We should be rescuing the ability of people to use their own creativity. We should build surprising partnerships with amateur and professional artists to create and distribute work. And I don't mean through a revival of community play models, but a reinvention of what a theatrical event can be. We can go far further than that...

Take the Canadian theatre company Mammalian Diving Reflex, whose Haircuts by Children, has professional hairdressers working with a group of 10 year olds for a term prior to a weekend in which residents of local community care and residential homes are invited to act as models for the children in a town centre salon. And the children really cut their hair. And the elderly clients really let them. It is impossible to express the care, trust and mutual respect that this process engenders in both child and adult. As the company says, 'these children are going to be voting in a few years time; surely we can trust them with a pair of scissors?' Is it 'theatre' – who knows?

Or Rimini Protokoll, from Germany, whose new piece explores the globalisation of labour by asking each audience member to wear headphones and a microphone so that they can be directed around the local area to meet a series of people who recount a story of their journey from another part of the

world. Only later do they discover that the person directing them via the headphones is watching their every move on CTV from a call centre in Calcutta. Now that is playing with ideas of a global economy.

And our own production of *The Polish Play*, which sets out to get the audience to talk and listen, not to us but, to each other.

It may be a big ask, but we should work to ensure that arts practice in rural England becomes a radical force, that the value of making work with, as well as for, all parts of the country is held dear, that renewal and experiment is not the sole preserve of the cities and that we rebut the easy characterisation of the countryside as a backward, romanticised place that never really existed.