

THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHORUS

Theatre and Community

KANIBADAM

Kanibadam is a town of about 50,000 people in the east of Tajikistan, close to the borders of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Like many parts of the former Soviet Union, it has experienced great economic, social and political pressures since 1991. Today, as many as one in four Tajik citizens have seek [work abroad](#), especially in Russia.

Two weeks ago, I was lucky to see the première of a new production in the town's State Musical Theatre named after T. Fozilova. The building is almost 100 years old and in desperate need of renovation: there are earth toilets at the back of the yard. A first, crucial step has been made, with support from the [Swiss Cooperation Office in Tajikistan](#), with the installation of modern light and sound equipment. The play I saw was the first presented with up to date technical facilities and the auditorium was packed for the afternoon performance. There were mothers with children, pensioners, teenagers at the back: only the working age men were few.

The play, 'Mother, Tomorrow I'm Getting Married', was adapted from a Russian text and told interlocking stories of families whose young people wanted to marry. Such romantic situations are the stock in trade of theatre, but this play focused also on the risks of early marriage, domestic violence and debt, as families overspend to show Tajik values of hospitality. This is such a problem that it is [illegal to invite more than 150 guests](#) to a wedding in Tajikistan.

The audience loved the play. It's a cliché but the atmosphere really did feel electric as the drama unfolded its alternating layers of comedy and tragedy, and the applause was long and enthusiastic. Everyone stayed to hear the President of the City Council praise the theatre for the excellence of the performance and particularly for having raised urgent problems faced by Tajik society. Then the director, Muhiddin Juraev, spoke passionately about his desire to revive Kanibadam's theatre and place it at the heart of the city's life. Fervent applause frequently interrupted both speeches.



Muhiddin Juraev and the cast of 'Mother, Tomorrow I'm Getting Married', 2015

Afterwards, I spent some time talking to Muhiddin Juraev and Dilbar Sulaymonova, the manager, about their hopes for the theatre. Juraev was born in the city and it was here that he discovered what drama could be. After his studies and an intensive, life-changing stage director's lab at [Ilkhom Theatre](#) in Tashkent, he accepted an offer to come home and revive the theatre in his home town. It was an exceptional chance for a director still in his twenties and he knows its value; he knows too what he must do to succeed. His task, he told me, is to win back the trust of local people. What I saw on stage and the plans he outlined give confidence that Muhiddin, Dilbar and their colleagues will indeed renew the contract between this theatre and its community and so play a vital role in how the city meets its challenges.

Although it is not an example of community theatre, this story speaks powerfully of theatre's place in the life of a community, even – especially – one as poor and remote from the fashionable centres of art production as Kanibadam. It shows how valuable and intense the relationship between a theatre and its audience can be. Nonetheless, for the time being at least, the people on stage are professional actors, well-trained and mostly with long careers in Tajik theatre and cinema. This kind of professional theatre has become a standard today, throughout the world. Its roots are ancient – and I shall return to that – but its modern form was shaped by the industrialising societies of Western Europe. Its central elements are an authored text, a dedicated building and separate roles for performers and audience. The orchestra pit that still divides them in many older theatres is the symbol of that separation.

But there have always been other ways of making theatre. There were no professional performers in Classical Athens or in Medieval religious plays. Today there are many theatre practices that bridge the pit to unite professionals and non-professionals in

making theatre. Without offering anything as scientific as a taxonomy of these practices, or even a comprehensive overview, I want to touch on some of the approaches that now enrich theatrical life in and beyond Britain. They are not all valued or well understood by critics, policymakers or, sadly, even by some theatre professionals. And yet they play a vital role in nurturing audiences, future actors and the roots of local theatre traditions. They are also sometimes laboratories in which new ideas of performance practice, aesthetics and language are explored. And most importantly, perhaps, they play a critical role in the life of democratic societies by enabling other, often marginalised voices to be heard.

AMATEURS ON STAGE



John and Iris Richards, West Bromwich Operatic Society

The easiest way for non-professionals to become involved in theatre performance is through amateur companies. Like its professional cousin, amateur theatre owes its present form to the emergence of industrial society. There are 2500 amateur theatre companies in the UK, a substantial proportion of which go back 100 years or more.¹ They were created by people with a love of the performing arts and a belief in education and access to culture as routes to social progress. Their continuity and growth, despite the enormous changes undergone by British society during the 20th century, is strong evidence of the importance of theatre in social life. It is also extraordinary, since these amateur groups are independently organised and financed, without any official or state assistance. The story of [West Bromwich Operatic Society](#), which I wrote about in a 2011 book called [Where We Dream](#), is representative of the field.

The company was set up in 1937 in what was then a fairly prosperous manufacturing town. As the name suggests, they specialise in musical theatre, and now create one

new production in the spring and another in the autumn. With rehearsals and company management, the hundred or more members are kept busy throughout the year, meeting at evenings and weekends. The shows are increasingly ambitious and the standards very high. Auditions are held and parts allocated by a professional director; the company also pays for a choreographer, musical director and musicians during the performance week. But everyone else is an amateur, holding down a job and making theatre in their free time. Many use their holiday entitlement to be available for the production week.



The Producers (2011) West Bromwich Operatic Society (Kate Jackson)

West Bromwich has gone through huge economic and social change since the 1930s. Its traditional industries and businesses have mostly gone, and its social make up has been transformed by immigration from the Indian subcontinent and Eastern Europe. Today, it is one of the most disadvantaged towns in Britain with high levels of unemployment, ill health and poverty; it is also a friendly, spirited community, working hard against the odds. When its theatre was converted into a cinema in the 1960s, the Operatic Society hired it back and transformed it into a theatre again twice a year. When it was demolished in the 1970s, they put on their performances in the Town Hall and the Methodist Chapel. All the time, the company's work grew stronger and more ambitious so today they hire 1,000 seat theatres in nearby Wolverhampton and Birmingham. The production budgets of £50,000 to £80,000 are raised through ticket sales so each show is a risk. Happily, the company's work and reputation mean that they can sell 4,000 seats or more in a week for a popular show, like *Oliver* or *Evita*. These reliable productions allow the company to put on more uncertain shows that the members find exciting, like *The Producers*, Mel Brooks' satire of musicals, which was the subject of my book. Twenty five years ago, the Operatic Society started a thriving youth company, with its own production schedule: many young people join

the main company as they get older so the organisation constantly renews itself. Amateur theatre is often a lifelong passion.

Professional theatre places a high value on artistic originality, though, of course, it does not always achieve it. In contrast, amateur productions rarely aim to be original, aspiring instead to a high standard of performance: sets and costumes are often hired from past productions rather than created afresh. This vision of art, based in replication of an ideal through craft and technique, has been unfashionable since Romanticism made authenticity and originality the benchmark of quality, but it should not be undervalued. Above all, it is important, if we hope to understand amateur theatre, to appreciate what it does try to do, and why, rather than assessing it against ideals which it does not have.

A high standard of performance is certainly one aspect of this and it would not be possible to sell so many tickets at £20 or more unless the audience had an enjoyable evening of theatre. The amateurs expect to be judged on their performance. When the audience is appreciative, the sense of personal fulfilment can be profound, as one member, Callum MacArthur, told me:

'I was very shy. I used to sit in a corner with my arms folded – and next thing I've got this new-found confidence. It developed the nights of the concert. I was on the stage and I'd sung this song and all of a sudden people were standing up and clapping – for me. And it was an achievement that I'd never really been good at anything before, but all of a sudden I've got involved with this thing and people were appreciating what I'd just done.'²

The members of West Bromwich Operatic Society are hardworking, level-headed and very likeable: they love theatre, but it is one part of lives that include family, work and much else besides. Being on stage is exciting and fulfilling, but what they spoke about most often was the sense of community, friendship and shared achievement they gained from being part of the company. Here are two more members' voices:

'It's a company that is also a group of people who look after you as friends, and in some cases as family, and that's very special. It's cheesy, but it's true.'³

'That sense of shared endeavour means that when you've done a show together you always have those shared memories.'⁴

West Bromwich Operatic Society is a fine amateur theatre company, with a deeply serious approach to its work; but it is not exceptional. It has peers across the UK, all striving for the highest standards of theatre making. The same is true of the many smaller amateur companies working in different styles and conditions. Some, like the [Robin Hood Theatre](#) in Nottinghamshire, or [West Acre Theatre](#) in Norfolk, have their own buildings and play valued roles in the life of their community. Others use schools, village halls and community centres, putting on one or two productions a year. Like all groups that depend on individuals, they have their ups and downs; some produce better work than others, but that is also true of professional theatre. What matters is their contribution to the artistic and social life of each place, which is as incalculable as the time and creativity invested by amateurs who love theatre.

WBOS in rehearsal for *The Producers* (Kate Jackson)

COMMUNITY THEATRE

Amateur theatre meets the needs of tens of thousands of people in Britain who want to participate in making theatre, but there are many others who look elsewhere to express themselves through acting. It may seem odd to distinguish between amateur theatre and community theatre, since both depend on unpaid actors, but it helps to clarify the diverse purposes of these practices. Perhaps the key difference is this: if amateur theatre aspires to the formal achievements of the professional stage, community theatre places greater emphasis on its expressive potential. Community theatre – which embraces an even wider spectrum of theatrical work than its amateur counterpart – is concerned with creating new plays, telling new stories and hearing from new voices. It is also usually led by professional theatre artists who seek those alternatives away from the mainstream of contemporary theatre and whose values and rewards they more or less consciously reject. One thing that unites their divergent aesthetics, ways of working, values and politics is an explicit (rather than implicit, as with amateur theatre) commitment to community. I will return to that idea shortly, to suggest why it is important – and especially important today – but first it may be helpful to outline how that commitment to community is expressed in theatre.

The most obvious form of community play is that which is rooted in place: community, after all, is most naturally enacted through the sharing of living space. Although, like other forms of theatre, community plays have much older roots, their modern form emerged from 1960s radicalism, as artists sought new ways of connecting their work with ordinary people and their concerns. In Britain, one expression of this were the experiments by people like John Fox at Welfare State International, and Ann Jellicoe

at the Colway Theatre Trust, among many others. Claque Theatre, which grew out of Jellicoe's work, describes the community play in these terms:

The mission of a community play is to enable the widest number of people in a community to produce and participate in an original play of artistic excellence and contemporary relevance. The process of producing a community play releases and develops the thinking, talents and strengths of individuals and the community – leading towards further collective and creative activity. Through the months leading up to the production, an abundance of activities, meetings, workshops and rehearsals develop friendships and support between people that represent a major reward of the work. The result is that people feel better connected to each other, to their sense of place and belonging. Participants leave feeling empowered to shape the places they live or work and to take a more proactive role in community life.⁵

This account of the theory and process of community plays underpinned much work created in the later decades of the 20th century, including the series of plays produced by Roy Nevitt and Roger Kitchen in Milton Keynes between 1976 and 2000. It may be surprising that these were all rooted in local history, since the city was founded only in 1967 but naturally both the place and the people who came to live there had long histories and it is from these experiences that stories were made. Indeed, the final production at Stantonbury Theatre completed the circle by telling the story of the creation of the city itself. In this new city, the work of community building was at the heart of the theatre's purpose, as Roy Nevitt said in 1976:

Stantonbury Campus Theatre exists for us and belongs to us. We are the 'community' in the phrase 'Community Theatre'⁶



'Days of Pride' (1994) Stantonbury Theatre, Milton Keynes (The Living Archive)

If there has been a decline in the number of large scale, place-based community plays since the 1990s, it has been compensated by a growth in semi-permanent community theatre groups in which community is rooted in shared experience rather than place. These groups tend to involve fewer people in smaller scale productions, but often sustain their work and their community over time. They therefore offer opportunities for development in skills, confidence and artistic maturity and in the relationships between the participants and with their audiences. The stories and ideas around which plays are made often drawn on the performers' own life experience and raise issues that concern them. Theatre by older people is a particularly strong instance of this practice. It has emerged naturally from the circumstances of an ageing society and because retired people are, on the whole, healthier and better educated than ever. They have the time and interest to be involved in the arts and, in some cases, they also have the desire to talk about their lives.



Phyllis Seely MacFarland, Louise White, Gloria Watson and Madge Williams (Mik Godley)

The [Malcolm X Elders](#) are a group of African Caribbean women who perform with the support of acta, a Bristol-based community theatre organisation. The initial impetus for most of the members was simply to remain active in retirement and to show their families, friends and neighbours that growing older did not mean giving up, so their first theatrical experiments were about the experience of ageing. From these modest but outward-looking hopes, the group has gone on to create theatre about their experiences as black women in Britain, including the play 'We Have Overcome', which recalled the experience of coming from the Caribbean to work in England and which was performed in many of Bristol's secondary schools. Their latest production, a show about Caribbean folk tales called 'Ticky Picky Boom Boom', saw the group perform in local schools and at the Rotterdam Wijktheater as part of an international festival in March 2014.

In Northern Ireland, many older people have taken part in Big Telly's [Spring Chickens](#) programme, creating new theatre performances in schools, community centres and public spaces. In South London, [Entelechy Arts](#) have made theatre a central part of their exploration of alternative day services for older people, creating an adventurous company of elder performers. In Cardiff, [Re:Live Theatre](#) have worked with older people on plays that have toured in Wales and further afield. Such experiences can be transformative, as Terri Morrow, who only started acting at the age of 67, told me:

'I went out and I sat there and—oh, the safety in the darkness of the cinema. It was wonderful. Suddenly I was given permission to be dramatic; it was okay to show your feelings. I was given the luxury of being able to stand there and let it out. [...] I carried all that baggage for years and suddenly through the drama it's now my best friend. It's not baggage: it's a tool, a very powerful tool.'⁷

And to underline the artistic achievement such groups can attain – albeit in dance, rather than theatre – it is worth mentioning that Sadler's Wells' Elders Project has just been nominated for the [2015 Olivier Awards](#), Britain's most prestigious theatre event.

These examples are a few among many good community theatre companies that have enabled people from all kinds of backgrounds and situations to stand for the first time on stage, like Terri Morrow, and feel empowered to say what they feel, to express their ideas and opinions in public, from the safety that art's rich darkness, its ambiguous beauty, its intimate exposure, alone can offer. But you don't have to be alone to be part of that experience. On the contrary, theatre is a collective art: even a monologue requires a listener and the essence of drama is dialogue, conversation, action and interaction. One empowering aspect of this collective art is that no single person need be strong enough to carry the whole. Collective expression enacts the belief that together we are more. In Roy Nevitt's words, 'We are the community in the phrase Community Theatre'.

THE CHORUS

As I have suggested, there is nothing new about non-professional actors taking the stage. Nor is there novelty in the idea that they might do so as a community. Both were central to Athenian drama and therefore to the foundations of European theatre. Of course, appealing to ancient roots is risky. It can be a way to close a discussion: this art is valuable because it is ancient. It's also dangerous because our world is new: the legacies of past civilisations cannot mean today what they once did. Nonetheless, the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes *do* speak to us, albeit, literally and metaphorically, in translation. They laid the foundations of European theatre, the empty space where drama happens, and the language, concerns, symbolism and rituals through which it is expressed. There is a continuity in human experience, alone and together, that makes inconsequential all that separates us from our ancient ancestors. And in theatre we enact that experience, consciously, in reason and feeling, to make better sense of it and of ourselves.



The Theatre of Dionysos below the Acropolis, Athens

So it seems natural that Athenians invented theatre even as they invented democracy. Their conception of theatre enacts the moral, political and philosophical dilemmas of its day. In the comedies of Aristophanes, for example, war and politics are recurring themes that mirror existential current realities. And the voice of the citizens is enacted on stage by the Chorus, a community of actors who form a bridge between audience and protagonists. They do not take part directly. They observe the actions of kings and queens and gods, interpreting and commenting on their behaviour. Sometimes the principal characters ask the Chorus for an opinion, though they don't always follow the advice they are given.

In time, the place of the Chorus in Athenian theatre declined, just as democracy itself was abandoned. Whether or not there is an actual connection between these things, there is an irresistible symbolic one. There is a parallel between people's ability to participate in theatre and their participation in democracy, if we understand a theatre – and the arts as a whole – as an alternative chamber in which the dilemmas of our time are debated. The key difference between the formal structures of parliamentary democracy and theatre is theatre can be a direct democracy, not a representative one. It is a chamber to which all citizens have, or should have, equal access.

COLLECTIVE VOICES IN A PRIVATISED DEMOCRACY

It is this idea that London Bubble are enacting this month in their community theatre project about democracy, [Hopelessly De-Voted](#). It takes place against the background of a General Election though the director, Jonathan Petherbridge, says:

The project did not set out to persuade people to vote, and it's not about competing manifestos. But it does seem to be making members of the group quite passionate about the idea of representation.⁸

That is particularly important today, in a world undergoing rapid change, when democratic space is under radical pressure, and many voices go unheard. Public discourse is increasingly dominated by the powerful, the affluent and the educated. It is they who interpret, decide and act. Theatre largely reproduces these social structures. Many watch; a few act. Those who are affected by the actors' decisions are silent because, alone and without a platform, they cannot speak. Some, with terrible consequences, make that silence a justification for aggression or violence.

Community theatre cannot solve these problems, but it can help us see and perhaps face up to them by giving a voice to silenced citizens. A living democracy is much more than an electoral system or a government: it also lies in how civil society meets, organises and converses with itself. The long, rich and diverse tradition of community theatre is a valuable resource in that conversation. All that is needed is a willingness on the part of theatre artists to look outwards and open their stages to new plays, new stories and new voices – to acknowledge the authority of the Chorus.

Everything changes. Our theatre is not Brecht's, Molière's or Marlowe's: nor is it Sophocles'. As even this brief look at some of the ways in which theatre is made in British communities shows, ideas rise and fall. What we mean by community theatre today is not what was meant 30 years ago and that is one sign that it matters. So when in 2010 the decision was taken to create [National Theatre Wales](#), no one imagined that it would have an imposing home Cardiff. Instead, from a small office in the capital, the company has produced new plays across the country, in theatres certainly, but also on mountains, farms, housing estates, factories, village halls and nightclubs. In forging a new relationship with the diverse people of Wales, NTW did not describe itself as a community theatre – it simply invited everyone to take part in whatever way they wished, and created various ways and opportunities for them to do so.

At the end of the company's inaugural year, they produced what is still their most celebrated piece: the *Port Talbot Passion*, directed by Michael Sheen and involving about a thousand citizens of the South Wales steel town over an Easter weekend, and an audience of over 20,000 people. In the words of one critic, the play was

Hewn with tenderness from the memories of locals, and largely performed by them – with a little help from a fine band of professional Welsh actors, [The Passion] was like watching a town discovering its voice through a shared act of creation.⁹

A participant in the procession put it in more directly human terms:

'I just feel that in walking and following the procession, in walking, we're talking, and I've seen people that I haven't seen for years, so this to me has pulled the whole passion story together; it's one of community and being one.'¹⁰

Everything changes, everything continues. Community theatre is as old as Aeschylus and as new as 'Hopelessly De-Voted'. Its forms and languages change, but its human role of bringing us together to feel, think and share about the things that matter most to us remain. The political scientist Benedict Anderson called nations 'imagined communities', rooted in a belief that unknown people who share our living space feel and think as we do. But all community is imagined and it is part of theatre's strength to help us find community with those who may not feel and think like us in every way, but who share our living space, our experience or our values.

When theatre artists want to open their work to their community, whether in Port Talbot or in Kanibadam; when amateur performers want to protect the social bonds that make them a community, together and with their audiences; when ordinary people want to learn the skills and find the courage to take the stage; when theatre of whatever aesthetic or tradition is willing to speak truth to power—then, the Chorus gathers, speaks and must be heard. When the Chorus has the authority of authorship there is hope that choices made will reflect not just the interests of the few who strut and fret upon the stage but the many in whose name they claim to govern and who otherwise only watch from the cheap seats.

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- ¹ This figure is an estimate: the National Operatic and Dramatic Association ([NODA](#)) had 2227 Society and associate members in 2013, but there are amateur theatre groups who are not members:
 - ² Matarasso, F. 2011, *Where We Dream, West Bromwich Operatic Society and the Fine Art of Musical Theatre*, Multistory, p. 63 (free download from <http://regularmarvels.com/downloads/>)
 - ³ Matarasso, F. 2011, p. 69
 - ⁴ Matarasso, F. 2011, p. 85
 - ⁵ <http://www.claquetheatre.com/about/community-plays/>
 - ⁶ <http://www.miltonkeynes.co.uk/news/community/community-news/the-show-must-go-on-at-stantonbury-theatre-1-6104199>
 - ⁷ Matarasso, 2012, *Winter Fires*, p.44-5
 - ⁸ <http://www.londonbubble.org.uk/blogpost/2015-02-the-making-of-hdv-part-1/>
 - ⁹ Lyn Gardner, *The Guardian*, 24 April 2011, see <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2011/apr/24/the-passion-port-talbot-review>
 - ¹⁰ From the 2012 BBC documentary, *Passion in Port Talbot*, directed by Rupert Edwards, see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0123x2t>