SHARING THE STAGE

POLICY AND PRACTICE: WORKING WITH AND INFLUENCING THE MAINSTREAM





Above: James Robson: A Sailor's Tale of Tea, a participatory performance by Yellow Earth Theatre designed to engage family audiences, part of a case study focusing on cultural representations in museums. Photo: Cutty Sark.

Right: Professional actors performing alongside older people in care homes in a Geraldine Pilgrim production.

Front cover: Graeae Theatre's collaborative production of *The Government Inspector* with Birmingham Repertory Theatre. Photo: Robert Day.



Sharing the Stage Policy and Practice: Working with and Influencing the Mainstream
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PREFACE

Our second Policy and Practice seminar on 'Working with and Influencing the Mainstream' saw our Learning Community wrestling with the sometimes nuanced differences between participatory performing arts and established theatre practice. Together we sought to find ways to influence change in the short and long term, so that more inclusive models of practice can be developed.

We were delighted to have two different case studies of participatory performing arts working with the mainstream presented to us. Graeae Theatre, a company which places Deaf and disabled artists centre-stage in both new and existing plays, took us through how it embeds its notion of the 'aesthetics of access' in theatre practice to change the sector's culture. Yellow Earth Theatre, which puts British East Asian actors, writers and directors centre stage, presented on how it worked with National Maritime Museum in Greenwich on a participatory performance designed to engage family audiences and challenged outdated perceptions of cultural representation.

I would like to thank our colleagues at the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation for being co-contributors on these seminars.

In this document we include Chrissie Tiller's summary of the second Learning Community, covering the two case studies in much more detail as well as summarising the action points we developed while working in smaller groups. We also include her briefing note 'From the Margins to the Mainstream' which delves into the twin issues of what 'the mainstream' means; and what the barriers are that stop stories from the more marginalised parts of society from being told. This document was circulated to participants before we held our seminar to drive their thinking.

Once again I left the seminar impressed with the thought-provoking discussions and the solutions highlighted to tackle the challenges that at first seemed insurmountable. I felt inspired by the case studies and reflected on how, despite unequal partnerships, forging ahead by creating new pathways to influence long-term change was in our control.

Kithmini Wimalasekera (Programme manager, Participatory Performing Arts)



Facilitator François Mattarsso addressina the Sharing The Stage **Learning Community at** our 'Working with and Influencing the Mainstream' seminar.

FROM THE MARGINS TO THE MAINSTREAM

INTRODUCTION

The main objective of the 'Sharing the Stage' initiative developed by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation's UK branch is to make participatory arts mainstream. This raises the question: what do we mean by 'the mainstream'? And what are the barriers which stop stories from every part of society being told?

Although we all have an impression of what 'the mainstream' is as far as the arts is concerned, it remains difficult to define. This is perhaps because often, as Russell Ferguson explains in his introduction to 'Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures' it is through creating a sense of the, 'unquestionable, invisible and universal' that the dominant culture maintains its influence. 'Its authority based on absence', the lack of power of 'the other' and an assumption that it is the 'all-encompassing norm'. Our starting point is to highlight these invisible power structures in order to influence them.

Our hypothesis is that if we can have a clearer conceptualisation of the issues, we will be better able to bring participatory performing arts from the margins into the mainstream.

The marginalised and the mainstream

In his introductory preface to the Arts Council England's publication 'Navigating Difference',² journalist Gary Younge highlights the problematic nature of the term 'mainstream'. Suggesting it often serves, 'as a synonym for white, Christian and straight', he notes that those who never see their own lives or experiences reflected on the main stage have 'little choice' but to see themselves as being 'on the margins'; albeit questioning 'how they got there'.

Skinder Hundal, CEO of New Art Exchange (NAE), responding to Art Council's 'Creative Case for Diversity',³ underlines the on-going nature of the division. 'There will always be a minority and a majority, a marginalised and a mainstream,' he

admits, but, wonders why NAE, as a Black-led organisation, still finds itself on the 'outside looking in' rather than the, 'inside looking out': the parity of perspective needed for equal exchange still missing.

The lack of progress on diversity and equality

The lack of progress on diversity and equality does not appear to stem from a lack of willingness on the part of both Government and Arts Councils. There has been no shortage of initiatives in the fifty years since the first Arts Minister, Jennie Lee, called for the 'the involvement of large sections of the community hitherto given little or no opportunity' to engage in mainstream arts and culture. Yet, in many ways Lee's original White Paper (despite some slightly oldfashioned language) still reads like a timely manifesto for change. The call for the need to 'include' those who 'are currently excluded' and move towards 'a more diverse leadership and workforce in the cultural sectors' still being echoed in the DCMS' most recent publication.4 These are all changes those of us in the participatory performing arts sphere see as vital, so it is pleasing to see we are on the same page as the Government and Arts Councils in terms of rhetoric.

Challenging the status quo?

Yet, despite all the noise being made for change, recent reports for the Arts Council of Wales, Northern Ireland, England and Scotland, all suggest participation in 'mainstream' arts by BAME and other 'marginalised' groups is actually falling; pretty dramatically amongst disabled and BAME groups according to Arts Council Wales. 5 While recent cuts to local authority arts funding along with welfare cuts to the poor and disabled are clearly having an impact on attendance at mainstream events it is interesting to note that the long tradition of working class cultural engagement persists, and, despite a pitiful lack of funding or infrastructure, participation in amateur and community arts has remained vibrant.

"Why do participation and access remain 'add-ons' rather than an intrinsic part of many arts organisations' thinking?"

So why is cultural democracy, and the movement towards what Holden calls 'something that we all own and make' rather than something 'given, offered, or delivered by one section of us to the other', still proving so elusive? Why do participation and access remain 'add-ons' rather than an intrinsic part of many arts organisations' thinking? Why are 'race, disability and class', as David Bryan notes in his recent article for Arts Professional, still not 'knitted into the fabric of our social narratives?'

Diversity and inequality

Perhaps, as one of the Arts Council's diversity officers, Hasan Mahamdallie, has suggested it is the target itself that has been wrongly identified? Diversity, in itself, he suggests is not the issue. 'Diversity exists; it does not have to be created. The issue is inequality within a diverse society'. Part of that inequality, as Naseem Khan9 indicates in 'Navigating Difference', might be said to stem from the fact Afro-Caribbean, Asian and Disability Arts, were always separated from the mainstream, placed as they were, in the 1970s, within the section of the Arts Council labelled 'Community'. Part, as she goes on to suggest, is the result of inequality being so ingrained in the culture that, 'opening the doors' to minorities will never be enough if the 'position of the walls' is such that their, 'construction keeps newcomers inadvertently out', making them 'so familiar that they are hardly noticed?' Those who belong to the cultural elite have enjoyed their privilege and power for so long they are often blinded to the fact that they are part of the issue as well as the solution.

Redistributing resources?

It is also clearly a question of funding. While the majority of arts funding continues to go to large cultural organisations whose model of engagement and participation is mostly one of 'outreach' and 'education', while the real decision making remains in the hands of a small cultural elite, there is little incentive to change the model. As Jancovich suggests in 'The Participation Myth', 'a redistribution of funding is required', not only, 'to reduce the power of the cultural elite' but also, 'to widen the range of voices involved in the arts and participatory decisionmaking.'10 In return, of course, the cultural community may have to accept that while those voices may become powerful advocates for public funding, the arts they elect to fund might create a very different ecology to that we see today.

The Creative Case?

In making the 'Creative Case' to put 'diversity at the heart of everything cultural'," ACE has recently demanded three interlocking progressions from its funded organisations:

- equality in the sense of whose lives are reflected on stage, in our museums and in our galleries
- recognition re-situating artists so that they are not only categorised by what puts them 'on the margins,' refugee artist, disabled artist, black artist etc., but are invited to take their place within a rich ecology

and

 a new vision that takes diversity out of a negative or 'deficit' model (often blaming it on the individual's position in a 'hard to reach' community), and places it in an artistic context. So that diversity becomes not an optional extra but part of the fabric of all our programming discussions and decisions.

"Real change also means bringing a diversity of voices into decisions about programming."

The role participatory performing arts can play in bringing voices from the margins to mainstream

Participatory performing arts would seem particularly well placed not only to contribute to bringing this progress about but also to offer alternative paradigms. There has always been an energy, agility and focus in theatre that comes from wanting to respond to and critique the society it finds itself in. As Peter Brook notes, 'the wish to change society, to get it to confront its eternal hypocrisies, is a great powerhouse'.

At the same time there is a need to articulate and share the stories and the experiences of those who rarely see their experience and more importantly their perspectives portrayed on stage. As playwright Kwame Kwei-Armah reminds us; 'That which is not articulated does not exist – we have been really bad at articulating the links between what could be seen as a peripheral activity and its impact on the mainstream.'12

Diverse audiences need to connect personally with the lives they see represented on stage, who they see presenting it and the narratives that are shared. Diversity and integration in performance, as Graham Vicks often suggests, will bring a diverse audience with it.

Making real change happen

Real change also means bringing a diversity of voices into decisions about programming — on the main stage as well as in the studio or in community performances. It means looking at issues of governance, the relinquishing of power from the dominant class and an openness to making real shifts within the status quo.

Participatory arts, Nina Simon suggests in the Participatory Museum, ¹³ can provide the platform where that might happen, a space to challenge old structures and offer opportunities for participants to develop the agency needed to contribute at other levels than being performers.

The arts mainstream is not a fixed entity ... 'and we and our organisations' as Nadine Andrews suggests, 'are not passive objective observers of something "out there"'. '4 We do have the capacity to challenge, subvert and influence change. Despite the fact that so little has moved in the last 25 years, Dave Bryan is clear; 'This in no way means that efforts should be abandoned. In order to get out of this cycle of haphazard engagement that constitutes more noise than substance, we need to forge an alliance of those that want what Charles Handy calls "the best road to a different future".'

As Jamie Beddard recently commented, 'The world we live in is incredibly diverse and incredibly rich, and currently more interesting and colourful than the arts. There is catching up to do.'

Chrissie Tiller, September 2016

NOTES

- Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures' MIT Press 1990
- Navigating Difference. Cultural Diversity and Audience Development ACE 2006
- 3. What is the Creative Case for Diversity? ACE 2014.
- 4. The Culture White Paper. DCMS. 2016.
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SEMINAR REPORT

SHARING THE STAGE: WORKING WITH AND INFLUENCING THE MAINSTREAM

INTRODUCTION

The second 'Policy and Practice' seminar for Sharing the Stage¹ brought together almost fifty organisations from across the UK to explore ways in which participatory performing arts might work with and influence the mainstream.

Co-facilitated by François Matarasso and Nick Nuttgens, and informed by a briefing note and presentations from Graeae Theatre and Yellow Earth Theatre, the debate explored both the differences between participatory performing arts (PPA) and the mainstream, and what possibilities there might be to work together more effectively and influence change.

Seeking a shared definition, Matarasso suggested a useful starting point might be to consider all non-participatory performance as 'mainstream.' Placing the focus on the evolving power dynamic between creator, participant and audience in response to changing perceptions of the role of the arts in society, as collaboration and co-creation are increasingly what audiences and artists expect.

Building on notions of participatory arts being part of a 'spectrum' of practice, ² Matarasso proposed alternative models. One built on the premise that PPA's main focus was social change:



The other exploring the different experiences of the audience:

Access to
Consumption Access to
Participation

While attendees agreed there is a place for either end of these spectrums, most felt what mattered was that organisations are aware of where their work is positioned. Many felt there is a need for greater honesty about the intention behind participatory programmes, in terms of whether the aim is to:

- Create new audiences
- Make great art with everyone in society (and not just those who are existing audiences)
- Offer different kinds of work to existing audiences
- Challenge our work as organisations
- Meet funding requirements.

The extent to which participants (and future audiences) are listened to and given a voice in decision making was highlighted as the main distinction between PPA and the mainstream. PPA, Matarasso suggested, is more like a piece of improvisation; where everyone works together to cocreate meaning. To be successful, PPA requires a high level of trust and bravery from everyone involved to enjoy the full benefits of the creativity it inspires.

Working in small groups, attendees were then invited to tackle these two key questions:

- What makes participatory practice slow to find its place within the mainstream?
- What can we do to bring about change?



Members of the Sharing The Stage Learning Community working together in small groups. "The other challenge is to present and engage with the past in a way that is relevant to audiences today."

WHAT MAKES CHANGE SLOW?

One participant offered the insightful image of the ocean, proposing the mainstream as an oil tanker, built for strength and safety but also difficult to manoeuvre. Hampered by its need for structure and hierarchy, it is often compelled to plough its way through the central channel, taking as few risks as possible. PPA, on the other hand, is more like a small dinghy, deft and flexible, responding more immediately to society's changing needs to unearth different ways of working and priorities.

Graeae Theatre's case study offered a holistic model of partnership with mainstream venues. Everyone from the front of house, marketing to the production teams, were involved in the development and therefore were invested in the shows being co-presented. Graeae Theatre's starting point is to move towards a world where it is no longer needed. Its ambition is to share its knowledge and experience to skill-up the sector and embed its notion of the 'aesthetics of access' to change the culture of the sector. Graeae Theatre is one of the partners involved in 'Ramps on the Moon,' a collaborative project with mainstream theatre venues across the country and designed to be a catalyst for change. Its first production from this collaboration 'The Government Inspector' was produced by Birmingham Repertory Theatre and toured to the partner venues. The process of collectively developing the production enabled teams at each venue to develop their confidence and capacity.

Yellow Earth Theatre's case study of working with the mainstream involved working with the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich on a participatory performance designed to engage family audiences with a gallery on the East India Company. This case study focused on cultural representations in museums and on the 'James Robson: A Sailor's Tale of Tea' performance. From a long tradition of Europeans travelling to different parts of the world to collect cultures to bring back to their country, how objects are used to interpret people and the past makes museums highly political spaces.

Negotiating institutional narratives and the lived experience of marginalised people is challenging, as is presenting audiences with multiple truths or perspectives on the past, when popular perception is of a single truth (from the perspective of the collector). The other challenge is to present and engage with the past in a way that is relevant to audiences today. Yellow Earth Theatre's experience of working with the mainstream is multi-layered. It is based on a smaller arts organisation working with an institution, and a marginalised experience seeking to be included in a popular interpretation of the past. It is also about the agility of the arts to explore the complexities of the past and make this a creative process of active audience participation.

Although the company felt it was difficult to remove a sense of being the 'other,' it found openings to share skills and knowledge missing within many large public institutions and successfully found a way to work with unequal power relations. The performance is the only mainstream museum performance giving an East Asian perspective on a monthly basis. Yellow Earth Theatre's experience illustrates how influencing the mainstream is a slow process, which may involve navigating unequal partnerships. Despite change happening slowly, it is positive change nonetheless.

Inspired by both case studies, discussion then centred on the things that practitioners can control and the things that are out of their control. However, as the discussions progressed, it became apparent that the things that seemed initially out of their control could be influenced by offering new models of practice. The discussion highlighted the following areas where the attendees felt they could influence change:

• Shifting dated attitudes is crucial, particularly in term of how audiences are viewed. Many also felt those who work regularly in participatory contexts are often perceived as having 'lower status' or 'less credibility' than those who work in the mainstream, suggesting that the ability to work collaboratively is often viewed as a secondary skill. Although, interestingly, this was not felt to be the case for mainstream or famous artists who were invited, or chose, to engage in a participatory project.

"Class and lack of diversity in leadership remain the most significant barriers to change."

- Some suggested these perceptions influenced arts funders in a similar manner. In an increasingly competitive climate, where 'quality' is measured in specific ways, it was felt participatory projects might not score well. Especially as committing to co-production means that the outcomes cannot be defined at the start.
- Notions of risk were another challenge. Despite the arts' reputation for being bold and adventurous as a sector, many felt there was a growing aversion to risk. Placing PPA on the main stage was seen as being financially, or sometimes reputationally imprudent despite the fact that diverse performers have been proven to bring with them exactly the new and diverse audiences many mainstream organisations are seeking.
- Certain social partners were seen to create their own barriers to change. Often thinking of themselves as the main community gatekeepers and the project instigator taking the lead on recruiting participants. This preconception is counter-intuitive to collaboration and fails to maximise on an arts organisation's expertise, gained over many years, in participatory practice.
- The imbalance of power was noted. The unequal relationships between funders and arts organisations, between larger and smaller organisations, and between those engaged with PPA and the mainstream. Although partnerships are one of the most important ways of integrating the skills and knowledge of smaller organisations into the mainstream, some explained they could still feel used. This was especially true where the pressure on larger organisations for greater engagement was driven by external obligations rather than internal passion, resulting in a lack of commitment or understanding of the important differences between PPA and audience development.
- This same imbalance of power and inequality was felt to exist within the structures of larger cultural organisations. In these organisations there are varying perceptions about the importance of those who deliver outreach, learning or participation, and those who produce mainstream content.

- Language often played an important role in establishing this inequality. For example, with the titles of posts (and salaries) and the differentiation between those leading on 'participation' and those concerned with mainstream production (not of PPA). Many felt there was an imperative to challenge job titles and descriptions.
- Class and lack of diversity in leadership remain the most significant barriers to change. Despite the many initiatives over the years, real diversity was still felt to be lacking at a senior level. This required a commitment to change at all levels, policy and practice simultaneously.
- Engaging critics and the media is essential in raising the profile of PPA.

In addition to the points above, the attendees considered that they had more control over the following areas:

- Finding ways to align with the mainstream through identifying shared values.
- Being confident in the skillsets PPA organisations have to deliver work that mainstream venues may be unable to deliver on their own, and being proactive about creating the partnerships and collaborations to enable this.
- Challenging ideas of PPA as being an 'add on' or 'other', and insisting on its place within the mainstream.
- Claiming the territory by offering case studies, advocacy and supporting mainstream venues who want to explore PPA.
- Framing the work to maximise on the wide-ranging impacts of PPA to explore authentic lived experience in artistic works and represent a range of life experiences in Britain. Showing how this will ultimately present audiences with a richer view of the universal human condition. This will enable PPA to avoid being marginalised as only being concerned with the issues of marginalised communities.

"The discussion raised further questions about whether PPA should seek to become part of the mainstream or seek to be valued as a distinct area of work."

WHAT CAN WE DO TO MAKE CHANGE HAPPEN?

Attendees had mixed opinions on the change we should advocate for. The discussion raised further questions about whether PPA should seek to become part of the mainstream or seek to be valued as a distinct area of work to recognise the unique skillset it requires.

One group proposed, instead of joining the mainstream, we might want to reframe PPA as the cutting edge of contemporary arts practice. Looking at examples such as Minefield, where British and Argentinian veterans from the Falklands conflict shared their own stories and the Hamilton Complex, sharing the experience of teenage girls, we can begin to see PPA as a way of taking on challenging and difficult issues. Again there was some overlap in the discussion; between what we could do immediately and what might take longer. But clear actions began to emerge.

Short-term actions to influence change

The following actions were identified as 'easy wins' and actions that could be taken immediately:

- Make the first call to a potential partner to explore where synergies and opportunities to collaborate may lie.
- Find allies and champions who can work with you to support PPA (include a wide range of stakeholders such as participants, audiences and partners).
- Make more use of each other as smaller organisations by sharing information, building networks and drawing on each other's expertise.

Long-term actions to influence change

These actions were identified as significant in making structural changes, where building relationships was key, to make a lasting impact:

- Collaborate and create networks to rethink established ways of working, using the case studies from Graeae Theatre and Yellow Earth Theatre as inspiration for developing new partnerships between organisations to share skills, experience and venues.
- Create opportunities to share learning. Invite the 'mainstream' to discussions and debates such as these by using the profile of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and Paul Hamlyn Foundation to ensure the right decision makers and influencers are at the table.
- Challenge assumptions of the kinds of work participants are interested in by being led by their interests (rather than ours).
- Communicate to audiences and critics that participatory work (as other work on the margins) often pushes boundaries and the aesthetic forwards, making a valuable contribution to the
- Challenge our own perceptions of what the mainstream might mean by looking beyond arts institutions to include institutions in other sectors (e.g. care homes, hospitals and prisons, etc.).
- Influence mainstream views of care by celebrating the contribution of participatory work in the health and social care sectors.
- Create equitable partnerships within our own organisations by challenging assumed hierarchies and power structures between 'mainstream' and 'participatory' roles.
- Transform perceptions of need to evaluate process and product separately so that both are understood and equally valued.
- Find synergies in ambition and gaps in ability in our own organisations and in mainstream organisations, to consider how strategic partnerships could offer new skill-sharing solutions.

"A number of attendees spoke about the need to listen (with humility) in partnerships and ensure it was an equal two-way process."

CONCLUSION

As the conversations drew to a close, a sense of building a movement emerged to empower and focus PPA, giving it a stronger voice. A call to be ambitious and bold, to challenge myths around participation and to promote it as a unique response to the context we work in.

The majority of attendees accepted that change may take a generation or two, but emphasised the need to continue to influence what was happening now by articulating our role in enabling positive change to happen. A number of attendees spoke about the need to listen (with humility) in partnerships and to ensure it was an equal two-way process, with everyone involved being prepared to accept that they might not have all of the answers.

Many attendees, including Matarasso, felt a huge shift had taken place and what we needed to focus on was continuing to build our champions in a new generation of mainstream leadership. The final image was one of seeing ourselves as tides and waves. A tide is inevitable, it slowly and steadily brings about change as the quality and credibility of the work is increasingly recognised. Whilst waves are more unpredictable, they are acknowledged as necessary to challenge and question the status quo at key moments. What was important was to recognise where we were and take care of ourselves and each other when the sea gets choppy.



NOTES

- Initiative that aims to make participatory performing arts mainstream, as a way to give a
 platform for the most vulnerable people to participate in society and be heard.
- ${\tt 2.} \quad https://participatoryalphabet.files.wordpress.com/{\tt 2014/08/what-is-participation1.pdf}$
- 3. https://www.liftfestival.com/events/minefield/
- 4. https://www.liftfestival.com/events/the-hamilton-complex/

ABOUT THE CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN FOUNDATION

The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation is an international charitable foundation with cultural, educational, social and scientific interests. Based in Lisbon with branches in London and Paris, the Foundation is in a privileged position to support national and transnational work tackling contemporary issues. The purpose of the UK Branch, based in London, is to bring about long-term improvements in wellbeing particularly for the most vulnerable, by creating connections across boundaries (national borders, communities, disciplines and sectors) which deliver social, cultural and environmental value.

ABOUT THE ESMÉE FAIRBAIRN FOUNDATION

Esmée Fairbairn Foundation aims to improve the quality of life for people and communities throughout the UK both now and in the future. We do this by funding the charitable work of organisations with the ideas and ability to achieve positive change. www.esmeefairbairn.org.uk



ABOUT THE PAUL HAMYLN FOUNDATION

Paul Hamlyn Foundation is an independent grant making body. We fund organisations whose charitable activities help people to realise their potential and have a better quality of life. www.phf.org.uk/

