

BOOK REVIEW

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THEATRE OF GOOD INTENTIONS: CHALLENGES AND HOPES FOR THEATRE AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Dani Snyder-Young (2013)

Palgrave Macmillan ISBN 9781137293022

Reviewed by Penelope Glass, Colectivo Sustento, Santiago-Chile.

If you work in community theatre, applied theatre or theatre for social change, and you believe you are transforming society, then you may find Dani Snyder-Young's book *Theatre of Good Intentions: Challenges and Hopes for Theatre and Social Change* confronting and perhaps depressing. You may want to throw in the towel after reading it. On the other hand, if you have stopped gazing at your navel, and realise that in fact your work is constantly limited by hegemonic, patriarchal and power structures —both internalised and also inherent in the contexts that you work in— then you will find that this book supports the thoughts you have harboured about the limitations, failures and challenges of your work in relation to actual social change. Are my utopian ideals and desires of any use, you may ask? The purpose of the book is “to examine what theatre can and can't *do*” (Snyder-Young 2013: 2).

My reading of this book is steeped in my own experience and location. I am a theatre worker who has collaborated with many communities in Australia and Chile and, since 2002, in a continuous prison theatre experience in Santiago, Chile: this work is fraught with constant institutional blockages, nevertheless while we recognise this norm, we constantly push its boundaries, applying theatre and non-theatre strategies to this end, spilling out of the institution, and into the wider world.

Snyder-Young's book focuses on the difficult underlying tensions that inevitably exist in applied, including political, theatre work. These tensions are not often the subject of enough in-depth reflection: doubt may be individual, but we resist speaking publicly about it.

In the Introduction to the book, the author poses: why do we want to use *theatre* to create social change? She goes to the heart of some of my doubts: whether we necessarily open up spaces of resistance; whether social critique through theatre provokes more reaction than action; whether there is reluctance to evaluate our goals and impact honestly, so as not to lose precarious funding; and whether we work strategically enough in the contexts we find ourselves in. The author doesn't negate what *does* work, after all theatre has unique properties, particularly as a collective, lived experience. This is where Freire's radical hope resides, these are the moments that sustain our utopia and our persistence.

Following this introduction, the book then reflects on the philosophical and/or logistical limitations of seven case studies, divided in two parts: Part I looks at the impact on participants and the tensions and challenges facing theatre facilitators; and Part II examines the impact of the theatre work on audiences.

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The case studies in Part I are projects in schools and a prison: a Theatre for Development project on the US/Mexico border; the author's own Theatre of the Oppressed practice in a school; and Storycatchers Theatre in a Chicago locked juvenile facility. Again, more questions are raised than answers given. Snyder-Young asks us to consider whether we perceive and/or question the privileged status we almost always have in relation to participants. She asks whether applied theatre process *necessarily* provokes resistance to the status quo, and brings up the thorny issues of our co-option by institutional agendas (reminiscent of James Thompson's Sri Lanka experience) and the impact on incarcerated participants when plays based on their own stories are performed publicly. These are all real and difficult dilemmas in our work.

In Part II, case studies are: Free Theatre Belarus in enforced political exile; zAmya Theatre Project's work with homeless and housed actors; and two theatrical responses to Hurricane Katrina. While the zAmya example focusses on the unpredictability of audience responses, and the performances inspired by Hurricane Katrina invoke theatre's limited possibilities of response to major events in comparison with the mass media, I found the Free Theatre Belarus case most relevant to the central objective of the book. Referring to a gamut of theatre scholars from Aristotle onwards, the chapter intricately examines the "limitations of both empathy and critical distance" (Snyder-Young 2013: 16) in relation to provoking the audience to real social action. An emotional catharsis in a theatre is not always a catalyst for social change; a litany of horror and tragedy played out onstage, in the unreal world of theatre, can often paralyse or provoke guilt rather than inspire action, ironically even when the issue patently needs action, as in Belarus (2011). Yet, empathy can provoke identification and respect, and "allows spectators to care about the people whose stories they watch onstage" (Snyder-Young 2013: 90-91). On the other hand, distancing effects in a theatre piece can provoke critical thinking but not necessarily action if the issues onstage are not *your* issues, and an emotional engagement does not propel audiences out of their comfort zones. Australia has seen this same complex problematic when theatre has engaged with the refugee issue.

The book is clearly aimed at theatre artists in wealthy nations, yet there are many connections with Chile and Latin America; patriarchy, institutions and the neoliberal system are after all global. Nevertheless, there are marked differences (in my experience). In my opinion, the book does not delve into possible alternatives where theatre workers have elaborated thoughtful ethical and political positions with regards to hegemonic contexts, instead of self-limiting with the usual economic arguments "I could lose my funding, I have to pay the bills". Where I live there is almost no funding for this work, theatre for social change happens despite tremendous limitations, and has inspired some creative and community-based income generating strategies. I believe this is definitely a viable alternative in wealthy nations, and a lot can be learnt from looking further afield.

In the Conclusion, Snyder-Young states: "Institutional power cannot be escaped and this power often works to consolidate itself. As artists look to use performance as a tactic, these hegemonic forces cannot be ignored" (Snyder-Young 2013: 138). While I agree these forces cannot be ignored, and must indeed be critically understood by us, there is a factor that may provide an effective tactic for resistance in these situations: that factor is *continuity over time*. Continuity is exactly what funding bodies won't provide, but what occurs with continuity is that unexpected alliances can be built between artists and participants; both may become theatre and social activists, projects may become powerful long-term experiences and social change may become less remote. Obviously we won't change global warming, but we might revert an entrenched paradigm or two.

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Theatre of Good Intentions: Challenges and Hopes for Theatre and Social Change is a clear provocation to theatre artists and also a timely reflection on the limitations of theatre in making social change. It brings up philosophical and ethical debates that are essential for theatre practitioners as well as theatre students and academics; debates that are often lost with our myopian focus on getting the work done, written about and/or funded. Also, the author challenges us to come down to earth and view our work as a part of something bigger if indeed what we truly seek is social change:

When we say we want *change*, how radical a change do theatre artists want, embedded as we are in systems of power, intertwined with institutions, enjoying our privileges? With change, somebody loses. It can be easier and safer to do things that *feel* like interventions, mobilization, and action but, in reality, provide more catharsis for those participating than *actual change in the real world*. (Snyder-Young 2013: 134-135, original emphasis)

I don't want to throw in the towel after reading this book. Rather, I join the author in encouraging my colleagues to be constantly more reflective about *why* we use theatre, to be more honest with ourselves and our possibilities, to be critical about and within our work contexts, and to seek opportunities to push the boundaries, as Snyder-Young writes: in order to "...tap theatre's potential as a force for social change, artists must transform live theatre's limitations into opportunities" (Snyder-Young 2013: 3). *How* we do that is the question that reverberates after the book is closed...

Penelope Glass

Since the 1970s, Penelope Glass has created theatre that provokes critical and social reflection with many groups and communities (in Australia and Chile). She firmly believes in the power of collective work and collaboration. Since 2002, she co-directs *Fénix & Ilusiones*, a continuous theatre experience in the Colina 1 men's prison in Santiago-Chile. In 2012 she founded theatre collective *Colectivo Sustento* which continues the Colina 1 theatre experience inside and outside the prison, while building on organic gardening as a means of sustainability. She returns to Brisbane for part of each year and is currently a PhD candidate in the Applied Theatre School at Griffith University. She sees her work as a constant "provocation of the possible".

Contact details:

Colectivo Sustento

www.colectivosustento.org

Facebook "Colectivo Sustento"

pennyglass@yahoo.com

sustento@colectivosustento.org

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