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Questioning Devising in a Post-Truth era: Crafting Theatre *with* Youth

Prelude

To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now (Beckett, quoted in McMillan and Fehsenfeld 1988, 14).

We are living in a time of epistemological complexity: we do not know *how* we know *what* we know. Discovering knowledge and being certain of its authority is problematic and this has significant pedagogic implications for educators working with young people. Following the UK's decision to leave the European Union in June 2016, two separate investigations have highlighted how social media has created opportunities for 'fake news' to spread, undermining our trust in democracy (House of Commons 2019; National Literacy Trust 2018). Understanding *how* stories are constructed and received is a pressing issue, not least in the field of education. How do we respond to this shift in public discourse? What artistic forms might, in Beckett's words, "accommodate the mess" of today?

Before 'post-truth' entered our lexicon, Julian Brigstocke forewarned that "if true political life is democratic life, then 'truth' seems now to have been distorted out of all recognition" (2013, 7). Whilst the denigration of truth is hardly a new phenomenon, 2016 was epoch defining. As Alan Johnson (2017) writes in his introduction to *Orwell on Truth*, "Trump's spokeswoman Kellyanne Conway channelled Orwell when she described a comment by the president as 'an alternative fact' rather than a lie" (xviii). Euphemising language and spinning statistics was epitomised by an iconic claim made by Vote Leave campaign, during the UK's 2016 referendum on its EU membership. Chaired by high profile MPs Boris Johnson (now the UK Prime Minister) and Michael Gove (now Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster), they appealed to voters by stating that £350 million would be returned to the UK, which could be spent on the NHS, if only the UK left the EU. However, the £350 million figure was a manifest fabrication of the truth.¹

In response to the careless or nefarious ways democratically elected politicians have misrepresented the truth, I argue that educators have a duty of care towards young people to help "defend objective truth" (Johnson, 2017, xviii) *and* to create spaces where *their* truth(s)

¹ The claim, as demonstrated by a 2016 report compiled by the UK Parliament's Treasury Committee, was "highly misleading" (65). The United Kingdom's financial contribution to the EU's budget is mitigated by a rebate, worth £85 million per week. Crucially, this deduction "is applied before the UK pays its budget contribution" (7). <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmtreasy/122/122.pdf>

and lived experiences can be shared, questioned and critiqued without fear. The two are not mutually exclusive. How might this care manifest and what kinds of spaces enable and sustain youth voice? This paper focuses on devising in which, as Duška Radosavljević describes, “actors take on an authorship role in the making of a piece” (2013, 59). By prioritising a non-hierarchical and collaborative mode of creating performance, devising holds pedagogical promise for youth theatre participants seeking to develop their creative agency.

In 2016, I worked in partnership with The Belgrade’s Canley Youth Theatre (CYT) and their youth theatre director, Jouvan Fucinni, and Canley Youth Services worker, Angela Evans, to create a performance that reflected their emerging political identities and sense of citizenship. We invited CYT to explore their hopes and fears about their future when cuts to youth services in the city of Coventry threatened free access to a range of cultural programmes. Simultaneously, the politics of Brexit, Donald Trump becoming President of the United States and the rise of “fake news” all made their way into our rehearsal room, influencing not only the content of our performance but, critically, the methods we used to create theatre together (Gallagher and Turner-King, in press; Turner-King 2018; Turner-King, forthcoming).

Canley Youth Theatre (CYT)

CYT’s “ufe space”, (their play on ‘youth’), was located at the back of a large community leisure centre in the socio-economically deprived area of Canley in the city of Coventry (University of Warwick 2016, 29). The Belgrade Theatre’s Community and Education team established CYT in 2005 to provide free access to weekly theatre workshops for young people with low engagement in arts and cultural activities.

This case study research is a component of a larger international, multi-sited, ethnographic collaborative study led by Kathleen Gallagher: *Youth, Theatre, Radical Hope and the Ethical Imaginary: an intercultural investigation of drama pedagogy, performance and civic engagement (SSHRC-funded 2014-2019)*.² My practice-led research collaboration with CYT began in March 2016 when we created an oral history performance as part of *Radical Hope*. Having fostered a strong sense of trust with Fucinni, Evans and CYT, we began our next collaboration in September 2016. Six existing CYT members were joined by a further eleven young people, all aged between 11-17 year olds. During this devising

² In the remainder of this article, I refer to this project as *Radical Hope*.

process, I was the lead ethnographer.³ Working in dialogue with Fucinni and Evans, my primary role was to record and respond to emergent creative ideas: I was operating between what Patricia Leavy terms as the “scholar-self” with the “artist self” (2015, 3). Our process started with four key questions: What do you hope for? What do you care about? What do you loathe? What do you fear about the future? We created *The Last Newspaper*: a dystopian fairy-tale about a future without truth. The story unfolded in the fictional authoritarian town of Paperville where Jack and Jill sought truth amongst ‘alternative facts’. In March 2017, CYT performed *The Last Newspaper* at The University of Warwick and at the Shop Front Theatre in Coventry.

Methodologies: between “Truth” and “Story”

Gallagher’s five year study investigates the concepts of ‘hope’, ‘care’ and ‘civic engagement’ for young people living in Canada, Taiwan, Greece, India and the UK, using three different modes of theatre-making: (i) verbatim; (ii) oral history performance; (iii) devising. As documented by Gallagher and Kelsey Jacobson, there was a twofold interest in using these modes:

They are all (1) practices/ways of creating that privilege a collective and collaborative creative process and (2) practices/ways of creating that make use of original (not received) stories and specifically the unique experiences/stories of those involved in the creative process (2018, 41).

Drawing on Carol Martin’s coinage of the term “theatre of the real” (2012), they explain that such performance modes draw on the lived experiences of its participants and, as such, have the potential to give “voice to under-represented communities” (Gallagher and Jacobson 2018, 42). Likewise, this devising process caused us to recalibrate the interconnections between ‘reality’, ‘truth’ and ‘story’.

Qualitative researchers have a complex relationship with truth and story, not least those working between “social science research and the creative arts” (Leavy 2015, 1). Writing about ethnography in urban drama classrooms, Gallagher acknowledges that the research she presents constitutes an act of storytelling:

I have endeavoured to share, as thoroughly as possible, the rich contexts, the diverse characters, and the marginal practices, that we

³ I received ethnographic support from doctoral student, Duncan Lees.

encountered. And a story it is ... I am making decisions about which story to tell and how to tell it at every turn (Gallagher 2007, 6).

There is an inevitable process of interpretation, selection and narration. Truth, be it the lives of the people we encounter and in our rendering of their lives, is contingent, unfixed and uncertain. There is a deeply political and radical dimension to this anti-positivistic approach to research, particularly in relation to what Leavy chronicles as the “social justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s” (2015, 9). As Matthew Reason and Nick Rowe articulate, during this time, there was “a conscious effort among academic and activists within the progressive movement to resist or overturn the claims of ‘objectivity’ that accompany scientific certainty” (2017, 5). They go on to cite Donna Haraway’s instrumental work on “situated knowledges” that has given “validity to the particularity of such individual and collective lived experiences” of the “subjugated or marginalised” (ibid).

The ideological and epistemological parities between qualitative research and “theatre of the real” are clear: in their differing ways, they open up space for multiple truths to coexist. As Joe Winston writes of drama research, “we seek out rather than solve problems, provoke rather than answer questions, deepen our understanding rather than rush to closure” (2006, 45). Artists are not hostages to singular notions of ‘truth’: they play with, reimagine and reinvent truths in a search for meaning. However, this orientation towards truth makes confronting the problematics of ‘*post-truth*’ all the more pertinent. Lee McIntyre explains that “the postmodernist approach is one in which everything is questioned and little is taken at face value. There is no right answer, only narrative” (McIntyre 2018, 120). He argues that this epistemological positioning has, in part, enabled right wing and populist politicians, such as Trump, to manipulate truth for their own ends, giving rise to “alternative facts”. It is incumbent on those engaged in research with youth to re-evaluate our practices and methodologies in these messy, chaotic times. It may seem counter-intuitive, therefore, to turn towards devising as a way of making sense of the mess.

Devising, openness and mess

Devising processes often welcome *mess*: a mess of ideas, opinions, moods, modes, concepts, energies, dispositions, abilities, knowledges, stories, truths and so on. Yet, in this final phase of *Radical Hope*, the open structure of devising was appealing. Verbatim and oral history performance are logocentric and, though distinct in their methodologies and aesthetics, both focus on recreations of personal accounts, stories or memories. In contrast, devising

processes “foreground collectivity, corporeality and/or the actor’s own creativity” (Radosavljević 2013, 120). Devising offered us a potentially more *open*, imaginative, creative form as opposed to working with a prescriptive methodology or predetermined script authored by a playwright. The aspiration to encourage the contributions of all its members, not just to realise the director’s or playwright’s vision, has drawn drama educators to the methodologies of devising. Jonothan Neelands’ particular model of “ensemble-based learning” (2009) was influenced by the professional rehearsal space of Michael Boyd’s Royal Shakespeare Company ensemble. Neelands drew parallels with this approach and “pro-social drama pedagogy” (183) in the drama classroom, arguing that both share an interest in “the uncrowning of the power of the director/teacher” (ibid). In the ensemble, knowledge is emergent and *co-constructed* through collaboration. Rogers, Perry and Wager (2015) argue that devising provides youth the opportunity to share “multiple perspectives and subjectivities” (86) and the process of translating these ideas into performance requires “youth to represent complex, fluid, and shifting discursive and embodied subject positions” (113).

Despite these opportunities, privileging so-called democratic co-creation raises questions about the responsibilities of the youth theatre director in the creative process. If devising is democratic because it draws on the *participants’* knowledge, does directorial intervention compromise the radical, democratic potential of collaborative devising (see Heddon and Milling, 2005)? This preoccupation with student creative agency versus teacher-intervention manifests in a number of cognate creative projects. In her study on “student ownership”, Melissa Swick writes “teachers become frustrated when they attempt to reconcile every idea each child proposes with the dramatic process ... the teacher cannot use them all” (1999, 75). If accommodating *all* ideas is an impossibility, what approach might one adopt? Jo Beth Gonzalez evolves a theory of “democratic directing” by investigating “the space between ‘director expertise’ and ‘student self-discovery’” (1999, 8). Gonzalez explains that “this does not mean that the teacher is to stand off and look on; the alternative is participation, sharing in an activity” (6). Debra McLauchlan (2001) investigates “the optimum balance between student freedom and teacher-imposed structure so that creativity would be sparked and not stifled” (54). In our quest to discover this “optimum balance”, my co-facilitators and I came to question the ‘openness’ of devising, prompting us to change our methods for “transforming ideas, interests and abstract questions into tangible elements of a performance” (Turner and Behrndt 2008, 181). Unexpectedly, the “craft” of dramaturgy and playwriting (Radosavljević 2013, 105) became a vital part of our devising process. The

synthesising of their messy, disconnected ideas demanded care-*full*, attentive, responsive leadership.

Devising, improvisation and knowledge: responding to mess

Lisa (CYT member, aged 11): Oh yeah cos, y’know the reason why Donald Trump doesn’t like Muslims, yeah, is because his wife used to be married to someone from ISIS.

Rachel (Practitioner-Researcher): Where did you hear that?!

Lisa: Erm, I just did ...

Jed (CYT member, aged 12): Yeah and didn’t Donald Trump have an affair with Theresa May? That’s why they want to ban him from coming here.

Rachel: OK. Let’s just pause for a second...

(Workshop: 24th January 2017)

This excerpt captures a pivotal turning point in our creative process. Working in sub-groups, CYT explored emergent ideas about the influence of social media in their lives as well as their anger about lying politicians. In the moment captured above, this particular group revealed their own ‘fake news’ about the world around them. Perhaps this is no great surprise: misinformation is nothing new, particularly for young people faced with “a digital media landscape crowded with information and frequent updates” (The National Literacy Trust, 2018, 3). Nevertheless, it was evident that asking them to develop performance material based upon inaccuracies would be educationally irresponsible.

The National Literacy Trust argue that educators can support young people to identify and unpack fake news by engaging in a ‘constructive dialogue, in a non-judgemental learning space’ (National Literacy Trust, 2018, 33). Instinctively, Angela and I gently corrected the participants on the facts and invited them to share the original sources of their news stories. They explained they had seen and heard a number of news items about Donald Trump’s proposed visit to the UK in early 2017 and the debate about if the Queen should host such a controversial president. Rather than undermining their confidence by simply dismissing their ideas, we asked them to play with *how* gossip manifests by improvising in role as the Queen’s servants who, whilst polishing silverware, concocted half-truths about Trump’s visit. They presented the scene to their peers, and whilst it was not yet dramatically convincing, this

somewhat absurd, parodic fictionalised frame of ‘gossipers’ was intriguing to the group. When tracing through our creative journals, Fucinni and I noticed that ‘gossip’ and ‘rumours spread on social media’ were mentioned repeatedly in response to the provocations, ‘What do you fear? What do you loathe?’

PHOTOS (see attached)

Indirectly, this messy moment of struggle contributed to the eventual creation of ‘The Gossipers’ in our performance, realised as four corrupt journalists, the slander-spreading henchmen of ‘Pinocchio’, a grotesque parody of Donald Trump’s then Press Secretary Sean Spicer.

This raises a number of significant points about collaborative devising. As is often the case with youth theatre groups, the ages and abilities varied. Five of our youngest members were just over eleven years old and were novice devisers, whilst our fourteen to seventeen year olds had devised work with CYT for over two years. In Anderson and Krathwohl’s revision of Benjamin Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives (2001), “knowledge” is positioned at the foundational level of cognitive processes of learning and “creation” is positioned towards the top of this hierarchy because it involves, “putting elements together to form a novel, coherent whole or make an original product” (215). As is shown by this micro-moment of practice, in order for our novices to create a “coherent whole” out of their existing knowledges, we, the adults, could not be passive observers. This relates to Gallagher and Jacobson’s astute observation that, whilst some students enjoy working independently, they witnessed frustration amongst youth “when guidance might have been very useful” (2018, 45). Whilst the young people’s ‘voices’ were at the heart of our creative process, gaining autonomy as theatre-makers is a developmental process. This resonates with Noorani, Blencowe and Brigstocke’s argument that “democracy is craftwork ... nurtured through *slow* apprenticeship” [emphasis mine] (2013, 2).

Fucinni often structured activities so that the older, more experienced members would work with the younger and less experienced, a strategy associated with Lev Vygotsky’s “zone of proximal development” (ZPD) in which learning occurs through social processes of “cooperation” and “interaction” between those less/more knowledgeable (cited in Muijs and Reynolds 2011, 25). Recent analyses of constructivist educational theories have emphasised the fluidity and dynamism of this relationship. Robin Ewing argues that knowledge manifests through “collaborative dialogue as *joint* problem solving” (2015, 137) between

teacher/learner/peers. This is particularly resonant with devising where, to varying degrees, the teacher/director works *with* the participants, searching for answers ‘in the dark’. There is something particularly radical about this epistemological approach: both master and apprentice are engaged in *not* knowing together. Critically, the phases of generating knowledge to creating performance are not as linear as Bloom’s taxonomy might suggest. Devising is a reiterative, messy process, where meaning-making and unmaking occurs on a micro-level each time we interact or share ideas.

In the spirit of experimentation, Fucinni and I invited CYT to improvise, often repeating, “have a go”, “try things out”, and “don’t censor yourself”. We encouraged them to generate mess and make mistakes in the hope it might bring about new insights. As demonstrated above, it was through our *mutual* struggle that we discovered a new set of characters that later played a significant role in our final performance. Tatiana Chemi describes the experimental nature of creative work:

The theatre laboratory needs spaces where mistakes can be made and brought to discussion in order to achieve experience and knowledge.

As in sustainable ecologies, waste is here reused, remade, recycled in other materials, and no waste is really a waste of energy (2018, 88).

In a responsive and attentive process, “mistakes” become serendipitous, productive possibilities. Nevertheless, dwelling in mess and grappling with mistakes can be time-consuming. Our rehearsal room was often fizzing with ideas and, whilst there were some intriguing ‘themes’ emerging, the work we produced was sometimes nebulous and disjointed. With the performance event drawing closer, we needed a narrative structure to contain their ideas. As Chemi suggests, there is a balance to be maintained between, “holding the process open, but also knowing when the process must be directed towards structure and conclusion” (230).

Devising and dramaturgy: many authors in search of a form

There are practitioners who make an artistic virtue of the disconnectedness that manifests in a devising process. Perry, Wessels and Wager argue that devised performance often “resist[s] linear narratives, plot cohesion, and thematic clarity” (2013, 653). Likewise, in Gallagher and Jacobson’s discussion of staging verbatim theatre, the more artistically credible performances avoided naturalistic recreations and instead made an “assemblage of reals” (2018, 40). Their argument is persuasive: if the devising process has produced multiplicity, polyphony and

cacophony then it follows that the performance captures this in a more abstract, symbolic and episodic form. This approach to theatre-making is associated with “post-dramatic theatre” which involves “fragmentary and partial character, [and] renounces the long-incontestable criteria of unity and synthesis” (Lehmann 2006, 57) and which “draws attention to its own constructed-ness” (Mermikides and Smart 2010, 6). However, CYT’s previous oral history performance was also episodic in nature so we were keen to search for new aesthetic forms. Fucinni wanted to introduce CYT to the ways we might create “great, complex characters” (Field notes, December 6th 2016) through the rigors of storytelling. In our version of devising for “theatre of the real”, Fucinni aimed to realise the young people’s expressions of their “real” experiences and concerns by reimagining and recycling them into a new narrative framework. We became engaged in the craft of dramaturgy.

Although there are multiple descriptions of the dramaturg’s role, primarily, they assist in the composition of a performance. As cited by Turner and Behrndt, Eugenio Barba describes ‘dramaturgy’ as a synthesising process, a “weave” or “weaving together” of elements (2008, 31). They go on to argue that the dramaturg’s creative antennae are alert to potential significant serendipitous micro-moments:

A certain look between two performers, a sudden hand gesture, an accidental entrance or simply a particular feeling about the timing or duration of a moment might provide an exciting shift in direction (2008, 177).

The dramaturg’s responsibility is to keep forensic notes of rehearsals and to notice and respond to the minutiae of interactions between participants. This acute focus of attention on words, atmospheres, feelings and affects aligns with the role of an ethnographer; it involves active listening and watching (Turner-King, forthcoming). In devising, a playwright often engages in similar processes as the dramaturg. As playwright Andrew Kushnir writes, his job is to listen to multiple “voices” and “*carefully structure* a theatrical encounter’ out of many competing ideas” [emphasis mine] (2016, 86).

The dystopian fairy-tale structure of *The Last Newspaper* emerged out improvisations, role-plays, conversations, debates, movement, listening to different genres of music, explorations of newspaper articles, headlines, graphic novels and storybooks. Once we found our ‘hook’, we started to retrace our notes to see how old, perhaps forgotten ideas, could be reimagined into the characters and storylines were forming. For example, in an earlier

improvisation, one of the youngest members, Lola, had stepped in to the role of Prime Minister and articulated her vision for drastic funding cuts, whilst assuring her peers, “Behind every raincloud is a blue sky!” (Field notes, 31st January 2017). Lola’s playful use of Orwellian doublespeak went to the core of our wider investigations into post-truth, and Fucinni and I were inspired to reimagine it. In *The Last Newspaper*, Lola’s line became part of the Trump-like rhetoric of the character of the greedy Porky, Chief Executive of The Three Little Pigs Limited.

After the performance, I invited the youth group to reflect upon their experience of devising:

James (CYT member aged 12): I’m just thinking that every little session we did all played a big role in actual the final performance ... because if you think, if you pick one night, every Tuesday, every little bit of that night is in the play ... the whole experience, these whole months ... every week, we’d devise something and then you or Jouvan would write it down and it would come to a great script.

(Interview: 28th March 2017)

It was reassuring that James considered the devising and scripting-writing processes as integrated. As Chemi describes of the interconnected ecology of the rehearsal room, “individual actors to build on each other’s ideas and proposals, in a co-creative chain that links ensemble and director” (2018, 87). Indeed, during the scripting process, Fucinni and I took great pleasure in translating *their* ideas into the dramatic framework. We were eager to share our drafts with the group and get their input. Frustratingly, time did not permit us to extend this dramaturgical and script-writing process and we would recommend allocating equal time to generating material and crafting performance.

The director as ‘caretaker’: between master and apprentice

In a recent analysis of the ‘host-guest’ relationship between the facilitator/director and youth participant respectively (Turner-King, 2018), I argued that part of the director’s responsibility is to open up this binary so that it becomes more porous and inclusive. This process of “uncrowning the power of the director/teacher” (Neelands 2009, 183) is unlikely to happen within the early stages of a project; creating an autonomous ensemble is a hard-earned, incremental process of negotiation. Moreover, aspirations to foster an open, welcoming space, in which young people possess creative agency, are in tension with an understanding that such

“freedoms need restraint” (Neelands 2016, 33). Alice O’Grady suggests that facilitators could be conceived as “the ‘caretakers’ of the participatory process” who “need to be mindful of the thresholds they construct for others to cross” (2017, 14). Given *Radical Hope’s* wider investigation into an ‘ethics of care’, O’Grady’s notion of ‘caretaker’ is an intriguing metaphor to apply to the youth theatre director. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a “caretaker” as “one who takes care of a thing, place, or person; one put in charge of anything”. Critically, caretaking involves a *dual* responsibility: to take care of others *and* to take charge of others. If the youth theatre director is committed to democratising the rehearsal space, this should involve an acute awareness of the ways authority relates to care.

In Richard Sennett’s insightful discussions on “the ethical frame of earned authority” he argues that effective leaders possess a “willingness to assume responsibility, for oneself and one’s group” (2012, 173). This tension between the practice of care and the practice of ‘earned authority’ raises questions about the relationship between director and participant. Our process of theatre-making involved a shift from ensemble-led devising to scripting a play, co-authored largely by Fucinni and myself. By scripting a play out of their ideas, I was concerned that we had perhaps lessened the young people’s sense of ownership and investment in the work. Fucinni offered a different perspective:

Fucinni: You can be one of two things in Youth Theatre: you can be a facilitator, or you can be a creative associate to the young people. A facilitator would provide them with the opportunity to do what *they* want to do, how they want to do it ... and so, you’re not *really* kind of *engaging* on an *artistic* level ... but then there’s the creative associate who works *with* the young people ...

By conceptualising his role as a ‘creative associate’, Fucinni cuts across the binary of the ‘hands-off facilitator’ versus the ‘authoritarian director’:

The way I like to work, as a creative associate is to kind of work *with* them, amongst them, as one of them ... whatever they give me, I question it. So I’ll accept it but then I’ll say, “tell me why” ... and then I’m listening to everyone and I’m trying to make the connections between all of their creativity and all of their work so that [it] makes sense, so that can be used in a narrative, that builds upon each other.

Fucinni’s description of being “with” and “amongst” the participants as they create relates directly to Sheila Preston’s perceptive examination of facilitation and the nuances of practice,

“which requires the facilitator to be in the work *with* participants, experiencing, noticing and responding” (2016, 46). Fucinni continues:

I’ve seen [past] shows and I’m like, “It’s nice” but it’s rarely shaped. It can be kind of rambling and unfocused.

As he suggests, creative processes without careful crafting, critical questioning and attentive, responsive leadership often produce weak art. Thus, there is an inextricable link between an educator’s ethical *and* artistic concerns (Winston, 2010). Whilst this devising process placed emphasis on the youth participants’ ‘voices’ and encouraged their contributions, Fucinni and I were ultimately responsible for the overall shape and sense of the piece. Simply accepting all the participants’ ideas in the name of democracy is not necessarily caring.

Sennett’s work on “craftsmanship” highlights the complex power relationship between novice and expert within the context of a “workshop”. The master’s responsibility is to create the conditions for apprentices to become skilled enough to work autonomously. Sennett argues that, whilst “there must be a superior who sets standards and who trains” (Sennett 2008, 54), this enactment of power can be both benevolent and nurturing. Terming what he calls ‘*social* experts’, the interaction between master and apprentice occurs corporeally as “face to face” (2008, 54) and “in the flesh” (54) exchanges rather than abstracted, distanced instructions from the top-down anonymous authorities. Sennett stresses the interactive, dialogic nature of the “earned authority” that involves “listening and taking notes, informal discussions ... [having] an open dialogue with subordinates rather than rigid dictation to them” (2012, 173). This resonates with Virginia Held’s argument that “caring relations includes a mutual ‘responsiveness’ between caregiver and receiver” (2006, 36). This responsivity is fundamental to connecting the ethical dimensions of youth work with the artistry involved in co-creating performance.

Conclusion

The *Radical Hope* project asks, “Is there a radical hope to be found in the humble high school drama classroom?” (Project: Humanity 2019). Running through all of The Belgrade’s youth theatre work is a commitment to nurturing young people’s ‘voices’ as engaged citizens. This project aimed to explore and communicate CYT’s hopes and fears at a critical time in their adolescent development, and at a time when their world seemed chaotic and unstable. For youth theatre directors such as Fucinni, motivation to work with young people comes from a place of care. Fucinni cared about the work they were creating because, fundamentally, he

wanted the young people to feel pride and receive admiration for their efforts. His repositioning of the director as “creative associate” and his repeated claims to be working “with” the young people offers a hopeful image of the interconnected ecology of creativity in youth theatre. In Duška Radosavljević’s recent examination of ‘eco-leadership’ in the professional rehearsal room, she focuses on the importance of networked relationships *between* directors and participants. Within this context, she proposes that the “heterarchical director renounces solo authority in favour of nurturing of multiple authorities” (Radosavljević 2018). Similarly, in this study, the ‘creative associate’, or ‘caretaker’, found a responsive and engaged way of listening *and* leading. He did not impose authority nor renege on his responsibilities to govern. This form of caring, nurturing leadership feels sorely absent in the current public political realm. In this study, ‘student ownership’ was a misnomer. By emphasising young people as the main stakeholders in the creative process, we falsely separate out the contributions of the participants and the actions of the teacher/director as if they were somehow distinct rather than entangled, shared and interactive experiences. Furthermore, whilst ‘student ownership’ may signal ‘empowerment’ and ‘agency’, all worthy aspirations for any educational project, there is a risk that we devalue the investment, care and efforts of the teacher/director in the creative endeavour.

As detailed in Gallagher and Turner-King (in press), alongside our devising process, CYT participants ran a parallel political campaign against the cuts facing their youth community. Despite their best efforts to dissuade Coventry City Council from closing Canley Youth Services, in 2017, it ceased to exist and many of the city’s youth centres closed. Amidst this dispiriting time, Jouvan, Angela and I were inspired by the young people’s activism. Devising *The Last Newspaper* (2017), therefore, became a vital alternative site for us to help them explore complex notions of ‘truth’ in their lives. Moreover, the performance event provided a public platform to communicate the lack of care they felt on a regional, national and international scale. In a ‘post-truth’ era, I contend that the pedagogies associated with collaborative theatre-making offer hope, particularly in the teaching of *critical* literacy. Social media platforms may provide young people with ubiquitous opportunities to participate in ‘democracy’ by enabling them to ‘voice’ their opinions. Rarely, however, do such platforms facilitate, nurture or support young people’s expressions of their emerging identities. In drama classroom/youth theatre space, young people are given opportunities to pause, reflect and make sense of their many shifting ideas as well as a site where adults can

listen, respond and question, finding *shared* joy in reimagining and co-creating theatre that matters to all those involved.

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