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Theatre, Performance and the Amateur Turn

Nadine Holdsworth, Jane Milling and Helen Nicholson

On July 1st 2016 groups of men in World War One military uniforms gathered in public spaces across Great Britain, at railway stations and harbours, in shopping malls, streets and on beaches. Looking blankly ahead, the men were silent except for the occasional chorus of 'We're here because we're here' to the tune Auld Lang Syne, a song that was sung in the trenches. If approached, each soldier offered a simple card bearing the name of the man he represented who had died at the Somme exactly one hundred years earlier. The presence of these ghost soldiers in contemporary settings was made more poignant by the fact that they were not only the same age as the men who were killed, but also because they were not professional performers but men with other jobs: teachers, office workers, students, flight attendants, plumbers, policemen and many others joined the ranks. *We're here because we're here* was commissioned by 14-18 NOW, and created by the artist Jeremy Deller in collaboration with Rufus Norris, the artistic director of the National Theatre in London. Deller is perhaps best known for *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001), a re-enactment of a bitter dispute between striking miners and mounted police in Thatcher's England in 1984.¹ His large-scale performances rely on choreographing cultural memory with non-professional performers as one way to attend to the narratives of the past and bring them into the present.

We're here because we're here illustrates the resurgence of interest in the amateur and amateurism, and captures their affective power.² Professionally conceived, it involved 1400 men between the ages of 16 and 52 who volunteered to perform in this living memorial to the dead. Rehearsing in secret, the event required disciplined participation and restraint, but involved no 'acting' as such; there was no line learning, no dramatic narrative, no monologues and no characters to play. Rather, the men remained eerily quiet, following subtle non-verbal cues that prompted them to respond (or not) to their environment, to move, march or sing. Involving untrained performers was integral to its emotional impact and their unsentimental participation, as Jeremy Deller pointed out, underlined the fact that many of the dead were not professional soldiers but volunteers.³ Part of the appeal of the performance lay in its unexpected intervention into everyday contemporary life, with every uniformed man representing a 'real' soldier and invoking his 'real' death. Although British in location and history, within days of the event in July 2016 there was interest in adapting this performative memorial in Anzac countries.

¹ For an account of this project see Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, (London: Verso, 2012) pp.30-37.

² <https://becausewearehere.co.uk/> [Accessed 11/07/2016]

³ <https://becausewearehere.co.uk/we-are-here-about/> [Accessed 01/11/16]

In this editorial we shall attempt to tease out some of the ways in which amateurism is conceived in contemporary cultural practice, and how amateurs contribute to the broad landscape of theatre-making. We open discussions with *We're here because we're here* because it prompts reflection on how amateur performers are integrated into contemporary performance, the visibility of amateur labour, and how amateur creativity contributes to contemporary cultural life. It also opens questions about the complex relationship between amateur and professional artists, and invites consideration of the emotional effect of the untrained body on audiences. In his essay 'Other Experts', gallery director Ralph Rugoff suggests that the twenty-first century is marked by a new focus on amateurism, both as 'an aesthetic strategy and a field of cultural production'.⁴ Yet, as the art critic John Roberts notes in his essay 'The Amateur's Retort', the participation of amateurs in contemporary art also invokes what he describes as a 'fantasy about what is authentically professional'.⁵

If distinctions between amateur and professional artists are predicated on claims to authenticity, it draws attention to how the 'real' and the 'fake' are performed and witnessed. New opportunities for members of the public to participate in projects led by professional theatre-makers often play on the presence of 'real people' in the performance, and creating a feeling of authenticity is integral to the artists' vision. *We're here because we're here* is a good example of this approach to performance-making. Emily Lim, associate director of the project, found that participants who had no experience of the theatre were able to respond to the sparse theatrical language more 'naturally' than those with acting experience, thus realising more quickly the effect that the professional artists imagined.⁶ Captured and shared on Youtube, the restrained performance was disruptive and urgent in each location, and yet the performance aesthetic was remarkably consistent from the Shetland Islands in the north to Plymouth in the south as 'ordinary' men, costumed and choreographed, mingled amongst the public from exactly 7am to 7pm on one day in July.

We're here because we're here also throws into relief distinctions between amateur theatre-makers, non-professional performers and community performers. Amateurs make theatre for the love of it, often sharing an enduring passion that lasts a lifetime and an enthusiasm that is passed down from one generation to another. Non-professional performers may participate in a single performance or event conceived by professional artists, and community performers work with professional theatre-makers, often focussing on local stories or participants' experiences. Each approach offers a different kind of creative agency, but almost invariably the status of amateur, non-professional or community

⁴ Ralph Rugoff, 'Other Experts', *Amateurs*, (California College of the Arts, 2008, pp. 9-14), p. 9.

⁵ John Roberts, 'The Amateur's Retort', *Amateurs*, (California College of the Arts, 2008 pp. 15-25), p.21.

⁶ <https://becausewearehere.co.uk/we-are-here-about/> [Accessed 01/11/16].

cast members differentiates their artistic contribution from that of the professional theatre-makers with whom they work. Writing from different geographical locations, the authors represented in this collection contest the political, artistic and cultural boundaries between these different forms of labour and cultural economies. The appeal of amateurism to contemporary performance is, perhaps, to inhabit these tensions and to make such distinctions visible and tangible.

If, as Shannon Jackson observed, the late twentieth century was marked by a social turn in contemporary performance, the amateur turn is its twenty-first century counterpart. In this editorial, we draw out three strands of the amateur turn in contemporary performance. In the first section, we shall outline some of the ways in which the idea of the amateur in many countries has been entangled with questions of cultural value, creativity, innovation and tradition. The second section analyses amateur theatre as one example of a community of interest, and in the third we turn our attention to how the values of the amateur turn, as aesthetic strategy and cultural practice, is interpreted by authors represented in this journal. By placing amateurs, amateurism and amateurism in juxtaposition, we hope to find points of connection and dissonance between how they are recognised, practised and understood in contemporary theatre.

Amateur Theatre as a Cultural Practice

Amateur theatrical practices are multifarious and the groups, some fleeting, some long-lived who come together to make theatre at any given place and time are motivated by radically different objectives. To tease out some of the complexity of what 'amateur' might mean as a cultural practice is, then, dependent on the location of amateur cultural practices in relation to the networks of cultural institutions, forms, national cultural policies and traditions. Looking across the varied histories of amateur theatre in different nation states, three lineages of amateur theatre-making, among many, emerge. One perspective traces amateur theatre as a place for avant-garde innovation and politically resistant forms, while quite another identifies amateur theatre groups as a conservative cultural force, aesthetically and politically conventional, centred on questions of cultivation or education. A third story of amateur participation marks the amateur as preserver of traditional or endangered cultural forms.

There is a modernist trajectory of amateur performance-making that views itself as aesthetically innovative or politically radical. Many of the aesthetic innovations of nineteenth and twentieth century theatre practice were made by and with amateur groups, some collaboratively woven

together, others led by self-appointed visionaries such as Stanislavski.⁷ These passionate amateurs are celebrated as Nicholas Ridout's romantic revolutionaries, but few would identify as 'amateur'. Indeed, Ridout is sceptical of the other trajectories of amateur work, and distinguishes his aesthetic innovators as neither hampered by an 'unreflective professionalism nor by the conditioned amateurism of the recreational hobby.'⁸ For some groups political opposition paralleled aesthetic innovation, and the idea of being 'amateur' was explicitly claimed as offering a zone of potential resistance to state-sanctioned theatre institutions. In post-1956 Hungary, amateur theatre groups staged 'revolutionary, experimental productions', improvised street theatre, or innovated folk dance ensembles in ways that were perceived as resistant to the state controlled cultural practices of professional government-sponsored theatres. Not only were politically divergent messages embodied in amateur performance, but 'amateurs made possible the survival of alternative aesthetic concepts.'⁹ For theatre-makers working in this spirit, being 'amateur' acts as a facilitating space of alterity, aesthetically or politically, that becomes quickly absorbed into the cultural mainstream as innovation. The amateur is one of the neglected ghosts that haunt the avant-garde, as James Harding might have noted.

Another strand of amateur theatre-making links those groups whose practices remain imbricated in the existing cultural mores and structures within their national context. Again a largely twentieth-century impulse amidst the wider political and economic changes of the Great War, and 'an era of high Imperialism', the rise of this kind of amateur championed amateur theatre as akin to that 'supremely civilising pursuit' the study of literature, as Terry Eagleton identifies in the rise of English as an academic discipline.¹⁰ To be amateur in this context was to contribute to institutional and educational agendas of self-improvement and cultivation. Michael Dobson's study of the iterative re-appropriation of Shakespeare by diverse amateur theatre groups across the British colonies charts the ways in which such amateur troupes found the Bard useful to support their colonial, cultural agendas and relationship to 'home'. Judith Hawley and Mary Isbell's recent collection explores the diverse educational, cultivating, or institutional impetuses of international amateur production practices in

⁷ Claire Cochrane glosses some of these innovators in European theatre in 'The Pervasiveness of the Commonplace: The Historian and Amateur Theatre' *Theatre Research International*, 26.3, (2001), 233-42.

⁸ Nicholas Ridout, *Passionate Amateurs: Theatre, Communism and Love* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), p.11.

⁹ László Magács, 'Hungarian Theater: Unchanged after the Changes: (A Subjective Theatrical history)', *Macalester International*, Volume 2, Article 15 (1995), 180-97. Zsófia Lelkes 'Changes in the Hungarian Theatre system' in Hans van Maanen (ed), *European Countries* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 90-124; p. 103.

¹⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1983), pp. 28, 31.

Toronto, the American South, Ireland or aboard ship.¹¹ Robin C. Whittaker observes that while the University College, Toronto Women's Dramatic Club offered an unusual public space for women to perform, it 'emerged from a world of patronage, patriotism, publicly performed acts of charity, and personal edification, [...] held together by legitimating dynamics inculcated at the university and the finishing school'.¹² This idea of the amateur was a space of cultivation and taste, pitted against commercial or mass entertainment. Yet paradoxically, amateur theatre was also comfortably imbricated in existing commercial theatre provision, and shared repertoire, aspiration and aesthetic mores with mainstream theatre, as Claire Cochrane's work has drawn out.¹³

A third characterisation of the amateur in cultural practice sees amateurs as expert guardians of traditional forms, legitimated not by their high aesthetic value, but as important markers of national or community identity. This conception of being an amateur is already nostalgic, and produces the amateur as responsible to cultural heritage, particularly vernacular performance forms, examples of which from the UK might include folk dance, Morris sides or mummings. There are parallel examples internationally that draw attention to the political and cultural stakes for amateurs in sustaining traditional performance forms. Lee Tong Soon's study of the amateur *xiqu* (Chinese Opera) tradition in Singapore charts the transition from a diasporic, recuperative practice of amateurs to a cultural practice where amateurs can be recognised as 'bearers of cultural heritage in Singapore' itself.¹⁴ Amateur *xiqu* performance is valued for its emphasis on the process of cultural acquisition as a practice of Confucian self-refinement and signifies, far more than professional *xiqu*, an act of culturally legitimacy. In this trajectory, to be amateur is to be conservative and a conserver of, often local or regional, cultural heritage. It is in the practice of the amateur that the cultural form itself, and concomitant expertise, is sustained. The amateur is the expert contemporary practitioner, but the content and spirit of the cultural practice itself is cast as traditional, retrograde, or backwards-looking. This chimes with Glenn Adamson's conceptualisation of the twentieth-century opposition of craft to fine art, where craft emphasises the skill, the doing, rather than the final product. In this formulation the skilled amateur craftsman is potentially threatening to the cultural status of fine art, 'if skill is at base a way of achieving cultural authority – then we might well expect skill to be challenged by those

¹¹ Judith Hawley and Mary Isbell, eds, *Amateur Theatre in the Long Nineteenth Century Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*, 38.2 (2011).

¹² Robin C. Whittaker, 'Entirely Free of Any Amateurishness': Private Training, Public Taste and the Women's Dramatic Club of University College, Toronto (1905-21)' *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*, 38.2 (2011), 51-66, 62.

¹³ Claire Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre: Industry, Art and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹⁴ Tong Soon Lee, 'Chinese Theatre, Confucianism, and Nationalism: Amateur Chinese Opera Tradition in Singapore,' *Asian Theatre Journal*, 24.2 (2007), 397-421, 404.

who position themselves as progressive.¹⁵ The fine artist must position herself as innovative and forward-looking, and by implication cast the amateur craftsperson as skilful but passé. So while the amateur domain may be recognised as significant in sustaining local cultures and traditional crafts, public subsidy is directed towards developing innovative, challenging, risk-taking arts practices.

These diverse identifications of what being an ‘amateur’ might mean, also imply an understanding of amateur cultural practices as a distinct amateur sector separate from professional practices. Indeed, in trying to capture the role of cultural production Pierre Bourdieu’s grand structure for the rules of art locates non-professional practice as outside the field of cultural production altogether, located for him in adjacent fields of the social and of power.¹⁶ Yet, as the diverse trajectories above reveal, being an ‘amateur’ is always caught up in relation to being ‘not-amateur’, as what is amateur, vernacular or everyday is produced in relation to the cultural value of ‘not-amateur’ creativity. In contemporary cultural contexts, being an ‘amateur’ and the cultural practices of amateur creativity are by and large pejoratively devalued through their relation to the professional, subsidised art world and their neglect by cultural policy.

This neglect of amateur creativity has arisen in part because in post-war Western ‘knowledge’ economies, the idea of creativity itself has undergone considerable evolution. Creativity has come to centre on individual creative production, and is understood less as participation in aesthetic-expressive cultural practices and more as a means of forging creative, flexible workers – an approach characterised by Richard Florida’s notion of a creative class, or Charles Landry’s creative cities. This change in the rhetoric around creativity has intensified since the 1990s with the rise of Britain’s cultural and creative industries as a recognised sector of the national economy. As Chris Bilton notes an:

individualistic, unaccountable logic of creativity has replaced the complexity of culture, and policy makers uncork the bottle of creativity, freeing creative individuals, enterprises, clusters and classes to weave their magic on the wider economy.¹⁷

Within this idea of the creative economy, creativity is valued when it is operationalized for explicit economic benefits and outcomes. It is perhaps not surprising that amateur creativity has not been valued or recognised within this rubric, except as a training ground for future employment – Stebbins’ concept of ‘serious leisure’ is built on this basis. Such a view of the amateur and amateur creativity

¹⁵ Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (London: Berg, 2007), p.78.

¹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), p.124.

¹⁷ Chris Bilton, *Creativity and Cultural Policy*, (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 1.

does not capture the range or significance of amateur cultural practices, particularly those that are not directly related to art or cultural markets.

An enduring part of the distinction in cultural value between ‘amateur’ and ‘not-amateur’ is brought into being by cultural policy and policy makers. From the Council of Europe’s statement that access to cultural participation is ‘pivotal to the system of human rights’, to UNESCO’s transnational measures of cultural participation, national governments encourage cultural participation.¹⁸ However, many national cultural policies privilege professional cultural activity and or require organisations and institutions to demonstrate the participation of audiences as a condition of subsidy; active participation in amateur creative processes are not included in their rubrics of participation. Remarkable among these perspectives, the Council of Europe’s report does not indicate a cultural hierarchy between types of cultural participation, drawing equivalence between cultural participation as an audience, as a professional artist, or as an amateur. While amateur creativity and the value of being an amateur is frequently pejoratively framed in cultural policy as home-made,¹⁹ imitative, or as merely a precursor to art, a recent report on cultural value suggests another rhetoric is emerging in which the ‘evolving ecology of commercial, amateur, interactive and subsidised engagement needs to be [...] seen as enriching rather than antagonistic.’²⁰

Amateur Theatre and Communities of Interest

Over the past three years we (Holdsworth, Milling and Nicholson) have been engaged in an AHRC funded research project ‘Amateur Dramatics: Crafting Communities in Time and Space’, in which we are investigating what might be considered the traditional terrain of amateur theatre that takes place in village halls, community centres and local theatres across England. This project was propelled by a desire to unpack the snobbery, if not derision, that the academy has shown towards self-generated amateur theatre practice of this kind. Activity that is predominately invested in producing a broad repertoire of plays from farces, to thrillers to cutting edge new drama, as well as musical theatre. The lowly cultural status afforded amateur theatre by the academy stands in marked contrast to the long-held interest in small to large-scale participatory theatre projects, which are largely initiated and animated by professional theatre-makers, such as *We’re here because we’re here* or *The Passion*

¹⁸ *The right of everyone to take part in cultural life*, Report of the Committee on Culture, Science and Education of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). <http://www.culturalpolicies.net/web/cultural-participation.php> [Accessed 3/11/2016]

¹⁹ See, for example, John Holden, *The Ecology of Culture* (Swindon: AHRC, 2015).

²⁰ Geoffrey Crossick and Patrycja Kaszynska, *Understanding the Value of Arts and Culture: The AHRC Cultural Value project* (Swindon: AHRC, 2016), p. 29.

produced by National Theatre Wales and WildWorks in 2011, which saw 1200 members of the Port Talbot community involved as musicians, singers, performers and stewards, or the production of David Greig's play *The Events* (2013), in which a community choir of local people were recruited to perform in each venue. Alongside contemporary academic concerns with these strategies of community assembly, sits the recent interest in an aesthetics of amateurism associated with performance companies such as Richard Maxwell's New York City Players and the 'radical amateurism' Sara Jane Bailes attributes to Forced Entertainment.²¹ In contrast, there is a sense that amateur theatre itself has not merited close scrutiny. Rather than blithely accepting the cultural stereotype of amateur theatre practice as unquestionably shoddy and tied up in cultural imaginings of undeserving prima donnas, tired repertoires and shaky sets, we have been keen to attend to a cultural re-evaluation of the processes, practices and repertoires of amateur theatre companies in England and to think through the value of making theatre together for individuals and communities.

Drawing inspiration from Tim Edensor et al we have sought to unsettle 'restrictions around who, what and where is considered 'creative' and argue that an understanding of vernacular and everyday landscapes of creativity honours the non-economic values and outcomes produced by alternative, marginal and quotidian creative practices'.²² In doing so we have been asking questions about this long-standing cultural practice that provides many people with their introduction to and regular interaction with theatre. What makes people want to invest their time and labour as actors, directors, designers and stage crew? Why do they find time to undertake the various ancillary roles of committee work and front-of-house duties that routinely make theatre in village halls, community centres and small local theatres viable? What makes people stay making amateur theatre, sometimes for a significant part of their life course? How does amateur theatre contribute to the formation and performance of individual subjectivities and group identities? Despite the increasing slippage and crossovers evident between the professional and amateur theatre realms, we are finding that the responses to these questions reveal something of the divergent motivations and values that drive and distinguish amateur theatre-making.

Amateur theatre groups are primarily founded from communities of interest – those who are driven by a love of theatre for its own sake and a desire to make theatre accessible to as wide an audience as possible. As such, communities of interest become what Etienne Wenger refers to as 'communities of

²¹ See Sarah Gorman, *The Theatre of Richard Maxwell and the New York City Players* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011) and Sara Jane Bailes, *Performance, Theatre and the Poetics of Failure* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011), p. 94.

²² Tim Edensor, D. Leslie, S. Millington, N.M. Rantisi, N. M. (eds.) *Spaces of Vernacular Creativity: Re-thinking the Cultural Economy* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2010), p. 1.

practice' rooted in shared enterprise.²³ As one amateur participant in the 2016 Royal Shakespeare Company production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with a professional cast and members of fourteen amateur theatre companies from across the United Kingdom playing the roles of the Mechanicals puts it, 'Amateurs are determined people who rush home from work to realise their passions; charitable people who do all the tedious tasks to keep the theatre alive. "Amateur" theatre means theatre crafted with love, and against the odds'.²⁴ The stress, here, is on realising, doing and crafting, which are key to how amateur theatre is made, but in our research we have been equally thinking about how amateur theatre contributes to the making of people, communities and places.

In their edited collection *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*, Ingold and Hallam refer to 'the dynamic potential of an entire field of relationships to bring forth the persons situated in it', an assertion that echoes Ingold's earlier work on the creativity underpinning social life in which people 'do not make societies but, living socially, make themselves'.²⁵ People involved in amateur theatre often talk about it in terms of the outlet it provides for their creativity, but in providing that sphere of social activity amateur theatre also helps foster, sustain and make that creative person. From a slightly different perspective, following ideas forwarded by anthropologist Erving Goffman in the 1950s, amateur theatre can provide a safe space for people to explore and perform different dimensions of their identities that may be a world away from their performance of self in school, work or the home environment.²⁶

We have also been situating amateur theatre as part of the 'thick web of activities and practices' that contribute, according to Graham Day, to our understanding of what constitutes the meaning of community or in terms of Gerard Delanty's invitation to see 'community as an expression of *communitas*; that is, a particular mode of imagining and experiencing social belonging as a communicative, public happening'.²⁷ The space of the local amateur theatre can serve as one manifestation of the 'physical fabric' that constitutes a plethora of community spaces that invite and facilitate community groups to congregate, which might also include local libraries, community centres and church meeting halls and many amateur theatre spaces also play host to other cultural activities such as film clubs, and creative writing groups.²⁸ In their very existence these groups, clubs

²³ See Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)

²⁴ Programme for the Royal Shakespeare Company's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* staged at the RSC, Stratford-upon-Avon, 15 June-16 July 2016 following a national tour.

²⁵ See Tim Ingold and Elizabeth Hallam, 'Creativity and Cultural Improvisation: An Introduction' in *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*, ed. by Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold (Oxford: Berg, 2007), p. 8.

²⁶ See Goffman, E, *The presentation of Self In Everyday Life* (London: Penguin Books, 1969).

²⁷ See Graham Day, *Community and Everyday Life* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006) p. 233 and Gerard Delanty, *Community* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2003), p. 26.

²⁸ See Graham Day, *Community and Everyday Life* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006) p. 233.

and societies signal and perform a socially visible community. However, it is what happens through the processes of exchange and interaction that makes amateur theatre a 'communicative, public happening', which, in turn, helps forge communities.

When speaking of their involvement in amateur theatre, many stress the practice of sociability - fun, friendship and deep camaraderie - as significant drivers in their participation. As people rehearse, build sets, design and make costumes and props together they often embark on a range of social exchanges. In so doing they build the foundations for and reinforce social bonds that can be understood in terms of Robert Putnam's work on how engagement in community groups helps to facilitate networks and social structures that create enduring social bonds or what Putnam refers to as 'social capital'.²⁹ In distinction to professional theatre, this idea of networks also extends to the relation between the spectators and actors in amateur theatre, which rests on the fact that many of the people who make-up the audiences are family members, neighbours, friends and work colleagues.³⁰ According to Mangan, 'for this audience, part of the pleasure is the double consciousness provided by the experience of watching people whom they know in everyday life play fictional parts'.³¹ Equally, audience members who may not have a personal investment, but who are devoted supporters of local theatre contribute to an often very distinctive viewing experience of insiders willing on and celebrating the achievements of the cast and crew, which we think is partially tied up in their support for 'real' people engaged in sustained unpaid creative labour. Indeed, the particular warmth of reception experienced by amateurs was not lost on the Royal Shakespeare Company during its tour of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to some of the cities, including Canterbury, Norwich, Nottingham and Cardiff, where their amateur collaborators were based. Talking about the impact of this experience for the RSC, Ian Wainwright, producer for the RSC's large-scale initiative with the amateur sector, Open Stages, stressed the unique connection with the audience born of working with companies deeply rooted in their immediate communities and localities.³²

This sense of rootedness can also have a more pronounced social or political dimension as amateur companies can involve communities of interest that assemble in relation to their sexual orientation, religious affiliation, ethnic identity or diasporic status and can contribute to the performance of group identities by staging cultural narratives that counter a marginal status or assert a distinct identity. The performance of these communal narratives can help to strengthen community bonds and draw

²⁹ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone. The collapse and revival of American community*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

³⁰ Michael Mangan, 'Theatre in modern British culture', in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Culture* ed. by Michael Higgins, Clarissa Smith and John Storey, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 158.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Conversation with Ian Wainwright, RSC's The Other Place, 5 October 2016.

attention to how amateur theatre rooted in different communities of interest can be compelling and generate 'sticky' communities where relations can be enriched over time. Nonetheless, communities of interest and identity can also risk seeming exclusive. A notable strength of amateur theatre practice is its often diverse inter-generational character and we can testify that the impression of amateur theatre as a largely middle-class pursuit is over-exaggerated, but the long-standing concern with a lack of ethnic diversity in amateur theatre groups in the UK does require close scrutiny. Some companies have actively sought to extend the reach and range of their membership, with Mad Cow Productions from Shropshire using Twitter, Facebook and finally a trip to Afro-Caribbean hairdressers Weavealicious to recruit for their 2015 production of *Hairspray*, but the fact that the UK's National Operatic and Dramatic Association (NODA) had to release a fact sheet as late as 2013 explaining the cultural politics and unease around 'blacking up' following a number of disputes between amateur companies and local authorities, is indicative of a deep malaise around the issue.³³

Amateur theatre also makes a significant contribution to the on-going process of place-making. However, rather than the 'construction of spectacular spaces of culture and consumption' in urban centres that Edensor et al critique as dominating creative place-making initiatives, we have adjusted our parameters to incorporate the everyday and the unspectacular in a consideration of amateur theatre's contribution to creative place-making in rural, suburban and city environments.³⁴ In addition to bringing cultural vitality to areas that may not necessarily have easy access to professional theatre, amateur theatre companies often contribute to sustaining local cultural heritage through their restoration and custodianship of key buildings, their dissemination of local stories, histories or cultural figures and their support for and presence at events such as summer carnivals and festive celebrations. Fundraising for theatre restoration projects as well as local and national charities is an established part of amateur theatre companies and this activity, alongside their creative *doings* also serves to embed them as significant place-makers who contribute to the shifting identity, narratives and cultural imaginings of place.

The Value and Values of Theatre's Amateur Turn

The interest in amateurs and amateurism in professional performance often seems remote from the enthusiasm for theatre shown by members of amateur theatre companies. As Bailes points out, the

³³ See <http://www.madcowproductions.co.uk/news/116-hair-today-a-star-tomorrow-shrewsbury-theatre-group-finds-new-actress-in-town-salon.html> (accessed 18 October 2016) and 'It isn't Always Black and White' NODA Factsheet, 4 July 2013, http://www.noda.org.uk/writeable/editor_uploads/files/nodafacts/It%20isn't%20always%20black%20and%20white%20V4%20July%202013.pdf (accessed 18 October 2016).

³⁴ Tim Edensor, D. Leslie, S. Millington, N.M. Rantisi, N. M. (eds.) *Spaces of Vernacular Creativity: Re-thinking the Cultural Economy* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 2.

amateur actor is an 'often risible and endearing figure to a British public', and impersonations of amateurishness by professional artists frequently rehearse the familiar trope that amateurs may try hard, but their work is marked by low production values and a lack of skill. This cultural imaginary of amateurism has appealed to contemporary performance-makers because, in Bailes' words, it 'invites its audience to question the value of theatre that reveals itself as it is'.³⁵ This returns the debate to authenticity and cultural value, particularly where amateurishness is used by twenty-first century professional artists as a political tactic or to suggest an alternative to a commodified culture industry. Writing about the amateur in the visual arts, John Roberts suggests that performing amateurism underlines the artists' professional identity. He argues that 'no contemporary artist can risk *being* an amateur as such', and this means that professional artists who associate themselves with the amateur (or amateurish) are 'only artists performing as amateurs, as a performance of art's exclusions and divisions'.³⁶ Professional performance artists such as Lone Twin, Desperate Optimists, New York City Players, Quarantine and Force Entertainment have all followed this impulse; their use of amateurishness as an aesthetic strategy self-consciously draws attention to the processes of making, or references the unfinished qualities of the improvised, provisional or hand-made art-work.

Theatre's amateur turn is not, however, primarily predicated on impersonations of amateurishness by professional artists as a cultural imaginary of the amateur. Rather, we are suggesting that the amateur turn is characterised by a renewed interest in amateur creativity and in amateur theatre-makers, on the inclusion of non-professional, amateur and community performers in professional productions, and on the increased visibility of community involvement in making theatre with professional artists, sometimes referred to as participatory arts. In her discussion of early twenty-first century theatre, Jen Harvie describes one approach to theatre-making as using 'delegated art practices' in which the unaffected qualities associated with untrained performers bring a particular texture or meta-theatricality to the event. Other professional productions, she suggests, 'celebrate amateurism, doing art for the pleasure of it', and yet she goes on to observe that this entails amateurs accepting that they have 'sufficient expertise' to contribute.³⁷ This suggests that theatre's amateur turn inhabits a paradox. On the one hand when professional artists perform amateurishness their alterity and 'real' expertise is affirmed, and on the other, when 'real' non-professional or amateur performers are included in professional work their affective value rests on the audience's perception of the 'authenticity' that untrained bodies bring to the stage.

³⁵ Sara Jane Bailes, pp. 93-94.

³⁶ John Roberts, p.21.

³⁷ Jen Harvie, *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), p. 36.

Attending to amateurs illuminates the value and values of theatre at their most acute. On the one hand, it begs questions about why amateur theatre-makers have been regarded as risible by the creative classes, and the lack of critical attention to amateur theatre suggests that Bourdieu's insistence that the academy defines inequitable cultural hierarchies and judgments of taste has not been heeded. The relationship between theatre and amateurism is not, therefore, without controversy. Furthermore, at times of economic precarity there is considerable pressure on the inclusion of unpaid, volunteer labour in professional productions and, in the UK at least, there is a risk that professional theatres turn to amateurs to plug significant cuts to their budget. Perhaps the juxtaposition of amateur labour and professional performers on stage makes such inequalities visible. For instance, the production of Alecky Blythe's *Little Revolution* at The Almeida in 2014, controversially engaged a 'community chorus', a 31-strong multi-ethnic group of volunteers from the local vicinity of Islington and Hackney, which Blythe suggested 'helps it to feel more like the authentic city that it is',³⁸ but others criticised the production for unwittingly underlining divisions of labour between the majority white middle-class professional artists who conceived and made the show and the multi-ethnic 'community' volunteers. The question about what constitutes an authenticity, and how 'real people' are framed in performance carries political weight.

In this special issue we bring together research that examines amateurism as a cultural practice and as an aesthetic strategy. The articles by Stacy Wolf, Erin Walcon and Helen Nicholson, both engage directly with how amateur theatre groups operate as communities of interest fostering individual development and close-knit social bonds rooted in shared experiences and sociability. Wolf's article on the invented tradition of the 'bunk show' musical produced and consumed at Jewish girls' summer camps in Maine, USA analyses how the processes of auditioning, rehearsal and performance involved in making amateur theatre function to empower this particular constituency through developing their theatrical skills, self-confidence, sense of achievement and familiarity with theatre spectating that 'supports the formation of positive (upper middle class) Jewish girlhood'. More than this, Wolf explores how the shared experience of making a bunk show and serving as an audience for others is a vital component in encouraging group cooperation and community-building as well as a wider affirmation of camp identity and values. As such, Wolf examines how this participation, alongside other camp activities, contributes to the sedimentation of a range of interconnected class, gender and religious identity markers for these young women.

A concern with amateur theatre's generation of social networks, social relations and the practice of sociability is at the heart of Walcon and Nicholson's article, which is rooted in theoretical concerns

³⁸ Interview with Alecky Blythe in Alecky Blythe, *Little Revolution*, (London: Nick Hern Books, 2014), p. 8.

with everyday creativity and the dynamic interplay between sociability and artistic processes. Based on embedded research with three amateur theatre groups: Philippine Theatre UK (PTUK), which brings together members and non-members of the London-based Filipino population to share and disseminate Filipino cultural narratives; Acting Out, an LGBT group based in Birmingham and TOADS Theatre Company, based in Torquay in south-west England, it investigates how the sociability fostered by amateur theatre is influenced by numerous factors including pressures of time and money and the physical environment, as well as specific personalities and inter-personal dynamics. It draws attention to the multiple relations, interactions and encounters at the heart of amateur theatre making that are at once playful and purposeful, serious and sociable, rooted in the everyday and gloriously distinct from it.

For many, amateur theatre provides an opportunity to learn and practice new skills. In his book *Making*, Ingold explores how people learn by doing and think through making and this process of crafting embodied knowledge is very much in evidence in the collection of short reflective articles on the materialities of amateur theatre curated by Cara Gray and Sarah Penny. Focusing on practical tools, skills and volunteer labour, these pieces illustrate the significance of amateur creativity and hands on activity – painting, building, sewing and mending – that make productions come to life, but also how these processes help to forge amateur theatre communities through the shared endeavour required to keep the back-stage, stage and front-of-house operational and to complete the ‘900 jobs over a season for ten shows’ identified by Robert Gill. Above all, these pieces capture the creative spirit of problem-solving, compromises and making do that defines amateur theatre made within financial constraint but with boundless enthusiasm and goodwill.

Questions around cultural legitimacy and the cultural value of the amateur are at the heart of articles by Taryn Storey and Diego Pellecchia. Storey traces the formulation of the Arts Council of Great Britain’s drama policy from its foundation in 1945, unpicking the implications for amateur theatre. Storey notes the fragmented implementation of the Arts Council’s drama policy, influenced by the financial interests of commercial producers, ultimately disenfranchised amateur theatre practices. The defining rhetoric of standards and risk-taking that emerged in this period marked a gulf between the subsidized and the amateur that still resonates in the contemporary perception of amateur theatre-making. In his article, Pellecchia addresses amateur Noh practices in Japan that encapsulate some of the complexities of assessing cultural value. He notes that, amateur Noh training and performances were briefly promoted by government ministries ‘as part of a process of re-constituting national identity.’ Yet, Noh amateurs today provide the only economic underpinning for, and form a ‘connoisseur’ audience for, both professional and amateur Noh performances. Both Storey and Pellecchia discuss the way in which creativity is framed in relation to amateur cultural practices. As

Storey discovers, the Art's Council rhetoric drew a sharp distinction between amateur entertainment and professional, subsidised 'theatre'. Whilst Pellecchia reflects that Noh practice acts as a mark of cultural distinction for participants, yet paradoxically, the amateur performers are permanent trainees to the professional master practitioner. These two articles help us reflect on the sometime surprising role of amateur creativity in an age of creative industries.

Two articles speak directly to debates about the amateur-as-producer, and amateurism as a contested site of failure. Simon Parry's article illustrates how amateur science in performance constructs a careful counterpoint to the fast-paced knowledge-economy. Drawing on Isabelle Stengers' conception of slow science, Parry argues that the amateur has a performative role to play as an activist in challenging the fast-paced and exclusionary regimes of scientific knowledge. He analyses the work of artist-activists James Leadbitter and Kota Takeuchi to argue for an engaged and embodied approach to knowledge-making, where science is understood slowly, in all its messy and emotional complexity. This position is clearly invoked in his suggestion that 'performing amateur science involves using one's own body as a measure of and metonym for such a state of being'. The amateur body, thus understood, is a site of aesthetic and political complexity, a site of passion in which scientific knowledge is constructed and felt.

The amateur body is of central concern to Sarah Gorman, who turns her attention to Jérôme Bel's *Disabled Theater* and *The Show Must Go On 2015* to raise ethical questions about the representation of 'performing failure' in association with disabled amateur performers. For Gorman, the juxtaposition of amateurism with disabled performers opens debates about the politics of social and material ability. Many audience members, she notes, responded to the performance of *The Show Must Go On* by commenting on its authenticity, a quality that they found emotionally moving. The self-generated, non-professional choreography in both productions invoked a sense that the performers were, Gorman notes, 'being themselves'. Dance critic Lynette Halewood's comment that 'everyman is on stage' prompts Gorman to reflect on the ways in which 'everyman' has been constructed in ableist terms, and how disabled bodies might be considered a 'strategic intervention' in this debate. Attending to the representation of amateurism as a discourse on failure, Gorman suggests that Bel's work with amateur disabled performers has the potential to contest normative constructions of the performing body, and underlines 'the need for isomorphic plurality'.

From different perspectives, many of these articles grapple with how amateurism marks a point of resistance to a commodified culture or knowledge industry, suggesting in different ways that the politics of alterity can contest conventions of realism when amateurism is invoked and respected. Perhaps this issue is testament to the fascination of amateurism for theatre-makers as both an

aesthetic strategy and a political force. Taken together, the articles gathered here suggest that amateur modes of production are politically porous and ambiguous, opening new opportunities for engagement and cultural participation as well as defining the untrained body in ways that can be both repressive and libertarian. In Parry's words, the 'unreality of theatrical processes' illuminate shades of the embodied and ambiguous 'real' as part of the twenty-first century amateur turn.