Re-positioning the field: Performer Training in Regional Theatre and University Partnerships

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ABSTRACT

As HEIs seek to demonstrate clear employability links in their academic programmes, so partnerships with the theatre industry have increasingly become desirable as a key component of the teaching and learning strategy for many theatre and performance related courses. However, for many university programmes these partnerships raise significant questions about the nature and type of training currently offered, its purpose and its future development. This is further complicated by the well documented consequences of a marketized approach to HE (Bunce, Baird, & Jones, 2017; Molesworth, Scullion, & Nixon, 2011; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005) and the perceived lack of value of arts-based courses within the mainstream media.

Focussing on a detailed study of Derby Theatre and University of Derby's *Learning Theatre* model and drawing on Bourdieu's notion of cultural fields, this paper interrogates the shifting dynamic between industry 'professional', academic and student in the training environment and its implications in the changing landscape of university-based performer training.

In a makeshift rehearsal space in a doorless, glass walled room of a regional theatre, a workshop facilitator leads participants through a whoosh! of Peter Pan, the theatre's upcoming Xmas show. The participants are a mix of third year undergraduate Theatre Arts students studying at the theatre, and young people in the local care system who are attending as part of the theatre's Plus One scheme aimed at supporting them through theatre engagement. This is the first of a series of workshops led by both the theatre staff and the students that will culminate in a public pre-show performance on opening night.

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The participants improvise and perform the story, guided by the facilitator as she narrates an ensuing battle between Hook's Pirates and Pan's Lost Boys, the actors on each side coming together only to create the ensemble crocodile that ticks, menacingly. Outside of the room where this takes place a growing group of people begin to gather - some watching the action, others browsing the mix of publicity shots of previous productions that adorn the walls - professional and student work positioned side by side. The performers carry on, focussed on the fantasy. The facilitator shoots an imaginary arrow and Wendy is hit, the group cry together "Ooh Wendy!" as one of the students crumples to the floor, the watching audience now engrossed.

By the time the workshop finishes, around 40 people have assembled as audience, and they begin to take their seats in the circle of chairs that has been set for them in the adjacent bar area chattering and discussing what they have witnessed. Some of them engage the young workshop participants in positive conversation about their activities. This area is the setting for the professional Peter Pan company 'meet and greet' with an open read-through of the script. The 'audience' group comprises the whole professional company including the artistic director of the theatre, professional actors, a group of undergraduate students who are shadowing various members of the team throughout rehearsals and a variety of other members of staff from the theatre and the university teams. As the workshop finishes and the meet and greet begins, one of the young people in care who is at risk of exclusion from education, approaches one of the students and asks how to get work in the theatre.

The student responds encouragingly: "you have to make contacts, be around, talk to people".

The facilitator steps in and says: "It's not about what you know it's about who you know, so stick with us and you'll be great!"

The above description is compiled from observation field notes recorded at Derby Theatre (DT), a case study as part of my PhD research into Regional theatre and university

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partnerships. I am specifically interested in how the intersection of the fields of Higher Education and professional theatre is navigated in these partnerships to align their objectives and negotiate their different senses of purpose. Fields, from the perspective of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu are often considered in a broad and abstract setting such as the fields of politics or education, but Diane Reay indicates that field can also be thought of as 'a particular social setting where class dynamics take place, for example, a classroom or workplace' (Reay, David, & Ball, 2005, p. 27).

Within society, fields consistently interact with other fields with Bourdieu suggesting that the existence and boundaries of a field are determined by its ability to operate autonomously from these outside influences . More recently, Professor of vocational and higher education Anne-Marie Bathmaker argues that the field of HE has become increasingly heteronomous and that the boundaries between it and external fields have become more permeable with the potential for the development of hybrid fields (Bathmaker, 2015). It is these permeable or porous boundaries, where the rules, behaviours, cultures and recognised forms of capital within the two fields seep into and crucially, compete with each other, that is the focus of this paper. As Bourdieu notes, fields are sites of struggle where agents compete and occupy dominant, dominated or homologous positions relative to each other and the agreed 'stakes of the game' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 7). Derek Robbins also highlights the historic struggle between the fields of education and employment, stating:

> Just as in the conflict between the religious and the secular, that between education and employment takes the form of strategic and reciprocal appropriation; the field of employment seeks to appropriate the values of education whilst the field of education seeks to accommodate the field of employment.

> (Robbins, 2006, p. 196)

 By drawing on some of the primary research examples taken from the Derby case study I intend to illustrate how the integration of the two fields creates a site of struggle and can

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change the 'stakes of the game' whereby partnerships between HEIs and theatres in performer training and education can move beyond a transactional partnership towards the transformational.

In the opening observation, the integration and overlapping of the activities around the theatre's performance programme, its community work and the university undergraduate degree is very clear. The students in the description are engaged as part of their curriculum across a variety of assessed modules, immersed in the professional processes of the production and associated activities. The pre-show public performance on opening night included the students and the young people in care and was supplemented with professional set and costume design displays from the show alongside some student designs in response to the same design brief which can be seen on the slide images.

Derby's 'Learning Theatre'

The integration of the activities of the theatre and the university's academic programme are a small part of the wider mission of what DT have called the Learning Theatre – a project launched by the University of Derby (UoD) in 2012. It's central focus puts learning and education at the heart of its professional programme encompassing community and participation work alongside training and artistic development. It is not a *university theatre* as one might understand it, neither situated on campus, nor being built for the university and it continues to run as a National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) regional producing house, subject to commercial market pressures and Arts Council Funding objectives. It does though, have an integrated approach in its relationship with the university theatre courses, beyond the usual educational expectations of an NPO regional theatre due to its significant financial and corporate relationship with the UoD.

Theatre academics and students are sited at the Derby Theatre building with staff sharing office space alongside each other and students being taught there. Academics and

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students are consulted on matters of programming and there is a student/graduate presence on the theatre executive board. Theatre staff mentor students, offer shadowing opportunities and academics sometimes run or contribute to Derby Theatre projects that are aligned with their expertise. In addition, theatre and university staff are continuing to work collaboratively to develop the existing undergraduate provision into a new theatre performance course that formalises these types of working and the underpinning objectives. Inevitably, the integration of the two organisation's activities produces points of tension as well as convergence and it is negotiating these points of tension which allow for a transformational partnership to occur.

Who you know not *what* you know!

The final verbal exchange in my opening description illustrates a key aspect of the Learning Theatre partnership with university and university/industry partnerships in the discipline, the value of social capital. The students recognise the value of social capital in the field of employment and the importance of connections and development of networks with professional 'gatekeepers' in the industry. The response to the young person's question about how to get work in theatre was simply – "You have to make contacts – be around, talk to people". A major benefit of the Learning Theatre is that it has the potential to allow much more access to these networks during training and before graduation. Often, though, the development of such capital takes place informally – 'being around' often means being around outside of lectures, in the evenings and weekends, volunteering or taking part-time jobs at the theatre, engaging in extra-curricular activities, conversing with senior staff. This can then lead to other opportunities where students can develop further knowledge, expertise and the cultural capital required to succeed in the field. During interviews and observations, the students that engage at this level were described by one senior member of theatre staff as the ones that "understand it" (DT staff interview) and there was some frustration expressed that these opportunities are grasped by only "one or two a year". This minority of students enjoy a relatively privileged position to their peers within the

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collaboration. They are held in much higher regard by staff because of their engagement outside of the curriculum. They are seen as driven, hard-working, committed and independent. This is consistent with a desire for students to be responsible for their own learning at undergraduate level.

Those working in HE will undoubtedly be familiar with the experience of only a minority of students taking advantage of opportunities presented outside of the curriculum. However, expectations around extra commitment, placing an increased burden on finances and time, and the importance of 'who you know, not what you know' are reflective of a theatre industry that is currently addressing several issues surrounding working conditions and wider access. It reinforces an assumption that those who 'really want it' are the ones that are likely to succeed without considering the barriers to those engagement opportunities. These tropes are legitimated through reinforcement of this type of behaviour within the field itself. It is an accepted part of the industry practice - what Bourdieu refers to as the 'legitimate principle of legitimation' (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 265). This provides a clear example of cultural attitudes specific to the field of theatre (and wider cultural industries) and that are in opposition to the field of HE, within which students are usually offered more protection by timetabling limits, advised study time and other systems to facilitate student engagement. The significance of other pressures on many students such as work or family commitments, a lack of finance, transport or the confidence to approach theatre staff who are often in positions of power and have discussions with them needs to be considered. As a number of researchers have illustrated, this reliance on individuals who possess the social and cultural capital to take advantage of such opportunities inevitably leads to the exclusion of certain groups in society (Allen, Quinn, Hollingworth, & Rose, 2012; Berger, Wardle, & Zezulkova, 2013; Lee, 2013). Outside of the university programme it has wider implications - if only a few undergraduate students engage in these opportunities, how many of those young people in less privileged positions, such as those in the opening example, are able or likely to? An acknowledgement of these differences within the collaboration offers the

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opportunity to consider appropriate changes to both industry practice and undergraduate training expectations to facilitate wider engagement.

One way that Derby is attempting to address this is to embed engagement with the theatre staff throughout the new curriculum from the first year to graduation and beyond. and to embed this within a flexible but transparent curricular structure. Similarly, aligning student work with theatre initiatives to diversify audience such as the Plus One scheme mentioned in the opening example offers both opportunities and challenges in respect of the university's own widening participation processes and certain exclusionary practices within its programmes.

Training in-between Spaces

The situating of students and academics within the theatre building allows for students to become immersed within a professional theatre environment and staff to become more aware of what is happening within each other's world at any given moment, respond to that, and find potential opportunities for alignment. It is also an attempt to make students feel more at home and familiar within a professional theatre space, to identify themselves as theatre practitioners. As cultural geographer Edward Relph notes:

> To be inside a place is to belong to it and identify with it, and the more profoundly inside you are the stronger is the identity with the place.

> (Relph, 1976, p. 49)

In an attempt to foster that identity and encourage a belonging, there are images of student work on the walls, students have most of their classes in the studio or the rehearsal room and they access the building through the stage door, operating in the midst of theatre calls and professionals going about their business. Inevitably, this provides many challenges for a working theatre spatially and the management of the spaces in the building has to be tightly controlled.

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The data collected from the focus group discussions, observations and interviews with student and graduates indicated that they felt an affinity with the 'backstage' spaces of the theatre (including the studio and rehearsal/dressing rooms) much more strongly than what I term as the front stage, more public spaces and the main auditorium. For example, students' responses explicitly said that they feel 'safer' in the studio downstairs.

> It's a safe place for us [the theatre studio]…we're just used to it…we've learned so much in that space…it's just home really isn't it? It's like we've built a camp downstairs where we're like 'yeah, this is my chair, this is her chair' and then it's like [whispers] 'noo…we're going upstairs'.
>
> (UoD student interview)

This is also re-enforced by the presence of student work in the building. The images of student work are predominantly to be found in the downstairs corridors and the rehearsal room, the backstage areas. Whilst they are studying there, student presence is often not highly noticeable in public areas of the building. This is in direct contrast to a university space where student presence and learning itself is very much 'frontstage' and in the public eye. In focus groups and interviews students indicated that they didn't feel welcome or comfortable working in more public spaces of the theatre, despite a great deal of the professional community work happening in these spaces and a clear mandate for students to utilise these spaces:

> There's an idea in my head that when we are rehearsing in an open space that people are going to come and judge us for rehearsing in the upper foyer, whereas if someone was to come in down here [the rehearsal room] and saw us rehearsing they'd be like [shrugs] 'yeah well'.
>
> (Focus Group 2 discussion)

This can lead to a feeling of continued separation between the university work and the theatre work that sits in contrast to the aim of the integration. As one staff member noted:

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> The theatre students are down in the studio and things are going on up in the auditorium and sometimes it can feel a bit, I don't know, separated in terms of the things that we do, but then when everything comes together, it's amazing.
>
> (DT staff interview)

Within the LT, despite efforts to make it 'home' to the students, the hierarchies of the space often continue to make a clear distinction between the training/learning and the 'professional' output in terms of which activities happen where, as one might expect. However, in the example given at the beginning of this paper, the relinquishing of strict spatial boundaries within the theatre building and its activities allowed for a connection between student work, community work and the main house to occur synchronously. This was a serendipitous moment that had not been planned. It was, as the previous interviewee mentioned 'when everything comes together'. When the boundaries between the two fields overlap in the physical space of the LT to create an 'in-between' space, it prompts a reconsideration of the established delineation of the theatre building. This can encourage moments of connection and integration to occur naturally. Thus, it forces a critical engagement with the spatial hierarchies that exist within such buildings to ask who feels welcome, where? And why? Similarly, it can encourage a more fluid approach to the formal learning spaces of university education to become more public facing and responsive to industry and community.

Mirroring Professional Practice – pedagogy, risks and creativity

Interviews with theatre and university staff in relation to the development of the new degree indicated a strong desire to replicate or 'mirror the professional practice' of the theatre. One academic commented:

> We are looking at creating people who can be independent practitioners…theatre-makers…in terms of how that's feeding into this new degree and how that's different

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> [from the existing programme] we're looking very much at mirroring professional practice as much as we possibly can, right from the first year.
>
> (UoD staff interview)

There was also an increased emphasis on marketability from the outset of their training alongside performance and devising skills.

> 'So if you're going to be a theatre company and you are making theatre, you need to actually really think about the kind of work that theatres are programming. The kind of places you might take your piece to in terms of tour packs or..thinking more like programmers as well as creators.'
>
> (ibid)

The intention was that students would learn how to create work that would be 'programmable' and be familiar with the types of companies and agendas that DT and other venues were looking for, which would then inform the development of their own artistic identity. This aligns with a strong employability agenda for the university and equips students with a valuable knowledge of how the market operates. It also emphasises employability within a narrow frame, based on existing industry practices and processes, potentially assigning significant value in the field to familiar ways of working above an independent or creative approach. One of the key management directives expressed by the chair in the development meeting I observed was that the course should focus on 'creative disruptions and risk-taking'. Mike Molesworth, Richard Scullion and Elizabeth Nixon's (Molesworth et al., 2011) research into student as consumer indicates that students within a marketized HE system are already predominantly risk averse. Where existing and established building-based practices and market focussed approaches dominate training, creativity and risk-taking, potentially, have less value.

The idea of 'mirroring' is a familiar one in theatre, where we are often concerned with mimesis. Professor of Drama and Theatre Education Jonothan Neelands writes about

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theatre as mirror in relation to what he terms the 'naturalistic fallacy' that challenges the idea of realism as a form that is somehow closer to truth. Neelands poses important questions in relation to this concept:

> whose mirror is it? Who holds it up and what is their relationship to the viewer/subject? Does it tell the truth – whose truth? Is it a kind mirror?
>
> (Neelands, 2010, p. 148)

He argues that theatre in fact can only hold up a mirror that presents an 'abominable imitation of humanity, not as lived experience itself' and that the power of theatre is in the gap between what we see reflected and our own experience.

The mirroring or reflection of 'industry practice' in undergraduate theatre training presents us with similar questions around who is holding the mirror and their relationship to the viewer/subject. It establishes a particular form and way of doing things that aligns with an established class and hierarchy. Does the 'mirroring' of professional practices within our educational framework present a version of an 'authentic' process that is closer to the 'truth' of the professional world? Or can it only ever be an 'abominable imitation'? And does it undermine the power of critical and creative approaches to studying theatre and legitimize practices that remain exclusive in nature? The varied abilities present in student cohorts compared to professional companies, the structure of the university timetable and curriculum, the disparity between professional and student budgets, differing institutional objectives within the organisations etc. suggest that a mirroring in this context might only ever be a weak representation of what exists 'professionally'. Closer movement towards a universal 'truth' that accurately reflects an industry 'standard' is perhaps neither achievable nor desirable.

The power of the collaboration in a LT might emerge through a different, but still important dialectic and dialogue between the needs and experiences of undergraduate students in theatre, the local community, university agendas and the established processes of professional regional playhouses. A critical engagement with each other's processes,

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acknowledging the various demands of each field but developing new practice models demands an approach more in keeping with the ensemble:

> The principles of the ensemble require the uncrowning of the power of the director/teacher, a mutual respect amongst the players, a shared commitment to truth, a sense of the intrinsic value of theatre making, a shared absorption in the artistic process of dialogic and social meaning making.

(Neelands, 2010, p. 156)

Conclusion

As universities seek to increase their focus on employability, take up the burden of cultural provision in underfunded local authorities and governments encourage an industrialised approach to the arts, collaborations between HEIs and professional theatres are increasing. Some examples include the University of Bolton's collaboration with the Octagon, Plymouth University's conservatoire programme with Plymouth Theatre Royal and across the water in Ireland earlier this year, University College Cork announced its own Learning Theatre partnership with Cork Opera House. At University of Portsmouth which is funding my PhD study, there is also a keen interest in developing the relationship with the New Theatre Royal and explore how this can enhance delivery on key objectives for both institutions.

Some others that are not connected to specific buildings are still feeling the influence of the intersecting fields. For example, a recent discussion with an academic from Bath Spa university indicated their plans to move from a semesterized approach to a seasonal approach to training to align with the standard theatre calendar. As the boundaries between these two fields in these contexts become more porous there are clear benefits to training such as developing social capital and professional networks, knowledge transfer exchange and exposure to rehearsal room practices that are often difficult to access. There are also clear challenges as I have outlined. A critical engagement with these points of conflict encourages a destabilization of existing hierarchies and, often, exclusionary practices within both fields. As a result of engaging in this way, Derby's LT continues to

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evolve both its theatre practice and its undergraduate programmes. In the context of increasing criticism and questions around the validity of arts-based degrees in disciplines such as theatre and the accessibility of the theatre industry and HE generally, a willingness to engage in this kind of reflective practice is increasingly urgent and necessary. I suggest that a Learning Theatre offers a model for re-positioning theatre industry and HE partnerships as intersecting or hybrid fields which can facilitate a necessary level of critical engagement between partners.

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