‘The Biggest Youth Theatre Festival on the Planet’: National Theatre Youth Connections

Selina Busby

Abstract In this chapter Busby explores Youth Connections which forms part of the UK’s National Theatre’s provision for young people. Connections was first launched in 1993 and since then each year the production team has commissioned ten professional and widely respected playwrights to write a play for 13–19 year-olds. To date it has published over 160 plays and over 50,000 young actors have taken part in the project. This chapter considers this key component of the National Theatre community work in four ways. First, Busby discusses the value of youth theatre. Second she focuses on the logistics of Connections itself. Third is a consideration of the position of Connections both within the National Theatre and the wider cultural agenda in the UK. Fourth the potential of the scheme to contribute to personal and social transformation for the participants is explored.

Keywords Youth theatre · Connections · National theatre · Utopia · Transformation · Access · Cush Jumbo

1 A Year with National Theatre Connections

On the 7th July 2014, as I sat in the auditorium of the National Theatre in London, awaiting the start of a play I tweeted: ‘Amazing to be in a packed Olivier Theatre for youth theatre. Imagine that, youth theatre on the main stage at the National.’ Thinking back to that night now it still amazes me. The auditorium of the Olivier stage at the UK’s National Theatre (NT) seats 890 people. It wasn’t quite a full house, but it was close to it and on stage was a youth theatre production of *Pronoun*, a play written by Evan Placey, commissioned for the National Youth Connections

In 2016 The National Theatre launched a revamped Youth Connections Scheme under the title of ‘The biggest youth Theatre Festival on the Planet’.

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Scheme. The play is about a young female-to-male transgender person and their relationships with friends and family as they begin to transition. It was being performed by a youth theatre from St Austell College in Cornwall, to probably the most diverse audience I have seen in the National Theatre. A lively but respectful audience, it was diverse in age, ethnic backgrounds and class and, looking more like the cross-section of people you would see on the London underground tube trains than you would usually see in the National.

The audience that night made me curious about Connections and how it is placed within the theatre's portfolio and I was also interested in finding out about the journey that the youth theatres undertake when taking part in the scheme. I have relationship with NT Connections as its directors are invited to complete a Post-Graduate Certificate in Applied Theatre with Young People at The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, using their work on the scheme as the basis of an assignment. Each year I attend a number of the regional performances and work with some of the directors at Central for couple of days, but now I wanted to know more. During 2015, I sporadically followed the Connections team and a participating school. In total that year 255 youth theatre companies took part, that is: 5,000 young people, in 684 performances, in 27 partner theatres, in front of 25,000 audience members. It's no wonder that the NT market the event as, 'The biggest youth theatre festival on the planet' and that it remains a 'key component of [the NT's] outreach work' (Deeney 2007 p. 331).

In this chapter I will explore this 'key component' of the NT's outreach work in four ways. First, I will discuss the value of youth theatre. Second, I will focus on the logistics of Connections itself. Third, I will consider the position of Connections both within the National Theatre and the wider cultural agenda in the UK. Fourth, I will explore the potential of the scheme to contribute to personal and social transformation for the participants.

The Connections Scheme was launched in 1993 by Jenny Harris, the former head of the NT Education department, and Suzi Graham-Adriani who was at the time the producer of the youth theatre projects there. Since then, each year[1] the Connections production team has commissioned ten professional writers to write a play for 13–19 year olds. Over the years NT has commissioned and published over 160 plays from established and widely respected writers, including some of Britain's best known playwrights such as Winsome Pinnock, Bryony Lavery, Roy Williams, Mark Ravenhill, Denis Kelly, and, some from overseas such as, David Mamet and Dario Fo. The scheme gives young people, youth theatres and schools the opportunity to produce one of these plays and experience theatre-making in a professional environment. Each of the productions that result from the scheme are staged first in their own venues and, now, transfer to one of the professional partner theatres in their region. One version of each play is then invited to perform at the NT itself. This is youth theatre on a grand scale. There has been little research specifically into NT Connections with the exception of John Deeney's article in 2007 in which he

[1] In 2011 the Connections did not run while the NT production team reviewed and revised the Scheme.

considered the efficacy and ethics of the 'NT's decision in 2006 to stage three professional productions of Connections' plays in repertory at the Cottesloe, the company's studio theatre' and focuses on two plays written by Mark Ravenhill for the scheme, *Totally Over You* (2003) and *Citizenship* (2005) (2007 332). More recently in 2012 Maggie Inchley also considered the professional productions of Connections plays in her article 'Hearing Young Voices on the London Stage: 'Shit Bein' Seventeen Int it? Never Take Us Serious'. Inchely focuses on Enda Walsh's *Chatroom* (2005) as well as *Citizenship* and several other UK plays that have young characters as protagonists. To date, there has been no published evaluation of NT Connection's impact on its participants, despite its self-proclaimed planetary scale.[2]

2 The Value of Youth Theatre

Many of the participating youth theatre companies are attached to schools. Sometimes the Connections production becomes the annual school play. This makes the work produced a hybrid of the school play and youth theatre, both under-researched and neglected entities. Writing in 2012, Sally Mackey comments on the lack of research material on the school play. She suggests this is because of its position both outside the school drama education curriculum, and the professional theatre. This results in the perception of it being, 'theatrically second-rate'. Mackey argues that the NT connection scheme has, 'helped elevate the status of school production work' (Mackey 2012, p. 35). In the US, the status of some school plays, according to theatre critic Jesse Green, seems to have been elevated by the trend 'toward the supersizing of school-based theatre' (Green 2005). Supersizing refers to the neo-professionalising of the event where, 'Beauty and the Beast last fall featured flying teenagers and motorized vehicles and cost $165,000' (Green 2005). Green questions the value of this for the young people involved and laments the lack of control they have in the process. More recently, J Kelly Nestruck, theatre critic for *The Globe* in Toronto, published an eight-part series on the Lakeshore Collegiate Institute's school play in 2015, *Les Miserables* (Nestruck 2015). These specific examples aside, Mackey is correct: the school play is largely absent from both public and academic interest and youth theatre appears to fare little better.

In 2004, Jenny Hughes and Karen Wilson undertook the most extensive research into youth theatre in the UK to date. In their report they comment on the lack of recognition of youth theatre and note that it has, 'attracted little interest from the research world and there is a scarcity of publicly available literature' (Hughes and Wilson 2004, p. 61). In their study Hughes and Wilson describe youth theatre as:

> A broad term used to describe a whole variety of organisations that engage young people in theatre-related activities. It takes place outside of formal education and is founded on the voluntary participation of young people. (Hughes and Wilson 2004, p. 58)

[2] In 2009 The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama commissioned Morrigan Mullen to write an evaluation of the scheme and their partnership with it.

Whilst NT Connections is often school-based it most usually happens both, 'outside of formal education,' and is, 'founded on the voluntary participation,' of the youth. Hughes and Wilson go on to describe a range of activities that fall under this umbrella heading and name four models for youth theatre. The first of these models most accurately describes NT Connections:

> Theatre/arts – the 'reason for being' of this model is to provide access to professional quality drama and theatre processes. Personal and social development outcomes may be a by-product of this work, but the driving force is to create theatre and performance. (Hughes and Wilson 2004, pp. 62)

With Connections, the model is to provide access to high quality theatrical writing, and directing (via the Director's weekend) and professional theatre spaces. In the field of drama education, theatre academic, Anthony Jackson, points out, there has been a, 'tension between the intrinsic value of the arts and the instrumentalist argument that the arts play a socially useful role' (Jackson and Vine 2013, p. 35). Connections is 'theatre as art' but as Hughes and Wilson imply, 'personal and social development outcomes may be a by-product'. Acknowledging that youth theatre is often described as having both personal and social impacts for its participants, they report that many of the young people interviewed:

> …clearly show that they feel the skills and capacities developed within youth theatre transfer to an increased sense of competence in other areas of their lives, in particular, in their ability to successfully interact with peers, teachers, and other adults and the ability to perform comfortably and effectively in a range of unfamiliar and familiar environments. (Hughes and Wilson 2004, p. 63)

NT Connections' participants from a North London School, a week after their regional theatre performance could also articulate the benefits of participation in youth theatre. One said it had given her the opportunity to be 'creative and experience new things', while another said:

> I think it's important because, like in life you're not just going to need maths and English, you need to know how to talk to people and if you have drama you'll be able to practice that, so drama helps people to have the confidence to practice speaking.

A third explained that:

> I think it can lift you up as a person and it makes you stronger, it brings out a different you. If like you are shy person when you are on stage you can release yourself, it brings you out.

Whilst these testimonies, and the study by Hughes and Wilson are testaments to the potential value of participating in youth theatre, I am mindful of applied theatre researchers who counsel us to be careful when making grand claims about the instrumental value participating in theatre can have (Balfour 2009; Thompson 2009; Gallagher et al. 2010; Snyder-Young 2013; Gallagher 2014). Kathleen Gallagher and her research team observe that drama performance gives some cause for celebration, but also notes that for some, specifically the teachers/directors there is also a, 'powerful melancholia' (Gallagher et al. 2010, p. 6). I, too, encountered

'melancholia' from the North London students who were disappointed at the size of their professional theatre space and the low audience numbers present for their final performance, they too felt it 'could have been so much better' (2010, p. 5). Here too there was cause for celebration and the young people talked about the positive effects of youth theatre, but this was also tinged with a sadness. In her 2014 book *Why Theatre Matters*, Gallagher cautions that:

> There are many such stories of transformation in the arts and education literature. They do happen. But it is often far more complicated than such neorealist narratives would have us believe. (Gallagher 2014, p. 132)

In 2015 the NT Connections scheme involved 50,000 young people, in a variety of different ways, but it is unlikely that all, or even most, of these participants were changed by this process. Before considering the possible effects of participating in NT Connections I will examine the logistics of the scheme and the aims of its producers.

3 The Logistics of Connections: The Biggest Youth Theatre Festival on the Planet

For the NT, the aims of the scheme are simple and have changed very little since 1993:

- Inspire 13–19 year olds with high-quality new playwriting;
- Give companies the knowledge, skills and confidence to bring the plays to life;
- Involve a wide range of young companies, giving additional support where needed;
- Encourage young people to get involved in all aspects of theatre making.

In an interview for the NT magazine, Rob Watt, the Connections producer from 2009 to 2015 explains that:

> Beginning in 1995, Connections was born out of the idea that theatre for young people is rarely about their own world or experiences… The focus of Connections, then and now, is to give young people across the UK and the globe access to new and innovative writing that is solely for them and about them; giving their view of the world a voice. (National Theatre 2011, p. 11)

As the producer of the scheme, Watt's role is to oversee the logistics of what he describes as, 'our learning department's biggest project.' (Khan 2014). Commissioning writers each year is just the start of a process that then leads to youth theatre directors and drama teachers applying to the scheme in the early summer and discovering if they have been approved to take part by mid-July. By early September, each selects their first, second and third choice of script and the NT team

then assign plays to each director ensuring an even spread of plays for each of the regional partner theatres' own festivals.[3]

In the autumn, all the directors attend a weekend hosted by the NT where each works with the writer of their play and the other directors doing the same script and an NT director. They workshop the play and take part in skills sessions. This weekend is, according to Watt, 'a pivotal moment in the cycle of Connections.' He goes on to say that, 'although it's a huge young person's project, I've got to make sure those directors go away inspired and skilled, as they're creating those shows' (Aloess 2012). His fear is that if this weekend isn't right, 'young people across the country aren't necessarily going to get the full impact of what we aspire for Connections to be' (Aloess 2012).

After the weekend the directors and their cast and crew go into a rehearsal process that spans October–February with performances in their home venue between February and March. The NT sends out a director of their own to watch the performance, meet with the cast and compile a show report, before the partner theatre transfer. The transfer happens between March and May as part of a festival of Connections plays at the partner venue. For Watt this is the 'exciting' part of the process because the young people, 'watch other young people's work – they're all treated as professionals and there is a real festival atmosphere' (Khan 2014).

After this, ten companies are invited to perform at the NT festival in what the NT website describes as, 'an exciting celebration of all the hard work which has taken place throughout the year' (NT 2015). Deeney describes the Connections Scheme as a, 'sustainable venture of some considerable magnitude' (Deeney 2007, p. 331). In his 50-year history of the NT, Daniel Rosenthall discusses this magnitude in both terms of participant numbers and economics when he states that:

> By 2013, more than 50,000 young actors had taken part in Connections in the UK; more than ten times that number had watched the home performances and region showcases, giving the project an immense educational and community impact, which explains why it regularly attracted six-figure support from a title or lead sponsor: British Telecom from 1996 until 1999, Shell from 2003 to 2006; Bank of America from 2007–2009. Hytner and Nick Starr's commitment to Connections is evident in their allocating requisite funds from the central NT budget whenever there has been a shortfall in Connections sponsorship. (Rosenthall 2013, p. 757)

He goes on to state that in 2013, Connections was funded by the NT core budget and a portfolio of individual donors, trusts and foundations. This clearly implies a strong commitment to the scheme even when the NT has to use its core funding, with no additional corporate sponsorship, to ensure that the work continues.

[3] Connections productions have happened outside the UK, in the past youth theatres from Norway, Sweden, Italy, Portugal, the USA and Brazil have directed plays from the Connections season, but they have done so without participating in the scheme fully, sometimes attending the directors weekend, and sometime not, often working to a different time scale and without the regional and national transfers.

4 Connections and the Wider Cultural Agenda in the UK

In her review of the Connections Festival at the NT in 2004, Lyn Gardner asked: 'who does the National Theatre belong to?' Her response to the somewhat rhetorical question is:

> Us, of course. But it doesn't always feel like that. Even with Nick Hytner in charge, the National often feels as if it is for them. But for one week of the year it feels genuinely national and truly ours when young people from schools and youth groups from all over the country take over the Cottesloe.[4] (Gardner 2004)

As director of the NT, Nick Hytner the same year declared that Connections is a, 'model of what theatre should be, and of what I hope the NT will be in years to come' (Rosenthall 2013, p. 754). This celebration of youth theatre in the NT is certainly extraordinary in terms of the more usual NT programming and audiences and although the scheme is to be commended there may be a more pragmatic position for its scheduling.

> As the name suggests, Connections links the National to thousands of young people and their families, who might never have visited the South Bank, and, in the process, generates considerable positive coverage on local radio and television, and especially, in small-circulation newspapers that would seldom, if ever, cover NT productions in London. (Rosenthall 2013, p. 756)

The scheme also gives the NT a presence in 27 partner theatres across the UK endorsing its 'national' position more legitimately perhaps than its regional tours. At the same time Connections is developing the youth who participate as potential audiences for the future. Drawing on Kershaw (1999) Deeney raises questions, 'about how young people are s/cited and utilised within the context and concomitant ideology of a major institution', and observes that Connections, 'judiciously attends to the demands of arts policy-making, particularly around issues of 'access'' (Deeney 2007, p, 333).

Issues of 'access' to cultural events and the value of the arts to both individuals and society are currently under scrutiny in the UK, with several large scale research projects investigating who is taking part in cultural activities and what benefits this might bring. The *Taking Part Survey*, commissioned by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport has been under way since 2005 collecting data on participation in both sport and culture in England. The Cultural Value Project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council has supported over 70 academic projects investigating cultural value, and the Warwick Commission conducted a 12-month inquiry into how Britain can secure greater value from its cultural assets.

The Warwick report (2015) maintains that in Britain in 2014, 'high socio-economic background, university level education attainment and professional occupation are still the most reliable predictors of high levels of participation in a wide range of cultural activities. The wealthiest, better educated and least ethnically diverse 8% of the population forms the most culturally active segment' (2015, p. 32).

[4] Renamed the Dorfman Theatre in 2014.

The *Taking Part Survey* suggests that, 'those with disabilities or from black and minority ethnic backgrounds and those from lower socio-economic groups on lower incomes or with lower education levels are significantly less likely to engage with the arts' (Martin et al. 2010). It also suggests that people who define their ethnic group as white are, 'significantly more likely' to engage with the arts than people from black or minority ethnic groups. The survey claims that 61% defining their ethnic background as white have attended arts events at least three times in the last year, while only 49% of those describing their ethnic background as black or ethnic minority have attended arts events.

The Warwick report also concludes that, 'access to opportunities for creative self-expression is currently socially stratified and restricted for many women, ethnic minorities and disabled people' (2015, p. 7). The panel notes that they are:

> Particularly concerned that publicly funded arts, culture and heritage, supported by tax and lottery revenues, are predominantly accessed by an unnecessarily narrow social, economic, ethnic and educated demographic that is not fully representative of the UK's population. (2014, p. 32)

The NT Connections scheme, albeit in a tiny way, does attempt to address this troubling situation in two ways. First, diversity is a consideration in the selection of writers who are commissioned. Watt states that:

> The diversity of our Connections writers is a huge consideration; we also have a combination of male and female voices… because we are working with young people, we're inspiring and creating role models; we show them videos of our writers to break down that it's not all older white men. (Khan 2014)

Second, by giving 270 schools from across the UK the opportunity to participate in theatre making and then to perform in professional venues, NT Connections is encouraging access to publicly funded culture, reaching a wider demographic of the UK's population than is the norm. It could be argued that these schools could achieve the same results through an annual school play. I would suggest that with especially commissioned plays, access to the writers and professional directors as well as the transfers to regional theatres NT Connections is encouraging access to professionals and professional venues that are beyond the scope of most State school drama departments in the UK. One of the schools participating in 2015, based in the London Borough of Hackney, took part perceisly as a means of addressing these twin concerns. When The Hackney School[5] was inspected by the UK Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills department (Ofsted) in February 2015 it was deemed to be, 'a larger than average sized secondary school with 1,190 students between the ages of 11–18.' (Ofsted 2015). It was awarded a Grade 2, which means it was considered to be a 'good' school. The report highlighted that, 'the well-being of students, including provision for their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, is paramount to their learning' and that:

> A combination of good quality teaching, a broad and innovative curriculum and enhanced activities to accelerate learning leads to students achieving well. Cultural development is

[5] I have changed the name of the school to The Hackney School at their request.

> extensive; students relish opportunities offered to showcase their artistic talents in drama, fashion and design. (Ofsted 2015)

For the drama staff at the school, part of this 'enhanced' curriculum was their participation in the 2015 cycle of the NT Connections scheme.

5 The Local Dynamic

Hackney is currently the second most deprived local authority in England on the Government's Indices of Multiple Deprivation with, 'approximately 36.8% of children affected by poverty' (London Borough of Hackney 2014). Ofsted noted in its school inspection report, that 'a high proportion of students are eligible for the pupil premium' (Ofsted 2015). This is additional government funding provided for students known to be at risk of poverty. The report records that 64.8% of the school body are eligible for free school meals and that the national average for this is 28%.

Ofsted also observes that, 'the vast majority of students are from minority ethnic groups, and the proportion is much higher than the national average', that the 'proportion of students who speak a first language other than English is high' and, that 'the proportion of disabled students and those who have special educational needs is well above the national average' (Ofsted 2015). The community at the school are therefore marked by socio-economic disadvantage, a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds and a higher than average percentage of disabilities and learning difficulties and therefore, according to both the Warwick Commission and the *Taking Part Survey* less likely to take part in cultural activity. The cast and crew of their Connections performance was a statistically average cross-section of the school population.

The play the school picked as their first choice was *The Accordion Shop* by Cush Jumbo. The play's action focuses on a riot that has been orchestrated via social media, with an anonymous text arriving on hundreds of mobile phones during the course of the night. It simply says 'RIOT – THE ROAD – 7 PM TONIGHT' (Jumbo 2015, p. 307). *The Accordion Shop* is written for an ensemble cast of any size. With seven named parts, two of which, Boy and Girl, are played by multiple actors. There is no characterisation marked in the script itself for Boy and Girl, and the director and cast must interpret how many people are present, or who these people are and what their context is. This gives the play an 'open' structure that requires the director and/or cast to be active meaning-makers, breaking down the sense of the lines and distributing them to specific actors. This gives the play a porous or fluid structure. There is a clear, although non-linear, narrative that involves the death of an old lady during the riot, a news reporter, policeman and teacher as well as a Mr. Elody the owner of the accordion shop in the centre of the riot. This school had 12 students playing the parts of Boy and Girl.

Like the other youth theatres in NT Connections, they first performed the play on their home territory and then transferred it to a professional venue, Artsdepot, on the

15th April 2015. My tweet for that night said, 'Congrats to the yrs 7 & 8s [11 and 12 year olds] from Hackney for an excellent performance of their NT Connections play. It was a well-paced, funny, poignant performance'. The programme informed the audience that, 'the students have shown commitment and dedication beyond their years and have been a joy to work with. Their enthusiasm and drive to succeed has been evident throughout and every one of them should be proud of their achievements.' It also stated that, 'Our performers are all from Year 7 and Year 8. Some of them have never performed on stage before, which makes this journey all the more exciting!' (2015, Programme). It is evident that Connections in this case is contributing to the widening of participation and access to the arts, albeit in this case only 17 pupils, and that in this respect it could be classified as successful in its aims.

The school discussed here was not chosen to perform on the stage of the Olivier. After the performance of *The Accordion Shop* that was chosen to showcase this play, the then new director of the NT, Rufus Norris, took to the stage to tell the audience that:

> Connections is the most important work we do, he said, 'It is what we are most proud of.' Having started at the Swan Youth Theatre [Worcester], he went on to say, his experiences there have been the bedrock of his career, teaching him empathy, cooperation, creativity and courage. (Godwin 2015)

Norris is making the claim that youth theatre has the power to positively effect its participants and so is an important strand of the work of the NT. In this statement he is echoing the sentiment of the 2000 Arts Council' s Boyden Report that claimed engaging with youth theatre develops both 'creativity and self-confience' (2000, p. 38). Inchely is skeptical about the engagement of the young people taking part in Connections, making the observation that their 'decision to participate was made for them in conjunction with teachers in the schools that joined the project', she also obverses that 'the project allow[s] a very small group of companies' access to the National Theatre's space' (2012, p. 337–8).

In his seminal text of 1999, *The Radical in Performance,* Baz Kershaw outlines his unease with building-based contemporary theatre arguing that:

> …increasingly theatre has become a social institution from which equality and mutual exchange – the practice of citizenship through common critique, say – is all but banished. Far from showing us the shape of new freedoms, the theatre estate in Britain and elsewhere has transformed itself into disciplinary marketplace devoted to the systematic evacuation or diffusion of disruptive agencies, oppositional voices and radical programmes for progressive social change. (Kershaw 1999, p. 32)

Is Connections therefore a form of theatre as a 'disciplinary market-place' working against social change for its participants? With its widening participation agenda is it a, 'process of audience training' that 'embeds normative social values in the behaviour of its participants?' (Kershaw 1999, p. 31–2). Inchely would seem to agree with Kershaw when she makes that claim that despite Connections 'inclusiveness at the lower levels, the scheme's pyramid structure of selection and privileged encourage an assimilation to an industry which functions at its own most prestigious end according to principles of selection and competitive individualism rather than

equality' (2012, p. 338). Perhaps this is the case, but this may depend on the individual youth theatre's ethos and directorial style; if they operate as an auteur, dictating decisions, Kershaw and Inchley's comments are pertinent. It may, however, be possible for the participants to work as an inclusive ensemble and to feel some ownership over the work, if the rehearsal process is one of collaboration between the director and cast that retains the scope for the mutual exchange and common critique. If this is the case it may, therefore, have more positive value for the young performers and offer them the potential for personal development. For me one of the most remarkable things about Connections is this opportunity for the ten youth theatres from across the UK to perform on the main stage at the National Theatre. Standing on the stage of the Oiliver theatre, surrounded by theatre professionals, in front of an audience of up to 890 people as a young person, from Hackney, or anywhere else in the UK, has, I believe the potential to create personal development. Working on a challenging playtext that focuses on contemporary issues facing young people as part of a democratic ensemble in a dialogical rehersal process may also contribute to the personal development of the cast.

6 Personal and Social Transformation

Joe Kelleher argues in *Theatre & Politics* that, 'theatre remains unpredictable in its effects, given that its effects reside largely not in the theatrical spectacle itself, but in the spectators and what they are capable of making of it' (Kelleher 2009, p. 24). The potential for social and personal change is then unpredictable. What is more dependable is the notion that, 'theatre may be capable of stopping us in our tracks' (Kelleher 2009, p. 42). The moment in *The Accordion Shop* where it is revealed that the Old Lady has been killed by the mob of young people, is one that has the potential to stop both audiences and participants in their tracks. Once 'stopped' participants and audiences are invited to reflect and in these reflective moments the potential for change may be glimpsed. In her book, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre* (2005) Jill Dolan is more optimistic, drawing on the idea of active spectators in order to make the claim that live theatre allows audiences to engage collectively in social discourse and imagine the possible (Dolan 2005, p. 2).

Whilst this seems extremely optimistic, theatre performances can stimulate audience members and actors into questioning their own experiences of the world in which they live. One of the Hackney School students decided to take drama as an examination subject after her Connections experience explaining that, 'after the performances we used to get feedback – like individual feedback and when they give you good feedback that kinda gives you a new confidence and you think maybe I am good at this.' Another has enrolled in a drama club outside of school, and both were thinking about future careers in the arts as a result of their participation in this production. Direct participation in an engaging rehearsal process with directors who facilitate the discovery of a play, rather than directing in the style of an auteur are, I would suggest, more likely to stimulate a questioning of experiences and the world.

This questioning may lead to the imagining of a different way to live, and this in turn makes theatre potentially hopeful or even utopic. In fact, I might even suggest that working on an NT Connections production could form part of a 'pedagogy of utopia' (Busby 2015). I would suggest that this was the case in the Hackney School's rehearsal and performance of *The Accordion Shop.* A pedagogy of utopia uses the drama classroom or rehearsal process to allow participants to see their current situation clearly and realistically and at the same time start to imagine a different future, or at the very least begin to recognise that change is possible.

Paul Ricoeur's definition of utopia is useful here in, he suggests 'the utopia is not only a dream, though, for it is a dream that wants to be realised. The intention of the utopia is to change – to shatter – the present order' (Ricoeur 1986, xxi). The intention of the NT Connections scheme is not to make change happen, but for the director at the Hackney School it is part of a process that invites the young people to think about their world and what their future might be, while at the same time experiencing performing in a professional theatre and think about the arts as a possible career. For this director, and maybe others, NT Connections is a vehicle through which their young people can see the potential to create personal or even social change. For the director of the Hackney school this is possible specifically through the play she chooses, in this case *The Accordian Shop.*

The Accordion Shop is a porous text that leaves much of the directing and decision-making process and the interpretation of events to the director and their cast. I would suggest that working on a text that is open to interpretation can open up the dialogue and mutual exchange that Kershaw believes is missing from the theatre, and that in this process the participants may contemplate the possibility of personal and social change.

The Accordion Shop is rooted in the challenges of actual events, it represents a situation the participants recognised, a riot in their home town. During the rehearsal process, the cast and director played with the various possibilities for staging the play and discussed the issues that it focuses on. During her Skyped interview with all the directors of her text at the NT Director's weekend, Jumbo identified the play's central themes as being about the, 'clash between the old and the new', 'rationalising the recent outbreaks of youth violence', and suggested, 'that we must change the way we think before these things will improve'. She talked a great deal about the, 'hope for young people and the future' at the centre of the play. This 'hope' is not immediately apparent in a play about violence, young people out of control, and the death of a bystander. The hope for the writer is contained in the dead woman's final monologue:

> Becoming invisible is something you get used to as you get older. You begin to watch others instead. Families moving in, families moving out, the area changes, but other things never do. The world we live in might be different but the kids don't change, not really. (Jumbo 2015, p. 328)

Together, the form and content of the play create opportunities for discussion. The structure of the play, by providing interstices and referential frame, allowed the space for the cast to imagine themselves in the same situation as the characters of

the play, to discuss and consider what they would do in a similar situation and think about creating alternatives. This was an aspect of the work that particularly appealed to some of the Hackney young people. One said that, 'I enjoyed that it was realistic because it was something around something that had already happened in Hackney. And it kinda fit into our characters,' while another noted, 'There was a riot in Hackney and this play remade that and we talked about that and what it meant in rehearsals'. In this dialogue the young people considered how events lead to a riot and what could have been done to avert its disastrous consequences. The events of the play seem to be unavoidable as the characters are swept along in a series of actions, in rehearsal the young people discussed how the characters were caught up in the moment and considered how the events could have been avoided. They also discussed moments in their own lives when they had felt powerless to change events.

Ricoeur uses the term 'social imagination', in his *Lectures in Ideology and Utopia* (1986) as he discusses how it is possible to imagine a utopia from within the dominant ideology. He argues that it is the 'social imagination' that makes this possible – this capacity, he states, allows the exploration of what it is to be human to take place while one is caught within an ideology. He expands on this theory by claiming that moments of 'distanciation' can be created from within an ideology that opens a space for critique. Jumbo's play and the rehearsal process at the school went some of the way to creating the circumstances in which a social imagination could be engaged. I suggest that this example of youth theatre provided the conditions in which the participants reflected on the fictional circumstances presented and juxtaposed these with the real circumstances at play beyond the rehearsal room. In this example, theatre invited these young people to think 'beyond' the familiar and begin to imagine alternatives. Peter O'Connor and Michael Anderson have commented on the:

> …growing cynicism and a sense of helplessness invad[ing] youth who see in post-normal times little sense or reason for hope, little belief in personal agency and understanding as the ways ahead appeared to be pre-determined. (O'Connor and Anderson 2015, p.18)

These students were starting to see the potential for different lives by engaging with the themes of the play and performing they could imagine alternatives, both for the characters they played and potential new futures for themselves because of the newly-found confidence the process engendered for them.

7 Conclusion: Making a Difference

NT Connections does not overtly set out to encourage personal or social change; its aims are to develop theatre skills and opportunities for young people. In her study of drama in schools, Gallagher notes that:

> …in ways both overt and subtle, theatre was evoked in the classroom as more than an instrumental set of skills – it was understood (by tacit agreement) as a vehicle for social change. (Gallagher 2014, p. 171)

NT Connections can also be more than 'an instrumental set of skills' and may lead to changes within the participants that go beyond the performances in the festival itself. The young people who performed in *The Accordion Shop* at Artsdepot explored the world and their place in it through the play. Hughes and Wilson acknowledge that this is an important aspect of youth theatre by suggesting that:

> Playing a part in a play can bring young people face to face with personal, moral, political and social issues and dilemmas – helping them refine personal opinions, develop empathy for other people and explore new issues and experiences from a variety of perspectives. (Hughes and Wilson 2004, p. 65)

The Hackney youth also talked about working through issues and problems as a group and referred to an incident when, 'sometimes in the rehearsals you felt like some people were putting in more than others and that was very annoying! So we had a group discussion and that person was confronted'. The resulting discussion allowed them to understand the 'stress' of a production makes people react differently. 'I think people put less effort in because they was nervous… I worry when we get close to the show I am going to forget my lines.' They began to work as a team who supported each other through the difficult patches and both acknowledged and celebrated that they had, 'to put everything in and saw the progress that was being made.' Drama Education researcher Jonothan Neelands observed of his own students that, 'learning how to act together in the drama classroom was also shaping their social actions as a community beyond the drama class and also, possibly, beyond school' (Neelands 2009, p. 181). There is some evidence to suggest that these young people from the Hackney School were doing just that, although a lengthier research process would be needed to see if this group dynamic has the potential for the next school year or in their lives 'beyond school'.

Annually Connections directly engages 5000 young people across the UK in making theatre and performing it in professional venues. Each year it commissions ten new plays from international award winning playwrights. It allows drama teachers and youth theatre directors access to those writers and to professional directors. At the end of the National Theatre's performance of *The Accordion Shop*, Cush Jumbo was invited onto the stage. She proclaimed that, 'Connections is an example that young people love theatre, and the future is in good hands' (Godwin 2015). Connections allows thousands of young people to access quality writing and experience performing. In doing so it contributes to widening participation in theatre in the UK. In addition to this it may have other less tangible benefits to the young people who take part, it may build their confidence and self-esteem. It may invite them to question the world in which they live and it definitely allows them to be part of a process that creates art.

In 2016, the scheme has doubled in size and aims to have 500 youth organisations taking part, and that's exciting for one of the young people at the Hackney School because:

> Drama is important because it doesn't just teach you about acting, drama teaches you about everyday life, it teaches you about emotions and how to deal with them and like how to deal with certain types of people. It teaches you about real things that happen in life.

With 'the even bigger youth theatre festival' planned for 2016, that's potentially 10,000 young people participating in Connections, all 'learning about real things that happen in life' through theatre. And that is something to be celebrated.

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