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The Outsider Comes In: An Overview of the Development of British Outdoor Performance 1972-2002

I have been asked to provide an overview of the development of British Outdoor Performance over the last thirty years. Obviously this is a huge subject so I hope you will forgive the generalisations and lack of detail as I dip and dive between the decades.

Looking back over the last thirty years the growth of outdoor performance has been remarkable. We now have an entirely new 'cultural sector' that did not exist before. It is now much more widespread: walkabouts and shows can be seen at amusement parks and heritage sites, buskers at major tourist centres, there are major festivals in Brighton, Manchester, Stockton and elsewhere which specialise in outdoor performance as part of their summer events, and even through the winter – Bonfire Night, Christmas light switch-ons and even New Years Eve. So that it is now possible to consider a career in outdoor performance, one that did not exist before.

It is now not only established with, for example, vocational training courses in street theatre, but also accepted – some universities now offer academic analysis of street theatre, the Arts Council has recently become much more favourable to the sector and crucially the commercial sector employs walkabouts and acts for corporate events.

Street theatre has also permeated other culture – invisible theatre on television, a street act as part of Cirque e Soleil in the Albert Hall. The employment of so many outdoor performers at the Millennium Dome was an acknowledgement of how much it has entered the mainstream of British Cultural life. The Dome show itself was a product of this sector and whatever one thought about it, it would be impossible to imagine thirty years ago, the investment and central importance given to this area, placing it at the heart of the nation's celebrations.

By contrast thirty years ago almost all outdoor performance was an overt expression of the counter-culture. Idealistic practitioners worked in the face of adverse conditions and a generally hostile media. In 1978 there was demonstration round the corner at Bow Street Magistrates Court supporting a test case which challenged the restrictions on street performance. Tony Allen was testing the limits of verbal obscenity at Hyde Parks Corner. Because the motivation was so evangelistic, performers were prepared to work for much longer with less regard for money than today. At The Faerie Fair, Paddy Fletcher and Incubus set themselves up in a muddy pit and sustained their grotesque goblin world for days. It did not matter quite so much how a performance was received what was important was the action of the artist.

This opposition to the ‘establishment’ was seen either in artistic terms or political terms, often both. Practitioners were often seeking an edge or at least some reality away from the artifice and introverted illusion of the world of indoor theatre: taking art to the people or an idea. There was more of an intellectual justification to the work than today when it is the entertainers who predominate. Unlike now, very few groups specialised in outdoor theatre. Much of the work was done by indoor fringe theatre groups such as Footsbarn, Incubus and Kaboodle, who only occasionally worked outside, who therefore tended to use narrative. Text or at least strong character work. (Patti Bee and Ross Foley are lone survivors of this approach) rather than exploring all the other tools that we now can see are available to the outdoor performer. I can hardly think of anyone currently doing text based narrative outdoors (Kneehigh? Welfare state?) There had been provocateurs since the sixties but they came in to their own with the advent of punk culture – Demolition Decorators, Chris Lynham, etc. Provocateurs have now disappeared from British outdoor performance, seduced into the stand-up circuit. Recently I was advised by an agent to avoid making our new walkabout piece too grotesque or provocative : “ people don’t like it”.

The other major source of early practitioners was the Art School. Tis aspect of outdoor performance has fared better – some of the groups Welfare State, IOU, Forkbeard are still going. Newer groups such as Whalley Range All-stars are going strong. The proliferation of statue acts and image –based walkabout performers thought to large scale spectacles using cranes, fireworks or water demonstrate the popularity of the *visual*. Arguably one of the major shifts in culture over the last thirty years has been the rise of the visual image at the expense of the word as the main means of communication. This may not only be due to the technological advances in electronic reproduction of images but the shift from manual to intellectual demands in the workplace. Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, the sit-and-watch culture has made physical skills more attractive This may partly account for the growth in circus skills on the streets today. Outdoor aerial acts did not appear until the mid-eighties but in the late seventies, apart from musicians, there were only very few street entertainers, even in London. There was the budgie man in Leicester Square and a tap-dancer who entertained cinema queues. This older generation of performers, whose background was fairground or variety disappeared with the advent of the new jugglers such as Tim Bat and Toby Philpot. There were only about *half a dozen* ‘new’ unicyclists then and they would all meet up at the Covent Garden Community Festival. This new breed of entertainers were given a boost in the Jubilee year of 1977, a particularly hot summer, with many a street party enabling a few performers to be in constant demand and to raise their prices. It’s ironic and significant that this year there seems very little extra demand. Which brings me to the significant change over this period – the growth of the profession.

But before that, as a comparison, a brief description of a show that happened at the Brighton Fringe festival in about 1976, one that for various reasons, could not happen today. A solo performance artist was engaged to do an event on a particular afternoon on the beach. He had not been required to provide a description of the show because this was a time when the concept of ‘happenings’ was accepted: too much pre-planning would kill the unique spontaneity of the event; his reputation was what counted. A far as can be gathered he had no idea of what he was going to do and spent most of morning getting thoroughly drunk in a pub. At closing time he staggered out into the Lanes, looking in shop windows and ended up buying a pair of crash cymbals, a snorkel and mask and some fish and chips. He finally arrived at the beach, vaguely near the arranged time and place, where a small crowd watched in mystification as he put on the mask and snorkel, placed the fish and chips on his head, walked fully clothed into the sea until only the snorkel and fish and chips were visible. After a little while seagulls swooped down, landed on his head to eat and , at that moment, he thrust the cymbals into the air, crashed them above his head, sending the unsuspecting seagulls wheeling off in terror.

It would now be inconceivable to get a booking without providing a description and pictures of a show. Videos as a guarantee of quality are almost obligatory. I can think of only one performer, Leo Bassi, who would get booked on his name alone. Generally the product is becoming more important than the performer – the walkabout pieces of the Natural Theatre have been franchised off to independent offshoots in Australia: a local team is instructed to exactly replicate the modes of action of the original.

The Performance art of the sixties and seventies was partly a reaction against the commercialisation of the art market. Artists used the ephemeral nature of performance to avoid creating a commodity that could then be bought and sold. To avoid being a product the performances were often one-off ‘happenings’ . One-off events are very rare nowadays – it is obviously more efficient in terms of time and money to replicate the same product a hundred times than to prepare a different show each time. It only makes sense if a very large crowd is guaranteed and, in this case, artists, bookers and funders are all taking an expensive risk. Of course the risk is greater if, as I’ve said, those involved see their work as a career, and at the level of large-scale events, not a bad career.

Much more attention now is given to production values – the quality, of costumes, punctuality and presentation – quality of the publicity, the web-site. Clearly being overtly drunk during the performance is not an advisable career move. Our Brighton performer would probably also fall foul of regulations dealing with Health and safety, water pollution and wild animals. But the most significant factor is the smallness of his crowd. Over the nineties and especially since the 1997 election, the principle of elitism has been challenged. The dominance of the traditional high arts had been challenged throughout the 20th Century – the fact that opera, ballet and poetry, for example, were not accessible to the working classes became more and more awkward as a fact. The policies of the BBC and the early Arts Council were in favour of educating downwards. This superior attitude was wrong-footed by the emergence of the new artforms, such as Jazz, undeniably of high artistic quality and yet emanating from the lowly social origins of the Blues. Similarly rock music shared the same root and its overwhelming popularity has undermined and even side-lined classical music.

Within this context, the Avant-Garde artist was in an anomalous position. Although knocking against the establishment, both politically and artistically, their work was no more accessible to the general public. However this elitist attitude did not matter because the avant garde could claim to be leading and forming public taste. This theory was accepted until the seventies when the first grumblings of discontent against Modernism, the tower block, began to be heard. However the Performance Artists continued for another decade to enjoy high levels of subsidy relative to their popularity. This debate continues today even though this strain of elusively rebranded itself as Live Art and then Performance.

In general this challenge to elitism has been good for outdoor performance, drawing, as it does, on grassroots appeal for circus, fairground and carnival. However the legacy of the economic downturn and Thatcher’s cultural policies in the eighties have compounded the cultural shift. The amateurism and spontaneity of the seventies fell away as professionalism demanded a commodity that is repeatable and maintains a consistent level of quality. Arts centres struggled, festivals died out, overtly left-wing groups who often used outdoor theatre were culled or severely squeezed and generally economic pressures meant that new performers looked to more lucrative art forms of music, film and TV. We also lost the GLC, a great supporter of neighbourhood events. Footsbarn, British Events and others left Britain for France, where Jacques Lang’s Ministry of Culture was far more supportive. During the eighties the French took over the European leadership of outdoor performance from Britain. In order to survive artists had to become more professional, slimming down their ambitions, increasing efficiency, widening their appeal and targeting their products to particular markets such as the foreign or commercial markets. Natural Theatre, the most commercially successful in Britain, is a good example. The work began to be more consumer-led than artist-led.

However the challenge to elitism, taken to its extreme, meant that the concept of artistic quality itself has been challenged. At a national circus meeting recently one traditionalist thought that art was a conspiracy of the upper classes, another considered it just a con-trick to obtain funding. There is huge confusion over the difference between art and craft. The logical extension of commercial values applied to the arts is that widest appeal equals ‘better’. Therefore, for example, the subtle but highly developed skills from years of experience doing interactive walkabouts may count for less than a bigger and brighter costume. The logical extension of efficiency is that walkabout performers don’t continue longer than their allotted time and that the maximum income is obtained for the minimum effort. Successful formulas are replicated – we see this clearly in the unicycle shows – an almost identical act can be seen across Europe and North America. Similarly walkabouts are beginning to ossify into a predictable pattern even if the costumes are very different. Compared with the seventies, the exteriors of craft, presentation and form are now more important than content or spirit. Originality is still prized and it is good to see British eccentricity still strong in the work of Whalley Range, Avanti Display and IOU but in general it is the visiting foreign companies, particularly those from less market-orientated Europe that present the more challenging work at our major festivals. Perhaps this is a reflection of Britain's position, caught between the subsidising policies of Europe and the more market-orientated mentality of the USA.

So the increased professionalism, while making outdoor performance more presentable. skilful, effective and popular has also fostered a more functional, mechanistic approach. Perhaps this is the inevitable result of a developing profession. Training schools such as Fool Time, set up in 1986, drew on idealism of the seventies, but in teaching people about 'the job' could not help but reduce it, define it, and simplify it in order to deliver it. Students increasingly want instant results. As vocational training it was necessary to teach basic business skills and attitudes. Teachers naturally wanted to cushion students away from the nightmarish scenarios they had encountered in their own experience. But, by making it easier, they did not, or could not, pass on the spirit of enquiry, inventiveness, that had produced the new formats, the new uses of materials. With the new agencies , festivals, professional know-how there is a feeling that we have discovered most of what there is to know about outdoor performance but this attitude will make this area ossify. New subsidies should encourage experimentation, foster artistic anarchy.

In the seventies there was a relative economic prosperity; low unemployment allowed young people the luxury of exploring their creativity with little anxiety about making it pay. The dole was relatively quite high and there was less government pressure to get a job. The Barsham Fairs in East Anglia and their successors were organised by local amateurs (amateurs in the true sense of doing it for the love). These fairs brought the urban avant-garde culture face to face with rural conservatism; there was an edge: Bruce Lacey performing his naked fire ritual in front of farm labourers from East Anglia. At many of these tiny fairs performers would collaborate in a hastily devised one-off joint performance, for its own sake. It was fun, scary, and a great way to learn from each other. Again this is something that would not happen today when performers tend to be more self-contained, and perhaps more suspicious of those they might regard as competitors. They also like to play it safe, avoid risk. Outdoor performers are not regarded as being so unpredictable, even dangerous, as they once were. But it is also harder for them to create such an impact as they used to.

In an urban culture where public areas are more and more saturated with images, logos , amplified music etc, it is harder for street theatre to stand out. Commercial art feeds on and absorbs anything new. Carnival made fun of established values systems and restrictive practices, playfully avoiding any promotion of alternative values except that of hedonistic excess – but it was temporary. Now it is no longer fashionable to promote values of any sort. Carnival has truly been absorbed into mainstream culture – it seems to have won the battle but lost its soul.

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