Report on the Street Theatre Project in Bristol 16-21 Feb 2009

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Context

The project involved five people who had never worked together as group before and were mostly unknown to each other. It was intended as an opportunity to try out ideas, tactics and strategies for a kind of street theatre that can amuse, communicate and challenge the public, using Invisible Theatre tactics as a starting point. It was intended as a forum to develop our own practice of street theatre, through comparison and discussion. We aimed to explore :

1) the line/balance between challenging/provoking the public and either putting them off or allowing them to quickly dismiss or categorise performing actions. Therefore we used actions that are either not obviously 'theatre' at first, or that are images that make people smile and think (like a living Banksy image).

2) incorporating current events and giving 'angle' on them. By 'current events' is meant anything that has already caught the attention of the public, locally, nationally, internationally, in the real world, in the media, in the weather. At the time of the project the big story was the economic downturn and its ramifications, in particular the apologies of the heads of banks and financial regulators as well as the question of whether their bonuses should be paid.

We were interested in theatre that is accessible to the widest possible range of the public and not just for those that are 'in the know'; so we aimed to avoid work that is too 'clever', obscure or within narrow political and cultural perspectives which would have put people off immediately. Even this, in the events, proved a challenge for us.

The project was self-funded with participants each making a contribution to the cost of materials.

Within the six days we tested six new pieces of performance. Three were alongside or over the main road into the centre of Bristol during the rush hours and three were in the main shopping area during the middle of the day. Like many such places, this area is frequented by evangelists, sales people, buskers, homeless, drunks and high-spirited young people so that the majority of the people are slightly on their guard to avoid these unpredictable obstacles to shopping activities. So for street theatre Monday morning would be better than

on Saturday afternoon because it is less of a leisure time and therefore less young people and less likelihood of drunks.

Research questions

1) Is the intention of the participants a serious one, to communicate didactically an ethical viewpoint or is it deconstructionist/relativist by making fun of all? Is there meant to be a single interpretation or is it intended to be open to multi-interpretation? It may be linear, logical in thinking, but not in structure, so therefore is it a model for ethical practice in post-modern context?

2) How to challenge audiences without turning them off, using threat and subversion in appealing, popular, commercial way?

3) In what ways can 'reality' be played with – Temporary hoax, Perpetual hoax or theatre provoking real events?

4) How can transformation occur - through demonstration (of what is possible), empowerment (new thinking, taking action) and community (created through sharing of threat, risk)?

5) Can play take the stress out of risk-taking, both as performer and audience. Is there a connection between unpredictable physical risk taking (adrenalin) and artistic cultural challenge. By doing the first are people empowered to do the second? Or are certain people risk-takers and others not or only risk in certain areas?

Description of pieces

The first three were in the shopping area, the second three were next to the main road into Bristol.

1) We gather at a bus stop as unrelated, inconspicuous individuals. One of us starts whistling a universally familiar tune - *You're just too good to be true, can't take my eyes off of you* . Another individual hums, the others begin to sing along with half-audible words, until we are all singing all the words. We sing as if to ourselves but there are moments of eye contact between us, sharing the pleasure.

The first time we do it, it builds to full-on singing with dancing but this immediately scares people away so subsequently we don't build so high and let it fade naturally. At the end a woman says how nice it had been "it's made my day". We try this a few times but get interrupted by the surprisingly frequent arrival of buses and the loss of our entire audience. So we get on the bus. We spread ourselves throughout the bus. The acoustics are much better and after the doors close there is much less background noise so we can begin with more subtlety. Some performers look out of the window as they begin to sing, others make light, smiley contact with those near them. Girls giggle, some people are a little anxious - are we drunk? Most smile, some hum or even sing along. The song fades away. Some of the performers get off at the next stop. As the bus sets off a passenger begins to sing *Summertime* and performers with other passengers sing or hum along but nobody knows

enough words and it fades away. The performers gradually get off the bus and appear to disperse.

Notes- On the bus people could not walk away and were therefore potentially more threatened. The fact that the song faded away reassured people that the situation was calming, that no harm had been done and left a space for others to fill. The level of participation could be very minimal and invisible. The shared pleasure and activity (trying to remember words of a song) meant that it was easy for strangers to speak to each other.

2) The second piece was more overtly theatrical but left some possibility of being perceived as real.

Three performers dressed as if they worked in a bank. They carried or wore placards which said they were sorry for the banking collapse but still wanted their bonuses. Two appeared to ask for money, the other appeared to be apologetic, performing a humiliating walk of shame. Before working separately, the three posed together outside banks and also outside the disused Bank Of England building, that displayed a *For Sale* sign. The apologetic/penitent banker received comments such as 'So you should be [sorry]" or 'It's OK' , to which the reply would be 'You can say that now but you wait; you haven't seen the worst of it yet'. Other comments were 'Are you a real banker? Which bank do you come from? ' , 'Why are you doing this?' 'What a tosser' , 'What's happened with the banks?' and 'I don't care - I haven't got any money'. Some smiled, realising that it was a'joke', others were curious and perplexed. At least 50% avoided contact. .

On the second outing of this piece two of the performers developed a piece they had done before - approaching people as sales personnel, asking them for money to help the banks pay for the bonuses of the chief executives and offering the 'Eric Daniels Super-Silly Savings Account ' .

This version had mixed responses, from amusement to hostility at being made to feel foolish at being 'taken in' by the realism of the look and manner of the performers.

Notes: In the first few moments of a walkabout a way of relating to individuals becomes naturally obvious - the way they look at you suggests the need to explain, or make contact person to person, despite the mask, a statement that they need to hear to complete the image, or a look. These first few statements are usually the right ones and are the foundations for future embellishment.

3) The most ambitious piece was on the final day. It was sited in Cabot Circus, a new shopping complex that opened triumphantly on the very day that the credit-crunch began to unfold. For its main publicity images it has used circus skills combined with consumer products.

It involved about 20 flash-mob volunteers as well as the installation of two visual images. The volunteers gathered invisibly in the central pit of the shopping centre. At a pre-arranged signal they placed paper bags with eye-holes on their heads on which was drawn a broad smile. They moved in a slow-motion 'happy' dance before, on a second signal, beginning a slow-motion dramatic death. At this moment an inflatable, life-size doll, dressed as a traditional clown carrying shopping bags, was released, suspended by the neck below a

bunch of helium-filled balloons; this floated up to the glass roof. At the same time two banners were attached in the most prominent positions on which were stencilled the same image of the clown, at the bottom of the banners were the words: Buy Now Pay Later. After the 'death' of the flash-mob group, they removed their bags and dispersed. The banners stayed up for an hour or two. The suspended clown was harder to remove and stayed up for two days.

Recorded interview responses to the piece varied:

"It's a protest, I'm not sure what they are trying to say" , "It's about consumerism" ,"some kind of McDonalds protest maybe? "   "It's about spending too much money when we can't afford it", "What's wrong with shopping? We're shopaholics". "I haven't a clue? Someone don't like clowns?" "Don't know what it's about, it's kind of scary" Physical responses varied from curiosity and amusement to avoidance.

Documentation viewable on You Tube - Cabot Circus Flash Mob

4) The first piece by the main road began as a site-visit to a pedestrian bridge during the morning rush hour. At this time the traffic usually moves slowly and has usually been crawling for many miles so the commuters are not focussed on driving but thinking about their day ahead and/or listening to the radio. They may be anxious about the unpredictable obstacles preventing them getting to work on time.

While we were observing the traffic, one or two commuters waved at us and we waved back. Drivers further away could see us waving before we could see them and before long almost everyone was waving, flashing their lights and/or sounding their horns. In the brief seconds of mutual visible contact it was possible to have a simple interaction. The commuters would make a particular sort of gesture/offer, which we would imitate and they would then repeat or develop the gesture. We were surprised by the amount of response and continued happily for 40 minutes, making contact with approximately 2000 people in this time. Pleasure was experienced on both sides.

Notes. The commuters feel safe to interact because of the distance, the brevity, the simplicity and familiarity of the 'game'. The nature of the interaction was proposed by the public not by the performers who simply respond to a need.

5) The following day we returned to develop the piece dressed in the costumes of a civic welcome - suggesting royalty, celebrity, ceremonial guard and politician. We carried coloured balloons and signs which read; *Welcome. Well Done. You've made It. Not yet nine o'clock.* We were interested in the effects of being seen by the same people at the same time and place and whether this would enhance the response. We also wanted to see the effects of theatricalising the action with costumed characters and signs. In the event we had less reaction than the day before but it was unclear whether this was because of either of the two factors mentioned or whether it was because the traffic was flowing more freely and faster. Possibly it was because we lacked the spontaneous exhilaration of the previous day.

Notes: Further tests separating the factors is obviously needed. We later discussed the similarity with hitch-hiking and 'hitch-hikers syndrome' in which a positive, fresh attitude to attracting a lift was more likely to succeed but was hard to sustain or fake. A similar effect

was noticed in the walkabouts; positive responses, however brief, raised positivity in the performer and increased their attractiveness whereas being ignored or avoided increased the performer's sense of isolation, making them less engaging.

6) The third piece beside the main road was during the Friday evening rush hour. It was based on the similarity between the exit from the city at this time and the start of a Formula One car race.

Two performers positioned themselves just beyond the last traffic lights before the motorway, dressed in white overralls, one with a chequered flag and one with a big, chequered sign which read: 'Start'. About 30 metres beyond was a similarly dressed man, enthusiastically displaying a sign which read: 'Life Starts Here'. A further 30 metres away on the same pedestrian footbridge were three performers, dressed as racetrack groupies, waving enthusiastically and displaying the sign 'Thanks For Coming'. This piece received a positive reaction - a smile or a wave - from at least 70% of the car occupants, particularly male drivers, such as those in white vans that had responded with playfully rude gestures to the welcoming piece the day before. Most of the pedestrians who passed us were very curious what we were doing and why. Some appeared to 'understand' it without explanation - "That's brilliant".

Notes: This piece seemed to be the most successful because it was easily recognisable, it built upon the positive feelings that already existed in the spectators and also because it revealed a quality of the normal experience and gave an 'angle' on it - the competitiveness of rush hour. It also might have suggested a wider metaphor of 'getting ahead' and 'the rat race'. It therefore could be read at many levels and was positive and fun.

Responses to research questions

1) Is the intention of the participants a serious one, to communicate didactically an ethical viewpoint or is it deconstructionist/relativist by making fun of all? Is there meant to be a single interpretation or is it intended to be open to multi-interpretation? It may be linear, logical in thinking, but not in structure, so therefore is it a model for ethical practice in post-modern context?

Problem - how to make clear statement without being single message didactic. Or how to have multi-interpretation without being obscure.

Difference between form and content. In order to be effective as communication, the public needs to be able to connect with the subject matter **AND ALSO** the aesthetics/images. If the aesthetics, format of the piece is too far away from their culture references it may be require too much effort for them to engage with. E,g slow-motion dancing with bag on head is too weird for most people whereas racetrack looked like something they knew.

The more open to interpretation the more the public can participate in the construction of meaning, therefore there is more potential for empowerment. They discover for themselves - better as learning process than being told. However if there is serious possibility of complete misinterpretation the event is useless as a transformative experience. The easier it is for

them to interpret the work, the more we are 'preaching to the converted'. If they are left curious they remain engaged and transformation may occur. If they are left indifferent or confounded it cannot. If the actions are easily classifiable (e.g. as a protest or as student pranks) the public are not curious. They do not begin to consider the content.

2) How to challenge audiences without turning them off, using threat and subversion in appealing, popular, commercial way?

With any unusual actions in public places the first questions the public asks are Who is doing it and Why? They are anxious about being unwillingly targeted by performers who have an undisclosed design on them.

When we create community through participation there does not need to be a message, the interaction and feelings it produces are the message.

What is the attitude to public? Is it doing it AT them/To them or WITH them. Can make fun of particular persons or occupations IF the public shares (or can easily begin to share) the same perspective. Bus singing was WITH in the sense that they could join in and suggest other songs. The Racetrack event built on the existing feeling of escape and acceleration. Clown was AT them - anti-shopping to shoppers, a protest. If they get the message they already understand it. Need to avoid creating 'us and them', elitist, pedagogical division. This may reinforce tribalism. Challenge but with care /understanding/empathy. Requires artists to have open attitude to public.

Theatre should always open up a dialogue but within provocateur work the dialogue may happen within the press, blogs, etc

3) How reality is played with – Temporary hoax, Perpetual hoax or theatre provoking real events?

Level of overtness/invisibility : When we are dressed as ourselves the actions are the least classifiable. Signifying that it is 'a performance' through costume, signs etc makes it classifiable - it has been thought out and planned without input from spectators, people think 'they have designs on us'. Whatever those intentions are they are not coming from public. Bus singing & first waving events seemed spontaneous. TSB bankers pissed some people off - annoyance at having been 'taken for a ride'. Appears to be making fun of people who have been trying to help by agreeing to stop and listen.

4) How can transformation occur - through demonstration (of what is possible), empowerment (new thinking, taking action) and community (created through sharing of threat, risk)

Being playful, connecting makes sense of community. This is important at a time when people need to stick together. To get away from the 'Fuck you' mentality. People are already anxious.

Before people can begin to play they need to know it's a game and what the game is. If it is 'Let's pretend ' (…. You are a banker, a race-starter etc) then they can position themselves in relationship to that. If it is 'Let's wave at a stranger' or 'Let's sing a song' they know what

to do. Clown piece was playful for the ensemble but had no invitation to play. Bus was actually more challenging for public because there was less ('excuse')preventing them joining in. Counter-cultural signifiers and values means it is popular with that sub-set but the challenge is to make community with all.

The pubic is not A 'thing' but a huge variety of people - it is very hard to find form and theme that everybody can connect to. Trying to appeal to 'everybody' raises more interesting questions about edges - artists are forced to step outside own cultural parameters. This may be impossible.

5) Can play take the stress out of risk-taking, both as performer and audience. Is there a connection between unpredictable physical risk taking (adrenalin) and artistic cultural challenge. By doing the first are people empowered to do the second? Or are certain people risk-takers and others not or only risk in certain areas?

For public :   In the street any unexpected play causes anxiety because they don't know the rules and haven't first agreed to play. They fear the unpredictable, of being made to look stupid if the game is thrust upon them. This stress may turn into thrill if they have enough confidence in the proposer of the game. "He who must play, cannot play" [Carse]

For performers: There is a thrill of the hidden secret, of the expectations of looks of astonishment. Also the fears of risk of arrest, of offending/alienating people, of causing injury. Risk of problems within the ensemble.

A 'light' (joyful) approach works well - bus stop & waving were useful as ice -breakers. I found engaging with public eased the stress of solo walkabout - it meant I was less isolated, I was not alone in my game.

There is fear of humiliation - kids saying "What a tosser" but they don't say it because whatever it may be it's a brave act; everyone else is trying to look cool or inconspicuous. It is brave to abase yourself - the character situation and the actor situation have the same deliberate lowering of status. This gains some kind of respect. Therefore debasement can raises your status.

Project was out of my control as the others joined it - an appropriate way to explore risk - less controlled , more surprises possible if let it go. Multi -voice not single voice. Non-linear process, diversions into amusing ideas, anecdotes and other activities. I could lead more but this would be less the possibility of surprises.

Learned or confirmed expertise:

Not mixing messages, not being half in costume , not dropping character. If you want to be invisible you must be neutral to start with - no dreads, tattoos, or unusual facial hair.

Important to have an attitude to public. In first few minutes you find what to say - it is usually the right thing.

Must try to think of every snag that could happen (eg. having wrong phone number at vital communication moment) Is the research/preparation thorough enough to see every snag?

<u>Next time</u>

Aim to be more targeted - for mass appeal use humour. How to do this without being formulaic?

Improve communication within group with fixed times for evaluation and planning meetings.

Develop the idea of creating community WITH public and reduce the tendency to do actions AT the public.

Use familiar cultural references in order to connect with public.

Use pedestrian bridge for images from the day's news

Questions to be addressed

Gaining power through measured hurdles of risk,.The balance of adrenalin and stress

Does play de-stress the edginess?

Being incognito/masked - effects of

Do participants want to get idea across or more playful

Limits of personal power - what were limits? How far will one go?

Does physical discipline give sense of power?

What are limits of official power?

What are limits of public acceptability/ challenge?

What are highest stakes?

Creating community with performers and audience - how ? And transformative effects?

Can you get people to take action?

Intro :

Brief personal intros - where live, what type of work done before, what wants to get out of week

Principles - balance of adrenalin and stress, playfulness to distress. Diving boards.

5 areas of fear - pain, personal failure, professional failure, negative effect on others, being out of control,

Risk graph - predictability against dangers/what's at stake. Controls - expertise and psychological & emotional preparation

Testing our limits and audience limits, shifts of level.

1)   What is more important to you - getting across an idea across or making fun?

Why?

2)   Are you known in this city?

Do you prefer to remain incognito doing events in this project?

Why?

3)   What was the most risky performance thing you have done up to now?

<u>Exit Questionaire</u>

1) Did you feel you got ideas across or was it just an attempt to have fun?

Did we challenge the public in some way or simply amuse?   If so, when?

Was it TOO challenging /'difficult' for them?

Did you feel we tested the limits of official power?   If so, how?

2) Do you feel empowered by the week?

Did you feel you had a greater sense of power at specific times during the week?

When?

3) What was the most risky thing you did? Would you have gone further?

Adrenalin moments - never quite enough ?

        OR thrilling, - when?

        OR too stressful- when?

4) Can you put in order the various types of risk with the one that has been the biggest issue for you with the highest number between 1 and 6?

………..   Pain/physical discomfort

………..   Looking stupid

………..   Appearing to be a failure and losing (professional/personal) status

………..   Seeming rude and uncaring

………..   Having actions misconstrued

………..   Being out of control / going into the unknown