

The inclusive aesthetic: inclusion is not just good for our health, it is good for our art

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Inclusive theatre will be unlike other community theatre or professional theatre just as an inclusive society will be different from the one that we currently share.¹

By exploring our individual praxis as practitioners within community cultural development, we are asking where we locate our practice in connection to the theory and ideas surrounding our work. Asking the primary questions of 'what do you do?' and 'why do you do this?' raises many concerns about where I locate myself between what I feel are the often conflicting spheres of the performing arts, community and education. As a theatre maker, teacher and CCD practitioner I try to balance these roles, negotiating these various identities. I try to unite these through collaborations in the hope of finding new ways of developing, sustaining and understanding my work.

First and foremost I create opportunities for expression and inclusion through the performing arts. How and why do I do this? What motivates me to pursue 'social inclusion'? I am drawn to working in this way for multiple reasons, selfish and selfless. It is immensely satisfying to make people feel included, to give the marginalised a voice and creative outlet. It gives both pleasure to them and pleasure to me; it is reciprocal. In simple terms I want to help create a fairer and richer community by making people feel worthwhile and giving them the pleasure of artistic endeavour.

Yet my desire to pursue inclusivity in the arts extends beyond this; I am drawn to a particular aesthetic, an 'inclusive aesthetic,' one that feels truthful, almost painfully real – an aesthetic that provides a more accurate reflection of the wonderful spectrum of our human existence, not merely a selective or superficial one. Inclusive theatre has the ability to show us who we really are. The role of art – to question, to reflect – is not subverted or

compromised by ‘inclusive theatre’, rather it enhances this ability. Inclusion is not just good for our health – it is good for our art.

Is the ideal of cultural democracy as beneficial to the world of art as it is to the greater community? To embrace our creative selves within the greater artistic community makes for a society with rich, multi-layered artistic appreciation and endeavour; a culture where each member of society has the pleasure and responsibility of taking part in community through art, where we share, celebrate, wonder and strive to make sense of our existence.

Social inclusion aims to provide greater equality and richer citizenship and I have used it within CCD to procure funding and seek justification, yet how does social inclusion relate to my practice of creative collaboration?

Before embarking upon my present CCD practice, the idea of ‘inclusive theatre’ was completely unknown to me. After my experiences with inclusive theatre practice over the last five years, however, I am convinced of not only of its benefit to society, but also its intrinsic aesthetic worth.

My current way of seeing the world came about by accident. It started with a problem of sustainability – by that I mean proper funding. I was given some invaluable advice: in order to get sufficient funds for my inclusive community theatre group the ‘City of Voices’, I needed to prove that what we did was *Art*. There seemed no doubt as to the positive outcomes of the process; however, the product needed to be perceived as culturally and artistically *worthy*. In order to get this cultural kudos, I was further advised to pursue *arts partnerships*. We could elevate our cultural and financial worth through collaboration.

City of Voices

City of Voices is an inclusive theatre company that celebrates diversity and welcomes people of any age, stage, ability, experience or disposition. We have members who are in their eighties, who live with mental illness such as schizophrenia, who have mild physical or mental disabilities, whose first language is not English and so on. The group have been going since 1992 and have established themselves as a top-rate community theatre group who create original and challenging performances for their local community.

It was strangely amusing trying to think of who we could collaborate with: who’d be interested in partnering with octogenarians, schizophrenics, down syndrome, Ukrainian refugees, to name a few, with no cultural or financial cachet to offer in return? Then I had a revelation: I could combine my two jobs. I could get a group of performance studies students from Victoria University, where I teach sessionally, to collaborate with the City of Voices to create an original performance together for the Melbourne Fringe Festival. The idea for an intergenerational, socially inclusive artistic collaboration was born.

The collaborations undertaken by the City of Voices during the last two years were an experiment in how artists and communities address inclusion within a community and cultural context raising the following question: can we engage in inclusive arts practice to celebrate diversity, promote citizenship and build mutual respect whilst creating 'good art'?

The first collaboration, The Reflections Project in 2007, aspired to build a relationship between the students and community theatre group, to give each the opportunity to share their specific and unique experiences as people, performance makers and performers. It aimed to develop a quality theatrical experience that challenged misconceptions and stereotypes surrounding people from all ages and stages, whilst being included into the greater artistic community by performing at a professional venue in the Melbourne Fringe Festival. This project was a wonderful success, in both process and product. It was a positive and life-affirming experience that benefitted both performers and audience. The group and students delighted in this collaboration, relishing the process and revelling in the outcome.

The Triumphs & Tragedies project followed in 2008 with a new, larger group of students culminating in *Of the Spirit, of the Will*, at the Fringe. We survived this project, but did not thrive as we previously had. Second time around, with greater support, funding, and resources, more preparation time and the previous year's experience to build upon – what went wrong? Essentially the students were unable to collaborate.

The 'greater' purpose of these inter-generational collaborations was to work towards an inclusive society, gaining fresh enthusiasm and satisfaction from contributing to the development across all age ranges. The collaboration was about building mutual respect between the performers as well as giving the wider community the opportunity to listen and celebrate the positive contributions made by the performers' efforts and achievements.

Admittedly the first collaboration was slightly biased as I hand-picked half the students. I was able to 'filter' and choose students whom I felt were able to be a part of the 'collective' and who would employ empathy, understanding, compassion. It worked; the collaboration was beautiful and authentic.

The second collaboration involved a larger number of students without any selection process. They were a lovely 'bunch of individuals' but as a collective they did not work. The collaboration was superficial and after the evaluation I felt as though the collaboration had not succeeded. There was an imbalance in the students' ability to detach concern for their creative and social 'self' and fully engage in such a collective collaboration. The majority of the student attitudes were untouched, they felt they had done 'a service' by working with 'these people' and their creativity had been compromised. Was there a generational factor affecting this? The twentieth century has developed an overreaching value of the 'self'; we have become to believe

it is all about who we are as individuals – the ‘me generation’ as described in UK filmmaker Adam Curtis’ documentary, *Century of the Self*. Was there an inability for the students to detach from their ‘self’ to be part of the ‘collective’?

Upon reflection, I became primarily curious about, *what would have happened if we’d got to them earlier?* Is there a need to develop the ability to engage in our creative collective identity within primary and secondary education? Is trying to employ this at a tertiary level for the first time too late?

Inspirational teacher

To go forwards, sometimes you need to go backwards. So I returned to my own experience of high school drama education, which had included an innovative collaborative program designed by Charles Slucki, who ran weekly drama workshops between Year 11 Drama students at Highett High (now Sandringham Secondary College) and the neighbouring Moorabbin West Special School (now Berendale College) since 1977. This collaborative program was inspired by the remarkable English drama educator Dorothy Heathcote, who created groundbreaking programs that extended drama beyond the classroom and the traditional notion of ‘the theatre’ to hospitals, schools for the severely handicapped, prisons for young offenders, youth groups and primary schools in poor areas. Drama became a catalyst, a conduit for giving voice to the individual and the community; students were open to a different type of expression, one phenomenally truthful, powerful and real.

Following Heathcote’s vision of educational drama that also strove to ‘develop social awareness and responsibility’, Charles Slucki implemented a drama program that embedded the inclusive ideal, including touring shows to neighbouring special schools, workshops in Adelaide as part of the annual theatre trip as well as the weekly drama workshops in Year 11. Slucki believed that developing respect for all creative expression was essential to a comprehensive Drama education. This encompassed the students ‘developing an understanding, and hopefully the ability, to relate to people with disabilities ... to understand that all people have a right to a worthwhile and creative existence’.² He felt that ‘by using educational drama, we can develop a student who is sensitive, tolerant of others, imaginative and able to cope with the outside community, and also to be able to utilise (their) leisure hours positively.’ Drama went beyond putting on the annual musical or comedy; it was about making the world a better place, about giving life direction and meaning.

As well as this inspired, inclusive curriculum, the drama program at Highett High held the reputation of providing one of the leading performing arts educations in the state secondary system. School productions were outstanding, fabulous shows, regularly attracting professional casting agents to pluck out the latest talent, and with many graduates following

into arts professions. Was it a coincidence that the school not only excelled in good community building and inclusive practice but that it also achieved extremely high artistic standards in mainstream performance? *Could this inclusive art practice actually contribute to greater creative ability?*

An Arts Council of England Study in 2009, 'Encourage children today to build audiences for tomorrow,' explored the relationship between childhood arts experience and arts engagement patterns in adulthood. The study – based on data from the 'Taking Part' adult survey (2005-06) – resulted from a collaboration between the Arts Council research team and Dr Tak Wing Chan from the Department of Sociology at the University of Oxford. It states:

The analysis confirms that being encouraged to engage in the arts when growing up has a significant impact on the chances of being an active arts consumer as an adult, even when a range of other socio-economic factors have been taken into account. The effect of childhood experience is very strong – almost as strong as the effect of education, one of the strongest predictors of arts engagement.³

Although I take a diversion here into the realm of audience building and appreciation of the arts, could the same principles apply to artistic ability? If we provide positive experiences of inclusion within arts education, could our children develop into better artists?

I had previously seen my various roles as conflicting rather than complementary; my roles as Teacher, Theatre maker and Community Worker were at odds with each other, incompatible. I felt these pulled me in opposing directions and struggled to reconcile these contradictions. So, I sought to juggle and balance the domains of education, performing arts and community cultural development by uniting them through these collaborations in the hope of finding new ways of sustaining, developing and understanding my work.

Suzi Gablik argues that through the act of creative collaborations we can make the 'strange become familiar'; that through the arts we can reconstruct the relationship between the self and the other. Gablik describes this world as a place where 'context becomes an open continuum for interaction, for a process of relating and weaving together – a flow in which there is no critical distance, no theoretical violence, no antagonistic imperative, but rather the reciprocity we find at play in an ecosystem, that is essential to skilful functioning'.⁴ This interaction and relating is central to the work of many CCD arts practitioners, but a cross over into the effect on 'mainstream' arts is already observed in the work of artists such as Liz Lerman.

Lerman suggests that we transcend the idea that we go into communities and do CCD just 'to do them good'. She declares that of course it does them good! However, according to Lerman it also does us good, not only as human beings but also as artists:

Over the years, as I hustled between concert work and community practice, I often felt I was bringing what I had learned from art making in the studio to my endeavours within the community. The equation seemed more weighted toward sharing concepts and ideas from our studio work with the communities we worked with, to their benefit. But in these last few projects, I have come to see how much my work in the community has emboldened me to make more cutting-edge work for the stage. I see that the freedom to work in so many different ways, with so many invested and excited people, has given me nuance and approaches I would never have discovered had I practiced choreography in isolation from community.⁵

In an article in *High Performance* magazine, Lerman asserts that the work she does within the community is as important as her 'art'. She states, 'teaching dance in a nursing home is just as important as performing at the Kennedy Centre'.⁶ Lerman feels that when we engage in CCD as artists, our range of artistic endeavour becomes infinite: 'the cutting edge is enormous. There is this extraordinary spectrum of artistic activity that we can live along'.

Despite the pioneering work of artists who also practice CCD, such as Lerman, Gablik fears that we cannot yet accept an aesthetic that supports this type of inclusive collaborative practice: 'perhaps we are not yet ready to be comfortable with art that embodies such feeling for others, that sculpts and shares the bond between'. However, in examining many of the performing arts practitioners who have shaped the practice of both the avant-garde and mainstream art in the last century, this practice is already embedded in the process of art and art making. In particular, the avant-garde, responsible for pushing the boundaries, navigating the cutting edge, has uncanny parallels with CCD practice.

Avante-garde

Historically the avant-garde has been described as the work done by small groups of artists and intellectuals as they open pathways through new cultural or political terrain for society to follow. Richard Schechner describes what he calls the 'intercultural avant-garde':

Works produced on or across various borders – political, geographical, personal, generic and conceptual – where universal values run against local values and experience ... People from different cultures interacting – some of this is uniting, some of this is conflicting. It is within this conflict where intercultural ruptures, philosophical difficulties, ideological contradictions and the disintegration of national myths lead to avant-garde performance.⁷

Mainstream and avant-garde theatre practitioners from Stanislavski to Boal agree that to be a good actor, to successfully express the gamut of human emotion and experience, an empathetic understanding of the self and the other is required. To become a conduit for the human experience,

therefore, it is highly beneficial to develop our ability to make the 'strange become familiar' and challenge our understanding of the 'other'. The most easily recognisable theatre practitioner to be aligned with CCD practice, Augusto Boal, asserts that 'when "I" is transformed to "us" we discover the discovery. We are able to speak of us, we become the sum of our relations and something more'.⁸

Like Boal, Bertolt Brecht spent his time developing a political theatre which sought social justice. Although often associated with a cold and detached aesthetic, fundamentally he saw the theatre's role as examining the relationships between people:

People have acquired new motives for their actions, science has found new dimensions by which to measure them, it's time for art to find new expressions ... Such is our time, and the theatre must be acquainted with it and go along with it, and work out an entirely new sort of art such as will be capable of influencing modern people. The main subject of the drama must be relationships between one man and another as they exist today and that is what I'm primarily concerned to investigate and find means of expression for.⁹

However, theatre and dance practitioners whose work was not as overtly political in nature as Boal's and Brecht's, those whose work focuses on the creation of 'art for art's sake' can also be connected to the inclusive aesthetic. Theatre practitioner Jerzy Grotowski worked towards a system of theatre which strove to create a 'holy' experience, creating opportunities for the actor and audience to transcend, unite and relate:

Art is the experience which we take upon ourselves when we open ourselves to others, when we confront ourselves with them in order to in order to understand ourselves ... in an elementary and human sense.¹⁰

From his Paris base, theatre practitioner Peter Brook has led his multinational company on a succession of epic journeys around the globe exploring what could be learnt about and through the theatre. These journeys include travelling through West Africa throwing away all the customary props of shared reference, performing stories outdoors on a carpet to audiences who had neither language nor social and cultural conventions in common with the actors, engaging in diverse cross cultural material and improvising sketches for strikers in California. Brook states: 'Theatre is not just a place, not simply a profession, it is a metaphor. It helps to make the process of life more clear'.¹¹ Brook's journeys have been a constant search for deeper ways of discovering the essence of theatre and its role in the development and reflection of our society.

Avant-garde dance practitioners such as Rudolf Laban and Anna Halprin have explored ideas aligned with CCD principals throughout the twentieth century and their innovative legacy still persists. Laban promoted the idea that dance was for everyone and his legacy still reflects this, with numerous

collaborative education programs based in the community. Halprin's work departed from dance into collective, community-based work that sought to heal and unite communities in 'the expressive arts healing movement'. She worked with terminally ill patients and investigated social issues through dance with her Circle of the Earth, a contemporary, community dance ritual confronting real-life issues facing participant communities around the world. Both Laban and Halprin are credited for their commitment and contribution to the Modern Dance Movements that are still alive and flourishing today.

Practitioners such as Brook, Laban, Grotowski and Halprin have been fundamental in developing the cutting-edge, art-based practices of theatre and dance. These are artists who employ collective goals and inclusive aesthetics because they feel it benefits the art. The artist, audience and society benefit from such art, not immediately recognisable as CCD – instead branded as the avant-garde.

As theatre maker, educator and community cultural development practitioner I came to wonder if a collaborative, inclusive aesthetic, recognisable within much avant-garde theory and practice, is essential to mainstream arts practice and curriculum?

Can we justify the inclusive aesthetic for art's sake?

Could the innovative, inclusive drama education I received at high school, where a shared desire to create individuals able to work in a collaborative and collective methodology, to create democratic cultural opportunities and engage in art making, be recognised as both community cultural development and 'Art'?

A 'reciprocal' learning experience involves collaborations where community members and artists learn from each other, re-evaluating their roles within society and the process of art-making. Our collaborations not only benefited the City of Voices by challenging and raising their aesthetic output, they also benefited the students, making them re-examine their view of the *other* and hopefully making them better art-makers in return.

Unfortunately, a prejudice and discrimination emerges when artists overtly seek to create in an inclusive, community setting. When avant-garde dance practitioner Anna Halprin moved into collective, community-based work that sought to heal and unite communities, she was re-labelled as a 'dance therapist'. Halprin, a pioneer of the postmodern dance movement, was culturally demoted when she explicitly chose to work with terminally ill patients or investigate social issues through dance.

This bias is also evident in this extract from a blog entry by a student from one of my collaborations:

The 'Mum' routine ... reminds me of a Year 9 exercise. Having said that, I think that the City of Voices clan do wonderfully and I am especially surprised at Kate's efforts for I had unfortunately stuffed her in the

'minimal responsibility' box because she is a Down Syndrome. I recall Myf commenting that she is a 'strong performer', but I honestly thought that she was just being polite: I now she what she means.¹²

In examining many of the performing arts practitioners who have shaped the practice of both the avant-garde and mainstream art in the last century, a collective, inclusive practice is already embedded in the process of art and art-making. I think we need to revamp our attitude to what art is and what art can be.

When I initially approached the course director of Performance Studies at the university I worked at with the wild proposal to put a group of university students and my community theatre group together I was received with apprehension. After some coercion I was given a studio class to run the program in, but instead of performance studies students, I was given education students majoring in drama. The course director felt that the learning opportunities and artistic direction of my proposal were more aligned with students who were studying to teach rather than be performers or artists. An assumed prejudice emerged: artists would not benefit from this as part of their artistic development. It was thought that the performance studies students wouldn't be interested or learn anything relevant from this experience. They couldn't have been more wrong: the education students stayed away in droves, and after more gentle pressure I was able to recruit some performance studies students who were intrigued and grateful for a change of perspective.

Interestingly, in semester two of 2009, the Victorian College of the Arts Drama Department employed a practitioner from Canada, Clem Martini. The University of Melbourne stated at the time that Martini was an award-winning playwright of social theatre, novelist and Head of Drama at the University of Calgary. Their website goes on to state:

Martini is collaborating with VCA students to develop a series of short dramatic texts and performances from a process of interacting with members of various communities in and around Melbourne, including bushfire survivors, members of the Stolen Generations, single mothers of Ukrainian descent and refugees. The objective is to develop the student's ability to make meaningful connections between their creative work and the society in which they live.¹³

Inclusive aesthetic

I find this inspiring: change is happening, but more needs to take place, major change, *attitudinal* and *institutional* to what art is and can be. An inclusive aesthetic needs to be engaged and recognised. We need *artistic inclusion!* Not just at a tertiary level but from our earliest educational opportunities and cultural experiences. Arlene Goldbard argues that 'curricula of conventional arts programs should include history, theory and practical applications of community cultural development, legitimising the work of community artists as part of the arts'.¹⁴ I want to extend this:

it's also *integral* to the study and practice of *mainstream* art. Social inclusion needs to breed. It needs to expand beyond health and welfare into the arts and education. More intersections and collaborations need to grow between community, art and education.

I aspire to an inclusive aesthetic, one that benefits society and also art. An aesthetic that moves with the times and reflects and examines our relationship with each other and the world in which we live, in pursuit of an inclusive theatre and inclusive society. We need to embrace our creative selves within the greater artistic community to create a society with rich, multi-layered artistic appreciation and endeavour. A culture where each member of society has the pleasure and responsibility of taking part in community through art, where we share, celebrate, wonder and strive to make sense of our existence.

The role of art, to question, to reflect, is not subverted or compromised by an inclusive aesthetic: I have been moved to tears and laughter, been challenged, amazed, seen beauty, truth, the depths of humanity played with and exposed by inclusive theatre. I believe that inclusion is not just good for our health—it is good for our art.

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Endnotes

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