UK people's theatres: performing civic functions in a time of austerity

Article

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UK People's Theatres: Performing Civic Functions in a Time of Austerity

In the United Kingdom, over the last decade 'The British people' have been so frequently invoked in relation to competing political agendas in public discourse that the term has become devoid of secure meaning. In the socially and culturally turbulent period since 2010 the UK has been fractured by the country's withdrawal from the European Union, four general elections in nine years, a divisive strategy of economic austerity that has left the most vulnerable in society acutely exposed to poverty, and more recently the government's failure to sufficiently respond to the coronavirus pandemic. Throughout this period, political upheavals and shifts to right-wing populism have been repeatedly underscored by calls to the will of the British people. Concurrently, the cities of Sheffield, Brighton, and Leeds have seen newly established 'people's theatres', while Camden People's Theatre in London became an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation in 2015, and historic people's theatres in Newcastle and Edinburgh continue to thrive.[1] People's theatres occupy a hybrid position within arts practice that encompasses, both in form and organisational structure, amateur, community, and professional practices. As I go on to outline below, definitions and practices of people's theatres remain fruitfully diverse and diffuse. However, in this article I assert that this contemporary movement of people's theatres in the UK is defined by a set of spatial, economic, and inclusive practices which, contrary to the cynical invocation of 'the people' in recent political discourse, are underpinned by radical modes of collectivity and grassroots civic participation. As such, what does this renewed people's theatre movement mean for understandings of socially committed performance and how might this practice occupy a position of resistance in the current political landscape in the UK? Here, I explore Brighton People's Theatre and Leeds People's Theatre and, given the characteristic practices that I identify as definitive of the people's theatre at the outset of the 21st century, I specifically examine the economic organisation, spatial practices, and programming priorities of these companies.[2] Through attending primarily to the material practices of these two companies I illuminate the broader utility of a people's theatre – a

[1] I would like to thank Jenny Hughes for her generous support in helping me think through some of the ideas around 'the people' presented here. I am also grateful for the thoughtful responses from peer reviewers and editors who have helped shape the discussion in this article.

[2] I explore the particular artistic forms of people's theatre's in England in 'Peopling the Theatre in a Time of Crisis', in *Performing Crisis in Contemporary British Theatre*, ed. by Claire Wallace and Clara Escoda (forthcoming with Bloomsbury).

form historically concerned with working class representation and/or performances of civic unity – in the context of economic austerity and growing inequality. In doing so, I illuminate the ways in which this model of performance making offers pathways to utilise collective action to reclaim discourses of resilience as a radical practice of empowerment within community theatre.

Since the turn of the 21st Century, resilience has been extensively conceptualised in the social sciences and humanities as a mode of neoliberal governmentality characterised by the intensified adaptability of ecological systems to externally imposed – and often unforeseeable – change. Resilience has embedded itself as a prescient concept in scholarship and policy given the increasing attunement to global encounters with environmental disaster and moves to economic securitisation in response to a series of acute financial meltdowns. Alongside this, in the UK and elsewhere there has been a concerted and insidious shift of responsibility for social, cultural, and economic resilience from the state to the individual. As Geographers Iain White and Paul O'Hare note, the term has become synonymous with 'shifting notions of risk and responsibility bounded within a reconstituted governance framework—all of which can engender confidence and potentially facilitate the transfer of costs away from the state to the private sector and communities' (2014, 947). Since the 1970s the UK has experienced an erosion of social security, public service provision, and community support. This erosion has accelerated since 2010, accompanied by a damaging rhetoric that asserts the primacy of the resilient individual, equipped to independently traverse economic and cultural challenges under late capitalism. In his critique of the proliferation of resilience, political economist Mark Neocleous asserts that in the wake of the 2008 economic crash resilience came to 'form the basis of *subjectively* dealing with the uncertainty and instability of contemporary capitalism as well as the insecurity of the national security state' (2013: 5). For scholars and practitioners in community theatre then, it is vital to attend to the ways in which such insidious discourses of resilience are deployed in service to the transfer of risk from the state or corporations to the individual subject. We must urgently reflect on how this might engender an increased pressure on practitioners and the people we engage, consider how such discourses might explicitly or implicitly emerge in our practice, and explore ways in which we can challenge the values neoliberal frameworks of resilience promote.

In this article, I draw on discussions from critical geography and urban politics that rearticulate resilience as a potentially radical practice of collective action and community-led resource building. In particular, I utilise the framework of critical resilience offered by Geoff DeVerteuil and Oleg Golubchikov, which asserts the capacity to conceive and deploy resilience as: a way to sustain alternatives to hegemonic models of living; an agentic rather than passive practice; and a 'precursor to potential transformation' (149). In examining how people's theatres in Leeds and Brighton offer alternative economic and cultural models of practice that cast their members in agentic roles, I assert that people's theatres can participate in a recuperation of resilience that resists the agendas of neoliberal governance.

I examine two companies whose work particularly illuminates the spatial, economic, and ideological potentials of contemporary practices of the people's theatre. Established in 2000, Slung Low are a theatre company based in Leeds, a city in the north of England. They specialise 'in making epic productions in non-theatre spaces, often with large community performance companies at their heart' (Slung Low, n.d.). Having delivered people's theatre projects in Sheffield and Hull, Slung Low established Leeds People's Theatre in the company's hometown in 2019. Brighton People's Theatre, located on England's south coast, was formed in 2015 with the desire to 'make theatre for the people, by the people' (Brighton People's Theatre, n.d.). The company originated from a collaboration with Brighton Unemployed Centre Families Project (BUCFP). Since 2017, the company have been instrumental in co-producing Your Place, later named Our Place, an initiative which supports residents in economically disadvantaged areas to co-commission the programme for Brighton International Festival, which takes place across the city each year. In 2019 Brighton People's Theatre received funding from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation to undertake a project to explore their 'role as a civic theatre for the city' (Alexander, 2019). Engaging with the practice of these two companies, my analysis in this article is anchored by three central foci: 1) the alignment of grassroots solidarity economies with practices and ideologies of the people's theatre; 2) the civic potential of people's theatres to fulfil genuine practices of cultural democracy 3) the disruption of demarcations of cultural space in urban landscapes and the provision of activities that sit outside of the traditional skills focused capitalist marketplace. In illuminating these three areas of focus I argue that the ideologies and organisational practices of these contemporary people's theatres have the capacity to

generate networks of community solidarity and realise practices of resilience as a mode of care and resistance.

People's Theatres and The People

In Europe, people's theatres emerged from socio-political transformation in the early 20th century. This turn to the people in performance happened alongside a desire to democratise theatre content, architectures, and audiences. Subsequently a proliferation of different approaches to *the people* in performance has persisted with practices appealing to this terminology ranging from building and non-building based national theatres to local community projects and interventions in public space. This breadth of practice is tied together through an inclusive remit which threads throughout people's theatres and challenges established boundaries between professional, community and amateur cultural activities. It is not then, that people's theatres adopt a particular set of performance forms or aesthetic modes, rather that they appeal to ideologies and practices of collective representation and community-led cultural provision. David Bradby and John MacCormick identify four categories of people's theatre: 'a substitute for religion'; 'political theatre' such as agit prop or those aligned with specific political parties; 'decentralised theatres' in order to make theatre accessible across regions and in rural areas; and 'community theatre', which regularly includes the audience as makers (1978, 13). Such a categorisation remains productive today; indeed, the work produced by Brighton People's Theatre and Slung Low's Leeds People's Theatre can certainly be understood through the latter three catagories. However, as MacCormick and Bradby have identified, the slippiness of the term means, 'those working towards a people's theatre have never formed a coherent movement or school: hence the difficulty of finding an appropriate term: popular drama, theatre for the people, people's theatre' (1978, 12). Given the porousness of this term, and its fluctuating usage, I am interested in what practices of the people's theatre look like in a contemporary UK landscape. Specifically, drawing on MacCormick and Bradby, I interrogate how decentralised models of community practice might be imagined and realised through the emergence of people's theatres in this period of acute social and economic inequality. Further, I identify how Leeds People's Theatre and Brighton People's Theatre might expand

the remit of people's theatres beyond presenting radical forms of political theatre to encompass the performing of civic functions for under resourced and excluded populations.

Alongside formal hybridity, people's theatres are regularly underpinned by an ideological outlook that aligns with social justice agendas and radical politics, asserting the importance of inclusive access to arts and culture in enacting these principles. Across the globe people's theatres have historically been connected to socialist movements and utilising culture as a vehicle to support the struggle for liberation: The Indian People's Theatre Association was established in 1943 as the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India and in response to violent British colonial rule (Purkayastha, 2011; and Bhatia, 2004); similarly, the People's Theatre Network of the Philippines emerged in the 1970s 'to build a counter-culture for liberation' (Van Erven, 1987: 133). Further, organisations such as the Amani People's Theatre based in Kenya and working across the East Africa region, focus on conflict transformation, to expand public 'understanding and caring - all with the conviction that cultural enlightenment and community involvement in fashioning stories of peace, can help lead to a more civil society' (Amani People's Theatre, n.d.).[3] The international engagement with the form and terminology therefore retains a diffuse notion of the people's theatre as one that seeks to collectively represent and intervene in the politics, socio-economic conditions, and cultural practices of a specific community of people through performance.

As Baz Kershaw has identified, while practices under this banner remain diffuse, people's theatres have been persistently marked by an explicit binary as 'either a broad, class-based politicised theatre or a liberal theatrical embrace of the whole population' (Kershaw, 2004, 350). However, this articulation of the people's theatre as either demarcating performance for a distinct class *or* as performing the cultural unification of a whole population is collapsed by the two companies I examine here. The work of Brighton People's Theatre and Slung Low, demands a reconsideration of this binary between class and collectivity in contemporary practices of people's theatres. Slung Low and Brighton People's Theatre fortify existing cultural resources in economically deprived areas and support citizens to access prominent arts venues and control local programming priorities.

[3] To read more about Amani People's Theatre see: Valentina Baú (2018) 'Participatory Communication, Theatre and Peace: Performance as a Tool for Change at the End of Conflict', *Communicatio*, 44.1, 34-54.

Consequently, my discussion here argues that emerging people's theatres in the UK go beyond established delineations of class representation or calls for cultural unity and instead align with practices of counter-cultural movements. These new people's theatres collaborate with people otherwise marginalised or erased from cultural life; and they seek to establish systems of community resilience through using radical practices of social, economic, and cultural collectivity.

Resisting Gentrification and Creating Solidarity Economies

I first turn to Slung Low's Leeds People's Theatre to explore how the material practices that underpin their community performance work offer ways to repurpose resilience for a civic agenda. Contrary to neoliberal articulations of resilience centred around risk and responsibility, DeVerteuil and Golubchikov's assert that resilience might also encompass 'the 'getting by', protection, care and mutualism that ensure survival in circumstances that disallow changes to the frameworks that dictate survival' (2016, 143). In this section, I illuminate how Leeds People's Theatre manifest, and are marked by, such notions of getting by and mutualism. Such practices are characteristic of contemporary people's theatres and reaffirm the potential of community-led economic, cultural, and social practices of resilience.

In 2010 Slung Low established a base at The Holbeck Underground Ballroom (The HUB) that occupied five railway arches located in the area of Holbeck, South Leeds. A thriving industrial suburb between the 18th and mid 20th centuries, in the 2019 index of multiple deprivation (which captures data on residents' income, employment, education and skills, barriers to housing, health, rates of crime and local environment) Holbeck was ranked in the most deprived 10% nationally and contains wards in the most deprived 1% nationally. Concurrently, Holbeck is one of the most ethnically diverse areas of Leeds, with a higher percentage of people of colour (27.4%) residing in the area compared to the city as a whole (18.9%). Holbeck has also been identified as one of Leeds City Council's 'priority regeneration areas' and significant redevelopment is taking place in the area, with local activists arguing there has been little provision for existing residents. This part of Leeds

then, has a range of diverse and under resourced communities, which Slung Low seek to engage.

In January 2019 Slung Low moved to a new home: The Holbeck, a former Working Men's Club and the oldest remaining Social Club in the UK, established in 1877. Working men's clubs began emerging in the mid-19th century with the rapid growth of industry in urban centres and the subsequent rational recreation movement, which sought to ensure the social control of working-class leisure time by industrialists and religious reformers. The working-classes subsequently took control of these spaces and by the early 20th century clubs were generally run by workers collectives, providing an alternative to profit making pubs, as well as offering access to education or cultural events for working class men and their families. By the 1970s, there were more than 4000 working men's clubs in the UK, with a combined membership of more than two million people, but membership started to dwindle with the decline of industry towards the end of the decade (Hall, 2017). Once central to the communities in which they were located, these clubs have been further impaired by increasingly strict licencing laws and inflating alcohol taxes. By 2012 over 2000 of these clubs had closed. In 2013 The Holbeck itself nearly collapsed due to significant debts, and between 2013-2019 the bar was staffed by volunteers, working for free to try to pay off these debts in order to save the club.

After talks with the membership in late October 2018, Slung Low agreed to clear The Holbeck's debt, financed the return of the building's deeds to the members, and moved into the club as their company base for an initial five-year period. Slung Low have taken over the day-to-day running of the club, whilst maintaining members' rights and facilities, they also ensure all staff working at the club are paid (Morton, 2019). Slung Low were able to finance this investment, in the region of £300,000, due to the financial success of their epic 2017 production *Flood* (commissioned as part of Hull City of Culture) and funds generated through theatre tax relief, a tax break introduced in 2014 that refunds around 16% of expenses incurred in the production of a performance (Lane, 2019; HMRC 2016). Additionally, all employees within the company are contracted on a company wage of £540 a week, a mode of remuneration that attempts to recognise the equitable value of all staff's labour in their projects. This figure is calculated to align with the income of the average UK earner. The combination of this wage model and that *Flood* was itself performed by a mixed

cast of professional performers and 100 volunteer performers from the city of Hull, meant that the theatre tax relief following the production generated a significant amount of income for the company. That this money, which was a product in part of voluntary community performance labour and company wage regulation, was then invested directly into preserving a site that serves its community (albeit one in a different city) offers a model of working that seeks to resist the acute precarity of disenfranchised communities during a period of economic austerity. This approach intends to build networks of grassroots community resilience that provides support for those who are most impacted by an ongoing retraction of social, economic and cultural provision for marginalised communities. As DeVerteuil and Golubchikov note,

> resilience can be a middle ground between victim and vanguard, when social actors cannot alter circumstances but still show agency, self-organization and adeptness in coping and adaptation, particularly in the face of filling gaps from neo-liberal austerity (2016, 147).

Slung Low demonstrate the potential of performance to circulate funds across and within communities as a way to support their self-organisation, sustain their resources and bolster their resilience under austerity. This asserts new ways in which arts practice might serve a socially productive function, both in sustaining its own future and creating provision for those suffering most at the hands of austerity.

Such practices are indicative of a solidarity economy, wherein 'producers, consumers, workers, and citizens act collectively and in solidarity' to create generative spaces, currencies, and value practices for local communities (Utting, 2015, 1). The ideological framework of the people's theatre is a catalyst for such economic modes of collectivity and offers a provocation to consider the wider circulation of money within socially engaged practices. Critical discussions of funding streams in applied performance have been particularly bound up with their relationship to state policy, private funders, and wider cultural agendas. Molly Mullen has offered a vital provocation to scholars and practitioners to undertake and attend to more nuanced analyses of the diverse economies which operate within applied performance. Drawing particularly on feminist economics, Mullen underscores the importance of,

> finding ways to articulate the economies of applied theatre that do not deny the structural forces or material realities of the socio-economic contexts in which

practices take place, but also present viable possibilities for finding the "freedom to act". (2019: 49)

By highlighting one model that solidarity economies offer for community performance, I seek to illuminate the possibilities for artist and communities to find the freedom to act in a financially insecure context of austerity. Conversely, the economies operating around and within Brighton People's Theatre point to a under resourced organisation that is offering extensive provision across its city, collaborating with major funded arts organisations and the local council to expand access to arts practice among Brighton residents. The theatre is run by a core group of four creatives (led by Alexander), who work in freelance capacity elsewhere, and collectively amount to one full time member of staff. Beyond this core structure the organisation commission artists to run specialist workshops for the Brighton community. That Brighton People's Theatre is able to offer such a range of provision, for residents, for the city, and for other arts organisations within it, is indicative of an arts practices emerging in austerity and finding ways to do more with less, an example of DeVerteuil and Golubchikov's 'getting by' as a practice of resilience. We must, as Mullen asserts, find alternative economies for community performance and acknowledge their materially inflected realities; in doing so, I think we can maintain the collective and empowering ideologies that such practices reach for.

Despite Slung Low's significant financial investment in The Holbeck, there were strong held concerns among the Holbeck Membership about the theatre company's management of the club. As club member Eve Tidswell, speaking in the first few weeks of the move, said, 'I think some of the members, and I don't know if they *still* do, but they have this idea that they've been taken over' (Tidswell in Chapman, 2019).[4] This anxiety from the membership is not unfounded given the cultural and economic landscape Slung Low's move sits within. Gentrification, and the role of arts and culture within this process, has been well theorised (see, for example, Harvie, 2011; Huse, 2014). Across different temporal moments and global contexts artists have been identified as agents of initiation in the economic regeneration and social cleansing of working class, or otherwise marginalised, urban areas.

[4] Tidswell was one of the club's members who participated in Brett Chapman's documentary film, *Standing in the Rain,* about Slung Low's move to the Holbeck.

The move, then, of Slung Low into a financially precarious working-class site might easily be read as an early stage of gentrification, of both the club itself and the surrounding area of Holbeck. However, given the co-operative approach of Slung Low with the Holbeck members and direct engagement with the local community I propose it is intentionally resistant to such processes. As Peter Utting asserts, solidarity economies are bound up with 'redistributive justice, so-called deep sustainability, alternatives to capitalism and the debt-based monetary system, as well as participatory democracy and emancipatory politics driven by active citizenship and social movements activism' (2015: 2). So, while Slung Low's relocation to a site of working-class importance might appear to trace the familiar path of gentrifying artistic agents, the company's approach to co-operative organisational practice and deep engagement with the community indicates a different approach. Slung Low's investment in The Holbeck is remarkable in its use of funds generated via artistic practice, it offers a different example of community engagement that is potentially resistant to gentrification, instead fortifying grassroots community resilience through their injection of economic capital and a management of an existing local resource. I propose this economic strategy resonates with the artistic and cultural agenda of the notion of a people's theatre. That is, both seek for a reclamation of the commons and a redistribution of power, both cultural and economic.

Following from the coronavirus outbreak in early 2020, as we enter a period in which a prolonged global recession is likely, wherein the political right will try and ensure the protection of resources for the already wealthy, there is a possibility that already under resourced communities will be further neglected and made to carry the social and economic burden of this crisis. Concurrently, cultural provision in the UK is under attack, with a lack of state support for artists and organisations putting the sector under intense pressure. Now more than ever, solidarity economies will be vital for the continuance of arts practice and its expansion to those who have been previously excluded from cultural and economic life in the UK.

People's Theatres, Cultural Democracy, and Civic Participation

Artistic Director of Brighton People's Theatre, Naomi Alexander describes the company's emergence as an attempt to diversify cultural engagement during a period of economic

austerity: '[d]uring a time of austerity with the cuts hitting the poorest, hardest, why is public subsidy of the arts being used in a way to produce work that primarily attracts white, wealthy, well-educated professionals to the theatre?' (Alexander, 2016). Culture is a site where power relations might be enforced or unsettled, as such it presents a critical site of intervention. Brighton People's Theatre are actively involved in the redistribution of cultural capital across the city of Brighton.

This most clearly manifests in their co-programming Our Place since 2017. Our Place is a programme of music, dance, theatre, puppetry, and spoken word in Hangleton and East Brighton, over two weekends as part of Brighton Festival & Brighton Fringe, the largest annual multi-arts festival in England that has been running in the city since 1967. The Festival primarily takes place in cultural spaces in the centre of Brighton and requires audiences to buy tickets. Our Place, is a strand of the programme introduced in the 2017 festival which relocates this investment and cultural production to marginal sites in the city. It is a partnership between Brighton Festival, Brighton People's Theatre, the Hangleton and Knoll Community Project, and Due East, a Neighbourhood Governance Organisation. A steering group of local residents in each location programme art made by, with and for people living in Hangleton and East Brighton. Over two weekends, the activities and events include professional productions, local artists and community performances, and sharings from workshops which run in the two communities in the lead up to the Our Place events. These workshops are run by resident artists selected for Our Place by the community steering groups and enable a sustained exchange between local participants and the invited artist.

In the UK there has been a revitalisation of cultural democracy, characterised by Arts Council England as 'an approach to arts and culture that actively engages everyone in deciding what counts as culture, where it happens, who makes it, and who experiences it'(2018, 2). Over the last decade this turn to cultural participation has been subject to renewed attention within scholarship, arts institutions, and cultural policy. As Steven Hadley and Eleonore Belfiore caution, these contemporary iterations of and engagements with cultural democracy

> must both reconcile themselves with the nuanced and semi-documented history of cultural democracy and the significant macro-level shifts in economic, technological

> and social fields which have made an imperative of the need to reassess these arguments. (2018, 221)

It is vital to attend to the partial post-war histories of this framing for cultural participation and the accompanying complexities of ongoing debates around the relationship between artistic excellence and radical transformative politics. Further, contemporary practices of cultural democracy must engage with continuing social fragmentation over the UK's exit from the European Union, the global context of the coronavirus pandemic and, at the time of writing, increasing disquiet over the UK government's response to the crisis. In this deeply fractured context the framework of the people's theatre has the potential to be an ideal conduit for practices of cultural democracy that genuinely engage, a wide range of people, but more importantly the people who have been persistently ignored and neglected by cultural institutions, politicians, policy makers in the UK.

Brighton People's Theatre, in cultivating local steering groups to facilitate their programming of Our Place, support the shift of cultural decision making from traditional hierarchies (in this case the curators of Brighton Festival) to grassroots local communities. Alexander noted her frustration at the limitations of Our Place, as it only takes place over two weekends a year. However, the success of the festival in engaging local communities as cultural producers in areas with lower arts participation, has led to Brighton People's Theatre inclusion in Brighton & Hove City Council's Strategic Cultural Framework (Brighton & Hove City Council, 2018). A central strand of this plan is to 'Enable residents (especially those furthest from opportunities) to develop, produce, participate in and benefit from cultural activities' (Ibid). It is noted in a Council report on the framework that the areas with lowest cultural participation are also those areas identified by national metrics as having high levels of social and economic deprivation, occupied by people who face barriers to other life chances. As Brighton People's Theatre have developed strong relationships with residents in Hangleton and East Brighton the Council they will be central to realising this goal and have already begun to work with the existing local steering groups to support their training as cultural producers and commissioners. The practice that Brighton People's Theatre engage in is therefore not only developing performance and offering workshops in arts activities for residents of Brighton, but in cultivating acts of cultural democracy in the city.

As part of their work with Brighton and Hove Council, Brighton People's Theatre undertook a year long community-led piece of research that explored what arts and cultural provision the residents of Hangleton and East Brighton wanted. The Open Up Arts research project was supported by sociologist Carlie Goldsmith and co-designed, developed and delivered by members of the cultural steering group in each area (Brighton People's Theatre, 2020). Community researchers identified the research parameters and then undertook in-depth interviews with other residents in the area. This activity demonstrates the potential of people's theatres to build meaningful relationship with communities and provide appropriate support for individuals to undertake their own substantial research processes to engage their fellow residents in the process of identifying what communities need and desire. One interviewee, Zoe, articulated, 'Human beings have an innate need to be creative, but I think that notion is denied to some people and people growing up in council estates are one of those groups of people'(Brighton People's Theatre: 2020, p. 10). Indeed, Alexander explained how interviewees commonly reported that, 'No one's ever asked me about what I think about the arts and culture and what's important to me and what's going on inside me'. (Alexander, 2020) There is therefore a real need for networked and civically embedded practices of cultural democracy which engage people across communities in designing arts provision which reflects their interests. This integrated approach working alongside councils, communities, academics and other arts organisations is indicative of the networked model required to ensure comprehensive community engagement and agency. This strand of work from Brighton People's Theatre illuminates the layered potential of peoples theatre practice to go far beyond the engagement of community members as participants in a performance and instead casts them as researchers, curators, designers, and producers, facilitating cultural provision within their own communities. In this moment of crisis, with calls for a 'cultural reset' growing, there is an urgent need to listen to communities who have been previously overlooked and collaborate with them to produce the arts practice that reflects, enriches, and represents their lives.

Reimaging Urban Demarcations of Culture and Rejecting the Drive for Individual Resilience

In this final section, I turn to consider how the two people's theatres I explore here reject individualising frameworks of resilience and reimagine demarcations of culture in their urban contexts. Returning to critical geography, Paul Chatterton and Rachael Unsworth examine alternative models for public space which champion civic ownership and participatory engagement. Chatterton and Unsworth advocate for harnessing participatory and inclusive spaces of culture that 'could make a genuine difference to social equality while fostering creative and dissenting interpretations of the ways we live our urban lives' (2004: 362). The spatial practice and Brighton and Leeds People's Theatres align with such an agenda as they work to, respectively, reclaim prominent cultural sites for the people of their city and work in collaboration with communities to fortify existing cultural resources.

It is of note that the relocation of Slung Low to the social club has been repeatedly discussed in the media as the arrival of the arts in The Holbeck. This obscures the existing cultural production of working men's clubs, which has been historically overlooked. Sociologist, Ruth Cherrington has noted that these sites are and were significant not-for-profit cultural venues for working-class communities, regularly hosting performance, cultural courses, and live music. Further, while there is a popular perception of social clubs as merely cheap bars, Social Historian Richard Hall has documented the importance of these sites, particularly from the 1950s onwards, as 'sophisticated leisure venues catering to hundreds of people at a time'. Given Slung Low's intention to serve the people of Leeds and make arts practice accessible, their location in a site that is historically concerned with community cultural production underscores the relationship between their spatial and their artistic practice. Most notably, in 2018, Slung Low began running their pay-what-you-decide Cultural Community College delivering courses in: Blacksmithing, Indian cookery, political ideas, Fire Eating, Plastering, Stargazing, and First Aid; in addition to Choir, Storytelling, and Performance Making workshops. Such provision, though proceeding the company's move to The Holbeck, directly links to the site the Slung Low now occupy. Indeed, Artistic Director of Slung Low, Alan Lane stated in 2018 that the college was inspired by 'those classic 19th-century working men's clubs, the Women's Institute, and models of civic education that have nothing to do with the work force or the impact on GDP.' (Lane, 2018) This reflection unites Slung Low and working men's clubs as underpinned by an aim to provide cultural education to people in a format that sits outside the increasingly acute capitalist drive in arts education to upskill people for the market. Slung Low's provision has been bound up

with the delivery of cultural practices regularly overlooked in contemporary models of arts engagement, but its Community College programme resonates with the history of cultural delivery in the Working Men's Clubs. The relocation of Slung Low to a site so embroiled with working class history, in an area of Leeds that is economically and geographically marginalised, then provides an opportunity to re-assert such spaces as culturally rich.

Basing the company in The Holbeck illuminates the hierarchies of culture which exist within Leeds, where there is substantial investment in cultural organisations serving the centre of the city and delivering what we might understand as established arts practice (opera, theatre, ballet) but less acknowledgement of Holbeck as a cultural space. This underscores what Unsworth has noted in her investigation of cultural trends in the city, that 'despite the economic boom in Leeds and the various efforts to "narrow the gap", the poverty gap between the city centre and the neighbourhoods situated closest to it [is] growing rather than shrinking' (2011, 198). Indeed, Slung Low's relationship to their locality has been explored further by Lourdes Orozco, Ben Walmsley, and David Bell; whose Donut Project examines this gap and the work of venues outside of the perceived culturally productive areas of the city (2018). Orozco, Walmsley, and Bell identified Slung Low's audiences at their previous home, The HUB as being extremely diverse, regularly travelling to Holbeck from across the city but found a lack of engagement 'from residents in the immediate locale' (2018, 24). The company's relocation to The Holbeck Social Club and their subsequent creation of a Leeds People's Theatre offers new spatial and artistic possibilities to engage with their immediate locale and has the potential to redraw lines of cultural participation both across the city (drawing people into Holbeck) and within their immediate community. Returning to Working Men's Clubs, Hall notes, in the 1950s 'Mass entertainment transformed the clubs, but also highlighted their resilience and flexibility in reconciling values of tradition, community and generational folklore, with the materialism and commerciality of the modern leisure economy' (2016, 88). In locating themselves in Holbeck, and specifically in *The* Holbeck, Slung Low invoke community and intervene in the commerciality of the contemporary 'leisure economy'.

This said, Slung Low must also address the complex social history of Working Men's Clubs as civic sites. As Lane notes, 'from Arts Council point of view it's very 'wow look the working class are coming here' and '[The Holbeck] is embedded, and yet for a long time it has been very excluding […]. [This] area is broadly speaking poorer, more unemployed and

employed in less valued work, a large Muslim population, a large West African population; none of whom want to come in here and drink a pint of mild' (Lane, 2019). Working men's clubs have been marked as a historically white, traditionally male space. For much of their existence, many of these clubs denied access to women and enforced tacitly racist membership rules, creating a monocultural space of white masculinity. Further, they emerged out of and thrived within a particular industrial model that relied on the delineation of leisure time in relation to labour structures. Such definitions, emerging from the European period of industrialisation, are insufficient in today's context. Slung Low are aware of the perceived and historical exclusivity of The Holbeck as a site and attuned to current Holbeck residents' diversity in terms of race, nationality, wealth, access to employment, and experiences of the city. The company have therefore programmed a diverse series of performances and events that seek to open an invitation to all residents of Leeds, and Holbeck in particular, into this social space. In one effort to disrupt the potential exclusivity of the site the company have invited all residents to use the upstairs space on a Saturday, thus far this has included: three Majorette troop prize givings, a few birthday parties, several Ghanian funerals, an LGBTQ+ safe space cabaret night, a first holy communion, and functioning as a polling station in the 2019 UK general election. Further, for the first month after they moved to The Holbeck, Slung Low agreed to say yes to every practical request they received from the local community. The company have since continued with this as a foundational principle of their work: 'We say yes to anything unless it's overtly commercial and dull (e.g. night club events we wouldn't allow) but everything else we say yes to' (Lane, 2019). This is not an easy principle to fulfil, and Lane and Joanna Resnick (Slung Low producer) have both spoken about the material and ideological complexities of making and maintaining such a promise to their community (Ibid). This requires an exhausting commitment to fulfilling the needs and desires of the community, a financial investment in making space for requests to be realised, and maintaining a space of genuine openness and compromise to host events and work that 'aren't to our taste nor our world view' (ibid). But this responsiveness is central to the company's praxis, a manifestation of what it actually looks like to undertake a comprehensive and sustained engagement with 'the people' in culture. Slung Low, and their work creating Leeds People's Theatre, positions the residents of Holbeck as co-curators of this cultural space and

reaffirms the site as a community resource to be utilised in whatever way the community wishes.

The spatial practice of Brighton People's Theatre differs from Slung Low, however they similarly traverse the idea of the class and the collective modes of people's theatres. The company do this in two ways: reclaiming Brighton's theatre spaces and opening them up to a broader public; and, through Our Place, re-siting the annual Brighton Festival in areas of the city which are under resourced, have a number of barriers to accessing cultural provision, and sit outside of the established spaces where the festival is programmed. Unlike Slung Low Brighton People's Theatre are not building based, but instead occupy community centres, theatres, and arts spaces around Brighton. This spatial promiscuity enables them to be responsive to the different communities which they serve, but also to locate themselves in sites across the city where there are higher levels of deprivation and lower arts participation. They are an Associate Company of The Brighton Dome, The Attenborough Centre for Creative Arts, and The Theatre Royal Brighton; the three biggest building based arts organisations in their locale. They invite participants into these arts spaces for backstage theatre tours and also run a Playreading Group – which meets monthly on the stage at the Theatre Royal to discuss a play while sharing a pizza. Additionally, Brighton People's Theatre get a number of free tickets for their members to performances at these venues and host theatre clubs to discuss these productions directly after performances. Spatially this is an invite to all residents in Brighton to inhabit these spaces and potentially shift their engagement with them. In the context of coronavirus, the strategies of the people's theatre underscore the civic potential of cultural buildings as sites for local communities to take up space in and feel ownership over. How might such sites be revised in service to community need in a period where theatres are required to remain dark and, beyond social distancing restrictions, how might cultural buildings invite inclusive engagement in programming their spaces?

As Alexander notes, 'There's something very freeing about this idea of a people's theatre and going 'do you have a Brighton postcode? Yes. Are you a human being? Yes. You're in. That's very liberating' (Alexander, 2019). This broad conceptualisation of 'the people' underscores the framework of a people's theatre as a catalyst for inclusion, whilst also being an invitation to gather collectively and create inherently political performance.

Brighton People's Theatre is clearly keen to maintain the identity of the company as a theatre for the city. However, Alexander notes that they primarily target those living in under resourced areas and social housing residents. The company's emergence in 2015 was a response to the failure of the arts sector in the UK to address genuinely diverse audiences; in 2019, 60-70% of people attending events in the Brighton People's Theatre programme have been residents in social housing (Alexander, 2019). This raises important questions around how artists articulate and label their practice and how that informs participants engagement. A people's theatre makes an open and inclusive offer. This invitation is distinct from other forms of community practice which might require people to identify under the banner of a particular identity marker (e.g. prisoner, refugee, elder). While these targeted practices have benefits, primarily the emergence of specific creative forms that directly attend to aspects of participants lived experiences, the naming of creative work under particular identity markers can limited the stories you invite people to tell. People's theatres do not label themselves as for people in economically under resourced areas, or those who are otherwise excluded, but such theatres do actively address them in their desire to redistribute cultural activity and facilitate power sharing around community resources.

Brighton People's Theatre 2019 programme included a series of creative workshops with professional artists. For example, they programmed storytelling with Suhayla El Bushra, Directing with Emily Lim, and Sound and Composition with Sam Halmarack workshops are on a pay-what-you-decide basis. The strapline for Brighton People's Theatre is 'Come and Play' and this ethos is threaded throughout their practice and their masterclass workshops are centred on providing creative opportunities for all residents of Brighton to creatively explore and play as a collective. While the Cultural Community College at Slung Low might take a broader approach (one that includes cooking, stargazing, and plastering alongside performance workshops), Brighton People's Theatre's positioning of creative play offers a similar a disruption of individualised conceptualisations of social and economic resilience. This invitation *to play* engages people in activities that refuse to upskill or prepare them for the market and instead seeks to illuminate the value of skill sharing and collective imagination. This resists any reiteration of instrumentalised publicly funded arts projects, which have been utilised by a political sphere that deploys notions of 'resilience' and 'community' as behavioural correctives to regulate citizens or establish hierarchies. Rather,

the concurrent focus of Brighton People's Theatre on making space for people's artistic experimentation by providing opportunities to 'collaborate creatively', aligns with foundational ideologies that have historically underpinned community arts practices. The resurgence of the people's theatre movement in the UK appeals to a re-politicising of access and power in culture; not in terms of diversity and inclusion policies but as an ongoing daily invitation to, and collaboration with, the communities who surround them. Speaking about a workshop in June 2019, Alexander said: 'People have said to us 'the penny's dropped. That what you are really about is releasing everyone's creativity and I have a right to come here and I have a right to be creative' (Alexander, 2019). As Alexander articulates, it's not simply making an offer to join: 'People definitely need more than permission to get involved. People need permission and a very direct invitation and loads of reassurance' (Ibid). This points to a significant amount of work that needs to be done to unpick the boundaries that have siloed arts practice as for a *specific* people.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the work of Brighton People's Theatre and Slung Low's Leeds People's Theatre illuminates how contemporary people's theatres, as well as producing performance work that is socially motivated and politically addressed, are variously functioning as cultural colleges, social clubs, civic arts commissioners and neighbourhood facilitators. The new people's theatres in the UK offer models of cultural democracy, agency, self-organization, and collective action that are required to contend with the challenges presented by neoliberal austerity and the rhetoric of individualism promoted by co-opted discourses of resilience. The spatial practices of the people's theatres explored here expose the ways in which performance practices that invoke 'the people' can function to reclaim prominent cultural sites for a broader public and/or work in collaboration with communities to fortify existing cultural resources that might otherwise have been neglected. Further, the breadth of provision and multiplicity of entry points offered by Brighton and Leeds respective people's theatres, collapses the established distinction of class-based or depoliticised collective people's theatres, to instead assert the rights of all to be creative whilst also attending to the unequal distribution of access to culture. Contemporary people's theatres offer frameworks for collective action and community resource building that challenge the boundaries of what we understand as performance practices and contest a logic of

resilience that maintains the neoliberal order through demanding people work harder, upskill, and prepare for precarity.

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