

**The entwinement of politics, arts, culture and commerce in staging social
and political reality to enhance democratic
communication**

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Abstract

This article explores how four British and German theatre companies that originated in the countercultural era continue to survive in an increasingly austere economic climate. Although their survival strategies have been marked by remarkable resilience, this has sometimes affected the quality of engagement with their socio-political enquiries and interventions informed in part by radical approaches to theatre-making that make these companies so distinctive. The article draws on relevant theoretical perspectives and ethnographic fieldwork to argue that whereas some constitutive elements of radical theatre are discernible, these are increasingly being constrained by elitist/political and market forces that threaten to undermine these companies' unique significance as conduits for democratic communication.

Keywords: Dialogic exchange; participatory engagement; aesthetic reflexivity; sociology of cultural production; social critique; political agency; pragmatism

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Introduction

Based on a synthesis of scholarship on radical theatre and perspectives from the sociology of cultural production, this ethnographic enquiry investigated theatre-making informed in part by radical approaches at four British and German case studies.¹ Given the multiple definitions² of radical theatre that emerged from different but interrelated ideological principles, visions and practices originating in the countercultural era (Lewis, 1990; Walsh, 1993), I conceptualise the term in a particular sense throughout; a sense that effectively captures the (overlapping) ways in which the case study companies have understood and applied radical approaches to theatre-making in their work since inception.

According to Cohen-Cruz (1998, p. 5), radical theatre in this sense can sometimes draw on agit-prop “to mobilize people around partisan points of view that have been simplified and theatricalised”, often acts as a “witness [by] publicly illuminating a social [issue]”, and plays a fusing role by blending “a theatrically heightened scenario into people’s everyday lives to provide an emotional experience of what might otherwise remain distant.” Moreover, it creates “utopia [through] the enactment of another vision of social organisation, temporarily replacing life as it is, and often performed with public participation”, and makes use of “common values, beliefs and connections, to address a current concern.” In some instances, such norms may be rooted in Marxist and/or socialist thinking that propagates working outside the confines of elitist/political and capitalist influences (Landry *et al.*, 1985).

¹ These are introduced in the methodology section.

² See Cohen-Cruz (1998, p. 3); Kershaw (1992, p. 139); and Walsh (1993, p. 5-6) on the different conceptualisations of the term.

This conception of radical theatre has been argued to offer “a critical perspective on the present social order [by highlighting] the uglier faces of capitalism and the crimes of the powerful [and in doing so, projects] a view from below [that gives voice to] the lived experience of domination.” (Murdoch, 1980, pp. 152-153). To Cohen-Cruz (1998, p. 6), it is seen to “disturb the peace” by crafting “visions of what society might be, and arguments against what it is.” Walsh observes that this radical approach to theatre-making challenges “the web of formative dualisms that conventionally preside over the creation, production and reception of [culture]” (1993, p. 6), with a view to “interven[ing] at least aesthetically, often socially, and sometimes politically” (Kershaw, 1992, p. 145). Kershaw (1999, p. 20) lists four features characteristic of this mode of theatre-making – three of which are most relevant for my purposes in this article: “dialogic exchange, participatory engagement, [...] and aesthetic reflexivity”.

The ideas of “disturbing the peace” and “intervening aesthetically” entail artistic values which have many dimensions that make them rather difficult to define since “everyone will have their own response to [artistic] work [and will] make different judgements of [such work] (Matarasso, 2000, p. 53). Nonetheless, artistic values in the context of radical theatre as conceptualised above are understood to be “about coming up with ideas, [...] about telling stories and doing it in a way that makes people listen or want to listen’ (Shaw, 2001, p. 52). To DiMaggio (n.d, p. 41), they are about “craft skill, daring or disturbing content, innovative production technique, virtuoso performances” while Parker and Sefton-Green view such values as facilitating “the ability to question, make connections, innovate, problem-solve, communicate, collaborate and [...] reflect critically” (*cf.* Oakley, 2009, p. 4). But with the ever-changing socio-political and socio-economic conditions of the twenty-first century, how does this conceptualisation of radical theatre fit in the current landscape of cultural production characterised by a “commercial culture governed by the free market and the

subsidized culture governed by an elitist aesthetic” (Lewis, 1990, p. 110) of which the pioneering case study companies are a part?

To put this in context, Kershaw (1999, p. 13) argues that social organisation (and by extension cultural production) in modern capitalist societies is centred on the market meaning that “the ‘performance’ of companies [...] may be measured primarily in [...] economic or industrial or civil [terms],” something that generates ambivalences, paradoxes and tensions resulting from “the conformity forced on cultural production by capitalist consumerism [and elitist/political demands]” (Kershaw, 1999, p. 16). I find it fruitful to draw on the sociology of cultural production to illuminate further how this phenomenon has proved problematic, and as such, poses a problem for the realisation of radical theatre as outlined earlier.

Critical sociologists of cultural production have argued that the sphere of cultural production in modern capitalist societies favours the making and marketization of cultural products that tend to be formulaic, bland, populist, and unchallenging in nature (Power & Scott, 2004) often with little or no socio-political significance at the expense of work that places “the needs of democracy before those of profit [...]” (Curran, 2002, p. 227). Populist cultural products, so the argument goes, are geared towards profit maximisation through repackaging and uniformity (McIntyre, 2012), something that deprives such products of a “daring or disturbing” and “critically reflective” dimension outlined earlier.

For the case study companies adopting radical modes of theatre-making, this could mean they may struggle to reach audiences who may presumably be swamped by cheap populist cultural products, or even worse, be tempted to jump on the bandwagon themselves in a bid to survive in a tough marketplace. Similarly, public subsidy and sponsorships can prove troublesome. Where they are granted to make cultural products that may not be profitable but reflect a critical engagement with the pressing issues of the day, they may come

with strings attached that may work to take the sting out of any perceived social criticism (Van Erven, 1988, p. 183).

This begs the question how producers in the companies under study in this article navigate this complex mesh of divergent imperatives, paradoxes and tensions in their socio-political enquiries and interventions. Given these companies' strong track record of work - much of which has been informed and impelled, in part, by radical approaches to theatre-making, it became very clear early on that a qualitative research methodology would be most suited to effectively illuminate the contexts within which such work was produced. To this end, I chose ethnography because of its key strength to yield sufficient detail to enable the interpretation of meaning and context of what is being experienced and researched (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), specific details of which now follow.

Methodology

This ethnographic enquiry formulated the following research questions:

To what extent do producers in the case study companies uphold radical approaches to theatre-making?

In what ways do producers respond to divergent imperatives and tensions?

In which ways do producers respond to demands from subsidy and sponsorship?

I explored these questions through the lens of the following four case study companies: *Antarc Theatre* and *Gray End Productions* in Britain and *Kraemer Youth Theatre* and *GRIPS Theater* in Germany respectively. I use pseudonyms to refer to the first three named companies and their respective productions in accordance with the ethical terms under which "privileged" access to carry out ethnographic fieldwork at those companies was granted. By contrast, the fourth company - *GRIPS Theater* - and its productions are referred to by real name and titles respectively because I solely studied publicly accessible documentary evidence, anonymising of which would have been problematic. Unfortunately,

full ethnographic fieldwork at *GRIPS Theater* was not possible owing to clashing timings and practical issues. As a participant observer at *Antarc Theatre*, *Gray End Productions* and *Kraemer Youth Theatre*, I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews and studied accessible documentary evidence (including newspaper articles, meeting minutes, output reviews, archived play scripts, social media websites and DVDs) between May 2009 and January 2012.³

For illustration, *Antarc Theatre* and *Gray End Productions* – both established in London in 1968 and 1972 as touring radical agitprop collectives respectively – created work that raised working-class consciousness and provoked widespread demand for social and political change. Today, both companies produce new, challenging and high-quality work which addresses a host of contemporary social and political issues nationally and internationally. Similarly, both *Kraemer Youth Theatre* (Thuringia) and *GRIPS Theater* (Berlin) were founded as left-wing theatrical entities in 1972 and 1966 respectively that questioned dominant social values, exposed perceived structural inequities and engaged extensively with the concerns and interests of the communities and regions they served (and still serve).

Alongside holding numerous informal conversations with a range of producers during devising workshops, rehearsals, meetings and journeys to actual performances, I interviewed the following: Adam – an English middle-aged Artistic Director at *Antarc Theatre*, Amanda – a twenty-something English associate producer at *Gray End Productions* and Markus – a middle-aged German co-Artistic Director at *Kraemer Youth Theatre*. Strikingly, accounts from the interviews and informal conversations in conjunction with what I observed at each of the respective case study companies clearly underlined producers' firm commitment and

³ A further exploration of documentary evidence pertaining to *GRIPS Theater* was undertaken from June to September 2015.

dedication to particular radical approaches to theatre-making as conceptualised earlier. I now discuss the extent to which producers uphold these and negotiate conflicting imperatives and tensions.

Dialogic exchange, participatory engagement, aesthetic reflexivity and commercial imperatives in staging social and political reality

During the countercultural era, radical theatre committed to an overtly political analysis of society (Murdoch, 1980). But evolving social and political circumstances from the 1980s onwards led to changes in thematic focus and production techniques with many producers addressing broader audiences and tackling emerging themes drawing in part on innovative and experimental theatrical techniques “to maximise the socially interactive potential of theatre.” (DiCenzo, 1996, p. 51). While some commentators observed a fear that radical theatre was in decline at that point (Kershaw, 1992; Peacock, 1999; Van Erven, 1988), others appear to have foreseen that the new circumstances offered an opportunity to reinvigorate this approach to theatre-making (Prentki & Selman, 2000).

For example, *Antarc Theatre* staged a production titled *Showdown With The Greedy Rich* (2009) which explored contemporary relations between politicians and ordinary people. This production, which according to Adam, oscillated between a “musical gig” and a “pantomime”, was based on the Luddite uprising of the early nineteenth-century in Britain. It told the story of a Luddite rebel who wages war against the ruthless “rags-to-riches” society of the time. Whereas this piece was set in the nineteenth-century, its subject matter was designed in such a way that it had “a satirical take on” contemporary elites and politicians as Adam recollects:

Showdown With The Greedy Rich was a Christmas show in 2009 and it was really successful. People liked it. It wasn't particularly well made. It was flawed. We knew there were weaknesses and we learnt from those weaknesses. Because it fell between a musical gig and a pantomime and people weren't sure what they were seeing. We were testing something out. But we knew it was working because

audiences liked it. Audiences did shout out, you know. At one point, one of the characters said about [another character playing the rich man]: “He’s just a bastard!” And then turned to the audience: “Let me hear you say the word ‘bastard’”. And the whole audience was shouting: “bastard, bastard.” And we were going: “Audiences like that. They like that naughtiness. They like that anger, but it’s childish.” So, what the danger is, if you are not careful, you dumb down the work and you go to the lowest common denominator and getting in a lot of the time “bastard” is dumbing down. But the character that we are calling bastard was belatedly a sort of satirical take on John Prescott⁴ who was the deputy prime minister. And what he had done was he had left his trade union behind to become this very powerful, power-crazy thug, really, you know. So, the audience knew that they were shouting bastard not at a character on stage, but they were shouting “bastard” at John Prescott, you know. So, yeah, on the surface you’ve got a quite superficial piece of work but under the surface, you’ve got quite a subversive piece of work which is attacking politicians

The production clearly addresses a contemporary issue of public concern. The fact that the audience was engulfed in emotion reveals the contemporary distrust and disillusionment with modern elites and politicians just like the Luddites were dissatisfied with the rich in the nineteenth century. My ethnographic fieldwork disclosed that although the piece was highly exploratory, it was commercially successful nonetheless and demonstrates the willingness of producers to take risks and to experiment with (hybrid) art forms in a bid to portray wider socially relevant and challenging issues in novel ways as opposed to sticking with tried and tested formulas common in conventional cultural production that nearly always guarantee commercial success.

Indeed, the boldness in deploying the experimental technique despite the risk of alienating the audience, I would argue, speaks to aesthetic reflexivity in the following sense. It appears to turn on its head the dialectic between creativity and commerce where the latter is seen to compromise the former by suggesting that real tensions notwithstanding, the relationship between the two can sometimes be navigable (McIntyre, 2012). Despite provoking the audience into expressing disenchantment with contemporary politics, dialogic engagement and participatory engagement in the sense described earlier are not identifiable.

⁴ John Prescott is a British politician who served as Deputy Prime Minister of the U.K between 1997 and 2007.

Whereas many of the company's productions I studied exhibited very similar patterns, there were notable exceptions.

A case in point was *Doomed World* - a dark comedy set in a future where food and water are extremely scarce. It is based on dramatic scenes documenting the plight of African migrants arriving at the Italian island of *Lampedusa* in the Mediterranean Sea. The play focuses on the intensifying problem of global warming and subsequent climate change both of which have adverse effects on the future of the planet. Adam made clear that *Doomed World* was "not about climate change" *per se*, but rather more about its consequences and possible future scenarios when he notes that:

Doomed World was not about climate change. It was about what happens as a result of climate change. That is, if we continue to treat this planet the way that we have done and are doing, which is to extract from it as if it is not an innate object rather than looking at it as a living being, then we would destroy it. We would destroy it as a habitat that we can live in. So, what would it be like to live in that virtually uninhabitable environment? And the play was basically saying: "We would do anything to survive and we would kill each other, you know."

Despite the treatment of this grim but socially relevant subject matter in a dramatic way, *Doomed World* did not resonate with some audience demographics which meant that it did not sell as envisaged though it appears to have entailed many of the ingredients that characterise a radical approach to theatre-making as discussed earlier. According to Adam, the reason for this was provided by audience research conducted after the play which revealed that many audience members found the play "brutal" and "bleak":

Now, people of the 18 - 35 age group really liked that play. People over 35 hated it. They said it was brutal. They said it offered no hope. It was bleak. Because we were showing a world - And what we were saying is: "That is the world we are heading for, you know." We were saying: "You know, when young people turn to me in my old age and say to me: old man, what did you do? You know, I can say: Well, I made a play and tried to communicate the message." But, you know, people in the audience were saying: "You're not supposed to do that. You are not supposed to make plays as bleak as that." I would argue they are in a state of denial. I would argue it's a state of fear.

At a basic level, “audience research” here can be said to reflect dialogic exchange and participatory engagement in what I observed to be common practice when producers and audience members shared their take on performances either through post-performance discussions on the spot or in a pub, or through surveys. Similarly, it was common for producers to facilitate the development of ideas for particular productions through workshopping and soliciting personal testimonies from interested community members – in addition to own research – something that producers believed was instrumental in contributing to effecting social and political change when ordinary people contributed significantly to making theatre than if they simply watched it (Prentki & Selman, 2000; Walsh, 1993).

An illustrative example of *Antarc Theatre*’s work that reflected dialogic exchange and participatory engagement at an elaborate level was a production reflecting a community tragedy called *The Blue Asbestos Tragedy* that investigated the circumstances surrounding the contamination of an inner-city in England with asbestos dust emitted by a local asbestos factory over nearly a century. Although local officials were believed to play down the effects of the tragedy, the ongoing deaths in the area were perceived to be linked to it. As such, the production shed some light on the “obscure histories, relationships, issues and problems” (Kershaw, 1992, p. 246) surrounding the tragedy. To this end, according to Adam’s account, interested community members were drawn into devising workshops over a nine-month period.

Not only did many community members contribute experiential knowledge of the tragedy that - in conjunction with historical research conducted by producers at *Antarc Theatre* - informed the production from conception through to post-performance discussions, but such community members also made up part of the cast. One might argue, then, that producers engendered an atmosphere in which community members could “feel involved in

the creative process; [becoming] aware that the play [was] for them, and in a very real sense, by them” (Van Erven, 1988, p. 177). This is an aspect I observed in the other case study companies as well, albeit to varying degrees.

From the 1980s onwards, *Gray End Productions* appears to have made increased use of verbatim theatre⁵ in its social and political enquiries and interventions. Capitalising on the technique’s greatest strength of staging characters that “exist or have existed in the real world, outside of theatre, outside of [producers’] imagination, and that the words those people are shown to be speaking are indeed their own” (Hammond & Steward, 2008, pp. 9-10), producers edit transcripts of public enquiries set up to investigate suspected wrongdoing on the part of public institutions into verbatim productions. In doing so, such productions are seen to provide “more space, more words, and more scope than newspapers and TV and radio news bulletins.” (Norton-Taylor, 2011).

An illustrative production is *Century Of East-West Relations* that charted over a century of Afghan culture, history and politics and how the country continues to be the focal point of the West’s foreign policy. My ethnographic research revealed that the play was staged at a time when the British public’s weariness of the armed conflict in Afghanistan appeared to have hit a new peak by the end of the 2000s. Amanda noted the play was “not so much about whose political or cultural position is right or wrong but about giving the audience insights into why events in Afghanistan are the way they are.” The play contextualised the conflict by providing a detailed exploration of over “170 years of invasion, occupation and conflict” to the 2000s, and in doing so, provoked discussion about the rationale behind British military presence in Afghanistan “nearly ten years after [the war] started.”

⁵ For a multifaceted definition and nuanced discussion of this term and other related concepts, see Cantrell (2013, pp. 2-3).

Virtually all the reviews of the play I studied praised the high level of skill and technique employed to assemble subject matter comprising primarily detailed historical research and in-depth interview accounts of involved parties into a high-quality piece of artful and dramatic work that was widely well-received as informative, educative and entertaining. Key to this was the input from a range of experts on Afghanistan, including experiential accounts of politicians, army officers and aid workers from the U.S, Britain and Afghanistan that fed into the devising processes of the play as well as into numerous post-production conversations and debates. This can be said to point to a high level of dialogic exchange at different junctures of the production.

Commercially, the production was nationally and internationally very successful (as reflected in the “attractive” sales of related paraphernalia in the form of publications and DVDs alongside ticket sales) despite the fact that it “almost broke [the company] because there was just so much extra stuff to do on top of the normal daily firefighting” as Amanda put it. I found that many productions at *Gray End Productions* exhibit a similar pattern (including an apparent successful negotiation between the creativity-commerce dialectic), but not with such a high intensity as *Century Of East-West Relations*.

However, there were exceptions too. *Torture and Murder in Military Detention* is one example whose subject material was derived from a public enquiry that investigated a fatality at the hands of British troops during the 2003 Iraq War and perceived widespread misbehaviour among military personnel. Of the play, Amanda commented that “[i]t had fantastic reviews” and she thought “the subject matter was great” but the “[b]ox office was terrible.” Of the reasons for this considering the company’s reputation as a “leading political theatre”, Amanda remarked:

I think it was a number of reasons: I think that it was summer, so people don’t come to the theatre anyway. The enquiry itself was so absent in the press that people didn’t really know or understand what

it was about or how important it was. So, there wasn't enough of that kind of consciousness of the subject matter [...] People didn't really know. I think people just – I wonder whether they had kind of politics fatigue from... We were in the wake of all the expenses scandal [...] you know, maybe they just kind of thought: "Do you know what? I don't want to hear about the government messing up again. I would much rather go [elsewhere]." I think that had a big impact on it. And also you know, it's [verbatim theatre] a very queer taste, it's a very sedentary style of performance. It's so subtle. It's almost formic. You know, nothing happens on stage except a witness leaves and another one comes on. It's not everybody's cup of tea. Again, that's fine. But it does make it very hard, you know, made us question whether we should put this on. But again, you just have to go: "Well, actually, that's what we are here to do!"

Although "the very sedentary style" renders the verbatim technique appear less imaginative and entertaining than, say, popular, fictitious plays, commentators have argued that "it lets people speak for themselves" (Norton-Taylor, 2011), and in doing so, "widen[s] the number and variety of people [...] listen[ed] to, to include people who traditionally haven't been seen and heard in the theatre" (cf. Hammond & Steward, 2008, p. 18). In doing so, "this sort of theatre provides what [dominant cultural production] fails to provide, and at a time when it is sorely needed" (Ibid, p. 10) and as such, signals participatory engagement at its best. To others, the verbatim technique is at its most effective when not deployed in its strictly original form meaning that invented input can be incorporated through "bolder editing and staging" even if this may "displace precise factual representation" for the sake of making productions come alive (Ibid., p. 101).⁶

Indeed, I found that producers at *Gray End Productions* aimed to "marry the gorgeously unwieldy nature of real speech to the dramatic needs of the story without losing the very thing that makes verbatim so [powerful]" (Ibid., p. 102) in its quest to "question", "make connections", "communicate", and "reflect critically" on key social and political issues of the day. Although the resultant productions may not always be perceived as artistically appealing which, in turn, renders them unprofitable as Amanda intimated, producers do not appear to give up considering the ultimate goal of giving voice to ordinary

⁶ See also Introduction in Forsyth & Megson (2009).

people. The fact that producers grapple with the situation as Amanda's introspection reveals speaks to a high level of aesthetic reflexivity – one that favours public participation over commercial considerations.

Ethnographic fieldwork at *Kraemer Youth Theatre* indicated that the company too embraces a radical approach to staging work covering predominantly family and community relationships of different kinds. A production exemplifying this was *Loving Life Regardless* that highlighted how hearing-impaired children and young adults along with their families navigate the hardships and struggles they experience. Set in a family context, the play explores the ways in which two non-deaf parents cope with the hearing impairment of their daughter *Mona* - a six-year old - and the associated, daily, negative experiences she undergoes.

The reviews of the piece I examined paid tribute to how *Mona's* portrayal related to the experiences of many affected families and illuminated the difficulties they encounter in their day-to-day routine. *Mona* – who in real life is deaf - is presented as “a personality with a bright and bubbly character that embraces life with all its complexities” and tirelessly works at “making friends” but is increasingly frustrated by “being constantly harassed and rejected.” Feeling “not understood” and “unwanted”, *Mona* inevitably withdraws “into her shell” and gradually becomes aggressive, something that aggravates the already difficult family situation.

A recurrent critique in the reviews was that the oscillation throughout the play between voice-over speech by performers off stage and the sign language used by on-stage performers to convey the message to a predominantly non-deaf audience felt disorientating. Markus concurred that it was indeed an issue with productions that address audiences with various needs. He intimated that under the circumstances, *Loving Life Regardless* was nonetheless a success. Not only did it sell, but its subject matter and portrayal helped raise

public awareness of an important issue through projecting the lived experiences of sections of the wider society that suffer isolation and marginalisation.

Key to this, I found, was the fact that the core cast constituted members of the community whose experiential knowledge and insights substantially informed the script, something that may have played an integral part in ensuring that the action and dialogue on stage resonated with the audience. Behind the scenes though, the “journey” - as Markus put it – was much more challenging. He intimated that there was some wrangling over character names, over the collectively devised script and over the improvisation of scenes in addition to other issues around some participants’ levels of confidence and commitment during the development stage.

It is precisely situations such as this that producers at the company professed to “love” about their work, something that can be said to point to a distinctive aesthetic that highlights a devotion to a calling that is of service to the community, particularly those perceived to be at the margins. The aforementioned challenges notwithstanding, *Loving Life Regardless* offered an “experience of what might otherwise remain distant” (Cohen-Cruz, 1998, p. 5) through putting participatory engagement to effective use and through negotiating artistic considerations in the best way possible, something that characterised many of the productions I studied at *Kraemer Youth Theatre*.

My examination of documentary evidence at *GRIPS Theater* indicated that from its inception to this day, the company has staged plays designed as a means to influence the social conditions of the intergenerational audience it serves (Hughes, 2014, p. 22). In doing so, the company significantly draws on dialogic exchange and participatory engagement to problematize the day-to-day context as it plays out in families, neighbourhoods and the different kinds of social relationships in society (Claus, 1988, p. 100). Key themes have revolved around consumerism, performance anxiety, mistrust, prejudice, identity, youth

crime, education, discrimination, physical violence, unemployment, sex and teen pregnancies, drug abuse, homelessness and the denial of the Holocaust. I found that the pattern of the productions has remained strikingly consistent over the decades.

No production at *GRIPS Theater* captures many of these themes simultaneously than *Linie 1*. Acclaimed as the company's most successful production (Hughes, 2014, p. 25), it tells a story of a young female character named Sunny who hails from a provincial town in what was then West Germany and finds herself stranded at the central Berlin Train Station. Pregnant and unable to cope with life back home, Sunny follows an invitation from the father of her unborn child – reportedly a rock-star known by the name of Johnnie to come and live with him in the borough of *Kreuzberg* in Berlin.

En route to *Kreuzberg* Sunny encounters a host of characters from different backgrounds, all of whom have their own individual and specific stories to tell about their experiences of and perspectives on life in Berlin and the rest of the country. Perhaps unsurprisingly, nearly all the experiences and perspectives revolve around the disillusionment with structural inequalities of different kinds – many of which were drawn into the devising processes of the production based on concrete lived realities (Hughes, 2014). The most interesting aspect about *Linie 1* is that many of the themes tackled when it first premiered in the then partitioned Berlin have remained relevant to date.

Back then as now, the engagement with the aforementioned themes has been characterised by a two-fold aesthetic: a) critical and socio-political, and b) emancipatory. Producers have made effective use of the former to scrutinise societal concerns and inequities with a view to engendering some kind of social transformation as opposed to conforming to the formalist standards of the arts Establishment seen as constraining (Fischer, 2002). To this end, the facilitation of participatory engagement across the company's productions and the conversations and debates such productions have stimulated have "help[ed] define Berlin for

generations” (Hughes, 2014, p. 20). The emancipatory aesthetic has been mainly concerned with nurturing a sense of citizenship in children and young people who form an integral part of *GRIPS Theater*’s intergenerational audience, especially through:

developing their self-confidence, helping them to orient and to assert themselves in their real world [...] to see our society as one that can be changed, to understand criticism as their undeniable right, to stimulate the enjoyment of creative thinking and of creating alternatives, thus stimulating their social imagination (Volker Ludwig, Founder, *GRIPS Theater* cf. Berghammer, 1988, p. 2)

Intriguingly, although virtually all the company’s work is nearly always sold out, *GRIPS Theater* does not make profit and has increasingly relied on public subsidy and sponsorship to put on productions, a phenomenon that the discussion now turns to.

Subsidy and sponsorship: Makers or breakers of social and political reality on stage?

A review of public funding for contemporary theatre generally shows that progressive policymakers in Britain and Germany have continually devised measures aimed at supporting the respective sectors (House of Commons, 2005; Hughes, 2007). And whereas many radical theatre producers categorically dismissed public support during the countercultural era for fear of becoming corrupted and appropriated into the dominant means of cultural production (Lewis, 1990; Mulgan & Worpole, 1986; Primavesi, 2011; Williams, 1981), there appears to have been a gradual shift in attitude and perception from the mid-1980s onwards. Then and now, the understanding has always been that although associated work is seen to inform community and public life, to critique and challenge the present order, and to enhance democratic practice, it may not be popular to stage, which in turn, renders it unprofitable (Morris, 2012; Morrison, 2008).

However, a turn of events in Britain from the late 1980s onwards led the wider political economy of the Thatcherite and successive Conservative governments to enforce a transition from the reliance on public subsidy to the business sponsorship of the arts (Feist &

Hutchison, 1990; Kershaw, 1992; 1999). Unlike in Britain, subsidy in the 1980s and 1990s in (both pre- and post-unified) Germany was widely considered to be “abnormally high” (Hughes, 2007, p. 135). By the 2000s, however, companies adopting the radical approach to theatre-making in both countries were facing substantial public funding cuts. For instance, whereas *Antarc Theatre* received £253,442 in financial year 2010/2011, this figure dropped to £235,955 in 2011/2012 and plummeted to £140,000 in 2012/2013. Of this, Adam observed:

Unfortunately, from March [2012], we’ve had our funding cut again significantly. So, for instance, *Show Down With The Greedy Rich* has nine performers in it including, you know, a celebrity – George. We can’t afford to do that. So we have to look very carefully. So now we are looking at how do we maintain an output on reduction of funding? And as anti-capitalists, we should be able to do things. So, we’ve started looking at other possible income streams, you know. It’s awkward that as an anticapitalist I’m using words like an income stream, you know. But I still have to play the business game. I still have to write a business plan for the Arts Council [...] So, in other words, the funding cut is forcing us to change our rhythm, change our output. What I cannot do ethically is I cannot do what Jeremy Hunt⁷ wants me to do which is to go to capitalist philanthropists and say: ‘Please, sponsor us.’ Because their money is dirty money, if you know what I mean.

Gray End Productions saw its public support drop from £779,071 in financial year 2010/2011 to £725,315 in 2011/2012, and in 2012/2013, decreased further to a little under £700,000. Amanda notes of this:

It’s a nightmare. It means that we are gonna have to have in future smaller artistic casts, simpler sets and fewer varied productions. It means that we would have to be much more - we would be much less accessible to smaller and less known companies and playwrights. So that’s gonna be really tough. We’ve already had to cancel some things like the solicitor script reading service of certain topics. We can’t afford it anymore. We are looking into fundraising. Solomon [the Artistic Director] is a full-time fundraiser himself. I mean he’s astonishing the way that he, you know, moves and shakes and puts things together and brings people together and sorts of things. We are also looking at sponsorship and other potential income sources

Kramer Youth Theatre lost a third of its public subsidy between 2009 and 2014 with further substantial funding cuts expected in 2015/2016. Markus captures the company’s desperation as follows:

⁷ Jeremy Hunt is a British Conservative Party politician who at the time of conducting this research (2009 – 2012) was the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport.

The situation is desperate – We are already struggling with the after-effects of the successive cuts we've had to endure so far but the pending cuts are going to hit us very badly on a number of levels. We are only four of us working with way over 100 young people at any one time. The workload is already massive but the cuts now mean that we might find it's only three core staff left which would verge on a catastrophe – and that's no exaggeration! How we are going to cope – We don't know yet but what we know is that the work needs to be done [...] We are left no choice but to reduce the number of our performances and tours and make the casts much smaller...

Of all the case studies, *GRIPS Theater* has been hit hardest having lost two-thirds of its public support since 2006 and nearly going under as recently as 2012.⁸ This has meant that producers are clinging on to any accessible subsidy and sponsorship they can get to go about their work. The problem is that a reliance on subsidy can compel producers to dilute social critique (Van Erven, 1988) or consign producers to self-censorship altogether (McGrath, 1990; Patterson, 2003). This may be particularly the case where receipt of subsidy is made dependent on the demonstration of “artistic excellence” – a very fuzzy concept (Kershaw, 1999, p. 45), and/or of economic value (McIntyre, 2012). It could also manifest itself in restrictive funding criteria and in refusals either to increase or even cut subsidy altogether (Hughes, 2007). Like subsidy, sponsorships can be double-edged: they can support the making of work that is impelled by participatory engagement but may not sell. Similarly, they can interfere with the independence of producers in ways that elitist/political demands and market forces discussed earlier do.

My collation of ethnographic data pointed to different responses to the pressures exerted by public funding and sponsorship. Sometimes producers succumb to these, at other times producers withstand them, and yet at other times, producers experience no constraints to their independence whatsoever. A case in point where producers gave in to the demands of funders concerned a development workshop that preceded a play titled *Why Racism*.

Designed by *Antarc Theatre* at the request of a school that experienced relatively high levels

See, for example: <http://www.welt.de/newsticker/news3/article106258149/Finanzierung-des-Grips-Theaters-gefordert.html>; <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/hilfe-vom-senat-benoetigt-grips-theater-steht-vor-der-pleite/6497938.html>; <http://www.taz.de/!5095645/>

of racial tensions owing to its location in the midst of a neighbourhood with strong British National Party (BNP) ties, the workshop contextualised the roots of racism by highlighting the role of colonialism, capitalism and imperialism.

However, the funding local council and school objected, compelling producers to rework it into something simpler that was reduced to “cultural differences” in Britain as Adam recalls:

So, we devised workshops and went in to try and explore these issues with these 14, 15 year old kids. And we realised it was working. They were realising, actually – one of them kept saying: ‘Poor countries, poor countries.’ I said: “Well, what happened to the resources that were taken from poor countries? People move from poor countries and go somewhere else, you know. So, all this talk that they come to our country and take our jobs - what’s left of their country? It’s kind of simplistic.” So, it’s back to that imperialism, it’s all those arguments and once you begin to peel that on your way, it’s very difficult to justify racism [...] Teachers said to me: “It’s very biased. It’s overloaded. It’s ineffective for the purposes of the workshop. We can’t have it like that.” So we ended up focusing more on cultural differences in this country. I wasn’t comfortable removing the context. But that’s what we did [...] It was better than abandoning the whole thing.

Producers at the company have attempted to counter situations such as this by pursuing a two-fold strategy: undertaking theatrical training projects geared towards social and rehabilitative purposes and venturing into established theatres to tour their work whenever possible. With respect to the first strand of work, the understanding is that the instrumental nature of such project work appears to attract funding more readily than (overly) critical work devised by the company. Its value is reflected in the recognition that participants in such projects – mainly young offenders - tend to “have better social and communication skills, are more likely to go on to pursue higher education, and are less likely to re-offend” (Walshe, 2012).

Interestingly, in his discussion of the factors affecting young people’s participation in artistic and cultural programmes, Hill (1997, n.p) asks what claim the arts may have on subsidy if they do not fulfil a social or rehabilitative function or “assist in the processes of

change in society?” By encouraging re-integration into society and the acquisition of social skills, arts projects such as the ex-offenders’ theatrical training project can be said to foster “a transforming experience,” (Matarasso, 2000, p. 16) thereby making a difference in the lives of the disadvantaged in society.

The second strand of work that *Antarc Theatre* is undertaking constitutes branching out into conventional theatres to diversify their revenue, something that is not only “rare” but is also riddled with problems and (ideological) “tension” as Adam explains:

We perform once in a while in [mainstream theatres]. And when audiences have come to see our work, that’s been really great because they know *Antarc Theatre* is performing. But that’s really rare.

Because we make left-leaning theatre which we feel is very challenging and questioning and critical, it makes [mainstream theatres] uncomfortable. The London theatres don’t want to take that kind of work. So, well, not from us anyway. They will take it from other people. So, I’m struggling with that one. But a voice in my head says it doesn’t matter [...] We are not selling out. Do I want us to sell out? Is that not part of the capitalist business system? It’s putting bums on seats, you know, it’s making a profit.

We have this dichotomy. We have this juxtaposition. We have this tension.

By contrast, *GRIPS Theater* – which similarly makes left-leaning theatre and has relied on subsidy for over four decades but now has to fend for itself - does not seem averse to commercial opportunities. The company has been compelled to partner with a large energy vendor as its main corporate sponsor along with others – an investment bank, a city council department and a building society – to deliver core programming and other work. This move appears to have tentatively ensured the company’s survival as justified in the recent interview comments made by its founder noting “[i]t is exhausting to have to fight forty-three years for the existence of a theatre that funders like to take credit for [but are reluctant to or don’t want to fund].”⁹ Remarkably, despite periodic threats and attempts to withdraw public support on ideological grounds over the decades, there seems no evidence to suggest that the company has given in to political pressure or surrendered its socio-political aesthetic (Fischer, 2002).

⁹ Ruediger Schaper, “Grips-Theater steht vor der Pleite,” April 12, 2012, *Der Tagesspiegel*, <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/hilfe-vom-senat-benoetigt-unsere-sparmoeglichkeiten-sind-restlos-ausgereizt/6497938-2.html>

In response to successive subsidy cuts and a need to preserve their autonomy, producers at *Gray End Productions* have developed diverse strategies built around fundraising and sponsorship events in a bid to diversify their income base as Amanda describes:

Solomon [the Artistic Director] is our primary fundraiser, frankly. We've also got two members in our development department who are constantly writing grant applications, writing to substantial finance individuals, trying to find corporate sponsorship – that kind of thing. They work more closely with the education and social inclusion department than I do. But often, actually, the social inclusion director writes her own funding applications and sources her own funding for her projects. Often, they are project-specific and bring funds as such. And I do a lot of fundraising as well either through applications, but also through events like an auction or a sort of extra-curricular activity like Am-dram performances recently where lawyers came in and performed for a week on stage with a professional director and a personal designer. The tickets were £8. Again, that was fundraising and it's really tough especially as memberships are dropping away. People's willingness to come to theatre is really, really tough. And that is very scary

Furthermore, I observed that *Gray End Productions* fully exploits its theatre space which is offered for rent to businesses and individuals wishing to use it for meetings and functions. Moreover, seats in the main auditorium are named after individual and corporate donors and sponsors who contribute considerable amounts of money in return for visibility and recognition. Asked whether these sponsorship strategies can have an impact on the company's autonomy, Amanda answers no but recounts an unprecedented incident that seems very problematic:

We've never got money from this guy before, we've got one guy who's just donated some money to [a recent production] with the condition that he's allowed to come in and sit in the rehearsals and give me feedback which I then give to Solomon so that, you know, he might want to consider. It's all a very difficult situation - Just because he gave so many thousand pounds why should he come in and tell us what he thinks it should look like? So, it's very difficult, and you know, I've been trying to tread it very carefully, but again, we're gonna need him in the future. So, of course, we need to make sure that he feels like he is being listened to. And actually, his points are well-made. So, it's really tough. But that's the first time we've done that. And we will have to, you know, decide whether it's worth it, and whether we felt it was appropriate or intrusive and that kind of thing

With decreasing public subsidy, *Kraemer Youth Theatre* has likewise had to spread out its revenue sources by increasing ticket prices, getting involved in co-productions with

prominent commercial theatre companies with fairly established followings and initiating fundraising and sponsorship strategies. The company has only two corporate sponsors both of whom are savings banks while the rest of the sponsors are primarily civil society organisations. Asked whether the company has experienced any interference from sponsors, Markus remarks that none of:

our sponsors have meddled in our programming. Why should they? They are visible in our premises and we credit them accordingly if they have sponsored any of our productions. In appreciation [for their support], we sometimes invite them to look at the rehearsals

All in all, it seems that building partnerships and maintaining links with corporate and individual sponsors has become an indispensable survival strategy for the case study companies. Indeed, commentators have observed that an increasing number of businesses are demonstrating an openness to the idea of initiating flexible and strategic partnerships with arts organisations in such a way that was seen to work in the interests of mutual benefits (Matarasso 2000; Shaw 2001). I would argue that in these economically difficult times, this seems like a viable relationship. But if these partnerships are going to entitle funders, sponsors and businesses to intervene in programming processes and thus foster the dilution of “social critique”, then this is a very worrying development for an approach to theatre-making that understands itself as a distinctive means to “question or re-envision ingrained social arrangements of power” (Cohen-Cruz, 1998, p. 1).

Conclusion

This article has examined how four British and German case study companies embracing radical approaches to theatre-making are engaging with perceived (societal) ills characteristic of modern capitalist societies. We have seen that dialogic exchange, participatory engagement, aesthetic reflexivity and commercial imperatives are discernible in the respective productions, albeit to differing degrees. Their negotiation plays an integral part in determining how effectively or not producers succeed in intervening in our social, political

and cultural surroundings in ways that conventional forms of cultural production have failed or are unwilling to owing to elitist/political and market forces.

Do the case study companies make radical theatre in the strict sense of the term? Well, we have seen that producers do not refer to their work as such but instead talk of staging “political theatre” (Amanda), “left-leaning theatre” (*GRIPS Theater*) or perceive themselves as “anti-capitalists” (Adam). More importantly, the empirical analysis points to a hybrid of a few principles from the “iconoclastic radical ideology, shaped by a deep opposition to the over-production and consumerism of” modern capitalist societies and “a pragmatism which produce[s], at the macro-level, an acute grasp of contemporary power structures, and at the micro-level, an engagingly unpretentious commitment to local community activism” (cf. Kershaw, 1998, p. 209). In doing so, it conjures up not only “just *freedom* from oppression, repression, exploitation [...] but also freedom to *reach beyond* existing systems of formalised power, freedom to create currently unimaginable forms of association and action” (Kershaw, 1999, p. 18 original emphasis). Moreover, in “[u]ncovering and giving expression to what is there, and to the realities of people’s lives” (cf. Kershaw, 1992, p. 152), some of the illustrative work we have seen

is produced on the scale of the local, national or transnational [and] works with its audiences to stage significant political meaning and perspective, posing opinions and facilitating specific critiques that challenge and sometimes [attempt to] break those certainties of governance [and in doing so, lends itself well] to contemporary political agency because of the opportunity it offers to engage in making difference (Hunter, 2013, p. 3-4).

Ultimately, in staging social and political reality to enhance democratic communication in an age of growing elitist and proprietary hegemony in public communication, the case study companies are countering the erosion of our civil liberties. They are facilitating a meaningful engagement with politics, arts, culture, and commerce in

terms of citizenship not consumerism, of expressions of cultural creativity not standardised products, and position audiences by citizenship rights and cultural needs not income (Cottle, 2003, p. 10).

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