Vital Spaces/Vital Signs: Young People, Performance, Identity and Dialogue

Submitted by Erin Colleen Walcon to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Drama In December 2012

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Erin Colleen Walcon
Signature: .................................................................
Abstract

This thesis advocates that young people’s participatory theatre in Britain is an important site for dialogue - both internally between young people and externally with those in positions of power and authority who have decision-making responsibilities in young people’s lives. Contextualising the work within the field of critical pedagogy, the thesis asks questions about how devised theatre with young participants can be an effective method to start conversations about young people’s identity and role in society.

The research was conducted within a Participatory Action Research methodology, and involved about 600 young people from across Devon in a variety of pilot projects which became increasingly dialogic in form over the three years of study. Looking first at the complex issue of ‘youth’ identity within sociology, cultural studies, ethnography and geography, the thesis posits that the fields of theatre and performance studies have important contributions to make to an understanding of how identity is a performed and constructed concept. Building upon this premise, the second chapter overviews the existing field of young people’s participatory theatre in the UK, stipulating that a pedagogical framework built on an historicized understanding of educational theatre is essential to mapping the existing state of practice. This pedagogical framing allows for navigation through the increasingly impact-driven criteria which can profoundly shape the aesthetics and authorship of such work when conducted in the field. These (often silent) shaping forces are analysed through a set of case study examples.

Chapter III defines and defends the framing of this work as a form of critical pedagogy, specifically exploring the definitions of dialogue and literac(ies) through case study examples of dialogic practice with young participants. Chapters IV and V examine the PAR research conducted over three years under the heading Vital Spaces/Vital Signs, which moved from small-scale pilot projects in youth centres to larger-scale ‘devised dialogues’ within more traditional theatre spaces. The praxis and findings encountered within the action research are detailed, and recommendations for future extended dialogic work are made.
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