

THE SOCIAL ACTOR

by Jon Oram

The original meaning of amateur - *for the love of* - has become corrupted to suggest performances lacking in quality. In my experience, that can be true of some professional theatre too. Quality depends on the integrity of the company or the individuals, so let's knock on the head the idea that amateur theatre has to be shoddy just because it's amateur. Good and bad theatre isn't doing the same thing in different measure; good theatre illuminates and enriches us, bad theatre diminishes us and drives audiences away. Whether amateur or professional if you perform you have to be tough about your responsibility to the audience. I use a small team of professional practitioners to work with amateurs and non-actors. My interest in amateurs is the relationship they have with audiences. It's my belief that amateur actors who live and work in the community to whom they perform are uniquely placed to offer something quite different; something professional actors aren't generally placed to do.

Having worked in mainstream, mainly physical, theatre I came back to work with the community (amateur and non-actors) because I believe they have more potential to be radical and subversive. I write and direct community plays with casts of up to 150 local people. The plays are specially researched and written with, for and about the community by proven, prestigious writers and supported by a small team of professional theatre practitioners: director, designer, musical director, etc. The performances are in the promenade style with stages round the outside of an open space that the actors and audience share. The audience find themselves surrounded by the action of the play and sometimes implicated in the drama. What I mean by implication are situations in the play where the audience is spoken or responded to as if they were playing a role themselves. I'm not talking about that shallow audience participation where people are dragged on stage to be humiliated, but an invitation to the audience as a group to get involved in the drama as someone other than themselves - an invitation to perform. There are times the audience might be addressed as a jury or an angry mob, mourners or a meeting of Quakers - all in the course of one play.

Twenty-five years ago I heard about Ann Jellicoe's groundbreaking work in the south west of England and her discovery of what was being

called the community play. I went to see Colway theatre's second production to see what all the thunderous press plaudits were about. The experience was full of startling revelations, but one scene was to change my view of theatre forever. The scene was a courtroom. Magistrates behind high desks addressed us as members of the courtroom. The cast pressed round us. Next to me were a mother and child, all but six years old, in costume. A judge was delivering a sentence of death on a young boy for burning down a hayrick. The girl next to grabbed my hand. We looked at each other. "Why?" She asked and I knew she demanded a response. I looked at her mother who was crying but equally was waiting for an explanation. Here was a six year old who was identifying with an ancestor of her community two hundred years ago and was pulling me and implicating me in her world, making the past present. I can't remember what I murmured, something like 'sorry' I expect. The point is I felt the hurt, anger and impotency to do anything that this community must have felt when simple, harmless Sylvester was sentenced to death. It was a profound moment that changed the direction of my life. Three years later I was artistic director of Colway and twenty-five years on I'm still pursuing their inexhaustible possibilities.

I'm interested in bringing the actor and

the audience together as a single community so that everyone feels implicated in the dramatic situation as if it were happening to the them in the now. Audiences, of course, are traditionalists and expect to sit in the dark and watch the play within a lit magic box, safe and secure in the knowledge that nothing more is asked of them than attentive respect. Entering a theatre with no seats and all surround staging is initially disconcerting. What is immediately needed is an actor who has developed new social skills to put the audience at ease, an actor who plays the perfect host to the arriving guests. So I am trying to develop what I call a 'social actor' – community members who have developed skills to draw the audience towards performance.

We all perform. We all play out numerous roles in any single day. We can learn to perform our roles differently, improve them, or play new roles. Performance is, in my opinion, so essential to personal and social development that it should be offered up as a possibility to the audience. The only way we can develop is to try things we've never done before, in other words play something other than what we normally play. I want audiences to play something more than being specta-

tors. The first step, it seems to me, is to build on their natural ability to empathise. Whenever we read books, watch plays or films we respond and empathise at a distance; but only theatre has the unique prospect to respond to the audience's responses. In theatre, because it's live, we have the chance to converse and negotiate rather than just show and tell. We can give audiences the opportunity to physically enter the world of the play.

There are conditions about the amateur actors from the community that make the audience's transition from mere spectator to involved performer almost seamless. Whilst we might be in awe of professional celebrity, there's a feeling of equality and intimacy when the cast and the audience come from the same community. Amateurs especially non-actors are closer to natural social behaviour as opposed to heightened performance. I build on these conditions by ensuring that the subject of the play is about the history of everyone in the room, and that they all share the same space. To put it succinctly there is a sense of community ownership about the play.

Ironically the expectations and demands on the social actor are more substantial than most professional theatre. They need the self same skills



as regular actors but additionally we are emphasising and developing social and improvisational skills. In a single promenade show social actors play a range of styles and performance energies: proscenium, thrust stage, in the round, street theatre but also skills of social behaviour- conversation, status, negotiation and so on. The plays are spectacles so there is also a huge dependency on mime, mask, physical theatre and visual techniques. Centrally too, the cast have to work as a collective, an ensemble. They go on stage, not for their own ends but to make everyone else look wonderful and feel comfortable.

I want to focus just for a moment on a unique aspect art of the craft social actor that I believe has the most potential for development. That is the one to one interplay between the social actor and the audience such as I described earlier when the six-year-old girl asked me a simple question that demanded a response. I believe it's my constant goal in community play rehearsals and performances to use the dramatic situation to remind the group that all through time people have found themselves in such positions as is happening in the drama. In other words we can all find something of significance for us in everything that has ever happened, is happening or will happen in the future. Theatre can help build our belief in the dramatic events but once that is established the social actor can move the audience towards a depth of insight about the experience. When I was confronted by a child in that courtroom I had come to believe I was moved into an moment of new awareness. True gut level drama has to do with you at your deepest level want to know about what it is to be human. How would act under pressure? Do you change when situations are extreme? What can you discover about yourself as you respond to a threatening event?

These are boundaries I want to push – where the audience learns something about themselves because they have been placed in situations rather than watching other characters respond in theirs.

We are discovering ploys to entice the audience in such as stopping the play to reflect,



involving the audience in ritual, interjecting the play with probes and questions; practices more associated with educational drama than theatre. In all this we have to be determined not to bully but to edge the audiences in almost unawares. The dilemma of community plays is they are often one offs and the three months rehearsal is barely enough time to teach people to be social actors never mind develop the concept. I'm now basing my work on one community and building a performance centre to explore the social actor and experimenting long term with local people. My hope and belief is that what we learn will enable us to pass it on to other communities. I think it will change our perspective on how to present theatre, how the plays should be written, what's written, how they are staged and designed. The centre also opens up the strange idea of train-

ing an audience, of changing their expectations of theatre and how they should respond.

The work of community plays is demanding but the effects can be profound. People are never less that surprised by their achievement. Actors and audience constantly refer to the experience as life changing. It offers overwhelming evidence that performing is socially and personally developmental. Audiences often feel something extraordinary has or is happening to the people taking part, but that can often be alienating, some people hate other people having a good time. I don't want audience to simply feel what

others are experiencing I want audiences to get that experience too.

The position that amateurs are in and the qualities they have are wonderful and unique in the theatre world but the tendency is to deny them. A lot of amateur theatre imitates professional theatre performing second hand west end hits. I'm not against that but there is so much more. There's a real opportunity to create something new and specific to the lives of their community and to make a real difference in people's lives.



Jon Oram

Jon Oram is recognized as one of England's top directors, particularly in the field of Collaborative Community Theatre. In the early 1980's Jon was hired as the British Arts Council's first-ever Community Arts Animator. In 1986 he was asked by renowned British playwright Anne Jellicoe to take over from her as Artistic Director of the Colway Theatre Trust, a company devoted to the production of large-scale original plays which engage entire communities in telling their collective stories. Since that time Jon has been instrumental in the production of well over two dozen such productions in many locations in England, as well as Canada, The United States, France and Denmark. In addition to directing, Jon is a talented playwright, actor, mime artist and theatre designer; and, beyond his community-based worked, has directed plays at the National Theatre in London. He has just completed a manual on Collaborative Community Theatre which will be published later this year. He is presently writing "The Social Actor: A Community Approach To Acting." Most recently he has been commissioned to undertake a community play called "Nelson's Tour", to be produced aboard a tall ship touring the coast of Britain.