

'At 20p -- it can't be bad!': The socio-political purpose of Live Theatre Newcastle's amateur aesthetic, 1973--1978

[[figure 1]]

In 1973 two ex-teachers in the North East of England, Geoff Gillham and Val McLane, pooled their savings to fund a theatre collective which would make performance 'about life as ordinary working people live it' (fig. 1). They set out their aims with serious political intent: this was performance that would not 'hide away in a theatre' but rather go 'to where people are -- in pubs and clubs, in youth and community centres, in schools and factory canteens, in fact anywhere where there's a space, some chairs and people' (fig. 1). On the surface, the project appears to bear many similarities to other political and community theatre models that were emerging in the early 1970s. Baz Kershaw has identified a movement of socially-engaged theatre at this time, which involved professional practitioners, often from outside the region, coming in to work with 'host communities' (2002: 145). Gillham and McLane were inspired by this movement and had met through a mutual acquaintance with Gavin Bolton, whose teaching on drama in education directly influenced their early work with schools (1979). And yet in spite of Gillham and McLane's expertise, the early years of the company are remembered as makeshift and full of mishap; descriptions of this time are often closest to the 'self-mocking depictions of amateurish misadventure' that characterise popular (mis)conceptions of amateur theatre (Nicholson, et al., 2018: 24).

In this essay, which draws upon materials from the Live Theatre Archive and associated ethnographic research, I argue that Live Theatre developed an amateur aesthetic as a self-conscious strategy to engage working-class audiences. This aesthetic was evident in the low cost and low production values of the performances, the nature and content of the work itself and the self-deprecating jokes told by company members both onstage and off. The cultivation of this amateur aesthetic was useful to the company in its early years (1973--1978) because it allowed for a radical reimagining of the performer--audience relationship that was both politically purposeful as a form of participatory democracy and also sensitive to issues of class. By adopting a self-deprecating position, Live Theatre engaged in a 'complex ideological transaction' with its audiences that signalled its rejection of the

hierarchical structures of professionalism and invited a new form of aesthetic engagement with its work (Kershaw, 2002: 145). Like other socially-engaged theatres of this time, as Live Theatre became more established it began to work within a text-based model. Consequently, its focus shifted away from experimenting with modes of production and onto the potential for new plays to intervene in the creation of local culture. The amateur aesthetic I have identified persists within the company's repertoire of plays,^{[note]1} as well as its backstage cultures,^{[note]2} and is now associated with a nostalgic recuperation of the past. However, this essay works with the few material fragments remaining from Live Theatre's first five years, supplementing these -- and paying careful attention to what is missing -- with ethnographic and conversation-based research with early company members. It argues that the amateur aesthetic developed by Live Theatre during these years was a socio-political strategy designed to engage audiences actively and ideologically, but also with sensitivity and respect.

[{figure 2}]

The politics of low production values

Live Theatre was set up as a co-operative where each member had an equal say in the decision-making processes and all received an equal share of any profits. The company's lack of resources was due to a conscious and politically-motivated decision not to accept public funding: they ensured low overheads by rehearsing in Gillham's flat and travelled to performances by bus (Fieldnotes, 19 November).^{[note]3} Lorraine Lawson, an original company member, recalls an instance when Live Theatre 'knocked back' an offer of funding from the Sunderland local authority because Gillham was fearful of what this might later mean for the company's artistic freedom (Fieldnotes, 2 October). Financial restrictions meant that the production values of Live Theatre's work and presentation were far from the standard of professional theatre, but the company embraced this by making self-deprecating humour a key part of their approach to audiences. The most popular comedy sketches performed by the company during these years depicted 'embarrassing moments' associated with working-class North East identity, many of which were drawn from the lived experiences of company members. Self-

deprecating humour is recognised for its 'lack of aggression' and ability to create a sense of community (Lowrey, et al., 2017: 6), and Live Theatre drew attention to mistakes or moments of failure in performance in order to create the sense of 'a shared joke' with the audience (Fieldnotes, 22 November). They also kept entry prices low (fig. 1), and jokingly promoted themselves to clubs using audience quotes that were clearly fabricated ('Wor lass laughed till the tears ran reet doon her face!'). These strategies collapsed the sense of hierarchy between performers and audience; cheap tickets also reduced the material risks of involvement for audiences.

[{figure 3}]

'Free-form back-chat' and the performer--audience relationship

Company members had a strong sense of themselves as 'local; working class' and believed that their local accents and informal performance style enabled their audiences to identify with the work (Fieldnotes, 2 October). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that Live Theatre were often mistaken for being -- in Claire Cochrane's vivid description of amateur performers -- the 'audience [that] wants to clamber into the performance space' (2001: 235). And yet there were significant differences between the kind of performance event that Live Theatre intended to frame, and what might be expected of amateur theatre. Amateur performance is often contextualised within an existing process of community and consensus building; audiences sometimes come with privileged access or information because of their existing relationships with those on stage, or they may take pleasure in watching known community members in surprising or peculiar scenarios and characterisations. This was not the case for early Live Theatre performances, which were managed on a freelance and ad-hoc basis with whichever local venues were willing to programme and pay them. Consequently, the exact nature of the performer--audience exchange was always unknown in advance, and all of the early company members I have spoken to have referred to unanticipated audience reactions, including being heckled, having items thrown onstage, and being 'paid off' in the clubs.[{note}]⁴

The unpredictability of the encounter between Live Theatre and its audiences was compounded by the fact that most of the performers were women (fig. 3), and

also by the style of performance the company favoured, which company-member Pauline Moriarty has characterised as ‘a young woman standing in the middle of a stage and speaking directly to the audience’ (Fieldnotes, 1 October). Within the context of a burgeoning feminist movement, Live Theatre’s decision to put young women centre stage, particularly in a working men’s club, was a strong socio-political intervention -- which also, inevitably, placed the lived experience of many of its company members at the heart of its exchanges with its audiences. This is remembered as an unsettling experience by some who ‘found it difficult’ because it was not the ‘kind of perform[ance]’ they were used to; others tell stories that speak of their vulnerability. For example Annie Orwin recalls, with discomfort, exiting the stage after a piece about domestic abuse and immediately being cornered by a group of men who were angry because it might have ‘given their wives ideas’ (Fieldnotes, 12 July). These challenging exchanges demonstrate how exposing this mode of working could sometimes be for performers, and Lawson acknowledges, with emphasis, that the performers were ‘brave’. Yet if this permeable boundary between performers and audiences was sometimes risky, it also opened up the potential for serious cultural intervention. For the most part, company members have transformed these experiences into self-mocking, humorous stories that mirror the ‘free-form back-chat’ performance style the company used onstage (newspaper clipping, [1974]) -- they joke about audiences asking, scornfully, ‘are you students?’ or shouting ‘you’ll only have to carry it all off again!’ as they were bringing in the set (Fieldnotes, 1 October 2019). These stories allow the company to rationalise -- and make light of -- difficult audience encounters and to assert ownership of the narrative by establishing a self-consciously amateur aesthetic.

[[figure 4]].

[[figure 5]]

Nostalgia, sentimentality and the dramatic repertoire

In addition to the self-deprecating jokes company members tell about themselves, there is a core set of humorous anecdotes in circulation that play upon Live Theatre audiences’ lack of familiarity with the conventions of theatre. The amateur aesthetic that emerges from these encounters is located in the assumed ‘amateur’ status of the early Live Theatre audience. Given that they explicitly sought audiences who had

'never fancied going to a theatre' (fig. 1), and whose cultural assumptions and expectations of what might happen were unknown in advance, the company were often surprised by the nature of responses to their work. McLane recalls a workshop that followed one performance, during which she remained in character, and notes with wonder and amusement that the children she was working with did not suspect she was playing a part but instead 'really believed it was real' (Fieldnotes, 28 June). For McLane, this was an intensely satisfying moment of collective magic that seemed to take both performers and audiences beyond what they thought was possible in performance. Similarly, Orwin recounts her experience during a performance of CP Taylor's *A Nightingale Sang in Eldon Square* (1978) at a community centre in Walker: when, in character, she was abandoned by her lover and began to cry, a member of the audience reached across and handed her a hankie saying 'he's not worth it, Pet' (Fieldnotes, 12 July). Even remembering the story many years later Orwin was deeply moved by the compassionate gesture.

Undoubtedly, moments such as this were professionally validating for performers. They also suggest that Live Theatre's radical reimagining of the performer-audience relationship resulted in a shift in the 'distribution of affect' in their work (Hurley, 2010: 9), and opened up the possibility that the performers might be as moved by the unplanned interjections of audience members as the audience were by what they saw on stage. And yet, while the exchanges were gratifying and pleasurable for company members, they also indicate a growing 'professionalism' in Live Theatre's performance style and mark the shift from socially-engaged work towards what Lawson has described as 'nostalgic and sentimental' plays. *Nightingale* was one of a number of new plays developed for Live Theatre in the late 1970s and early 1980s to achieve national recognition (it was filmed for the BBC) and it has established its place within the company's repertoire. The success of this play, and others like it, fundamentally changed the ethos of Live Theatre and initiated a new approach to making work, which no longer saw theatre as 'a means of production', but instead as 'a collection of texts' (McGrath, 1979: 54). As the company gained in skill and experience, and began to accept public funding, both the nature of the work and the company's risky relationship with its audience also began to change. The residue of an amateur aesthetic remains in the circulation of well-rehearsed anecdotes of humorous failure, which are told by Live Theatre performers with such virtuosity that they dismiss the possibility of amateurism even

as they invoke it. It is also present in Live Theatre's dramatic repertoire which continues to negotiate the complex and changing relationships between work and leisure that working-class communities have experienced following rapid deindustrialisation in the North East. What has been lost, however, is the messy idealism of those early years in which Live Theatre's amateur aesthetic worked to frame the performance encounter as a negotiation of participatory ethics. By willingly adopting a non-aggressive, self-deprecating posture within this negotiation, the company radically reimagined the performer--audience relationship and created space for its audiences to take an active role in the processes of cultural production.

Notes

1 Examples include Northern Glory by Phil Woods (1989), which tells the story of the amateur Northern Football League, and Lee Hall's Pitmen Painters (2007), which focuses on a group of amateur artists from a mining village.

2 I have previously written about the amateur aesthetic in Live Theatre's more recent work, and explored how this aesthetic has created and sustained a sense of organisational identity (2019).

3 All fieldnotes refer to ethnographic research, which I undertook with early Live Theatre company members in 2019.

4 A club act was 'paid off' when the performers were asked to leave the stage before the end of their show, usually as the result of an unfavourable audience reaction.

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Figures

Figure 1. Promotional flyer advertising Live Theatre and outlining the company’s aims [ca.1975], demonstrating both the low ticket prices and self-deprecating humour (‘At 20p -- it can’t be bad!’). Courtesy of the Val McLane Archive, Special Collections, Newcastle University.

Figure 2. Handwritten poster [ca.1976], showing makeshift approach. Courtesy of the Val McLane Archive, Special Collections, Newcastle University.

Figure 3. Head shots of early company members [ca.1973], L--R: Val McLane, Lorraine Lawson (then Lingard), Madeleine Newton. Courtesy of the Val McLane Archive, Special Collections, Newcastle University.

Figure 4. Live Theatre performing CP Taylor’s The Killingworth Play at a local school (1978). Photo Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen, courtesy of Live Theatre Archive, Special Collections, Newcastle University.

Figure 5. An early Live Theatre audience [ca.1976]. Courtesy of Live Theatre Archive, Special Collections, Newcastle University.