Building Resilient Actor Practice: Reciprocal relationships in theatre with and for children

Jennifer Andersen

Jennifer Andersen is an actor and theatre maker whose work has included visual theatre, interactive installations and musical composition. She has a long term interest in children's arts and has made many new works for young audiences, most recently with the theatre company Pocketfool. She is the coordinator of the artist learning program at ArtPlay, a children's arts centre in Melbourne, and is a PhD candidate at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education (University of Melbourne).

Introduction

The results of two recent reports on the mental health of professionals in the Australian entertainment industry are shocking. *Working in the entertainment industry*[1] and *The Australian actors' wellbeing study: a preliminary report*[2] indicate that actors and other workers across the industry experience high levels of anxiety, depression, suicidal feelings, bullying, financial stress, insomnia, relationship difficulties and drug and alcohol abuse. These two reports, and other investigations into the lives of actors,[3] show that actors contend with unique and often severe industrial and social stresses. My PhD research explores how actor practice is shaped by creating theatre with, and for children, drawing on the experiences of nine actors who work in this field. The findings suggest that actors engaged in this sector experience working conditions and creative practices that give them satisfaction, autonomy and joy. In particular, they develop an outward looking practice that is focused on their relationship with the audience who become co-players in what UK theatre artist, Tim Crouch, calls a "structured conversation".[4] My own twenty-five years of experience as an actor has been that this live exchange with the audience is one of the central thrills of acting. It promotes new theatrical ideas, techniques and beliefs, and empowers practitioners. This paper examines the practices of actors who create theatre with, and for children that appear

to promote resilience, and considers the wider implications for the roles and responsibilities of actors in the theatre.

What is resilient actor practice?

The Commission on the Social Determinants of Health (CSDH) for the World Health Organisation (WHO) defines resilience as the capacity to "react and adapt positively when things go wrong".[5] Resilient actor practice could therefore refer to a number of characteristics beyond the skill most obviously connected with this definition; that of being able to improvise well. It could also refer to 'staying power' in the industry, healthy professional identity, and the development of strong craft. The CSDH notes that while resilience is influenced to some extent by individual qualities and actions, it is also strongly connected to external factors such as social justice and positive relationships. It identifies three inter-connected social contributors to mental health: material circumstances, psycho-social circumstances (i.e. sense of control over one's life), and political voice.[6] When applied to actor practice, these factors may be interpreted as financial security, creative autonomy and professional respect and agency. It is clear from the industry reports cited in the introduction that actors' working lives rarely achieve these goals, so an examination of incidences where they do so can help to identify the conditions that may subsequently contribute to resilient practice.

Material, social and political conditions

The entertainment industry exposes actors to many inherently stressful material conditions including night time performances, physical strain, long hours, and touring. The effects of these conditions can be mitigated through better pay, proper breaks and sufficient rehearsal time but they are all overshadowed by the scourge of the industry: chronic unemployment and the severe financial and emotional strain that follows. Most of the actors interviewed for my ongoing PhD research enjoy higher rates of creative employment than many of their peers, which is important for several reasons. For one of these actors, Alex Pinder, working in Theatre in Education in the 1970s and 1980s gave him a welcome long term contract on an Equity minimum wage. It also offered him the opportunity to perform shows hundreds of times, to work in an ensemble and to play a variety of roles. A consideration of how material

factors such as these intersect with actors' social and political lives prompts a revisit of notions of resilient actor practice.

The CSDH defines psycho-social circumstances as the "psychological/emotional/cognitive impact of social factors"[7] which may include, for example, negative feelings stemming from unemployment. Like any skill, acting requires repetition but it can be difficult for actors to obtain the necessary hours 'on the floor' in either a paid or unpaid capacity. Moore finds that this can lead to a crisis of identity as performers worry that they cannot call themselves actors if they are not employed as such, and become anxious about the associated potential loss of skills.[8] Alex Pinder says working in TIE satisfied this professional and personal need to identify and practice as an actor:

> You just wanted to work as an actor. That's it. And working with children was
> kind of put down a bit but I figured it was better than working as a waiter.

Theatre with, and for children often involves long tours and repeated workshops and these employment opportunities have given the actors in my research a chance to exercise control over their professional lives through opportunities to refine their craft. For example, Ellen Steele claims long tours of theatre for children have helped her to identify persistent problems in her work. She says:

> As much as you think that something's vital, if you then see that, "Well, you've
> been doing it for six weeks now and it's still not landing the way we envisaged
> it …" I think children's theatre is great for that. Get rid of it. Keep adjusting.

A German-born actor in my research, Jens Altheimer, says that he was led to pursue a family market in Australia when his idiosyncratic style of clowning proved difficult to sell to adult audiences here. Children's theatre has therefore provided him with the vital ingredient of opportunity that is necessary for furthering his practice. Importantly, Jens defines practice as both his performances and his ability to analyse and shape all aspects of production. The willingness, confidence and opportunity to do so makes him what UK theatre artist Tim Crouch, in an interview with Patrick O'Kane, has called an "authorial actor". In this interview Crouch says that he almost retired from acting because he was often denied the opportunity to contribute to theatre productions beyond the narrow parameters of characterisation. Frustration with being excluded from the 'creative' production team is echoed by other actors

who reveal that acting is frequently positioned by the industry as a process of translation rather than creation.[9] Crawford says this, and other conditions that infantilise actors and restrict what the CSDH calls their 'political voice', have a detrimental effect on practice because, "It is hard to make a theatre a place of belonging when the people on stage do not belong".[10]

The importance of relationships

For Crouch, an authorial actor is not just one who gets to decide what costume she wears on stage. Rather, the term refers to the actor's sense of responsibility for everything that happens in "the world of the play",[11] including their relationships with other actors and the audience. The CSDH identifies the quality of relationships as a key factor in resilience, so it is important to examine how they intersect with actor practice and the presence of children.

Crawford observes that whilst they are kept at arm's length from important decision making processes, actors are simultaneously exhorted to use their social skills to create cohesive, productive rehearsals and performances.[12] They do this readily because it is through relationships with each other that productions come into being. As Crawford asserts, and my own experience as an actor confirms, whether it is called ensemble practice, team work or 'complicité', the ability to work well as a group is one of principal pleasures and creative drivers of good theatre. Theatre with, and for children presents models for how this can be realised and the rewards it presents for actors.

Alex Pinder remembers that one of the greatest pleasures of working in TIE early in his career was performing as part of a long term ensemble, an opportunity that rarely exists today. Spatz observes that many actors yearn to participate in a "community of practice" and while he is referring largely to the development of shared technique, it is clear that ongoing artistic collaborations are a source of great creative and personal satisfaction for actors. Many of the participants in my research have developed long-term relationships with other artists that offer moral support and opportunities to extend, refine and articulate their practice. Matthew Kelly is half of the children's comedy duo, The Listies. In an interview for this research he said he is deeply appreciative of the 'permission' his creative partner grants him to be silly, to improvise and to present ever more exaggerated versions of his character on stage. Together,

they have built a distinctive and resilient practice built on trust, experimentation and experience.

When I commented to Jens Altheimer that it seems like relationships are very important to his theatre practice he replied, "That's what it all is in the end, isn't it?" This comment may seem odd, coming as it does from a solo performer, but he was referring to what is perhaps the most significant relationship of all in theatre: that which occurs between the actor and the audience. The special conditions of theatre with, and for children highlight the nature of this other, often under-acknowledged, exchange and point to its importance to confident, authorial and resilient actor practice.

The child audience

The interaction between audience and actor is fundamental to theatre. Although Auslander questions the scope and significance of the live theatrical exchange, his argument is largely an ontological one that does not refer to the feeling or experience of being in the theatre.[13] Elsewhere, the relationship between the audience and performer has been referred to as "autopoiesis"[14], a "feedback loop"[15], "interplay"[16] and "co-creation".[17] It shapes actor practice but has been given little explicit attention in training, the workplace, or research. This is surprising given that actors repeatedly emphasise the importance of the exchange. Also interviewed by O'Kane, Gabriel Gawin says,

> ... it's an active partnership, like dancing with someone, you can't ignore your partner and you can't dance for yourself. It's important to be in active relationship with the audience, moment, by moment. [18]

Tim Crouch calls this interaction a 'structured conversation' in which, although the actor has usually been given the authority to do most of the speaking, there is a 'shared responsibility' with the audience for what takes place.[19] He says audience members are,

> ...operating as frantically as I am, as an actor, to make sense, to make connections, to keep the live contact, to interpret, to understand, to create story, to create their own story.[20]

Choices made about staging and content shape this exchange, and although it may be more overtly present in highly interactive productions for children, it exists in some form in all

theatrical genres and between actors and audiences of all ages. A closer examination of this relationship suggests ways to achieve the "connection and enfranchisement" that Crawford says is "crucial to well-being"[21] and which aligns with the CSDH's advocacy of social connection and political voice.

A persistent theme arising from my research is the participating actors' love of the theatrical exchange that Alex Pinder describes as "communal dreaming". Matthew Kelly says he aims to make everyone feel part of this shared experience:

> [I] always look for what's in the room and always acknowledge that everyone is there. So I always make an effort to make as much eye contact with people as I can. I smile at people. You know, if someone's wearing a cool shirt, you tell them!

This genuine interest in the audience is common to all the actors in my research. They endeavour to get to know them, pay careful attention to their responses and use this information to calibrate their performances. Many of them say they have to make an extra effort to do so with children because of the inevitable distance between adult life and childhood. As one actor says, "I love being in that world, but it's not my world." One way they find a key to this world is by listening to children, both in the literal sense of receiving sound and in the sense of being open to the enriching possibilities presented by them. Indeed, Matthew Kelly says that, "everything that comes from the kids is an offer." Another actor participating in my research, Carolyn Hanna, works as a clown doctor in children's hospitals, where she has to establish accurate, individualized understandings of children in order to initiate the exchange they need at that moment. She says:

> So it's all of the reading and the signals and then taking those signals on board and making a game out of it 'til they feel comfortable enough to be part of the game. It doesn't take long to kind of walk into a room and go, "Oh, they're really into this. We can go somewhere directly." Or, you know; "We can't even go through the door."

While this restraint can result in some awkward moments, Carolyn says that by mentally asking children, "Actually, who are you? What do you find funny?" she is rewarded by being taken to different places imaginatively. As she explains:

> You surprise yourself. You don't know how you end up getting to such a ridiculous scenario. You went that way, and then you went around there, and you discovered that they laughed when you scrunched the plastic bag … and they will tell that story over and over again.

This focus on what the audience needs, rather than how the actor's performance is being rated, develops an outward-facing practice that may also prevent performance anxiety as David Warrilow tells Laurie Lassiter:

> There was a time when my perception of the audience was "us" and "them". I was so full of anxiety that I was not able to enter into the proper flow of the exchange. I was therefore for a long time in the position of investing a great deal of energy in defending what I was doing against supposed criticism.[22]

A focus on genuine interplay with the audience must also inevitably acknowledge their agency, giving them, as Crouch says, "authority to go where they like in relationship with that story".[23] This means, somewhat paradoxically, that actors may have to give up some power in order to enjoy the creative rewards of a respectful exchange. Dan Goronszy, who performs regularly in Polyglot Theatre's participatory events, said in an interview for my research that when she first began to work with children she didn't trust their creative abilities, or her own. By actively listening to children, and entering into more open collaborative relationships with them, she has been witness to their courage, creativity and generosity. This has emboldened her to take more risks with her own performances. She says of the positive effect this has had on her practice, "Working with children shifted my whole perception of art and my own place in the world." In the face of intermittent employment and prohibitively high production costs, Dan's practice is characterised by a strong sense of social and creative purpose arising from her experiences of working with children.

Conclusion

The World Health Organisation states that mental health problems require both social and individual solutions.[24] Resonating with this idea in his analysis of the interplay between the industrial, social and creative aspects of actor practice, Crawford proposes that "if we change the politics we change the art".[25] This paper highlights the importance of respectful reciprocal

relationships to that end but the fact that they are readily evident in children's theatre, particularly in devised and applied contexts, is not presented here to persuade actors to work in these fields. Rather, it serves to highlight what is important for maintaining resilient and enjoyable actor practice across all genres. Theatre actor training tends to focus on the actor's relationship with their character and co-performers, but the participants in my research challenge the notion that this alone can allow actors to access their full potential. Their experiences suggest a response to Crawford's call: if we change the art, and become connected to our power as artists through nurturing our relationship with the audience, we may also begin to change the politics that have such a strong influence on actor practice.

Acknowledgements

NOTES

[1] Julie van den Eynde, Adrian Fisher, and Christopher Sonn, *Working in the Australian Entertainment Industry. Phase 2: Executive Summary*. (Melbourne: Victoria University, 2015) Web. 10 Feb 2016. <http://entertainmentassist.org.au/vic/entertainmentassist/uploads/files/Phase%202%20Executive%20Summary%20-Final.pdf>

[2] Maxwell, Ian; Seton, Mark and Szabó, Marianna, 'The Australian actors' wellbeing study: A preliminary report', *About performance* 13 (2015): 69-113, 233-35.

[3] David Throsby and Anita Zednik, *Do you really expect to get paid? An economic study of professional artists in Australia.* Strawberry Hills, Australia Council for the Arts, 2010. Web. 9 Feb. 2016. <http://australiacouncil.gov.au/workspace/uploads/files/research/do_you_really_expect_to_get_pa-54325a3748d81.pdf>; Paul Moore, 'Longing to belong: Trained actors' attempts to enter the profession'. Unpublished PhD thesis University of Sydney, 2004. Web. 8 Feb. 2016. <http://hdl.handle.net/2123/2005>; Terence Crawford, 'Feudal positions and the pathology of contentment: Sites of disconnection for Australian theatre actor', *About Performance* 13 (2015): 23-43.

[4] Patrick O'Kane, *Actors' voices: The people behind the performances* (London: Oberon Books, 2012) 105.

[5] Lynne Friedli, *Mental health, resilience and inequalities.* Denmark: WHO, 2009. 24. Web. 2 Jan. 2016. <http://www.equalitiestoolkit.com/sites/default/files/shared/WHO%20Friedli.pdf>

[6] *Ibid* 8.

[7] *Ibid* 9.

[8] Moore, 'Longing to belong'.

[9] Patrick O'Kane; Terence Crawford, 'Feudal positions and the pathology of contentment: Sites of disconnection for Australian theatre actor', *About Performance* 13 (2015): 23-43; Terence Crawford. 2015. *Real human in this fantastical world: Political, artistic and fictive concerns of actors in rehearsal: An ethnography.* PhD thesis. University of Sydney, 2015. Web. 10 Feb. 2016. <http://hdl.handle.net/2123/13803>

[10] Crawford, 'Feudal positions', 27.

[11] O'Kane, *Actors' voices*, 92.

[12] Crawford, 'Feudal positions', 23-43.

[13] Philip Auslander, *Liveness* (London: Routledge, 1999).

[14] Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The transformative power of performance: a new aesthetics*, Trans S. Jain. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008) 34.

[15] *Ibid* 38.

[16] Geesche Wartemann, 'Theatre as Interplay: Processes of Collective Creativity in Theatre for Young Audiences', *Youth Theatre Journal,* 23.1 (2009) 6.

[17] Caroline Heim, *Audience as Performer: The changing role of theatre audiences in the twenty-first century*. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016) 167.

[18] O'Kane, *Actors' voices*, *187*.

[19] *Ibid* 105.

[20] *Ibid* 93-4.

[21] Crawford, 'Feudal positions', 23.

[22] Laurie Lassiter, 'David Warrilow: Creating symbol and cypher' in Phillip B. Zarrilli, ed., *Acting (re) considered: a theoretical and practical guide* (London: Routledge, 2005) 319.

[23] O'Kane, *Actors' voices*, 94.

[24] Friedli, *Mental health*, v.

[25] Crawford, 'Feudal positions', 30.