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Future cities

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Future Cities: Using drama as a tool for exploring communities.

Introduction: ‘By the way, if you’re not on Facebook then you don’t exist.’

These words, spoken in a devised theatre performance by a group of Romanian high school students, made me consider their understanding of the world. A world that – for them – is very different from the austere communist upbringing of their parents and grandparents. The themes of this school performance suggested a postmodern, fragmented world where order and definite ideas constantly shift; the only way for them to exist with any certainty is in the virtual cyberspace of Facebook and other social media platforms. But, of course, this is not enough. No one can exist just virtually; if they do so, their world will become even more distorted and fragmented, even more nonsensical and harsh. In this sense, their virtual worlds may become like the world of the Romanian people under Ceausescu; isolated and insecure.

Since 2014 I have been visiting Romania along with UK Drama undergraduates to work in schools on various projects. In that time, I have seen both UK and Romanian students learn from each other, as they lead and participate in workshops. More significantly, I have observed the students’ interactions with each other and seen how their mutual participation has fostered a kind of reciprocity that, I suggest, resonates with Victor Turner’s notion of spontaneous *communitas*, in which kinships are formed that ultimately become the foundation of structure and law.

Return to Iasi

In October 2017, I returned to Iasi – this time unaccompanied by my own students - for a series of workshops, exploring how we

might begin to make new communities. Beginning with a pre-text drawn from David Campton's 1977 play *Us and Them*, I guided the young people through a scenario of two groups of people finding land, sharing it, dividing it, building a fence then a wall, destroying the wall and, ultimately, each other. From this premise, I asked the question 'what would we build in a new city?' The young people began working in 'role' as architects and city planners with complete control over their designs; their only limit was their collective imagination. Working with the young people, aged between 13 and 16, soon started to generate some interesting ideas that revealed much about their attitudes to their fellow citizens and themselves. I asked the young people to work in small groups and sketch out ideas for a new city, a task they embraced with enthusiasm.

Structure of workshops: Metaxis and Otherness

As a guide to the reader, I will briefly outline the workshop structure. While it is not possible to give a detailed account of the activities, the following is intended to illustrate how the workshops were run and my role in them. Throughout, the students were in role as architects. Following this, they became various members of the new city: people in a park, doctors, teachers, politicians, children on a rollercoaster, and TV newsreaders amongst others. Thus, the young people were firmly embedded in roles. Often, I did not have to place them or direct them into these roles as they happened organically, an initial sign of emerging spontaneous communitas. For the young people as workshop participants, they inhabited dual roles; that is, they dwelled in two worlds simultaneously in what Augusto Boal would have termed metaxis. Boal suggests that when an 'oppressed' individual,

'in the role of artist, creates images of her own oppressive reality, she belongs to these worlds, both

utterly and completely ... shar[ing] and belong[ing] to these two autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image' (Boal 1995: 43).

Although Boal applies the term to theatre in which one is potentially liberated from social and political oppression, metaxis may be an important stage in the workshops as students can see their present and future selves, as well as being able to play 'roles' as 'architects' and 'citizens' of the new city.

The ideas explored in these workshops were a way of *being* as oneself but also *being* as a kind of Other. By using the term 'Other', I am drawing on the Lacanian notion of the unconscious as part of ourselves that we are not aware of and that 'which renders every subject alien from itself' (Fortier 2007: 91). In this sense, it refers to the other identities as 'Other' that we might inhabit. Therefore, where Otherness is explored, metaxis in this experience may be like Boal's own use of the process, in which he facilitated the exploration of other perspectives and opinions as a means of challenging and ultimately producing an efficacious outcome. In Boalian terms,

'in order for metaxis to come about, [an image of the Other] must become autonomous. When this is the case, *the image of the real is real as image*' (Boal 1995: 44).

Thus, participation in the imaginary world of the future city planners acted as a means of transubstantiating the self into an Other whilst also embodying the 'real' selves of the young people.

As for my role, I was the workshop leader, acting as a facilitator first and foremost. In another sense, I was in role: as a visitor to Romania and to the school, and perhaps imbued with a kind of 'specialness' or at least able to invite the curiosity of others. In process drama, this role of facilitator is often described as the

‘teacher in role’ and may involve this ‘role’ switching between character and teacher. Cecily O’Neill (1995) describes this practice as offering:

[B]oth a change of stance to the teacher ... and an opportunity to function as playwright within the work ... it is a means of engaging participants in active contemplation and inviting them to live in both the real and imagined world (126).

My role as facilitator was intended to be as a guide, someone to introduce the pretext and move the students along each stage. I made the decision to remain as myself rather than adopt a role as I wanted the students to be the creative driving force of the activities. Nevertheless, there were times when I found myself becoming part of the action, in a kind of metaxis, inhabiting both the world of the drama and the world of the school.

Each session began with an extended warm up and round of activities to explore the notions of working together, listening and responding to each other. This led to a general sense of egalitarianism and reciprocity among the participants and was an important levelling experience for all. Once this had been established, I guided students through various activities that worked on the principle of an A and a B; in other words, that there was some level of arbitrary individuality and separation. This was an important part of the process as I then introduced the students to *Us and Them* by David Campton, a play that explores – initially – reciprocity, egalitarianism and communitas but soon becomes about division and suspicion.

The pre-text: Imagining and building a future city

Once the story of *Us and Them* had been explored and the final image of the play was established, I introduced the students to the following pretext:

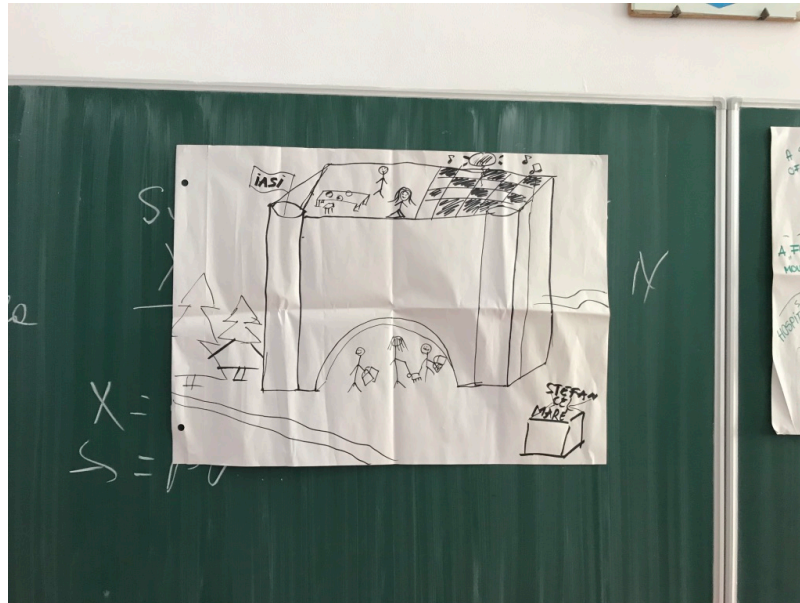


Figure 2: Drawing by workshop participants (October 2017).



Figure 3: Drawing by workshop participants (October 2017).

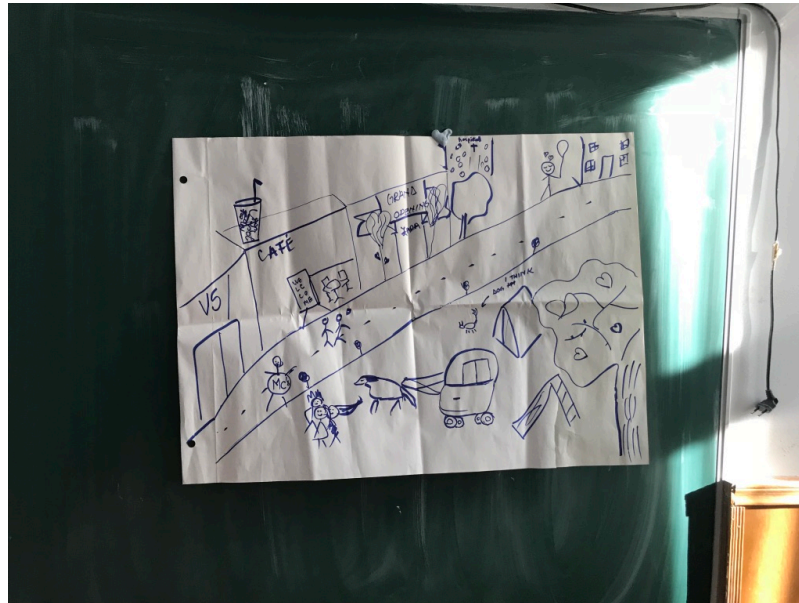


Figure 4: Drawing by workshop participants (October 2017).

The students' explanation of their plans revealed a set of values that embraced the Western late-capitalist ideology of shopping and entertainment (including shopping *as* entertainment), evident in their inclusion of malls and notable brands such as H&M, Zara, and Pull & Bear. It was notable, however, that there was a dominant sense of civic pride and duty coming from the young people. A glance at their drawings (see figures 1 to 4) reveals that they place great importance on schools, hospitals, public spaces such as parks and swimming pools, and council buildings. Revealingly, they also included reference to Stefan Del Mare - a Romanian national hero - suggesting an understanding of their heritage and a shared history as well as national pride. In addition to this reference to a collective past, one group of students included a 'statue of us,' indicating that they see themselves as citizens of the future whose contributions should be valued and celebrated. In an exercise where the students created a living statue to be placed in a fictional museum and explained by one member of the group, all of the students' choices focused on a sense of togetherness, civic pride and welcoming others into their

future community. For example, one group of students discussed how their statue represented people of the past as well as people of the present and future. There was a strong sense of national pride but one that welcomed all, no matter where they were from. In another exercise, later in the devising process, I gave the students the pretext of creating a TV advert for their new city. Rather than focus on the places, shops and attractions of the city, the young people placed themselves and others at the centre of the 'advert'. This exercise confirmed my thoughts about their wish to place people, rather than buildings, at the heart of a city.

Future citizens: Emerging communitas

As a result of these workshops, some interesting ideas emerged. Most strikingly for me was that these future citizens were concerned with being good citizens and fulfilling their civic responsibilities as much as their desire for shopping malls and multiplex cinemas. Perhaps I should not have been surprised at this although I was impressed at the depth of knowledge which the young people had, something that felt different to my experiences of working with UK citizens of the same age. It would be interesting to see a direct comparison between the two groups of young people, something that the project will endeavour to explore in future iterations. Most importantly, however, I felt that these workshops were concerned with a sense of exchanging cultures and experiences; of what they – as future city architects – could offer to others. This is where I felt a sense of communitas emerging, between the young people in the group as well as between the group and me. For Turner, there are three types of communitas:

(1) *existential* or *spontaneous* communitas ... (2) *normative* communitas, ... [and] (3) *ideological* communitas, which is a label one can apply to a variety

of utopian models of societies based on existential
communitas (1969: 132).

The first notion – spontaneous communitas – becomes tangible when groups of people, usually with a common interest, form a temporary kinship or solidarity. Turner cites the hippy movement of the 1960s and their ‘happenings’ as one such example of spontaneous communitas although more contemporary examples can be illustrated by fans at a football match or the collective euphoria felt by clubbers united by a DJ curating music. Despite the free and easy way in which spontaneous communitas emerges, it ultimately develops into part of the structure and law of society and therefore becomes ideological. Normative communitas usually emerges in a logical manner, as a need to ‘organize and mobilize resources’ (Turner 1969: 132). Spontaneous communitas, which is a much more organic process, emerged from both the workshops in my earlier visits with UK and Romanian participants and during my most recent experience in Iasi. In the first few visits, this communitas developed as the students from both countries got to know each other and a sense of mutual respect was earned. In my experience as a solo visitor, I witnessed how the Romanian students were deeply engaged in the drama activities but, more significantly, the ideas, beliefs and values that they embodied. For example, in asking the students to explain their proposed new city, they saw it as a space built on the values of the citizens. As they sketched plans for their city, they talked animatedly about how they would interact with the spaces, as consumers and members of a civic society. It was apparent to me that space, for these young Romanians, is empty without the individuals that comprise a community. Under Ceausescu’s regime, one might conjecture that these young people would regard space and their environment much as French sociologist Henri Lefebvre did; as ‘an obstacle, as a resistant ‘objectality’ at times as implacably

hard as a concrete wall' (Lefebvre 1991: 57). For the young person in Romania today, this resistant objectality has been removed as they embrace the freedom granted by membership of the European Union.

These workshops exploring how to build a city clearly illustrated Turner's notion of *communitas* in action. In the safe space of the school environment, these young people began to create a society in microcosm. For me, this raises some questions about the role of drama in education and its potential for empowering young people – not just as individuals who may become more confident – but as a means of bringing nascent communities together and addressing important questions about their collective future. In a UK that is currently negotiating its exit from the European Union, I believe that it is essential for young people to engage in similar activities as those young people in Romania and that drama is the means to do so. While it is not a case of directly comparing the UK with Romania, there is much to be learned from exploring these ideas in a range of diverse contexts.

This methodology of examining, understanding and (re)enacting societies is something explored by Victor and Edith Turner with anthropology students at the University of Virginia and with drama students at New York University in 1982. Using 'strips of behaviour' from other cultures, the Turners facilitated 'playshops' in which students could explore aspects of other cultures' behaviour as well as their own. This exploration and integration of cultures, including rites of passage such as wedding ceremonies, allowed the students to gain a deeper understanding of the world in which they lived. This kinetic understanding of familiar and unfamiliar cultures afforded the students in Virginia and New York an opportunity to gain an 'inside' view of their own worlds, both augmented and

challenged by the insertion strips of behaviour from alien cultures. In a similar way, the workshop participants in Romania were able to examine their present selves and speculate about their future selves in a safe and supportive environment. This kind of self-reflection is, I believe, an essential aspect in the development of young people and their identities. In an age where (to paraphrase my opening statement) lacking a virtual identity is to lack a real identity, young people need opportunities to explore collective identities, measured against other collective structures, beliefs and values; only then, can they begin to form a clearer picture of individual identity.

Conclusion

Drama is an effective medium through to explore these ideas and ideals. The next stages of this project lie in the potential for these workshops to further explore future cities and the people who live in them. In investigating future cities and future communities, the potential for spontaneous *communitas* grows and it is this spontaneous *communitas* that ultimately, argues Turner, becomes structure and law. Whilst, at first, this may seem to be a negative outcome of the freeing process of spontaneous *communitas*, it is necessary for further episodes of *communitas* to occur and to continue to build future cities and future citizens.

My aim is to develop the Future Cities project further as more visits to Romania take place whilst also cultivating the project in the UK, partly as a means of comparison between the participants but also as a way of building links between the UK and Europe. To me, this has some urgency as we hurtle towards 11pm on 29th March 2019 when the United Kingdom officially leaves the European Union. Its urgency lies in the need to draw on the positive attitudes of the young people who see their futures as a collective one, where the group is more important than the

individual and there is a collective responsibility for our worlds. These 'real' worlds will become a reality whether we intervene or not but it is through 'drama worlds' and the resulting creative outputs that enable consideration of future societies and communities. The importance of this should not be underestimated, nor should the role of drama in doing so, as there are many possibilities and great potential to empower the participants, transforming the young citizens of today into the architects of tomorrow.

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