

# Performance Research

## A Journal of the Performing Arts

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rprs20>

---

## Practising Freedom

Combatting modern slavery in heterotopic spaces

Stephen Collins & Nii Kwaterlai Quartey

To cite this article: Stephen Collins & Nii Kwaterlai Quartey (2023) Practising Freedom, Performance Research, 28:2, 125-129, DOI: [10.1080/13528165.2023.2260719](https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2023.2260719)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2023.2260719>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 19 Dec 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 45



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Practising Freedom

## Combatting modern slavery in heterotopic spaces

STEPHEN COLLINS AND NII KWATERLAI QUARTEY

### INTRODUCTION

In his lecture 'Of Other Spaces', Foucault describes heterotopias as places 'outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality' (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986: 24). The James Town Community Theatre Centre (JTCT) sits a little set back from the John Evans Atta Mills High Street that runs along the coast of Accra in Ghana. It is, perhaps, a ten-minute walk to the west of James Fort, the first fort built by the British on the then Gold Coast, and only five minutes from the James Town Lighthouse. In other words, the JTCT does have a location in reality; it is a physical space. However, as we discuss in this article, the reality in which it sits is a contested site, a palimpsest of layered colonial and postcolonial history. Moreover, the JTCT is above all a meeting place, where complex, painful and taboo topics are shared, discussed and resolved through performance. By analyzing the JTCT, and the work of the resident theatre company Act for Change (AfC), in their ongoing project to develop community capacity to support survivors of modern slavery and human trafficking, this article seeks to tease out the ways in which thinking about the JTCT as a heterotopia, helps to articulate its significance within the James Town community.

### HETEROTOPIAS AND PERFORMANCE

Foucault distinguishes heterotopias from utopias, which he describes as 'fundamentally unreal spaces ... without geographical markers' (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986: 25), suggesting that heterotopias are real but exist 'elsewhere', in a space adjacent to normal life. As such, they serve a 'precise and determined function within a society' (ibid.). They are spaces, such as boarding schools or gardens that, though real,

sit apart from the reality of the everyday. From this description, it is possible to read all theatre spaces as heterotopic. Ever since the development of performance spaces in ancient Greece, sites of performance have served specific functions in communities, providing a space for an audience to enter and view a world or time that is reflective of, but not, their own.

Indeed, Foucault draws upon theatre spaces to expand his definition, suggesting:

The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. Thus it is that the theater brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another. (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986: 25)

Here, Foucault draws out two important features: first, the architecture of the space itself does not change, it remains the 'rectangle of the stage', for which we might substitute the theatre in the round or the arena space, or any other configuration. Second, that the playwright and director are free to rearrange the stage picture as they see fit to place the action in different locations and the audience, by convention, accept the shift. Fundamentally, the audience recognizes that they exist in a world separate from the world of the play.

The relationship between the world of the performance and the world of the audience has been the subject of much analysis. As Mike Pearson suggests, '[p]erformance relies upon the shared competence of all the participants to identify and mark off a strip of behaviour, this grouping of activities and objects, as performative' (Pearson and Shanks 2001: 57). Here, as Pearson notes, the separation of the world of the play and the world of the audience is acknowledged by both performer and audience. Irrespective of how drawn into the action of the play we may become, it remains a fundamentally different world. As Marvin

Carlson suggests, within the performance of the play,

the actor remains an uncanny, disturbing 'other', inhabiting a world with its own rules, like a space traveller within a personal capsule, which the audience, however physically close, can never truly penetrate. (Carlson 1989: 12)

There is a clear synergy between these conceptualizations of the dynamics of the performance space. The theatre auditorium, as heterotopia, houses an interface between the world of the play and the 'duller, safer world of everyday reality' (Carlson 1989: 12). It is at this interface that, according to Carlson, theatre occurs. Elinor Fuchs (2004) takes this further, suggesting that the play *is* a world with its own architectonics and internal logic.

Though this description is uncontroversial and fits neatly within a Western tradition of performance theory from the late twentieth century, it is limited as an understanding of the theatre as a meeting place. In Carlson and Fuch's characterization, the audience act as witnesses to another world that moves before their eyes. However, as we describe below, the theatre space and the world of the play can be activated as spaces in which audiences, performers and the wider community can meet and, under the right circumstances, co-author meaningful change through performance.

#### THE JTCT AND JAMES TOWN

Though James Town today is an area of multiple economic deprivation (Tutu *et al.* 2017) throughout the late nineteenth century and early twentieth, James Town was the centre of the Gold Coast's wealth and status. The Gold Coast was the name given by the British to the area of the coast that is now part of modern Ghana. As one of the first British settlements on the Gold Coast, James Town has cycled through multiple identities since the seventeenth century (Macmillan 1968 [1920]; Wellington 2017).

The changes in James Town's status can be seen in the architecture of the area. As noted, the chief's palace – the Ngleshie-Alata Mantse – is a short walk from the JTCT and occupies a commanding spot on the main road. The name, Ngleshie, a corruption of 'English', and Alata or

Alada, the name of a slave market in modern Nigeria from where people were brought by the British to build James Fort in the seventeenth century, provides an insight into the dynamics and development of James Town during that period (Wellington 2017). James Fort and nearby Ussher Fort, originally built by the Dutch as Fort Crevocoeur, speak to the contested status of the area before and during the colonial period, the legacy of which can be seen today as you walk between 'Dutch Accra' and 'British Accra'. Further along the main road towards the JTCT, the remains of the circular Kingsway building, now derelict and home to graffiti and impromptu games of football, was, a hundred years ago, noted as the finest department store in West Africa (Macmillan 1968 [1920]: 173).

Decades of underinvestment by consecutive governments have left James Town's economy largely reliant on the traditional wooden fishing boats that line the beach below the lighthouse. The jetty, once used to bring in the latest motorcars and goods from Europe and America, is now largely derelict (175). Despite these challenges, the arts are helping to bring attention back to the area. James Town is now home to the annual James Town Arts Festival and the internationally recognized Chale Wote Street Art Festival.

The JTCT was established in 2011 in an old warehouse that was then used as a boxing gym. Each evening, when the boxers had finished training, the company would clean the space and run theatre workshops for the community. Following approval from the local traditional heads, the space was given to the company Act for Change to run as a community theatre.

The JTCT is now a dedicated arts space with a large performance studio and an outside courtyard. The regular sound of drummers and local children taking part in drama workshops means that people have become used to the venue as a hub for the arts, open to them to see and take part in performances, workshops and rehearsals. It is a performance hub that serves its community on multiple levels. The arts form part of the fabric of James Town and the JTCT's geographical position and reputation means that everyone in the community knows where it is and what it does. It is, as the Ghanaian theatre

pioneer Efua Sutherland said of the first Ghana Drama Studio, 'a place where experiments in African drama are going on' (July 1987: 76).

Act for Change, the JTCT's resident company, promotes the cohesiveness of the James Town community using drama as a tool for social change. Run by Collins Seymah Smith and Nii Quartey with a roster of core collaborators, who in many cases are from James Town and have worked on community projects with AfC, since its inception, Act for Change have delivered projects on sanitation, teen pregnancy, teen marriage, sexual health, modern slavery and human trafficking.

These rights-based projects, which are drawn from specific issues within the community, are delivered through an applied performance technique they call 'touch-tag'. Derived from Augusto Boal's work, Act for Change develop performances on specific issues for a particular audience. A joker introduces the piece and the format of the day, the piece is performed once and then the joker invites the performers to begin again, although, this time, members of the audience can freeze the action, tap the actor they wish to replace and then act out a potential solution to the problem.

Projects are the result both of funding opportunities – AfC is often approached by foreign embassies to deliver projects within the local community – and by the team's walking tour business. James Town Walking Tours offers tourists a guided tour through the area and a description of the local history. Money raised goes to fund the running of the JTCT, so that the theatre can still operate and pay a core team while waiting for larger jobs. This model of sustainable practice also means that the AfC is not reliant on national or international funding but can adapt to opportunities as they arise. This financial autonomy also means that the company is free to respond directly to issues as they arise in the community.

#### THE JTCT AND MODERN SLAVERY

Since 2018, Act for Change has been researching modern slavery and human trafficking in James Town. Our research identified three forms of modern slavery and human trafficking in James

Town: boys leaving James Town for fishing on the Volta, girls coming in from surrounding villages for work in the sex trade and educated young women leaving for domestic service in the Gulf states. Modern slavery is a taboo subject in James Town. In a manner that mirrors social and cultural dynamics during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, modern slavery is conducted in ways that make it easy to ignore. It is effectively hidden and so unacknowledged in the community.

One of the main findings of our research is that, although James Town is in many ways a close-knit community, there is a distinct lack of formal or informal mechanisms for supporting survivors who return. In the case of young women coming back from the Gulf states, survivors remain isolated by the impression that they have travelled abroad and so must have made money. Thus, their suffering is unacknowledged, and their experience is not used to warn other, vulnerable groups. Hence, there was a real need to use performance to develop a meeting point.

Over the course of the project, we tried different approaches to communicating the stories of survivors. Initially, we adopted a verbatim approach, taking the stories of survivors into local senior schools. Speaking directly to at-risk groups, the performers from Act for Change produced a performance experience that conformed to the description by Pearson and Carlson discussed above. The company performed a play to an audience who were clearly invested and angered by what they saw. Feedback from the performance highlighted the need for change and the desire for the government and police to do more. However, one of the areas we were investigating was how to build community capacity to safeguard survivors and act against modern slavery in a manner that goes beyond acknowledging that it exists. Hence, we needed to move beyond asking the audience to witness a performance describing modern slavery and enter into a mediated dialogue.

The most recent stage of the project took place in June 2022 at the JTCT. Over the course of three days, we brought together the various stakeholders who had been involved in the project to date: survivors, arts practitioners, school students, teachers and non-governmental

organizations (NGOs). Within the walls of the studio space, Smith and Quartey led the group for two days to develop a touch-tag performance based on the experiences of the survivor-experts.

Following two days of rehearsal and development inside the JTCT, the company emerged into the courtyard and began to gather the audience. The courtyard space, bordered by the main road and separated by a low wall and an open gate, provides a clear line of sight for the community to see the performers. As text messages and children spread the word that the performance was about to begin, the performers began to warm up, standing in a large circle and singing call-and-response songs, inviting the audience in. The audience, a mixture of friends, colleagues, children home from school and community members with an hour to spare, entered the courtyard without needing to pay, and each took one of the plastic chairs placed outside the centre or found a space on the floor. Using handheld microphones and a simple set, the company, now led by one of the survivor-experts as the joker, led the audience in a gentle warm-up, bringing the performers and audience together as accomplices, gently priming the need for not just their attention, but their action.

As the performance played out, the joker invited the audience to participate, intervene and test solutions to the protagonist's problems. As the performance went on, the solutions were discussed, debated and refined; they built upon one another until a solution was found that the audience agreed was practical and actionable in the real world.

Here, the space moved beyond the slightly idealized, pastoral view of heterotopias described by Foucault, into a productive heterotopia. The space provided a physical context in which survivors of modern slavery and the community came together to discuss an issue of the utmost importance that, to that point, lacked a forum. The skill of the practitioners was to use performance as a methodology for opening up a conversation. The location and dynamics of the space provided a safe space, adjacent to the real world of the everyday, where that conversation could take place.

## CONCLUSIONS

The James Town Community Theatre Centre provides a great deal more than simply an audience's ability to witness an adjacent world. Here, the community space takes on the form of the public square where alternative solutions can be played out by spectators within the scaffolding of the heterotopia. This is to say, the parameters are clearly established for the participants – performers, stakeholders, survivors, audience – that the focus is on developing solutions to specific instances of human trafficking and modern slavery that have taken place within the community. The solutions put forward by the audience are in some ways secondary to the dynamics of conversation that take place between the audience and the performance. As in many Theatre of the Oppressed practices, the solution is negotiated live in front of an audience who make their approval or disapproval known in real time. However, as heterotopias represent a 'break with traditional time' (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986: 26) there is no limit on how many solutions can be tested or how many moments rerun.

The JTCT is perhaps a more developed version of a heterotopia than the form of theatre invoked by Foucault. As he explains: '[t]he site is defined by relations of proximity between points or elements' (23). This describes the function of the site as a meeting point between multiple elements, not simply a performance and an audience. Hence, it is the fact that the JTCT is a community interlocuter that can accommodate and facilitate multiple meetings that elevates the work of the JCTC from a traditional theatrical experience of actor/audience to a socially and politically charged act of advocacy where solutions to real-world problems are played out in the heterotopia of the performance space.

This dynamic, the active pursuit of societal change, would not be possible without the real location of the JTCT, a community space that exists to challenge and serve its community through the arts. It is perhaps not, therefore, Foucault's definition of heterotopias that is expanded in this analysis but rather his, and others', analysis of the dynamics of performance. What made the second iteration of the project

in James Town more successful than the first was that it included multiple elements, multiple stakeholders who were brought together in a manner that enabled and facilitated their 'relations of proximity'. We were able to have a conversation about an ordinarily taboo subject, and so develop community strategies that may have a real-world impact, because of the status of the space within the community.

The JTCT space is a geographical, social and artistic interlocuter; it is the bridge between the community, the arts and James Town's past and present. Like all theatres, it is a heterotopia, a space. Unlike other theatres, however, the JTCT demonstrates an alternate model for a cultural venue that is responsive to and reflective of the community in which it sits.

#### REFERENCES

- Carlson, Marvin (1989) *Places of Performance: The semiotics of theatre architecture*, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Foucault, Michel and Miskowiec, Jay (1986) 'On other spaces', *Diacritics* 16(1): 22–7.
- Fuchs, Elinor (2004) 'Visit to a small planet: Questions to ask a play', *Theater* 34(2): 4–9.
- July, Robert (1987) *An African Voice: The role of the humanities in African independence*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Macmillan, Alistair (1968 [1920]) *The Red Book of West Africa: Historical and descriptive, commercial and industrial facts, figures & resources*, London: F. Cass Publishers.
- Pearson, Mike and Shanks, Michael (2001) *Theatre/ Archeology: Disciplinary dialogues*, London: Routledge.
- Tutu, Raymond, Boateng, J., Busingye, J. and Ameyaw, E. (2017) 'Asymmetry in an uneven place: Migrants' lifestyles, social capital, and self-related health status in James Town, Accra', *GeoJournal* 82(5): 907–21.
- Wellington, Nii (2017) *Stones Tell Stories at Osu: Memories of a host community of the Danish transatlantic slave trade*, Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers.