

## What is education for? A review of Roger Wooster's *Theatre in Education in Britain*.

by Bobby Colvill

Theatre in Education was a uniquely British art form, a hybrid of participatory drama practice and political theatre, it forged a truly radical child-centred practice. Unlike children's theatre in which a performance could be for the whole school, a TIE programme often took place over a whole school day and involved only one class at a time. Preferring 'minds in action' to 'bums on seats' this practice was diametrically opposed to a market-led artistic policy, favouring quality over quantity in the execution of its aims.

The insistence of time and a relatively small pupil-to-adult ratio enabled TIE to develop its participatory practice. The participatory element of a TIE programme developed into something more sophisticated than a simple forum for the young people to air their opinions. The drama and the theatre were interwoven into the same fictional conceit, where the young people would watch the theatre element as if it were an event in the world of the role they were inhabiting. Geoff Gillham, in describing the three key features of TIE, wrote about the participatory aspect thus:

... is the physical manipulation of the real world by the children in the fictional world of the TIE programme. And they bring their selves, their whole selves, to this physical manipulation: their life experience, their knowledge, their feelings, their imaginations, their ideas and insights, and their hands and bodies. They are **in it**, not **watching** it only. This is the characteristic of learning in **ordinary** life. Gillham, G (1994) SCYPT Journal No 27.

As close as one can get to the experience of ancient Greek drama in the modern world.

The democratic dialogue that was practised in the school hall and classroom was mirrored in the set-up of the companies themselves. Unlike the wider theatre profession, actor/teachers were employed on long-term contracts, eliminating the insecurity of unemployment and enabling them to develop along with the theory and practice of the team. Companies also tried to set themselves up as collective practices, placing the control of the artistic decision-making into the hands of the whole team. Although this was not always the most efficient way to run a company, sometimes bringing about a disputes - some necessary, some not - nonetheless, it offered the members of the companies ownership over their artistic programme, something very few people had in theatre or in any other walk of life.

These two symbiotic components of TIE, the artistic practice and its company structures, stood it apart from the norm in both the theatre industry and the world of education, especially since the advent of the 1988 education reform act. That is not to argue that there was no radical drama practice happening in schools. There was and there continues to be authentic drama teachers who structure extraordinary learning experiences for their pupils. It is simply to point out that TIE stood against the current of marketisation that pulled both professions into perilous waters.

Even though the practice of TIE was radically unique, it went mostly unseen by the media and the general public and apart from its own professional publications, was largely undocumented. This void was often filled with myth, gossip and snobbery from those who could not accept that the practice of TIE was as artistically significant as the theatre staged at our national institutions.

Wooster has attempted to address this gap with his timely book 'Theatre in Education in Britain', an insightful narrative and analysis of the conditions in which TIE was created. Whilst this is a book that documents the particular core philosophical and theoretical ideas that created the TIE movement, in excavating the site in which it began, thrived and became extinct, or, depending on your perspective, evolved into its present day form, it is also an implicit critique of democracy and education in general.

The book is separated into three sections: 'Roots', 'Fruits' and 'Shoots?' with examples of practice in each section and an after-word from three academics to sum up and critique Wooster's own analysis of each period of development.

The TIE movement has its roots in the ideas and practices that reach back to the struggle for rights and democracy at the time of the English Civil War, and whose present day form takes the shape of the struggle for the welfare state. As well as narrating the development of the political and social landscape, Wooster also focuses in the early chapters on the developments in theatre, psychology and educational thinking between the two world wars where we can see a recognisable influence on the practice of TIE.

It was the founding of the welfare state that produced a ground rich enough for these ideas to take hold as a practice and spread throughout British schools.

The end of the Second World War is immediately identifiable as a watershed in British social life. Returning soldiers and their war weary family's voted for a radical shift in the governance of their lives. (13)

The Labour Party offered a programme of universal welfare and was duly elected. Yet, whilst keeping their promise of creating the NHS, social security and nationalising key industries, they kept private interest alive within these primary institutions.

Wooster usefully reminds us that the Welfare State, whilst improving the lives of working people utterly, was a compromise:

An NHS with private hospital beds, nationalisation with the same bosses as before and an education system that entrenched class divisions had become accepted. The socialist utopian dream had been betrayed to the gods of consumerism and consumption in the 1940s and not even the Labour Party had the will to try and construct a new social reality. (23)

Although the welfare state had the contradiction of private interest embedded in its structures, it also contained the logic of equality, rights and social progress. Whilst, the possibility of a change in social relations had been stunted, the welfare state had, nevertheless, breached the ideological walls of capitalism and offered the possibility of a different world.

Education, particularly in the 60s and 70s is often, lazily, characterised as a time when trendy left wing teachers hijacked our schools to politically indoctrinate the young. As Wooster, quite rightly points out:

...it has become accepted wisdom that these post war years were a hotbed of progressive pedagogical approaches and this view needs to be tempered. (19)

However, new ideas were beginning to challenge the old ways and for a time there was a useful debate, about the nature of education at government level as well as classroom level. This came to an end, at government level anyway, at the first onset of the economic crisis in the 70s. In 1976 the Labour Prime Minister called for a 'great debate' about education.

This led to a new consensus that a centralised, functionalist response to economic imperatives was required. (81)

Alongside developments in education, the establishment of the Arts Council after the war, concretised the idea of art as a right - along with, amongst other concepts, the right to health and education - subsidising theatre across the country in both repertory and community settings. With drama schools now open to the working classes, more students from working class backgrounds attending universities and theatres given the financial space to experiment, there was an explosion of creativity in British theatre.

And, in 1965, the year that comprehensive education was introduced, Edward Bond's *Saved* was premiered at the Royal Court and the first TIE programme was performed

by the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry.

Throughout the 1960s and 70s, TIE spread across the country as more and more people, driven by the principle of art as a right and the idea that theatre could change the world, set up their own companies. By 1977, TIE was flourishing with up to 90 companies operating across the country. As with all living processes; no one entity is identical to another, so with TIE, no one company was identical to another.

There were certain features or tropes as Wooster calls them that can be identified in the early days of the Belgrade:

The Coventry service was free to schools and the team would spend the whole day with the target group. There was extensive preparation involving staff, and support materials were provided for following up the work after the visit... (34)

It seems then that the structural similarities were enough to differentiate it from children's theatre and to define it as a uniquely new art form.

As TIE established itself as a recognisable feature of education provision in the UK, the need to develop and share the ideas that guided the artistic practice became a necessity. In 1973 The Standing Conference of Young Peoples Theatre (S.C.Y.P.T.) was set up:

...SCYPT emerged from a symposium of companies, local authorities and other funding agencies that discussed the content, philosophy and funding of the work. (61)

The organisation and its annual conference was a forum, a space in which companies could share their practice and most importantly the ideas guiding it. It became 'the cauldron for the advancement of TIE.'

Additionally, at a time that British politics was moving rapidly to the right (culminating in Thatcher's election in 1979), companies working to a more egalitarian agenda needed the solidarity of being part of the TIE movement.

In 1977 SCYPT began publishing its own professional journal. The Journal was a mix of theoretical essays from inside and outside the movement, case studies of companies' work and political analysis where relevant to the movement. For TIE practitioners, the journal was an essential tool in understanding their art form as it progressed.

Much is said about the political nature of SCYPT and the supposed sectarian nature of the debates and arguments. Wooster gives space to these issues and concerns without allowing sensationalism to deflect from the importance of the movement's struggle for

theory and the theoretical nature of the differences that developed within the organisation.

Wooster, usefully, notes the wider political currents within which TIE was trying to stay afloat. There were some pretty major events during the life of TIE: (in no particular order) the Cold War, the end of the Soviet Union, the end of Apartheid, the war in Bosnia, the first war in Iraq, the Miner's strike, anti-Trades-Union legislation, the 1988 Education Reform Act to name a few. Events which were not only reflected in the practice with the young people but also in the fight for the very survival of the art form. It is no surprise then, with such a high level of political engagement by its practitioners and an overtly political content to the work, that the struggle for a coherent theory would get entwined with the political struggles taking place at the time.

It was, indeed, this relationship between art and society that was at the heart of the theoretical differences within the movement. If theatre/drama is to be put into action to change the world for the better, how was it to be done? What was it about the nature of drama that could achieve this?

Obviously the work of Brecht was a major influence on the movement, especially the dramatic devices intended to provoke his audiences to consciousness of the reality of their situation. As the participatory element became more sophisticated and less crudely didactic, the theories of Heathcote, Bolton and, for some, Boal, began to play a more prominent role in the devising process.

It was here that the major differences within the movement emerged. Warwick Dobson analyses it thus in his afterword to part one:

During the course of the 1980's, SCYPT companies divided into two camps. The first might be characterised as those espousing an issue-based approach; and the second, those committed to a concept-based approach. At the heart of this division is a fundamental philosophical difference; the former begins from an idealist position, the latter from materialism. (91)

The work of Heathcote and Boal were crucial to the thinking of both camps. Heathcote's work struck a deep chord with those attempting to forge a conceptual approach to TIE, whilst Boal's forum theatre offered a vehicle in which the young people could successfully solve the problem dramatised in the TIE programme.

Much later, the work and theory of Edward Bond would take the practice in a qualitatively new direction. Rejecting Brecht's attempt to alienate the audience from the dramatic event, to place them outside the event, Bond wanted to place the audience, in its imagination at the very centre of the drama, as if they were the eye of the storm.

Creating a gap for the audience to enter, Bond strips away the ideological signifiers that translate the event for the audience, forcing them to translate it themselves, evoking the imagination to search for reason.

Wooster's attempt to trace this development of theory within the TIE movement, its internal differences and outside influences, is, for me, the strength of the book. It is precisely these theoretical struggles that, ironically, take the book beyond an academic study into an understanding of the ideology inherent in present day educational policy.

In the second part of the book, 'Fruits', Wooster pulls through the line of part one with two in-depth case studies of TIE programmes demonstrating approaches Pre-ERA of *Careless Talk* devised by Theatr Powys in 1986 and *When Sleeping Dogs Awake* written by Geoff Gillham in collaboration with the Belgrade TIE company in 1988.

Both programmes are examples of a concept-based approach to the work and illustrate the value in dramatising a problem in order for the young people to grapple with its meaning.

In *Careless Talk* the themes of war, friendship, bullying, racism, death, loss, and responsibility are explored through the particular events of a family and an evacuee in the Welsh countryside. The young people experience these events from the perspective of children at the school in the story enabling them, to be participants not just in the events but crucially in creating the meaning of the events.

If education is about understanding the world and being empowered to make it better, it means finding the space for safely offered reflection and analysis. In TIE, this space is the fictive world of a theatrical construct. With this accepted fiction in place, children can relate their own particular knowledge to it and build from an understanding of universal issues. (108)

*Sleeping Dogs Awake* explores the themes of:

...street racism, systematic racism (and the ideological relationship between the two), what we need to know in order to act in our best interests and what stops us from knowing what we need to know. (114)

The programme explores these themes, not by confronting them with the young people straight on, but indirectly, through the metaphor of stray dogs living on a piece of derelict land. This enables a more authentic understanding to be formed by removing the temptation for the young people to give the adults the answers they think they want. It is a fine example of the often stated aim, to teach young people how to think, not what to think:

There is no place, in Gillham's TIE world, for a workshop that merely acts as a measure of the extent to which the pupils have absorbed and accepted the message. That is akin to assessment at the end of a lesson and is often a feature of Theatre in Health Education programmes... (122)

In 1988 the Tory government brought in the Education Reform Act (ERA). The act was to lay the foundations for the total reversal of the developments in state education since the 1944 Education Act. All the changes in education since: from the national curriculum, performance related pay, SATs and league tables have been heading towards a definite outcome, the final stages of which - the transference of real estate from local authorities to central government under the academisation programme - we are now witnessing.

The immediate effect of ERA was to shift the orientation away from child-centred education to the needs of employers and the markets. In order to do this the government wrested away the control of the curriculum from schools and democratically elected LEAs centralising what was taught through the National Curriculum and how it was taught, through Ofsted. The effect on TIE was devastating, with the introduction of league tables and SATs, schools became dominated with passing exams and tests; senior managers would simply not allow the time, space or the money for a peripatetic service which did not advance results. LEAs had their funding cut as their role was reduced, TIE services were similarly cut. Repertory theatres replaced their TIE teams with education departments, including the Belgrade, and set texts became the staple of theatre seasons as they tried to compensate for their own cuts in funding by guaranteeing full houses of exam-studying school children:

TIE had become a flagship for an authentic education that involved scaffolding for children between what they know and what they are capable of knowing. The medium for this scaffold was theatre, role and a feeling response to objectively placed dilemmas. The commoditisation of education almost eliminates the possibility of working this way. (86)

As the market's grip on education grew firmer, SCYPT and NATD went on the front foot, in 1989 organising a joint conference in Birmingham: The Fight for Drama - The Fight for Education. As well as being noted for some key theoretical developments brought forward by Heathcote and Bond, the two key-note speakers, the conference was significant in that it marked a turning out from the two associations.

Following the conference, NATD and the Portuguese drama association met with the 'aim of creating an international organisation to develop drama and TIE.' In 1992 IDEA was formed, its first congress was held in Porto with nearly five hundred

delegates. However, the tension within the organisation between its original aims and the financial opportunities it offered individual members and associations, led to unacceptable undemocratic and financially concerning practices and eventually the resignation of SCYPT and NATD.

Wooster, writes about these events accurately and calls IDEA to account over its shameful treatment of Tony Grady, who unselfishly devoted a large amount of his time towards the running of the organisation.

Even with its membership shrinking rapidly due to the closure of companies, SCYPT still attempted to turn outwards. When individual members out-numbered company members it formed The SCYPT Theatre Co-operative in an attempt to keep the practice alive. At the same time, in response to leaving IDEA it formed the International Centre for TIE (ICTIE). In 2000 ICTIE organised an international conference in Jordan 'People in Movement' attended by drama practitioners from around the world. In 2001 Geoff Gillham passed away. His early death not only robbed drama and education of its most important practitioner, someone whose own practice developed the practice of a whole art form, it also robbed the movement of its driving force. Without Gillham and under impossible material conditions, SCYPT and ICTIE have ceased practising.

Ironically, as a consequence of free market policies, there was an explosion of social problems from a rise in crime, drug addiction and mental health issues. As the government refused to accept its policies were in any way responsible for these events, the health service and education were left to clean up the mess. It wasn't long before the opportunity arose for theatre to be employed as the perfect vehicle to get the right messages across to young people. Money was poured into Theatre in Health Education and companies proliferated performing plays about the dangers, for example of drugs and unsafe sex. Theatre and drama were now to be used for social discipline, not for social change and it was Forum Theatre that was the perfect tool for this.

The use of Forum Theatre in this way exposed its limitations as a dramatic form, structured as it was to avoid the paradox that is at the centre of the art form. Instead, Forum Theatre was designed to solve the problem and thus shut it down, until the next performance. It was in that sense the antithesis of meaning-making. This was the fundamental pedagogic weakness of issue-based TIE, whilst appearing to give the young people a voice - they took action didn't they? - it in fact closed it down, offering them an empty satisfaction but little understanding.

However, Theatre in Health Education was one of the few places where companies could get any funding. Those who could use Forum Theatre would have a chance of survival, for the time-being anyway.

Ironically again, as TIE was ceasing to exist, a major development in its theory and

practice occurred with the collaboration between Edward Bond and Big Brum TIE. Bond's understanding of the importance of drama in the cultural development of humanity, whilst not in conflict with the theoretical understanding of TIE, it truly challenged them, taking them to a whole new level. He argued for the essential importance of the imagination to our humanity. In his plays he dramatised a paradox, opening up a gap cleared of ideology, in which the audience would have to stop and re-describe it and whilst doing so, themselves. Bond's drama, unlike Brecht's, is radically democratic, never dictating what the audience must feel, only that they take responsibility for why they feel the way they do.

If I have a criticism of the book, it is that the work of Bond and Big Brum deserved a chapter in itself, especially the significant theoretical development it heralded. Bond has continued the partnership with Big Brum often his only practice in the UK, since *At the Inland Sea* in 1995. That, I would argue, is the only TIE practice that continued the methodology started by the Belgrade in 1965.

These events seem like they happened in another world. The present government is about to carry out the wholesale privatisation of British schools, returning it to a state prior to the First World War and stealing our assets in the process. Children are taught a technical programme of grammar and arithmetic, learning the twelve times table by heart, a practice not needed since decimalisation and proof that the curriculum teaches children nothing but an ideological fantasy.

In the final section of the book: 'Shoots?' Wooster carries out an audit of current practice of companies currently claiming TIE and the various mutated forms of TIE largely developed post-ERA: amongst others, prison theatre, heritage theatre, drama therapies. In adapting TIE practices, drama practitioners find themselves creating ways of responding to funding possibilities. This is not an accusation of cynicism, the more you need to create to live the more you have to find funding to live, as cruel a paradox as any in a Greek tragedy. However, in adapting to the market demands, you become something different to what you were - the funders demand it. TIE companies were not cut and closed down in order for them to be opened up again under a different name. Arts funders insisted that for companies to continue, they create work that was 'cutting edge'; in others words companies spend their energies second guessing the demands of the purse holders, not developing the theory and practice of the art form.

Wooster analyses it thus:

TIE has had to mutate to survive the post-ERA world. The TIE that has emerged in this time has the power to adapt to the changing needs and priorities of a utilitarian education system. Some of these mutations are to be treated with a great deal of suspicion - not because the perpetrators set out to abuse TIE technique but because the socio-political environment demands certain approaches from them and companies

lack the theoretical confidence to find more legitimate ways of pursuing a vision of a better world. There is a need to have regard to what fruits these new shoots might put forth. (202)

In reading the final section of the book I am not convinced that TIE methodology has developed into a form which has found a way for young people to dramatise the world and create its value and their values, to imagine a world in which we all have a right to be at home in. Instead, I see present drama practice as offering young people ways in which to fit into the world, in reality denying themselves and their reality. It's not so much that the glass is half empty, more that there isn't even a glass.

There is much to recommend in Wooster's book, not least the chronology and bibliography, but I think its most important recommendation is that it serves as a reminder that education doesn't have to be like this, it could be so different.

Children and young people must know themselves as natural beings; as social beings; as technological beings; as creative beings; as thinking beings. A curriculum that offered materials and knowledge to the young to explore and explain to themselves the diversity and complexity of mankind, would feed the innate capacities and questions that spontaneously emerge out of the experience of living in the world-this is what is needed. It would be a curriculum for living on the planet- not a *National* Curriculum. It would be a curriculum for living.

(SCYPT Manifesto, 1992.)