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Heroism and heroic action in applied and social theatre: a selection of provocations from TaPRA's Applied and Social Theatre working group

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Introduction by Dave Calvert

The following collection of short papers has been developed from provocations presented at the Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA) conference, 3-5 September 2014, hosted by Royal Holloway, University of London. The four authors – Katie Beswick, Kay Hepplewhite, Lisa Woynarski, and Maja Milatovic-Ovadia – are members of TaPRA's Applied and Social Theatre working group and offered their provocations in response to the working group's conference theme of heroism and heroic action, a theme which was already provocative in its own right.

Discourse around applied and social theatre has long exercised caution about the notion of heroism. The heroic tradition within mythology idealises its protagonists, elevating them for extraordinary acts of courage or compassion. When attached to practitioners, such idealism may also result in a counter-productive form of aggrandisement. There are resonances here with Helen Nicholson's collapsing of easy distinctions between outward-looking altruism and self-regarding egoism. Nicholson notes that, regardless of how well-motivated the altruistic practitioner may be:

there is still an uneven balance of power between altruist and recipient ...
Because practitioners often work in contexts in which they are outsiders, for all kinds of reasons their good intentions about 'helping' others in 'need' may be construed as patronising or authoritarian, contributing to keeping 'others' on the margins rather than taking centre stage. (Nicholson 2005, 30)

Heroism, in which individual actions can be seen as an outcome of altruistic motives, intensifies such concerns. From such a perspective, the heroic practitioner not only pursues the best interests of others, but does so by acting alone and on

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their behalf, destabilising the common principles of self- and collective-empowerment on which much practice rests.

Nicholson (2005, 29) also observes that altruism, in its historical formulation, 'provided a moral justification for industrial capitalism, and ... was explicitly intended to support a hierarchical and social system'. The celebration of heroic actions, as propagated through story-telling, is equally susceptible to dominant ideology. James Thompson draws attention to this difficulty when discussing the use of narrative during the conflict in Sri Lanka: 'The mythic stories of Sinhalese kings and heroic Tamil civilisations ... often are tied ethically into repeating and celebrating the conceptions of the world that are propelling a country or a community to violence' (Thompson 2005, 39). Through its translation into mythology, heroic action encourages the circulation of ideology through popular consciousness.

The propaganda inherent in mythology is also built on the exaltation of those with particular characteristics; in the Sri Lankan example, it is the ethnicity of the heroic figures, rather than heroism *per se*, that motivates ideological manipulation. This exploits the exclusionary aspect of heroism, its separation of the world into opposing camps, presenting a series of oppositions in which the centrally-placed heroes are variously distinguished from villains, cowards, fools or victims. In the context of war or conflict, these divisions may be drawn along nationalist or racial lines. In other contexts, other forms of socio-cultural dominance may be maintained through heroic representations. Most commonly, the hero is often identified with a male figure, effecting both the construction and celebration of 'masculinity' as a particular model of action. At its most crude, the encoding of gendered relations in heroic mythology is affirmed in the melodramatic rescuing of 'damsels-in-distress'; similarly, disability is frequently used in melodrama to extend the semiotic contrast with heroism as a masculine construct: it either compounds victimhood or intensifies villainy as a deviation from the ideal of the non-disabled hero (see Stoddard Holmes 2004).

Given such legitimate and deep-seated concerns about the exploitative potential of heroism within discourse, representation and narration, proposing it as a conference theme may appear unnecessary. Yet there is, perhaps, an equal need to be wary of dismissing heroism outright, along the same lines that Joe Winston (2010) argues in relation to the notion of beauty. Winston has observed that in

ancient Greece, beauty 'was just as likely to be applied to a person's character, to an idea or to a deed than to a human artefact; both an act of courage and a philosophical argument could be described as beautiful' (Winston 2010, 12). There are obvious consistencies here with the heroic in the recognition of beauty as an aspect of character, deeds and courageous acts, suggesting that perceptions of heroism are always already rooted in aesthetics. Winston also outlines a series of suspicions about beauty that echo the concerns about heroism and heroic action noted above. He concludes that 'there is one obvious aspect of beauty that such cultural and political debates have tended to ignore and that cannot be wished away; that is, its very ubiquity as a value in areas of human experience ... that marks it out as of central importance in our lives' (2010, 3).

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell (2008) attaches a similarly central importance to heroism. In his analysis, all mythical heroes and narratives reflect the dilemmas and maturation of human experience, frequently sharing symbolic imagery with the dream states of the subconscious and the metaphors employed in ritual. Heroism is thus a composed response to the text and subtext of human experience, a means of exploring models of action through a specifically aesthetic set of reflections. It is, by this definition, an intrinsically theatrical concept.

As such, it may be impossible for applied and social theatre to foster a categorical immunity to heroism, however entrenched its reservations. The instigation of the theme for the 2014 conference emerged from the previous conference, hosted jointly by the University of Glasgow and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, where celebrations of 'heroism' appeared at the edges of discussions about ecological performance practices. The proposal to focus on heroism and heroic action as a conference theme emerged from the recognition that it is a resilient concept, one which resists resistance. As such, it appeared worthwhile to pursue a critical approach of its circulation in both practice and research, in order to articulate its complexity more fully and to investigate whether it holds any residual relevance for the field.

Despite – or perhaps because of – the many reservations about the concept, the theme has not previously been directly approached in discussions of applied and social theatre. In anticipation of the annual conference, an interim symposium

was held at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama to establish some parameters for discussion. This was stimulated in the first instance by four pre-recorded interviews with academics and practitioners (Ola Animashawun, Sue Mayo, Gerri Moriarty and James Thompson), which were filmed and distributed in advance of the symposium. These initial explorations of the theme were then expanded on through four responsive papers at the symposium, presented by Matt Hargrave, Adelina Ong, Kay Hepplewhite and Katharine Low. Discussions centred on definitions of the heroic, the relationship between heroism and acts of resistance, the inflections of risk, bravery, care and compassion that identify the hero, and the tensions between individual and collective empowerment.

The annual conference further developed the resonances of heroism in relation to applied and social theatre practice. Papers focussed on: the heroic demands on participants in contexts of conflict and volatility (Susan Haedicke, Matt Jennings); the relationship between heroism and martyrdom, and the recognition of ordinary heroes (Katharine Low, Sue Mayo, Sally Mackey, Sarah Cole); the intersection between the heroic and democratic practices (Alison Reeves, Cath Heinemeyer); cultural performances of queer heroism (Stephen Greer); and the triangulation of heroism, aesthetics and solidarity (Dave Calvert).

The four provocations that are developed here focus on different co-ordinates of the heroic in relation to the practice of applied and social theatre. Katie Beswick picks up on heroism as a representational trope within performance, considering how class identities are constructed in the National Youth Theatre's performance of *The Block*. Her analysis looks at the hero's alignment with the applied theatre practitioner, exalting models of external intervention over community empowerment. Kay Hepplewhite also considers the role of the practitioner, analysing a reflective dialogue with the artist Kate Sweeney. Using Bakhtin's model of the hero as a dialogical protagonist, she explores the practitioner's role as one guided by responsibility rather than the artist's own motivation.

Lisa Woynarski addresses questions of idealism and representation in performance work with an ecological agenda, problematizing the heroic exaltation of indigenous people as protectors and guardians of the environment as an act of political and cultural colonisation. Finally, Maja Milatovic-Ovadia picks up the theme introduced above by James Thompson, exploring the need for applied theatre

projects in post-conflict Bosnia to confront the cultural and ethnic divisions that arise from the ideological construction of heroes and villains. These papers, taken collectively, may not resolve the tensions and antagonisms that unsettle discussions of the heroic; they do, however, demonstrate that the invocation of the hero is in constant circulation throughout the aesthetic, active and experiential practices of applied and social theatre.

Notes on contributors

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