



# University of HUDDERSFIELD

## University of Huddersfield Repository

Low, Katharine E. and Calvert, Dave

Conference Review: Heroism and the Heroic in Applied and Social Theatre

### Original Citation

Low, Katharine E. and Calvert, Dave (2015) Conference Review: Heroism and the Heroic in Applied and Social Theatre. *Journal of Arts and Communities*, 20 (2). pp. 173-176. ISSN 1757-1936

This version is available at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/22507/>

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

- The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
- A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
- The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: [E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk](mailto:E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk).

<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/>

**Conference Review** of the TaPRA Applied and Social Theatre Working Group's Interim event on Heroism and the Heroic in applied and social theatre, March 22<sup>nd</sup> 2014 at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, London.

Dr Katharine E. Low, Royal Central School Speech and Drama  
Dave Calvert, University of Huddersfield

---

In March 2014, the TaPRA Applied and Social Theatre Working Group held a research day at the Royal Central School Speech and Drama (RCSSD) exploring the significance and implications of the notion of heroism in socially engaged theatre practice. Heroism as a theme emerged from discussions at the end of the last annual TaPRA conference in Glasgow in 2013, which led the working group convenors (Sylvan Baker, Dave Calvert, Alison Jeffers & Katharine Low) into discussions on risk and bravery in applied and social theatre from which have emerged ideas about care and protection, both of participants and of practitioners. Another strong theme to emerge from our conversations on heroism was the notion of leadership; different models of leadership, and changing perceptions of self in leadership roles. Is heroism always epic or can we identify small acts of everyday heroism and is it at all helpful to think in these terms? Does thinking about heroism lead to a certain romanticisation of applied theatre?

As convenors, we were keen to explore different ways of generating a conversation around the notion of heroism and began by interviewing four key practitioners and academics in the field, namely Ola Animashawun, Sue Mayo, Gerri Moriarty and James Thompson, on their views of the notion of heroism. We circulated these filmed provocations in advance of the research day to all the attendees and employed them as the basis of our discussions which were also informed by four presentations. The films brought a number of different perspectives to the room, for example, Gerri introduced Joseph Campbell's discussion of the hero's journey (*The Power of Myth*), explaining how for her this prompted an understanding of collective heroism and the role of the unsung heroes and provoked the question: what are the small stories we should be telling in applied and community theatre (rather than the 'heroic' ones). Sue talked about the risks involved with the heroic actions noting that without risk the actions would not be 'heroic'. In particular, she questioned if we need heroes in the field and the potential adulation and projections which could be imposed on them (while she argued we do need heroism, to help things move forward). James proposed a form of the heroic triad (observer, victim and saviour/carer, who is usually identified as the hero). Linking this idea with the field of humanitarianism, where the heroes are the saviours and not the victim, James questioned the gendered nature of heroism and debated the academic's perspective and the fine tightrope between wanting to do something and 'being paralysed by the overcautious critique'. Finally, Ola rejected the idea of engaging in 'heroic' work, arguing that a hero is brave, courageous and engages in 'the ultimate sacrifice'. By contrast, he proposes that he engages in his practice because he is passionate and has a desire to engender change, but that does not often involve 'facing the fire'. Debunking the concept of a hero, Ola cautioned the value judgments often ascribed to heroes and, similarly to Gerri, questioned instead how we could set up instead, shared responsibility.

In the room, the presenters also introduced a range of shared ideas and provocations; Analysing the character of Bartleby the Scrivener (from Herman Melville's short story) and Back to Back Theatre's production of *Small Metal Objects*, Matt Hargrave (Northumbria University) explored the diverse forms of resistance possible (authentic, pure, passive and 'I prefer not to') to question the impacts that they may have in applied theatre and with a particular audience. Adelina Ong (RCSSD) examined the idea that heroes can limit a person's imagination. Comparing the encouraged celebration of the 'heroic' story of Lee Kuan Yew, the founding father of Singapore, she received at school with the antihero stance found in the field of skateboarding, Adelina offered a view of making theatre with young people by encouraging them to do better than their heroes. Kay Hepplewhite (Northumbria

University), discussed the notion of 'hamartia', the hero's fatal flaw with reference to the applied theatre facilitator, exploring how the facilitator's role often requires less space and there is a desire to have a low status. With reference to her research into the training of applied theatre practitioners, Kay questioned if the making oneself invisible has an impact on the work and offered the idea that practitioners do not want to see themselves as 'do-gooders' but rather as artists. Finally, Katharine Low (RCSSD) questioned the notions of emotional labour and the care which are sometimes described in applied theatre practice, arguing that this consideration of the work as labour (the idea we have worked hard and cared deeply) has always carried a strain of heroic martyrdom. She proposed that such a view ignores the dialogical aspect of the work between facilitator and participant, the sometimes mutual benefit for both, and echoed Gerri's call for the celebration (not the patronisation) of more ordinary heroes.

The ethos of the day was to create an open space for debate and exploration of the role of heroism in our work and what heroism or 'the heroic' means for us. The event was prompted by a recognition that a discourse of heroism, long resisted by academics and practitioners, was appearing at the edges of critical discussion. Approaching this under-theorised concept reached few conclusions and raised many more questions. The complex intersections between heroism and gender construction were opened up, as were the entanglements of the heroic with colonial and post-colonial discourse. Definitions and categories of hero were also critiqued and contested, from the role model to the unsung hero, along with models rooted in facilitation or inaction that extend or oppose conventional understanding of heroism. Reading work as heroic may carry an implicit hierarchy in which projects were valued according to the degree of risk involved, diminishing work at a more personal, ordinary level. At the same time, resistance to heroism can foster an over-cautious approach which is hampered by its own concern for security. Finally, the question of the academic's role itself came under scrutiny. Given the power of critique to promote acts as heroic and practitioners as heroes, should this be used to encourage innovative or ambitious social practice through an endorsement of risk-taking, or should it exercise caution, relaying doubts that restrain impulsive actions? These, and many other debates, were continued when the dialogue resumed at the annual TaPRA Conference in September 2014 at Royal Holloway, University of London.

TaPRA Applied & Social Theatre Working Group Convenors: Sylvan Baker, Dave Calvert, Alison Jeffers & Katharine Low