

Because the city is a nexus of motorways, TV signals, suburbias, Internets, dreams, global currents and trickle-downs, a place where our desires wash up, are fed, disrupted, chained, dodged or neutered by what people call late capitalism.

Because the city contains small beauties, zones of possibility. Because it's thick with the ghosts of politics, old and current.

Because it reflects the life you must reflect and must reflect on and the life already reflected in you.

Because the city can trap you, nurture you, teach you, unravel you, unspeak you. Because you are just one among many here, and the dynamic of one in relation to many (conversation, dialogue, difference, the negotiation of public space) is what theatre emerges from and thrives on, what art must address and what cities must somehow contend with if they are to survive.

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theatre & the city

Introduction

Small Metal Objects at Stratford Station, East London

In autumn 2007, Back to Back theatre company from the city of Geelong (near Melbourne), Australia, brought their show *Small Metal Objects* to London, England, where I saw it as part of BITE, the annual Barbican International Theatre Event. Though presented by one of London's largest diverse arts complexes, *Small Metal Objects* was staged in neither of the Barbican Centre's two theatres but several miles east, in Stratford train and Underground station. The audience sat, wearing headphones, in specially installed seating overlooking the station's main entrance hall. Alongside the real ambient sounds of commuters' rushing, ticket machines printing, turnstiles bleeping and trains drawing in and out, the headphones brought us a recorded music soundscape plus the voices of the show's four actors, who wore discreet microphones. The actors themselves played out their drama before our eyes

but twenty to forty metres away on the station's entrance course and central stairway and ramp, initially camouflaged amid the surging and ebbing flow of real commuters.

The drama focused on the efforts of two wealthy and arrogant City executives to purchase illegal drugs for an imminent office party from two apparently suburban drug dealers. The first executive thinks the deal is secure because he has ample funds with which to pay, but dealer Gary refuses to go and collect the drugs because he won't leave his friend Steve, who simply will not move from the spot where he's standing. Increasingly anxious, the executive calls in his colleague Carolyn, and together they make more and more desperate attempts to close the deal; she eventually tries to persuade Steve by offering him oral sex. But Steve and Gary will literally not be moved, not by offers of money, nor by the false intimacy of free sex, nor by anything else the City executives might think desirable. Ultimately, Steve forgoes earning the price of the drugs in favour of staying with Gary and honouring the real, everyday intimacy of their friendship. The executives leave humiliated and empty-handed; Gary and Steve finally leave, no wealthier financially, but with their friendship confirmed.

Small Metal Objects showed that the city supports gross social and economic inequality through the uneven distribution of wealth and opportunity. But it also showed, within that unevenness, the potential the city offers its inhabitants to find human affinity, support and friendship. It asked why we value what we value. Clearly this related to friendship and money (including those small metal objects, coins). But

it connected also to assumptions we might make hundreds of times a day about our fellow city-dwellers – those strangers we live with in our cosmopolitan cities – on the basis, for example, of whether they wear business suits or tracksuits, whether they move with assurance or are frozen by some secret fear, and whether they appear to feel socially entitled or are socially excluded. Back to Back Theatre's website notes that the company 'is driven by an ensemble of six actors considered to have intellectual disabilities', and *Small Metal Objects* 'explores how respect is withheld from outsiders – the disabled or unemployed – who society deems "unproductive"' (www.backtobacktheatre.com). The show drew the audience's attention to how we make such unconscious and literally superficial judgements through narrative but also through sensitising us to the uneven distribution of power often embedded in the dynamic relationship between those who look and those who are looked at. Inevitably, many passing commuters realised they were literally in the middle of a performance, cast as one of hundreds of unpaid, unwitting extras, and they looked back at us looking at them. Already eavesdropping through earphones on the private transactions of the drama's four characters, the audience could not fail to recognise our roles as voyeurs in the dramas of both *Small Metal Objects* and the everyday lives moving before us, nor could we fail to recognise the connections between the fictional and the real. *Small Metal Objects* was resonant in London, but it has also toured to acclaim globally, appearing in Singapore and in cities across Australia, the USA, Canada and Europe.

Why does the relationship between theatre and the city matter?

I open with *Small Metal Objects* because it exemplifies many of the reasons it is important to explore the relationship between theatre and the city. Simply put, exploring and understanding theatre in relation to the city can help us understand both better. Understanding the city, first, is immediately important as the world becomes predominantly urbanised: the United Nations Human Settlements Programme, UN-HABITAT, notes in its 2006/7 *State of the World's Cities* report that, since 2007, more than half of the world's population lives in cities (p. viii). Theatre can help us understand *how* we live in cities.

Small Metal Objects, for example, addressed whom the city is effectively for. It compared power-dressed executives with an apparent underclass consigned to a black-market economy in a context of grossly uneven economic and social opportunity. It asked what ideologies (or systems of belief) the city enforces, from neoliberal, self-interested capitalism to a climate of fear, in an age of anxiety about terrorism and of CCTV and other forms of surveillance (perhaps evoked in the pun on 'all metal objects', which airport security requires we empty from our pockets). And it asked where we think the city, its culture and its power are located – whether centrally, in the square-mile City of London proper, home to both the central financial district and the Barbican Centre, which some might see as elite, or on its East End margins in Stratford, where the show was staged and its ostensibly underclass characters made their home.

This is not the tourist destination Stratford-upon-Avon associated with Shakespeare. As part of the London Borough of Newham, this Stratford is one of the UK's poorest urban areas: in 2000/01 unemployment in Newham was 13.6 per cent, more than twice the national average of 5.4 per cent (Greater London Authority, *London Divided*, 2002, p. 111). In part to bring targeted investment, Stratford will host the 2012 London Olympics. It is also where one of London's most important 'alternative' theatres – the Theatre Royal, Stratford East – has long been based, staging a new kind of socialist working-class theatre under Joan Littlewood in the 1950s and explicitly addressing local black and Asian audiences in what is now one of the UK's most ethnically mixed areas: the 2001 Census indicates the local area then had a white population of less than 40 per cent, compared with London and English averages of roughly 70 and 90 per cent, respectively (Office for National Statistics, 2001 Census).

Small Metal Objects demonstrates that theatre and performance can help us understand city experience and some of the grounds on which we need to understand cities. Put most simply, cities are places where people live and work together in dense populations. But even such a simple definition raises key questions. What are the places like? What is the relationship between their private and public spaces, such as the train concourse or street, and between different parts of the city, such as London's Square Mile and Stratford? In a world increasingly connected by trade, travel and communications, what is the relationship of one city to others around the globe? Who are the people who live

in cities? We know urban dwellers are enormously varied, coming from other cities, the countryside and abroad, and encountering in the city hugely different conditions of wealth and opportunity, but what does the experience of city living make them? And how do people relate to each other in such circumstances, where cities offer marvellous opportunities – for example, for communication with so many different people – but also enormous risks – such as the risks of feeling alienated among so many strangers, and of poverty, despite the city's riches? Do civic spaces produce civility or incivility? Finally, *how* do we live and work in cities? People often live in cities for the work opportunities available there, but what work is this; how does it structure our lives and affect our leisure? What work is it, in particular, in an age when capitalism and consumerism are becoming increasingly entrenched? Frankly, how do so many of us negotiate living together in cities, the source, as Richard Lehan puts it in *The City in Literature* (1998), 'of both political order and ... social chaos' (p. 3)? So, to refine the definition offered near the start of this paragraph, cities are ever-changing geographical, architectural, political and social structures where most people live and work densely gathered in extremely complex social structures. Across his career, social geographer David Harvey has argued that they are better understood as urban process because they are constantly changing (see, for example, *The Urban Experience*, 1989).

Theatre, likewise, is an ever-changing material, aesthetic and social structure where many people gather to

participate – through work and leisure – in complex social activities; it is also usually located in cities. Theatre is therefore in some ways symptomatic of urban process, demonstrating the structures, social power dynamics, politics and economies also at work more broadly throughout the city. Theatre actually does more than *demonstrate* urban process, therefore: theatre *is a part of* urban process, producing urban experience and thereby producing the city itself. In some ways, how theatre does this is implicit and everyday: city people work in, make and go to the theatre; it *is* their urban experience. Alongside this, some theatre and performance aims explicitly to intervene in and change conventional urban process. *Small Metal Object's* site-specificity, for example, aimed to challenge urban processes of social exclusion directly. Indeed, we might see theatre and performance as exceptional cultural practices through which to understand urban experience because of their long-standing literal centrality to urban life, their longevity as a set of urban cultural and labour practices, and the specific ways they both bring people together in live, shared encounters and offer people opportunities performatively to *influence* urban life.

There are at least three ways that theatre practices produce urban meaning: through their dramatic texts, material conditions and performative practices. The relationships between characters in plays about the city can tell us about changing urban social relations, as *Small Metal Objects* staged a conflict between characters with very disproportionate financial and social power. Aspects

of theatre's material conditions – where it is located, what forms it takes, how it is staffed, how state policies affect it – can show us how material conditions structure urban experience: for example, which opportunities are most geographically, financially and otherwise accessible, for whom, in the city; how the city organises us as groups or individuals and reinforces or challenges social hierarchies; and how economic ideologies such as capitalism are embedded in everyday urban lives. And the opportunities afforded by performative theatre and performance – such as site-specific urban artists' walks, urban protests and performative interventions – increasingly appear to invite audiences actively to participate in making their theatre experience and indicate more broadly how we can interrogate and change how we perform ourselves in everyday urban life and who we are therefore able to be.

Critical strategies

My central aim is to explore how we can use an understanding of theatre in the city to make sense of and change social experiences in and of the city so that the many benefits of urban living are more widely shared. But I also aim to enhance understanding of theatre by reviewing and revising critical approaches to thinking about it, especially in relation to the city. My aim in this respect is to re-evaluate the two critical strategies I feel are predominantly and most influentially used within theatre and performance studies to explore the relationship between theatre and the city: cultural materialism and performative analysis. I have

already begun to indicate what these strategies are and how they are practised, and later in the book I explain them in detail. But let it be enough for now to say that cultural materialism focuses on the material conditions of cultural practice and how these conditions affect – and particularly limit – the range of practices possible. For example, economic conditions might mean particularly popular plays are staged more frequently than unknown work, and the conditions of built theatre architectures might limit the range of audience/performance relationships available in a given theatre. Performative analysis argues that how we perform in everyday life constitutes us as who we are, reinforcing codes of behaviour to do with gender, class, age and other aspects of our identities. In the context of theatre and performance, it focuses on the ways they encourage us to perform – or discourage us from performing – particular identities. For example, gathering at theatres committed to a particular constituency can reinforce a sense of that group identity, or deliberately behaving contrary to cultural norms can challenge those norms, as when cyclists in Critical Mass temporarily dislodge the car from its dominance of the road.

Both cultural materialism and performative analysis have advantages and limits. Cultural materialist analysis risks suggesting that making socially progressive theatre verges on the impossible because theatre is always so constrained by its material conditions. Conversely, performative analysis can give the impression that theatre and performance are infinitely progressive, offering us unlimited opportunities to