HELEN NICHOLSON

39. APPLIED DRAMA/THEATRE/PERFORMANCE

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I first heard the term ‘applied theatre’ sometime in the mid1990s from a colleague who had heard it used at an academic conference. At the time I didn’t ask which conference he had attended, although of course now I wish that I could locate the history of this keyword more precisely. There is, however, a general vagueness that accompanies all accounts of the derivation of the term, suggesting that it is not a phrase that was coined by a particular individual to describe a very precise set of practices or concept, but that the term that emerged haphazardly and spread like a rhizome to fill a gap in the lexicon. Locating the ways in which this keyword is used, therefore, is not a search for the authentic roots or the essential meaning of applied drama, theatre and performance, but in recognising its pliability and porousness. Inevitably there are ways of thinking about this field that I find more persuasive than others, but my entry marks an attempt to reflect some of the different ways in which the term has been understood rather than to insist on a particular derivation or single meaning. As the theatre historian Joseph Roach points out, ‘improvised narratives of authenticity and priority may congeal into full-blown myths of legitimacy and origin’ (1996, p. 3).

Although the terms applied drama/theatre and performance are differently inflected, it is widely understood to refer to theatre practices that are applied to educational, institutional and community contexts. This work is usually led by professional theatre-makers and is intended to be socially or personally beneficial to participants. It is often, but not always, funded by charities or the public sector who have particular interests in promoting the well-being of a particular community group, or in encouraging public engagement in specific issues. Judith Ackroyd (2000) was one of the first to point out that applied theatre (as it is widely known) is not a particular set of dramatic practices or performance methodologies, but an ‘umbrella term’ used to describe many different forms of educational and community-based theatre – including theatre-in-education, reminiscence theatre, theatre for development, theatre in hospitals - all with their own specialist agendas.

The appearance of a collective noun, and the speed with which it spread, suggests a willingness to question whether there are family resemblances between the different movements and ways of working, and an interest in investigating their shared concerns and common principles. It is interesting that my colleague first heard the term in an academic setting; unlike many other nomenclatures within the wider field of community arts, applied theatre was a term that emerged in universities rather than developed by practitioners. Undergraduate and postgraduate programmes

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called ‘applied theatre’, ‘applied drama’ or ‘applied performance’ were introduced at different UK universities towards the end of the century, a new on-line academic journal was established in Australia in 2000, and newly formed research centres secured funding around the turn of the century. Publishers were not slow to spot this trend, and three books with similar titles were published between 2003 and 2005 to support the growing academic market (Taylor, 2003; Thompson, 2003; Nicholson, 2005). A materialist analysis of this intellectual history would note that the rapid spread of this term within universities was partly indebted to the pragmatics of academic funding and the economics of the job market; it is easier to recruit students for degree courses that have a broad remit rather than for those that focus on one specialised aspect of the field (such as TIE or theatre in prisons, for example). The proliferation of careers for theatre practitioners in community and educational settings meant that there was a demand for courses that interrogated questions of pedagogy and the principles of theatre-making in different communities and institutional settings. Furthermore, arts academics across the world have been increasingly pressured to attract research funding, and research centres which offer the capacity to work in multi-agency and inter-disciplinary teams promise to strengthen funding applications. More ideistically, the context in which the term emerged suggests that the millennium ushered in a new scholarly interest in theorising forms of drama that take place in a range of community and educational settings, and that the university training of community-based theatre practitioners meant that their work was becoming increasingly professionalized.

It is not just the place in which the term emerged that is important, the timing is also significant, not least because it sheds light on how the common principles that underlie different forms of theatre-making in community and educational contexts were re-conceptualised in the twenty-first century. There is a long tradition of community arts and educational theatre which had its roots in the political Left, and to which contemporary practice is indebted. During the twentieth-century, however, theatre activists often articulated their political intentions in revolutionary terms; theatre was instrument through which capitalism might be overthrown (Nicholson, 2005; Govan et al, 2007; Jackson, 2007; Prentki and Preston, 2009). Although social change remains an important tenet in applied theatre, without the old certainties of mid-twentieth century Marxism there was a need to re-evaluate the principles that informed socially engaged theatre. The 1990s brought in, as Baz Kershaw identified, a ‘new world disorder’ in which political theorists analysed systems of power in a globalising world, and cultural critics were pressed to re-imagine the social meaning of democracy following the fragmentation of the political Left after the collapse of Communism (Kershaw, 1999, p. 6–7). It was within this political climate that the term applied theatre took hold, begging questions about how the democratic principles that had been associated with all forms of community and educational theatre might be re-envisioned for the new millennium.

I have always understood that the term applied drama/theatre/performance does not announce a specific set of dramatic methodologies nor a particular political pedagogy, but indicates a discursive practice and defines a scholarly field in which drama that aspires to be publicly and socially beneficial might be theorised and its