The Silence within the Noise: Reflections from the UK on “A Vibrant Hybridity”

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The challenge to write a response from a UK perspective to this stimulating introductory chapter is daunting. Following the twists and turns of socially engaged theater over the last 50 years or so traces a contested history; there is a rich legacy of different perspectives and complementary voices that has contributed to diverse contemporary practices in the UK. Socially engaged theater also travels, and the networks and practices Jan describes so eloquently have extended beyond national boundaries leading to dialogue between practitioners and scholars across the world. This rhizome-like activity means that sharp distinctions between practices in the UK and the US cannot always be made.

And yet, there are differences. The three aspects of practice that Jan identifies – the finished production, participatory theater, and cross-sector collaboration – are recognizable to practitioners in the UK, but patterns of history and geography mean that they are differently nuanced. Reading about how the civil rights movement led to the vibrancy of the Free Southern Theater, for example, or the influence of the Vietnam War on theaters of protest, invited me to reflect on the same historical period in the UK, and the ways in which historical events shaped performance practices. Anyone whose childhood was spent in a British city in the 1950s or 1960s will have memories of playing on bombsites, often with slum clearance taking place around them, the aftermath of the Blitz. Those of us living in the UK in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s were accustomed to regular bombings in shops, pubs, and other public areas, often a consequence of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Theater historian Marvin Carlson memorably notes that all theater occupies a haunted space. Since the 1950s it seems that socially engaged theater in the UK has been doubly haunted; it is haunted by the noise of bombs.
One of the playwrights whose work straddles socially engaged performance and building-based theater (such as London’s Royal Court Theatre) is Edward Bond, who grew up in London during the 1939–45 war. It is hard to imagine the scars and sense of disorientation that were left by living in cityscapes that could change, literally, overnight. Speaking in 2010, he reflected on how this experience influenced his writing:

One of the things that makes me a writer is that, from the age of three, I was constantly bombed ... People would fly overhead and try and kill me. A bomb is coming down and you say, “it must hit me” ... And so you write out of the noise – and the silence within that noise. (Bond qtd in Todd 2010)

Bond’s metaphor of writing out of the “silence within that noise” seems to summarize the impulse that continues to define socially engaged theater. And although memories of the war Bond describes have faded, and a different generation of practitioners has embraced what it means to live in a New Europe, a fierce sense of social justice still guides practice. Writing about twenty-first-century performance “in a time of terror,” Jenny Hughes suggests that politics in today’s age of uncertainty is “defined by the production of waste and wasted life” (2011, p. 21). Radical, socially engaged theater still appears to occupy a wasteland in which the sound of bombs is never far away.

Hughes’s emphasis on waste is instructive, as it points to the relationship between materiality, performance, and social change. If, as Marx suggests, social change is only possible when material circumstances become equitable, it is worth paying attention to the ways in which “basic human needs such as food, shelter, clothing, employment, education, health, peaceful coexistence, meaning, and recreation” that Jan invokes in her Introduction are experienced at different times and in different places. This distinction of wealth, precarity, and poverty inflects the history of all three modes of socially engaged theater that Jan identifies. For radical theater makers such as Joan Littlewood and John McGrath, “The Finished Production” in mid-twentieth-century Britain involved popular forms of theater, which offered one way to challenge entrenched class-based politics and uneven distribution of wealth that scarred everyday life. Participatory practices arose, literally, from the ashes of a bombed-out city when Coventry Belgrade Theatre began their Theatre in Education (TIE) programs in the 1960s. Pre-dating Augusto Boal’s TO by at least a decade, Theatre in Education