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Peopling the Theatre in a Time of Crisis

Sarah Bartley

Representation becomes imperative in times of crisis; concurrently, such periods can be marked by a threat to the functions of democratic, cultural and political participation. In this chapter, I explore the distinctive practices of Camden People's Theatre (established 1994) and Brighton People's Theatre (founded in 2015) to reflect on the utility of people's theatres in discrete moments of social, political and artistic crisis in the UK. Throughout the 20th and 21st century people's theatres have been variously defined as: collective attempts to represent a public and their experiences onstage; radical engagements of a non-theatre going public; forums to put *the people* (rather than professional performers) onstage; and a redistribution of cultural capital from a perceived centre to a more dispersed regional landscape. Here, I particularly consider what characterizes contemporary people's theatres and their relationship to social and political turmoil. The economic crises of 1990 and 2008 have shaped life in the UK over the past 30 years and these two moments of acute crisis act as buoys marking the terrain of my analysis. Through an examination of the creative practices of these two companies and the contexts in which they emerged, I establish the distinctive practices of people's theatres as a mode of making that responds to conditions of crisis.

Reflecting on the global financial meltdown in 2008, Lauren Berlant asserted that such a crisis 'congeals decades of class bifurcation, downward mobility, and environmental, political, and social brittleness' (2011: 11). Throughout the 1980s the Conservative government rapidly grew the economy through removing regulation, increasing competition, privatizing state-owned industries, reforming labour laws and stimulating consumer spending through low interest rates and low income taxation. This resulted in an overextension of the economy and a mirage of consumer wealth that was abruptly shattered through sharply rising

inflation as businesses failed to keep pace with significant demand, that was itself built on instability. In 1990 higher interest rates were imposed in a bid to control inflation and, concurrently, the pound sterling joined the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM). A precursor to the euro, the ERM tied participating currencies to the value of the deutschmark in an effort to stabilize European markets and encourage trade among nations. This only served to intensify the economic crisis in the UK as the terms meant there was little capacity to cut interest rates at the point the country's economy entered into recession. On 16 September 1992, the UK crashed out of the ERM, following a battle to retain sterling's parity against the deutschmark and a rush of traders selling the pound on foreign stock exchanges; this day became known as 'Black Wednesday', costing the UK Treasury £3.3 billion (Tempest 2005).¹ The high interest rates that ensued had a severe impact on the UK housing market and a doubling in the level of unemployment led to a large fall in domestic spending (Jenkins 2010: 34–5).

Following the recession of the early 1990s, the UK experienced a prolonged period of economic growth. However, undeterred from the boom and bust of the 1980s and 1990s, this period was marked by accelerating financial deregulation, a growth in inequality and increased borrowing. The collapse of US investment bank Lehman Brothers Holdings on 15 September 2008, brought about through the bank's overreliance on subprime mortgages, sent unprecedented shockwaves through the global financial system. Across the world, stock markets plummeted. In the UK RBS, Lloyds and HBOS had to be bailed out with taxpayers' money to the tune of £137 billion leading to a substantial increase in the national debt (Mor 2018: 3), a return to high unemployment and a destabilization of the housing market. The consequences of 2008 continue to be felt more than a decade later through government-

¹ The reputational and economic damage of Black Wednesday is still keenly felt in the UK, with some political commentators drawing a line between the fallout of this financial disaster and the country's vote to leave the European Union. See Keegan, Marsh and Roberts 2017.

imposed austerity policies which have served to accelerate the neglect and oppression of already under-resourced communities across the UK.

In this chapter, I take up Berlant's concept of 'crisis ordinariness', wherein she recognizes 'the ordinary as an impasse shaped by crisis in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on' (2011: 8). Here, I foreground these two specific moments of macro-economic crisis to acknowledge the present as structured by a propagation of systemic crises and I assert the potential of the people's theatre to offer ways 'of living on' under such conditions. Berlant advocates for recognizing how the affects of such conditions are made manifest in emergent genres and aesthetic forms (2011: 4); I posit that the recuperation of people's theatres in the contemporary UK might constitute a formal response to the negative affects of crisis. Specifically, how the practices of collectivity and solidarity alongside the popular, experimental and playful forms instigated by Brighton People's Theatre and Camden People's Theatre respond to the affective conditions of anxiety, divisiveness, anger and isolation, which have proliferated in the fallout of 1992 and 2008.

Naming the people

Based in the repurposed site of the Lord Palmerston pub, Camden People's Theatre (CPT) was founded in 1994 by a collective of practitioners including Sheridan Bramwell, Shaun Glanville, Lynne Kendrick, Penelope Prodromou and Tony Gardner. Over the company's 26-year history their proximity to the term people's theatre has fluctuated. The term itself, a people's theatre, encompasses a plurality of practices and alludes to a range of contextually located cultural and political interventions.² Tracing CPT's relationship to the term offers insight into the

² I have examined various definitions, international and local examples of practice elsewhere in Sarah Bartley (2021) 'UK People's Theatres: Performing Civic Functions in a Time of Austerity', *Research in Drama Education*, 26 (1): 171-186.

complexity and diversity of practices such a moniker invokes. As one of the founders Shaun Glanville shared,

We had massive discussions about the naming. I think the idea of calling ourselves a people's theatre was partly about the kind of theatre that we wanted to make and who we wanted to make it for and with. ... It was also to do with drawing on European models of ... *volkstheater*. It was also that feeling of wanting to be rooted within a community and acknowledging the communities within that geographical area and trying to bring them in. (2020)

Glanville alludes to the way in which identifying as a people's theatre implicitly demands that the relationship of people to artistic practice is centred. Concurrently, a people's theatre indicates a particular connection to democratic modes of representation and collaborative working practices with which CPT wanted to align. Glanville also articulates the naming of the theatre as bound up with European models of *volkstheater*; a form which Alison Phipps identifies as encompassing both 'the impulse towards the traditional and expressing a sense of belonging' and 'radical tendencies, politically and critically reflecting upon the life of everyday people and urging action' (1999: 632). The people's theatre is therefore both rooted in the community and acting politically for and as a community; it seeks to assert a particular set of ideological, social, and artistic aims. That is not to say there is no history of practices aligned with people's theatre in the UK; the socialist Unity Theatres and Citizens Theatres of the 20th century were similarly underpinned by a desire to make social and political theatre for and by working class people. CPT intended to foster experimental and non-hierarchical arts practices, to build relationships and embed themselves within the local communities, and to make politically relevant and urgent work (Glanville 2020).

There are two dominant conceptualizations of the people's theatre: as a unifying force that seeks to create relationships across different social groups; or as a practice which specifically seeks to engage the disenfranchised and support their public representation. Bérénice Hamidi Kim, in drawing a history of people's theatres in France, asserts that 'the notion that "all receive dramatic communion in the auditorium" was shattered by the realisation that there existed a "non-public", a category that became the emblem of economic, social and cultural exclusion' (2009: 73). The illegibility of the non-public provoked the emergence of people's theatres that sought to advocate and represent the experiences of this disenfranchised group. The history of CPT weaves both these ideologies – theatre for all and theatre for the dispossessed – into their practice; marking the potential for a more nuanced understanding of the people's theatre in crisis ordinariness of the present, as a way to unite multiple groups of disenfranchised peoples.

When CPT arrived in Camden in the 1990s, the borough constituted (and still does) one of the most economically, ethnically and culturally diverse areas of London and the UK. The Hampstead Road had become a locus of intense racial tension between the predominantly white British and Irish residents of Somers Town and the first- and second-generation Bangladeshi population who largely resided in the Regents Park Estate. The relationship between these communities deteriorated following a number of high-profile incidents of racialized violence.³ Moving into the building on the corner of Drummond Street and the Hampstead Road, Camden People's Theatre took up residence in the middle of this geographical and cultural conflict. Initially, sharing their building with the Drummond Street Asian Youth Association, CPT built strong relationships with the Asian community in Euston. Concurrently, CPT made work on both neighbouring estates, working with young people across communities, initially separately

³ See Goulbourne 2001 for an in-depth discussion of the broader racial politics that surrounded this tension and its reporting.

on targeted projects and then together in the building to make performances. In the early 2000s the company ran Estate Side Stories, Camden Summer University and Youth Theatre projects that brought these groups together (CPT 2000 and 2001). This points to the potential of the people's theatre as a form to engage multiple publics and, in doing so, it recognizes all participants as *people of this place*, holding a space in which conflicting groups might see themselves as people of *the same place*.

Thinking about the more recent history of CPT, current Director Brian Logan shared that on joining the company in 2011 (as a co-Director along with Jenny Paton) the interviewing board suggested people's theatre might be removed from the company's name, noting that '[a]lthough 2011 is relatively recent it feels like a different epoch. It was a time when names like Camden People's Theatre were deeply unfashionable, it just sounded like some totally retrograde syndicalist union. We were encouraged to rebrand and start afresh with a different name' (2020). As Logan comments, the landscape for contemporary people's theatres has changed substantially. Indeed, a wave of contemporary people's theatres have subsequently sprung up in the UK in the intervening decade: Sheffield People's Theatre (2012), Brighton People's Theatre (2015), Leeds People's Theatre (2018) and Paisley People's Theatre Project (2019). That there has been a groundswell of companies working under this banner during a period of economic austerity speaks to the potential of the form within a context of economic and social crisis. Thinking back to the decision to retain the name in 2011 Logan articulates the provocation offered: 'Obviously when CPT had been founded, they didn't call themselves that by accident and it meant something to them then' (2020). In the early years of the 21st century, against the backdrop of a period of relative social stability and persistent economic growth in the UK, there was gradual drifting away from articulating CPT's identity as a people's theatre, with the space being emphasized instead as a home for emerging experimental artists. Reading this shift through the relationship of performance to crisis, arguably identifies

the possibility of a cultural turn to the people in times of turmoil. Indeed, in 2011 the effects of the economic crash were intensifying subsequent to the outgoing Labour government bailout of the UK banking sector and the newly established Conservative government's implementation of an economic programme of austerity. Concurrently, the incoming artistic team in 2011 set about negotiating a return to the original aims and agendas indicated by the people's theatre title, reflecting on what such a return might look like in contemporary Britain.

Nine years later, in 2020, CPT is predominantly perceived as a venue, an incubator for emerging companies and new work, and also continues to produce its own in-house productions. How does this aspect of the company's identity, as a producing venue and space of artistic development, expand understandings of the people's theatre and their relationship to crisis? CPT predominantly operates a festival-led approach to programming; staging up to four curated festivals each year that respond to a politically or socially urgent theme. Indicative examples include: *Calm Down Dear* (2013-), an annual curation of feminist performance; *Whose London Is It Anyway?* (2016), an interrogation of gentrification in the city; *No Direction Home* (2018), performances located around displacement, migration and refuge; and *Common People* (2018-), a collection of works on class and austerity. The programming at CPT stages and reflects the anxieties and fears of this period of protracted crisis. It is this responsiveness and political engagement with contemporary crises that reasserts the theatre as a *people's* theatre; it speaks directly to the experiences of the theatre's audience, while continuing to diversify that audience.

The festivals give one model for the marriage of popular and experimental performance modes that are cultivated at CPT. Logan states,

If you accept ... that normal people are alienated from theatre and high culture the thing they're alienated from is not the interesting types of performance that happen at CPT,

it's people swanning around in gowns looking into the middle distance in French windows. It felt to me that the type of theatre maker we work with at CPT had enormous potential to build bridges between the work we make and people from non-theatre going constituencies. ... how can we make popular and experimental really enforce each other; and, how can we honour the term people's theatre while still mainlining new forms of performance? (2020)

Supporting people not otherwise engaged with performance to encounter and deploy forms that sit within experimental practices demonstrates the potential for popular and experimental to intersect. It ensures community practices are not siloed, rather the engagement of people is bound up with their exposure to the exciting and experimental forms CPT develops and foregrounds. In particular, the socially and politically engaged festivals curated at CPT address the immediate experiences of people living in the contemporary moment and so extend a more urgent invitation to audiences into the theatre. Brighton People's Theatre offer a similarly broad range of encounters with practice to their members, as I discuss below, utilizing modes drawn from various artistic forms and models of grassroots community organizing. This approach of supporting an engagement with a more diverse range of forms is illustrative of the artistic practices of people's theatres in the UK at the outset of the 21st century; and, arguably, participates in the ongoing innovation of practices within community performance.

Such is CPT's importance to the wider landscape of performance in the UK, that theatre critic Lyn Gardner has argued: 'British theatre would be less rich without its flagship theatres, but it would be completely stymied without the tiny, under-resourced venues such as CPT which are such a critical part of the theatre ecology' (2018). Shunt, Fevered Sleep, Ridiculusmus, Rachel Mars, Jamal Harewood, Milk Presents, Kelly Green, Sh!t Theatre, Emma Frankland, Barrel Organ and Nouveau Riche are just a few of those who have

collaborated with the venue while early in their careers. In addition to providing spaces for this kind of performance in central London, CPT run several artist development opportunities: Starting Blocks, where five artists undertake a collaborative ten-week residency at CPT to create a piece of new work; Home Run, a £5,000 commission and in-kind support from the venue to develop a new project from work-in-progress to a full production; and an Associate Artists scheme which offers a £1,350 bursary and provides companies space to develop aspects of their practice with no set output (CPT 2020). In 2020 the central aspect of the theatre's identity is located around its position as a small but mighty DIY performance space in central London, which cultivates exciting new work from a diverse pool of emerging artists and community collaborations at an affordable price for audiences. Far from contrary to its identity as a *people's* theatre, the artists' support programmes that CPT offer enable a more representative range of artists to establish themselves as performance makers. Peopling the theatre is also about making material interventions that offer artists from diverse backgrounds the means to flourish in an increasingly elitist industry. Through critically engaged programming practices and the material support of emerging and underrepresented artists CPT's history of proximity to the terminology of the people's theatre expands the possibilities for this practice in the contemporary UK landscape.

Established in 2015, Brighton People's Theatre work across their city, engaging residents in theatre making workshops, playreading groups, and artistic programming and curation for the Brighton Festival. The creative team at BTP is made up of freelance artists who collectively equate to one full-time staff member; yet they have managed to engage over a hundred residents of Brighton, many of whom had not previously participated in cultural activities. Speaking on the naming of BTP, artistic Director Naomi Alexander notes the company was going to be called The 92%,

in response to the Warwick Commission finding that it was the most white, most wealthy, most well-educated 8% of the population who access the arts most frequently. ... I'm aware that there is a growing movement of people's theatres in the UK and I'm interested in aligning with that ... in terms of putting the means of production into the hands of the 92% of people who don't normally go to or make theatre. It's not necessarily about making political shows. The act of making theatre in this way is political. (qtd. in Alexander and Hughes 2017: 177)

While Alexander eventually chose to name the company Brighton People's Theatre, in order to situate their work within both the longer historical lineage and the contemporary movement of people's theatres, the concept of the 92 percent remains threaded throughout their practice. Published in 2015, The Warwick Commission into Cultural Value found that engagement in funded cultural activity was skewed (meaning the most privileged were benefiting disproportionately from public subsidy of the arts) and there was a significant lack of diversity in the cultural workforce in terms of race, disability and class. Responding to this context, Alexander's articulation of the politics of practices of creation resonates with the early principles of CPT, in a commitment to a way of working that, in its practices of making, is imbued with a set of inclusive and radical values.⁴ For BPT this is made manifest in a focus on redistributing the means of production to those who have been otherwise excluded from cultural creation, to both resist the ways in which the arts sector mimics the elitist division of resources pervasive under capitalist societies and also contribute to broader social systems seeking to illuminate and reverse this inequality (Alexander 2017). David Bradby and John McCormick note there is a huge range of practices that identify under the banner of a people's

⁴ The founding of BTP also strongly resonates with John McGrath founding of 7:84 in 1971, who derived their company name from a 1966 *Economist* statistic that 7 percent of the nation owned 84 percent of the country's wealth. Similar to the BTP, 7:84 was committed to making theatre of, and for, the people in non-hierarchical and collaborative ways.

theatre but ‘it is easier to identify their common enemy than their common aims ... all have been united in their impatience with existing theatrical forms, audiences, buildings, techniques’ (1978: 11). This characteristic discontentment is evident in BPT’s disruption of the elitist and exclusive nature of cultural life in the UK; and, CPT’s rejection of dominant modes of making theatre and material interventions into the development of emerging artists.

Thinking about the work of these two companies alongside the crises that preceded their formation illuminates the responsivity potential of the people’s theatre to the body-politic. CPT offer an anti-individual mode of making through collective devising that contested the dominance of the individual literary models in UK theatre at that time. Read against a backdrop of fifteen years of acute individualism and a catastrophic attempt to participate in the European Exchange Rate Mechanism, this asserts the role of the people’s theatre form to reimagine modes of collectivity that were flourishing in European politics (with the formation of the European Union in 1993) and cultural practices (in models of collaborative performance making) but were struggling within the UK. In this instance then, the people’s theatre response to the crisis of the early 1990s was both formal and ideological. By 2015, the UK had already experienced five years of austerity policies and individualist rhetoric that sought to blame the nation’s economic and social pain on the poorest and most marginalized members of the population. The re-election of the Conservative party (with a large majority) that same year confirmed the success of their persistent ideological attack on the scapegoated figures of, among others, the welfare claimant and the migrant. Once more, facing such rampant individualism and exploitation, the need to redistribute the means of cultural production was increasingly urgent. The particular approach of BPT was therefore overtly supportive of its community, specifically those most clearly encountering the brutality of austerity. In the contested terrain of the demonization of the poor, the model of the people’s theatre that

emerged in the 21st century was to redistribute representational resources to those who were being damagingly misrepresented and weaponized by mainstream public rhetoric.

Histories and temporalities

In the UK, and globally, people's theatres have had close historical association with the political left and, in many cases, arose from broader socialist projects or movements. CPT emerged from the London branch of Unity Theatre, a civic theatre rooted in socialist beginnings and part of a constellation of companies borne out of The Workers' Theatre Movement that flourished from the early nineteenth century. As Rupert Watts notes, the London based Unity Theatre founded in 1936 'lived through many crises ... even the War could not dampen the enthusiasm which kept Unity alive for so long' (1993: 16). However, in 1975 the theatre burned down and there followed a hiatus of activity until the revitalized Unity Theatre was established at the site of the Old Lord Palmerston pub in the early 1990s. Engaging a number of younger performance practitioners and appointing Sheridan Bramwell as the production co-ordinator indicated a renewed appetite for radical theatre. However, the experimental performance and collective devising processes of the emerging artists that would later gather under the banner of CPT proved incompatible with established figures within Unity Theatre. This arguably marked a significant shift in the artistic forms being deployed within the strata of people's, unity, citizens theatres. As Glanville notes,

What they wanted, I think, was a return to the kind of very clearly socialist agitprop type of theatre that they had been producing previously. ... what we were interested in was being – with a small p – political through our methodology and our way of working rather than through content messaging if you like. ... we all came from a pretty much left-wing socialist kind of viewpoint but that manifested itself in a way of working

which was collaborative, not script led, and very influenced by kind of body-based performance techniques. (2020)

In the 1990s, and now, the artistic practices and aesthetic modes of the people's theatre CPT engaged with were experimental and formally innovative. The collective sought to make non-text-based performance, centring on devising and body-based performance practices that emerged through collaborative working practices. This shift from the previous focus of Unity Theatre ultimately proved too drastic and the artists who would later establish CPT broke away from Unity Theatre after around eighteen months of collaboration following an incident where they were removed from the building on Hampstead Road. This collective of artists continued working independently around the West Camden and South Euston area, forming as their own independent company under the banner of CPT. When the lease for the Hampstead Road building came up to tender in 1994 Camden Council awarded the site to CPT, who remain based there twenty-six years later.

This rupture happened against the backdrop of a nation in the midst of a deep recession, with high unemployment and a housing crisis; a context that required the Left to reimagine what it might offer, both culturally and politically. After another gruelling Labour election loss in 1992, Tony Blair was elected leader of the Labour Party in 1994 and later would become UK Prime Minister in 1997. Blair's reimagination of the popular left in the political sphere would become more centrist, led by third way ideologies that espoused the potential of a marriage between free market economies alongside social justice and a range of social inclusion policies. Conversely, at CPT in the 1990s creative practice was deployed to expose people to democratic modes of making and genuine approaches to community engagement, making the promise of representation evident. The aesthetic modes of the people's theatre at CPT were/are experimental and formally innovative; they seek to cultivate new practices that

represent and inhabit the experience of lived reality in the present moment. In a way that feels distinct from other practices of community and applied arts occurring during the New Labour period, that sought to align with, or overtly deliver, state sanctioned cultural and social agendas, at CPT artists were positioning themselves as co-creators with the non-professional community members they were working with. This positioning might be more easily located in the lineage of the alternative theatre movement of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s rather than alongside the instrumentalization of community practices that was occurring in the late 1990s.

Collaborating with communities using the experimental forms that are threaded throughout the venue's artistry remains core to CPT. Their in-house productions, *This Is Private Property* (2016), *Fog Everywhere* (2017) and *Human Jam* (2019), specifically sought to make experimental devised work about themes that are urgent to their community – the housing crisis, air pollution in London and the High-Speed Rail 2 (HS2) project – with people in their locale who are non-professional artists. The HS2 project seeks to improve transport and connectivity across the UK, but also threatens to destroy much of the area surrounding CPT to build a new rail station.⁵ Down the road from CPT at St James Gardens, in the biggest exhumation project in European history, 63,000 bodies are being moved from an 18th and 19th century burial site to make way for the new track. This forms the central conceit of *Human Jam*, which explores the disruption of the dead to reflect on the threat this project poses to the living residents of Drummond Street. *Human Jam* deploys a collage of performance approaches, a mode I am arguing is both central to contemporary practices of the people's theatre and core to socially committed artistic response to crisis. In *Human Jam* this collage consists of performance lectures, a community chorus, disruptions of the action with 'the real', direct address and political songs. The focus on the burial site itself invokes an intersection of

⁵ The HS2 national infrastructure project is estimated to cost £106 billion. It has attracted multiple protests due to the spiraling costs of the project, the ecological damage it causes and the displacement of residents and communities in urban areas.

multiple temporalities: verbally, as Logan talks us through his volunteering at the site retrieving and deciphering headstones; and then, by the appearance of 18th century land rights activist Thomas Spence, the past is embodied on the stage. Spence's materialization in the present highlights the HS2 project as having an agenda much broader than transport:

Logan 'The 25-year development plan involves the sale of £5-6bn worth of publicly owned land around the station, in which Lendlease will acquire a leasehold interest for up to 300 years'.

Spence That doesn't even mention a railway. It's about land. (CPT 2019: 16)

The removal of housing and businesses from West Euston and the exhumation of the bodies facilitates the transfer of public land into private hands. Introducing Spence functions to interrogate land grabs across three centuries, from his activism in the 1700s to the current resistance of the people of Camden in the present day; from the enforcement of Enclosure legislation in Early Modern England to contemporary models of gentrification.

Human Jam was made in collaboration with the community under threat from HS2, both as research collaborators and cast members. Throughout, a community chorus interjects with co-created protest songs to articulate their position:

In the name of HS2

They're digging up the ground

In the name of HS2

People fight but what can they do

Come here and hold my hand

While they take our land (21)

The use of song collectively expresses the immediate threat to the community and articulates a yearning for unity in the face of this threat. The community chorus also give voice to one of Spence's own songs from the 18th century:

But thank them for nought if the Heavens they could let,
Few Joys there the Poor would e'er see,
For Rents they must toil and for Taxes to boot,
The Rights of the People for me. (25)

Reanimating Spence's song, articulating the same threat to land and oppression of people through the community chorus draws a lineage between historic oppressions and the present privatization of public land. Eugène van Erven has argued that 'contemporary radical popular plays' are indebted to Brecht's epic theatre (1988: 175). While van Erven is making this point in the late 1980s, it holds resonance today that such works 'contain songs that serve a narrative and analytical purpose quite similar to Brecht's (Ibid.). Drawing on the model of epic theatre, in *Human Jam* song is deployed to perform collective power and expose explicitly to the audience the damage that is being done to the Euston area. In such practices, CPT demonstrate the potential for the people's theatre to draw a community together but also to connect that community to its histories of struggle in order to provoke a resistance in the lived crises of the present.

From revolt to play

BTP's first production *Tighten Our Belts* (2016) emerged out of a collaboration with Brighton Unemployed Centre Families Project, where Alexander ran a series of creative workshops for service users at the centre examining themes of austerity in the city. Funded by Arts Council England, Alexander established a strong relationship with the Brighton Dome, which provided a range of in-kind support around access to rehearsal and performance space, as well as production staff and advertising (Alexander 2017). *Tighten Our Belts* depicted a cast of characters from across Brighton who had been impacted by the severity of austerity policies. The performers introduced themselves at the outset and dropped in and out of different roles, with the line between performer and character often blurred; this served to emphasize these stories as real situations, happening to real people, but avoided asserting that these were the performers' own stories. Similar to *Human Jam*, the production utilized a range of formal approaches from agitprop, movement pieces, third person monologues and political songs, together composing a number of vignettes provided snapshots of characters rather than a singular complete narrative.

Hamidi Kim identifies the potential for a people's theatre to function as 'a protest against the current political system and the ruling classes, [aimed] at widening existing social divisions so as to make them still more unbearable and to stir spectators to revolt' (2009: 74). *Tighten Our Belts* sought to represent the violence of austerity to a broader public, to make the cruelty of these policies 'still more unbearable'. Punctuating the performance were three versions of the eponymous protest song 'Tighten Our Belts'. Each version of the song exposed how the government had constructed the narrative that overinflated public spending in the UK was to blame for the 2008 economic crisis, and then how they used this narrative to justify their devastating austerity policies. The first song, from the perspective of the voter ran thus:

We voted for the Tories, cos the country's in a mess

They're cutting public spending – guaranteed success.

We need the people working – it's better than the dole

Let's discourage all the shirking and climb out of this hole (BTP 2016: 3)

Again, there is a resonance with the use of music in epic theatre. Here the song reveals the public narrative of austerity, at its base appealing to the in-work poor and positioning them against those in need of social security support. This points to the way voters reflected the discourse of the Conservatives articulated in the 2010 election, when the UK was reeling from the global financial crisis. The second rendition articulates the position of Conservative politicians, identifying the way in which austerity policies were implemented by invoking the global economic crisis. The third and final song, from the perspective of the disenfranchised, offers a chorus of resistance:

They said 'We're speaking for the workers – we're speaking for the poor'

They said 'We speak for the disabled – we're speaking for them all'

They spun us a good story – they said it was for the best

But now it's seven years later – they've failed the austerity test

We've had to tighten our belts

They made the cuts, the debts remain

But they slashed our dole anyway (tighten our belts)

They've only helped themselves

And now we're still all in the hole

It was the bankers' hubris

That got us in this mess
The Government was ruthless
And wanted more for less
But we know the solution
So try not to despair
Here comes the revolution (22)

The use of perspective through the three iterations of the song in the performance tracks an emerging resistance in response to a toxic discourse that emerged in the wake of the 2008 crisis. Both *Tighten Our Belts* and *Human Jam* utilize choral protest songs as a dramaturgical device to articulate a collective resistance to crisis both in the content of the songs and in the act of coming together to sing as one. As Casey Dué has argued – in relation to readings of Aristophanes, Spike Lee and Beyoncé – the Classical performance practices of choral song and movement when deployed in contemporary culture continue to have the potential to affect the ‘audience on both an emotional and cognitive level and incite social change’ (2016: 24).

In January 2019 BTP relaunched their programme offering a range of theatre making workshops led by artists at a Brighton community centre and a playreading group held at the Theatre Royal. The company’s new tagline is ‘Come and Play’; an ethos that is seeking to invite people into play and enjoy cultural experiences. In line with this ethos, at the start of 2020 the company held their first People’s Inspiration Meeting, an open invitation to all Brighton residents to contribute to the kind of work BTP is to make in the future. Run as a workshop, this meeting invited the people of Brighton to consider what form, thematic focus, and location an urgent piece of theatre about contemporary Brighton might take (Costa 2020). Alexander’s approach is now firmly dedicated to the importance of joy in this process, ‘Focusing on the most challenging aspects of people’s lives ... doesn’t feel congruent with our

values as a company' (Alexander qtd. in Costa 2020). This marks a significant shift from BTP's work devising *Tighten Our Belts*, which very much interrogated the acute struggle of encountering austerity, and perhaps offers insight into the relationship of artistic practice to crisis. In the moment of producing *Tighten Our Belts* the most disenfranchised in the country were still reeling from the Welfare Reform Act of 2012, with further punitive social security reforms on the horizon in 2016. The people's theatre in this moment gave a platform for the people to expose the harsh inequalities of our collective society and to invoke revolt against them. At the outset of 2020, the inclination to cultural practices of play and joy speaks to an extended drought of these opportunities in the contemporary landscape of the UK: a decade of austerity, a deeply divisive exit from the European Union and a period of electoral instability with four fractious general elections in nine years and increasing appeals to populism on the left and the right. Such a landscape yearns for a different iteration of a people's theatre, one that does not necessarily overtly address the oversaturated political discourse, but instead seeks to undertake politics in its practices of inclusion, participation, collective imagination. In some ways, this shift in strategy resonates with those early practices of the people's theatre at CPT; in the times following the *moment* of crisis we might then understand the people's theatre to respond to a desire for non-hierarchical modes of theatre making and creating, a space in which to re-envision our collective future together. Such arts practices might seed models of active participation across communities that then encourage people to reclaim an active role in shaping public discourse.

Current crises

October 2020. We are in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic and a confluence of crises: health, economic, representational, cultural. We are encountering a health crisis that is exposing the inequalities in the social fabric of society, both in the UK and elsewhere. We are

standing on the precipice of global economies potentially collapsing, leading to unprecedented levels of unemployment and financial depression. In the UK, after a protracted period where the cultural sector was given no financial support, the UK government announced a £1.57 billion bailout package for cultural, arts and heritage institutions in July 2020. At the time of writing, questions continue to be raised about the prioritization of institutions over artists, the uneven distribution of funding across regions in England and the particular vulnerability of smaller arts organizations to financial collapse. Throughout the crisis, BPT have been offering online (and offline via the post) theatre making activities and workshops to residents of Brighton, continuing to foster play and community connection, working towards a sharing of creative practice. CPT have been in dialogue with the community of artists they regularly collaborate with around the support they need; concurrently, they are collaborating with Food For All (a volunteer food distribution service) to run a foodbank out of their building. In August CPT also announced four commissions for artists exploring live performance in a time of social distancing; a socially distanced festival for local residents; and a further fifteen new commissions for artists working digitally, with an emphasis on supporting those from marginalized backgrounds. Out of this crisis, there is a movement emerging that seeks to rebuild culture on fairer terms, with greater inclusion, more embedded in the communities they serve.

It seems in this moment – when we are witnessing increased collective action in the arts and in wider public life, alongside a growing awareness of the intensification of social inequalities following a decade of austerity – there is an appetite for the kinds of practice that the people’s theatre might offer: practices that undertake a more inclusive offer to communities; that create in collaborative ways utilizing a collage of experimental and popular forms; that are embedded in a place and seek to respond to/with the people occupying their locale. A people’s theatre gives voice to communities when their representation is under threat

and it calls them into a collective. A turn to the people in artistic practice is an all-encompassing creative invitation which, in line with the historic roots of the practice, seeks to engage with the most marginalized or economically under resourced. Such practices meet crisis through a collage of performance forms and structures of collective making that endeavour to both unify a people and invoke a revolt.

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