

TOWARDS A DEMOCRATIC THEATER

How Working Class Communities Are Excluded from Mainstream Arts and Culture

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About the Author

Paula Currie is a writer and theater maker who works in collaboration with marginalized communities. During her time at Alt Valley Community Trust, Paula has produced fourteen original plays, which were performed to four thousand members of the local community. Paula is currently working on a community project at Liverpool's Royal Court Theatre.

Alt Valley Community Trust (AVCT) grew out of local activism in the Liverpool suburb of Croxteth, in the early 1980s, as Margaret Thatcher's government began imposing neoliberal doctrine on Britain. Croxteth is an area of low socio-economic capital, and is one of the top 4% of deprived local authority wards in Britain. Child poverty is common, and there is little spare cash for children to visit the theater, or attend music or drama classes. Until funding cuts intervened in Summer 2017, my role as Head of Creative Development at AVCT involved using art as a tool to educate and empower the local community. Our drama project, *Love Acting*, offered young people and adults free arts education in a local setting.



The Love Acting group performing at the Edinburgh Fringe.

The project, which ran for five years, was wholly committed to inclusivity and to ensuring that the local community had access to high quality arts events. During *Love Acting's* existence, its group members performed fourteen original plays to over 4,000 members of the local community—many of whom had never seen a play, or visited a theater before. We received no funding from Arts Council England during this time.

In 2014 we applied successfully to the BBC's Performing Arts Fund, for a grant to stage a play featuring both our youth and adult drama groups. *Good Education* was based on the true story of a unique episode in Liverpool's recent history: the occupation by local people of Croxteth Comprehensive School. The script was adapted from oral histories taken from community members who were involved in the struggle to retain a secondary school in the area. The actual story was a perfect fit for the group: It was relevant to the local community and could accommodate



A Midsummer Night's Dream in Croxteth Woods – performed to a local audience of over 400 people.

a large local cast of adults and young people in telling an important story about Croxteth's history. The experience of producing the play was to reveal a great deal about class, culture, and democracy at local level.

Liverpool's iconic Everyman Theatre was closed demolition in July 2011. It was thereafter rebuilt on the same site and reopened, as an award-winning venue, in March 2014. Following discussions with the Everyman's supportive community worker, we were offered the use of the theater's new community space, EV1, to perform *Good Education*. We were thrilled to be performing at the city's most prestigious theater, and this occasion became an important motivational tool for our large and diverse group.

The years 2014 and 2015 should have been a good time to develop an innovative, intergenerational project designed to promote social cohesion, and access for what arts funding bureaucracies call "non-traditional" audiences. The Warwick Commission on *The Future of Cultural Value* was convened in 2013 at the University of Warwick. Its report, published in 2015, revealed a distinct lack of diversity in Arts audiences, finding that: "The wealthiest, best educated and least ethnically diverse 8% of society make up nearly half of the live music and a third of the theater and gallery visitors."

According to Vikki Heywood CBE, Chair of the Commissioners: "The key message from this report is that the cultural and creative industries need to take a united and coherent approach that guarantees equal access for everyone to a rich cultural education and the opportunity to live a creative life. There are barriers and

inequalities in Britain today that prevent this from being a universal human right. This is bad for business and bad for society.”

In seeking to redress this imbalance and break down these barriers, the report identified five goals to ensure that the “Cultural and Creative Industries can fully enrich Britain.” Goal 2 asserted that the “production and consumption of culture and creativity should be enjoyed by the whole population and deliver the entitlement of all to a rich cultural and expressive life.” While Goal 5 aimed to establish “a vibrant creative life at local and regional levels that reflects and enriches community expressions of identity and culture across the UK.”

The Commission welcomed Art Council England’s “Creative People and Places” initiative which explored “how best to generate cultural demand and aspirations in areas of the country with very poor profiles in terms of cultural participation.” It concludes:

There is a general need for public funders to more proactively fashion investment strategies and interventions that are more responsive to local needs and demand, to talent from across the country, and to natural organic growth in the vibrancy of our towns and cities. This will require more assertive efforts to bring together new models of public and private partnership on a regional and city basis. Cultural organisations need to do a better job at coming together locally to share resources, devise partnerships that will unlock financial savings and generate income benefits, and join forces in making their case. [...] They should invest time, effort and self-criticism in a deeper understanding of the economic, social and environmental challenges facing their local communities so they are able to make an intelligent and realistic arts-based contribution to solving those problems.

In many ways, their decision to work with *Love Acting* might have been an opportunity for the Liverpool Everyman Theatre, a major arts organization, to refine its understanding of the “economic, social and environmental challenges facing local communities” and to explore how a cultural organization might try to do a “better job of coming together locally to share resources and devise partnerships.” Unfortunately, our experience fell far short of such aspirations, and I offer some reflections on how and why this was so.

Following confirmation of the performance date with the very helpful artistic and community staff, we began a series of meetings with the theater “management,” which, from the outset, made us feel unwelcome. At the first meeting, with a panel of two managers and one community manager, I opened by screening a short film we had made about *Good Education* (<https://vimeo.com/117820093>). I was bubbling with enthusiasm about the project, but was cut short by a young, male

manager who stared at me through lowered glasses and said, “Excuse me if you have a very long CV, but who are you? Where do you come from?” I should have replied, “Somewhere with manners!” and walked out, but instead, I blushed down to my working class roots and began listing my professional credentials. During the meeting I also highlighted the fact that we were working with a large cast, and that the production would pose some technical difficulties. The female manager’s response was, “You’re not exactly selling it to us.” Until then, I hadn’t realized I was “selling” anything.

This encounter set the tone for how the management team would approach the project. They constantly focused on problems, and seemed unwilling, or unable, to offer solutions. At no point during any meeting was there any evident interest in, or enthusiasm for, what we were trying to achieve: to enable a group of marginalized individuals to perform in a major city venue—a place many of them had never visited. In Arts Council policy terms, this project was an opportunity for the Everyman to engage with a “hard to reach” section of the community and to grow a new audience. Meetings were dominated by financial matters, and the managers communicated an overriding concern as to whether we had sufficient funds to pay for venue hire. Concern for this matter was surprising, as the community worker had initially informed me that venue hire would be met from the Everyman’s community budget, for which we were very grateful. We had undertaken to fund technician costs, and any further charges incurred, and the play had been scheduled for April 2015.

One of the earliest issues identified by the managers was that the Green Room was too small for the cast to use during performances; so it was suggested that the performers could remain onstage, on benches, throughout. Whenever an issue arose, during the production process, managers appeared unwilling to support our problem-solving efforts. Two particular examples, in relation to promotion and ticketing, illustrate an increasingly unhappy relationship: They refused to promote the event on their company website, as “they couldn’t promote projects which were not made in-house.” Actors and their families had been checking online, and were extremely disappointed that our event was not being publicized. When a community member tried to buy a ticket and was refused, we were informed that the Everyman would not officially ticket our event. They could print out our tickets for a fee, which we agreed to pay. However, this meant our audiences would be unable to reserve seating online or pay for tickets in advance. It was suggested that we sell directly to the public from a table in the foyer. As we were performing in a small space, selling tickets on the door meant that many people who turned up on the night would not get to see the play. We were then advised to use a commercial ticketing website, but the booking fee inflated the ticket prices and we were committed to a community rate of £5.00 to ensure a strong local presence.

We began to feel increasingly marginalized by The Everyman bureaucracy, even though the theater is an Arts Council National Portfolio Organisation, formally committed to encouraging inclusivity and diversity. Their message to us seemed to be: As a community group, you can use our facilities but don't expect to be treated like everybody else. It is difficult to admit, but more difficult to avoid the conclusion, that our being a working class community theater group was at the root of the problems we experienced. In all our interaction with The Everyman (which I frequently dreaded) we were made to feel like "amateurs" and were very much treated accordingly: This attitude reveals disturbing and outdated notions of what community theater is and what it can achieve. The final straw came when we received an email stating that due to the large cast being present at all times in an auditorium limited, by Health and Safety Regulations, to a capacity of 60 people, audiences could not exceed 30 people at any performance. This was a direct consequence of the advice given to us at our first meeting, and to have it disclosed three weeks before we opened was a huge blow. The cast had worked on the project for a full year, and many friends and family members would now not be accommodated.

We felt we had no other option but to cancel the venue. After all our hard work and effort, our brilliant community cast would not be performing on The Everyman stage after all. Maybe it was not such a big deal: All of their reasons were perfectly valid. They could be justified. It wasn't a blunt refusal to allow us to perform there. But sometimes, this is how barriers work: Lots of small ones add up to a large one. They have a cumulative effect. Throughout this process we felt unwanted, patronized, like a nuisance, and most of all like we didn't belong. Overall, our experience at The Everyman seemed like a missed opportunity. The theater had the chance to welcome a marginalized community into their space and give them a positive experience: to show them that theater is not just for the white, middle class 8% that the Warwick report highlighted. That it is for us, too: the remaining 92%.

Good Education was finally performed in a community theater space to a capacity audience of 200. It was performed again, a year later, at Liverpool Museum to 300 people. Most of the audience had never visited a theater or a museum before. Working class theater audiences do exist. If the audience is welcomed and feels that the play is relevant to them, they will come.

In the year that *Good Education* should have been performed at the Everyman, the redesigned and rebuilt theater was the recipient of the Royal Institute of British Architects Stirling Prize for Architecture. A central feature of the theater's design is a series of exterior panels showing striking photographs of members of the



A scene from *Good Education* at the Liverpool Lighthouse Theatre

local community. In our experience, this is exactly where The Everyman keeps the community: on the outside.

Following our cancellation one of the managers sent me an email stating that The Everyman was “just starting the process of working with community groups, and [they] were still finding their feet.” I hope that they have now found them.

The Warwick Commission’s five goals were set with a view to smashing “barriers and inequalities that prevent equal access to a rich cultural opportunity to live a creative life.” If these goals are to be achieved, and established arts institutions are to engage with working class audiences and theater makers, support for work like this must be a feature of all aspects of the organization, and the way it approaches relationships. An encouraging community team, genuinely excited by the project’s potential, is insufficient on its own.