Immersion and Communion in Community Plays

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Abstract: Community Plays as invented and conceptualised by Ann Jellicoe in the 1970s are not Immersive Theatre, but they are certainly precursors of the form. The article centres on the seven Community Plays written for the city of Dorchester and its inhabitants since 1985, exploring how the hundreds of participants become engrossed in the long creative process in ways that are similar to what immersants experience in an immersive play. But the audience is in its turn invited to participate during the performances, not only interacting with the cast but also really becoming part of an enlarged community. Moreover, the immersive techniques used have a political potency: in creating together and sharing their emotions, views and ideas, all the participants experience commonality not only as a form but also as an ideology which is at odds with the individualistic stance of a lot of immersive plays.

Résumé : Les *Community Plays*, imaginées et conceptualisées par Ann Jellicoe dans les années 1970, ne peuvent être qualifiées de théâtre immersif. Pour autant, elles en sont un des précurseurs. Cet article s'intéresse aux sept *Community Plays* écrites pour la ville de Dorchester et ses habitants depuis 1985. Il explore la façon dont les centaines de participants se trouvent absorbés tout au long du processus créatif, selon des modes qui rappellent ce que ressentent les immersants. Par la suite, les spectateurs sont à leur tour invités à participer, dépassant la seule interaction avec les acteurs pour devenir véritablement membres de la communauté élargie. Mais les techniques immersives que l'on retrouve dans les *Community Plays* ont une portée politique : en partageant leurs émotions, leurs idées et leurs idéaux et en créant ensemble, tous les participants font l'expérience de la communauté, non seulement comme forme d'art mais aussi comme idéologie, une idéologie aux antipodes de l'individualisme souvent prôné par le théâtre immersif.

Keywords: Community Plays, Immersive theatre, politically-committed theatre, site-specific theatre, amateur theatre

Mots-clés : Les *Community Plays*, théâtre immersif, théâtre engagé, théâtre in situ, théâtre amateur

Immersive Theatre places at its centre the spectator turned immersant and reorganises the space of performance so that audience and actors are not separated. In that, it shares many features in common with experiments that have aimed at breaking from more traditional theatre in the UK, especially with the second generation of politically-committed playwrights after 1968. If none of those experiments can strictly speaking be labelled "Immersive Theatre" as it is now known, one can trace a filiation, if not a continuity, which may shed light on the inspirations for and motivations behind such dramaturgical choices.

The present article means to explore specifically the form of the community play, as it was experimented and defined in the 1970s and is still used as a form in the UK and in other countries around the world. In her definitive work *Immersive Theatres*, Josephine Machon defines immersive experiments through degrees of immersion. One of her chapters is entitled "Gauging an immersive event" (67). In that light, we would like to gauge how immersive community plays are, explore how this immersion works and to what end. Community plays are celebrations of the community, not only of actors who perform but also of spectators who share an unforgettable experience. They gather participants together and celebrate unity where Immersive Theatre tends to fragment its audience and celebrate individuality. The common points between the two forms are nevertheless numerous, as is made apparent when Machon quotes David Jubb, Joint Artistic Director of BAC, stating the motivations behind the company's choice of form. His words would fit community plays:

> In a relatively secular society perhaps theatre can provide that place where people come together, explore their differences and by putting differences and creativity together, invent something new, invent a future […] it's about people and it's about putting the audience at the heart of the experience. (23)

Our contention is that the model of the community play can be seen as one of the precursors of Immersive Theatre. But where the former results in (if not aims at) politicising its participants and celebrating a feeling of social bonding, the latter seems most often to be apolitical, more intent on entertaining individuals and adapting to each spectator's particular situation. To explore the stylistic filiation between the two and try to assess the ideological positioning of each, we will first look at the concept of the community play by concentrating on its creative process and its building of a community of actors. We will then examine the position of the audience which is integrated in the community. This will lead us to define the particular connection established between actors and spectators and understand its political impact on the experience as a whole, and how it may be compared to that created in Immersive Theatre.

Community plays appear now in a variety of forms, but as a genre it was created and defined by the established playwright, theatre director and Literary Manager of the Royal Court Ann Jellicoe. In 1974 she decided to leave London and move to Lyme Regis in Dorset. She was asked to write a play for her children's school, and discovered that little by little more and more people, not just the schoolchildren, got involved in the creation. Retrospectively, Jon Oram explains in the afterword to *A Time to Keep* how "[a]n amazing energy emerged; long-lost feelings of belonging to a place and a community began to surface" (in Dale and Edgar 127). In the end, the school play was a promenade production, written for and about the town, involving a professional production team and open to anyone who wanted to participate.

The play was such a success that Ann Jellicoe decided to promote the creation of other such experiments. She therefore set up the Colway Theatre Trust to explore the concept. Among the hundreds of plays which belong to the genre now, we propose to concentrate on the seven community plays which were written for the city of Dorchester since 1985, along the principles defined by Jellicoe. They are all about some part of the history of the city and its inhabitants, and produced and performed by its inhabitants. The first was *Entertaining Strangers*, written by then established playwright David Edgar in 1985 and directed by Ann Jellicoe, with Jon Oram as her assistant. Ann Jellicoe then wrote and directed *Under the God* in 1989. Andrew Dickson, who had been music director in the first two experiments, turned playwright and wrote *Running Still* in 1996. Rupert Creed was asked to write *Fire from Heaven* by the Dorchester Community Plays Association (DCPA) in 2002. David Edgar returned and co-wrote with Stephanie Dale *A Time to Keep* in 2007. Rupert Creed also came back with *Drummer Hodge* in 2014. Finally, Stephanie Dale wrote *Spinning the Moon*,[1] which was to open in April 2020, though its creation is postponed in the context of the Coronavirus crisis. Beyond showing the exceptional endurance of the form, this long list also reveals a filiation in the creative process: people who get involved are often so in the long term, and following the precepts of many 1970s Fringe experiments, change roles and learn new skills in the process itself.

The creation of a Dorchester community play involves a team of 4 or 5 professional writers, directors or music directors but one of its main principles is its inclusiveness: whoever shows up for casting will get a part in the play, even if the playwright must create it. All actors are amateurs even if many have become professional afterwards. There is no main part, as there is no central character. These characteristics stress some of the differences with immersive plays which are performed by professional actors, but they participate in creating a bond with the audience which is arguably even tighter because the participants and the audience are all inhabitants of the same city.

Moreover, the plays are created over a long period of time, usually 18 months, which allows to build real connections and relationships, as the professional team must settle in the town. In that regard, the way actors and spectators describe the experience of the Community Play is often comparable to the way the audience of Immersive Theatre describe their experience:

> Regular theatre audiences can leave a performance elated and enlightened, but in time those feelings generally fade away. Here is the community play, an art that touches people to an extent that adjusts their long-term attitudes and changes their lives. I receive letters and meet people years after their plays are over who tell me this is so. (Oram in Dale and Edgar 129)

We may note the use of the possessive which underlines the appropriation of the play by the participants, but these words are also comparable to the reactions of many spectators of Immersive Theatre, who cannot really define when the experience ends. Daniel Schulze thus writes about Immersive creations: "It is almost sublime to notice that this performance seemingly never ends. It mirrors the real world in that it goes on and on and on, it has no discernible beginning or end" (170). If Schulze here takes the standpoint of the spectator, the process is similar for all the participants of community plays who feel exhilarated, who often take part generation after generation and play after play and who experience a lasting sense of bonding. Similarly, Josephine Machon writes about immersive theatre: "If large-scale you may feel that there is no ending, that a party has begun in the bar. There is a very strong sense of community and shared experience as people chat over drinks, mill around or head to public transport together. […] The experience bleeds into the real world" (55). The participants of a community play tend to see themselves as members of a large family, much like Ariane Mnouchkine's company *Théâtre du Soleil*. There are indeed not only huge casts of actors and musicians but also dozens of participants who help with costumes, design, administration, organisation, people of all ages from babies in their mothers' arms to 90-year-olds, disabled people, unemployed people. This diverse but united community is described by former participants

in letters that Ann Jellicoe quotes in her book, *Community Plays: How to Put Them On*:

> We were a motley collection of people—from a window cleaner to a University lecturer, from factory workers and unemployed to top professionals in various fields, from schoolchildren to ancient people. […] As a result of this new friendships were formed, old ones renewed, history was relived, there were new interests, a fresh sense of comradeship, of belonging, of achievement and an acceptance of us "furriners" by the original Kirtonians. (260)

The letter, written by a new inhabitant of Crediton, emphasises the inclusiveness of the experience. That feeling of finding a large community to which you belong, not only for the time of the creation of the play, but years and decades after it, is probably the contemporary version of the Christian congregation which also found itself galvanised and reunited through the participation in Mysteries in the Middle Ages. The Vicar of Dorchester himself explained, when he participated in *ES* and accepted that the Church be used as a stage: "For two months the church was a real centre and real life went on in it. We had contact with many people we would otherwise never have touched—and they were so grateful and co-operative" (Jellicoe 40). The social purpose of community plays is made clear through these testimonies, and seems at odds with the concept of Immersive Theatre where spectators are considered as individuals, especially in the creations of Punchdrunk, as Felix Barrett, the artistic director of the company, explains to Rose Biggin:

> The whole thing with Punchdrunk is it's always for the individual. So even if it was a larger scale show, an audience of two thousand people, it's still about each one as an individual, and we'd still want to make sure every single one of them had their own experience they had ownership of, and there were enough beats of intimacy and that panic-inducing alone time. (201)

The lexical field of individualism is here prevalent, and goes along with that of Capitalism as the participants are meant to own their experience. On the contrary, the community play is a shared property. If this quotation seems to contradict Machon's "strong sense of

community and shared experience," one may also note that we have so far been concentrating on the community of actors, or participants in the community play, whereas Barrett comments on the spectator's perspective. We shall now look at the reception of Community Plays and try to assess the degree of immersion for the audience.

One of the main aspects shared by community plays and Immersive Theatre is the fact that they are site-specific: performed in barns, schools, factories or castles, they reject the traditional space of the theatre building and reinvent well-known spaces, turning them into heterotopias, to take up Michel Foucault's analysis. Where Foucault defined theatres as heterotopias, spaces cut from the real world while utopias are localised physically, community plays and immersive theatre conquer real spaces, devoted to social activities throughout the year, and transform them for the spectators into heterotopias through the experience of the performance. When their children's school or their church is turned into a performance space, they acquire a new and long-lasting meaning for the spectators of the Community Play, a feeling which is shared by the spectators of Punchdrunk's play *Kabeiroi*, who saw the familiar streets of London differently after their experience.

Both forms also follow the principles of environmental theatre as defined by Richard Schechner: the audience and the actors share the same space constantly, and follow the action in a promenade production. Participation is therefore almost unavoidable, as the spectators walk about and around the actors and interact with them. As early as 1978, Ann Jellicoe had understood that a moving audience tended to make spectators more active:

> [T]his audience was locked into an extraordinary experience, *The Reckoning* was a promenade production which was still very rare at that time. […] [W]e found a physical form which reinforced the idea of involvement. The audience was part of the action, even those who were seated became a backdrop. (5)

Quite tellingly, Jellicoe here writes about the spectator's "experience," a term which recurs in the description of Immersive Theatre,

and which corresponds, according to Patrice Pavis, to site-specific performances:

> Lorsque le théâtre est "hors de soi" : sorti de son lieu traditionnel, fermé et institutionnel, lorsqu'il déborde sur la rue ou dans n'importe quel cadre non spécifiquement créé pour lui, il devient *site-specific*, c'est-à-dire : *in situ*. Il est alors conçu non comme un lieu à remplir, une tâche à accomplir, mais comme une expérience qui part des conditions concrètes du lieu. (263)

The only time when the more traditional form of staging, with a proscenium arch, a curtain, and sometimes a fourth wall, appears on stage in a community play is for plays within the play: then the actual spectators find themselves on the same level as the characters-turned-spectators, discovering the entertainment meant for them all. In Immersive plays the separation of audience and actors is sometimes underlined by the masks: it seems that in both forms, more traditional separations of audience and actors sometimes reappear, the better to emphasise the difference with moments of communion and bonding. In community plays, the play-within-the-play is usually situated at the beginning. In *FH*, "[t]he play proper starts with music that draws everybody's attention and establishes a rhythmic beat. Cast leave off from their improvising and focus on the imminent entrance. A masked and costumed carnival procession enters to the rhythm" (2). Here "the play proper" is not the community play but the procession within the Community Play. The cast had been improvising as stallholders of a merry fair organised before the play itself, as some sort of half-real half-fictional frame, and had then played the part of spectators to the procession.

But if the form definitely leads to the immersion of the spectators, the content, or message of community plays shares the same goal. As the action travels back and forth in time, the spectators become archeologists. Déborah Prudhon, when describing the immersants' experience in *Kabeiroi*, also uses the metaphor of archeology: "Les participants, au cours de leur aventure, remontent le temps, traversant une à une les strates de différentes époques – et de différents lieux – dans ce qui évoque un procédé archéologique" (323). The beginning

of *ES* plays on the same confusion between past and present: "Good evening. My name is…, and I'm a real person. There are photocopies of various documents concerned with the characters in the play you're about to see" (13). The action of the play, which starts in 1984, jumps backwards in time (1870-1850-1828) and forwards again to the time of the performance. What is more, the characters are all actual people who lived in Dorchester, some of whom may be the ancestors of the spectators, of the actors, or of people they know. *ES* set a precedent, which Stephanie Dale followed in *SM*. Her play focuses on the Trenchards, a noble family of Dorchester in the 16th century whose well-known descendants still reside in the same Manor today.

Thus blurring the line between reality and fiction, past, present and future, actors and spectators, community plays immerse their audience into a world whose boundaries are difficult to define. Very often, and as was the case in *FH* quoted above, fairs are organised before the show, creating a liminal space where the spectators progressively enter the world of fiction. In *RS* the composite quality of space is symbolised by the objects which are turned into props: "Many of the cast are involved as stallholders or punters. […] [I]n the booths are lots of bits and pieces from the rest of the show" (1). At some point, as one of the stallholders begins complaining, an activist shouts: "Can someone from the community play please sort this out?" (2). The spectators are left to wonder whether the play has begun or whether there really is a problem delaying it. Spectators of immersive plays very often share those feelings, mistaking "real people" for characters in the play, or spaces meant to be out of bounds for spaces to be explored. In Community Plays, these liminal passages are also occasions for the spectators to participate in the action. In *TK* for instance:

> [D]uring the interval, the audience becomes gradually aware that everything on sale from costumed SALESPEOPLE—drinks, snacks, merchandise—is contraband. In addition, selected members of the audience are approached and asked to "look after" items. At the end of the interval, EXCISE MEN raid the refreshments and merchandise stalls, dragging the salespeople away […]. They also arrest costumed CITIZENS who have

> received contraband items to "look after". None of the real audience with contraband will be arrested, but they don't know that. (75)

Nevertheless, a striking difference appears between Immersive Theatre and Community Plays: when the former aims at entertaining the audience and sharing powerful emotions, the latter also tests the ethics of the spectators.

Of course, the sheer number of participants in community plays is bound to arouse strong feelings in the audience. Just as in a stadium when thousands of fans sing together to boost their team's morale, the hundreds of participants who mix with the spectators, telling them terrible stories of deprivation and death or expressing their joy at weddings or victories after deadly wars and epidemics, will quite effectively share strong communal pain or elation. The spectators of Immersive Theatre similarly recount feelings of fear or bliss because the plays address their bodies and not their intellect: as Déborah Prudhon describes, "[l]'immersant, gagné par un sentiment d'insécurité et d'appréhension plus ou moins important, se recentre sur lui-même et, de manière instinctive, devient plus conscient de son propre corps" (312). But the community plays go further, testing the moral limits of the spectators. Jon Oram thus asks:

> How would you react under pressure? Do you change in extreme situations? What can you discover about yourself as you respond to a threatening event? You can only make these discoveries inside the events. These are the boundaries I want to push—where the audience learns something about themselves because they are placed inside situations, rather than watching other characters respond in theirs. (Oram in Dale and Edgar 132)

This difference between Community Plays and Immersive Theatre springs, we argue, from the fact that community plays aim at politicising the spectators. Born in the 1970s, in the wake of a strong second wave of political theatre in Britain, the form was seen as a means not only to spread a message or an ideology well to the left of conventional politics, but also to test it directly on the audience, through their connection with the actors.

The will to belong to a community, even to create one, is in itself an ideological statement, which materialises when the professional team starts living in the city, as the creative process begins. Some immersive plays work along the same lines. In their conversation with Josephine Machon, Bill Mitchell and Sue Hill describe how their company worked for 6 months prior to the performance of the immersive play *The Passion* to collect stories and images in the city where it was set:

> WildWorks collaborated in the streets, malls and social clubs of Port Talbot, finding stories, memories and images of the place. [The play] resonated with the past and present narratives of the place and its inhabitants […]. Over 1200 community members took part as writers, musicians, singers, performers, makers, stewards, messengers, angels and demons. (17).

The term "community members" here is certainly not random, and once more underlines the links and filiation between the two theatrical experiments. Community plays embody in their very form and creative process the idea of an immersion of all participants. This is even more striking during the performances themselves, and has led Jon Oram to create the concept of the "social actor": "a social actor somehow has permission to implicate the audience in the drama, *because* this is their home territory; the actors and audience are neighbours" (Oram in Dale and Edgar 131, my emphasis). The conjunction here underlines the causal link between the formal characteristics of the community play and their consequences in terms of reception: because all participants have known each other for years, empathy is easy, and spectators become involved participants almost seamlessly. Both cast and audience are equally bound to become participants: spectators who discover the plot are thereby invited to get involved as people other than themselves, as a jury, a mob, mourners at a funeral, revellers at a wedding or Quakers at a meeting. The cast must work as a collective, an ensemble (especially as the plays are interspersed with songs), not only among themselves but also with the audience (who will invariably be asked to sing along). The play here is a catalyst which allows the community to come together, and the energy released in the process is quite mesmerising. But does the community thereby formed have a uniform political stance? The work of Immersive

Theatre has recurrently been deemed conservative and individualistic, working towards a fragmentation of society and embodying the values of Capitalism. But how can we take for granted that the feelings and political views of the community of Dorchester are more progressive than those of the individuals who participate in an immersive play? In a conversation I had with Stephanie Dale in January 2019, the playwright explained how the Community Play Committee made sure that the play would not alienate part of the audience who are, in this relatively wealthy town of the South West of England, predominantly conservative. On the other hand, the participants in the plays themselves are mostly liberal and left-wing, as are invariably the playwrights. The play-texts will nevertheless consistently avoid being too confrontational, and will voice different views on contemporary issues, always resorting to light humour and circumventing issues that are too divisive. The last play *SM* for instance expresses both anti- and pro-Brexit views and the ending is consensual: after having laughed together at their neighbours' adverse political views, all the citizens will sing along and join in the chorus.

The ideology of Dorchester Community Plays is indeed at times conservative and at times liberal, blending the traditional Christian values of the country and the vision of a more inclusive, multicultural and multi-confessional future. The play *FH* is a good example: taking place in the first decades of the 17th century, the first act seems to take sides with the Puritans as the new vicar, who wants to reform the city, finds himself expressing universal values of compassion and wishing for a more equal distribution of wealth:

> Mr. Gould we have a Christian duty to provide for our neighbours—the elderly, the sick—those who are unable to look after themselves. What I've seen is offensive. Children are starving. Beggars line the streets- and don't tell me they are all just work shy-I'm no friend to the idle but what I see in Dorchester is extreme- there is great wealth and great poverty—I am suggesting that some of that wealth should go where it's needed most—in caring for our own- to do otherwise is ungodly. (24)

The fire of the title is seen as coming from heaven to punish the inhabitants for their dissolute habits. But the second act then coun-

terbalances this ideological stance by showing the hypocrisy, duplicity and selfishness of supporters of Puritanism as Royalist troops enter the town. The Civil War is depicted from the perspective of the people of Dorchester and their local and individual interests. This is not to say that individualism is upheld as a moral stance or political philosophy, but rather that by looking at History from the point of view of people's stories, or people's History, the spectators may identify and understand the complexities of conflicts, whether they be between families, political parties or countries. But beyond teaching a lesson, are community plays more effective than traditional politically committed theatre as an instrument for sensitisation and mobilisation?

Both immersive plays and community plays have been criticised for their lack of political backbone, the first considered as a commercial product and the second as amateur and bland. We argue on the contrary that community plays, and indeed Immersive Theatre when it is communal and not intent on one-on-one experiences, may be political in content, but are certainly political in form, because of, or thanks to, their immersive qualities: when the audience is considered not as an outsider but as an insider, an active participant, and a co-producer of the work of art, not merely someone who comes to learn something, or be entertained by others, but someone who creates alongside the actors, then the political content and impact is not merely potentially in the message, but in the form, in the process of creation.

Far from separating and excluding the outsider, as is often claimed, the form of the community play, because it is immersive for the spectators, transforms them from passive viewers into active participants and co-creators complicit in the action. As boundaries between insiders (actors) and outsiders (spectators) are blurred, the spectators are not only responding to the play or to the actors, but to themselves. This is how Sarah Weston, who is not from Dorchester and felt first at odds with the rest of the audience, describes her experience:

> In *Drummer Hodge* there was a scene where women passed through the crowd asking for donations to the war effort. Watching, I realised that I myself was part of this general 'crowd', the general mass of Dorchester

> was also me, and the women came to me directly and asked for donations. In this instant, I did not feel like an audience member targeted for some tokenistic audience participation, but a conscious person being asked a moral and political question about whether I should donate to this cause. (9)

Thanks to two staging conventions, the promenade systematised by Ann Jellicoe and the concept of the "social actor" as theorised by Jon Oram, the spectators of the community play become gradually involved in the community and placed in situations where they have to take sides and act. The role granted to the audience follows Jacques Rancière's definition of an emancipated spectator: "That is what the word 'emancipation' means: the blurring of the boundary between those who act and those who look; between individuals and members of a collective body. […] It was the reconfiguration in the here and now of the distribution of space and time, work and leisure" (Rancière 2009: 19). Even further, and as Rancière suggests, form takes precedence over the message in terms of efficacy: far from preaching to the already converted, the community plays reach out and meet the spectators on their own ground, and rather than confronting them, physically and politically guide and accompany them towards a shared perspective on the world. In Rancière's words, in a chapter entitled "Les paradoxes de l'art politique" which is not part of the English version of *The Emancipated Spectator*:

> Le problème alors ne concerne pas la validité morale ou politique du message transmis par le dispositif représentatif. Il concerne ce dispositif lui-même. Sa fissure laisse apparaître que l'efficacité de l'art ne consiste pas à transmettre des messages, donner des modèles ou des contre-modèles de comportement ou apprendre à déchiffrer les représentations. Elle consiste d'abord en dispositions des corps, en découpage d'espaces et de temps singuliers qui définissent des manières d'être ensemble ou séparés, en face de ou au milieu de, dedans ou dehors, proches ou distants. (Rancière 2008: 61)

The very formal characteristics of community plays, and their particular immersive techniques, are probably why they are politically

effective. If we follow Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of "art relationnel," we understand how Immersive Theatre can be effective not only in revealing individuals to themselves through emotional and sensitive experiences, but also in revealing them as part of a society. Theatre outside the limits of theatre buildings and traditional staging methods can become a place where alternative forms of social interaction are built, where moments of constructed conviviality are enjoyed live, where audiences find a voice, a role, an identity within the new community that is built through and by the performance itself.

Ann Jellicoe's own words certainly best express that wish:

> If I were to sum up the work of the Colway Theatre Trust and what I hope it is trying to achieve, I would say that it has allowed us to glimpse a vision of theatre and art which is part of life, not simply set aside in some special building which we walk by and ignore. We are beginning to value and indeed look for excitement, reassurance, insight, sensitivity that art can offer us, and in experiencing these things together, becoming more friendly and open towards each other (5-6).

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[1] David Edgar's *Entertaining Strangers* is referred to as ES throughout this article, Ann Jellicoe's *Under the God* as UG, Andrew Dickson's *Running Still* as RS, Rupert Creed's *Fire from Heaven* as *FH* and *Drummer Hodge* as *DH*, Stephanie Dale and David Edgar's *A Time to Keep* as TK, and Stephanie Dale's *Spinning the Moon* as *SM*.