Theatre without the politics: global reflections on the depoliticisation of applied theatre and its potential impact on the future of practice

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Theatre without the politics: global reflections on the depoliticisation of applied theatre and its potential impact on the future of practice

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ABSTRACT

Applied theatre has become depoliticised over the past 30 years. Distanced from its original socialist conception in the 1960s, applied theatre can be argued to have become complicit in the entrenchment of neoliberal values. This article questions the future of applied theatre if depoliticisation continues at a rapid pace. Applied theatre's depoliticisation will hinder practice when reconfiguring power relations of the future. Drawing from work in Chile, Kenya, and Australia, we adopt a historical perspective and chart the aforementioned depoliticisation. We argue that if applied theatre is to remain a form of political action in 2056, alternative approaches are needed.

Applied theatre in 2056 – devoid of a political heart?

We are three collaborators who work in different and divergent contexts internationally. Our work has taken place in the village fields of sub-Nyando county in Kisumu County, Kenya, a multitude of community settings in Brisbane and other parts of Australia, and the *poblaciónes*[1] of Santiago and Valparaíso, Chile. We utilise a variety of practices in our work: popular cultural forms, theatre of the oppressed, Brechtian conventions, group-devised and physical theatre. The collective work also traverses many of the titles given to applied theatre practice: theatre for development (TfD) and theatre in education for Matthew's work, community and prison theatre as an attempt to capture Penelope's long-standing practice and popular theatre as the recognised term in Chile for Jorge's practice and research.

Despite different contexts and practices, we have a shared goal of employing applied theatre to support the creation of a more equitable and just society. A society that seeks alternatives to the dominant neoliberal paradigm of the past 50 years. We are equally influenced by the work of Paulo Freire and the work of critical pedagogues who have sought to use education as a liberatory process.

Whilst acknowledging the differences between our contexts (African postcoloniality, military dictatorships and the destabilisation of public education), we have witnessed a singular history where critical public space has been diminished by neoliberal initiatives.

We agree with Crouch's (2011, 1) argument that neoliberalism has not only survived the financial crises of 2008 but became stronger as a result. The result of this has been a growth in global inequalities that favour corporations and elite institutions (Hickel 2018). The article presents three historical snapshots demonstrating how neoliberalism has disrupted applied theatre practice in the separate country contexts and presented a challenge to its political origins as a left-wing socialist project (see Gooch 1984; Itzen 1980; Jeffers and Moriarty 2017; Kershaw 1992).

Most importantly, we aim to take this critique forward and respond to the question of this special issue, 'what will the terrain of applied theatre, drama education and applied performance look like by 2056?'. We took the special issue as an opportunity to collaborate and reflect on our own practices and histories in the context of neoliberalism and question: if such a socio-political project continues without resistance, what will happen to the core political principles and values of applied theatre practice? In 2056, will applied theatre be devoid of a political heart?

We begin the process with a short framing of neoliberalism's ability to depoliticise artistic practices and its capability to diminish critical public space. After this, our historical snapshots begin with Penelope's analysis and discussion on the demise of community theatre practice as a subject in the Australian higher education context. This is followed by Jorge's discussions on the challenges that have been presented to Chilean popular theatre makers since the 1990 transition to democracy, albeit restricted by a pervasive neoliberal Constitution. The final snapshot is presented by Matthew and tracks his own observations of contemporary applied theatre practice in Kenya and its uneasy relationship with the State and aid. We aim to signpost within each section to the commonalities and differences between our contexts. Whilst taking a historical perspective which does present negative projections if the continued trajectory of depoliticisation continues, we argue there are still opportunities to unsettle the dominant hegemony. We utilise our conclusion to hypothesise what a depoliticised practice could look like whilst also pointing to possibilities of radical hope against what appears to be an insurmountable challenge.

Our process of arguing for different possibilities in this paper is guided by three tenets: reclaiming of public space, *autogestión* as an alternative economic model and critical hope. The notion of public space is elaborated on below, but we agree with Mouffe (2013, 92/93) that public spaces are 'striated and hegemonically structured' but they provide the platform for theatre makers to bring to the fore 'the existence of alternatives to the current post-political order'. The examples of our practice below demonstrate how encroachment of neoliberal thinking can limit opportunities for counter-hegemonic practices. In addition to public space, we actively seek alternative economic models to sustain our work. Applied theatre has rightly been 'critiqued for capitulating to the problematic economic logic of capitalism' (Mullen 2019, 15). In this paper we utilise the model of *autogestión* as an alternative. This economic model advocates for an 'ethical and cooperative way of life' and resists the neoliberal logic of competition and self-interest (Glass 2019, 99). Penelope's work in Australia and Chile provides an example of how this model supports a politicised applied theatre practice autonomous of state funding. The final aspect of critical hope, which informs our conclusion, is our agreement with Paulo Freire (2021, 16) and his argument that

> The idea that hope alone will transform the world, and action undertaken in that kind of naïveté, is an excellent route to hopelessness, pessimism, and fatalism. But the attempt to

do without hope, in the struggle to improve the world, as if that struggle could be reduced to calculated acts alone, or a purely scientific approach, is a frivolous illusion.

Applied theatre's transmogrification

Neoliberalism as a socio-economic strategy has been the defining political project of the last 50 years. It is a force that favours the individual, prioritises the market, drives privatisation of public space and works at an unrelenting pace with no sign of slowing down irrespective of the damage it causes. It functions effectively in communist China; it was successfully installed in post-apartheid South Africa's political restructuring and has unashamedly been celebrated as the reason for several countries' economic successes in Latin America despite its autocratic enforcement and military force (Harvey 2005). Neoliberalism has succeeded in its public presentation as a 'neutral' concept that treats economics as a scientific objective process which aims at 'universal rational consensus' (Mouffe 2005, 22–23). In addition to this, the risk to democratic participation is how neoliberal dominance is hidden 'behind pretences of "neutrality"' which enables a depoliticisation of the public sphere (22-23).

Brown argues that there is a need to understand neoliberalism as an ideology that 'transmogrifies every human domain and endeavour' (2015, 9). It is in Brown's argument where we as researchers, activists and theatre makers find interest. Our collective work across three continents is firmly situated in the public space. In agreement with Brown's argument, we have experienced and witnessed how neoliberal ideology has crept into the public space and, most worryingly, our practices. Mouffe argues that where critical public spaces are available citizens can 'contribute to unsettling the dominant hegemony' (2013, 91). However, as Giroux (2004, 130) has observed, the privatisation and closure of public spaces limits individual agency and contributions to democratic processes. The examples in this paper which include the destruction of the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre in Kenya and the closure of the ENTEPOLA festival in Chile demonstrate the negative impact of closing public spaces. A contradiction emerges where public space has its own possibilities for critical civic engagement but the framework in which this happens has been impacted by neoliberal ideology which undermines collective participatory democracy.

Applied theatre practice has not been exempt from its own process of neoliberal transmogrification. The greater irony is the deep history of socialist, communist and left-wing ideology within applied theatre practice. As Nicholson (2011, 72) observed, the radical and progressive foundations of practice were completely incompatible with the entrenchment of neoliberal ideology in UK state systems during the 1980s. The survival of practice came with a range of caveats: the finding of the term 'applied theatre' led by the higher education sector (Nicholson 2005, 3), practice becoming determined by social or government policy (Neelands 2007, 313) and a dominance of instrumentalist practices where economic value is determined by 'social benefit' (Mullen 2019, 29). The results have led to a paradigmatic shift over the past 40 years where practice is not predominantly led by political or ideological value but, most likely, determined or funded by policy initiative which itself will have been impacted by neoliberal ideology. As Balfour argues approaches are still 'politically committed' but do not always derive from left wing ideologies and the politics of practice are more 'tentative and questioning' (n.d., 4). The 'political' is not

absent from contemporary practice and it would be ignorant to make such a claim, but critical consideration of how practice has been appropriated as part of the neoliberal project is needed. The impact of applied theatre's neoliberal appropriation has not gone unnoticed and its impact on wider civic participation has been detrimental. As Matarasso (2011, 11) reflects

> In the past, political parties and trades unions, community development and education activists – including artists – could give collective form to such feelings. In an era of depoliticised individualism, who was there to organise, analyse or explain? The absence of an articulate political dimension leaves the individual unquestioned as the central actor in a market economy.

If we are to employ applied theatre to 'unsettle the dominant hegemony' there is a need to question the future of applied theatre practice when both public spaces and artistic practices have been compromised and there is an absence of collective organisation.

Australia: community theatre, from zeitgeist to marginalisation

Theatre has always had a political role in society (provoking reflection or often simply upholding the status quo). Furthermore, theatre in community contexts can change people's understanding of their role in the polity, public discourse and the democratic process, and it can strengthen a community's identity or understanding of itself. It may not be 'transformative' (Retuerto et al. 2020) in the sense of provoking momentous social or personal changes, but nevertheless theatre can be of influence as one part of a movement for social change. If there is a high level of connection, collective advocacy and reflective debate between community or applied theatre workers themselves, this can greatly increase the visibility of this theatre and have influence in broader political movements: this is the measure of its politicisation. In Australia, as in Chile, this occurred from the late 1960s to the 1980s.

This section poses two questions: How has Australia moved from having a highly politicised and vibrant community theatre movement in the 1980s, to now, when this field of work and its training is effectively marginalised and/or invisible? And what can be extracted from the past to inform the future?

I (Penelope) trained in theatre at the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) Drama School from 1979 to 1981. These years were part of a small window of opportunity in which community theatre was the school's raison d'être: to train theatre workers who were 'self-reliant and able to create theatre in response to what was going on in the world around them' (Milne 2004, 161).

In the 1980s, I worked with Popular Theatre Troupe and Order by Numbers in Brisbane (Queensland), when an oppressive conservative regime held power in that state. Theatre workers had the conviction that their work, together with community, union and indigenous activists, journalists, and others, would force radical change. Then, from 1998 to 2022, I worked in Chile, where the neoliberal economic system impacts all aspects of day-to-day life, as Jorge describes below. As in Brisbane in the 1980s, popular and community theatre workers in Chile see theatre as a form of resistance, and this is still true: they use their craft to express outrage, or paint utopias. In Chile, I was able to mentor theatre workers in prison theatre methodology, and I helped coordinate instances of reflection and sharing about community theatre practice, particularly as part of the International Community/Popular

Theatre Festival ENTEPOLA (1987-2021). I experienced, as in 1980s Australia, the impetus of *autogestión* – independent economic sustainability (as opposed to reliance on institutional subsidies), out of need but also conviction (Glass 2019). The practical application of *autogestión* and its complexities have been detailed in my wider writing (see Glass 2019). In fact, the most common phrase I used to describe my long Chilean experience was: 'it was like going through the eye of the 80s again' (in Australia).

My experience in the 1980s mirrored that of many theatre workers across Australia. We were part of a movement 'taking theatre out into the suburbs and regions and holding the mirror up as it were, to the lives of ordinary Australians' (Davies 2012, 4). This was in turn part of a global community arts movement, born in the 1960s and 70s, 'which became synonymous with an era of "empowerment", […] and quickly spread throughout much of the world facilitating the establishment of "participatory" arts programmes in Europe, America [USA], Canada, South America, Asia and Australia' (Evans 2003, 6). Community theatre was the *zeitgeist* in which we were working. This was part of the general radicalisation of Australian society from the late 1960s, when large numbers of young people participated in political movements such as opposition to the Vietnam war, to environmental depredation, and for women's, gay, migrant, and indigenous rights.

The VCA Drama School, from 1976 to around 1984, spearheaded a huge, although short-lived, shift in Australia's theatre training. It was founded on the grand idea that each student year group would work like a community theatre company, which would then, after graduating, go off to work in the suburbs and regions of Australia. Diversity of life experience, age and sociocultural background drove student intakes. Students were encouraged to work collaboratively, to group devise shows, to create new work for different places and conditions, outside of conventional theatre spaces, and with communities.

The first VCA Drama graduates founded Murray River Performing Group (MRPG, 1979-1995) in Albury-Wodonga (one of their projects was the Flying Fruit Fly Circus, the first Australian school for young circus performers) and West Community Theatre in Moonee Ponds (1979-1990), in the western suburbs of Melbourne. The second year of graduates formed TheatreWorks (1980-present) in the east of Melbourne.

Community theatre companies sprouted in city suburbs and regional towns all around the country, some examples being: Mill Theatre (1978-1984) in Geelong, Workers Cultural Action Committee in Newcastle, Zeal Theatre (1989-present) in Sydney (Zeal Theatre Australia n.d.), Riverina Trucking Company in rural New South Wales, Junction Theatre (1984-2001) in Adelaide, and Street Arts (1982-1997) in Brisbane. There were groups working specifically with unions (Melbourne Workers Theatre, 1987-2012), people with disability (Back to Back Theatre in Geelong, 1988-present; Back to Back, n.d.), women (Vitalstatistix in Adelaide, 1984-present), and prisoners. Somebody's Daughter Theatre in Melbourne (founded by a VCA Drama student in 1980) continues to work with women prisoners and young people to this day. Other companies, such as Sidetrack Theatre (1978-2008) in Sydney, worked directly with migrant communities (Abdi 2021): 'Non-English language companies peaked in the late 1980s, with companies such as the Greek-language Filiki Players in Melbourne and the Italian-language Doppio Teatro in Adelaide' (Arvanitakis 2019). All the groups had deep connections to their place or community, and formed ongoing collaborations with unions, schools, community organisations and their workers.

Another phenomenon of the 1980s was the establishment of Community Arts Networks in all states and territories of Australia. These organisations, formed by the artists

themselves, were a powerful parallel movement, connecting artists with communities, providing training and resources, and advocating for the power of participatory arts with non-arts departments and organisations (health, housing, education) and local councils. Training courses in drama-in-education and community theatre were run in all states of Australia, and although local research for teaching resources was scant, course leaders could draw on their own practical experience or create their own resources. For example, in 1991 in Brisbane, when Street Arts co-founder Steve Capelin started teaching community theatre at the Queensland Institute of Technology, he had to edit a book himself about the recent history of political and community theatre in Brisbane (Capelin 1995).

Theatre-in-Education companies proliferated, touring to schools with issues-based shows. Community arts centres were set up, and a wide range of community programmes, such as CYSS (Community Youth Support Scheme), saw theatre as a potent way to engage participants in collective activity. These companies and programmes offered fertile opportunities for on-the-job training and collaboration, further enriching the field. In the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, the Australia Council for the Arts (ACA) directed funding towards community theatre, through their Community Arts Board, and later Community Cultural Development Board (CCDB); together with the Australian Council of Trade Unions, it funded the Art & Working Life Programme. Community theatre did not have to compete with mainstream theatre companies, but rather other community-based work.

Such was the volume of community theatre work that every year from 1983 to 1987, a National Community Theatre Conference took place, showcasing work and galvanising a potent national network that nurtured the movement's political focus, internal debate, and successful advocacy for policy changes in arts funding at all levels of government. Community theatre was a small player in the national polity. The polity was highly charged by grass roots activism in the 1970s and 1980s, movements for social change were buoyant, and huge changes had occurred in Australian society and in its education system (like university fees being abolished in 1974). The world was clearly changing and community theatre contributed to that change; community theatre workers felt naturally included in a broad activist movement, the connection may not be so obvious these days.

The movement's gradual decline from the late 1990s on mirrors the broad sociopolitical and funding shifts that occurred in Australia in that decade and beyond. It is well-documented, from Bauman (1998) onwards, that globalisation and the adoption of neo-liberal economics systems, some more brutal, some more subtle, has had huge human consequences. Australia is not exempt; the country was deeply affected by the actions of conservative governments led by PM John Howard (1996-2007) which privatised government services, skewed egalitarian notions of home ownership, and introduced anti-union labour laws, emulating neocons Thatcher and Reagan. Present day Australia has an endemic housing crisis and, for anyone under 40, education debt and labour precarity are a huge burden. Within the arts sphere, during the 1990s, the concept of the 'cultural industries' (neoliberal ideology implanted onto the arts) began to appear in government cultural policy in an attempt to give economic value to arts products, in order 'to bolster their defences against financial cuts and ideological onslaught' (O'Connor 2000, 17) by conservative governments. This placed emphasis on cultural activity as a product rather than a process, on audiences as passive consumers rather than participants.

In the second half of the 1990s, there were changes in ACA boards and assessment processes. Perhaps with the naïve intention of creating a 'level playing field' within arts disciplines, community arts were mainstreamed into specific artform boards. As a result of this false idea of inclusiveness, community theatre projects were now evaluated by the ACA's Theatre Board (mainly representatives from mainstream theatre) and community theatre companies were exhorted to increase the 'excellence' of their product to secure ongoing funding (Milne 2004).

In ACA language of the time, excellence not only referred exclusively to the arts product, but also to a concept of excellence within a Western European canon. For example, there was debate in the 1990s about the legitimacy of ACA Board decisions about the value of an arts project from a non-Western canon (from a migrant artist or community), when board members came predominantly from Anglo and/or European backgrounds. In my experience, community theatre had and has always been concerned with excellence, with a focus on process rather than product: excellence of relationships with their community, excellence in ethics and collaboration, but also excellence in production values. Although in the context of process, the product is not seen as an end point, but rather an important part of the process; an implicit understanding that was perhaps not sufficiently debated at the time. These nuances were lost on the ACA and state funders, who, according to Milne, 'increasingly saw their role as managing the industry' (398). The funders decided that community theatre companies' management was problematic (most were managed by the creative team with some administrative support), and, as a result, 'emphasis on management over art was by no means uncommon by the middle of the 1990s' (399-400). This narrow focus on 'managing the money' is indicative of the government's increasing embrace of neoliberalism. After many years of ongoing funding, community theatre had all but forgotten the impetus of *autogestión*, and, as in Kenya, had become wedded to institutional support.

Also, a palpable change in the *zeitgeist* occurred in the late 1990s, and it was to some extent generational. Many first-generation community theatre workers were moving on to new work or having families. Some were able to pass on the baton and the sociopolitical drive of their work (for example, Back to Back in Geelong, Death Defying Theatre now Urban Theatre Projects in Sydney, and Vitalstatistix in Adelaide; Urban Theatre Projects n.d.), but the vast majority were not successful in that transition. Funding for community theatre began to dwindle and, by the late 1990s, many companies had folded or had adjusted to the 'excellence' criterion. It is interesting to note this comment on the website of Hothouse Theatre (1995-present), which grew from the MRPG,

> … the board of the Murray River Performing Group decided that the structure which had carried the Company through its first sixteen years was no longer the most effective way to achieve the aspirations and goals of the Company. Local audiences were now seeking out work of the *calibre* found on the main stages of major cities (Hothouse Theatre n.d. Author's italics).

In another blow, by the mid-2000s, almost all state Community Arts Networks were defunded. At the time of writing only one survives, in Western Australia. This was a major assault on connectivity, training and work opportunities; it stymied information sharing, political advocacy strength, and any remaining sense of a movement. Some theatre work commensurate to the spirit of the 1980s community theatre movement

remains to this day in the form of projects within siloed contexts: theatre in prisons, in hospitals, with older people, in the context of disability, with homeless people, and others. The theatre workers toil on, unconnected to each other, and under precarious casualised labour conditions, common to all three cases in this study.

And what about training? A deep online search reveals that training courses in community and/or applied theatre in Australia have gone the same way as the theatre companies themselves. Theatre students are now directed almost exclusively towards mainstream theatre, film and television. At the same time, a whole generation of 1980s/90s community theatre practitioners have not been able, or did not know how or where, to hand on their skills. Mentoring and on-the-job training had occurred within the work itself.

Let us consider the example of the Applied Theatre Program at Griffith University in Brisbane. Established in the 2000s, the program had both a social change and research focus; staff coordinated ran community workshops and projects in schools and communities, and hosted seminars and conferences. In 2018, the program was dismembered. A new Bachelor of Acting was set up at the Conservatorium (professionalised arts training centre at Griffith) and additionally, the Humanities still offers Directing, Performance (intro), Dramaturgy and Drama for Social Action (theatre in community and educational contexts) as core courses for students majoring in Drama within the Bachelor of Arts and for Bachelor of Education students with Secondary Drama as a teaching area. For other students within Humanities, these courses are offered as electives. Applied or community theatre is no longer embedded in the training of professional theatre workers at the university, and, with the disappearance of a consolidated Applied Theatre Program running projects in schools and communities, there is no pathway for students wishing to do further practical training or work experience in this area while at the university.

The disappearance of the community theatre movement, as well as training courses for community (or applied) theatre, the lack of mentoring, the defunding of state community arts networks, in conjunction with the 'siloing' of community-based theatre has rendered this work invisible to new generations of both theatre and community workers. Opportunities for reflection, collective action and connection have also disappeared.

However, neoliberalism will not suddenly disappear, and therefore the Academy in Australia (as in Chile) may continue to marginalise applied theatre. Competition for ever-smaller amounts of theatre funding will continue to be intense, requiring ever-higher levels of administration and financial skills. Many applied theatre workers have turned to philanthropic funding and adapt to their agendas, and they spend more time on grant writing than sharing *why* they make theatre or *how* it could be active in social change. The risks of adapting to funders in Chile and Kenya are expanded upon later in the article.

Can this depoliticisation be short-circuited before 2056, or is the structural change too immovable? Or are we perhaps in a moment when theatre workers in Australia could draw ideas from the conviction, interconnection, impetus and *autogestión* of the 1980s community theatre movement, or popular theatre workers in present-day Chile, as discussed by Jorge below?

There would need to be a new shift in theatre training: both in content and teaching. Theatre students could be connected into the diversity of the field (not just mainstream) and, conversely, theatre practitioners working in community contexts could be connected back into the training courses through master classes, placements and mentoring. This would foment intergenerational work as well which, in my experience, is a powerful way

to not only pass on craft and reflective knowledge, but also to inspire. Universities (where most theatre training occurs) have changed greatly in the last 20 years and present a huge barrier to these proposals; arts courses are being cut rather than improved. On the other hand, theatre workers themselves would need to autonomously (re)form networks firstly on local levels, to connect and then propose ideas, not just wait for institutions to consult them, and all this would require impetus and cooperation, contrary to the neoliberal *zeitgeist*. These are not easy proposals, but the alternative is to succumb to disconnection and inaction.

Chile: a journey of popular (applied) theatre

As a result of the 1973 military-neoliberal coup and the sociopolitical restructure that is still in place, the Chilean cultural sector, and theatre in particular, have undergone significant transformations in order to survive within the prevailing neoliberal market model. Also, despite the passage of time since the end of the dictatorship, the Chilean state has not yet established an adequate institutional framework allowing for the authentic political expression and inclusion of community and cultural sectors (Pérez Herranz 2010). This situation has created subjects who are technologically globalised but alienated from their local community. This generates obstacles for the development of social organisation, and popular theatre as well, since popular theatre is inextricably linked to social movements in Chile.

Between the 1960s and the late 1990s popular theatre in Chile was recognised as a significant sociocultural expression, outstanding among its diverse formats. It sought to transform not only the individual but also the community, through a process that was deeply pedagogic. Popular theatre was developed mainly by amateur theatre groups in unions, neighbourhoods, universities and local territories. From my (Jorge) experience as an actor, director and researcher, applied theatre in Chile was and still is defined as *teatro popular* – popular theatre – given that this term embraces diverse formats such as community theatre, Theatre of the Oppressed, spontaneous theatre, theatre in schools, prison theatre, circus theatre, theatre in unions, and others, which have emerged in different historical moments. Therefore, popular theatre (theatre of the people) is an apt descriptor for theatre that uses pedagogic tools to provoke reflection and collective creation, and to promote social transformation.

In this unofficial history of Chilean popular theatre, there have been emblematic events such as the *Población* Theatre Festivals held in peripheral districts of Santiago like La Bandera, La Pincoya and Puente Alto, and in the country's south (Osorno, Castro), and especially Santiago's Latin American Community/Popular Theatre Festival (ENTEPOLA) (1987-2021), founded by *La Carreta* theatre company (Bozo Marambio 2022, 134).

Currently, popular theatre faces theoretical and practical tensions that bring into question its dramaturgical, methodological, and aesthetic foundations. The political conditions that previously impelled popular theatre in times of crisis and deep oppression (such as the dictatorship) have disappeared, and, with some exceptions, community-based artistic creation has lost the ideological compass that guided it in previous eras and has moved towards contemporary concerns. Globalisation has further exacerbated this discrepancy, generating cultural mutations and new questions about popular practices. Also, the role of the director has become more authoritarian, in contrast to the collaborative work of popular theatre in the 1970s and 1980s (Marin 2018).

Economic precariousness is another significant problem: theatre workers lack adequate social security, and many are forced to work multiple casual jobs to survive. The lack of recognition of this work can be discerned in cultural and trade union policies (Kardelis et al. 2020, 46), preventing true cultural democracy (Brodsky et al. 2021, 94). Private universities proliferated during the neoliberal era, creating a clientele without any guarantee of employment on graduation. Despite theatre workers' high unemployment and job instability, there is still surprisingly high demand for university acting courses. Within the theatre field itself, there is also internal discrimination due to unequal access to performance spaces – theatre programmers prefer shows with less challenging content, or whose cast includes commercially recognised actors, since they are more likely to attract ticket sales. This reflects a classism driven by the market (preferring performers that have achieved industry 'success' over theatre that reflects social reality) that furthermore impacts on critical content (Bozo Marambio 2022, 213).

Up until the 1990s, popular theatre was central to social activism and change, the arts were influential in community networks and grassroots organisations and contributed to social and political movements. The emergence of the cultural industry model in the 1990s affected the relationship between theatre and grassroots organisations. The new cultural institutions set up post-dictatorship either marginalised popular theatre from funding criteria or drove its workers to become cultural operators in order to survive (Eco 1968); some have been able to secure performance opportunities in municipal festivals and large venues, others simply ceased working.

Faced with competitive funding systems and minimal market demand, popular theatre groups have been forced to adjust their aesthetic-political proposals and their organisational methods to fit in with government funding and the cultural industry model, in the same way as Australia's community theatre workers in the 1990s and Kenyan TfD practitioners. Additionally, popular theatre is marginalised in academia, where there is little to no research and a limited focus on the historical process of social, educational, and union theatre. Theatre students in Chile, although to a lesser extent than in Australia, are often unaware of popular theatre work, or understand it as an extinct historical format. While Chile's mainstream theatre is in deep crisis (Brodsky et al. 2021), popular theatre is even more embattled as it gradually disappears from the social and pedagogical sphere.

Popular theatre faces a powerful enemy, the meaninglessness of neoliberalism, the impact of which has threatened to make culture and popular arts that oppose injustice, amongst other things, disappear (see Boyle 1988; Cozzi 1990; Noguera 1990). Despite the momentous 2019 Social Upheaval, feelings of hopelessness and depoliticisation have returned to Chile. Nevertheless, according to Paulo Freire (1993), times of crisis generate fertile ground for the rebirth of social organisation. The impact of neoliberalism across Latin America has created a community-based artistic/creative response: *cultura viva comunitaria (CVC)*[2]-alive community culture. According to Celio Turino, who devised Brazil's Culture Points Programme to fund CVC organisations, CVC acts as 'social acupuncture' (2013). Disadvantaged sectors regain their collective skills and confront state and market oppression by autonomously organising the community's territory and creating associative spaces through social, cultural, artistic and reflective gatherings, or training workshops. Popular theatre groups are strongly represented in the CVC movement. In contrast to Australia, community cultural workers seek out connectivity, even if the collective process it requires is fraught with difficulties. On the other hand, notions of

collective assembly for Kenyan artists appears inconceivable with troupes having to fiercely work against one another for the next potential project.

In twenty-first century neoliberal Chile, changes caused by a new phase of capitalism, and structural phenomena such as uncertainty, will continue to affect cultural and social practices (Bauman 1999; Beck 2006), including popular theatre. However, new survival strategies are emerging in territories where popular theatre operates, with the most visible alternatives being community theatre and carnivals. Popular theatre has found new spaces and audiences in communities such as schools, prisons, hospitals, and women's organisations, and is resisting traditional forms of theatrical management. Theatre of the Oppressed has become more prominent, as a tool for *concientización* or awareness-raising in popular/community sectors. Popular theatre is also drawing on inter-disciplinary methodologies, collaborating with popular education, socio-cultural anima-tion, and social science professionals.

While Matthew's work turns to research as an alternative economic framework, as dis-cussed below, some popular theatre workers in Chile, faced with the restrictions imposed by bourgeois culture, academic theory and the market-based model, seek to completely disengage from megaproducers, sponsorships and government subsidies. *Autogestión* provides the autonomy that allows them to integrate diverse artistic expressions without restriction, and also to break away from the traditional actor-audience relation-ship of Western theatre. In this way, popular theatre reclaims the right to revise its own language and meaning (Martínez de Albéniz 2001). A return to a Latin American theatri-cality is manifest in public spaces, such as the street or the square, where it unfolds as embodied resistance to neoliberalism. One outstanding example is the emergence of a new popular theatricality within urban carnivals, reviving the ritual ceremony of anthro-pological theatre, offering an inclusive space for expression (Bajtin 1987) and also func-tioning based on collective methodology.

From the 1960s to the late 1990s, while popular theatre prioritised critical narratives built on spoken text, the carnival was also present. Urban carnivals, historically part of Chile's cultural tradition, were suppressed during the dictatorship, but now this sister expression of popular theatre has taken over the public and social spaces of every Chilean neighbourhood. It is a refuge, a place and a time that contains and embraces theatre, allowing it to self-reflect and providing a format within which popular theatre prepares its pedagogic onslaught to better respond to this time of crisis. By 2056, it appears that applied theatre in Chile will find itself in a polarised position where the cen-tralised work of cultural producers will become more formalised and exclusive whilst popular theatre workers will grow on the margins in an accessible and ethical manner. Considering the above, in the case of Chile, popular theatre is in a stage of experimen-tation and reaffirmation of its autonomy within the urban carnival space. This is one way that popular theatre is resisting the neoliberal commodification of the arts, and the crisis of depoliticisation and social disconnection.

Kenya: dreaming of a new Kamiriithu

Since independence in 1963, there has been a multitude of points in Kenya's history where opportunities for a more egalitarian and socialist society have either been rejected, ignored or resisted. The historical markers include: the intimidation and negative public

campaigns against the socialist Kenya People's Union party (KPU) in the 1966 election, the assassination of the leading progressive politician Tom Mboya (1969), the authoritarian Moi regime (1978-2002), the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s and the corruption of the Kibaki premiership (2002-2013). Throughout all of these moments, a neoliberal ideology has been cemented into Kenyan governance which has led to worse levels of poverty and political unfreedoms (Hickel 2018, 40). The recent significance of this history is the election campaign of President Ruto in 2022 which prominently featured the 'hustler nation' slogan playing to the entrepreneurial ambitions of young people (Lockwood 2023, 8). The impacts of these denied opportunities and entrenched neoliberal practices have led to an apolitical landscape leading to devastating post-election violence in 2007, an apathetic public who are suspicious of formal politics (Odongo 2023, 447) and, most recently, the Gen Z protests against potential tax rises.

The theatre movement would not be left unmarked either by the internal struggles and external pressures on Kenya's socio-economic development in its postcolonial era. The most notable example is the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural project led by Ngugi wa Thiongo and Ngũgĩ wa Mirii in the 1970s and 80s which saw the development of a community-led popular theatre troupe and, most famously, the 1977 production of *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (*I will marry when I want*). The events surrounding the Kamiriithu project have been widely written on (see Ndigirigi 2007; Ngugi wa Thiongo 1981, 1986, 1993) and this section does not aim to go over the detail but will highlight one aspect of this work which is the human consequences of creating politically progressive work in postcolonial Kenya.

Ngugi wa Thiongo was imprisoned without trial throughout 1978 and the Kenyan government withdrew the licence for public gatherings which meant no further productions of *Ngaahika Ndeenda*: 'they were attempting to stop the emergence of an authentic language of Kenyan theatre' (Ngugi wa Thiongo 1986, 58). Attempts at staging a new play, *Maitu Njugira* (*Mother Sing for Me*), took place in 1981–1982 but this was met with a ban on all activities at the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural centre and as Ngugi wa Thiongo (59) describes,

> An 'independent' Kenyan government had followed in the footsteps of its colonial predecessors: it banned all the peasant and worker basis for genuine national traditions in theatre. But this time, the neo-colonial regime overreached itself. On 12th March 1982 three truckloads of armed policeman were sent to Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural centre and razed the open-air theatre to the ground.

The oppressive process by the government 'ensured the immortality of the Kamiriithu experiments and the search for an African popular theatre practice' (Ngugi wa Thiongo 1986, 59). The Kamiriithu example showed how a theatre practice can be collaborative and political, but such a process of workers and peasant communities reclaiming their dignity in the pursuit of a more equal society came at a great expense, politically, personally and culturally. Similar to the context of the Chilean dictatorship described above, applied theatre was a high-risk strategy that offered opportunities of emancipation in complex and challenging times whilst placing artists in dangerous situations.

The Kamiriithu project was not the death knell of all politically engaged practice in Kenya. Plastow (2021, 197–200) identifies the numerous projects that took place post-1982 that challenged state agendas and ideas. However, these works were predominantly

made in university departments and by professional playwrights who have succumbed to commercial demands of TV production. This section will look at how the 'political' in community theatre practices in Kenya became ignored or subsumed in the aid NGO led development agenda that influenced a wave of apolitical instrumentalist theatre practice under the broad umbrella of Theatre for Development from the 1980s onwards.

Aid presents a major paradox in relation to political ideology and practices. On a micro level, projects such as reduction of maternal mortality rates present themselves with an apolitical humanitarian and human rights purpose. The macro political economy of aid demonstrates a global economy working towards entrenching inequalities that favour richer nations and the marketised economies they perpetuate. As Hickel's analysis (2018, 27) argues; 'for every dollar of aid that developing countries receive, they lose $24 dollars in net outflows'. In a more pointed critique of the global aid industry in Africa, Moyo (2009, 47) argues that 'aid is the problem' with US$1trillion spent over a 60-year period and 'not much good to show for it'. The use of art and theatre within NGO programmes has not been a neutral or unaffected process. The impact on community theatre in Kenya has been the development of short-term instrumentalist pieces supported by funders who do not have an interest in the long-term processes of critical awareness or the identification of the wider structural systems which perpetuate daily injustices for the poorest communities (Prentki 2015, 58).

In the region of western Kenya where I (Matthew) have worked since 2019, my collaborators Odhiambo (2005; 2008) and Plastow (2021, 2023) have written extensively on the demise of applied theatre practice within the region with short-term training and delivery of projects, didactic health messaging and poor-quality performance (mainly unrehearsed and highly improvised skits). Despite the innovative work by practitioners such as Lenin Ogolla and Oluoch Madiang in the 1980s and 1990s, a dependency on funding by aid agencies meant that when such funding or interest would move on, there would be a return of 'ineffective models of practice' (Plastow 2023, 43). Practitioners find themselves in a dual position of aiming to create work that is of intellectual, political and artistic interest whilst also aiming to serve the apolitical needs of the NGOs who are the predominant funders of this work. Unfortunately, it is the economic strength of the funder that dominates the artistic process.

Echoing the discussions of precarity in Chile and Australia, Kenyan theatre workers and practitioners make decisions based on livelihoods as opposed to artistic ambition. I recently collaborated on a book chapter with Equator Ensemble (Adhiambo et al. 2024) where we documented realities of economic precarity for artists in Kisumu. The discussions were enlightening and infuriating with stories of artists being paid in food tokens, a corrupt director who stole funds to buy a car and frequent sexual exploitation of female actors. This all leads to a complex picture where the state and NGOs see theatre as an instrumentalist tool for policy agendas whilst in the spirit of the 'hustler nation' some artists see applied theatre as an entrepreneurial pursuit of self-interest. In resistance to the apolitical state and the 'hustler nation' is an ambition by myself and Equator Ensemble to revitalise the politics and ethics of the Kamiriithu project. Nevertheless, I am aware that this would either be met with strong repressive tactics, be appropriated by cultural entrepreneurs or be ignored by an apathetic population who have been subject to a neoliberal individualised discourse (Kiambi and Nadler 2012, 507). But the current context of applied theatre practice in the Kenyan context is unsustainable and unknowingly plays a significant role in the neoliberal project of global development.

When considering the future of Kenyan applied theatre in light of the context described above where practice is predominantly unprofessional, under rehearsed and an opportunity for free community handouts (condoms, nominal amount of Kenyan shillings and random 'prizes'), the bolstering of a hustler nation by 2056 could only exacerbate these existing issues. It would be oversimplified to argue that practice would no longer exist, especially as theatre has been a significant tool for NGOs and the state for various political projects as discussed above. Penelope also notes how Australian policy was also adopted to shape community theatre practice into a mould that was deemed acceptable for the state and elite institutions. On its current trajectory, neoliberalism and individualism in Kenya could see applied theatre by 2056 being completely devoid of a political heart or, even worse, being utilised explicitly for political purposes oppositional to the Kamiriithu project. Applied theatre as an instrument to spread didactic messages of individualism where participants only attend to receive a free handout as described earlier.

The question remains in Kenyan applied theatre practice of how to disrupt the current route of depoliticisation that has been strengthened since the end of Ngugi's project. My own practice and collaboration with Equator Ensemble is not exempt from the conundrum of working against an entrenched political and cultural project whilst also being complicit in its ideals. All the practice I have collaborated on since 2019 has been informed by a health and research agenda which is inextricably linked to the Sustainable Development Goals, both of which are politicised and adopted for international or national political gains. In the worst-case scenarios, development goals are intertwined with the entrenchment of neoliberal ideas in low and middle-income countries (Kumi, Arhin, and Yeboah 2014).

However, this practice takes root in a space external to the dominant short-term NGO models described above and, as practice is framed under research, it enables such freedoms. As argued by O'Connor and Anderson (2015, 245), applied theatre research offers a unique space for radical practice that works alongside communities. Whilst recognising research has its own 'self-serving' agenda (248), my own experiences of research as an avenue to work against dominant narratives has proven fruitful. My most recent project, Masculinities and Mental Health, aimed to contribute to the wider project of decolonising mental health by documenting and exploring indigenous knowledges of mental health in Kenya over a 12-month period in 2021-2022. Whilst I had criticisms of my own practice in this (see Elliott 2024), there was a clear break from the established didactic process of the NGO agenda and the dominant global agendas with a practice that looked at collaboration and aimed to exercise agency over matters that determine lived experience and citizenship. A move towards a re-politicisation of applied theatre practice in western Kenya.

Some examples of how this practice deviated from the criticisms of NGOs above include each week being self-determined by the community, a dialogical approach where health agendas were decided upon by communities, and artistic exploration that was based in the cultural context of the communities e.g. Dholuo storytelling circles. There were no reports to file, no specific criteria or health messaging to follow and, most importantly, the agenda was decided upon by the community themselves. The outcome of this process was a one-day event in central Kisumu where community members came together with health professionals and, using participatory practices,

engaged in dialogue on how to reframe mental health for men in Kisumu County. The project has subsequently been supported by another three-year research project in the same community. Aside from notions of dialogue, participatory research has also enabled a long-term engagement which is another contrasting point to NGO practice. It is the inductive approach of participatory research that enabled this practice to happen.

As argued by Jorge and his experiences in Chile, alternative frameworks appear to be providing the best opportunities for applied theatre practice to resist against the removal of its political heart. If politics is to have a significant role within applied theatre practice, to work within the existing system or structures appear to be an impossibility. Research has been an alternative avenue for applied theatre practice in Kenya. Whilst accepting this is not always an option for communities, a radical suggestion would be how can the learning and practices of open-ended and inductive research be transposed to other models of arts funding in the Kenyan context. A brief example of this is training the NGOs who commission artistic practice. I have co-written previously on the impact that underfunded or misunderstood training of theatre can have on applied practice (see Elliott and Odhiambo 2025). Collaborators and I piloted a project in 2023 that sought to train NGO managers and commissioners to enable a better understanding of the possibilities of applied theatre practice. The results of this found that artists were consulted in the process of project development and a significant change in understanding of how applied theatre functions effectively.

Further notions of seeking out alternative modes of practice and funding them in a different way will be discussed in the conclusion. Whilst returning to the explicit politics of Ngugi's work might not be appropriate within an entrenched neoliberal context, the politics of dignity and civic rights that were apparent in my work still have as much need now as they did in 1978.

Conclusion

> Utopia, however, would not be possible if it lacked the taste for freedom … Or if it lacked hope, without which we do not struggle (Freire 1993, 99).

The applied, popular and community theatre case studies in this paper come from three different continents. Nevertheless, there are common factors that have influenced their development and the current trend towards depoliticisation. This conclusion summarises these factors and points to possible ways out of this trend towards a more autonomous and enriched applied theatre practice, more fully embedded in its social and political role, more driven by its workers and participants, by the time we arrive at 2056. A return to where the public space can disrupt the dominant hegemony as posited by Mouffe in the introduction.

In all three countries, applied, community and popular theatre work has faced similar challenges: labour precarity, discrimination within the theatre field, and lack of recognition within the Academy. Competitive and constrained funding agendas have damaged networking and collaboration between theatre workers. Neoliberalism and the installation of the cultural industries model has impacted theatre's connection with community organisations. Public space, once inhabited naturally by popular theatre, has been privatised – the takeover of plazas by drug trafficking, the banning of public gatherings, and the criminalisation of street protest have reduced this space. All these

factors have impeded the sustainability, autonomy and visibility of the work, and have forced community-based theatre workers to adapt to new realities in order to survive, which has often led to a depoliticisation of their practice.

There is an urgent need to reaffirm the autonomy and the sociopolitical power of applied theatre, to resist the artform's commercialisation and, in the case of Kenya and Chile, to decolonise practices and agendas imposed by external agents, such as NGOs.

We propose three provocations for the reader on how applied theatre practice can work against the tide of depoliticisation: networks, diverse funding and recovery of space. To enhance collective action, we are proposing a re-evaluation of the networks that are present in our practice and the possibilities of collaboration across country, discipline and focus. Networks framed on political values and ambitions as opposed to singularity of artistic form or community context. In addition to this, a broadening of academic conferences and networks to incorporate practitioners and activists alike. These provide invaluable opportunities for collaboration which should be easily accessible for all who do such work, especially as the origins of applied theatre are practical and political.

To ensure economic sustainability, the work needs to be supported by diverse funding models and needs to break the dependence on funding sources that operate under constrained top-driven agendas. The individualistic competition set up by the neoliberal context, that only serves to divide theatre workers, can be resisted by identifying models of economic support that do not follow the standardised instrumentalist approach. *Autogestión* has been discussed in this article as one alternative and the example of training commissioners in Kenya was also provided. We are aware that these movements go against the tide of neoliberal practices in applied theatre and, by doing so, presents a range of difficulties in implementation. But without enduring these struggles, a complicity to neoliberalism would dominate our practices.

We argue that by subverting the individualisation and siloing of practices with increased collaboration and diversification of funding there will be an opportunity to recover the public spaces of our cities, towns and villages and rekindle theatre's community connection of decades past. The hybridisation of practice between community theatre and street carnivals in Chile provide one example of doing this.

To conclude, we are acutely aware of the depoliticisation that has troubled applied theatre over recent decades and are conscious of the impact it will have on practice if left unchallenged. In 2056, we could have a workshop space for a group of disconnected individuals where applied theatre enhances a smoother co-operation with the market economy. Or, even worse, an empty workshop space absent of theatre altogether. The menace of neoliberalism requires resistance if applied theatre is to bare any resemblance to its political foundations in 2056. Led by notions of critical hope as proposed by Freire, we persevere with colleagues in the field to identify and effect an alternative future.

Notes

1. The *población* is the name for poor, under-serviced districts in urban or rural contexts, akin to the *favelas* of Brazil.
2. *Cultura viva comunitaria* is a Latin American cultural movement of grassroots and indigenous cultural expression, which includes popular theatre.

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