

Moved to Connect

Chris Cooper

Abstract

This article explores the relationship between self and society and how society is reflected in the self, whether we like it or not. It examines the natures of interactivity and participation in theatre and drama with and for children and young people through the power of story at a time when the crisis of culture makes it difficult to be present in our lives because we are so distracted. It calls for a unity of form and content that examines the political in the social and the personal by enacting human experience to create an event *in* us rather than an empty effect. It is through this kind of dramatic engagement that we can avoid distraction and participate authentically in our lives and be moved to connect with the world and each other and explore that relationship between self and society.

About the author

Has worked in educational theatre and drama since 1988 as an actor, director and playwright. He was Artistic Director of Big Brum TiE Company, Birmingham UK, 1999-2015. He works mainly in China, with Drama Rainbow Education, Beijing, and Jian Xue (See & Learn). Cooper's work also includes teaching, training, lecturing and presenting workshops, with long term collaborations in Norway, Hungary, Slovenia, Greece, and Ireland. He has written extensively on the theory and practice of educational theatre and drama in a variety of books and journals. Cooper is the author of 51 plays for children, young people and community audiences.

E-post: accidenttimeproductions@gmail.com

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Nummerredaktører: Ellen K. Gjervan, Siren Leirvåg, Ragnhild Gjefsen, Ulla K. H. Kallenbach, Keld Hyldig

Ansvarlig redaktør: Keld Hyldig – keld.hyldig@uib.no

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This text is based on the Keynote Cooper prepared to the JOIN INN Conference, Bergen, on 2 October 2021.

I'm very nervous, because I'm feeling full up, so to speak. Full of emotion, mainly anger, at what has happened to all of us over the past two years, and because I've been locked in my study for most of the last 19 months. The last two weeks is the first time I've been face to face with people for a long time. And it's really brought home to me how much I need to connect, personally and professionally, which is why I have chosen Moved to Connect as the title for this keynote and why I am so 'full'.

On a less emotional note, I'm really interested in exploring the relationship between self and society and how society is reflected in the self, whether we like it or not. And having listened to the speakers this morning, particularly what Hilde said about asking questions that you already know the answers to, or don't really want to hear the answers to, I'd also like to talk about authenticity, and talk not so much about interaction, or intra-action, but about participation.

The theme of the conference is participating in your life and one of the things I recognise very much is how hard we find it to do exactly that, to be present in the moment because we are very distracted. In *Brave New World Revisited* (2004), Aldus Huxley noted that those who were on the alert to oppose tyranny "failed to take into account man's almost infinite appetite for distractions." Unlike Orwell's *Big Brother*, where oppression and control was administered through violence and pain, people in Huxley's *Brave New World* were controlled by inflicting pleasure. According to the sociologist Neil Postman, writing before the advent of smartphone technology, Huxley, not Orwell, was right, and he feared that human beings are "amusing themselves to death", which became the title of his 1985 book. In my opinion Postman was being enormously prescient. I also believe that he was raising a serious question for drama.

Let me first qualify what I mean by drama. When I say drama, I mean it in the Greek sense of the origin of the word, *dran* meaning to do, to enact, often in the theatre, from *teatron*, meaning the place from which to see. We dramatize human experience in order to make meaning, to explore what it means to be human, be that in the theatre, interactive or not, process drama or whatever dramatic form we choose. I'm talking about enacting human experience to create an event *in* us rather than an empty effect. It is through this kind of dramatic engagement that we can avoid distraction and participate authentically in our lives and be moved to connect with the world and each other. We can come to know our selves and explore that relationship between self and society.

It may be unfashionable to say this, but I think that we do this through the power of story, which situates us in time and space. And we are, as Edward Bond (2000) once wrote, our own story. We use story to create a map of self and society and if our story is what happens in our lives, in our

culture, then drama according to Bond is the analysis of the story. It's the relationship between the two, our lives and the culture, that shapes who we are and how we perceive the world.

Let me share a simple illustration of what I mean: Before leaving for Bergen, I allowed myself, in the still very Covid conscious UK, to go shopping. I don't go shopping very often. I hate shopping, but I had to buy a new suitcase and I had other jobs to do. So, I thought I'd treat myself to a trip out of my study and off I went. I live in a place called Sutton Coldfield, which is in north of Birmingham. It's not exactly the end of the world, but you can definitely see it from there. Anyway, I went into DHL because I was sending a parcel to China. The man serving me asked where I was sending the parcel to and announced that China wasn't there. He was pointing to a catalogue. 'It's definitely there, mate', I replied. And then I said to him, 'Why don't you look up PRC'. He said 'PRC? What's PRC?' The People's Republic of China. I added 'obviously, it's not the People's Republic, but that's what they call it. You know, it's like Great Britain, we're not great. In fact, we've really gone down the shitter. But that's what we like to call it.' And this woman next to me in the queue tutted and said 'Well, I think we are'. I apologised and sort of smiled and she deliberately looked away. And I realised that my trip out of my study had re-entered me into a polarised society, back into these narratives that completely divide us into camps and create this rather cruel and unpleasant place to be.

So, off I went, into another shop, buying dog treats for the dog because as you all know she will be bereft without me. When I got to the counter the woman serving said, in a very strong Birmingham accent, 'You want to buy some of these', and she showed me a box of Maltesers, 'for the Christmas charity', or at least that's what I thought she said. I also thought 'Oh, isn't that really nice, that she's trying to persuade me to buy Maltesers for charity' because, as she explained, there's a competition between the different stores in the area to raise as much money as possible and whoever raises the most gets £500 towards a Christmas charity. So, I bought some. It was only when I heard her repeat it to the next customer as I was packing my Maltesers and dog treats that I realised she didn't say Christmas charity. She said 'Christmas party'. And I got immediately angry with her. How trivial. How dare you try to persuade me, when there's all that suffering and misery out there in the world, to invest in your Christmas party. I walked out to the shop, feeling angry *and* self-righteous. It took me about another 10 metres walking further along the pavement to realise what an arsehole I was being. I recognised that you can become so saturated in your own narrative and judgmental with it. And it took me about another 100 metres to realise that actually, it really mattered to her to have a good Christmas party. It really mattered to her to be recognised, acknowledged for her low paid graft once a year, and she was trying so hard to beat the other store that she told me always wins the competition. Why, why, why did I take that attitude? I heard what I wanted to hear, and I didn't hear what she was trying to say to me, and I didn't connect. I didn't make that human connection. She was telling me *her* story. Only I wasn't able to hear it because it didn't conform to mine. I was also confronted with my 'self' and how society's story speaks through me.

Jerome Bruner (1996) explains the importance of story, saying its only through story, narrative, that human beings construct identity, that through narrative structures they begin to really encounter themselves. In mainstream education narrative is treated as decorative or extra-curricular. Bruner (1996) is at pains to point out the error in this way of thinking. Narrative structure is reflected in how we frame every personal experience. And how we represent our lives to others. He points out that psychoanalysts recognise that personhood itself implicates narrative and that neuroses reflect either an incomplete or insufficient or inappropriate story about oneself. Stories frame and nourish identity.

But what happens when our stories become colonised by ideology? Or as in my own case above, captured by society's story? What happens when *I* begin to articulate authority's story, a story that's been implanted in my brain? What happens when we cannot tolerate a different narrative? Or hear another's story? We do not recognise the other, and that makes it possible to obliterate the other. This kind of extreme polarised division has been a defining feature of our experience in the UK throughout this horrendous period in our history, from Brexit, the pandemic, right the way through to the human catastrophe we have created in Afghanistan unfolding over the past few months.

We know that the species stands on the brink. And yet, what are the narratives that we invest in? What are the stories that are being told? Our muppet of a prime minister made a joke to the UN about Kermit the frog being wrong for saying its 'hard to be green', when supposedly addressing the climate crisis. Greta Thunberg paraphrased all the hot air from our leaders as 'blah, blah, blah, blah, blah'. And of course, she's so right. She's so right. But in a way, she misses the point too. Yes, Johnson and his peers are further distracting the already distracted by trivialising the coming catastrophe because they have no intention of solving the problem - it *is* beyond them. But also, to a large extent he is telling us what we want to hear, that it's not hard to be green, that the solution is painlessly within reach, usually presented to us as a future god like technological invention that will solve the carbon crisis, because the political class will continue to enable capitalism's drive to consume more and more, to feed a relentless desire for instant gratification. As we become more and more distracted amusing ourselves to death, the ability to defer gratification as individuals is being reversed culturally by the market. We are both alienated and infantilized. We are alienated not only from our labour, and from our environment (including the natural world), we are alienated from the other and ultimately the self, and as the ancient Greeks said, you can only know yourself when you can see yourself in the eyes of the other. It legitimises you.

This alienation makes participation in our lives, being present, difficult. And worse, we are complicit in the process. Blah, blah blah becomes a convenient narrative. And if we do not get instant gratification, we adopt another of society's stories to explain our frustration, we demonise the other, or we look for someone else to take responsibility for our weaknesses. This according to Pankaj Mishra has rendered us angry with disturbing levels of *ressentiment*. According to Nietzschean thought *ressentiment* is a sense of hostility directed towards the object, identified as the 'cause', of an individual's frustration. Mishra writes: "The racism and misogyny routinely on display in social media, and the demagoguery in political discourse, now reveals what Nietzsche, speaking of the 'men of *ressentiment*' called 'a whole tremulous realm of subterranean revenge, inexhaustible and insatiable in outbursts.'" (Mishra, 2017) It is a state characterised by inferiority complex, envy and self painfully divided. Its delusional.

And in the UK the delusion is everywhere. It's in my exchange with the woman in the shop about Great Britain, it's in my own self-righteousness about the Maltesers. It is being lived in Afghanistan.

What an extraordinary narrative, created to conceal naked self-interest, fighting a war on terror, to make the world safer. This imperialist act, of course, has made it much more dangerous. Twenty-two years of misery heaped upon twenty years, arguably more, before that. Today the narrative has been changed and the US and Britain have walked away, and more and even worse suffering will follow, including mass starvation this winter. So, the distraction begins with another

delusional narrative. We affect moral outrage at the tarnishing of Great British democratic values, values that never really existed. MPs stand up in Parliament, and say, we don't need to abandon our allies in Kabul. We can act as global Britain against the Taliban. Our former Prime Minister stood up and said we don't have to follow America. Are you kidding me? Where's she been for the last 50 years? Every single word was a self-deceiving lie. Some MPs were arguing that the withdrawal from Afghanistan is the greatest foreign policy disaster since Suez. You may not be familiar with the Suez Crisis of 1956, but it is significant because it's the moment that history caught up with Empire and Britain realised it was no longer great. I mean, it's obviously nonsense, isn't it? Talking to you, here today, you know that's bullshit. You just have to look at Iraq since 1991. What are they talking about? They're talking about a world that never really existed in an Empire that died half a century ago. But as Charlotte Lydia Riley so eloquently put it:

Invoking Suez is not really about learning new lessons. Rather, it is about signalling a particular idea of what it means to be British in the world, and constructing a history of British foreign policy in which the nation has made one, single mistake, which no event since has ever beaten in disaster or ignominy. It's a comforting fiction. (Riley, 2021)

We live in extreme times, described sometimes as a post-truth age, in which comforting fiction abounds. The fiction of English exceptionalism, because it is the English really, is fed by delusional narratives like the one about Suez. It's hard to make sense of it all. How do we find, centre, ourselves in this chaos? We talked earlier in the conference about what's reality, what's fiction? Is reality on the stage and fiction in our lives? I'm sure you are experiencing this in your own contexts. If you choose to look. I'm characterising the world in this way because I feel it. It moves through me. I'm connected to it.

So, how do we participate and be present, how do we sustain connection? I suppose this is what I mean when I say it is a question for drama. And I want to talk about the role of theatre and drama in creating counter narratives to the ideological ones. This is why the Greeks created drama as public space, to question itself and society, question dominant narratives, a place where people could reflect on human experience and participate as citizens. The polis chose social connection to take responsibility for their society. And it's so important because there's another pandemic that's been going on for many, many years. It's a pandemic called loneliness. COVID accelerated it, the isolation and the loneliness of the old and the young is terrifying. And they're even more isolated by the technology that they think connects them. It's a contradiction.

So, how do we deal with this? How do we really connect? I don't know the answer. Of course I don't. What I will say is that a lot of my work for the last 33 years is in what we call theatre in education, or TiE. And theatre in education, for me, is the very embodiment of the relationship between the social and the political in the personal, self and society. It attends to the social function of theatre and drama, and never separates form and content. Participation or interactivity is meaningless unless it is completely connected to the content and context of the story, to the situation, otherwise it just becomes an empty form of consumption, aesthetically pleasing perhaps, but empty, nevertheless. And I believe we currently have a real problem with the separation of form and content in the field of theatre and drama for children and young people, often interacting for interacting's sake.

But I think that to understand the political in the personal in the social means really probing that relationship between self and society and how society is reflected in the self. And that children

and young people demand this because they're natural philosophers. Why is that? The first question the child will ask you is, why? Why is the world like this? Why do I have to do that? It's only when you get older, integrated into the culture, and start to worry about paying the mortgage that you stop asking that question. And then respond to your own child's why with 'because I say so!'

The child asks why because they are curious, they want to learn, and that's because they want to draw into themselves the diversity and the complexity of humankind, draw into themselves the richness of culture as historical, social, natural, political, emotional, imaginative thinking, human beings. Vygotsky (1978) said, the dynamic of a personality is a drama. And the stage is the human mind. It's in the interaction between the mind and society that the drama unfolds, and personal identity is enacted. This is why interaction or participation has to be meaningful, dialogical, probing, questioning, not token blind activity. And that's also why it's so important that we ask real authentic questions. Open rather than closed questions where the 'correct' answer is implied in the question. In drama there are no right or wrong answers, no penalty zone. We have no right to indulge in moral rhetoric, you can't tell kids what to think. No one should tell you what to think. But what you can do is you can create a gap a space for meaning to be made. And when you do that, they can begin to enter the process of orientating themselves in society. And perhaps even seeing how society is reflected in them, just like me with my box of Maltesers. This opens the mind to thinking about how you want to live and take responsibility for yourself, to know or even create your own story. Because if you can't take responsibility for yourself, you certainly can't take responsibility for others, or the planet for that matter.

So, we have to create those opportunities where engagement is real. Don't ask questions you already know the answer to. It makes people angry because they know they're being manipulated. We need to dramatize stories and situations that leave space for them to participate both physically and imaginatively, where they can meet themselves on the stage so to speak. Dramatize stories that are rich and nuanced, ironic, and ambivalent, open to active interpretation. We have to trust the children and young people we work with, and I think that we have to find creative ways of building that trust, the trust that comes from real engagement with no penalty zone.

When I was flying over here, I was reading Hansel and Gretel by Jeanette Winterton. I don't know if people are familiar with her. She is a fine, fine English writer, who announced herself to the world with a wonderful memoir called *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. But she's also a children's writer and she contributed a retelling of the Hansel and Gretel to series called *Fairytales Revolution*. I suppose it's fun, but there's no revolution. In this version Gretel becomes Greta and the children like planting trees. The Stepmother has an obesity problem and is irrepressibly greedy. You get the idea. But what I think is really interesting, is that this retelling is actually telling the reader what to think, what the appropriate response to the natural world should be. It's highly moral, a form of transmission morality. It is faux radical story telling for middle class parents to confirm what they already know and impart upon the kids. It's also, in my opinion, pretty charmless and it loses all the nuance of the original story.

The original story, that's an interesting question itself of course. I don't if you are aware of this but in the first written down edition of the story by the Grimms brothers, there is not a wicked stepmother. It's the mother of Hansel and Gretel who decides to abandon her children in the forest. But in the third edition of the stories Wilhelm Grimm changed it to a stepmother. Why? Well, I suppose the narrative was too unpalatable for emerging Christian bourgeois sensibility. We cannot tolerate a folk Medea. A woman, a mother, would never abandon her children to their

fate in the forest would she? No! Gott in Himmel! So, he solved the problem by making the architect of the crime a wicked stepmother. And make the father more sympathetic of course. He is just a victim of certain circumstances and a manipulative evil woman, who loves his kids. That is how the Hansel and Gretel story was filled with a different set of values that supported a burgeoning bourgeois ideology, conforming to a new narrative.

Having said all that, however, the power of the story, its ambivalence, transcends Grimm's attempt to sanitise it because it's so elemental. It taps into our darkest fear of being abandoned in the forest, by our parents no less, without determining what the forest is exactly. That is for us to imagine. Gaps remain in the Grimms that are filled in by Winterson's telling. As you know, from the story, the first time they are led into the forest Hansel lays a trail of pebbles behind him so that they can find their way back. And then the 'wicked stepmother/aspect of our mother we fear' sends them off again, and the second time he uses the last chunk of bread to lay a trail of crumbs, but as you all know, the birds eat the bread, and they are lost. On meeting the story again today, at this time of distraction and disconnection, I am struck by the trails because they appear to me to be threads of human connection, that want to connect the child back to the mother, to security, to feeling at home in the world. A psycho-social umbilical cord. And that is such a profound element of the story that there is no politically correct retelling that can ever, ever match the gap that these trails open up in the imagination, because it's a real thread of connection that has conjoined children and their world for generation after generation. And that feels to me to be extremely important because that connection opens up a real engagement, potentially, between what is known and unknown. If we are to work with this story in an interactive or immersive or participatory way, how do we open this particular gap for the imagination, what other threads may emerge? What are the other connections between the child and the story that we mediate as facilitator- teacher- artists?

This brings me back to authenticity. As a teacher or a facilitator, or as an actor, you are a mediator between the world of the child and the world of the story. And in that intersection the child can begin to ask those most profound questions about what it is to be human and answer them for themselves. We talked in the conference yesterday about a preparation for living. Well in my view using drama as preparation for living requires total contextualisation in the fictional world, in the particulars of the story, and it's in those particular, those dramatic, authentic interactions, that the children can universalise, begin to explore their own values, to test things out and to make active choices. Should we go this way? Should we follow that thread? Or shall we go that way? And in that safe fictional context and we're really asking the questions rather than manipulating the way we want them to go, then they can begin to think as social critical, individual creative human beings and then they are much more likely to use these threads in their own life. Not just as bread or stones but in so many diverse, complex and rich forms. I suppose what I'm trying to say is this, if we can engage them dramatically in a space where we don't drive to tell them what to think, but they can think for themselves, where participation is experiential, then what young people begin to do is think feelingly and feel thinkingly, there's no separation between mind and body. They are totally sensorially and intellectually and emotionally connected to the whole through parts, and this is a deeper form of knowing. And they stand a head taller than themselves in fiction because the context of the story itself, projects them into a zone of proximal development. They are ahead of themselves, and they can do extraordinary things that will give them extraordinary insight and they will use what they have learned in real life.

I want finish by telling you another story. Recently I came across a book called *Dear Life: A Doctor's Story of Love, Loss and Consolation* by Rachel Clarke a doctor who deals in palliative care

based in London hospitals. She's a remarkable woman. She is concerned with how you enable people to die with dignity in a system that treats patients as units rather than people. She is interested in her patient's stories because that is what makes them human to her. She recounts a story. I'll read it. She writes:

A colleague from one of Britain's foremost cancer hospitals, the Royal Marsden in London demonstrates the power of storytelling beautifully. A children's play specialist. She set out to tackle the fears and anxieties of children facing radiotherapy for cancer. When the treatment is given, no one else can be in the room so the child of necessity is separate from their parents to face a loud, intimidating machine alone. Sometimes, only a general anaesthetic, a risky procedure to be avoided if possible, can quell a child's terror of being abandoned in the radiotherapy suite.

After careful consideration of this matter, from a young patient's perspective, the play specialist invented something she called 'magic string': a simple ball of multicoloured twine, one end of which the child could clasp, while the other would weave out of the room, under the door, to be held by their parent. She had devised a literal thread that was, simultaneously, a narrative thread, a story that a frightened child could tell themselves, while lying cold, alone, behind a lead-lined door, that Mummy or Daddy were still there, on the other side, caring and holding on to them. Simultaneously cheap as chips and priceless, magic string helps children with cancer today reframe their experience away from abandonment to being nurtured, loved and supported.

As with any addiction, I found that the hit of emergency medicine, though intoxicating, were unsustainable. Life-saving of an altogether more prosaic kind – the myriad ways we can help someone feel human in hospital by treating their story with respect and attentiveness it deserves – seeped indelibly under my skin. In matters of life and death, I was learning, sometimes actions spoke louder than words. (Clarke, 2020)

It is no accident of course that Clarke's colleague was a play specialist who understands the power of story. Furthermore, since actions speak louder than words, she was dramatizing the story, utilising the power of action that we take for granted in the theatre. I don't know if that colleague was familiar with Hansel and Gretel, or if she was conscious of it when she had the idea about the 'magic string', but I'm willing to wager that she has the ability to empathise and be truly present in her own and the lives of others that only comes through the use of the imagination, and that is someone who can imagine the real and de-centre from themselves through the power of story. For it is the imagination that creates human value. Undistracted by a formal patient doctor narrative, she was a living presence in the relationship and could see, feel, the terror in the child's eyes, and she recognised that terror in herself, terror that is in all of us, lurking in the forest. When we treat the story with the respect and attentiveness it deserves, we transform our ways of seeing. We might begin to see that the mother/stepmother, was perhaps recognising that they had no other choice. Maybe she comes from the kind of community where she lost not one, not two but three children already to various diseases and famine. Maybe she was just being practical and she knew that if she and her husband survived, they could have more children.

When we dramatize the whole complex situation, we realise that we cannot solve the mother's problem. But what participants can do is identify what the problem is, understand its extremities and explore it, then they can *own* it. And then perhaps they can begin to face the extremities in their lives. And that is why we must be authentic and open and find space for our audience and participants in our work.

If I take anything away from our conference, I recognise that without that authenticity, there's no real interactivity, no real connection or participation. Not only in your work, but in your life.

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