‘I’m just a pebble in the pond’: exploring the lived legacies of art for reconciliation

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ABSTRACT
Since the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, the arts have been promoted as capable of reconciling communities in Northern Ireland. In keeping with cultural policy orthodoxies in Britain and Ireland, practitioners are expected to provide even more information on the contribution of their work to this agenda. However, short-term evaluation processes entrench bureaucratic systems of arts administration that occlude, and even hinder, the complex, long-term legacies of particular applied arts projects. This article instead argues that situating participant experience within the broader material conditions of inequality and scarcity they face offers a better account of the transformative power of such projects.

KEYWORDS
Theatre; reconciliation; peacebuilding; Northern Ireland; participation

Introduction

Since the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, the arts and cultural expression have been promoted as central to fostering reconciliation in Northern Ireland. The peace accord saw a shift in cultural policy and funding away from arts traditionally seen to appeal to middle class audiences and towards the community and applied arts sector. National and transnational funding bodies drew organisations that had previously operated at the periphery of the funding system into the ambit of state and international peacebuilding policies. As a consequence, the presumption that the arts and cultural activities can (or should) deliver reconciliatory change has become embedded both at the level of policy making and within the common sense of the practitioners and facilitators involved in the development of Art for Reconciliation (AfR) practices through theatre. However, despite the emergence of a strong tradition of socially engaged theatre, and amidst the proliferation of ever more demanding forms of outcomes-based evaluation, a long-term study of the contribution of such work to reconciliation remains elusive. Funders continue to assess the contribution of the arts to reconciliation either in time-limited, project-based assessments or in generalised, synoptic reports. As one major funder, the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), noted: ‘the process by which [individual change] is scaled up or amplified at a societal level is not clear’ (Rush and Houston 2011, 49). It is a lack of clarity that raises important questions about the scope and limits of artistic agency;
about how art seeks to transform its participants; and whether that transformation is able to extend beyond the life of a single project.

Performance studies has defined itself as a field through the debate over the relationship between the ephemerality, role-playing, and affective power of the performance encounter and longer-term change. Scholars such as Fischer-Lichte (2008), Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006), and Jill Dolan (2005) laud the transformative power of bringing persons together in contingent, time-limited performance events. Others, such as Rebecca Schneider (2011), emphasise that all performances attain political force precisely through the repetition of remembered acts in novel historical junctures. Despite their explicit concern for the impact of performances upon those who constitute them, such scholarship has tended to eschew engaging directly with spectators and participants. Ever-wary of reductively ascribing a theatrical cause to political effect, or erring too close to the reductive metrics of funder-led impact assessment, they instead speak about ‘fleeting intimations’ (Dolan 2010, 2), ‘the ephemerality of the event’ (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 162), and conjuring with ‘the past’s fugitive moments’ as a ‘politic of possibility’ (Schneider 2011, 180). However, theatre and performance scholarship has undergone lately something of an empirical turn, as scholars have begun to think in a more systematic way about where such approaches sit within the field. As Matthew Reason and Kirsty Sedgman note:

there is a sense that until recently empirical research in theatre studies has largely consisted of sporadic pockets of activity, rather than something fully integrated into the subject area as a whole […] we are hopeful to have reached a turning point. (Reason and Sedgman 2015, 118)

Broadly focussed on the construction of cultural value through the performance encounter, these new approaches centre participant and audience experience while also resisting the appropriation of such groups by market researchers, arts funders, and theorists alike (Bennett 2013; Freshwater 2009; Radbourne, Glow, and Johanson 2013; Reinelt 2014; Sedgman 2017, 2019). This article seeks to build upon such a critical approach by turning towards the question of amplification: what becomes of performance’s ‘fleeting intimations’ when they come into contact with the world outside? And how does a small-scale applied theatre project relate to, and intervene in, wider social currents? As one participant in the case study at the heart of this article put it: ‘Making a difference matters, even if I’m just a pebble in the pond’ (Devlin 2015).

As a testimonial theatre project that spanned several iterations across a significant period of time, Theatre of Witness (ToW) provides an exceptional opportunity for researchers to trace how participants have employed the knowledge they derived from theatrical engagement within the broader arena of conflict transformation. The project’s process of creation was developed by practitioner Teya Sepinuck in the United States and trialled in other international contexts, most notably Poland, before being brought by her to the Six Counties in 2009. Based at the Playhouse in Derry until 2014, ToW received two tranches of funding through the Special EU Programmes Body’s PEACE III fund, as well as grants from the Holywell Trust and funding from the Northern Ireland Executive through the Community Relations Council (CRC). Across its lifespan, the project involved the mounting of six productions and the development of workshops in which practitioners
and participants were trained in ToW techniques. Individuals trained in this methodology directed two of the six productions.³

ToW involves the director working closely with a group of participants to develop and rework personal testimonies into ten-minute monologues that are subsequently written into a performable script. Sepinuck argues that ToW is less a theatrical project than a forum for individual and collective healing where ‘victimhood changes to survival, and denial into accountability’ as participants come to terms with their own experiences in relation to the often complex experiences of others (Sepinuck 2013, 229). The project drew participants from across groups that participated in or were affected by the 30-year civil conflict (known as the ‘Troubles’) between the British state, broadly Protestant, pro-Union paramilitaries, and broadly Catholic, Republican groups fighting for Irish Unity. The cast of ToW productions included victims and survivors, ex-members of paramilitary groups, and serving members of the security forces. The productions toured extensively to theatres and community spaces across the North and border communities, and each show was followed by audience discussion and mingling with participants. Crucially for the purposes of this article, ToW has had a longer-term impact after Sepinuck returned to the United States through the involvement of former participants in a range of peace-building initiatives in Ireland, Britain, and elsewhere.

In depth interviews with those involved with ToW offer a unique, if complex, insight into the lived legacies of AfR. We approached five participants who took part in We Carried Your Secrets, I Once Knew a Girl and Release: Robin Young, former member of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) Body Recovery Identification Team; Kathleen Gillespie, whose husband Patsy was murdered by the Provisional I.R.A. after being forced to drive his bomb-laden van into a British Army checkpoint at Coshquin; Anne Walker, who was for a time a member of the I.R.A. in Derry; Therese McCann, whose family were ‘put out’ of their house during the ‘Troubles’ and who experienced sexual violence as a child; and Paddy McCoey, who survived a car bomb when he was young. We also interviewed artistic director Teya Sepinuck and Magdalena Weiglhofer, a researcher who wrote one of the project’s evaluations. Collectively, the interviews appear to offer a relatively straightforward account of one applied theatre project’s longer-term legacies: from them, we can identify a multitude of subsequent peace-related activities that were clearly spurred and informed by involvement in the Derry-based project. However, such a legacy must be properly contextualised. It must be acknowledged that only a minority of participants was accessible for interview. Those that agreed to discuss the project are more likely to have regarded ToW as a positive experience than those that have distanced themselves from the project. Moreover, in contrast to funder-led processes of evaluation that tend to treat ‘feedback’ as straightforward evidence of transformation, interview material must be carefully situated. Attending to the ways interviewees retrospectively interpret, arrange, and afford significance to events ‘as part of a much broader cultural conversation, proffered within the constraining formulae of their specific context’ (Sedgman 2019, 479) offers a rich, multi-perspectival view into what makes the experience of AfR and applied theatre stick, or come unstuck.

Even a small sample of responses can offer us an insight into how participants refashion, adapt to, or navigate ‘constraining formulae’; and whether broader issues of class, gender, and social status affected their interpretation and amplification of AfR. The peace scholar John Paul Lederach argues that peacebuilding is a process of ‘web
making’: it requires web-spinners who are investing in ‘building relational spaces that have not existed or that must be strengthened to create a whole that, like the spider’s web, makes things stick’ (2005, 85). Theatre-makers and those that participate in applied theatre projects can be considered as being in the business of weaving webs and making web weavers: together, they try to fashion the collaborative bonds that make a performance possible. In the context of conflict transformation, it is the necessity of collaboration that makes applied theatre an attractive means of forging those ties of interdependence that conflict tears apart. What gives such ties sticking power, however, is less clear. Laderach’s focus on space rather than process implies that sustainable peace requires the development of a durable supporting infrastructure (that is, a reserve of training, knowledge, and material resources) as well as one off projects and events. Ultimately the ability of theatre artists and participants to build their own grassroots peacebuilding practices must be understood as entangled with the political-economic agendas that shape contemporary cultural policy in Northern Ireland.

This article employs ToW as an opportunity to rethink the transformative power of applied theatre in relation to the broader infrastructure that sustains (and constrains) its impact. It will begin by outlining Northern Ireland’s policy environment and considering how Afr practice has been shaped by the dynamics of peace-related funding and cultural policy. It then analyses interviews with those involved in ToW as a way of exploring how the evaluation process entrenches bureaucratic systems of arts administration that decontextualise participant experience and overlook their longer-term engagements in reconciliation activities. Finally, the article explores how a funding system built upon scarcity, competition, and project-based funding has continued to shape the attempts of ToW participants to amplify their experience of applied theatre. What the interviews reveal is how the failure of funders, policy makers, and (to a lesser extent) artists, to conceptualise impact in terms of infrastructure has left participants vulnerable to co-optation and exploitation. Without considering broader questions of social and economic justice as part of the lived legacies of Afr, participants will continue to struggle to cultivate genuinely grassroots, and ethical peacebuilding practices.

**Post-agreement cultural policy and the liberal peace: constraining formulae**

The 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement marked an important discursive shift in the understanding of peace and reconciliation and the role of culture in that process. The new constitutional arrangement committed Unionist and Nationalist designated parties to pursuing ‘exclusively democratic and peaceful means of resolving differences’ (NIO 1998, Annexe A). The Agreement did not itself aim to resolve the issue of the North’s constitutional status, but provided a structure of governance and rights that could contain disagreement to democratically elected institutions until such a time as a referendum on Irish unity would be called. Its commitment to equality and reconciliation were limited to the familiar liberal grammar of rights and protections that had become the orthodoxy of policy making in post-Cold War Europe. In place of the cultural and political supremacism of the pre-1972 Unionist state, it bound the devolved administration to ‘the promotion of a culture of tolerance at every level of society’ (Section 6, Para. 13). In place of systematic and state-sponsored discrimination, elected representatives were obliged to
ensure ‘the right to equal opportunity in all social and economic activity, regardless of class, creed, disability, gender or ethnicity’ (Section 6, Para. 1).

While acknowledging the role of the Agreement in reducing political violence and promoting workforce integration (Muttarak et al. 2013), scholarship has begun to unpick the contradictions in privileging rights and representational equality over issues of structural change and questions of social justice. The consociational model of the Agreement was informed by theoretical work by Brendan O’Leary and John McGarry (2004) that adopted a liberal paradigm of peacebuilding premised upon security, statehood, democratisation, institutional reform, and the promotion of free markets (Cooper et. al. 2011; Richmond & Franks 2009; Mac Ginty 2009; Paris 2010). In this model, a lack of economic activity in the present is interpreted as being a consequence of war, rather than the legacy of those long-term structural inequalities that contributed to the conflict in the first place. Consequently, since 1998 the promise of reconciliation has been continuously undermined by the failure to evenly distribute the economic benefits of the peace (O’Hearn 2008; McCabe 2012; Coulter 2014). The problem is less that a policy focus on formal equality and promoting ‘parity of esteem’ is problematic as such; rather, it is that deeper continuities of oppression and marginalisation affect the task of promoting tolerance between formerly warring groups.

The broad assumptions underlying the peace affected the aims of cultural policy in the years immediately following 1998. Arts administration began to focus on the value of culture and creativity in producing desirable social and economic outcomes. In place of the patrician values that had served to entrench the social power of the (broadly Unionist) bourgeoisie (McIntosh 1999), public subsidy was redesigned to serve the perceived ‘needs’ of the public as a whole. Funding for the applied and community arts rapidly expanded as unprecedented resources were made available to arts organisations through ‘arms length’ governmental bodies such as the ACNI and CRC, and international organisations such as the SEUPB (Hill 2001, 215–235; Nash 2005). Yet while these bureaucratic structures are taken to be apolitical and routine, they represent the prioritisation of a ‘bureaucratic rationality’ in cultural policy (Mac Ginty 2012). This hierarchical approach represents local actors as unruly and inefficient and, therefore, in need of strict forms of management (Richmond & Franks 2009). Such structures do not merely facilitate arts funding but determine the nature and scope of peacebuilding activities from the top-down.

Despite promising to disenchant the politics of cultural policy, making arts administration a focal point of public policy opens policy makers to influence by external interests (Clarke & Newman 1997; Mommaas 2004). The ascendancy of a pro-market agenda informs the overall logic of cultural policy. This agenda prioritises urban redevelopment and the re-shaping of conflicted zones into sites for cultural tourism. The closest thing to a definitive statement on the aims and intentions of ‘good relations’ in Northern Ireland can be found in the Executive’s 2013 Together Building United Communities, a document that has significant influence over the policies of local authorities, ACNI, and the SEUPB. It measures progress towards peace in terms of representation, diversity and inward capital investment, noting that the North has become somewhere investors consider a viable business base; where tourists want to visit; where significant inward immigration has led to the creation of a diverse, multicultural society and one in which the vast majority of our young people can grow up in a peaceful environment. (NI Executive Office 2013, 10)
Insofar as culture is involved in this process, its function is reduced to preparing the ground for private investment. Where such assumptions prevail, artistic ambitions to engage with social and economic exclusions and inequalities are liable to be overlooked in favour of amelioratory cultural representations designed to increase the saleability of the region in the global marketplace.

The manner in which AfR projects such as ToW are funded and monitored is greatly affected by the priorities of the liberal, technocratic model. Prior research from ‘The Art of Reconciliation’ project-based upon 43 interviews with funders, arts administrators, and funded artists has revealed areas of tension between funders and the funded around the precise role of art in reconciliation and, crucially, the suitability of processes of funding administration. Both funders and practitioners agree that reconciliation cannot be reduced to any single project or event, but is implemented through a multitude of activities that together transform inter-personal and inter-communal relationships over a long period of time (Coupe 2021). Yet in spite of this emphasis on incrementalism, the majority of funding for AfR is allocated in the form of small grants for single projects (Campbell & Jankowitz 2019). A single run of performances, for example, often involves multiple applications to different funders for separate aspects of the process, from preparatory workshops, to venue hire and touring costs. This multiplication of bureaucratic processes consumes the scant resources of arts organisations and artists, and focuses their attention towards short-term material necessities over longer-term practices of critical reflection, developing good working relationships, and building organisational capacity.

That this system of administration has developed in conjunction with a reduction in the overall funding for the arts in the North only increases the perception that contemporary funding regimes are disciplinary in nature and intent. Indeed, as it remains unclear as to whether or how participant and audience feedback is used to inform future policy (Grant 2021), practitioners are inclined to treat evaluation as a tick-box exercise in order to secure competitive advantage in future funding applications. Moreover, the sense amongst spectators and participants that artists rely on positive feedback to make a sustainable living introduces positive bias into ‘official’ post-project questionnaires and surveys (Johanson & Glow 2015, 267). In this way, the adoption of a pseudo-market logic wherein competition over resources is understood to increase efficiency (‘value for money’) ironically undermines the critical and ethical reflexivity that makes for effective and responsible applied arts practices. As one interviewee remarked: ‘It is actually the antithesis of being involved in an arts process […] it has taken away from my capacity as an artist to work on the project’ (Interview, Playwright and Theatre Producer, 5 November 2018). Overall, artists and arts organisations remain outside, and subject to, the processes through which peace-related cultural policy is designed and administered, increasing the sense that funders lack an interest in the practical expertise and material requirements of arts organisations and those who take part in AfR activities.

The pitfalls of evaluation

The unequal power funders wield means that they are able to impose their conceptions of transformation through procedural systems and regulatory frameworks that at first appear neutral and objective. In this context, the mediation of participant experience
in post-project evaluation becomes a key site of legitimation through which funders embed their interpretations of reconciliation and measures of progress. It is important not to understand top–down evaluation as a monolith. Funded projects often involve multiple and overlapping assessments, some of which depart significantly from traditional quantitative and qualitative surveys. Nevertheless, methodological innovation does not in itself free a particular evaluation process from the wider political pressures outlined in the previous section. The liberal model of peace still helps to determine what information is deemed relevant for inclusion in the first place, regardless of the precise methods used. Even relatively small projects such as ToW cannot escape such pressures, and, as such, they offer us an opportunity to understand what is being overlooked. Analysis of the two ToW evaluations alongside participant accounts of their experiences reveals decontextualisation, aggregation, and short-termism as the main areas that limit our ability to locate AfR’s long-term effects. This reflects a broader tendency to consider the social and economic status quo (i.e. the liberal peace) as the neutral ground of reconciliation, rather than as an important ‘constraining context’ that affects how participants experience AfR.

The central issue to emerge during the ToW project was a disjunction between the ethical and aesthetic complexities of the project’s process and the demands of funding bureaucracy. ToW received two tranches of funding from 200 to 2011 and 2012 to 2014, the bulk of which came from the SEUPB’s PEACE III programme, a fund designed to ‘specifically focus on reconciling communities and contributing towards a shared future’ (Interview 12 July 2020). Peace III was notorious for requiring funded projects adhere to a cross-community composition (a 60–40 split either way between Catholic and Protestant participants) and monitor and evaluate their projects using ‘quantified indicators and targets’ (54) that largely consist of individual attitudinal change surveys. Magdalena Weiglhofer, who in 2011 conducted the first of ToW’s two evaluations on behalf of the Holywell Trust while simultaneously researching her Ph.D. on storytelling as a method of peacebuilding, remembers that the project administrators at the Playhouse in Derry were ‘very busy indeed with amplified, time-consuming and occasionally unmanageable administrative tasks’ (Interview 12 July 2020). Despite the fact that both her Ph.D. and her role as an evaluator broadly converged around assessing the contribution of ToW to peacebuilding, Weiglhofer notes the disjunction between the approach funders require and her own ethnographic methods:

[T]rade within an increasingly bureaucratic policy-driven industry (money for peace) might give more cause for concern, considering that results are expected that simply cannot be guaranteed. At the same time, it also raised questions as to how much agency was really left for the participants when the effects of a project were pre-determined by funders. It seems to indicate that no matter what the participants told, their stories had to somehow deliver a message that funders were looking for in order to satisfy contracts and secure future funding. (SEUPB 2007)

Though she goes on to remark upon the limitations of the quantitative methods funders prefer (attitudinal surveys, economic and demographic data), Weiglhofer’s criticism is with the way funders expect participant feedback to be analysed rather than with specific methods of gathering data. Instead of treating participant feedback as acts of interpretation that give us clues as to precisely how and why they find value in the experience of participation, arts organisations are incentivised to weaponise such
data by treating it only as transparent ‘evidence’ that targets have been hit, and public funds well-spent.

While it is clear from our interviews that the project produced powerfully felt ties between participants, little contextual information is given in either evaluation as to how and why such profound and durable relationships emerged in spite of significant challenges. To reduce inter-group contact to a calculation of numbers and vague statements about fostering ‘human connection’ (Weiglhofer 2011, 27) and ‘a real sense of unity within the group’ (Holywell Trust 2014, 47) is to overlook this careful handling of locally specific political and cultural barriers to effective practice. For example, ToW’s second production, I Once Knew a Girl, addressed the experiences of women often overlooked in male-dominated accounts of the conflict. Performers recounted experiences of sexual violence at the hands of family members and comrades, and spoke candidly of their engagement in paramilitary activities. To make such stories public was to face shame in a context where women have traditionally been represented as dutifully nurturing and supporting male combatants in the domestic sphere (Conrad 2004; Gilmartin 2017). Indeed, Anne Walker recalls how her family ‘had people in the background telling them don’t be letting Anne do this, telling the truth saying that she was in the IRA’ (Interview, 20 July 2020). Given this context, it is striking that participants retrospectively conceptualise the experience of collaborating on the productions, in familial terms. Walker and Gillespie speak about how they ‘all became a family’ during the project (Interview, Anne Walker & Kethleen Gillespie, 6 December 2019) and Therese McCann stresses that ex-participants ‘always support each other […] I know they are always there if I need them’ (Interview, 20 July 2020). Properly contextualised, such statements add substance to the idea of ‘human connection’ by suggesting precisely why such connections are meaningful and important to the participants. They allow researchers to locate the value of the project as much in its development of alternative kinship ties between participants who had shared and often-difficult experiences of family life as in the performances themselves.

Beyond the SEUPB’s strict head count of participants for their funded projects, efforts to aggregate participant data also constitute another form of decontextualisation. Evaluations tend to organise the qualitative information in accordance with the pre-determined aims and objectives funders look for when selecting projects to support. As is the case in both ToW evaluations, this results in interview data being presented without indication of biography or background. In the absence of even a minimum of information, we are unable to understand how particular subjectivities influence the participants’ subjective construction of value, and how modalities of class, gender, and ethno-religious background mediate this process.

One illustrative example of the importance of attending to biographical context is Therese McCann’s experience of participation in the second, all-female ToW production, I Once Knew A Girl. Her story shared many similarities with those of her fellow participants: her experiences of sexual abuse as a child paralleled the sexual assault Anne Walker recounts in her narrative. However, Theresa’s interview remarks are notable for dwelling upon a concept that is central to the ToW process: ‘giving voice to the voiceless’ (Weiglhofer 2011, 2). She talks about how before participating in ToW she ‘couldn’t speak’ and ‘just hadn’t got a voice’, and goes on to observe:
My major challenge was my education, speaking out, and letting other people hear. I was called stupid most of my life, because I couldn’t read and write and my brothers and sisters could do all this. It gave me a voice and helped me realise that I can teach myself to do stuff. I am glad that I have done what I have done through the ToW, because I am here today because of them. (Interview 20 July 2020)

For Therese, the most valuable aspect of ToW was that it gave her the confidence and tools to participate in the articulation of her own experiences for the first time, something that Northern Ireland’s inequalities of class and gender had denied her. Therese experienced first hand the conflicted nature of the private sphere during the ‘Troubles’: it was at once a space protected and claimed by competing, male-dominated political forces in the public sphere; a space of refuge from public censure; and a space of confinement and even abuse (Conrad 2004, 125). It is here we see the importance of Sepunick’s careful devising process of gradually moving participants from private to public domains, beginning with individual interviews, to the sharing of stories amongst participants, to the shaping of those stories into a performable form. The voice is something that is not simply ‘found’, but is afforded or denied according to social norms. For Therese, the project ‘gave’ her a voice by providing a social situation in which she was shielded from the recrimination faced by women in wider society. This allowed her to discuss her experiences and gradually find the confidence and words to make it public for the first time.

It is only by remaining attuned to biography and social context that we can distinguish between the different qualities of efficacy associated with a particular creative process – how an individual’s background or social context can produce different constructions of value and different forms of personal transformation. As Kirsty Sedgman has persuasively argued, the reduction of cultural value to a determinate aims and outcomes ignores how value is constructed over time and in culturally specific ways. Interpreting ‘the manoeuvres different people go through to make sense of performance encounters’ (2017, 315–316) helps us to better understand the barriers to effective participant engagement and long-term change, and whether the strategies a specific art project used to address them were appropriate, something that is particularly important in a context such as the North where ideas of religion, heritage and nation can be a source of division.

In the case of ToW, biographical details can shift assessment beyond a simplistic focus on the binary of whether a certain target is achieved, to an understanding of what it was about the project’s particular mode of devising and participation that appealed to individuals, such as Theresa, and conversely what aspects of Sepinuck’s process that did not appeal to others, and why.

Short-term funding patterns also place significant temporal constraints on the evaluation of projects such as ToW. Arts organisations tend to accept the burden of funder-orientated data gathering as a necessary evil to prove their compliance with instrumental targets. The prospect of extending the longevity of a project is tied to successfully proving that its aims and objectives have been achieved over a short span of time. For ToW securing further funding through the evaluation process was crucial in strengthening and adding to the network of participants that formed around the first two productions. Anne Walker, Kathleen Gillespie, Robin Young, and Therese McCann were crucial in recruiting and supporting the new performers (something that was perhaps symptomatic of Sepinuck’s rather haphazard selection process). Not only is the accretion of such a network of activists entirely absent from the evaluations, so is any critical reflection on
the factors sustaining these bonds over the long-term. Impact in both evaluations is understood in temporally linear terms as a simple process of cause and effect, with the single intervention leading to a determined outcome. Little space is given to the shifting terrain of personal, political, and economic circumstances that also affect how participants have perceived and appropriated their participation, particularly in the time that has passed since they first joined the project.⁶

Our interviews, on the other hand, not only reveal the extent of the follow-on activities pursued by some, though not all, participants, but also provide a more expansive account of impact in relation to key informant biographies as well as social and economic justice imperatives. Paddy McCoey, for instance, remarks upon the importance of ToW as a means of personal healing and expresses his reluctance to engage in post-production activities after such an intensive and demanding project: ‘It was a measure of the healing that I could move on’ (Interview, 9 June 2020). And though our interviewees expressed positive opinions regarding their participation in ToW, we cannot account for those that could not be reached. It would be just as important to understand whether a negative experience of the project informed further peacebuilding activities, but such information is beyond the scope of this paper. Despite these limitations, the available interview material does provide an insight into the importance of properly contextualising the lived legacies of applied theatre. As the next section will explore, the nature and extent of participant involvement in these subsequent activities are conditioned by precisely those biographical and contextual issues that are absent from the ToW evaluations.

**Sticking power: shaping the legacies of applied theatre**

Existing scholarship has rightly identified ToW’s resistance to co-option within dominant narratives of the peace through such crude attempts at measuring its effects. Grant and Jennings argue that ‘the success of this project, both as a work of art and an instrument of social change, lies in its refusal to resolve the disturbing and contradictory aspects of the stories told’ (2013, 78). In *I Once Knew a Girl* Kathleen Gillespie declines to forgive those members of the IRA who murdered her husband. Her moving account is set alongside Anne Walker’s complex experiences as a female member of that very same organisation: though committed to the peace, she is open and honest about her desire to join the IRA after Bloody Sunday. Lisa Fitzpatrick similarly argues that these tensions collectively enact ‘a resistance to the Conservative-led government’s narrative of brand new dawns’ while’ (2015, 138).⁷ Miriam Haughton’s account of the later production, *Sanctuary*, centres the role of affect in promoting a sense of communion between participants and spectators, fleeting moments that do not ‘assume an idealized resolution or conclusion’ (2018, 198). This focus upon the eventness, presence, and affective power of the performance encounter, while valuable, risks reproducing the short-termism inherent to the crude systems of quantification they often criticise. As Elaine Aston has argued, politically or socially engaged performance does not act in isolation, but operates within and links up with ‘heterogeneously formed, intersecting sites of emancipatory possibility’ (Aston 2016, 17). Turning towards the longer-term legacies of ToW helps us to understand how such projects connect to, and become entangled with, political life outside the theatre.
The capacity of a single series of theatre productions to affect change often rests on the ability of its participants to create, access, or augment existing peacebuilding infrastructure. Equally, a project can find itself caught up in circumstances that are politically disabling, where its transformative aspirations are undermined by difficult material conditions or co-optation within conservative cultural policy structures. Lederach’s definition of peacebuilding as ‘imaginatively weaving relational webs across social spaces within settings of protracted violent conflict’ is useful only if understood in relation to those circumstances that enable and disable the difficult work of weaving webs (2005, 84). Interviews can offer an insight into how participants navigate obstacles and exploit existing structures in their attempts to build more durable spaces for peacebuilding using the expertise they developed through ToW. Analysing their experiences allows us to explore how better to support AfR & applied theatre projects as they seek to amplify their effects, and, more broadly, how a peacebuilding policy might more effectively weave heterogenous activities into a broader network of change.

Across our interviews, it becomes clear that the powerful relationships the project created between performers subsequently came into tension with the logic of scarcity and competition that characterises funding for the arts and peacebuilding in Northern Ireland. Training for new ToW facilitators was embedded in the project and did produce two productions, Sanctuary and Our Lives Without You, led by directors trained by Teya Sepinuck. However, once funding ceased in 2014, the ToW form – with its careful process of facilitator-led devising and scripted testimonial performance – ceased to exist. Despite her best efforts, Sepinuck recalls that ‘had there been some funding’ to train another lead facilitator to develop her techniques, ex-performers ‘would be more empowered to use this in a way that could be more effective’ (Interview, 20 August 2020). In lieu of this support, it was left to ex-participants to continue the project by participating in further activities and performances:

You see, we knew that whenever the stage production was finished that there would be a: Oh My God, as if we had started to run a race and somebody just went Stop! And we had all that energy and we were all still looking at each other, working with each other and mixing with people from the other production. All these relationships were happening, ex Police, UDA, victims, and survivors and it was like, what’s happening? (Anne Walker, Interview, 19 May 2020)

It is important to note that some participants, such as Paddy McCoey, did not wish to engage in such work for reasons unrelated to their material conditions. For others, the pursuit of further activities meant relying upon established organisations that already had access to core funding – including the Playhouse in Derry, the Tim Parry, and Jonathan Ball Peace Foundation in Warrington, the Holywell Trust, and the Training for Women’s Network (see Table 1) – and therefore adapting ToW’s careful process of workshops, performance, and post-show discussions to suit the interests of each.

The form of follow-on activity is therefore dependent upon and shaped by a variety of institutional interests operating within the context of the broader funding system. The Playhouse allowed participants significant latitude to shape their workshops: working with one full-time coordinator, Anne Walker, Kathleen Gillespie, Therese McCann, Robin Young, and other ex-performers have, since 2011, worked with local community groups in both majority Catholic and majority Protestant areas. These workshops usually consist of playing filmed versions of their performances, including a 2013 film
| Organisation | Date       | Participant(s)                                                                 | Activity                                                                                     |
|--------------|------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Theatre of Witness Workshops with Playhouse | 2011–present | Anne Walker, Kathleen Gillespie, Therese McCann, Robin Young & other ToW ex-performers | Community peacebuilding workshops using ToW techniques and performance recordings               |
| Tim Parry & Jonathan Ball Peace Centre, Warrington | 2011       | Anne Walker, Kathleen Gillespie, James Greer, Robin Young, Therese McCann        | Workshops & Facilitation Training                                                             |
| International Women’s Day                        | 2011       | Cast of I Once Knew a Girl, including Anne Walker, Therese McCann & Kathleen Gillespie | Performance of aspects of I Once Knew a Girl in the Long Gallery at Stormont Parliament Buildings |
| St. Ethelburga’s Centre for Reconciliation and Peace in London | 2013   | Kathleen Gillespie, Paddy McCoey, Anne Walker & cast members from Release (2012) | Performances of extracts from previous Theatre of Witness projects                             |
| Utrecht Peace Conference                         | 2013       | Kathleen Gillespie, Paddy McCoey, Anne Walker & cast members from Release (2012)| Performances of extracts from previous Theatre of Witness projects                             |
| Derry City Strabane District Council Prejudice Face On | 2015–2018 | Robin Young                                                                    | Facilitated school workshops on diversity focused on work around good relations programme      |
| Organisation for Security and Co-Operation Europe – TAHCLE (Training Against Hate Crime Law Enforcement) | 2015–2017 | Robin Young                                                                    | Police training investigation of hate crimes with French National Police, Italian Police & Carabinieri |
| Organisation for Security and Co-operation Europe-effective Human Rights Compliant Policing with Roma and Sinti Communities Training for Women’s Network | 2016–present | Robin Young                                                                    | Police training in effective working with minority communities in Romania, Slovakia, Hungary, Ukraine & Kosovo |
|                                                        | 2019–present | Kathleen Gillespie & Anne Walker                                                | Accredited workshops & performances to women’s groups across NI                               |
about the project called *The Far Side of Revenge*, followed by extended discussions of the issues raised by each. However, the participants were also asked to perform extracts from the original productions for a variety of events, including International Women’s Day in 2011, a 2013 event organised by St Ethelburga’s Centre for Reconciliation and Peace in London, and the 2013 Utrecht Peace Conference.

The improvisatory aspect of ‘doing the lives’, as Kathleen Gillespie calls it, raises important ethical questions about extracting testimonies from the scripted ‘whole’ of each production (Interview, 6 December 2019). While Gillespie, for example, argues that these performances promote empathy through their emotional immediacy – ‘it gets me closer to them and it makes them understand the pain that is involved’ – Anne Walker prefers the filmed recordings because they show the entire ensemble in action (Lederach 2005). Sepinuck, on the other hand, believes the follow-on performances risk compromising those aspects of the devising process and performances that made the project effective: the careful balancing of different perspectives; the inclusion in each production of non-speaking parts to represent those who could no longer speak; and the use of movement to communicate the relations of care that had developed between practitioners:

> The beautiful thing is that the performers had sort of taken it upon themselves. The not so beautiful thing is I was beyond aghast when I heard from Ann Walker that people want them to perform live, so they have been performing live. And I said, what have you been performing? And she said, you know, we just do our parts. And I said, who is rehearsing you? And I said, what are you doing? She goes, well, we don’t really use the script. I said, do you use music? Or the movement? No, we just tell our story. (Interview, 20 August 2020)

These conflicting perspectives shed light on the different interests at work in amplifying ToW as a relational space. While participants prioritise what they can make of their experiences in difficult circumstances, the artistic director is concerned with the integrity of a theatrical method she promotes in other international contexts. Underlying this tension is the issue of strategic planning. Without the financial and institutional support that existed to enable the original productions, participants are often forced to adapt their performances to suit the needs of organisations that may have less interest in ethical and aesthetic concerns of applied theatre. It is important not to underplay the agency of the former participants in improvising upon, an even improving, ToW’s strategies. But the struggle between Sepinuck’s longer-term priorities and those of the participants reveals the inadequacies of a short-termist funding system that inhibits a strategic view of how projects link together, and therefore leaves participants exposed to potentially unethical or exploitative situations.

Scarcity of resources, both within the arts funding and state-welfare systems, is also a significant factor shaping the ability of the participants to determine, from the bottom-up, the form and content of their subsequent activities. Though the Playhouse workshops offer a degree of autonomy, funding is only available for a single part-time coordinator and to pay facilitators £30 an hour, and on a workshop-by-workshop basis. This, of course, favours those who already have the independent means to support themselves financially:

> I am on that level of Universal Credit and this extra money comes so all that money balances. If I end up, which is very hardly likely now at 52, I am experiencing ageism.
out there and I am not 52 until July. If I do find a full-time job that takes me away from this, that leaves me saying, no I can’t do that workshop and I can’t go to Bangor and work with Training for Women’s Network® because I have this other commitment (Stack n.d.). I know this is what I am fully committed to. I hate to sound like I am complaining, but I don’t want to have to make that choice in my life, where I have found what I am good at, what I could be far better at given the right platform. (Interview, Anne Walker, 19 May 2020)

Such experiences are indicative of a UK economy in which women are disproportionately exposed to under-employment, in-work poverty, and the cuts to state support brought about by the welfare reform agenda of successive UK Conservative governments (Hinds 2011, 116–126). Though ToW-derived workshops are built upon a principled tolerance for political differences, they take place within, and are greatly affected by, the broader political context of economic austerity. That participants on low incomes are forced to choose between the financial stability of full-time employment and a commitment to developing an independent peacebuilding practice demonstrates just how amplification and efficacy are bound up in existing inequalities of gender and class.

The contrast between Walker’s experiences of precarity and Robin Young is suggestive of how top-down peacebuilding interests shape the amplification of projects such as ToW. Before his retirement from policing in 2017, Young was involved in the much-publicised and debated reform of the RUC into the rebranded Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). Alongside participating in the Playhouse’s ToW workshops, and ‘culture café style’ peacebuilding events for the Holywell Trust, he was also involved in policing reform programmes run by the Organisation for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE) in countries such as France, Ukraine, and Slovakia. He talks candidly about adapting ToW’s storytelling model for an OSCE training programme in Romania designed to promote ‘human rights compliant policing’ with marginalised Roma and Sinti communities:

We take them through a process. First of all, the process is not about ‘you need to change your attitude’, it is about getting them to understand that their attitudes don’t hold water. I do that through narrative, we bring stories into the room from the Roma community, we bring positive role models of the Roma community into the room, for the officers to look at their own barriers to this community. (Interview, 24 June 2020)

The use of Sepinuck’s storytelling techniques in such a context raises important, if troubling, issues. The power of the ToW model derives from its ability to balance the performance of care between participants with a general refusal to resolve each story into an overarching narrative of forgiveness and redemption. In this way, ToW maintained a disruptive stance towards the state-sponsored discourse of ‘new beginnings’ and ‘fresh starts’ (see Jennings and Grant 2011). However, Young’s statements show how potentially disruptive strategies can be re-used as a means of underwriting state power:

[I]f you have good relations in that community you don’t have to use these Special Forces guys, you can negotiate and mediate your way in, be effective and come out again. That is where the value is, a little bit like Teya’s process. (Interview, 24 June 2020)

Young’s experiences also show how the legacies of applied arts projects can be co-opted to serve the dominant liberal model of peacebuilding. The early post-agreement period was defined by demilitarisation, decommissioning, and the reform of the police into a more representative, less Protestant-dominated force, a process which culminated in
Sinn Féin’s 2007 recognition of the PSNI as legitimate (Mac Ginty 2009, 698–699). The social capital derived from the apparent successes of such reforms has become almost as important as the success of the reforms themselves (Ellison and O’Reilly 2008). While the Northern Ireland Policing model has become something of an international brand, with personnel like Young being deployed into ‘post-conflict’ zones as far afield as Kosovo, East Timor, and Ukraine (Sinclair 2012; Mulcahy 2013), as commitments to so-called community policing and inquiries into police collusion during the ‘Troubles’ have been watered down (McGarry and O’Leary 2004). Recent years have also seen a shift in discourses of political policing towards a class-based resentment towards the role of the PSNI in ‘the protection of a post-GFA status quo that continues to fail previously excluded communities still mired in socio-economic deprivation’ (Hearty 2018, 140). As with the liberal peace model more broadly, representational change, image management and the project of extending NI’s soft power abroad obscure the structural inequalities that fuel patterns of sectarianism and mutual suspicion. These internal inadequacies belie the international image of policing reform that Young unintentionally upholds.

What our interviews make clear is that amplification quickly becomes entangled in competing institutional and personal interests, whether that be the desire of artists and facilitators to ‘own’ the legacies of their projects, or the elevation of certain participants to be promoted by, or absorbed into, top-down, state-affiliated conflict transformation initiatives. Without strategic planning that considers the ethical and practical implications of this ‘constraining context’, participants are afforded few opportunities to develop grassroots, bottom-up practices. Spaces such as the Playhouse have managed to develop institutional capacities over longer periods of time precisely by harnessing the collective power of ex-participants. It has become a hub for Anne Walker, Kathleen Gillespie, Robin Young, and Therese McCann to develop their distinctive ToW-derived peace-building workshops. Such work continues to inform its subsequent peace-related programmes. In 2017, they received SEUPB PEACE-IV funding to found the Peace Academy. The project was designed to ‘reflect the Theatre of Witness model to the extent that they use a theatre/multi-media approach to giving a platform to seven participants with direct experience of the Troubles’ (Durrer & Grant 2021). However, participants continue to rely upon disruptively short-term systems of funding management that both disregard their expertise and leave them with little time to undertake further training, or reflect upon and scrutinise their practice.

Conclusion

The transformative power of applied theatre is much more than a time-bound shift in attitude or identity from one fixed point to another; it does not take place exclusively within the duration of a performance, or over the span of a project, but encompasses the activities of participants as they take their lessons into the social world beyond the theatre. Understanding the lived legacies of projects such as ToW, therefore, requires a critical view of arts management and policy processes as sites of political contestation and negotiation. Within a competitive and fragmented funding environment where power emanates from governmental departments, as well as gatekeepers such as funders and arts organisations, participants struggle to find space and support to build peace-related infrastructures of their own. Performance scholars have tended to limit analysis of ethical
considerations to the performance encounter, overlooking the difficulties participants face in negotiating this social environment, and the ethical implications of this for the afterlives of applied theatre techniques in workshops, screenings, and other peace-related contexts. This article shows how issues of gender and class, and difficulties inherent to the political economy of the peace, affect the ability of individuals to participate in, and fully appropriate, lessons derived from their participation in AfR projects. The transformative power of applied theatre cannot, therefore, be understood apart from either the subjective experiences of participants or the social context that constrains them.

ToW nevertheless presents an exceptional case of an applied theatre project with significant ‘sticking power’. Participants from a range of cross-community backgrounds have remained committed to one another and a variety of peace-related initiatives. Participant interviews shed light on why the project was so durable. Firstly, it is important to recognise the power of the devising process and experience of performing as part of a collective. Participants retrospectively narrate participation in ToW as a significant turning point in their personal lives, and some regard the project as inspiring further action. Secondly, ToW developed a strong network of participants who, like a ‘family’, have supported one another in subsequent peace-related activities. Thirdly, material support has also been crucial in partially overcoming the differential exposure of participants to financial precarity. In the words of Therese McCann: ‘It helps us to go where we need to go and to speak and it pays for our petrol money, when we go to speak and when we go to the Schools’ (Interview, 20 July 2020).

Questions concerning how best to support locally-responsive and politically attuned applied theatre practices must attend to the relationships of power, knowledge, and control that determine the experiences of participants after productions or performances conclude. Financial hardship and a lack of institutional support differentially render participants dependent upon existing funding organisations and structures, re-shaping the legacies of projects such as ToW to fit established peacebuilding agendas. As a consequence, the agency of applied arts projects depends upon the ethos of established arts organisations and their ability to support subsequent activities. The Playhouse, for example, provided a space to support the network of artists and facilitators that converged around ToW. Since the departure of Sepinuck, it has allowed artists and ex-participants to adapt and develop ToW into a series of interrelated local AfR productions. This shows the importance of thinking infrastructurally: a competitive funding system that equates political or social effect with single projects will fail to make proper use of existing material resources and knowledge in scaling up, or amplifying change. Complementing funding for single projects with improved support for art and peace-related infrastructure – access to arts venues, workshop spaces, & technical advice – might provide a way to enable participants to further explore and amplify their experiences of AfR.

In assessing the lived legacies of AfR, the evaluation must not only seek to understand where participants are coming from but also where they might go in future. Understanding the potential barriers that participants might face should they wish to do further work necessitates an assessment of existing local arts infrastructure, expertise, and training; that is, the resources that are necessary to empower participants to devise genuinely grassroots peacebuilding strategies and goals. As Lederach has argued ‘[w]e have, in essence, thought too much about “process management” and “solution generation”
and too little about social spaces and the nature of interdependent and strategic relationships’ (2005, 86). A comprehensive understanding of how applied theatre projects feed into wider arts and peacebuilding infrastructure remains threatened by the broader political context that supports a top-down funding system premised upon short-term targets and competition over scarce resources. Without long-term support for institutions that can nurture grassroots peacebuilding activities, effective strategies of applied art risk being diverted to serve entrenched political interests and top-down peacebuilding agendas.

Notes

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2. Art for Reconciliation is a broad term used in the research project informing this article to encompass the wide range of peace-orientated arts and creative practices.
3. We Carried Your Secrets (2009), I Once Knew a Girl (2010), Release (2012), and Sanctuary (2013) were directed by Teya Sepinuck. Unspoken Love (2014) was directed by Thomas Spiers and Our Lives Without You (2014) by Alessia Cartoni.
4. Despite the supposedly ‘hands off’ nature of arts administration, UK-wide research has noted the positive bias inherent in contemporary systems of funding evaluation (Belfiore 2006). Research on peace funding theatre projects based in Northern Ireland corroborates these findings (Jennings and Baldwin 2010, 85).
5. Indeed, she notes that she used the same in-depth interviews she conducted with participants for her evaluation in her research outputs (Weiglhofer 2014, 2015).
6. Harte and Hazley have also criticized, in the context of oral history projects, the tendency to conceptualise impact in linear terms, arguing instead that outcomes depend upon the ‘emotional, situational, and historical dynamics’ that shape reception (2021, 43).
7. Writing about Our Lives Without You, I have argued for the ethical importance of non-verbal expression in communicating pain while simultaneously resisting totalizing narratives of forgiveness or revenge (Coupe 2017).
8. See Stack n.d.

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