

### **/Engaging Communities/**

Throughout the years, many performing arts institutions have started to adopt different approaches for the wellbeing and growth of the society they live in, by including the different communities that have been historically excluded from those institutions. Especially in this time where topics such as immigration, inclusiveness and diversities are daily subjects, performing arts companies and institutions should be a vehicle that can create bridges between cultures to foster communication via the language of arts. In the world of today, shaped by globalisation, economic exchanges and fast technological development, the performing arts are often considered to be at the periphery of the community development process and only a minor player when redeveloping the outskirts of a city and reaching people from different backgrounds, needs, education or levels of income. If from one side waves are changing, old traditional forms of communication and art such as music, dance and theatre must be preserved and passed on to the future generations as part of our human heritage. Despite increasing globalisation, communities are beginning to recognize their own identity, culture, traditional art forms and the value of working together on a local level. "The arts engage, provoke, amuse and excite us but, above all, the arts reflect and shape our sense of community identity and helps building social cohesion." (Keating, 2002). When groups of passionate people gather to sing, tell stories, dance, write, or make music together, they are participating in the most time-honoured forms of community engagement. A committed and active art community can shape social networks, encourage new leaders, increase the quality of community life, improve the lives of individuals, and engage citizens in new and profound ways.

In this essay, based on the lectures and my own researches, I will analyse three case samples and illustrate the ways in which engaging in performing arts programs can have a positive impact on community life. The United Nations states on the The Hangzhou Declaration (2013) that: "We reaffirm the potential of culture as a driver for sustainable development, through the specific contributions that it can make to inclusive social, cultural and economic development, harmony, environmental sustainability, peace and security". Therefore, the institutions I am presenting offer a great example of programs that reach disadvantaged populations such as immigrants and at-risk youth, while others focus on activities that increase the connectivity between local communities with difficult financial situations and cross-age exchange.

*The first example is by Protein Dance, a dance company based in London lead by Luca Silvestrini, that organized a community engaging activity called There and Here that took place in July 2015 at the at Islington Centre for Refugees and Migrants (London). In the UK, as well as the rest of Europe, it is a difficult time to be a migrant or refugee even if you have been officially accepted by your hosting country and even if public opinion is becoming more welcoming. People arriving need structures that can support them as they try to understand their*

new life in a different country. The Islington Centre for Refugees and Migrants is the only charity infrastructure in London that offers free support services, daily meals and free languages course. Inspired by a previous work of the company that explored a 'post-Brexit' Britain, the company organized a series of workshops with a group of migrants and refugees and created an informal sharing performance. This project connected theatrical experiences with real life stories from the people that were taking part in the process. The project expected to improve the English language, creative and collaborative skills of the group. Members where came from different countries, including Sudan, Russia and Turkey, and their ages ranged from young adults in their 20s, to journalists and mothers in their 40s. Andy Ruiz Palma, Project Manager at the Islington Centre, said, "The benefits are both immediate and long-lasting with participants enjoying each and every session and then discovering dance as a way to express oneself, which it then turns to improve the wellbeing and contributes to our inclusive sense of community." (Liber, V. 2015). One of the people that took part in the project, Majid, a Sudan journalist that had been tortured by the security services of his country, and had been forced to flee, reported one such immediate benefit. He says "This last week I've stopped all my physiotherapy appointments... I'm on medication but over the last three weeks I've felt stronger, in my body, mind and heart." (Bayes, H. 2015). As a result of that, many public health institutions started to value the efficiency of community participation activities as an essential value in the overall health of the entire community.

With such a broad diversity of positive outcomes, community performing art engagement offers an interdisciplinary 21<sup>st</sup> century approach to building civic engagement, defined as the "commitment to participate and contribute to the improvement of one's community, neighbourhood, and nation." (Lewis, 2013). There is a growing trend of using participatory programs to increase local engagement; many innovative organizations that recognize the value of these programs use them to pursue different goals.

Indeed, an additional notable example is the one led by balletLORENT in Newcastle (UK) in October 2017 called *Rumpelstiltskin*. The project involved children and older adults living in disadvantages areas of Newcastle with disposable income and very few opportunities to get involved in any arts events. The project offered an opportunity to participate in series of activities and workshops and later on invited the individuals to be a part of the stage production at the Northern Stage of Newcastle. The fairy tale behind the project explored themes such as grief, loss, loneliness, exclusion (themes that some of the people involved have also experienced) and the redemptive healing power of love. The story of our own times shows another parallel, the recurring and problematic socio-political challenge of how to produce social mobility in people of all backgrounds. The outcomes showed a great improvement in health and wellbeing (both physical and emotional) of the engaged groups. Some of the improvements involved an increase in confidence and self-esteem, as reported by one of the teacher; "She is now getting a lot more confident and involved with dancing and wanting to be

part of a group", emotional regulation, self-knowledge, social skills "It does build confidence and self-esteem, that ongoing understanding of other people. I think it brings another dimension to children seeing that we're not all the same, that people have talents in different ways. And also, it's that world out there – it broadens their horizons hugely - because despite our best efforts they have quite narrow experience and I think if you broaden a child's experience of the different things they might do then it builds self-knowledge and knowledge of people and social skills as well" (Watson, 2018). Probably the most important finding has been how participation in the event encouraged understanding between different communities and generations. The relationships forged throughout the project created bridges across communities and brought people together from a wide range of social settings as well as cross-generationally, encouraging an inclusive and diverse occasion for many people living within the city of Newcastle.

By supporting community engagement activities, the performing arts institutions extend their role in their local area not only around artistic challenges but also on other values on larger common issues. Researchers demonstrated that people who participated in creation of art in a group setting experienced greater communication skills, a sense of autonomy and responsibility, and have tended to engage more in other kinds of community activities (Keating, 2002). An additional benefit of these activities lies in the fact that they are not pre-made but are flexible and adaptable to fit the necessities of each local area, community situation and needs, available resources and in accordance to the institutional mission. Therefore, as the community grows and changes, participatory arts activities can change and develop with them.

An example of that, can be demonstrate by what has been done by Casa da Música (Porto). To introduce that, I would like to recall what Jorge Prendas, head of the educational department says "educating is a process of imitation, learning without being taught but rather experiencing it." When in 2001, Porto became a European capital of culture, one of the fundamental aspect was the educational service that was, in fact, the first department developed by the institution. This served as a pretext to renewing some cultural apparatus of the city but also an opportunity for Porto citizens to start understanding theatre, dance, music or visual arts as important elements of their daily lives. The city in those years, had a very low index of cultural consumption mainly in the music field. For that reason, Casa da Música has focused on working to cover various areas of musical activities. The education service since then, have been responsible for creating and producing musical projects meant for schools but also for different areas of the community, with the main goal of opening the institution to all and giving a democratic access to culture. The first and one of the most significant projects carried on by the institution, started in September 2000, was the production of *Opera Wozzeck* in the 'barrio social' of Aldoar (a socially underprivileged area in the city of Porto), in partnership with the Birmingham Opera Company. The project aimed to put in contact art and culture with a section of the population that was excluded, and involving them as much as possible during

the whole production. Also, at the beginning of the process a newspaper (Vozéquio) was created and distributed among participants of the 'barrio'. Furthermore, in February, during the local carnival parade, five costumes made by the community were selected for the Opera and the five designers sent to Birmingham. Participants rehearsed the songs and the choreographies for the opera, while regularly receiving visits from a Birmingham Opera delegate. Ten days before the concert an intensive period of rehearsals took place with one hundred people from Aldoar. On the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of April, the Opera was performed in a non-conventional staged version; singers, community members, orchestra and audience were mixed and were sharing the same space and the same time. The community had the role of extras on stage, but they also sang with the choir in some occasions. The outcome of the project was so satisfying that the project was not only repeated but also further developed. The following year, the community not only performed but, with the help of writers and composers, created their own new opera called *Demolition* based on their experiences and lives; a new piece within and for the community, with strong, social and political messages.

As shown by the three cases, involving the community in art-making activities, is an effective method that can be implemented in a multiplicity of contexts, leaving open numerous possibilities for an institution or a group to experiment with new program ideas. This essay proposed to encourage those types of actions and to investigate the many ways in which performing art activities can enrich and enhance communities. Small achievement in single communities can have a remarkable impact on the entire nation and what is only needed is the willingness of the group to try something new, a passion for the arts, inspiration and a little bit of creativity. The arts and especially performing arts such as dance, music and theatre, can break any ethnic, linguistic, or social class boundaries, and for these reasons are one of the most successful tools to perform major changes and development through community engagement.

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