PRECARIOUSNESS AND THE PERFORMANCES OF WELFARE

Edited by
Jenny Hughes

Precariousness and the Performances of Welfare

Precariousness and the Performances of Welfare brings together an international group of artists, activists and scholars to explore precarity in the contexts of applied and socially engaged theatre. The policy of austerity pursued by governments across the global North following the financial crisis of 2008 has renewed interest in issues of poverty, economic inequality and social justice. Emerging from European contexts of activism and scholarship, 'precarity' has become a shorthand term for the permanently insecure conditions of life under neoliberal capitalism and its associated stripping back of social welfare protections. This collection explores a range of theatre practice, including activist theatres, theatre and health projects, the community work of regional theatres, arts-led social care initiatives, people's theatres and youth arts programmes. Comprising full-length chapters and shorter pieces, the collection offers new perspectives on social theatre projects as creative occasions of occupation that generate a sense of security in a precarious world.

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Jenny Hughes is a Senior Lecturer in Drama at the University of Manchester, UK. She is Points and Practices editor of *RiDE: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* and publishes in the areas of theatre and economic justice; performance and war; activist performance; and aspects of applied theatre, especially theatre with young people living with risk and the histories of socially engaged theatre. Her recent publications include *Critical Perspectives on Applied Theatre* (with Helen Nicholson, 2016) and a special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* edited with Simon Parry, 'Theatre, Performance and Activism' (2015).

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The Artists' Bloc of the Immigrant Workers Centre in Montreal (Canada) are a collective of immigrant and migrant workers, artists and activists that advocate and fight for dignity and rights in the workplace. The collective engages in artistic pursuits, research initiatives, activism and project-based interventions, generating new forms of knowledge from creative and dialogic explorations of an exploitative labour system, and experiences of the Canadian immigration system.

The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home are a family of two adults, Gary Anderson and Lena Šimić, and their four children Neal, Gabriel, Sid and James. They have been running an art activist initiative in their family home in Liverpool, UK, since 2007. They are funded by 10% of all income that comes through the family. It is a long-term experiment in art activism.

INTRODUCTION

Theatre and the social factory

Jenny Hughes

Nestled comfortably on a double bed, feet up, shoes off, I undertake a series of interviews with participants of a theatre and film-making project in Rochdale (UK). I had been invited to carry out an evaluation of the project and, from the insights gathered, create a 'toolkit' for social housing workers interested in using the arts to tackle long-term unemployment amongst tenants. This project took place over a three-month period in 2010 and, to draw on the terms used by project managers, it engaged with people who were experiencing 'worklessness', caused by a range of 'progression barriers' into education, training and employment. The theatre and film activities provided an informal learning space to improve confidence and self-esteem, motivation and soft skills. These activities were followed by a two-week long psycho-social intervention that aimed to help individuals identify and rehearse self-help solutions to their personal 'progression barriers'. On the one hand, this social theatre project can be understood as an example of art at work in what has been called 'the social factory' (Berardi 2009, 213), reflected in the demand for demonstrable gains in the immaterial labour of participants – the cognitive, communicative and social capacities expected of precarious workers in post-industrial economies (Lazarrato 1996). On the other hand, the creative and social encounters between artists and participants during the project provided opportunities to *occupy* the social factory in a way that presents a more equivocal perspective on the relationship between economic precarity, social productivity and creative practice.

My request for interviews led to one participant inviting the group to a tea party at her home. After enjoying a plate of sandwiches, I was transferred to the bedroom, with participants taking turns to come in for interviews carried out against a background noise of general hilarity emanating from the front room of the two-bedroom flat. Themes explored by participants during these conversations, readers may not be surprised to know, did *not* include miraculous narratives of overcoming barriers to education, training and employment. In fact, the life experiences described during the interviews – of care for families and friends, regular bouts of insecure employment, and engagement with off-the-grid economies of work – conflicted with the designation of this group as being without work, employment experience, self-motivation or creative and social skills. Moreover, lack of local jobs and the financial costs of further education and training were seen as the most prohibitive barriers to formal employment. What was also highlighted by our conversations was the importance of the social experiences offered by the project. That is, the opportunity for a group of people, some of whom were extraordinarily isolated, to socialise, build friendships, take part in a novel and engaging programme of cultural activity and, quite simply, have a reason to leave the house twice a week for a three-month period.

Whilst preparing this edition on precarity and social theatre, I have repeatedly returned to the project with 'workless' people in Rochdale. A formerly affluent cotton town, by the late twentieth century Rochdale was characterised by entrenched and high levels of poverty and unemployment. This downturn in economic fortunes is legible in a town centre ghosted by the architecture of historic prosperity and, following the economic crisis of 2008, too poor to

sustain an outlet of McDonalds, the global fast food franchise (Davies 2011). The threats to the life of the town, posed by a global economic context in which economically unproductive communities are perpetually at risk of what Wendy Brown describes as redundancy, abandonment and sacrifice (Brown 2015, 110–111), were reflected in the lives of some of the participants engaging in the project. During the intensive psycho-social programme exploring personal progression barriers, participants were asked to record their short-, mid- and long-term goals, and to keep a daily diary of activities that helped them move towards achieving these. During this exercise one participant whispered quietly, 'what if you can't see a future?' In the weeks following the project, two participants died as a result of drug-related incidents and another, the woman who could not see a future in those final weeks, was hospitalised as a result of long-term mental distress arising, by her own account, from childhood experiences of abuse.

There is nothing new in this story of exclusion, suffering and threat. Distressing, each and every time, yes, but my intake of breath as I tell the story again is familiar. Too many stories akin to this have accrued over more than 20 years of work as a practitioner and researcher with people unable to find a place in a system that measures value by the logic of economic competition and profit. The 'shock doctrine' policy of austerity pursued by governments across the global North following the economic crisis in 2008 – a policy already tried out in the global South (Klein 2008) – has renewed public and academic interest in poverty and economic inequality. Emerging from European contexts of activism and academic scholarship, the term 'precarity' has come to provide a shorthand for understanding the common conditions of labour and life under neoliberal forms of capitalism associated with the embrace of free market ideologies from the late 1970s, and a concomitant stripping back of social protections provided by state welfarism. In these contexts, precarity is not identified with a particular class, context of work or state of impoverishment, but is a general economic condition that unsettles the social relations of labour and life, with negative effects that are unequally distributed according to usual discriminations of class, race, gender and differential economic and political power. Importantly, as Brett Neilsen and Ned Rossiter show, the regulated economy and welfare safety net in European countries, which helped to contain such negative effects, was in fact a historical exception to the rule of capitalist expansion (Neilsen and Rossiter 2008, 54). Whilst the term 'precarity' is European and relatively contemporary in origin then, it reveals a set of conditions for the production of social life, and the production of social theatre, that are as global and historical in their provenance as modern forms of capitalism.

What implications does precarity, and the body of thinking associated with this term, have for understanding the aesthetics and politics of social theatre? This question opens up an opportunity to pay attention to the relationship between precarity and the labour of performance-making and world-making, and the contributions to this special issue have responded to such an invitation in various ways. Reflected in many of the contributions is a feature of discussions of precarity described by Rebecca Schneider and Nicholas Ridout as a 'tension between what might be called "good precarity" and "bad precarity"' (Schneider and Ridout 2012, 8) – between precarity's potential for generating new understandings of the creative and critical possibilities of performance, and its closeness to symbolic and material forms of threat and death. Interestingly, Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt, turning their attention to Italian autonomist philosophy influential in precarity activism in Europe, identify a similar polarity in discussions of the immaterial forms of labour prevalent in post-Fordist economies. For Gill and Pratt, this

> double-face … speaks on the one hand to the extent to which emotions, feelings, relationships are 'put to work' in post-Fordist capitalism, and on the other to the immanent human cooperative capacities and potentialities that may be set free by such labour. (Gill and Pratt 2008, 15)

Immaterial labour, also described as affective, biopolitical and virtuosic labour (with important distinctions that I do not have space to comment on here), refers to the creative work that underpins social forms of productivity predominant in post-industrial economies, distinct from the wage labour described by Marx because it involves 'the worker's personality and subjectivity in the production of value' (Lazzarato 1996, 135). Immaterial labour blurs the boundaries between the performance of work and performance of self, and time and space of work and nonwork, resulting in communities and workplaces characterised by 'precariousness, hyperexploitation, mobility and hierarchy' (Lazzarato 1996, 137).

Social theatre projects often provide spaces for the development of enterprising kinds of affective and immaterial labour from artists and participants, creating intense forms of temporary affect and social relationship that dynamise productivity in the 'social factory'. In one of the source texts for the concept of 'the social factory', Antonio Negri argues that in post-Fordist economies, 'the entire society becomes one enormous factory, or rather, the factory spreads throughout the whole of society' (Negri 1989, 204). Franco Berardi, in a more recent work, comments that work in the social factory demands that we 'place our very souls at its disposal: intelligence, sensibility, creativity and language' (2009, 192). The conditions of life and labour associated with the term precarity, then, frame all social life, including social theatre, as open for economic exploitation. Here, the social domain is under a kind of siege enacted by forces of capital that extends through all forms of subjective and social life. The introduction of financial instruments such as 'social impact bonds' into the infrastructures of newly privatised social care offers a startling example of how this is playing out in the economised welfare regimes of the UK (Dowling and Harvie 2014). Social theatre projects, offering a novel and innovative machinery to enhance social productivity, are at perpetual risk of uncritically participating in this siege. This discussion casts a troubling perspective on the affective and relational features of applied and social theatre practice, often seen as a source of its critical politics and aesthetics.

And so, how to think about the aesthetics and politics of social theatre practice in the social factory? In relation to the double face of affective and immaterial labour – its precaritising effects and immanent potential to free life from the forces of capital – Gill and Pratt argue for 'the urgency of *thinking these together*' (Gill and Pratt 2008, 16, italics in original). The invitation to *think these together* asks that we think of social theatre as releasing a series of affects and effects that work *with and against* the critical and creative intentions of practitioners and socio-economic contexts of their work, and in ways that can only be understood contingently. The provocation to *think these together* also challenges researchers to reconsider the reductive set of binaries sometimes present in reflections on the political potencies of social theatre – between affect and effect, the social and/or aesthetic, art or social work. What seems to me to be a wrong move here, and what critiques of socially engaged art sometimes promote, is an attempt to *withdraw* art from the social factory or to insist on art's autonomy inside the social factory (see e.g. Kunst 2015). Instead, it seems imperative to develop perspectives on and practices of art and theatre as *occupations* of the social factory. The worklessness project in Rochdale, for example, revealed a social world under siege, with long-term economic decline leading to the closure of adult education and community provision that had historically provided the material architecture for social relationship. This siege was also enacted by a set of discourses that attempted to contain the affective environments and social relationships created by the project by framing them as a means to individual economic gain. However, as the participants repeatedly noted, the project's combined art and social intervention affirmed for them the importance of access to socially sentient time, space and work. This affirmation predated and outlasted its own life, and was both in excess of, and a protective counter to, the networks of economic precarity that the project participated in.

Important here is Nicholas Ridout's argument that theatre contains a communist potential not because it exists outside capitalism but because it 'nestles so deeply inside it' (2013, 9). In order to understand the potency of this suggestion, I have found it useful to turn to philosopher Gaston Bachelard's descriptions of the nest as a space that offers a form of protection that is fragile and yet fits the shape of bodily life, and is hidden from view: 'a nest … is a precarious thing, and yet it sets us *daydreaming of security*' ([1964] 1994, 102, italics in original). Applied and social theatre has nestled inside some the most alienating and damaging of capitalist institutions – schools, prisons, hospitals – institutions with architectural forms and routines that mimic the factories of industrial times, shaping subjective and social life to the productive regimes of the social factory by means of demands to work harder, do more, improve, help yourself, move on, perform or else. But perhaps social theatre-makers, making nests in such structures, can also provide access to and protective cover inside a social world under siege, as well as fabricate lines of flight from the social factory. At its most potent, perhaps this nestling also provides artist-inhabitants with opportunities to work in solidarity with other socially sentient workers to transform cosy habitation into quiet and noisy forms of occupation. Here, the labour of performance and world-making becomes a resilient irritant for a capitalist regime that cannot quite regulate those precarious bits of life that haunt the economic realm and are irreducible to units of value exchanged for profit. In such a domain, social theatre projects build their critical potential not from a mobilisation of affect or insistence on autonomy, but from manufacturing occasions of occupation in which the art of theatre becomes the social work of performance and back again.

This special issue engages with a diverse set of socially engaged theatre practices that offer opportunities to consider such occasions of occupation, including activist theatres, theatre and health projects, theatre-based research into experiences of homelessness, the community work of regional theatres, arts-led social care initiatives, theatre in contexts of higher education and corporate training, people's theatres and youth arts initiatives. The critical questions driving these contributions range from enquiries into the politics of theatre-making with communities affected by precarity, to investigations of the precarious aesthetics of performance. There are two kinds of contribution to the issue. The eight research articles are followed by a Documents section that presents nine shorter pieces by artists and researchers, including two pieces that feature audio and audio-visual accompaniments accessible to online subscribers to the journal. The Documents by artists and researchers are shorter pieces of writing, sometimes with visual or audio–visual illustration, describing artistic and theatrical responses to precarity.

Two overlapping themes run through the issue as a whole. First, the exploration of theatre as a means of materialising social relations – often with unexalted communities and in contexts of precarity – that generate alternative constructions of value from creative mappings of people and place. In the article that opens the issue, Dirk Rodricks and Kathleen Gallagher offer a powerful account of a theatre research project with homeless young people in Toronto (Canada) that drew on young people's cultural knowledge, expressed through theatre, to generate new conceptions of wealth, and practices of value exchange and knowledge production. My own contribution offers an analysis of an example of political theatre-making in the city of Bradford (UK) that transformed its site, and the ensemble of performers and audience members, into a *common* – a concept that opens up a terrain for understanding and developing alternative economies of cultural practice. The contributions from Claire Cochrane and Selina Busby both provide an extended temporal perspective on this theme. Tracing the history of a regional theatre's engagements with young people and communities in the UK since the 1980s, Cochrane argues that these engagements, stimulated by neoliberal cultural policy, opened the theatre to its host communities in productive ways, but also exposed the building and its custodians to long-term insecurity. Busby reports on a decade-

long series of theatre exchanges between UK students and young people from Dharavi in Mumbai (India), exploring the problematic colonial legacy woven into some aspects of this exchange but also showing how its longevity supports what she calls a utopian practice of community and theatre.

The Documents that speak to this theme offer insights into an inspiring set of projects that consider the creation, through art and theatre, of new relations between people and place in sites local to the artists and artist-researchers writing each piece. Koby Rogers Hall and Manuel Salamanca describe the art activism of the Artists' Bloc of an immigrant workers' centre in Montreal (Canada) that develops public expressions and awareness of economic injustice and also provides opportunities to develop resilience. In her account of the occupation of Teatro Valle in Rome (Italy), Alice Borchi describes how artists in the city, in response the threatened closure of the theatre due to funding cuts, created a cultural commons. The Institute of Dissent at Home document a manifesto slam performance event in response to the UK government's policy of austerity, a piece of performance activism that began at home and extended to a place of rest and recuperation in a local shopping centre. Describing respective theatre projects that also made critical and compassionate relations between people and space in contexts of austerity – Naomi Alexander and Erin Walcon give an overview of their respective home-based initiatives, Brighton People's Theatre and Doorstop Arts in Torbay (both in the UK). Kirsten Sadeghi-Yekta's contribution offers a complementary perspective from Downtown East Side of Vancouver (Canada), with her description of *Project Limelight* showing how the spectacle of performance can manifest diverse constructions of the wealth inside a community. In the first submission accompanied by supplementary online audio-visual material, David Grant presents a series of documents – a film, images, script and poetry – from a performance project with men in north Belfast (Northern Ireland). The project created a performative mapping of this site to depict with humour and compassion the community's struggle to navigate the aftermath of military conflict and ongoing economic precarity.

The second theme threaded through the collection relates to precarity and the performance of the labouring body. Contributions on this theme explore the demand to make the body work, and performance as a means of preparing the body for efficient work and/or demonstrating the as-yet unproductive body's potential. These contributions also explore performance as a means of destabilising the forces that threaten bodily life. Sarah Saddler's article is the first in this group, and it reflects on the ways labouring subjects found opportunities for nestled critique inside a theatre-based corporate training environment in India that sought to prepare those same subjects for precarious work. Kennedy Chinyowa and Nehemiah Chivandikwa, writing about a performance made with a group of disabled and non-disabled students at the University of Zimbabwe, explore theatre as a positive means of destabilising the precaritisation of the disabled body in Zimbabwean contexts. In a contribution on this theme coming from the UK, Sarah Bartley considers two theatre projects with unemployed people, showing how each problematised the categorisation of people as 'unfit for work' and also reflecting on social theatre practice as an expression and contestation of the necropolitics of austerity. Providing an account of the precarious aesthetics of dance performance in post-economic Greece, Natalie Zervou argues that economic precarity gave rise to approaches to devising and staging performance that were responsive to the public mood of agitation for socio-political change in that context. Two shorter contributions also speak to the theme of the labouring body. In the first, Elanor Stannage considers the repeated motifs of balancing, wobbling and teetering in the reflections of participants on an arts and mental health project. And, finally, in the second submission accompanied by online content, Robert Vesty and Antonio de La Fe, two lovers, provide a moving record of an unrehearsed performance, with Vesty's

complementary reflection exploring the potential of 'unrehearsed-ness' as a response to the economically precarious conditions of work experienced by the performers.

Taken together, the contributions to the issue highlight the importance of engagement with others in the process of making and reflecting on social theatre, evident in the prevalence of critically engaged ethnography as a methodological approach, and of work arising from practice-based research or from close collaborations between researchers and theatre practitioners. The researchers writing here have sought out opportunities to generate knowledge from participating in the social factory, working collaboratively with other researchers and artists. This impetus, common to applied and social theatre research, raises questions about the politics of collaboration of course, but is also a welcome response to those dimensions of precarity that threaten to diminish the social realm. The drive to work with each other, to think and do together, creates occasions for the nurture, protection and flourishing of a social world under siege.

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Performing to understand: cultural wealth, precarity, and shelter-dwelling youth

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ABSTRACT

Collaborating with *Project: Humanity*, an acclaimed socially engaged theatre company, we mobilized, over 16 weeks, an applied theatre methodology of drama workshops and traditional qualitative research methods to explore issues of spatialized inequality and localized poverty with a youth shelter community in Toronto, Canada. Observations gleaned through drama activities provided graphic evidence of the multiple and overlapping socio-economic pressures and limited infrastructural and personal support experienced in their young lives. In this article, we use critical race theory to trouble majoritarian narratives of access, capacity, and success. In particular, Yosso's [2005. "Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth." *Race, Ethnicity, and Education* 8 (1): 69–91] typology of 'community cultural wealth' has allowed us to reconsider the idea of 'capital' as it is exploited by youth in creative engagement with the material precarity of their daily existence.

Prologue

Something has stayed with me (Kathleen) from early research that remains a kind of puzzle. In the research project that formed the basis of my 2007 book *The Theatre of Urban: Youth and Schooling in Dangerous Times,* I carried out an ethnography of two high schools in Toronto and two in New York City over three years (2002–2005), with youth in both cities who were, by all definitions, living precarious lives. The struggles of some American students in Queens Jamaica and in Midtown Manhattan where I was working were hard to fathom and on the heels of 9/11, the meteoric intensification of surveillance and 'homeland' security in their lives and in their schools was conspicuous. Yet despite that unprecedented and disturbing context, with such a palpable sense of uncertainty and fear in the air, I found myself in an alternative school in midtown Manhattan known officially as a 'last resort school' both by the New York Board of Education and by the young people I met there. One of the Toronto schools I was working in was similarly running a programme for students who had achieved minimum high-school credits and/or had been suspended from other mainstream schools. They, too, considered their programme a 'last resort' of sorts.

In these contexts, I met some very committed teachers trying to make success possible for highly precarious populations of students. They ran alternative school hours for students who were working; they had childcare inside the school itself for young students who themselves had dependents. They were trying very hard to make school work for young people for whom the barriers to success were enormous. And in my interviews with many of those young people, I heard about their deep appreciation for the institutions and the teachers trying to serve them. One young father, a 17-year-old student in New York who I remember vividly, told me that he hoped his own child could one day go to this school when he grew up. I was struck by this because it was a school known for the marginalized population it served. It was the place to go when you hit the bottom. But this young man's sense of normalized precarity in his own life meant that in this school he had finally been able to access the support he needed to be successful; importantly, he had finally met a community who assumed he could succeed. Though he appeared to have 'hit the bottom', this young man was, for the very first time in his life, feeling supported and full of possibility. And that is what he wished for his own child, all the evidence needed to support Isabell Lorey's proposition that precaritization is not the exception but the rule (2015, 1). Or, what an arts-based American researcher describes as the 'age of collapsing banks and soaring homelessness and poverty for the children of America' (Finley 2009, 62). Must young people hit the very bottom, in the new normal that is social and economic insecurity, before they can imagine possibilities? We find ourselves now asking, what is going on – pedagogically, aesthetically, and relationally– when deep hope springs from inside profound and normalized disadvantage?

A brief search of the literature confirms that scholars across many fields are using arts-based or drama methods in their work with homeless youth populations, especially noting the power of theatre for dissemination of research findings more broadly to non-academic audiences and to research populations themselves (see Saldaña 2003; Ottaway, King, and Erickson 2009; Liehr et al. 2013). Many of these accounts also evidence the prevalent notion of 'giving voice' to such marginalized groups, with some notable exceptions challenging that colonial discourse (McCreary 2001; Wake 2003; Hughes 2013; Gallagher 2016). Our interest in mobilizing critical race theory (CRT) in our own exploration has provided us with an important counterpoint perspective to the familiar impulse in this kind of work to 'give voice' to a population presumed to be without the power or the means to speak their own truths. Of course, 'giving voice' is a decidedly contested idea, especially in feminist and critical scholarship, but it remains, nonetheless, a pervasive stance in the empirical work that transpires. We have used our theoretical frame and applied theatre methodology as a way to intentionally shift such normative perspectives. This means that we are using a different frame to work alongside a marginalized group, one that begins from the assumption of their cultural wealth. We assume our participants have a voice, and a very expert one indeed. We know that our work with them, and our privilege relative to them, is equally capable of inviting their voices in to the conversation or shutting them down. And so, we use drama, and work in role, to engage with the expertise of our participants, an epistemological shift that asks us to work in different ways. Our turn to drama also reveals our sense of its potential to retrieve a battered yet still powerful imagination in this (not-so) new millennial era of extreme insecurity.