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Laughing Together : Community Based Theatre's Vital sense of Humour

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11 | **Laughing Together: Community-based Theatre's Vital Sense of Humour**

Mary Moynihan and Paul Kennedy

Smashing Times is a professional theatre company, which specializes in developing theatre at a local level. The company presents both professional and community-based theatre productions, and provides expertise and training to a wide range of people and organizations throughout Ireland, aiming to make theatre accessible to all.

Our work with a new group always begins with general drama workshops and as the group develops, so too does the specialized nature of the workshops. For a new group, the workshops are about developing new skills in drama and theatre, making new friends, developing a love and knowledge of theatre, accessing creativity, and recognizing that theatre belongs to everyone, with the emphasis all the time on quality and innovation. Above all else they are about having fun through a creative process. It is the 'fun' or 'comedy' element of the workshop, which helps participants to relax and let go of any inhibitions they may have. As people let go, the creative work grows. When conducting a drama workshop, we would draw on a range of theatre techniques – the two main theatre practitioners we work from would be Augusto Boal and Constantin Stanislavski.

Boal is a Brazilian theatre director, writer and theorist who aspired to a new type of theatre – one which is entertaining and fun but also useful and instructive; his methods transform theatre

into a democratic arena where the spectator becomes the 'spectator', contributing ideas, taking over roles, using theatre to confront all forms of oppression, problems such as violence, sexual harassment, poor pay, and racism. Boal has developed a range of theatre techniques under the collective heading, *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Many of the Boal exercises we use in a drama workshop are based on children's games and are ideal for putting people at their ease – games like Cat and Mouse or Brazilian Indians, in which everybody gets the chance to be the big chief as they move through the space making rhythmical movements and sounds. Just like we did when we were children. Another great game is the Circle of Knots where the entire group literally tie themselves up into one big knot, physically interacting through howls of laughter.

We explain to the group that they may feel a bit silly at the beginning but we encourage everyone to be open to this and it is amazing how their inhibitions disappear as the laughter takes over. Exercises help people to relax and to let go of stress, and the games are ideal for breaking down barriers and accessing creativity and imagination. The laughter from the games and exercises encourages a sense of exploration and helps to bond the group. There is plenty of laughter (and the occasional tear) as the participants 'play' the games and become like children again.

Women mainly attend the workshops although men are welcome and growing in numbers. But within the community it has mainly been women who have come together to share experiences, to create and to enjoy themselves. Some women shine from the start and others open up gradually like flowers blossoming. We remember one woman who came to her first workshop with her head bent, incredibly shy and lacking in confidence. By the end of the year she was on stage performing in front of huge audiences. For her first public performance she was delighted to have her two young daughters and elderly mother sitting in the front row of the auditorium, three generations of one family all involved in the magic of theatre.

Following on from the drama workshops, Smashing Times will then facilitate a local organization, if the group wishes, to develop their own theatre performances. This happens through a process of research, workshops and devising, to create original plays that

come from within the heart of a particular community; because everyone plays a part in the creative process they become very passionate about what they do. Performances to date have concerned a range of themes: friendship, love, unemployment, changing communities in the context of urban development, drug and alcohol addiction, violence against women, racism and issues of cross-community conflict, diversity and reconciliation. The themes range from the light-hearted to the very serious, but in many cases, the performances are full of humour and laughter.

Eighty-five percent of our community arts productions tend to be comedy-based. Many of the actors are performing for the first time and they can sometimes prefer comedy to serious work because the laughter from the audience gives them confidence. The audiences attending the shows would know many of the actors onstage, as they are all from the same area and would be friends, relatives or neighbours. They come to support the actors and there is a great buzz and excitement in anticipation of the show. The audience come in ready to be entertained, and they laugh as they recognize their neighbour on stage now dressed as a tramp or a lover or a policeman; they laugh together in anticipation of a show that has been created within their own community and they laugh as they recognize their own stories and real-life situations now dramatized onstage. There is a strong bond between the performers and the audience as they cheer on their neighbours, friends and relatives. This bond is a unique feature of community-based performances and you can almost see the invisible threads connecting the audience to the performers, where everyone is raised to one level and are working together.

A good example of this process can be taken from our involvement with Ringsend, where Smashing Times presented *Over the Bridge* in association with the local Watersedge Community Drama Group. Smashing Times director and writer Paul Kennedy wrote and directed *Over the Bridge*, which was first presented in the City Arts Centre, Dublin, in November 2000, as part of the Dublin Millennium celebrations, following a year of research, interviews, devising and rehearsals with people from the local community. Accompanying the performance was a photographic exhibition and a video documentary on show in the theatre foyer – all linked

to the theme of Ringsend. Based on the original success of the project, Smashing Times was then invited by the Dublin Docklands Development Authority to present *Over the Bridge* as part of the Docklands Festival in June 2001.

As part of the project, local people were interviewed and asked to share stories about growing up in Ringsend. A wide range of people agreed to share their stories with us, ranging from dockers to the local barber to the people who lived in the flats on Thorncastle Street. One woman told a story from her childhood. She remembered sneaking into the morgue of St. Patrick's hospital with some other children and being fascinated by the dead bodies lying on the slabs. One day she and a few other children were kneeling down saying a prayer for the soul of the corpse, when gas was released from the dead body. The children were terrified at the noise and ran out of the morgue and on to the street and over the bridge back to Ringsend. This story was included in the play, *Over The Bridge*, in dramatic form.

Stella Gaffney from Ringsend was the woman who told this story, and on the opening night of the play in the City Arts Centre she arrived with family and friends and sat in a seat in the front row. You could hear her laughter at the back of the theatre when this scene was acted out on stage. What was she laughing at? What was the audience laughing at? Her laughter was intimately connected to her childhood memories – and these memories were all the more poignant because her story was being acted out in public. She was now sharing her story with the audience. And yet in some real way, she *is* the author, the originator of the story. Stella spoke to us afterwards and found the experience immensely rewarding and entertaining. What was the audience laughing at? Community arts plays are for local audiences. This does not diminish their impact. It creates circumstances where the audience and actors can share in a common understanding of oral and local history. The audience responded with laughter to Stella's story because it rang true to them, because they recognized the place names mentioned in the story, and also because they knew that all the stories in that particular play had been researched and collected from local people. This shared laughter is in some ways reminiscent of the way families or extended families share stories. Things can be fun-

ny because they belong to our collective memory as a group. We laugh to reinforce our communal identity.

Many of the communities that Smashing Times work with have experienced poverty and varying levels of disadvantage, yet they still share a strong sense of community and a strong sense of culture. Many of the performances become a celebration by a group, using the creative process to celebrate their own stories and unique cultural experiences, in addition to celebrating the sense of achievement that comes from creating and presenting one's own show. In community theatre practice, both the participants and audience come to the theatre to celebrate, which is why laughter and humour come to play an important role.

This combination of comedy and celebration was evident in *Over the Bridge*. Paul recalls that when he was interviewing the elderly people of Ringsend, nearly all the stories they told him had a comic element. Even hardship stories about growing up had a funny twist, and the director believes this is because people in poorer areas used humour in their everyday lives to alleviate hardship. Comedy and humour had served a real and practical function in their lives, helping them to survive times of austerity. As an audience this makes them particularly receptive to comic moments onstage. Some audiences will even laugh at tragic moments, *not* out of disrespect, but out of the habit of laughter. Tragic moments in their own lives are interspersed with laughter and an instinctive reaction to tragedy in the theatre can also produce laughter.

Community theatre audiences laugh more easily and openly and in some ways more sincerely than audiences in the 'mainstream' theatre, because they do not enter a theatre space with received notions about the 'sanctity of art'. They are to a certain extent a very relaxed, yet spontaneous audience, by which we mean they bring a fresh eye and a fresh ear, because in most cases they would not be conditioned to react like audiences at the larger theatres such as the Gate or the Abbey. They also cry and share an empathy that reaches through everyone when tragic moments are presented, particularly when the issues are very real and close to home: a child dying from a drugs overdose, the realities of life in war-torn Belfast, or the senseless and violent rape of a woman. But the comedy always comes back, because in a way it has to. One

example of this is when we staged *Where have all the spoons gone?*, also in Ringsend in 1999.

Where have all the spoons gone? was written by a local woman, Tara Grey, from a devising process conducted by Paul Kennedy. It dealt with the childhood and adolescent experiences of a drug addict. A lot of the content of the play contained quite harrowing scenes – drug overdoses, distraught parents, communities in crisis, failed attempts at rehabilitation culminating in the death of the main character at the end of the play. Yet when the play was first performed in Ringsend (as part of the National Drug Awareness Week), there was a strangely electric buzz in the audience. Some people in the audience seemed to laugh at inappropriate moments, when great suffering was being portrayed by the actors. What were they laughing at? Was it derisive laughter? The play received a standing ovation. And again at the next night's performance ... more laughter. Why? Well, because it seemed that the audience laughed at moments of *recognition*. The laughter was saying, 'I know exactly where you're coming from', or, 'I've been there, and it's funny now to see that experience represented on the stage by people from my community'. The laughter is also, importantly, the community's way of saying to the actors, 'We're here, we're listening, we think you're great to get up there on the stage and perform for us'. It is a part of the community, it is a part of survival, and it brings people closer together and is, of course, an expression of enjoyment.

Devised performances enable groups to explore issues relevant to their lives, whether they are personal, social or political. Another play titled *The Winter of My Soul* was developed from a programme of workshops run by Smashing Times with the North West Inner City Women's Network based in the Smithfield/Markets area of Dublin. *The Winter of My Soul* was scripted by Ann O'Rourke, a local woman, from a devising process conducted by drama facilitator and director Mary Moynihan, and is based on an actual event from Ann's life. When in her twenties and with a small child, Ann had an operation to remove a brain tumour. A month after the operation she was at home and received a letter to attend the hospital immediately for further tests. Something had gone wrong.

The play opens with the central character, called Ann, reading the letter and anxiously making arrangements to go back to hospital. Ann sets off to the Richmond, a hospital that specialized in head injuries and was, at that time, based in the inner-city area of Dublin. The hospital was situated next to a hostel called the Morning Star Hostel for homeless men. Ann is admitted to a ward with three other very ill people; we witness her fear and confusion at what is happening, and the different patients and nurses she meets as she waits for a doctor to come and counsel her. As she waits, her anxieties increase. When a doctor finally arrives in the ward, Ann thinks she has lost her reason, as the doctor (or the person she thinks is the doctor) proceeds to do a comedy routine of song and dance for each of the patients, including those who are comatose. Through a series of almost surreal scenes, Ann witnesses in growing disbelief the doctor singing and dancing for each of his patients, as he encourages them all to keep up their spirits. Ann believes that the brain tumour has caused her to go mad, and it is only when she realizes that the 'doctor' is an impostor, a homeless man who is a regular intruder into the hospital from the Morning Star Hostel next door, that she sees the funny side of things and breaks into laughter. Ann eventually overcomes her illness and there is a suggestion that her willingness to laugh at life in all its absurdities has helped her to survive an emotional and frightening experience.

As a comedy, *The Winter of My Soul* brought forth howls of laughter from the audience. Again there was that strong sense of support from the audience as they laughed at the comedy in the play, and as a way of encouraging their family and friends on stage. Local women performed the play and many of them brought an inventiveness and originality to the work, which was exciting to watch. The script started from an original story, further developed through a series of improvisations in which each of the women evolved her own character. Because each actor had created the character she was playing, there was a heightened sense of truth, and it was the women themselves who created the comedy on stage as they infused their own personalities and senses of humour into the performance.

The arts can help us to define a sense of ourselves within society and help us to explore and express our cultural identities. Both professional and community theatre practices can be used to help a community define itself, but, of equal importance, to help a community re-invent itself. I am referring to the notion of change, using theatre to encourage change for a better and more inclusive society. Increasingly, *Smashing Times* is using theatre to explore social and political issues, using theatre to support cultures and giving those voices a form through which they can be heard. A recent production, *A Chain of Hands*, is a performance piece that raises awareness of racism and celebrates cultural diversity. Mary Moynihan scripted and directed the play following a workshop and devising process run in association with the North West Inner City Women's Network, Prussia Street Women's Group, and the Vincentian Refugee Centre, all based in Dublin. It was presented in March 2002 at various community venues to celebrate Anti-Racism Day and has since gone on tour. The show was performed by participants from black and minority ethnic communities, working alongside professional actors and participants from community-based drama organizations. As part of the workshop and devising process, participants from many different backgrounds came together to explore issues of racism through the medium of drama.

In the final script the stories and experiences of refugees and asylum seekers coming to Ireland were brought to life onstage to raise awareness of racism. A number of scenes contained depictions of the harrowing experiences endured by some refugees, yet comedy also played an important role in the production, allowing for a more subtle absorption of the serious message contained within the play.

In Ireland today there are a lot of exaggerated and alarmist comments being made about the number of asylum seekers coming to Ireland in recent years. There are also many rumours in circulation about the types of benefits to which asylum seekers are entitled. *A Chain of Hands* uses comedy to show how many of these rumours have been blown completely out of proportion, particularly by the media, and how the rumours are contributing to negative stereotyping. Siobhán, a central character in the play, is

fearful of the many new communities being 'dumped', as she sees it, into her area, which is already under pressure from problems such as drugs, high unemployment, and a lack of access to education and other facilities. She meets up with a journalist, a crazy, over-the-top character who bounds on stage at every opportunity to report in a frenzied manner on how, 'the floodgates are opening as a new army of poor march through the country'. Egged on by the journalist, Sheila tells the audience that, 'there's a black family up our road keeping live snakes in their bath...to drink the blood, and if those snakes escape they'll poison us all'. Sheila and the journalist compete with each other as to who has the wildest story, which the journalist then proceeds to broadcast as 'news', until he is finally led off foaming at the mouth and babbling about 'alien invaders' and 'spaceships from Mars'. Sheila believes the misinformation and wonders whether the recent floods experienced by the country are due to the number of asylum seekers. She exclaims, 'Oh God, maybe the country's sinking under their weight!'

The comedy in *A Chain of Hands* is important for holding the audience's attention and for putting across a serious message in a way that is engaging and non-threatening. Theatre is a medium that is accessible to everybody and provides a creative and entertaining format for stimulating public awareness of issues such as racism. The issues become more real and engaging because they are presented in human terms through characters and storylines. Comedy allows the script to promote cultural diversity as a value in our society without being too didactic or preachy, and the audience's response to the play is hopefully stronger as they are more open to what the play is saying.

A Chain of Hands confronted people on the subject of their perceptions of asylum seekers and refugees, and told some of the personal and tragic stories behind the statistics. The play presented the personal experiences of refugees and also the experiences and fears of Irish people engaging with new communities in Ireland. Despite the sometimes tragic content of the play, there was laughter in the audience. In the play *Katya*, a refugee from Kosovo has asked to join the local woman's group. She is refused by Siobhan who explains that, 'it took us a long time to get this

group together, we really don't want their kind here'. She then leans over and politely pats the refugee's hand saying in her friendliest voice, 'no offence missus', which, at every performance, produced laughter from the audience. Is this the laughter of recognition, particularly when people were recognizing their own prejudices? Possibly, the laughter is an admittance of guilt: 'Yes, I am like that sometimes'. The recognition here is really important, but it is the laughter that gives it expression – not glib laughter, but genuine laughter, which suggests the possibility of change. While presenting stories of pain and tragedy, the play used comedy as a tool to bring about change, challenging people to change their habitual way of perceiving the world. In this sense, comedy is important for tackling core issues within any community, particularly when using a comedy that is rooted in the community's identity, but also looking ahead to ask in what ways the community needs to change.

Because comedy plays such an important role in community theatre, it is important to ask, does comedy allow a community to *avoid* facing up to certain issues? The answer is 'sometimes' – because comedy can also be a way to mask over and refuse to deal with painful areas. While being funny is definitely important in its own right, comedy and community theatre should not be merely a palliative; it ultimately has to have some other function than to be funny. This can be developed over a period of time, which again emphasizes the importance of long-term access to the arts at a local level.

The work of Smashing Times, particularly the collaborative approach, encourages people to become the creators of their own work, to develop their own talents and to use the power of drama for their own benefit. Community theatre is by its nature socially conscious and while a professional artist and group may not begin with a political agenda, it is important not to shy away from such issues as they arise – and central to this can be the use of different styles and forms of comedy. We also believe that the use of different forms of comedy should be explored further within community theatre, for example developing within a community context the skills for clowning, *commedia dell'arte* or mime, forms which are often underutilized within community theatre practice.

The activities and benefits of the theatre work practised by Smashing Times are wide and varied, but it is interesting that at all levels, whether in a drama workshop to develop specific skills, in a devising workshop for script development or during performance, alongside the passion and dedication there is always the element of fun and enjoyment. There are those who may believe that only the rare few are true artists. In Smashing Times we believe that everyone has creative potential. There is a huge amount of creativity out there and Smashing Times will continue to act as the facilitators, taking part in a whole new growth in theatre that is both exciting and challenging.

In Smashing Times we use theatre to entertain, to foster creativity, to stimulate awareness and to bring about action and change in a creative way. Humour is one of many elements used within our work to entertain and to bring people together. Humour is also used as a political tool to encourage change in a creative way where, together, we as practitioners and participants are sharing laughter (and tears) to define our experiences as they are and also as we would like them to be.