Community plays in Dorchester: how to find a common ground for theatre?

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1. Communities are very often defined through their relation to time: a common heritage, a common history, a common past, or the will to share a common and better future is what shapes, defines and vitalises a common ground where people want to meet and build their identity. But that common ground is first and foremost spatial, or at least it was so prior to online experimentations in the context of the covid pandemic, and we may assume that all theatre professionals will seek to return to real interactions in real spaces shared for the time of the performance as soon as possible. Indeed, so as to share time together people also need to meet at some point, regroup in one space, and possibly exclude those who do not fit in that space. Thus, Michel Foucault defined the 20th century as the era of space, in a conference entitled "Des espaces autres" in 1967: "L'époque actuelle serait peut-être plutôt l'époque de l'espace. Nous sommes à l'époque du simultané, nous sommes à l'époque de la juxtaposition, à l'époque du proche et du lointain, du côte à côte, du dispersé".[1] Foucault also defines what he calls "heterotopias" as utopias which are realised in particular places or spaces, in his own words: "des sortes de lieux qui sont hors de tous les lieux",[2] and he names as one of those heterotopias the stage of a theatre, where a series of different places, spaces which nothing unites, will be recreated and evoked one after the other on the rectangle of the stage.

2. I wish here to explore one of those heterotopias, which aim specifically at creating a sense of community, as its very name claims. Community plays were first experimented on and then developed as a new form in the South of England in the 1970s. Ann Jellicoe, who was then artistic director of the Royal Court in London, decided to settle back in the country and was asked to devise a play for her children's school in Lyme Regis, Dorset. The experience was so exhilarating that she went on exploring the concept of writing a play especially for a particular community. In 1978 she set up the Colway Theatre Trust which, through her impulse and energy, developed the genre of the community play. It is specifically in the city of Dorchester that that genre was experimented on according to the concept first imagined by Jellicoe. There, members of the community set up a

1 M. Foucault, "Des espaces autres", 12.
2 *Ibid.,* 15.

committee (the Dorchester Community Plays Association) and, every few years, commission a professional playwright who is paid to write an original play, helped by a community research team. The play is set in a period of the history of the town chosen by the committee, and in or around the space where it will be performed, by members of the community themselves. I will here concentrate on three plays written for the community of Dorchester over a period of thirty-five years: *Entertaining Strangers* written by David Edgar in 1985, *A Time to Keep* written by David Edgar and Stephanie Dale in 2007 and *Spinning the Moon* written by Stephanie Dale in 2020. Due to the pandemic, the latter has unfortunately not been produced yet, but is set to open in April 2022.[3]

3. Out of the seven community plays which have been written for Dorchester so far, only two playtexts were published, namely *ES* and *TK*, and we may infer that this is due to the fame of the playwright David Edgar. The others remain unpublished but were made available to me by their authors. Apart from those texts, published analyses of this genre remain scant. Ann Jellicoe wrote a book about the experience, entitled *Community Plays: How to Put Them On*. It reads both as a journal recounting her various productions, in Dorchester and other cities in Dorset, and also as a handbook guiding future stage directors who are tempted to try their hand at a community play. She also wrote a preface to the published text of *ES*. Another handbook, aimed at artists, was written by Sarah Burton and published in 2011, in which she also describes precisely the material and practical aspects of the production of a community play. Academic research on this genre is almost nonexistent, with the exception of the work of researcher Sarah Weston. I hope the present article will enter the conversation and help understand how the genre of the community play is an effective political and social tool, as it helps build a sense of belonging by having participants and spectators participate together and on common grounds to a communal experience.

4. I wish to show how community plays offer new ways of sharing a common space which will define the reasons why a group of people will feel they belong together through a long process of creation, and also, in a different way, during the performances at the end of that process, with the spectators who have come not only to witness the community play, but also to share that feeling of belonging to the same community. I will first explore how community plays, which are defined by the place they share and uphold, not only celebrate that place but also spread, reinvent and reorganise it throughout the process of creation. I will then turn to the specific moment of the performance, examining how the space of the stage is symbolically organised so as to involve the

3 The titles to the three plays will be presented in the article as follows: *ES* for *Entertaining Strangers*, *TK* for *A Time to Keep* and *SM* for *Spinning the Moon*.

spectators and embrace them into the community. The play thus turns into the celebration of a common space and a common history which define a common identity. Finally, I will probe the limits and the efficacy of that experience by looking at its political message and discussing whether defining a common place is not commonplace in itself, and whether it is possible to renew the experiment every few years when the model of the play is defined so precisely. Throughout, I will also inquire into the risk of communitarianism, whether because the community which is celebrated is too local to adequately mirror the realities of a multi-cultural society, or because space is redefined in order to reject and expel the alien: how can community plays open themselves to the world outside if they define themselves through their localism?

Finding commonality in the process of creation

5. First I will examine the process of creation of the community play, and consider how space is reorganised for and by the community. Space and community are indeed interdependent, as the definition of the latter term suggests[4] and as Jean-Luc Nancy intimates in *La Communauté désoeuvrée*: "C'est d'abord la question de la communauté qui doit être remise en jeu, car c'est d'elle que dépend la nécessaire redistribution de l'espace".[5] The Dorchester Community Plays Association offers its own definition of the community play on its website:

> Locally performed plays have a long tradition but the community play as we understand it today took off in West Dorset and South Somerset in the late 1970s largely thanks to the enthusiasm and expertise of our President Ann Jellicoe […]. The essence of the modern community play is that it tells a story taken from the community's past. Typically, the historical setting will be factual while the actual story may be fictitious but nevertheless makes use of authentic material.[6]

6. This definition highlights the importance of space, and place, as those plays are not only about the "setting" of Dorchester, but they are also performed solely in the city of Dorchester, because they will be of prime interest to the community they represent and are part of. In the preface to *ES*, Ann Jellicoe also summarises the community play as "a strong emotional story with local appeal" (*ES* 4). So how local is the process of creation? If the committee is composed of inhabitants of Dorchester, a professional playwright is asked to write the play. In the best of cases that playwright

4 For the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a community is "[a] body of people who live in the same place, usually sharing a common cultural or ethnic identity. Hence: a place where a particular body of people lives." The modulation underlines the interchangeability between people and space.

5 J-L. Nancy, *La Communauté désoeuvrée*, 27-28.

6 https://www.dorchestercommunityplay.org.uk/what-is-a-community-play (Accessed 18 Dec 2020).

should have strong links with the region. That was the case for instance of Howard Barker, who was asked to write a play for the city of Bridport in 1981 and "engaged his talent with total commitment and respect for those amongst whom he was working" (*ES* 4). The adverb "amongst" underlines the idea of inclusiveness and tightness. Similarly, Ann Jellicoe evokes the importance of welcoming the playwright in the community throughout the process of creation: "If we were to commission writers from outside the area, however high their reputation, they must be prepared to come physically down to the town, to be part of it, associate themselves with it, learn from it" (*ES* 4). The phrasal verbs suggest a circulation of knowledge and energy within the community which would be beneficial to all. They also imply the disappearance of a hierarchy which would give precedence to the professional over the amateur, as well as, implicitly, to London, the capital, over the rest of the country.

7. The first Dorchester community play written by an outsider was *ES*: David Edgar, who was from Birmingham, multiplied meetings with the inhabitants of Dorchester and worked in close contact with the research team, whose task it was to gather information about Dorchester's population in the 19th century. The information was then re-injected into the play. The result is a text in which more than 150 characters are the fictional representation on stage of real people, with their real names, family situation and occupation in life. David Edgar himself recalls, in the introduction to *ES*: "almost every character actually existed, and their names, ages, addresses and relations were not easily invented, but patiently culled from microfilm, ledger and in several cases gravestones" (*ES* 7). The material of the play is literally deeply-rooted in the ground of the city, and brings back to life the ancestors of the participants to the community play. Thus verging on the historical documentary, the play nevertheless is highly theatrical, evincing an energy and strength which were noticed by London critics and artists, so much so that the Royal National Theatre created it at the Cottesloe Theatre under the direction of Peter Hall, with the national stars Judi Dench and Tim Pigott-Smith and a budget which was of course much more substantial.

8. On the whole, critics either only talked of the London production without mentioning the Dorchester one or, when they had seen both, compared the two and noticed the strengths and weaknesses of each. Thus Michael Billington sums up: "What you lose, inevitably, is the moving sense of a community coming to terms with its own past; what you gain is a greater sense of dramatic focus and the high definition skill of the professional actor. In Dorchester I was moved to tears; at the Cottesloe I looked on with admiration".[7] These clear-cut descriptions underline how

7 M. Billington, "In The Madding Crowd", *The Guardian*, 17 October 1987. The title is of course a wink at Thomas

community plays, when they are performed by the community for the community, are particularly strong emotionally and manage to involve the audience, including the spectators from out of town. Comparatively, the admiration the critic feels for the professional actors seems cold and distant.

9. Another review of the Cottesloe production, written for *The Times* by Benedict Nightingale, is also quite representative of a different reaction, evincing the contempt of the London critic towards the provinces:

> In prospect, visiting the National Theatre to see "Entertaining Strangers" seemed rather like going to the Ritz for bran and apple juice. According to pre-opening publicity, it was a "community play," a history of 19th-century Dorchester painstakingly researched by the townspeople themselves and originally presented in a local church. Everything suggested the sort of piece critics receive respectfully and their readers are canny enough to avoid. It sounded worthy, earnest and paralyzingly dull; the equivalent of a working breakfast in a rural vicarage.[8]

10. This quotation reveals how some places are intrinsically associated with expectations of relative quality, implying that a National Theatre stage is too good a space for amateur and provincial work. Furthermore, the respect earned through hard work (the counterpart of the cold admiration felt by Billington at the National Theatre) is also scorned because it supposedly lacks the sparkle of inbred London-based genius. Underneath those words, it is also possible to make out social class prejudice, the author taking for granted that community plays are for poorer people who cannot afford the Ritz, that is high-class entertainment. This is of course true if we compare budgets. With state and regional subsidies dropping drastically since the 1970s, the Dorchester Community Plays Association has had to rely more and more on local sponsorship and the resourcefulness of participants who organise fairs, raffles and other fund-raising events. In her handbook, Ann Jellicoe dutifully details the budget of *ES*: the play cost £25,654, of which the city of Dorchester, with its 15,000 inhabitants, managed to raise £4,238. The tickets for that play ranged from 50p to £5. The rest of the income came from subsidies – approximately 1/3 – and from sponsorship – approximately 2/3.[9] More recently, the last community play to be performed in Dorchester was *Drummer Hodge* in 2014. It cost in total £60,978. The highest source of revenue was from donations with more than £16,000 compared to only £2000 from local authority funding. The standard ticket price was £12.[10] In comparison, the National Theatre receives an annual grant

Hardy, and many of the community plays refer to the local author directly or indirectly.

8 B. Nightingale, "Harvesting Drama in Hardy Country", *The Times*, 17 January 1988.

9 A. Jellicoe, *Community Plays*, 172-174.

10 The budget is detailed in a document entitled "Dorchester Community Plays Association Report on Dorchester's Sixth Community Play *Drummer Hodge*" to be found in Dorchester's archives, at Dorset History Center.

from Arts Council England of £16.7 million each year and ticket prices are on average four times more expensive.[11]

11. Nevertheless, though the budget is certainly different from that of a London production, the fact of privileging unpaid participants, with only a handful of professionals being paid, entails consequences which are at least as ideological as they are financial: all volunteers share in the cost as well as the benefits of the creation, and those benefits are for the most part not financial, as we will try to show. Interestingly, the title of the review quoted above – "Harvesting Drama in Hardy Country" – also suggests that, for once, London is gathering the fruits of countryside talent, and implies that, as a consequence, the cultural appropriation will deprive Dorchester of its achievement. On the contrary, the rhetoric developed by the creators of community plays relies on lexical fields of communal benefit: both Ann Jellicoe and Jon Oram, who succeeded Jellicoe at the head of the Colway Theatre Trust and who wrote an afterword to *TK*, speak of "creating together", being "part of", in "daily, direct, unselfconscious contact".[12] They also consistently insist on the local origin of the work. In Oram's words: "there should be a local steering committee driving the project, and helping to define and implement its social agenda" (*TK* 129).

12. What is more, these notions of inclusion and of sharing are also developed in the plays themselves. All three plays include plays-within-the play which are revivals of traditional pageants and processions, reproducing famous battles, resurrecting historical figures and glorifying the patriotism of the English inhabitants of Dorchester. Those processions enact within the play the re-appropriation of space, as the well-known surroundings turn into far-away battlefields, as in the following announcement at the beginning of *ES*:

> If there be any citizens of Dorchester who are not of the most patriotic cast of mind particularly at this hour of national peril we are yet to hear of them. […] That most famous troupe, the Macarte Leviathan Equestrian Extravaganza […] [w]ill represent in Salisbury Fields at four o'clock precisely […] [t]he heroic actions of our Turkish allies at the battle of the Danube basin and Silistra […] [f]ollowing a Grand Procession through town. (*ES* 39)

13. This scene takes place in August 1854, and the procession reenacts a battle which took place only two months before. This, at least for the actors turned spectators of the play-within-the-play, is therefore more akin to the living newspaper form than to a history play. On the other hand, the

11 These figures appear on the site of the National Theatre: https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/about-the-national-theatre/key-facts-and-figures (Accessed 30 August 2021).

12 These expressions are repeated throughout the preface to *ES* written by Ann Jellicoe and the afterword to *TK* written by Jon Oram.

setting, the well-known Salisbury Fields of Dorchester turning into Silistra in the Ottoman Empire, combines close and far, familiar and exotic, regional and international, story and History. But space is not only a setting in community plays, it is also a topic, if not an issue: *SM*, for instance, constantly uses space and spatial references as illustrations of its political message. The play very effectively explains in geographical terms the economic and social changes induced by the disappearance of manorialism in England and the division of the land among private owners. The play starts at the Trenchards', a noble family of Dorchester. We understand that the family is in dire straits and needs to sell parts of their land and it is suggested that the land be sold to the farmers: "The land is sold, you reap the rewards, and the farmers will care for the land because it belongs to them" (*SM* 25). In passing, a character here partakes of a common belief in the positive aftermath of co-responsibility and co-ownership which are at the heart of communal experiences. Similarly, the amateur company does care for and about the play which they helped create, and which belongs to them.[13]

14. But the lesson, if any is to be drawn from the play, is far from straightforward. The fact that the land is now shared among the people and not possessed by one family means progress for the inhabitants of Dorchester overall, in terms of social status and redistribution of wealth, but it also creates a new class called "the landless". The landless, whose identity is blurred behind a communal appellation, are too poor to buy a place to live, and are forced to take shelter in the woodland as the land is turned into grazing pasture for sheep that they do not know how to tend. They are in effect marginalized, thrown out of the community through their eviction from the common ground. Another spatial metaphor which is extended throughout the play explores the dialectics of closure and opening: the Manor house system implied open fields, which are now divided into smaller properties limited by fences. But conversely, the development of capitalism and economic growth also go hand in hand with geographical expansion: the farmers who prosper consider buying a cart to sell their goods to other villages, illustrating the process of global marketing on a smaller scale. On the whole, though the play is a celebration of the local community, the message is also that traveling, discovering new places and new people, enlarging one's horizon, fills individuals with hope, in the guise of the young couple at the end of the play, envisioning "perhaps a new life;

13 See D. Bollier and S. Helfrich's analysis of the power of the commons in *Free, Fair and Alive*, in particular chapter 2 entitled "The OntoShift to the Commons". The authors also mention in their glossary of commons-friendly terms the tradition of beating the bounds, the process by which commoners monitor the boundaries of their commons to protect against enclosure while celebrating their identity as a community. This concept is all the more relevant when analysing the ideology of *SM,* whose plot centres on the way land is divided, bought and possessed by a community. (D. Bollier and S. Helfrich, *Free, Fair and Alive*, 73).

travelling at sea…" (*SM* 137).

15. But if the message of the community plays, though ambivalent and complex, celebrates what unites the community, it is also interesting to notice how all the more technical aspects of the creation put those principles into practice. We have already seen how the professional playwright was made to feel part of the community. Apart from the playwright, very few paid professionals take part in the creation, and preference invariably goes towards employing a local professional, or even better a local student who will learn a new craft in the process. Similarly, there is no lead part in the plays, and if there happens to be professionals among the actors, which is very rare, they will have minor parts in crowd scenes, so as to galvanise the company and share their knowledge. The principles of filiation and of transmission are also visible if we look at the three community plays on which this article focuses: the first was written by David Edgar, the second by David Edgar and Stephanie Dale, and the third by Stephanie Dale, exemplifying the idea that unity gives strength and that shared knowledge is more productive. Another telling example is that of Jon Oram: first a spectator of Howard Barker's community play for Bridport, *A Poor Man's Friend* in 1981, he then worked with Ann Jellicoe as co-director of *ES*. He succeeded her at the head of the Colway Theatre Trust and "ha[s] gone out to direct, write or produce thirty community plays, taking the concept to Canada, America and mainland Europe" (*TK* 128). This expansion of the geographical domain of the community play echoes that of the brewery whose development is one of the plots of *ES* and which expands "in Dorchester, Cerne Abbas, Weymouth and beyond" (*ES* 37).

16. Another practical aspect of the creation is the choice of venue for the Community plays of Dorchester: never performed in actual theatres, they are created in locations which belong to the community, such as churches or schools. In the process, these common grounds are reinvested by the cast. What is more, the participants who are acting in the community plays also take part in the creation of the costumes and the sets: their personal space, at home, is being invaded throughout the long months of creation, and in return the set of the community play is sprinkled with their personal belongings which acquire the status of prop or décor. The personal and communal spaces are thus porous and mutually enriched by the experience. For all those reasons, participating in the creation of a community play is very often unforgettable, because it is inseparable from the rest of the life of the participant, as Jon Oram sums up: "it has allowed to glimpse a vision of theatre and art which is part of life, not simply set aside in some special building which we walk by and ignore" (*ES* 5).

Defining a common ground with the audience

17. Community plays are certainly an unforgettable experience for the participants, but they are also memorable and haunting for the spectators. I will here concentrate on the particular apprehension of space experienced by the audience of a community play. Most of the spectators being from the city will find themselves in familiar surroundings during the performance: a school, a church or a hall are indeed chosen because they are not theatre buildings (which might be intimidating for some) and because they are well-known public spaces. A common characteristic of all the community plays is indeed that the spectators should be made to feel at home. Thus, street names (Durngate St, High Street East), names of churches (All Saints, St George's Church), famous buildings (the Antelope Hotel) are constantly mentioned by the actors, or serve as settings. The spectators also follow the peregrinations of characters through town:

> Moule's walk from his vicarage, down Fordington High Street, up Dorchester High East Street, past Cornhill, up High West Street, to Top' o' Town and to the Barracks. He passes a number of people who collectively represent most of the social classes of the Borough; and by the end of his walk they will form a geographical and social 'map' of the town.[14] (*ES* 21)

18. Space is not only geographical but endowed with a social and political meaning, as is here made evident. It serves the message of the play, highlighting the social segregation of the city, and the fact that the space is familiar makes the message even more effective. Sometimes, a sound is enough to evoke a place, as is the case with "the midnight chimes of the Corn Exchange clock" (*ES* 13). In *SM*, the opening stage directions insist on the recognizability of the locations, and on their link with the present:

> The courtyard that John Trenchard was so keen to show off to royalty exists to this day. […] The play is set in key areas in and around Dorchester including: Wolfeton Manor, Fordington Church, Abbotsbury Monastery and surrounding downlands. (*SM* 3-4)

19. The link between past and present is indeed constantly reactivated in the spectators' minds thanks to space: in *TK*, some scenes take place at the Maumbury Rings, a Neolithic henge in the south of the city. It is now a public open space, but it was used in the 17th century as a place of public execution. It is the place where, in reality, Mary Channing was burnt at the stake in 1706 (a story which fascinated Thomas Hardy), and it is where, in the play, a company of amateur actors

14 The geographical and social map of Dorchester is detailed in another stage direction: "The upper orders are concentrated in High West Street, the commercial and public classes in Cornhill, and in High East Street, and there are a large number of lower sorts amassed round the White Hart and the Fordington turn-off" (*ES* 40).

gather in 1804 to rehearse *their* play about Mary Channing. The bridge between past and present and between fact and fiction is thus embodied in particular locations which are familiar to the spectators but which acquire a new meaning after they have participated in the community play. I had the same experience after following an actor through the streets of my home town: every stop he made to tell his text is now fixed in my memory, and whenever I walk the familiar streets I associate those places with the stories he told. The experience of this itinerary through the city, with stops at different points, may also be compared to that of the spectators of mysteries performed in various station wagons scattered along the main streets of medieval towns.

20. In the case of community plays this works on two levels, both with the actual space used for the performance, and with the spaces which are evoked or reproduced on stage, in the play itself. They belong to everyone and no one in particular, and sharing them does not mean that common ground is being divided among its owners, but that it acquires a new value for all present. It becomes a common wealth. Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, in their essay entitled *Commun: Essai sur la révolution au XXIe siècle*, thus describe the common wealth of a common culture: "les communs de la connaissance sont des biens non rivaux, dont l'utilisation par les uns non seulement ne diminue pas celle des autres, mais a plutôt tendance à l'augmenter".[15] I would argue that the same applies not only to the community play, which involves several hundreds of participants, but also to the common public grounds, which are put in the spotlight as they become the stages for those plays. Thus, having been the stage of the production of *TK*, the school hall gains a more open function in the minds of the students as their parents are invited, along with spectators who have no children in the school, to gather in the same space. Similarly, St Mary's Church, where *ES* was created, became the meeting point of a more inclusive congregation, mixing Protestants, Muslims, Jews, Catholics and nonbelievers.

21. Not only are those actual spaces redefined as more inclusive horizontally, welcoming in their midst occupants who were so far excluded, but they also acquire new depth vertically, through the rediscovery of their historical roots. At the beginning of the same play, the characters comment on the findings of an archaeological excavation of "the site which was shortly to house the Dorchester Waitrose" (*ES* 13). The metaphor of the excavation of the past is here literalized through the words of the actors who present the setting and the action. For the spectators, the supermarket also acquires new depth, as its past is unearthed.

15 P. Dardot and C. Laval, *Commun,* 161.

22. Furthermore, the community plays are made not to be witnessed but to be partaken of. The inclusion of the audience starts with the disappearance of any clear distinction between the world of the play and the real world outside. This is the case right from the start, as the spectators enter the building and discover that a fair is taking place, in which some are dancers, musicians, magicians or craftspeople in reality, while others are actors in the play, who offer drinks, play music or perform magic acts both as themselves (recognized as such by their family among the audience) and as their character in the play. Thus the audience participates, both as individuals who enjoy themselves at a fair, and as spectators of the community play which starts progressively, during the fair. The same blending of fact and fiction through the blending of spaces and statuses is at work at intervals, as spectators are forced to share in the plot. Thus, in *TK*, in which many of the characters are smugglers:

> During the interval, the audience becomes gradually aware that everything on sale from costumed salespeople – drinks, snacks, merchandise – is contraband. In addition, selected members of the audience are approached and asked to "look after" items. At the end of the interval, excise men raid the refreshments and merchandise stalls, dragging the salespeople away. (*TK* 75)

23. Audience participation is of course not new in a theatre, but community plays are felt as occasions for the community to gather around the hearth, to listen to the tales or the myths of their own common origin, to share in the festivities, to partake of the adventure, and this experience, in our modern world where people change places more rapidly and more easily than ever before, is not that frequent anymore. Claude Lévi-Strauss reminds us that myth defines itself first and foremost as time becoming space.[16] The community plays perform that transformation, as through them, a common history, a common heritage, are embodied by common grounds on which the community meets, unites and gathers strength. The recent lockdowns, which forced people to spend more time in their home and among their closest relatives and was felt by many as a welcome breath, may perhaps help us understand how feeling included in a community which shares the same ground is experienced by many spectators of the community plays as a balm and a personal enrichment, in a world where one can easily feel estranged and alone. It is also interesting to notice that one of the more recent experiments with participatory theatre in Britain, immersive theatre, tends on the contrary to favour one to one relations and unique individual experiences. This is for instance the case of Punchdrunk, whose artistic director Felix Barrett explains to Rose Biggin:

> The whole thing with Punchdrunk is it's always for the individual. So even if it was a larger scale

16 C. Lévi-Strauss, *Le Regard éloigné*, 301.

> show, an audience of two thousand people, it's still about each one as an individual, and we'd want to make sure each single one of them had their own experience they had ownership of, and there were enough beats of intimacy and that panic-induced alone time.[17]

Whereas the immersive plays of Punchdrunk work on the individual emotions of the spectators, of which they are the sole owners, and tend to induce fear and loneliness, community plays try to create communal feelings of comfort and a sense of belonging which are made possible through the sharing of well-known homely space that is owned by all.

24. Thus space and time are shared, experienced in common, which erases the usual separations between actors and spectators as Ann Jellicoe explains, emphasising this permeability, this porosity between past and present as well as actors and audience: "There was a feeling of 'it happened here' and confusion in terms of us and them and then and now" (*ES* 4). Indeed, this connection at the heart of the community which unites participants and spectators is also reinforced by the choice of never separating the spaces: following the precepts of environmental theatre as developed by Richard Schechner,[18] the stage directors of community plays have their audience scatter and move about freely among the actors, with only a few seats for the disabled and the elderly, and follow the action which develops all around them. It is thus site-specific and promenade theatre, and the audience becomes indistinguishable from the actors, all the more so with casts of more than 100 participants while the audience counts roughly 200 spectators. In crowd scenes especially, the actors are there to lead the gaze of the spectators and ensure they all look in the same direction and share the same vision or point of view: "All of Dorchester turns its attention to the trial of Emma Gawler" (*SM* 110). Location becomes a metonymy for a united people which conjugates in the singular.

25. There is one exception, which is to be found in all three plays, where the traditional separation of audience and stage prevails again, that of the plays-within-the-play. In those scenes, a fourth wall and the proscenium arch are resurrected. In *TK*, the embedded play is performed at the beginning, for the royal family who happens to be in Dorchester. The opening stage directions comment on the wonder of the audience of the community play: "As the audience enters, they may be pleasantly surprised to find themselves in a theatre, with proscenium and even maybe a curtain" (*TK* 11). Those metatheatrical elements underline the difference between traditional theatre and a new form which offers a common experience, on common ground, ground which is not a theatre. In the afterword, Jon Oram expatiates on the benefits of a shared space:

17 R. Biggin, *Immersive Theatre and Audience Experience*, 201.
18 See R. Schechner, *Environmental Theatre*, in particular chapters 1 (on space) and 2 (on participation).

> The performance venues used generally consist of stages around the edge of a central area so the actors and audience share the same space. The audience find themselves surrounded by the action of the play. […] Essentially the audience is not a separate society from the actors but is embraced by the cast as members of the same group. […] There's a feeling of equality and intimacy when the cast and the audience come from the same community. (*TK* 131)

26. Oram further theorises the relation between audience and actors thanks to the concept of the social actor. It is because the cast and the audience initially belong to the same community that, when they meet on common ground, they can share the same position, geographically and ideologically:

> Regular theatre audiences can leave a performance elated and enlightened, but in time those feelings generally fade away. Here is the community play, an art that touches people to an extent that adjusts their long-term attitudes and changes their lives […]. I believe this is because actors who live and work in the community to whom they perform are uniquely placed to offer something professional actors can't. […] A social actor somehow has permission to implicate the audience in the drama, because this is their home territory; the actors and audience are neighbours. Audiences are implicated the moment they step through the door and the promenade style makes this fact more potent. (*TK* 129-131)

Those quotes are rife with the lexical field of space, and they emphasise the potency of the community plays as socially- and politically-committed art.

Probing the ground on which community plays are built

27. Here nevertheless it is important to compare the techniques, aims and audiences of the community plays with those of other experiments in politically-committed theatre. Committed artists have long been accused of preaching to the already converted, and indeed the audience gathering for a David Hare, or for that matter a David Edgar play at the National Theatre will mainly share the same beliefs and ideas as those playwrights, who are famous for their left-wing sympathies. In comparison, the audience of a Dorchester community play is more varied, but also generally more conservative. Remarkably though, all the professional playwrights who have written community plays are politically-committed and share left-wing views. But the Dorchester Community Plays Association is adamant: it is a rule never to confront the audience and force an ideology on them. On the contrary, the aim of the play is to find common ground in spite of differences of opinion on particular subjects. Controversy is avoided, so, in Stephanie Dale's own

words: "the plays are political, but in a more covert way".[19]

28. What is more, even if the plays are written for the inhabitants of Dorchester, the spectators are not all from that town. So can they too feel included, or are they cast out of the community? Sarah Weston describes her own experience as a spectator in 2014:

> In *Drummer Hodge,* there was a scene where women passed through the crowd asking for donations to the war effort. Watching, I realised that I myself was part of this general "crowd", the general mass of Dorchester was also me […]. In this instant, I did not feel like an audience member targeted for some tokenistic audience participation, but a conscious person being asked a moral and political question about whether I should donate to this cause. […] Though in effect I was a double outsider: both outside the world of the play by being an audience member, as well as being from "outside" of Dorchester, the staging conventions led me to feel "inside".[20]

This analysis points to the very reason why community plays are effective at creating a sense of community that is inclusive of all spectators at least for the time of the performance: because they partake in a live experience, and because they have to participate and take decisions which impact the group to which they are associated, the audience feels rooted on common ground, and consequently identified as one community.

29. From that particular experience of a spectator from outside Dorchester, I wish now to enlarge the scope and look at an important aspect of the political message conveyed by the community plays, which all focus on the welcoming of strangers, or foreigners, among the community. All three plays develop a dialectic of opening and closing the door to diversity, of including or casting out people from outside. The very title of the 1985 play, *ES*, is at the same time an appeal for more hospitality and a reference to the Bible (Hebrews 13:2) which acknowledges and celebrates the deeply-rooted Christian tradition of England. Indeed, the three plays refer to mass, baptism, wedding and burial not only as the festivities of a common culture, but also as defining milestones in the characters' lives, anchoring them in Christian territory. The playtexts waver between a celebration of communal feelings thanks to mass and an ironic demonstration of the hypocrisy of most Christians. Thus, the newly appointed Reverend Henry Moule suggests that the custom of his predecessor was to pay to get his congregation to take the sacrament: "From this day forth, communicants will not be paid sixpence or indeed any sum at all for taking the sacrament" (*ES* 20). But he also tries to galvanise his parish with songs: "the whole congregation should be – and sing –

19 Personal interview with Stephanie Dale on 26 January 2019.
20 S. Weston, "Being part of Something Much Bigger Than Self", *Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 9.

in the body of the church" (*ES* 21). The church is not only symbolical, it is an actual site where the characters converge, and where the participants and the audience meet, to sing songs together. But the songs are not always Christian: all the community plays invite the spectators to sing along, especially at the end of the performance, and those songs, which are chosen because they represent the identity of Dorchester, turn out to be very effective in creating a sense of community and belonging. In *ES*, a 1784-song[21] celebrates "the pride of old England" and "good Dorchester Beer" (*ES* 27), as a counter-proposition to Reverend Moule's hymns. Here, even though an actual common location ensures the cohesion of the community, the most potent factor is the celebration of a common culture, be it Christian culture or indeed pub culture. Cherry Schrecker, author of an essay on the concept of community in Anglo-Saxon sociology, takes up again Gertrud Neuwirth's conclusions after her study of a "Dark Ghetto" in the 1960s: "Gertrud Neuwirth explique que la cohésion de la communauté n'est pas fonction du lieu d'habitation, mais d'une solidarité partagée qui peut se manifester en réponse aux stimulus extérieurs".[22] This analysis corresponds to the experience and the message of the community play: celebrating the strength of the culture and heritage of the community helps it to consider opening itself to strangers and welcoming them not as a threat but as added strength.

30. But singing the qualities of Dorchester Beer hardly qualifies as a serious political message which aims at social change. This is only one of many examples which could lead us to qualify community plays as poor and hackneyed attempts at finding common ground so as to gather the population: is beer and popular culture the lowest common denominator which ensures community plays have indeed an audience? Are these types of celebrations only facile and demagogic? This assessment echoes Jean-Luc Nancy's description of a lost community and its rituals:

> La communauté perdue, ou rompue, peut être exemplifiée de toutes sortes de manières, dans toutes sortes de paradigmes : famille naturelle, cité athénienne, république romaine, première communauté chrétienne, corporations, communes ou fraternités – toujours, il est question d'un âge perdu où la communauté se tissait de liens étroits, harmonieux et infrangibles, et se donnait surtout à elle-même, dans ses institutions, dans ses rites et dans ses symboles, la représentation, voire l'offrande vivante de sa propre unité, de son intimité et de son autonomie immanentes.[23]

31. Community plays indeed lay themselves open to nostalgia, looking back to the past and

21 The song appears in *The Vocal Magazine: or Compleat British Songster*, vol. 1 to 9, 1784, 121, visible here: https://archive.org/details/vocalmagazineorc00rugg/page/120/mode/2up (Accessed 18 December 2020).
22 C. Schrecker, *La Communauté*, 25.
23 J-L. Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée*, 30.

representing their own cultural heritage as an unquestionable wealth. As we have seen, the Bible and Christianity (represented by Anglicans and by Catholics) are the sole religious references, and are omnipresent in all three plays. The form of the community play also draws from such theatrical traditions as moralities, which have themselves been revived in England since the 1950s. The two forms, though different, are comparable on many counts: defining themselves as "community events" seeking to "keep history alive",[24] the contemporary mystery plays rely on amateur casts of hundreds of enthusiasts who are recruited locally. Stephanie Dale notably wrote the playtext of the Chester Mystery Play in 2013 (and Sarah Weston was assistant director). While mystery plays perform stories of the Bible, community plays relish in the traditional English cultural references, especially literary ones. The play *TK* is a good example: in it, one of the characters named Gulliver changes his name for Swift as a pseudonym when he joins the smugglers; Jane Austen's novels come to mind as the young women of the play are all in a turmoil because of officers (*Pride and Prejudice*), or think of eloping (*Sense and Sensibility*), or are prevented from acting in morally-doubtful plays (*Mansfield Park*). The Bard is also often conjured up: *Romeo and Juliet* is alluded to through the character of an apothecary "of consumptive disposition" (*TK* 83), and the form of verse drama (be that of Shakespeare or that of T.S. Eliot) also appears. But most often than not, it is parodied, for instance with this doggerel, in the prologue and chorus of the play-within-the play:

> Good gentles, and most gentle Majesty:
>
> A fanfare heralds high solemnity.
>
> So why is this poor creature to aspire
>
> To act as prologue, in this mean attire?
>
> Chorus: First to confess, that for our reveling
>
> We'd hoped for nobles, never yet a king
>
> To hear our tale which starts in long lost time. (*TK* 11-12)

32. Indeed parody is very often used to distance the genre of the community play from more traditional forms of theatre, or culture, which are often considered as elitist and therefore less inclusive. The community plays also always offer some critical distance and self-irony: "Some doubt our talent, others the expense. /While critics question our dramatic mode" (*TK* 12). Up to a

24 See for instance the website of the Chester Mystery Plays: https://chestermysteryplays.com/history/ (Accessed 18 December 2020).

point, community plays make fun of those literary references and the cultural background they represent. Nevertheless, and in spite of that self-deprecation which is sure to arouse the sympathy of the spectators, the community plays' cultural references are still very English, and not really representative of the multiracial and multi-religious society of Dorchester in the 21st century.

33. So do those community plays, written by well-known politically-committed playwrights, actually convey a clear political message as to the community's admission or rejection of strangers? *TK*, set in 1804, is pervaded by the fear of a foreign invasion: Napoleon's troops are said to be ready to land on the beaches of Dorset, and the usual rhetoric prevails, about the enemy who should be kept at bay, fought like a virus and stifled by a tightly-knit community ready to protect its territory in a bloodbath if necessary. In their introduction, Stephanie Dale and David Edgar quote the words of a sermon which was made by Reverend Nathaniel Templeman, rector of the Dorchester parish of Trinity St Peter in 1804: "Methinks I see them now. We should all go down on our knees, and when we rise we should go and take each a pike out of our church, and fight Bonaparte" (*TK* ix). Far from being pacifist, the prevailing message of 1804 is also anti-revolutionary, as this extract from the Dorchester and Sherborne Journal of February 1804, quoted in the introduction as well, demonstrates:

> Inquire whether there is any instance, either in ancient or modern times, of the multitude having ever profited by revolution and tumult? Let me advise you to prefer being governed by your own countrymen, whose language, manner and customs are familiar to you, rather than by a foreign foe, who hates the British name. (*TK* x)

34. This quote emphasises the parallel drawn between the threat of a foreign attack and the threat to the constitutional monarchy. The same dialectic will be taken up again in the 20th century, in the opposition between nationalism (all classes must unite) and communism (all races must unite). David Edgar's famous play *Destiny* (1974) explored that opposition and, in trying to understand the trajectory of National Front politicians, was accused of condoning nationalism. With *TK*, Edgar might be accused once more of defending a nationalist ideology: researching the period and reproducing its ethos on stage means you risk delivering the same message. What is more, the very geographical rootedness which is the strength and characteristic of community plays means that playwright, cast and audience might easily find themselves endorsing patriotic if not jingoistic views. The play thus consistently mocks, to general laughter, the German accent of the Heavy Dragoons who protect the royal family: "Fraulein, we are vrom ze barracks. My nem iz Lieutenant Frederick Baron Uslay. Und zis is Captain Count Kielmanregge" (*TK* 24). This is counterbalanced

by hints that the enemy comes not from without but rather from within: in *ES*, the rioters are not "strangers from afar" (ES 25) but the poor of the parish, in *TK*, the smugglers are "the enemy from within" (*TK* 80) and in *SM* the message is even clearer: "It's not the stranger you need to fear, but those who have the gold" (*SM* 33).

35. The message is nevertheless simplified, not only because the text, compared to that of an openly-committed play, is less complex, but also because of the form specific to the community play: the huge cast of participants on stage, compared to more traditional theatrical formats, the fact that the audience is more likely to know some of the actors personally, the fact that they are participating in the action and made to sympathise with the characters' plights, are among the many elements that raise an emotional response, which gets in the way of reason. We are touching here on one of the contradictions at the heart of the genre of the community play: it is efficient in raising consciousness because the actors are part of the community and share their views (or those of the playwright) with fellow citizens, friends and family, but those close personal links also mean that the message tends to become more private and individual, less social, general or universal.

36. The question of the future development of community plays also points to contradictions: as Oram noticed, "Here are actors who know what promenade means and an audience growing used to the style, so it's possible to open the boundaries a bit more" (*TK* 132-133). With a long tradition of community plays, Dorchester is indeed getting used to the form, which in the process becomes more commonplace, and probably less effective in stirring political awareness. What is more, Oram's ambition of opening the boundaries, that is exporting this form in other counties or countries, risks eroding what makes its specificity, that is its localism. If the form is adaptable to any community, in England, the UK or even the world, will it not lose its soul?

37. Community plays are specifically written for a community, to be performed among the community, by members of the community. They are intrinsically linked to a particular location as they are not only *about* that location, but do not, or should not, exist outside that location. The case of *ES*, which was first written as a Dorchester community play and then transferred to the National Theatre, is a case in point: the second play was different, it was performed in front of a different audience and did not implicate it so directly as the original did, because there was no direct link between them anymore, as is the case when all belong to the same community.[25] Then again, the

25 Even B. Nightingale, author of the review already quoted, is forced to acknowledge: "The play has undoubtedly lost something on its way from that Dorchester church, packed as it was with Dorchester people. It was a bit naive of Peter Hall to think he could create a sense of community by staging it as a "promenade" production at the National, since the performers in the theatre's well are clearly professionals, and the audiences milling round them are mostly

form of the community play, because it is dependent on a common space or place, and because it is reproduced in that place, runs the risk of becoming commonplace. What makes it effective and constantly regenerated remains nevertheless its potency to create a common artistic experience, celebrating the life of a community on common ground.

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