Performance Training: The Next Generation

A brief biography: I do not have a formal performance training. My university career was initially a BA in English Literature and subsequently an MA in theatre - an MA that involved some theoretical study, a modicum of practical training and a lot of benign neglect.

I graduated into recession in the 1980s and started working as actor, writer, teacher, youth facilitator and occasional odd-jobs man. In particular I worked in an avant-garde, post-Grotowskian ensemble and as a Youth Theatre facilitator. The gap between the demands of those two roles was very instructive. I continued this by-any-means-necessary approach to learning and earning until I emigrated to Australia in 1997. There I added ‘improvisor’ to CV. I also specialised for a while in working in schools, especially with young children.

During that time I also developed the fascination with ensemble that has fuelled and defined my more recent work.

In 2004 I moved back to the UK and became Senior Lecturer at a UK University, a post I held until 2013 - though for the last few years I had cut back to part-time working. While an academic I co-wrote and ran an intensively practical MA in Ensemble Physical Theatre. That MA was eventually closed by the University - insufficiently profitable at a time of deep funding cuts to HE. And I published a book.

Since then I have run DUENDE, a collection of ensemble-focused artists from all around the world. Though we have made a few productions, scarcity of funding means we are primarily a training organisation, running workshops, residencies, HE-based projects and - starting in September this year - The DUENDE School of Ensemble Physical Theatre… about which more later.

DUENDE’s work in the last few years has taken me to India, Australia, Mexico and America, repeatedly to Greece, Sweden, France and Germany as well as elsewhere in Europe. This week I taught for the first time in Singapore.

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1 This paper was delivered at ‘Standing Still, Still Standing’ - a conference organised by the Singapore Drama Educator’s Association (SDEA) in Singapore in June 2015
Repeatedly, in all the countries I visit and in online contact, I encounter a recurring question - usually though not exclusively from performers in their early twenties: 'Where are the best places for me to train?' Or: 'Should I do an MA? If so, where?' Or 'What are the best drama schools?'. Sometimes: 'I'm lost. Can you help?'

When I probe, I usually get a more nuanced question…. the young performer is looking for a coherent, rigorous training that is practical, creative and intensive. They want to encounter and develop their craft through ‘guided doing’. They are frequently looking for something that is neither what is increasingly offered in the HE section - a small amount of practical work intended to stimulate theoretical research and critical thinking, nor that which is offered in the commercial sector - often ‘industry-focused’ and not generally concerned with a young artists’s desire to find her own voice and develop her own aesthetic.

The questioner is also looking for something that is affordable, in a way that HE and commercial training often is not. A practice-based MA at Rose Bruford costs between £9,900 and £16,000 depending on your country of residence. At Kent University an MA with practical components costs £5,250/£12,890; at Naropa in America, fees are around $22,000 per year, at CalArts, around $43,000… An MA at RADA is £11,000/£17,500. Training costs.2

There are significant numbers of young artists who are not interested in - or cannot afford - what is on offer.

Unsurprisingly, as I travel, I also encounter a burgeoning of alternative trainings, designed to meet the evident and urgent demand from the emerging generation.

There is a history of alternative educations in the arts - quite apart form traditional modes of learning such as apprenticeships, families and guilds, gurukula and that old favourite - sheer bloody-minded persistence and self-development. Stanislavski - of course - set up a studio-based training that was powerfully in opposition to the prevailing culture. So did Copeau in France. Eugenio Barba located training within a company when he assembled a group of drama-school rejects to form Odin Theatre. But I want to look very briefly at two ‘alternative institutions’ - institutions dedicated to a education based in the arts. I want to see if they might offer some lessons to those of us who are

2 All prices taken from the websites of the relevant institutions, June 2015
seeking to imagine new trainings for the next generation.

The Black Mountain College was established in 1933 in North Carolina in the Southern United States. It was the indirect product of the bizarre dismissal from Rollins College of John Andrew Rice, Professor of Classics. Though the charges against Rice were strange to say the least - including that he called a chisel ‘one of the world’s most beautiful objects’, that he whispered in chapel and that he had ‘an indolent walk’, it is safe to assume that the heart of the matter was that he was considered ‘disruptive of peace and harmony’ as the President of Rollins College is quoted as saying. He, accompanied by some staff who left in sympathy with him (or were fired for supporting him), decided to pioneer an alternative approach to education. Thus Black Mountain College was born.

The college was to be a liberal arts college, interdisciplinary in focus inspired by the progressive education movement. The fundamental tenets of the ‘progressive education’ movement included: collaboration, experiential and practical learning, education for social responsibility and democracy and a commitment to the development of individual learning pathways for each student. The founders of Black Mountain College were much influenced by the work of John Dewey. Dewey had written that education fails because it: ‘… conceives the school as a place where certain information is to be given, where certain lessons are to be learned, or where certain habits are to be formed.’ Dewey suggests that the problem with conventional education is that it: ‘…neglects the fundamental principle of the school as a form of community life’.

Black Mountain’s history is one of dissent, schism, bitter argument, betrayal and extraordinary achievement. Constantly the changing rostra of scarcely-paid staff fought battle around ethics, morality, pedagogy, curriculum. There were those who felt that personal and social development was the college’s objective, art its vehicle. They were bitterly opposed by those who felt that artistic training was the objective, and that ethical and moral standards should be imposed on students and faculty to support that training. There were those who felt that the college should actively engage with contemporary politics - especially when questions arose about the integration of Americans of colour into


4 Both quotes from John Dewey taken from Article Two of ‘My Pedagogical Creed: School Journal vol. 54 (January 1897).
the student body and faculty. Some felt it was the mission of the school to pioneer such integration. Others felt that to do so, isolated in a deeply conservative southern rural community, would be to invite at best isolation, at worst violence. Such hostility would actively prevent the College pursuing its artistic mission they felt. Similar schisms opened up around questions of sexual morality, gender, sexuality.

There were those who felt that all discipline was anathema except that which students decided for themselves. There were those felt the entire notion of a ‘curriculum’ in the creative arts was meaningless.

In many ways the debates that characterised BMC mirrored debates in wider American society. But they were magnified and personalised by the small size and relative isolation of the community, and by the financial pressures under which it continually struggled. BMC was never really linked into wider, official and statutory funding streams.

Undoubtedly one of the dominant themes in the history of Black Mountain is this struggle for financial survival. BMC had no significant financial support and - though occasionally it managed to conform sufficiently to the demands of various funding bodies to attract a little support - it generally had to survive by appealing to wealthy donors. Often survival was dependent on an individual’s whim.

Winters are cold in the mountains of North Carolina and, without money, food and fuel could be scarce. The very real poverty that accompanied most of BMC’s existence lent a brutal urgency to ethical and pedagogical debate. If people were going to struggle that much, it would have to be for something that, heart and soul, they believed in.

Lack of money was not a problem for the founders of Dartington Hall. Dorothy and Leonard Elmhurst had plenty of it and - profoundly influenced by Leonard’s relationship with Rabindranath Tagore and experience at Shantiniketan in West Bengal - they wanted to use it to foster a progressive, liberal arts education in the UK. They bought Dartington Hall and established the Dartington Hall Trust. It was to be - according to Simon Murray and John Hall:

‘….a kind of enlightened feudalism, which brought sociality, local economy, education and the arts together in a single social organism.'
Dorothy’s wealth protected the experiment from a reliance on the policy constraints of external funding.’

Murray and Hall write that the Arts policy of the Trust:

‘…veered between, or tried to combine, two different approaches to arts education: one in which the arts are seen as potentially serving the locality and playing a full part within it …; the other in which it could act as a protective environment for established artists and companies to train and to develop new work.’

Already in this we can see an echo of divisions at BMC between those who saw the primary focus of the work as personal, community and social development through art, and those who saw the primary work as being the nurturing of art and artists. However, while at BMC the permanent and eventually terminal financial crisis meant that these arguments took on a life-or-death tone, at Dartington, the relatively affluence of the Trust meant that it was possible - by and large - successfully to balance and nurture both aspects of its founding mission.

There is no space here to chart the enormous achievements of the Trust, but it is worth looking for a moment at what happened when, in 1961, the Trust formalised some of its education work - and made it more publicly focused - through its support for the establishing of the Dartington College of the Arts. The College, aiming to deliver recognised national qualifications in the UK Higher Education sector, needed to learn to respond to - indeed became beholden to - shifting governmental educational policy and the requirements attendant on getting - and keeping - government funding.

In other words, it became part of the system.

The requirements that becoming part of the ‘official educational system’ imposed on Dartington had both productive and detrimental effects. Having to explain and justify their pedagogy and curriculum to validating authorities, led to intensive, continuing and interdisciplinary conversations among the faculty that, in the words of Simon Murray, helped define: ‘A model of learning which articulates training as performance … and as a reflexive and critical practice’ - in other words,

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5 All of the quotes from Murray & Hall - and much of the background of this paper - from: ‘Arts for what, for where, for whom? Fragmentary reflections on Dartington College of Arts, 1961–2010 Simon Murray , John Hall; Vol. 2, Iss. 1, 2011
that the process of training to be an artist is an artistic practice, not preparation for an artistic practice and so arts education could be validated through the quality and rigour of its process rather than only through the nature of the products that emerged from it. Again to quote Murray: ‘An embrace of learning as a process towards goals which are never completely known and which remain to be (re)invented.’

Being in relationship with the wider educational establishment (a relationship which Black Mountain College consistently refused) had clear value in clarifying the pedagogy at Dartington. However, as governmental preoccupations changed, so the pressure of conforming to expectations and regulations became onerous and ultimately unsustainable: ‘Over the final decade, in the face of an increasingly instrumental learning culture, it became ever more necessary (for tactical reasons) to embrace the languages of a narrow(er) vision of training whilst protecting the integrity of the practices’.

As the ideological position of the state became increasingly neo-liberal and utilitarian under first Margaret Thatcher and then her successors, so the whole raison d’être of Dartington came to be at odds with what the government decreed that education ‘ought’ to be doing. And of course, with what the government was prepared to pay for. This was a danger Black Mountain College - perhaps because of its origins in a dispute with an established college - was fully aware of from the start.

After all - he who pays the piper calls the tune.

Instrumental learning treats education as a product - and neatly fitting with the neoliberal capitalist ideology that underpins it - sees students as customers who purchase that product for personal use. Of course, they will not purchase something - especially something very expensive - if they do not know what it is, so ‘defining’ the ‘educational offer’ (and delivering it at a competitive price with a profit-margin built in) becomes the core business of universities and conservatoire.

Murray and Hall describe this process as: ‘…turning Higher Education into a matter of individual investment, much like one made on the financial or housing markets….’

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Among the more destructive symptoms of this instrumental and utilitarian approach are: suggestions that all learning should be quantifiable and directed towards known, defined outcomes, that learning should be deliverable through a rigid curriculum that is not dependent on the particular skills or personalities of the artist/academic running it (in other words that education is product-delivery, not the development of learning through relationship) and - crucially - that education should generally support and demonstrate the employability of the student within the existing social context (which entirely removes from the educational establishment its role as a crucible for examining, radically, notions of aesthetics, community and democracy).

'Instrumental learning' is increasingly entrenched in the thinking of most governments now. And it generally comes with a high price-tag which means that a student (unless she or he is fortunate enough to have come from a wealthy background) is deeply discouraged, once graduated, from pursuing low-paying careers outside ‘the system’, having first saddled themselves with enormous debts studying inside the system.

An aside: Earlier this year the entire first year cohort of students studying for an MFA at the University of Southern California’s Roski School of Art dropped out simultaneously. They claimed that the university administration: ‘did not value the Program’s faculty structure, pedagogy or standing in the arts community.’. They also complain bitterly that respected and established artist/teachers had been squeezed out and replaced by absurdly underpaid adjuncts - usually recent graduates - who - mirroring a trend seen across HE in America and beyond - teach what they are told to teach and (having themselves accumulated enormous debts undertaking Post Graduate training) are both too junior and too financially precarious to advocate against University Administration on behalf of their students.\(^7\)

Let’s look at The DUENDE School - my own attempt to meet the demand that is out there.

The DUENDE School is based on a few simple ideas.

The work is practical, intensive, rigorous and detailed.

There is an underlying, unifying pedagogy so when students consider applying they can have clarity. The underlying approach is Self-With-Others - my own approach to training individuals within ensemble, about which I have written extensively enough for interested students to be able to find out about it. All the main teachers at the school will share this ethical and pedagogical foundation.

The School will be peripatetic and will run in low-cost countries. This means we can keep the fees as low as possible, and living costs for those coming from overseas will be relatively low. Prices are lower for local students than for those coming from overseas to ensure that being in a low-cost economy does not translate into a kind of neo-colonialism. Hence the first iteration of the School will be in Athens. It is feasible in future that established organisations in richer countries might choose to ‘buy’ an iteration of the school - but then it will be for that organisation to deal with sourcing the students necessary to fill it.

There will be a lot of practical work. This is experiential training. Though the course is only (in this first iteration) 10 weeks long, the days will last from 9.30am until 6.00pm. Students will need to spend evenings developing work on their own or in small groups. There will be a constant process of performing. The course will culminate in a fully-directed ensemble production open to the public. The aim is to saturate the student so that the work resonates with her long after the school is over.

The focus is international, interdisciplinary and collaborative. Though there are requirements in terms of physical capacity and experience, we actively encourage students with diverse trainings and disciplines to apply, so that all those involved will meet work which is technically, aesthetically and culturally ‘other’.

There will be a process of conversation with the wider community. Local performers will come in to teach and collaborate, and sometimes local musicians will visit us to accompany some of the training. Some students (those who feel confident enough) will offer public workshops on weekends at nominal costs, as part of the way of developing their practice, of contributing to the local arts eco-system and of helping them build their own networks of contacts.

There will be no assessment and no qualification. Students will attend the school because they want the training. Nothing else.
There will be a small reading list and a weekly theoretical seminar so that the work is always seen in context of broader performance history and theory. We want young artists to consider themselves as creatively and intellectually engaged and informed, rather than as bodies-for-hire. All of the work is aesthetically, culturally, intellectually outward-looking.

This was the offer we decided to make through The DUENDE School - affordable, transparent and rigorous.

So what lessons might we draw - indeed did I draw - from my awareness of Black Mountain College and Dartington, and other attempts at alternative education, as I move into establishing the DUENDE School?

The first is that finances are important. The model must be economically sustainable - for student and faculty. There is no great value in setting up a training where concerns about short or long term survival dominate daily experience. If you need support from external sources, those external sources will decide (or at least heavily influence) artistic and pedagogic policy. Cost matters - unless one wants simply to be complicit in the advantaging of those born in privilege over those born without privilege, there is little value in offering a training that only an elite can afford.

Secondly: there is a real and continuing desire and demand for creative education that is both rigorous/directed, and processual/open-ended. Perhaps too many institutions have lost sight of the fact that many people seek artist training not because they want to become stars, but because they have undefined creative vision that they need assistance in realising. It is simply not true that the offers made by established training programmes represent either the only useful models of training, nor the only forms of training to which ‘real’ artists ought to aspire. Neo-liberal educational utilitarians do not have a monopoly on understanding the function of art or the education of artists, however they might seek to convince us otherwise.

Thirdly, the intention of a school must be clear and the pedagogical approach must support its intention. Is the work designed to foster artistic practice? Is it designed to teach existing skills and techniques? Is it intended to create employees for the existing ‘cultural industry’ or to facilitate the education of those who see themselves as being outside
that cultural mainstream? Form and function need to support one another.

Fourthly - a school is a community that exists in a context - historically, geographically, culturally, aesthetically. Knowing and celebrating that a school is a community - within itself and also in terms of its location, lineages, international interconnectedness - helps the trainee to locate herself as an individual artist who herself will always have to work within contexts.

Finally - perhaps crucially - the school should celebrate its ethical and moral purpose and standards. It should be clear about how much it can and how much it cannot develop and compromise its vision, so that - as it adapts and evolves - it does not betray the very reasons for which it was established.

Strangely enough - or perhaps not strangely at all - these guiding principles are the same ones that I apply to my work when I am developing productions. All work must be financially sustainable and money always has strings attached, all work is process not product and must be rigorous in execution, a work’s intention must be clear and its working processes must support the realisation of that intention, all work is made and must be presented in a context, and all work should be underpinned by some kind of ethical vision that cannot be compromised without fatally undermining and destroying that work.

A final thought. Murray and Hall, writing about the curriculum at The Dartington College say the following:

“These were practical courses. This means that people wanted to learn how to do things (or at least how to do better what they could already do). What things, though? Three possible answers:

to become skilled interpreters of the canon,

to become new heroes of modernism,

to become skilled arts functionaries, equipped to take up already established positions in the arts “industries”.

The third was only ever of marginal interest “
Of course there are those who - perhaps because they care for the employability of their potential students or perhaps because they fear and dislike the unknown and radical - would have us believe that the sorts of alternative trainings I have been discussing here are, at best, of marginal importance and at worst are actively to be discouraged and destroyed. Let’s remember: among those who passed through and were radically influenced by Black Mountain College are: Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Robert Rauschenberg, Josef and Anni Albers, Merce Cunningham, John Cage, Cy Twombly, Buckminster Fuller. Dartington Hall nurtured, among others John Cage (again), Rudolph Laban, Michael Chekov, from Copeau’s School came Barrault, St Denis, Artaud and (indirectly) Jaques Lecoq. From Lecoq’s own school came… well we can go on….. These alternative trainings are the nurturing ground for some of the major game-changers, the visionaries, the inventors of our contemporary culture. Who is going to be training the next generation?