



# Applied Theatre

## Bewilderment and Beyond

James Thompson

'It's a pleasure to review a book, which also turns out to be so personally useful [...] a provocative and fascinating read.'

*Prof. Jonathan Neelands, Research in Drama Education*

'This is a theoretically complex account that [...] lays stress on the crucial role of facilitators in welcoming difficulty and complexity whilst offering participants and colleagues creative development with containment, support and ethical awareness. Necessary reading.'

*Frances Rifkin, practitioner, Artistic Director of Utopia Arts and author of The Ethics of Participatory Theatre in Higher Education (2010)*

'Interesting, thought provoking and deeply inspiring, Thompson's book unravels the most fundamental concerns of practising theatre in non-theatre contexts.

His personal reflections provide essential insights into the world of applied theatre, its challenges, its controversies and even its beauty. This book is a key resource for anyone interested in applied theatre.'

*Dr Zoe Zontou, Teaching Fellow, Liverpool Hope University*

*Applied Theatre: Bewilderment and Beyond* explores the practice of theatre in communities and social institutions with marginalised groups. It shifts between contexts and countries to examine different ways that theatre has been applied to a wide range of social issues. Theatre projects in Brazil, Burkina Faso, Sri Lanka and the United Kingdom are analysed to argue for a complex and questioning view of the practice. Initiatives in prisons, developing countries, war situations and participatory research projects become the sites to interrogate the claims that applied theatre can be a theatre for social change.

Many practitioners and researchers have witnessed powerful applied theatre projects but nonetheless struggled to articulate the reasons for the projects' success. This book uses the questions inspired by that perplexity to create a case for applied theatre as a major area of contemporary theatre practice.

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*To Debbie, with love*





*The act is beautiful if it provokes,  
and leads us in our throats to discover, song*

Jean Genet

*This life is more than just a read thru*

Red Hot Chili Peppers



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## Preface: 'Applied', A Preface to 'Theatre'

'Applied theatre' has become an increasingly popular term, used by theatre practitioners from a diverse range of settings and countries to categorise or explain their work. It has emerged in response to practice in a number of different social policy or educational contexts and it is grounded in a history of theatre that has sought to operate beyond the boundaries of theatre buildings. Here in the UK it is also a product of the practicalities of creating an engaged, participatory theatre in the particularly brutal and unforgiving economic environment of the 1980s and 1990s. Applied theatre developed under the combined effect of a harsh funding climate and the post-cold-war impact of postmodernism. A desire to take 'theatre to the people' was divided into creating theatre with a multitude of peoples (prisoners, disabled groups, the elderly, children and so forth) and idealism was tempered with a pragmatic search for sites where theatre practice could gain non-arts financial support. In 2002, alongside the involvement of companies and individuals, applied theatre has also become firmly established inside the higher-education sector, with the term appearing in the titles of undergraduate and postgraduate courses, centres for research in the UK and Australia and modules in universities from North America to Sri Lanka. It is therefore practised, taught and researched without, I would argue, commensurate attention being given to understanding its meaning. This book is therefore part of a necessary debate about what it has been, what it is and what it could be. Each chapter uses areas of theatre application – predominantly prisons and development settings – to explore problems and possibilities for the 'field'. The book does not aim to be a conclusive text. Instead, it offers a particular approach to applied theatre through a series of chapters that individually cover very different issues. Through these discussions, the book offers a way of seeing the work that I hope will be questioned and challenged by alternative accounts.

One of the purposes of this preface, however, is to explain how I will be using the term and to outline some of the problems in its use. Applied theatre can cast a wide net, and it is important to examine some of the practices that are pulled in during that process. The metaphor of the net is deliberate, in that applied theatre brings together related fields as much as it constitutes its own. It is a collective and collecting term whose use has emerged before a strict definition has been agreed. For example, it has been welcomed by many who do not like the strict line that is often drawn between 'third world' 'theatre for development' and 'first world' 'community theatre'. The term 'applied theatre' insists that theatre in the marginal, excluded and impoverished areas of the UK has much to learn from theatre created in, for example, Burkina Faso in West Africa. Similarly in teaching, it has supported a sharing of knowledge drawn from the fields of theatre in education, drama in education, and theatre for social change. In practice it has meant the experiences of theatre in specific communities – for example with prisoners, with disabled people or with the elderly – are brought into dialogue with each other. It is a term that joins different categories of a socially engaged theatre without denying their separate histories or dictating what can be placed within their own boundaries. It seems, for example, to claim community-based participatory theatre, but is more equivocal about dramatherapy or psychodrama. These tendencies are often as arbitrary as they are well considered. This book does not seek to offer a final definition of the term, but instead argues that it is a useful phrase for a theatre that claims usefulness. It is imperfect. It is a term cast in different places, and therefore it will catch different practices according to the theatre histories of the places from which it is thrown. Operating in Brazil it will engage different traditions to those in the UK. This book considers practices that are particular to my experience and makes no claims that they are definitive.

The problem, of course, with a term that collects other practices, is that it can be accused of both denying differences and also seeking to claim a range of projects that do not wish to be included in its all-consuming reach. It is important, therefore, to acknowledge where the specifics or particularities of applied theatre are, as well as where it is a more general or boundaryless term. We need to consider where its definition is rightly fluid



and where it should become fixed. The debate between the open and the fixed is repeated and reformulated in different guises throughout this book. It appears in the use of the term 'bewilderment' (see below), in a discussion of ethics, in questioning the notion of orthodoxy and around principles of practice. One place to start this discussion however is by noting that the two words in 'applied theatre' hide others. There are referents in the term that are not made explicit. For example, an object is hinted at – a place, person, community, issue or 'thing' to which theatre is applied. I would argue that it is because these 'things' are unspecified, that the discussions between various practices become possible. Theatre in education talks to theatre in prisons. In addition, the term conceals its subject. The person, group or community doing the applying is invisible and this allows theatre *by* elderly people to come into dialogue with theatre *for* youth. The debate focuses upon the verb, the action of application, and not the specifics of the agent or the place. Because it is based on that action, it permits the zones to be different and the types of theatre to be varied. Applied theatre becomes a practice that engages with the politics of prepositions. The theatres 'of', 'by', 'with' or 'for' question each other because none is given primacy in the term. These unspoken elements stimulate the debate between the different practices. Unquestioningly claiming 'theatre in education', 'prison theatre' or 'theatre for development' as part of a wider 'applied theatre' field should be rejected. However, the term is welcomed in the first instance for the discussions that it permits.

While noting the unspecified, it is also important to write about applied theatre's visible components. As I mention above, there are 'specifics' or given features of applied theatre. These need to be acknowledged and in my definition include the following. *Applied theatre* projects always take place in communities, in institutions or with specific groups. They often include the practice of theatre where it is least expected; for example, in prisons, refugee camps, forgotten estates, hospitals, museums, centres for the disabled, old people's homes and under-served rural villages: sometimes in theatres. Applied theatre is a participatory theatre created by people who would not usually make theatre. It is, I would hope, a practice by, with and for the excluded and marginalised. It is, at its best, a theatre that translates and adapts to the unfamiliar. It is a theatre wedded to vital

issues and one that values debate. In circumstances where fear is dominant, it can be a theatre of celebration. In circumstances where celebratory escapism is dominant, it can be the theatre of serious enquiry. It should aim to be a theatre that somehow balances the pragmatism involved in making itself relevant in difficult environments with the idealism of a belief in transformation. Applied-theatre programmes can be a vital part of the way that people engage in their communities, reflect on issues and debate change. They can be central to different groups' experience of making and remaking their lives.

The theatre that is made is neither simple nor singular in form. It can be the rough improvised naturalism of a prison theatre group and the well-crafted, dance-filled performance of a youth theatre. It could include HIV/AIDS education Forum theatre or Shakespeare in a secure hospital (Cox, 1992). The majority of the theatre forms discussed within this book are in some way derived from the 'theatre of the oppressed' tradition of Augusto Boal. This is exhibited in the centrality offered to participatory workshops, the blurring of spectator and audience divisions and the role of interactive 'forum'-style performances. Boal, I would contend, offers a powerful model of practice that is adaptable to a range of communities in diverse situations. The applicability and flexibility of the arsenal of techniques in the 'theatre of the oppressed' (Boal, 1992) is evidenced in their widespread use in Europe, the Americas, parts of Africa and Asia. However, it must be acknowledged that the focus on Boal is also arbitrary. It is a product of a UK environment where extended exposure to his writings and workshops over the last twenty years has made many applied and community-based theatre practitioners, including myself, take inspiration from his techniques. Boal thus has a strong place in this book out of a considered choice and importantly as a result of this specific history. His dominant position in the writing here should not be taken as an indication or an assertion that applied theatre must only take formal inspiration from one source. All applied-theatre practitioners apply forms of theatre that are specific to their history, community and culture. This is to be welcomed and is not denied by how I have chosen to locate Boal in this work.

## A Discipline?

While arguing that applied theatre has a necessarily wide reach, the action of writing about it will inevitably develop boundaries that are more distinct. Writing a book can lead to the emergence of the idea of a 'discipline', even when the strictness that this term implies is disavowed. I want therefore briefly to compare it to other 'disciplines' that use the word 'applied'. Whereas applied theatre belongs to the communities in which it is practised, it cannot escape the fact that it has strong roots inside universities and educational establishments. Its place in the academy must therefore be examined.

Applied mathematics  
Applied anthropology  
Applied physics  
Applied theatre?

These subjects are, therefore, not *mathematics*, nor *anthropology*, nor *physics*, nor *theatre*, but something else. In all of them 'applied' becomes a critical word that condemns and at the same time pleads with the 'non-applied' cousin. It condemns in that the related disciplines are by implication disconnected from the 'real'. They are presented as ivory-tower abstracts. 'Applied' is added to bring the sheltered out of their comfortable buildings – theatres or lecture halls – into the world. It is the term that in the words of social historian Mike Finn 'emancipates the academic from the ivory tower by forcing him or her to confront' real people and real situations (Finn, 2001, p. 17). The 'applied' disciplines appear to fight the esoteric with the used, worn, worked or honed. They champion the practical against the obtuse. However, the word 'applied' also pleads with the 'non-applied' disciplines to legitimise practices that have been kept out of the academies or have struggled to justify their place in them. It petitions them to be considered a part of mathematics, anthropology, physics or theatre and competes with an argument that too often dismisses the *applied* disciplines as opposites

to the *pure*. This argument contends that they are not suitable subjects for the academies but the lesser, applied versions of the 'real'. The 'applied' therefore do not only choose to go beyond the building, condemning those that stay inside. They also remain on the outside, kept there by the action of those within.

This ambivalent position compels theatre practitioners to ask whether *applied theatre* is really a useful category if it forces theatre into the company of the sciences of practical use. Are we comfortable with the instrumental intent of that governing verb? Is theatre a practice that needs to be forced out or liberated from its tower? Or does the verb mean that these applied disciplines are separate from and not a freed version of the non-applied other? How does this applied theatre relate to *theatre*? Is theatre squashed by a prefatory word that says its value depends on who it is done *by* and not for what it *is*? Can the critique of abstraction be justified when it is possible to show that all theatre belongs to, grows from, responds to, and cries against the contexts in which it is found? There is a great deal of scholarship to show that performance is minutely tied into and active within the societies in which it operates (see for example Case and Reinelt, 1991; Colleran and Spencer, 1998; Reinelt, 1996). Is it ever so utterly disconnected that it only exists as an irrelevant activity hermetically sealed within the boundaries of well-funded regional theatres, performance venues or university campuses? Mathematics can be understood as an abstraction from real objects to a system of symbols. In this case, the 'applied' word could be a means to reconnect the symbolic system to those objects. But does theatre operate in such a symbolic arena that requires this reconnection? Augusto Boal plays interestingly with this idea:

Before Pythagoras, adding sacks of rice and beans was easy: sacks stayed still, not exhibiting a will of their own. But how can you add up fifteen cows and seven bulls, all ravenous? Animals, not having the patience for algebra or other philosophies, wanted to graze: which is what they were born for. Pre-Pythagorean arithmetic suffered from such bovine hunger: calculations came out wrong, on the account of an impatient cow or wandering bull.

Pythagoras separated the number from the thing numbered, and human thought took a giant leap forward. (Boal, 2001, pp. 342–3)

The 'applied' word helps it take a huge leap back. Back to the bovine? Linking disciplines to their real-world past. This evolutionary view is one of the inspirations behind a tendency to see applied theatre as a recall to a past theatre practice that was more intricately connected to the realities of people's daily lives. Again Boal:

In the beginning the theater was the dithyrambic song: free people singing in the open air. The carnival. The feast. Later, the ruling classes took possession of the theater and built their dividing walls. (Boal, 1979, p. 119)

In this definition, applied theatre becomes an exercise in breaking those dividing walls. 'Applied' refers to an act that takes theatre practices out of the obscure black boxes and brings them back to the 'open air'.

However, this turn to the past is too easy. The idea that 'applied' implies a 'connection' is positive because it takes it away from a more direct and crude instrumentality. However, we should be wary of the idea of a return. Evolutionary models too easily permit the belief that research into communities that have vibrant performance practices can teach us about lost rituals of our own. They support divisions between the modern and the savage, which need to be strongly countered as an easy excuse for racism. Applied theatre, although it accepts the idea of a reconnection to the community, should be understood as a contemporary theatre practice that has many different histories and varied rationales depending on where it is happening. To subsume it within a discourse of a longing for an idyllic 'simpler' past denies the complexity of its operation in the moment. This is not to dismiss outright the idea that theatre practice might have changed its role and shifted its relation to the 'people'. Applied theatre in Burkina Faso, Brazil, Sri Lanka and the UK are all practices that use forms, ideas and approaches that have a strong affiliation with the present, and a complex connection to their different pasts. They are not simply evidence of their closeness to an imagined history that only we in the 'developed world' have had the privilege to move through.

The applied disciplines are creating practice in response to a critique that they are too isolated from the communities in which they exist. In addition, they are creating strong theoretical roots to demonstrate that they

are disciplines in their own right and not poor relations of the non-applied cousins. Although it is easy to see a return to some mythical origin in these practices, I believe it is more productive to understand them within the dynamics of the different disciplines and the demands of a very utilitarian age. This is the pragmatics and anti-idealism I speak of above. The current discourses of usefulness, relevance, evidence-based practice and value for money are as much a backdrop to the term 'applied theatre' as our desire to burst into dithyrambic song. In using the term 'applied', I am clearly accepting the logic of much of that harsh utilitarianism. However, it is still only a preface to the 'theatre'. Somehow, that *art form* must tangle with the constraints that the prefatory word implies. The problems that ensue in that mix are of course the central concerns of this book.

## Disclaiming the Mantle: The Act of Applying

The *act of applying* takes the theatre practitioner or researcher into a number of different academic disciplines, social practices and research fields. The theatre engages with the discourses and approaches in these settings but cannot claim expertise in them. We will always be external to these changing and historically specific debates. Applied theatre comes to psychology, development and prison education (to name some of the areas encountered in this book) but cannot speak for or speak from those fields. We are only ever visitors within the disciplines into which we apply our theatre. This is in the same way that we are only ever invited by the prison governor, the development agency or the refugee group into their setting. We may be familiar with the theoretical debates that inform the practices in these places but we exercise that knowledge from a particular position. We are not expert in these areas nor should we seek to be. One of applied theatre's strengths is in its status as the outsider, the visitor and the guest.

This book could have chosen a range of sites to illustrate arguments and debates within applied theatre. I make no apologies for the fact that the examples of application are dependent on the peculiarities of my practical experience and are in no way definitive. They are used to demonstrate the problems of application more than offer an authoritative critique of prison education policy or development theory. The invisibility of the object and the agent as discussed previously means that applied theatre should concentrate on the mechanics of the process, not the specifics of the place. We need to develop a strong sense of critical understanding in these fields, but do so as outsiders to them. The disciplines we meet are historically situated and applied theatre can only engage with that particular moment. It must do so recognising that the practices and ideas that it encounters are contingent. Prison education policy, as is noted in chapter two, shifts historically and artists have engaged and will continue to engage with certain instants in that debate as it is realised in practice. Chapter two is therefore more about the problems of applying theatre than the peculiarities of the philosophy of prison work programmes in the late 1990s. We must be constantly aware that the *act of applying* is an unfinished process that encounters situations that are themselves evolving and not fixed examples of social practice.

The above is stated as a disclaimer; an apology for the inevitable crudeness that emerges in the analysis of certain practices by the non-expert. I am not a prison psychologist, development policy theorist or war trauma analyst, but a theatre practitioner meeting these disciplines at certain moments in their own evolution.