

All you need is Tussy: A Day in The Community Theatre

Reflections on the performance of Eleanor Marx: A Life in Movement 23 October 2022

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There is something that goes on an hour before a show. The room is both chaotic and calming all at once, staff running around getting the lights in check, dancers passing around hairspray and spreading foundation over their cheeks, everyone is moving constantly. When I entered the Windsor Room that Sunday afternoon, everything dosed in light from the windows, I remember thinking, “What the hell did I get myself into”. My expertise on performances is limited to my 3rd grade talent show, in which I sang a terrible song with terrible choreography and made a complete fool out of myself. The thing about community theatre is that like regular theatre, there’s this fog of excitement that settles in amongst everyone. In that final hour, the dancers stretch, the ushers (me) wander around the room looking for things to help with, chairs move, lights are fiddled with, and everything is like an overdrawn excitement-panic-attack. I met one of the assistants set managers right before the play began, and she said, “community theatre is dare I say, community-based”. Say what you will about the repetition of the word community, but Mia has a point here. Everyone is excited to tell the story of Eleanor Marx, in their own way. Through dancers, singers, actors, and writers they all play essential roles in the execution of this 20-minute

play in the hotel dining room telling a story about a forgotten leader, told to forgotten communities, with a collection of students and teachers wanting to amplify a voice we have forgotten.

It has been referred to as "art theatre," "little theatre," "amateur theatre," and even "tributary theatre." Louise Burleigh invented the term "community theatre" in 1917. The European Art Theatre Movement, which is often credited with sparking the American Little Theatre Movement, began before the turn of the century with revolutionary innovations in theatre technique, playwriting, and acting style. The moniker "small theatre" came from the size of its performance spaces. The Irish Players' 1911 U.S. tour seems to have had the biggest impression on us. They "fired the American imagination," according to Robert Gard and Gertrude Burley; their tour "aroused the antagonism of American citizens against the feeble productions of the commercial theatre and seemed to be the catalyst that caused countless dramatic groups to germinate all over America, as a protest against commercial drama"¹. Community theatre works to amplify the voices of the audiences and the actors on stage to connect about the struggles they relate too. In this production, *Eleanor Marx: A Life in Movement*, we ask ourselves why no one remembers a woman who paved the way for so many more after her. As audience members, we sit and marvel, how can a woman like this slipped from our fingers so easily? Community theatre enhances the lives of individuals who participate in it as well as those who profit from live theatrical presentations. Those engaged on either side of the footlights reflect a wide range of age, culture, life experience, and a strong belief in the value of the arts. It also extends to the audience, after one of the performances, a girl in the seat in front of me breathed out loudly and said "wow". I never

¹ Lynch, "Community theatre History".

got her name, but she talked about how she has a background in dance, and all she could do was watch the dancers. To her, they were the ones that connected her to Eleanor Marx the most. The words at times would lose her but she saw the way the dancers moved, the stories they told with their bodies, and she understood. Later, I met a duo of older women, Jenn, and Emily. Jenn is from Los Angeles and was visiting her daughter Emily here in London. They had popped to check the performances out and were thoroughly surprised. Jenn and Emily had already had an idea about Eleanor Marx. But “this tongue and cheek play used simplicity to tell a story about a complicated woman”. I think we can all relate to these women and their reactions to different elements of the play. From the music to the acting, their range in age and experience all play key roles in bringing this story to life and interconnecting various women from all ages into the story. When you leave the traditional theatre, if you’ve seen a good play, you are left reflecting on yourself and the world around you. Community theatre does the same. But where in the traditional theatre you are looking on from a distance, removing yourself from that conversation, in the community you are forced onto the stage in this hotel dining room.

Through my courses this semester I have had the privilege to attend world-class theatres and see actors shine brightly. Theatre allows us to perceive things from a different perspective than our own. Humanity, psychology, motives, conflict, and resolution are all demonstrated. We, the viewer, get to see the lives of people other than ourselves. We put ourselves in emotional and intellectual circumstances as artists that we may never face in our daily lives. The arts encourage us to give truth power, to take chances, and to advocate for new and varied perspectives. However, community theatre has taught me that it comes *from the community*. It starts here, in our local basements, hotels, diners, everywhere. We can make a stage and tell the world, who we are. Tussy, is smart and a know it all but she

had guts. The world chooses to forget her, but her legacy has been spread into everyone who has felt unheard, unseen, and insignificant. Her story has stretched across seas and is hidden behind every single one of us. This story, holds a mirror and asks us, who else will we let be forgotten? We are not only sharing space and an experience with the artists performing, but we are also sharing the experience with other audience members. Movies and television do not provide the same level of closeness or engagement. Sharing an experience with live performers and audience members is not only important, but also required for human connection. We all need theatre, just like we all need Tussy.