

Analyse the use and effects of culturally-specific theatre in the construction of community identity

In this essay I will examine culturally-specific theatre work – that is, work by theatre companies focusing explicitly on specific ethnic or religious communities – within its wider social context. I will focus on two productions, *Anansi trades places* by Talawa Theatre Company and *Yeshivah of the Absurd* by Merkavah Theatre. I will show how culturally specific references, narratives and rituals perform a ‘community-building’ function but, when placed in a theatrical context, can also radically refigure lines of community identity, blurring and softening borders and demarcations both internally and at the ‘defining edge’ of the group.

Methodologies and literature review

My primary material is taken from a play that I saw (*Anansi trades places*) and one that I devised and directed (*Yeshivah of the Absurd*). I conducted further research by gathering information from culturally-specific theatre companies’ websites, and writing emails to their staff. I conducted interviews with members of Talawa Theatre Company, during which they gave me some internal documents to supplement my understanding of their work. I obtained key documents and articles from the Arts Council England website, which I used to research the contemporary cultural and policy context, and from online newspaper archives. I based this essay’s theoretical foundation on works about Pierre Bourdieu and Mikhail Bakhtin, and used works by Helen Nicholson, Richard Schechner and Petra Kupperts to place it in the context of performance studies.

This essay's focus is considerably determined by what I could access directly. It would be impossible for any essay to cover the entire range of culturally-specific theatre, especially given the ambiguity and contested nature of what constitutes a 'community' and where the lines are drawn. I intend to look at a small selection of current practice and possible models, illustrating what they tell us about theatre's role in issues of identity and community. My own Jewish background and work in the field, and the special access I was given to Talawa's work, allow me to comment most fully in reference to Jewish and Black theatre, allowing them to reflect on each other.

Terminology

'Identity' and 'community' are notoriously slippery terms. Helen Nicholson's description of "communities of identity" illustrates the way I mean to use these terms:

communities of identity are constructed when people recognise their own experience in others, and share an understanding of each other's values or stories [...] In other words, communities of identity are constructed on a balance between sameness and difference – on the acknowledgement that particular interpretations of experiences are somehow different from the experiences and understandings of others.¹

For the purposes of this essay, I define 'culture' according to the *UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*: "culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and [...] encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs"².

¹ Nicholson, Helen, *Applied Drama* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 94

² *UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*, 2001. Available from <http://www.minorityrights.org/?lid=759> (Accessed 23 January 2008)

The Arts Council's and Tamasha's *In Conversation evaluation report* refers to companies focusing explicitly on specific ethnic cultures as “culturally focused” companies³. I prefer to use the term ‘culturally specific’ as it inscribes the deliberate act of choosing – ‘specifying’ – a cultural grouping, which is a vital component in the construction of cultural identity.

Black and Asian theatre in Britain

The rise of Asian and Black theatre companies dates back to the late 1970s, when Tara Arts and the Black Theatre Cooperative (now Nitro) were founded as responses to ethnic tensions and misrepresentation in British society, and the under-representation of Black and Asian artists in mainstream theatre.

Talawa Theatre Company was founded in 1986 and exists to “give voice to the Black British experience”, to “nurture, develop and support talent”, and to “cultivate and develop Black audiences and audiences for Black work”⁴. Similarly, Tamasha was founded in 1989 “with a mission to bring contemporary work of Asian influence to the British stage”⁵ and aims to “[retell] our histories, revealing the hidden stories and sharing the complexities of the world with modern theatre audiences”⁶. Thus the emphasis has subtly shifted to reflect changes in Britain's cultural climate since the 1970s: under-representation is still an issue, but the companies address mainstream

³ Brahmachari, Sita, *In Conversation evaluation report* (London: Arts Council England and Tamasha, 2006), p. 15. Available from <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/documents/publications/phpWBnxXa.rtf> (Accessed 17 January 2008)

⁴ Talawa Theatre Company, *About Us*. Available from <http://www.talawa.com/about/index.html> (Accessed 17 January 2008)

⁵ Tamasha, *History*. Available from <http://www.tamasha.org.uk/about/history/> (Accessed 17 January 2008)

⁶ Tamasha, *About Us*. Available from <http://www.tamasha.org.uk/about/> (Accessed 17 January 2008)

misunderstanding of specific cultures and their need for authentic voices of expression more than they tackle *open* racism and conflict.

This fits into a wider discourse of ‘cultural diversity’. The term emerged in 1997 in *The Landscape of Fact*, an Arts Council paper reviewing the significance of cultural diversity for the English funding system.⁷ According to Brahmachari, its emergence “engaged with the aesthetic traditions, adaptations and hybridisation of shifting cultural and artistic identities in British society in a way in which multiculturalism had failed to do”⁸, taking into account individuals’ multiple memberships and belongings, and allowing “a complex conception [...] of solidarity that does not repress the differences within in order to maximise the differences between the ‘essential’ community and others.”⁹ Within this context “companies such as Tamasha exist to tell the stories of culturally-specific and under-represented communities.”¹⁰ A number of these companies are supported by the Arts Council, which has named ‘celebrating diversity’ and ‘vibrant communities’ as two of its six priorities for 2006 to 2008.¹¹

However, there are still a number of tensions and misunderstandings between the companies and some sections of ‘mainstream culture’. These misunderstandings may be the legacy of multiculturalism, despite the shifting terminology. Thus the work of culturally-specific companies often struggles for recognition as art in its own right. Many of the culturally-specific theatre companies such as Tamasha, Talawa and

⁷ *The Landscape of Fact* (London: Arts Council England, 1997)

⁸ Brahmachari, p. 14

⁹ Bilton, Chris, quoted in Brahmachari, p. 15

¹⁰ Brahmachari, p. 14

¹¹ Arts Council England, *Our agenda for the arts*. Available from <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/aboutus/agenda.php> (Accessed 23 January 2008)

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the Islam-based Khayaal Theatre Company explicitly want their work to be universally accessible and relevant, despite its specific cultural roots. The mission to provide a platform for culturally-specific artists to enter the mainstream (currently a misnomer, as audiences and artists are disproportionately white) is itself based on the assumption that they have universal appeal. Nevertheless, the work, according to Tamasha's Kristine Landon-Smith, "is being categorised by its ethnicity, which, she says 'creates a veneer so that people can't see what they are seeing'."¹²

Blinded by this 'ethnic veneer' some theatre-goers may oppose the very concept of culturally-specific theatre, claiming it is divisive. The label, 'Black theatre', can be an obstacle. "So is it only for Black people then?" asks a white respondent quoted in a marketing research report conducted for Talawa: "If you put it like that it seems like white people aren't expected to go."¹³ The reality is much more complex. Tamasha's Joint Artistic Director, Sudha Bhuchar, says, "It is important in our work to be culturally rooted"¹⁴. It is vital for the companies to provide a cultural mirror for the specific community, as one of this theatre's *raison d'être* is a lack dramatic forms, characters, narratives and symbols which speak to those from specific backgrounds. Moreover, all theatre is in some way "culturally rooted", but 'white theatre', to borrow a quote from a feminist context, "is the norm and therefore unremarkable"¹⁵.

Anansi trades places

¹² Brahmachari, p. 17

¹³ *Marketing Research Report* (London: Zenith), p. 21

¹⁴ Brahmachari, p. 18

¹⁵ Phelan, Peggy, 'Broken Symmetries: Memory, sight, love', in Jones, Amelia, ed., *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003) p. 109

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The marketing for Talawa's most recent Christmas show, *Anansi trades places*, reflected this desire to speak both specifically to Black audience members and universally to general theatre-goers irrespective of ethnic background. Advertisements and reviews appeared in the mainstream press, such as *Time Out* and the *Observer*, and also in newspapers for Black readers, such as *New Nation* and *Voice*. However, Black audience members made up the vast majority of attendees, despite the *Observer*'s naming *Anansi* in its '50 best Christmas shows'¹⁶. On the night I went to see it, 2 January 2008, I was one of only three non-Black attendees in an audience of 65.

The production itself is a comic musical for families. It reshapes the myth of Anansi, the trickster and man-spider who is found in West African and Caribbean folk stories, as he attempts to avoid 'fading out' from 'Storyland' by swapping places with an 11-year-old tearaway, Omari. The play displays the dual appeal discussed above, using culturally-specific characters, music and references that may be recognisable to some members of the audience, but drawing universal 'conclusions' and remaining intelligible to the uninitiated. The scenes depicting Omari's adventures in Storyland use a number of traditional Jamaican and African stories. For example, Anansi shows Omari how to hunt eggs by tricking Firefly, while elsewhere Omari escapes being cooked by refusing to speak a witch's name, 'Five'. These characters and situations would have been familiar to those who, like Patricia Cumper, Talawa's Artistic Director, "have wonderful memories" from childhood "listening to [...] Anansi

¹⁶ Rogers, Richard, '50 best Christmas shows', *Observer*, 2 December 2007. Available from <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,,2219821,00.html> (Accessed 23 January 2008)

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stories”¹⁷. This of course is more likely to be true for the older audience members. The play itself is about ‘keeping stories alive’ and their relevance (or not) to young Black people growing up in 21st Century Britain. Thus it raises questions of cultural change and hybridity. This is further reflected in the music, which features both calypso and grime. The Anansi myth is related to present-day youth culture, paralleling the mischievousness of the traditional trickster and the rebelliousness of hoodie-sporting Omari. Thus the references, from African, Jamaican or contemporary British (partly ‘Black’) youth culture, were recognisable to different audience-members to differing extents, but did not exclude those who may have missed any particular set. Moreover the play ended with a ‘message’ that was universal: treat people with respect and spend time with family.

At moments *Anansi*’s cultural-specificity prompted a certain quality of audience-reaction. Christopher Rodriguez, the Associate Director of Talawa, describes these moments’ effect on Black audience-members: “Someone might do a dance and with a black audience people erupt out of recognition.” This, he says, is of vital importance as “You are always looking for something that’s a reflection of yourself and your wider life experience.” These reflections would hardly be seen on stage were it not for Black theatre companies making it their business to put them there, with the sensitivity and cultural literacy to do so with “authenticity”. Psychologically, this reflection “validates [...] You have the right to look, feel and see the way that you do.”¹⁸ Carol Dixon, Project Manager of Talawa’s *Trading Faces – recollecting slavery*, adds, “When I see myself reflected, it lifts my spirit and makes

¹⁷ ‘Welcome from Patricia Cumper’, *Anansi trades places* programme, bought 2 January 2008

¹⁸ Dixon, Carol and Rodriguez, Christopher, (17 January 2008) meeting with Joel Stanley at Talawa Theatre Company

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me feel I am here. It is a big boost to our self-esteem and our place within the wider British community.”¹⁹

I see the audience imbalance mentioned above as a symptom rather than a cause of divisions with British theatre and wider society. The ‘codedness’ of certain elements of *Anansi* are certainly justifiable given the largely unacknowledged cultural bias in mainstream theatre. Moreover, because the play’s concerns are universal and it appeals on a number of cultural levels, it has what I term a ‘soft cultural accenting’. It invites difference in to watch rather than conspicuously excluding, so it may even be possible to appreciate the cultural specificity and relate it to one’s *own other* cultural specificity. It can lead to an appreciation of *cultural specificity in itself*. Similarly, the forthcoming Talawa education project, *Staging Voices*, will work with young people aged between 14 and 18 to explore themes of identity and their local community.²⁰ So it fits nicely with the issues referred to earlier by Rodriguez and Dixon, but applies these issues universally. Thus, *every* participant is encouraged to engage with *his or her particularity*.

Habitus and community-building

I would like to return to the moment described by Chris Rodriguez when an audience “erupts out of recognition”. As mentioned above, this relates to the lack in mainstream culture of specific forms, figures, symbols, cultural norms and – it should be mentioned – role-models on stage which can be so self-affirming. It is unsurprising then that Talawa’s research report shows Black respondents more likely than their

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Babb, Gail, ‘Application for Grant Aid for *Staging Voices*’, Talawa Theatre Company to Southwark Council, 2007

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white counterparts to “see enjoyable events in terms of a cultural or racial relevance or significance.”²¹ The nature of Black theatre “should reflect the Black experience, socially, politically, nationally and internationally”. It is “about acting out the Black experience. If it’s just black actors not dealing in any way with the Black experience what is the point?”²²

Seeing the “Black experience” on stage confirms individual audience members in what Pierre Bourdieu might call their ‘habitus’. Habitus is the “deportment, the manner and style in which actors [people ‘acting’ in the world, rather than the dramatic sense] ‘carry themselves’: stance, gait, gesture, etc.”²³ Note the emphasis here on gesture and physicality, and the stimulus for Rodriguez’s ‘moment of recognition’: “Someone might do a dance”. Habitus is partly what enables an individual to work within a ‘field’, “a social arena within which struggles or manoeuvres take place over specific resources or stakes and access to them.”²⁴ A field is a specific social and cultural reality. If, therefore, culturally-specific theatrical references confirm audience members in the field of their community of identity, those individuals are likely to feel more comfort and, indeed, identification with the community in question.

Petra Kuppers recognises the role of performance in building group identification: “Community performances are an important part of the symbolic and

²¹ *Marketing Research Report*, p. 6

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20

²³ Jenkins, Richard, *Pierre Bourdieu* (Padstow: Routledge, 2002), p. 75

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 84

real actions that define nationhood and cultural affiliation.”²⁵ If a performance can deploy cultural markers and references to appeal to certain aspects of a participant or audience member’s identity, it can elide their resistance and draw them further into an imagined community. Sonia Kuftinec analyses these processes in more detail:

Community members define these borders [of inclusion and exclusion] in both perceptual and material ways, noting shared values, interests, and territories, while differentiating themselves from others who don’t share these defining features. Yet even within seemingly bounded communities, differences exist, and individuals continuously cross and renegotiate borders of difference [...] While boundaries of identity hold great meaning for the individual, these borders are more perceptual than actual, and can thus be redrawn. As a site of re-presentation, performance becomes a medium through which this redrawing can occur. The performance process reinforces commonalities, illuminates differences, and alters boundaries of identity, bringing together, for a time, those who perceive themselves as belonging to different communities.²⁶

It is interesting to note, given the reference to “those who perceive themselves as belonging to different communities”, that *Anansi* incorporates both Caribbean and African music and stories, and unites them in a single theatrical production. Though Kuftinec is referring to community-based, participatory theatre projects, this renegotiating of borders also takes place at a theatrical event with ‘spectators’. It is possible to argue, in fact, that such events that have been predetermined, where the process of creation is hidden, can manipulate audiences towards certain norms of community identification. Hence, the Nuremberg rallies of 1923 to 1938, helping “bind German people effectively to a propaganda of racial superiority”²⁷. Of course, the intentions and effects of *Anansi* are much more benevolent, self-affirming without

²⁵ Kuppers, Petra, *Community Performance: An Introduction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p. 33

²⁶ Kuftinec, Sonia, ‘*Odakle Ste? (Where Are You From?): Active Learning and Community-Based Theatre in Former Yugoslavia and the US*’, *Theatre Topics*, 7 (2), p. 171-86, quoted in Kuppers, p. 36

²⁷ Kuppers, p. 47

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denigrating a demonised other. Nonetheless, culturally-specific theatre can be a powerful tool in the building of communities of identity.

Jewish theatre

As in the case of Black and Asian Theatre companies as illustrated above, Jewish theatre exists within the context of specific communal concerns. These are, however, different for ‘the Jewish community’. Jews are not under-represented in the arts, but then, since the Enlightenment, they have been able to assimilate and be absorbed into the mainstream culture. In other words, Jews who are not religious (but may still identify as Jews at least in name) can blend in. This is also at the root of the most prominent Jewish communal concerns, namely assimilation and intermarriage (‘marrying out’ of Judaism). For those who care about the continuation of Judaism, as a religion and as a culture, the building of Jewish identity becomes hugely important.

In the United States, Storahtelling “promotes Jewish cultural literacy [competence in Jewish cultural and religious norms] through original theatrical performances and educational programs for multi-generational audiences”. Its work can take place in the theatre, with professional actors adapting “Jewish myths and rituals for a popular audience”, or in “synagogue-based ritual performances”²⁸. These latter performances are comparatively interactive, as they ‘bring to life’ stories and issues from the Torah (the Five Books of Moses) that in most cases would only be chanted in Hebrew. Yet this seeming innovation is itself a modern revival of a traditional practice that has fallen out of use. Until “around one thousand years ago” the Hebrew chanting “was accompanied by live translation in the local vernacular,

²⁸ Storahtelling, ‘Our Story’. Available from <http://www.storahtelling.org/story.jsp?link=story> (Accessed 23 January 2008)

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provided by the Mturgeman (a translator/commentator), increasing both comprehension and contemporary relevance.”²⁹ Hence Storahtelling’s ‘slogan’: “deep inside tradition, way outside the box”³⁰.

While in the United States there are also some ‘conventional’ Jewish theatre companies (principally putting on plays, with an element of Jewish cultural-specificity), there are very few Jewish theatre companies in Britain today. Again, there is not the space to go fully into the possible reasons for this, but it may be to do with Jews’ relative success in the mainstream arts on the one hand and the conservatism of communal leadership on the other. Nevertheless, in 2007 I founded my own Jewish theatre company, Merkavah. The aims of Merkavah include bringing Jewish wisdom and storytelling to life, using theatre “to explore Judaism and Jewish issues in exciting and original ways”, connecting to the past and looking to the future, and exploring “the rich interface between performance and participation”.³¹ These aims are in many ways similar to Storahtelling’s. The setting and the context however are different.

Yeshivah of the Absurd

Merkavah’s *Yeshivah of the Absurd* was a 45-minute interactive promenade theatre-piece performance performed on 25 December 2007 at Limmud Conference³², with/to

²⁹ Ibid., ‘Storahtelling in the synagogue’. Available from http://www.storahtelling.org/programs_shultime.jsp (Accessed 23 January 2008)

³⁰ Ibid., ‘Our Story’.

³¹ *Merkavah Theatre*. Available from <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=4767246607> (Accessed 23 January 2008)

³² “Limmud Conference is a unique and magical cross-communal, cross-generational festival of Jewish learning & culture in the UK” (Jeneration, ‘Limmud Conference’. Available from

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about 150 participants/audience members. The production aimed to set up and subvert audience expectations in a number of ways. I publicised it in the Conference brochure – where it appeared alongside 24 other educational or cultural sessions taking place at the same time – with the following: “Rabbi Zalman Meintz and his teaching staff invite you to their alternative yeshivah and sem [types of traditional Jewish religious school] fair for a Jewish learning experience unlike any you’ve ever known. Part performance, part Beit Midrash [‘House of Learning’], part carnival.”³³ Many Limmud sessions are in fact front-led Jewish education or discussions. This was the first model we meant to subvert. Limmud also has a large number of musical and dramatic performances that are staged in front of an audience. This was the second model, also front-led, that we intended to invoke and undermine.

The performance itself took place in a large studio theatre. When the audience entered there were five characters on a stage at the front, leading them to believe they were to watch a conventional ‘proscenium arch’ play. Rabbi Zalman Meintz, the fictional director of proceedings, introduced himself and the other characters (Jewish teachers at the aforementioned ‘yeshivah fair’), and explained directly to the audience that they would get to meet them all and “choose a yeshivah to join”. At this he clapped his hands, signalling for the characters to jump down from the stage and position themselves at ‘stations’ among the audience. The seats were removed and for twenty minutes participants wandered from teacher to teacher, interacting and learning with them, and asking them questions. However, the interactive element was interrupted by the sudden emergence of a masked figure from a cupboard set on the

http://www.jeneration.org/index.php?option=com_seyret&task=videodirectlink&Itemid=119&id=38, accessed 23 January 2008)

³³ *Limmud Conference 2007 Handbook* (London: Limmud, 2007), p. 117

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edge of the space. The central part of the performance was a staged battle, both physical and verbal, between the teachers and the masked figure, with the audience members forming the ring in which the conflict took place. Finally, *Yeshivah* finished with participants choosing which yeshivah to join, singing and dancing together, and watching a reconciliation between Rabbi Meintz and the masked figure.

The five teachers were all satirical of models and trends within contemporary Jewish and secular life. As in *Anansi*, there was an element of cultural hybridity. For example, one teacher encouraged studies in ‘Tabloid Torah’, using pages of *Hello* magazine as her sacred text, while Rabbi Meintz was a satirical take on an Orthodox rabbi. Meanwhile the masked figure, in both the words that he spoke and violence he provoked, represented the repressed and suppressed parts of the various teachers. Thus the spectacle of the conflict symbolically staged contemporary communal tensions.

More than *Anansi*, *Yeshivah*’s effect depended on audience members’ familiarity with certain cultural norms. While some aspects would have been familiar to non-Jews, much of its humour came from the characters’ cultural hybridity, and the resulting clashes and absurdities. If the audience were too unfamiliar with the concept, say, of Jewish learning, or had never met a rabbi before, they might not ‘get it’. These artistic decisions were made in the knowledge that at Limmud there would be an almost entirely Jewish audience. The exclusivity of the material was also balanced slightly by the participatory element. Characters could respond directly to questions so they could ‘bring outsiders in’.

Carnival and communitas

One purpose of *Yeshivah of the Absurd* was to create what I called ‘a delightful chaos’, a carnival in Mikhail Bakhtin’s sense of the word. That is, we created a space where hierarchies were inverted, prohibitions abolished, costumes and masks worn, and the body and emotions ruled as much as the head.³⁴ Thus we had both of “the dual moments of suspension and affirmation that can occur in rituals”³⁵ – affirmation through the reflection of participants’ culturally-specific experience and framework, and suspension through the carnivalesque loss, reversal even, of received communal norms and mores. That *Yeshivah* was intensely physical – for both performers and participants – and participatory demonstrates the suspension of communal boundaries and understood behaviours: Jewish religious culture has in the past been accused of being exclusive, with women unable to perform certain roles, and disembodied, ‘heavy’ with book-study.

Richard Schechner writes of his “attempt to make a collective out of the individuals who constitute an audience, a temporary collective – a community for the time being”.³⁶ This process takes place in theatre and ritual through the redrawing of boundaries described by Kuflinec, who goes on to use Victor Turner’s concept of communitas: “As [...] Turner himself underlines, communitas is an essential though temporary enactment of community, and thus can veil difference as much as it seemingly enacts commonality”³⁷. When, as in *Yeshivah of the Absurd*, a group

³⁴ Bakhtin, Mikhail, ‘Carnival Ambivalence: Laughter, Praise and Abuse’, in Morris, Pam, ed., *The Bakhtin Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 206-26

³⁵ Koppers, p. 21

³⁶ Schechner, Richard, *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), p. 148

³⁷ Kuflinec, quoted in Koppers, p. 36

sharing a set of experiences, understandings, values or cultural markers enter the 'liminal space' of performance, particularly carnivalesque performance involving participation, not only can they be brought together but what they are *coming together to mean* is 'up for grabs'. In other words, the borders of the temporary community are radically unstable and, if the performance is open enough, can be determined by the participants themselves. Participation in particular "voids destiny and fortune"³⁸. The uncertainty *communitas* – of temporary community enacted in performance – can be brought to bear on the culturally-specific community of identity, even as participants are 'called to identification'. Participants are affirmed in their specific identity but are granted collective agency over where the performance takes them. Moreover, if a piece of theatre can use a wide enough range of different cultural references so as to be as inclusive as *Anansi* – if it can speak with a 'soft cultural accent' – then it is not just the 'internal' borders that are blurred and redrawn, but the very outer limits of the group. If you are 'in the room' then you are part of the "community for the time being".

Conclusion

In this essay I have shown how culturally specific codes, narratives and references can affirm individuals in their habitus – how they can perform a self- and community-building function to address some of the specific community's concerns in the wider society. I have also shown that the hybridity, irreverence and uncertainty of carnivalesque participation can help create a sense of *communitas* and put theatre's construction of community identity back in the hands of the participants.

³⁸ Schechner, Richard, *Environmental Theatre, Expanded Edition* (London and New York: Applause, 1994), quoted in Koppers, p. 30

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