History, Theatre and Self

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ABSTRACT

Using the creation of a new piece of narrative drama with undergraduate students inspired by the meaning of 'hero', and the achievements of Sophia Duleep Singh and Paul Stephenson, this article will look at the intersections of history, theatre, and self. Delineating how 'lost' histories—when converged with present realities, can create future thinking for, and with, the artists of that future—it will touch on how creating brave spaces in which to approach such work is rooted in relationships, both interpersonal and intertextual. It will explain how looking at, learning from, and working with, Singh and Stephenson's stories, allows for the creation of performance. In its creation, decoloniality, social justice and equality are foregrounded, providing the students with the advocacy and critical tools needed for change.

THE W's

All stories in Western Eurocentric paradigms begin with the five 'w's': what, where, when, who and why. Commonly, stories begin with the narrative voice locating itself within that framework, formally and/or subconsciously. In knowing where the centre of a story is—its genesis, its progenitor—the bias can be located.

The progenitor of *this* story—the 'me'–is Black, British and male.

My biases are very much located within the disruption and challenging of the hegemonic structures that facilitate the acceptance of the societal stories that are told.

The story upon which this article will focus began with an exploratory question—what is a hero? This question arose from my curiosity around the legitimacy of the ascribance of importance to commonly held heroes. It was also located in the fact that many of the heroes that are venerated in the UK education and societal spaces in which I was raised, are White and male; with those who are non-White often being from other countries. There were never any heroes who looked and/or identified like me.

It is very often the case that Black 'heroic' figures are located 'away' from the UK, thus giving ideological and philosophical distance between it and the excesses of its colonialism and imperialism. This is a clear attempt to dissociate an inextricable interweaving with the history of the suppressed around the world, from an island which still venerates a hereditary monarch as head of state. A monarch with a 'history of extraction, enclosure and exploitation' (Clancy, 2020), whose significant wealth can be linked to the subjugation, enslavement, and rape of people and lands across the globe (Clancy, 2022; de Wijs, 2022; Goss, 2022).

'Black History Month', which in the UK happens during the 31 days of October—three days longer than the derisory 28 days of February in the US—is a month designated to celebrate the entirety of an undefined 'Black History', which by definition, is simply 'history'—my history, *our* shared history. In separating and faux-venerating, it is made explicit that this knowledge isn't celebrated and known as much as it should. That the entire history of what is deemed to be 'Black'—or non-White—can be celebrated in a month, leaving the other 11

months—or 90+%—of the year for presumably 'White' history therefore excluding me and those whose lived identities transect with mine, underscores this point.

It was sought to discover what a hero is, where we find them, when they existed (and where) and who they were. Paul Stephenson and Sophia Duleep Singh—her first name is pronounced '*So-Fire*' (UK Parliament, 2017)—were determined as examples to explore themes—amongst others—of decolonisation, power, race, and gender. In doing so, an aim was to ascertain and make clear just how much 'knowledge has been tainted and distorted by the exclusions of class, race, gender, imperial power' (Sheehan, 2020).

These provocations formed the basis of a project with undergraduate students to create a piece of narrative theatre which would allow for the excavation of underserved history, and the stories contained within. These stories could be used as a way to 'unlock' personal history and make available and valid, personal, subjective experiences.

DECOLONISATION

Decolonisation is an essential consideration in the creation, and teaching, of artistic work in and around formal education. Knowing which lens is being looked through, whilst being open to other lenses, is paramount in being able to juxtapose the search for knowledge and the consolidation of culture. The way in which knowledge is couched and framed is a powerful tool.

The decolonisation of the academy is a multifaceted and multiagency endeavour. In addition to calls for examination of the Eurocentric nature of the taught curriculum, 'decolonisation also calls for attention to the role of cultural and racial minorities in transforming Europe through their contestations of race and empire' (Gopal, 2021), in the use of a pioneering Black-British man and an activistic Anglo-Indian princess, this project addresses this head on.

It is vitally important for considered critical engagement so as not to continue to perpetuate—however inadvertently—cultural violence (Galtung, 1990), precisely because 'decolonising of university curricula is an imperative' (le Grange et al., 2020)—the supremacy of 'White' narratives must be challenged. It is also imperative that institutions do not engage in 'decolonial washing' which gives 'the impression that […]

curricula are decolonised although this might not be the case' (le Grange, et al., 2020). Additive changes are cosmetic; sustained change comes from the motivation for that change. These facets were held very presently in my thinking and planning around the uses of heroes and these particular 'heroes' introduced as part of this project. In shedding light on areas which have been in shade, it is hoped that the links between what is known and what isn't, and the systemic and structural reasoning for that would be writ large without the need for explicit signposting. 'In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform' (Freire et al., 2000, p. 49). This method of Freire inspired pedagogy liberates space for discussion and thought, a space systemically closed by the perpetuance of a Eurocentric curriculum whose positive reference points are often White, and male.

To achieve a new society where there is a level of equality – or at the *very* least an open discussion about it—it must be remembered that 'it is a liberated individual who undertakes to build the new society' (Fanon et al., 1994, p. 102). In liberating teaching from the figures that have been taught before, we challenge the modes of thinking that have perpetuated those figures' lauding, allowing for it to be checked against another set of figures to see and test whether or not the initially propagated and 'accepted' thinking is as egalitarian as it would purport to be. Whilst it is fair to hold in mind Lorde's assertion that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' (Lorde, 2018, p. 19) it is contended here that 'our personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action' (Lorde, 2018, p. 19). It is in the crucible of the act of testing and critical engagement, in which those personal visions of the next generation of academics, artists, citizens, subjects, will be forged. It may well be that once that process is started, it is realised that the tools we have are not the ones that we need, but it is only through that investigation and engagement that those claims will become irrefutable. There is liberative confusion in the UK context, which, by virtue of having a constitutional monarchy, is arguably constructed of subjects and not citizens. Citizenship connotes a fuller level of equality and autonomy, subjectship doesn't. Whilst the constitutional arguments (Government Digital Service, 2014) against this designation exist, the nomenclature is difficult to ignore. It is

against this backdrop that much curricula were created and the structure and systems in many institutions, instituted. Here we are aiming to create and empower creative *citizens* with all of the autonomy that that connotes.

STORIES AS HISTORIES

Stories are the way in which knowledge is stored, imparted and understood. Knowledge is an amalgam of experience and/or interpretation of such experience. Those experiences, by definition, are all in the past; histories. History is a collection of stories, ostensibly told by 'master' storytellers, weaving together narratives to create a view of the world subjectively, thus influencing the understanding—and therefore uses—of said history. It is often through these stories that societal mores and ills are taught. Values are imparted through stories because 'dramatic stories about […] heroes in the literature of history and fiction are likely to attract the attention of learners, to arouse their interest, and to raise questions among them that lead to discussion and reflection about values' (Sanchez, 1998) and it is in these discussions and reflections that learning is crystalised and solidified.

As an interesting aside, this approach is mirrored in the psychotherapeutic technique 'Narrative Therapy', which comes from the 'third movement of psychotherapy' in which 'the power of cultural systems in shaping people's lives' (Semmler & Williams, 2000) is addressed. In looking at stories as a repository for history, we are confronted by the question of how people's lives been shaped by cultural systems. Creating artistic work around this impulse creates a space for answers to that question to be pondered and bravely explored.

In order to create space for change there should be a compulsion to draw on knowledge and information from outside of the immediate sphere in which one is working. That is not to say that expert knowledge is to be gained before embarking, in fact it is suggested that the exact opposite may garner positive and powerful results. The idea of the 'expert' connotes that there is an end to the learning journey—in that the higher reaches of academia contain people who know more and more about less and less, creating a potential silo—or echo chamber—of knowledge and thought. Whereas, using ideas and seeing where they lead in a different sphere is an important facet of co-

creation. Artists come to their work from, and with, differing viewpoints and in exploring those actively, together, the tools of mental engagement and therefore critical engagement are sharpened.

WHO ARE PAUL STEPHENSON AND SOPHIA ALEXANDROVNA DULEEP SINGH?

Paul Stephenson (born 1937) 'helped desegregate Britain' (Andrews, 2020) but 'few know' (Yong, 2017) about him and what he was part of. In 1963, and 'seeing what was happening in the USA I [Stephenson] decided we should draw more attention to what was happening here with Black people, particularly in Bristol' (Stephenson & Morrison, 2021, pp. 82-3) and alongside the West Indian Development Council—formed by Roy Hackett, Owen Henry, Audley Evans and Prince Brown—a boycott of the Bristol Omnibus company was organised. The company, 'a nationalised company owned by the British government since 1950, and operated through the Transport Holding Company' (Black History Month, 2022) upheld a 'colour bar' where there was refusal to employ non-White drivers; 'it was a symbol of all that was wrong with Bristol because it advocated and defended racism and was the most notorious racist employer in the city' (Stephenson & Morrison, 2021, p. 83). The boycott and the subsequent highlighting of a similar 'colour bar' in public houses in the city—'Black people […] couldn't get into public houses because bar staff would say they were not welcome there' (Stephenson & Morrison, 2021, p. 104)—resulted in these discriminatory practices being changed after being directly and publicly challenged, ultimately seeding the conditions for the Race Relations Act of 1965.

His activism explores and highlights that 'being Black and British was, and to a large extent still remains, a complex matter' (Stephenson & Morrison, 2021, p. 131) and that 'when a group of people manages to induce institutional change to achieve their aims through the successful staging of a protest movement it generally convinces other groups of people to do the same' (Mansour, 2014).

Born in 1876, 'Princess Sophia Duleep Singh was as close to an international celebrity as it was possible to be in 1910' (Anand, 2015, p. xiv) but is similarly little known. Her father was the last Maharajah of the Punjab and her godmother was Queen Victoria, but as a south Asian female, her story has—mostly—been lost to the haze of time.

During her lifetime 'she had been placed under surveillance by the British government, her movements, along with those of her family diligently recorded, by spies' (Anand, 2015, p. xv); movements which have not been subsequently indelibly written into British history.

Amongst her other activistic-leaning activities across her 72 years—the establishment of the Lascars' Club in London; highlighting the contributions of Indian soldiers in World War One (WWI); nursing wounded Indian WWI soldiers at Brighton Pavilion—Singh was a prominent suffragette. She appears, although often not credited, in a widely circulated picture of the Caxton Hall meeting on 'Black Friday', November 18th 1910. Even though 'in 1914 she gave £51 of her £600 annual income to the Pankhurst war chest' (Anand, 2015, p. 299), her contributions—and sacrifices—for the movement are overshadowed by those of her racialised-as-White counterparts.

Sophia can be seen as a very interesting, and almost singular, study in the intersections of (amongst others) class, sex, gender, and racialisation, as her story challenges many of the stereotypes of those identity designations.

With both Stephenson and Singh not being racialised-as-White, using these figures as lynchpins directly challenges the orthodoxy of 'White as right' as they can be seen to 'pass through the cultural and ideological net which is supposed to screen Englishness from them' (Gilroy, 2002, p. 68). Their work directly challenges White Supremacy and both are very clear agents of change and social justice, making for great provocations for brave conversations.

BRAVE SPACES VS SAFE SPACES

In talking about potentially contentious issues, it is important to create a space where ideas and thoughts are spoken freely, engaged with magnanimously, and critiqued adroitly. There has been much spoken about creating 'safe spaces' for conversations and learning, especially in education, but – it is contended here – 'safe space', is a misnomer. If a space is designated as safe it inherently can't be. To designate something as safe connotes that there are set parameters which are agreed by all who use the space—a check list of sorts—however if all aren't privy, or contributors, to this 'check list' and the designation of safety is made by the convenor, it cannot, and will never, be truly 'safe' for all participants.

Arao and Clemens (2013) speak cogently about the difficulties of safe spaces asserting 'that authentic learning about social justice often requires the very qualities of risk, difficulty, and controversy that are defined as incompatible with safety' (Arao & Clemens 2013, p. 139) and suggest that the linguistic shift to a 'brave space' emphasises 'the need for courage rather than the illusion of safety [in order] to better position ourselves to accomplish our learning goals and more accurately reflect the nature of genuine dialogue regarding […] challenging and controversial topics' (Arao & Clemens 2013, pp. 141-142).

In using this framework, the parameters of discussion and acceptability are predicated on courageous and honest conversation, agreed and explored by all involved in the dialogue—not just the convener. This creates space for social justice, inherent inclusivity, and explicit equality, intrinsic, and essential, to conversations around figures such as Stephenson and Singh and the thematic ideas that their histories provoke.

TALKING THROUGH ISSUES

The sessions in which the narrative drama was created were envisioned as a three-part story, the first act being that of development, the second of formulation and the third as presentation. Using this structure with the undergraduate students allowed for dramaturgical and structural practice to be at the heart of the piece. The dramaturgical impulse presented as 'asking the right questions at the right time' was imperative to the ongoing project and governed by 'brave space' principles.

The developmental stage began with discussions around heroism and definitions/understanding of the concept. Pedagogically, it is important to understand and cement a common starting point to facilitate and structure useful and appropriate learning. These sessions, dramaturgically underpinned as described, focussed around a series of provocations. These provocations, posed as open questions, prompted, facilitated and, in many cases, demanded a discussion which would see ideas clash and contrast. In thinking about heroism and heroes, acts and qualities as a generic concept were sought, which were, after suggested reading around Stephenson and Singh, mapped against the acts and qualities of these two figures.

That the figures were historical but unknown to the participants allowed for investigation as to why, and a linking to heroes of their own. At this stage, the idea of creating a piece of narrative drama seemed a little distance away, but the academically probing and courageous conversations around the topics that were raised and critiqued, began to make clear the thematic underpinning of the eventual piece, as well as the links to previous learning and thinking.

Explicit questioning around why it may have been that these two figures weren't well known was had, and my reasonings for using them being used as stimulus in this project discussed. My bias in the impulse to present the figures was discussed, with factual inaccuracies challenged and researched. This facilitated a bedrock of active, curious and collegiate investigation as opposed to the passive disseminating and imbibing of pre-existing thought, enabling participants to use this process to learn and exercise the tools needed in advocacy for change. That much of the thought generated in the sessions could be linked to existing academic thought around the excision or non-inclusion of figures such as Stephenson and Singh, produced a sense of ownership and confidence leading to new discoveries.

It must be remembered that equality, diversity and inclusive practice aren't nouns, they're verbs, they are active and therefore must be actively triggered not only in what it is that is being learnt, but also in the manner in which it is taught and understood.

Moving to the 'second act' of formulation therefore came easier. The principles of dramaturgical questioning and narrative structure were in the fabric of the project, meaning that themes and characters could be focussed on, with precision.

FRAMING DEVICES AND LAYERS

At this stage framing devices were discussed and trialled.

That these two historical figures had been framed in specific ways led to dialogue around how people and ideas are framed, and more importantly who by and who for. Thoughts around these facets led to the understanding that the framing of a subject can make transparent or opaque layers of understanding and nuance. In using historical figures, it became easier to explore, almost dispassionately—taking in ideas from 'Narrative Therapy'—the contentious issues and subject matter which allowed and provoked more personal, present responses.

The ideas around framing devices seen through a theatrical prism allowed for learning about the framing of stories in general and, in that, the messages and morals contained within. Using this type of theatre practice as a 'trojan horse' for sociological exploration is vital if we are to empower the storytellers of tomorrow with the tools and courage to use the contextualised and empowered 'self' as a site of inspiration in order to tell the stories that will shape and challenge the world in which they wish to create and live in.

The final phase (or 'act') of the project looked to explicit performance technique—including voice, movement, and proxemics—as well as drawing together some of the seemingly disparate work that had been done to this point.

In using the terms 'characters', 'form', 'theme' and 'narrative' it was possible not only to see the piece as an explicit piece of theatre but also the historical constructs and societal injustice it sought to explore and make clear. This type of 'parallel teaching' is crucial in the creation of hybridised and not siloed knowledge—across disciplines—that will help to facilitate a more nuanced and irrefutable conversation around notions of social justice. In creating impenetrable citadels of siloed knowledge, the links and commonalities which allow for sustained and wide-ranging change can be lost. Linking ideas together, especially at undergraduate level, allows for more considered, detailed and 'joined up' thinking to happen, leading to suggestions and maybe even solutions along the same lines.

The search for equality is iterative and if it is remembered that 'in the tripartite function of EDI, Equality is defined and enabled by Diversity and Inclusion' (Daly, 2022), we must be striving for all forms of diversity, whilst ensuring that we are creating spaces where differences in these areas are not only accommodated, but also facilitated.

CONCLUSIONS

Brave not Safe

The dominant reason why those issues are not spoken about freely and with clarity is because the spaces in which to discuss those contentious issues is not created. Throughout the history of theatre—and art more broadly—there is evidence for its use as a site for

challenge and change. That challenge and change often coming from a collective vision leading to new ways of presenting and therefore seeing. Blake's maxim that one 'must create a system, or be enslav'd by another mans' (Blake et al., 1991, p. 144) looms large in this reimagining.

Seen through this prism it becomes clear that 'difference must not be merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. […] Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate' (Lorde, 2018, p. 18). Safe spaces create a 'conflation of safety with comfort' (Arao & Clemens 2013, p. 135) which is counterproductive; 'we do not make transformative changes in the way we learn as long as what we learn fits comfortably in our existing frames of reference' (Mezirow, 1997, p. 7), this is especially true when a position of comfort doesn't include all in the conversation. More often than not, spaces are convened and configured by figures who, through discomfort, stand to learn the most. In all of our work, especially around social justice issues, it's imperative that bravery is prioritised over comfort.

Looking Back to Look Forward

The use of historical figures allows for issues to be raised and spoken about, initially, without personal investment. The distance of time opens a space for discussion and the understanding of context. As is seen, many social justice issues, especially those of racial, class, and gendered justice are ever present, it often seeming as though the same battles are being fought in perpetuity. Speaking specifically about racial justice, but extrapolatable to other social justice fights, it is the case that 'the function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being' (Morrison, 1975). Using historical figures allows for that explanation to happen in the temporal gap between when it occurred and the contemporary encountering of it. Using this as energy—a sort of intellectual, and in this case, theatrical, fuel—facing forward and into the future, new ways of being can be posited with the hope that the argument is moving forward; away from explanation, toward solution. Anecdotally, in the creation of this project, one participant was thankful that they could talk about their personal experiences through the prism of the project, thus allowing for

a level of 'Narrative Therapy' to be enacted. Stories are powerful—they can unlock doors that were hitherto unseen or hidden.

Relationships

All theatre work is predicated on relationships. Good, solid, honest relationships can be predicated on the removal and flattening of hierarchy and preconceptions. If the text, (the source material or the matter in hand), is positioned as 'the arbiter between yourself [as the director or lead artist] and the actor [or participant or student] if there is any disagreement' (Mitchell, 2009, p. 120) the relationship will be built and maintained on professional, work focussed principles. Looking to restorative practices can give a useful framework through which to see and enact relationships, 'the fundamental premise in Restorative Practices is that people are happier, more cooperative and more likely to make positive changes when those in positions of authority do things *with* them rather than to them or *for* them' (emphasis added) (Wachtel and McCold, 2004). The social justice window as posited by Wachtel and McCold (2004), suggests that this 'working *with*' space is created by combining high support (enacted through encouragement and nurturing) with high control (enacted through limit setting and discipline). The principles around brave spaces work in tandem with these aims and should therefore be fervently strived toward. Building relationships is vital for building collectives, and therefore theatrical work.

Use of Theatre to Talk through Issues

This project was initially predicated on the idea of heroes and heroism and the exploration of those themes. That theatre was used to talk through, and to, these themes, allowed and called for active engagement in the topics and ideas studied. In creating spaces in which the necessary discussions and critique could happen, a layered and nuanced piece of theatre was created. That is not to say that the theatre making was secondary, but, as has been elucidated here, was used as a method of structuring learning and challenge, hopefully empowering the participants with the tools needed to challenge injustice and build a more equal, diverse, inclusive and equitable world. Indeed, the sharing of the work, prompted an audience member to comment that it was 'a clever way to open discourse', and in the

pursuit of justice, open discourse is certainly key. It is hoped that the final piece can be shared on professional stages, using the power of storytelling—and theatre—to prompt conversation around history, theatre and self.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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