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## **Social justice and fringe theatre in higher education**

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**Abstract:** Theatre and performance have long been used to platform, challenge, and agitate for social justice. Using contemporary work focussed on marginalised communities can facilitate and broaden the reach and understanding of such work. This paper reports on a case study using *It's A MotherF\*\*King Pleasure* (FlawBored, 2023) in a formal higher education setting, examining what can be gained in the use(s) of such work. In moving through arguments advocating for working with 'fringe' artists and their work, the benefits of conscious enactment of critical pedagogy and the highlighting of the potential benefits to students – and educators – in their understanding of social justice, this paper argues for the inclusion of those new artists making work now, into the teaching material. The case study emphasises the importance and ability of creating a space in higher education (and beyond) for open and engaged inquiry into deeply held viewpoints, with suggestions of how to enact it, offered.

### **Keywords**

social justice; representation; higher education; inclusion; change; performing arts curriculum

### **Social justice, theatre and higher education: the what and the why**

Social justice, and the use of theatre to promote, challenge and understand it have a long history, from Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (first performed in 1959), Martin Sherman's *Bent* (1979) and Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* (1982) through to *It's A*

*MotherF\*\*King Pleasure* (2023) by FlawBored – the textual focus of the case study discussed in this paper. Respectively, these pieces challenge and are thematically engaged with racism, homophobia, sexism and ableism. These, unfortunately perennial ills, *can* be addressed in the curricula and teaching materials that students may be introduced to at both under- and post-graduate study, but the study of theatre and its use for the advancement and understanding of social justice is not uniform across performance-based courses in higher education. Thematic focus on race, sexuality, gender and ableism are not routinely offered in, and on, the canons used and/or referred to.

Hansberry, Sherman and Churchill's work can be argued to be part of the canon of work which is understood to contain works that are 'authoritative in our culture' (Bloom, 1994, p. 2). The scholarly study that has been dedicated to these pieces (for example – see Rose, 2014; Sterling, 2002; Cameron, 2009) and their places of debut<sup>1</sup> can be seen as validation of this assertion. Their ever-topical ideas can be addressed against the context in which they were written, and contrasted or juxtaposed by the context in which they are received/offered. Pieces like Flawbored's, by virtue of its 'newness', can only be viewed in a contemporary context; the same context and temporality in which current students are learning and working.

In working with new(er) fringe artists, and their texts and ideas, access is created for students and lecturers to engage with the new trends and emergent themes that are leading to the exciting and multifaceted provocations which are informing contemporary theatre and performance. The ability for social change, and the tools to facilitate it, are embedded in critical pedagogy and through that pedagogical understanding the skills and desire to create the work that will lead to that change can be gained. Freire remarks that '[l]iberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information' (Freire, 2000, p. 79),

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<sup>1</sup> *A Raisin in the Sun* was first performed at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on Broadway with *Bent* and *Top Girls* both at The Royal Court in London. *It's A MotherF\*\*King Pleasure* debuted at VAULT festival – a fringe theatre festival in south-east London

and the making of theatre, it can be argued, is a pure act of cognition which results in transferal of information. In understanding that '[t]heatre is a form of knowledge, [which] should and *can also be* the means of transforming society' (Boal, 2002, p. 16, emphasis added) it can be argued that those studying theatre, once empowered to see the changes needed, can use their acquired skill and resident fervour, to change the world. The possibility, therefore, to include 'fringe' artists and their work in higher education study, and therefore understanding, is an excitingly potent prospect for all concerned. Keeping the field up to date by being actively engaged in what is happening now, contextualised by what has gone before, is an immeasurably important facet of the work that socially engaged theatre and theatre makers should be immersing themselves in. Looking to the statistics that delineate the age profile<sup>2</sup> of those lecturing, teaching and therefore choosing texts, it can be deduced that the education, worldview and base knowledge of those choosing the plays are, at best, often in the *near-contemporary*<sup>3</sup>; exploration of the riches that fringe theatre can offer can act to address this.

If that exploration is not possible due to factors including geography, there are a growing number of initiatives to remedy the gaps in knowledge should they exist. Projects such as Lit in Colour explicitly addresses 'how literature is experienced by students from the age of seven in primary school, until the end of sixth form or college' (*Lit in Colour* / Penguin Random House, 2023); Multiplay Drama commissions 'established writers and distinctive new voices' to create 'large-cast plays, specifically written to be performed by and appeal to young people' which 'span a wide range of styles, setting and subject matter' (*What Is Multiplay Drama?* / *Multiplay Drama*, n.d.) and 1623 Theatre company's Queer Folio in which '60 queer artists joined members of the LGBTQ+ community to co-create [...] new

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<sup>2</sup> Using the 2022/23 Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) collected data on academic staff across higher education we can see that 29% of all academic staff are between the ages of 36-45; with 25% between 26-35 and 23% between 46-55. (*Who's Working in HE?: Personal Characteristics* | HESA, 2024).

<sup>3</sup> 72% of all academic staff would have completed their undergraduate education *at least* 15 years prior (*Who's Working in HE?: Personal Characteristics* | HESA, 2024)

shows [...] inspired by Shakespeare's First Folio and queer experiences today' (*Queer Folio* — *1623 Theatre Company*, n.d.) are alternate sources of texts should engagement in, and with, fringe theatre be difficult. To build for a new world of broader and more nuanced representation, the present needs to be understood outside of the structures that have been held sacrosanct. The only way to create change is to change. The contemporary world is the one into which students will emerge at the completion of their studies and it is the understanding of where we are – both metaphorically and philosophically – that will influence where we could be.

FlawBored's *It's A MotherF\*\*King Pleasure* was first performed at VAULT festival at the beginning of 2023 with a run at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival following in the summer of that year. It has oft been noted that the 'Edinburgh Festival Fringe has proved to be an important incubator for theatre and comedy shows that end up on the West End, Off-Broadway, and even Broadway' (Putnam, 2023), indeed *It's A MotherF\*\*King Pleasure* found itself in an Off-Broadway theatre toward the beginning of 2024<sup>4</sup>. In understanding that the relationship between fringe and, capitalistically minded, commercial theatre is 'deeply entwined and interdependent [...] with producers working across both, and artists flitting between one and the other' (Gardner, 2021) it must be acknowledged that the work found in fringe contexts can be used to teach the art and artistry of theatremaking, unsullied or diluted by the commercial need to make money. Art, freed from the need to make money, is often more in touch with the emergent trends and concerns that socially engaged theatre is rooted in.

### **FlawBored: *It's A MotherF\*\*King Pleasure***

FlawBored are a disability led theatre company. Formed in 2021 by Samuel Brewer, Aarian Mehrabani and Chloe Palmer, they aim to 'create meta theatrical work with dark irreverence [aiming] to address complex and uncomfortable issues surrounding identity

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<sup>4</sup> The show played a two and a half week run at SoHo Playhouse in January 2024

which no one has the answers to' (*FlawBored / Home*, n.d.). *It's A MotherF\*\*King Pleasure* addresses these issues head on.

The main narrative of the piece explores the monetisation of disability – the creation and exploitation of 'able anxiety'. Blind talent manager Tim, alongside blind influencer Ross and their anxious HR manager Helen, set out on this mission, eventually realising that their manipulation of peoples' desire to fit in, leads to unintended and tragic consequences. In a parallel story 'Aarian', 'Sam' and 'Chloe' (somewhat grotesque versions of the actors playing them) are aiming to deliver a fully accessible show but consistently run into complications, frustrating and making plain the difficulties and hypocrisies that are often seen in the making of 'fully' accessible theatre.

All three founder members graduated from the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama (CSSD) in 2020. Two of the company – Samuel and Aarian – are registered blind and are male identifying, Chloe, the third member, is female identifying. After graduating, Samuel became a co-director of The Diversity Initiative which had the stated aim of addressing 'under-representation, access and diversity in UK drama schools' (Rodgers, 2022, p. 2); Aarian, in 2020, took part in The RXConnect Panel Event: House Of Bernarda Alba (rxtheatre, 2020) centred around the Graeae<sup>5</sup> show of the same name, and hosted by the Manchester Royal Exchange Theatre. The panel discussed issues around the Covid-19 lockdowns in the UK and how disabled people were disproportionately affected, moving to imagining a future where theatre makes even more space for the same people. Chloe has worked, as an actor, almost exclusively on new work which has been written and/or directed by people who are marginalised. These details are important as they suggest an impetus and context for the work that the founders aim to do in, and with, *FlawBored*. These perspectives

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<sup>5</sup> 'Graeae is founded on the mission to create theatrical excellence through the vision and practice of Deaf, disabled, and neurodiverse artists. The experiences of these artists are part of Graeae's genesis, the early productions devised by the company were specifically written to combat societal expectations of disabled people. Over time, the company has produced original works, cabarets, Shakespeare, musicals, and everything in between. While not every show specifically speaks to the Deaf, disabled, and neurodivergent experience, they are all inherently Graeae.' (<https://graeae.org/who-we-are/our-history/>)

and beliefs are formative in their view of the world and the way the world views them. It is precisely because of these experiences and viewpoints that their work was judged to be exemplary for a project rooted in social justice with an angle toward societal change.

### **The Project: Aims and objectives**

The project was run as part of a module called ‘Pilot Project’, which is a 20 credit, core – and therefore compulsory – module taught in semester one at level 6 of the BA (Hons) Theatre and Performance course at Leeds Beckett University. It has the express aim of facilitating collaboration between the students and an artist in the creation of ‘an innovative and sophisticated performance product’ (Leeds Beckett University, 2022) – the final product is often performed to level 4 and 5 students as well as faculty staff. Importantly, this is not a public performance opportunity, taking away a perceived pressure of it having to be ‘perfect’ in order to attract an agent; the emphasis is placed on the opportunity for learning.

Given that this is a project in the final year of the three-year undergraduate degree, there is a clear drive to prepare students for the world outside of the institution. There is a recognition that ‘[h]uman activity is theory and practice; it is reflection and action’ (Freire, 2000, p. 125), and if we are to see their previous two years as theory heavy, this year – and module in particular – is most certainly practice.

The introduction of the ‘new’ into this teaching space allows the new – in this case FlawBored – to begin to lay claim to authoritatively articulating ideas, themes and practice in ‘our’ culture that is ripe for study and scholarly understanding. In doing so, however, there must be a consideration of the ethics and broader ramifications of such an introduction – there is a tautological contention that just as all work that can be studied should be studied, not all work that should be studied is. A positive two-way learning journey could be enacted if those who are to be studied are informed and involved. When extant new work is not used for public performance, it is often used without the full knowledge of the originators. This precludes theatre makers from knowing and understanding the far-reaching effects of the

work that they make whilst also not facilitating a level of ethical working and care. This is important. There must be constant and consistent communication between the educational and professional space, else each will exist in a silo of its own making and not make the gains that are clearly there to be had. Doing so on this project allowed it to be known to FlawBored that they were not to be positioned as a proxy for *all* disability led work but as an example of *one* specific way of creating disability led work. It allowed the project to involve them, as theatre makers *and* individuals.

### **The Project: First steps**

Students were able to contextualise their understanding of the piece through direct contact with the theatremakers – an ability for the training world to talk, directly, to the professional world. Via email they asked:

- What influenced you to make the play?
- What reaction have you had?
- What reaction did you hope to have?
- Why is it important that those ‘on the margins’ have their own voice?
- How did you find the process of making of the piece?

Samuel and Chloe, from the company, graciously responded, in some detail, via a video message to the students. It became apparent that the two-way learning journey, as mentioned, was visible. FlawBored were able to contextualise their work, in their own words, and with agency, to nascent scholars in the academic space, thus confronting one of the themes of their piece – ‘able anxiety’ - and proving that ‘by listening to and respecting the voices of marginalised individuals, we can support them in taking greater control of their lives and challenge those who seek to exclude them’ (Shevlin & Rose, 2022, p. 1). Creating valuable spaces for the marginalised to speak for themselves within the academy is intrinsic to this goal. The act of introducing their work to the project has resulted in *their* entry into the literature, not least via this paper, giving them some level of parity with other works deemed



‘authoritative in our culture’ (Bloom, 1994, p. 2). The students’ learning journey was materially impacted by the knowledge that this sort of work was available and being (successfully) made. They were able to begin to understand that there was work in the professional sphere that thematically and structurally challenged and confronted issues that to them are just conversations or embodied experiences. Their attitude and willingness to partake in the project was markedly different after this interaction. A sense of purpose that existed beyond grades and marks was sparked. In coming face to face – or in this case, screen to screen – with the makers of such work, the students were able to see the theory of Boal (for example) made flesh; they could see what was, is, and could, be possible. It is argued that in introducing the work in a manner that did not remove it from the ‘mainstream’ but positioned it as work that could be accessed and therefore explored in the module, made this realisation more tangible – there was a currency in the contemporaneousness and exclusivity in working with this new text.

If we accept the idea that education exists to pose problems that students can relate to in real terms, we acknowledge that they ‘will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge [...] Their response to the challenge evokes new challenges, followed by new understandings; and gradually the students come to regard themselves as committed’ (Freire, 2000, p. 81). This commitment is a precursor to dedicated independent and self-motivated study.

### **Blueprints and building**

Once fully engaged with the piece, and with the beginnings of ideas around the social justice issues that they wished to explore, the students were tasked with reading the script three times.

The first read of any script, it is here suggested, should be reconnaissance, gaining a sense of *what* is happening. The second read should look to untangle *why* what happens does. The third read, the last before action, is to understand *how* what happens does. It is contended

that encountering scripts in this way allows for the mind to work in the order that it encounters the world, seeing what is there before ascribing meaning – ‘*l'existence précède l'essence*’ (Sartre, 1970, p. 36) – maybe this is an existential mode of thinking, but in a world seemingly experiencing multiple existential crises, this perhaps seems apt.

After the first read, the students were able to recant the base narrative and the secondary story, after the second, the themes became more apparent and after the third, they began to understand and question the structure. Through prior learning, the concept of narrative cogency was something that they were familiar with. In reading, they, as politically aware individuals, began to form ideas of themes that they were interested in exploring. It was therefore clear that the best use of the text would be to mine it for structure, in the knowledge that ‘[w]ith practice, the process of structuring becomes instinctive’ (Jeffreys, 2019, p.9) and that the use of a pre-existing example by an oppressed (or marginalised) group allows those who are marginalised to ‘be their own example in the struggle for their redemption’ (Freire, 2000, p. 54).

In groups, they were tasked to deconstruct each scene, with the aim of identifying what happened in each in broad terms, leading to the creation of a blueprint for their own work, this also facilitated them in understanding how and why the piece read and felt as it did. The uniqueness of the dramaturgical underpinning of the piece was achieved through honing over, possibly, hundreds of hours of work by FlawBored and whilst this method of mining is by no means a replacement for that dedicated work, it is a shortcut to the creation of a new piece of drama without the students losing their enthusiasm for the narrative and themes whilst ‘creating’ a new piece of social justice inspired drama. The aim was to facilitate engagement with social justice and not necessarily with groundbreaking and unseen new forms of theatrical presentation.

Culturing a preference to work in *Brave Spaces* which ‘better prepare participants to interact authentically with one another in challenging dialogues’ (Arao & Clemens, 2023, p.

149) over *Safe Spaces* which, due the conflation of safety with comfort, do not ‘foster a learning environment that supports participants in the challenging work with regard to issues of identity, oppression, power and privilege’ (Arao & Clemens, 2023, pp. 138–139) allowed for, and facilitated, a level of sharpening of the students’ own ideas with minimal external input. If we are to empower the makers of the future, we must give them the tools and see what it is that they make with them. To confront Beckett’s famous statement: ‘Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better’ (Beckett, 1983), we must, in a supported and brave learning environment, allow mistakes to happen as ‘one of the possible solutions to achieving more effective learning’ (Lee, 2020, p. 9). If these moments of failure and/or doubt are understood to be ‘precisely when new knowledge is created’ (Lindgren Galloway, 2023, p.19) empowerment can be cemented pedagogically.

### **Listening and learning**

With a structure now in view, the students were tasked with exploring, in more depth, the social issues that they were interested in. It is important in this work to not impose assumptions but to create a shared learning space where students are able to bring their full selves and their personal interests to the work. The effect of this is to create a level of control and self-determination that such projects could fall foul of without such consideration; it also creates a space of true collaboration and learning for *all*.

Issues relating to geographical division, linguistic differences, cultural differences, challenging stereotypes, age, class, sexism, hierarchy, homophobia, technology, Politics, embodied and lived experience, expectations of young people, gender politics, and meta-theatre were identified and discussed by the group as a basis for their social justice foci – all of which challenge, directly, social norms. These interests align cogently with Baker and Ali’s 2022 research in mapping young people’s social justice concerns. These are issues that are reflective of where they are, and it is in these reflections that these specific young people needed to be met – there was learning for all in these important developmental discussions.

Applied theatre can be understood to offer the ‘potential to play with alternatives, and offer space for communities to engage with the politics of oppression’ (Abraham, 2021, p. 4); this project stays true to this definition whilst also offering the tools to these students to disseminate these ideas through their acquired theatre making skills as they advance into their careers.

### **Motivation**

With a structure and themes in hand, the focus now turned to the creation of the work that they would perform to their peers and staff. It was communally decided that instead of creating separate pieces tackling the vast array of issues identified separately, they would create one piece of theatre would allow for all of the themes to work with and against each other. In taking inspiration from *FlawBored*, the group centred the marginalised as opposed to pitting it against that which creates and services the marginalisation. In doing so, they began to take ownership of their *process* instead of being focussed on the *product*.

In rehearsing, the students were incredibly self-motivated as their ownership of the project and process created an intrinsic motivation (Hanrahan & Banerjee, 2017). In higher education spaces it can often be the case that themes are imposed from a position of hierarchical privilege – the opposite was the case here. Students were very much the thematic leads, with dramaturgical and skill acquisition input offered where and when useful. Harnessing this motivation is important not only in the pursuit of education but in the pursuit of self-determination and understanding, and claiming, of agency – a pre-requisite for social justice advocacy. In order to teach and study through, and with, a social justice lens, it is logical to embed social justice in its study; as the students looked to learn around metatheatrical principles from the source text, they could also learn from metasocial enaction in the learning.

### **Lessons learned**

The final performance, which was entitled 'Listen', comprised a series of thematically connected vignettes. Performatively, these oscillated between narrative based drama, metatheatrical scenes commenting on what went before and/or what was to come, and narrator lead, almost Brechtian inspired narrative interruptions. Thematically, they aimed to explore the social justice issues that the students had identified in their earlier work. Some scenes focussed on one theme whereas some explored, lightly, intersectionality and how the collision of issues can sometimes bring more nuanced discussion and discovery. Between these performed scenes were pre-recorded audio monologues. These aural monologues were all single voice and pulled on the theme of being sorry that things are the way that they are – something gleaned from the analysis of the FlawBored text. They were voiced by the writer in a confessional manner and allowed more themes to be touched upon than could be included in the 45-minute performance. Practically, this allowed for changing of set, and costume for the cast.

In their evaluative statements, the students commented on how much they enjoyed the process, identifying, in several instances, that the autonomy, and freedom, that they had was incredibly important, as was the ability to voice their thoughts and opinions in a space that not only welcomed them but acted upon them. It became apparent that some of the students had a deeper appreciation of their power, and indeed the power of theatre, in tackling and discussing pertinent and the sometimes thorny issues associated with such themes. In evaluative discussion each member of the group delineated something that they learned about themselves; words such as 'understood', 'felt', 'experienced', 'engaged' and 'surprised' were used repeatedly. Their worldview and/or the world hitherto unknown to them, became clear(er).

## **Conclusion**

If we are to seriously agitate for a better world, we are compelled to build the conditions for that better world to come into existence. This is very often more about *how* we

do what we do, over and above what it *is* that we do. Creating a space for open and engaged inquiry into deeply held viewpoints which, in other spaces, could be shied away from, is one of the major bonuses of introducing professional, critically acclaimed, work to students at this point in their careers. Having the ability to converse with those makers makes the world feel smaller and therefore more approachable, engendering a sense of belonging for both sides.

The study of racism, sexism, homophobia and indeed ableism, should – and needs to be – accessible to the broadest range of voices. If we are to have nuanced discussions leading to sustainable and actionable change instead of narrowing, we can – and must – seek to broaden. This broadening – in educational circles at the very least – is reliant on the ability and willing of those who find themselves in positions of power and privilege to acknowledge their position before using it to the betterment of all who are, or could be, in their orbit. Looking outward necessitates acknowledging and laying open gaps in knowledge as well as the ambition and willing to face those gaps down and work with them instead of ignoring them. Doing nothing to create inclusion is arguably as good and as useful as actively raising barriers. To this end, broadening the canon to encompass a wider span of lived experience will only work if it is done, the canon is not an organic organism but one that is curated and kept, even Bloom acknowledges that '[w]riters, artists, composers themselves determine canons, by bridg-ing between strong precursors and strong successors' (Bloom, 1994, p. 522) – if we continue to do the same things in the same ways, the same results will occur, and the same exclusions will perpetuate. We need to find different ways of bridging the gap. Looking to the margins, and the spaces in between, is often where richness lies. Fringe theatre can be a site of canonical growth.

The aim is not to remove, but to enrich, countering Bloom's unfounded assertion that there is an 'academic-journalistic network' who wish 'to overthrow the Canon in order to advance their supposed (and nonexistent) programs for social change' (Bloom, 1994, p. 4).

Knowing that FlawBored's work sits within a rich mellifluous lineage of work that began life in fringe contexts, will give roots to the trees that students will cultivate. They will care because it is theirs and they will own it because it is theirs. Freire's suggestion that when the oppressed 'discover within themselves the yearning to be free, they perceive that this yearning can be transformed into reality only when the same yearning is aroused in their comrades' (Freire, 2000, p. 47) is manifested here as (and in) the students' motivation. The care and ownership witnessed in this case study led to more engaged and engaging learning – there is absolutely no reason for this to not be the case in the other projects that this paper will hopefully inspire.

Connecting those in the profession to those in training allows for there to be a two-way learning journey, where the profession enriches those to come and those to come enrich the profession with new ideas and different provocations. Facilitating this through enacted critical pedagogy methodology ensures that there is a rigour in such work. In this way the profession will always be alert to what it is and what it could be, it would be continuously evolving and including – this can only be a good thing in the telling of our shared humanity.

Not once in this project was the phrase Applied Theatre used, but there is little doubt that that is what this project was. The trick now, is to ensure that the learning and fervour engendered in this process is not dissipated by the adverse experiences that may lay ahead. We change the world one story at a time.

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