In this paper I intend to look at two projects as examples of initiatives in cultural regeneration. Here culture suggests not just the long association with the arts, but also values which are exhibited in the social behaviour of the group in question (see NACCCE 1999 p 40-41). This study then is concerned with initiatives which seek, through theatre, to produce social change for the participants in the projects. Both are concerned with the development of a drama culture as socially significant. The paper offers a brief account of the projects, noting what has been achieved and learnt so far by these two projects. It concludes with a consideration of what indicators are emerging to guide future similar work.

I have not detailed my research methodology in such a short paper. Both are case studies, and I am positioned as an outsider to the work, but not an invisible one: I have built relationships with participants throughout the process. Research methods have included interviews, observations, collection of written data and focus upon a representative group of the participant population. In both projects I am able to triangulate by reference to different types of data (quantative and qualitative) and to the notes and observations of others, fellow researcher and advisor.

The wider context for the projects: a focus on creativity and regeneration

These are very different projects – one theatre based and one school based. Both however are concerned, through drama, with affecting change within the group of people directly involved and within the wider community. There is a focus upon people as the source of change. There is recognition of the need to invest in people because their attitudes and behaviours are models or signs to others in the community, and recognition that people are a creative and active force capable of transformation for themselves and for others. Both projects are products of the current interest, prevalent in the UK and elsewhere in human creativity as a
force to impact upon economies, technological as well as social and personal spheres of life. Projects such as the international Creative Town Initiative which is concerned with urban regeneration states that the principles which guides all initiatives is their potential to ‘unlock the potential’ in people, to ‘stimulate and encourage’ people and ‘create the conditions in which creativity may occur’, factors which are reliant upon ‘the capacity to build partnerships’ (Landry 2001). In the same spirit, a report commissioned by the UK government and published in December 1999, emotively entitled All Our Futures, has recommended better training for artists, better arts training and provision for pupils, trainee and practising teachers and the building of stronger partnerships between arts and culture organisations and schools. New initiatives are being funded nationwide in the UK at present to realise these recommendations. One, the ‘Creative Partnerships’ project focuses upon deprived areas and offers ‘strategic approach for developing and sustaining partnerships between schools and arts, cultural and creative organisations’ (Arts Council 2001) that can be replicated elsewhere. Both of the projects I am about to describe have grown from this context.

**Something wicked?**

The first of my projects was funded precisely because it offered an opportunity for the development of artistic practice but within the context of and with an eye upon its community impact. Coventry is home to two universities in the city both of which boast theatre courses and produce performers. It is also home to the Belgrade theatre, where in 1964 the Belgrade TiE first coined Theatre in Education. Since this time the Belgrade has retained a commitment to its social, community identity: both its local artists and its people. For over ten years it has run a Summer festival which, unlike many which feature touring companies, celebrates the work of local small-scale artists and is now building long term relationships with international artists whose work has some kind of resonance for local artists and people. This festival and the relationships which it has fostered was the foundation for the establishment of the Coventry Theatre Network (CTN).

Seven small-scale companies (including one youth theatre company) together with the Belgrade theatre put in a bid for funding for a three year project in which:
artists would work collaboratively on a number of projects to develop new kinds of theatre
artists might undertake training, theatre experiments or make theatre to develop their own professional practice, collaboratively or alone
through meetings artists would explore shared training, administrative and other agendas which might be better addressed collaboratively.

The bid, entitled ‘Something Wicked This Way Comes’ was focused upon the collaboration of small-scale theatre companies with the Belgrade as partners – a significant change. Typically the funding goes to the Belgrade who as patron, commission work; through CTN funding the small scale companies came as equal negotiators. This reflected current interest in developing regional theatres both as nurturers of small and middle scale work and as active community resources (Boyden 2000 p. 21).

The project featured a number of ‘Big meeting days’ as they were called, run by an independent arts consultant who was known to the group. At each meeting all companies shared their company news about what they were recently, currently or imminently engaged in. At each meeting an agreed agenda was explored and often a specialist was brought in for example to address questions the group had about local arts policy, or new funding initiatives. At times the group provided an important forum for a company to show material, or to present their company. For examples, a common difficulty for these companies was knowing how to market themselves in order to improve their profile and secure a tour for their work. How should they represent their devised experimental work? The CTN gave a supportive forum for debate and feedback.

The rest of the project was concerned with the creative work of the companies involved. For many of the companies the opportunity to make a video of their work was of interest. For example a young company Pathways, reconceived a devised piece inspired by the experience of Anorexia for a short video which was jointly planned, shot and edited under the guidance of a company experienced in multi-media work: Talking Birds. As a result they have developed a new line of education work through the Eating Disorders Association involving the video, pack, workshops and performances. Often companies were able to revise and
develop existing work and to reflect, in practice, on their own processes, on their identity and direction. One company of national repute, *Snarling Beasties*, who had difficulty finding actors prepared to work experimentally, were able to fund workshop weeks with a team of actors from whom the cast of a play was selected, thus ensuring a foundation and a shared set of expectations amongst the cast before the rehearsal process began. Another company, *Theatre Absolute*, kick-started a vision they had of establishing a writing house: a forum for writers, directors and actors to test out new material, relationships approaches without the requirement to realise a performance, possibly as a process in the writing of a play, or in revising, or in exploring approaches for realising a text. The Writing House is now a highly successful vehicle and many of the plays that have been through the process have since been staged successfully at the Belgrade. Another company, *Shaskeen*, with a strong profile of youth and community work with the large Irish population in Coventry has been responsible for developing a strong community link with the theatre through plays using mixed professional and community cast and initiating carnival through the streets of Coventry to celebrate the growth of community involvement with professional artists who teach skills of performance, costume and float-making. These are just a few snippets of the range of work which has developed from the CTN.

There have been particular performance projects which have engaged many artists from the companies collaboratively. One contentious project has been the realisation of ‘A Hundred and One Dalmatians’, directed by Debbie Isitt of *Snarling Beasties*, involving five of the seven CTN companies in some capacity. The production was an experimental realisation of the story, which is most popularly known as Disney’s animation. Isitt’s production moved between film and theatre, the stage intruded into the audience and actors entered from numerous places including from a rope above the audience, snow blew in their faces, in short the piece sought to create ‘surround theatre’. In Isitt’s version Cruella conveyed an obsession with her own power, invoking storms, watching like Big Brother through CCTV cameras and verbally beating her men into submission. For Isitt the narrative echoed the human atrocities of the concentration camps and in more recent year of ethnic cleansing, where many were hounded (and killed) by the henchmen of one or a few with a singular vision. Cruella was an aging film star
Driven by her own jealous obsession with her faded youth and glamour. Her ‘badduns’ were foolish, scared but dangerous louts and the puppies were played by children (the new borns being shown as babies to emphasise their vulnerability). This was indeed ‘wicked’. The content and style was quite challenging and shocked some audiences who, on the basis of popular culture brought very young children. Some audiences complained, some walked out. But the Belgrade with Isitt decided quite intelligently to open the display boards to public comment inviting every audience member to write their views and pinned everything up including bad press. This gave a voice also to the 101 children involved, many of whom expressed their disappointment that adults should patronise them by suggesting that the material was too dark for children and who could not celebrate the achievement of such a huge community cast in a professional experimental main stage piece. Their comments made illuminating reading. The piece remained a box office success – through Isitt’s reputation and the controversy itself and attracted a high audience not just from the city but from outside the city and even outside the region.

The performance was not the only difficult aspect though. To bring a director of a small-scale company into an established theatre building was to invite a clash of cultures. In the former actors and technicians are contracted especially for a show and there is a small team pulling together under the pressure of making and touring the work which means that regular hours and defined roles become blurred. In the latter the opposite is true: actors and technicians are in-house and work on every show, work regular hours, clock off at regular hours, have defined and expected practices. Add to that the director concerned is renowned for practice which is intuitive and intense, where the demands upon resources and hours are flexible and there is the potential for fireworks. Of course difficulties were anticipated and meetings were set up for theatre staff to be briefed about different expectations but the nature of the process was not grasped by many theatre staff who felt excluded from the understanding shared by the actors. There was a lack of a shared vocabulary so that the values embedded in each culture remained different rather than shared. Each felt conscious of demands and compromise but not of common ground.
Just how ‘wicked’?

The title of the project was, as you will doubtless have noted, comes from the witches in *Macbeth*: where wicked suggests danger, but also excitement. There was also an intended pun on the popular contemporary meaning of ‘brilliant’. So was it?

Most of the partners in the CTN consider the three years to have marked a period of growth and success. All appreciate what the funding bought them: freedom and opportunities to experiment and to develop, confirm or challenge their direction. For most partners the CTN has been significant in their growth as artists also because it has removed the personal isolation of being an artist and reminded them that there is a thriving community of artists in the city. It has also for most companies removed the defensiveness that companies often feel in a competitive funding framework prompting collaborations, further developing existing contacts, even sharing or passing work to each other if appropriate. This is no mean feat. Four of the companies now have offices in the rehearsal studios which neighbour the Belgrade theatre and this has evidently been significant in developing a community ethos. The other and perhaps most significant aspect of funding has been that it has given companies impetus and leverage to apply for more funding. Most companies accounts of project funding show multiple sources in which CTN funding is but one source, thus more partners are engaged. The amount of co-productions between companies, the Belgrade and other theatres has increased contributing to national and regional partnerships emerging. Each of these factors indicates that the existing artistic community has been strengthened and developed by the project. Younger companies on the peripheries of the project have benefited from the emerging culture and commented upon the importance of the network to their development. Some mentoring relationships have developed between CTN and younger companies.

This period has seen a number of new departures for six of the companies, some examples of these are:

- Debbie Isitt has made her first full-length film which has lead to Isitt being invited to be a partner in a new film production company called Her Films.
- The Belgrade have attracted new audiences through the work developed with these companies and more of the work of the CTN artists has featured in the main Belgrade programme rather than just within the Arts Alive programme.
- Site-specific work in the cathedral; ruins and the town centre has expanded involving collaborations between internationally renowned and local actors and directors.
- Work involving the community as performers on the main stage has become a regular feature of Belgrade work.
- Actors with learning disabilities have worked in performance projects directed by CTN artists, such as the Mysteries.
- *Talking Birds* have set up a website for their company with some on-line performance elements as well as a spring board for the expansion of the company members’ individual identities as writer, composer, film-makers and designer.
- *Shaskeen* have moved into direction and into working collaboratively with other companies developing site-specific and street performance skills.

The success of the Coventry Theatre Network has gained national profile – the model is of interest to the Arts Council of England and the work of the companies concerned has benefited from that profile. Funding is not necessarily easier now and CTN funding has ended, but profile is a form of cultural capital which improves the position of these artists in the competitive ‘field of cultural production’ (Bourdieu 1994) and is proving to earn them greater visibility. The community of artists in Coventry has been strengthened by the CTN. New companies and community-based companies are benefiting from this support. The Belgrade theatre has now seriously begun its journey towards regenerating its profile as a regional theatre committed to a greater range of performance forms of quality through a wide range of local, national and international collaboration. Staff are now better able to support and work with a greater range of artistic practice. One mark of this has been the proposal by the City Council, with whom this journey has not been easy, to seek funding to provide electrical points in the cathedral ruins. This offer is recognition of some of the powerful outdoor work which the Belgrade has presented here and which has attracted large audiences from the city and beyond - many of whom are not regular theatre attendees. This was the achievement of last year’s ‘Mysteries’ which were devised by
a mix of local and international directors and actors and which were celebrated nationally. These are the achievements.

But it has not all been ‘wicked!’ Some experiences have been rather dark. One younger company has felt unable to fully divest itself of its image as a student company and has not felt among equals but rather patronised, of having expectations raised but not fulfilled. The same sentiment was expressed by the youth theatre group. Inequality of funding increased these tensions for a few companies also. Many found the Big Meeting Days were excellent for updating and networking but found the group discussions less dynamic and productive than they had hoped. One even suggested that the inequality between the Belgrade and the companies should have meant that there were some opportunities for meeting without the inhibiting presence of the Belgrade. One company spoke entirely negatively of the experience of feeling more ostracised at the end than at the beginning although here there were other agendas at play which affected relationships with others in the network.

The extent to which companies express the positive qualities of the project appears to relate quite closely to the sharedness of values or the respect and understanding of each other’s different values and practices. For some companies where the dialogue had not been established or developed and where common ground was limited it was difficult to develop the culture. This was further compounded by poor information flow between meetings. Communications might have been prompter and more transparent between members at every stage of the process, avoiding the difficulty of partial circulation. E-mails / letters tended to occur just in advance of and after the Big Meeting Days dealing only with that agenda. For example, there was opportunity for the meeting days to be more rigorous and focused through the use of e-mail to circulate ideas, probe responses and collate views in advance. The dynamic of the Belgrade as the ‘big ship’ in the project also caused tension.
Dramatic Effect in schools

I have left less time for my second study – deliberately so because this is a project in progress. However I would like to give an account of the project so far.

This is a project in one education authority in the UK. The arts inspector here instigated a bid for funding a two-year, artists in schools project in three schools. The objectives were:

(i) to advocate for the arts as central to whole school planning: impact upon whole school culture through the development of confidence, creativity, personal and social development
(ii) to demonstrate the importance of partnerships between professional artists and schools, namely: to develop professional and community based arts practice and culture in the borough and; to offer schools a a means to enhance school arts culture and provide a framework for creating and sharing different models of artistic practice
(iii) to include at least one school in the North of the authority where there are significant concerns about social exclusion.

In fact two of the three schools involved in the project are in the North of the Borough. The third, where an arts culture is flourishing, has had to defer its first project. Data so far then relates to an area in the North. This area, formerly in Birmingham, was a new housing initiative some 25 years ago where council house residents in slum areas of the city were moved with a view to ‘urban regeneration’. Open space, new shopping centres and houses and a singular social type did not constitute adequate basis for a healthy community – as Landry (1990) now tells us. In this part of the authority truancy is a major problem, and exam results at age 16 last year were only 13% compared with a national average of 49% and a 55% average in the rest of the borough (OFSTED reports). Expectations are very locally referenced and there is a high incidence of crime. Pupils are recognised to suffer from poor self-esteem and confidence and this project was for both of the schools studied so far, centrally concerned with raising self esteem. In line with the findings of Matarasso (1997) this project was constructed on the premise that participation in the arts ‘is an effective route for
personal growth, leading to enhanced confidence, skill-building and educational developments which can improve people’s social contacts’. Drama in these schools focused upon drama in education methodologies with high focus upon social behaviours and issues.

Per year, the project involves:
- two half day meetings of all artists, drama teachers, senior management team, administrator, LEA arts inspector and researcher (one to plan one to review practice)
- one half day meeting in each school between artists, drama teachers, senior management team, administrator and LEA inspector.
- 10 artist days in school with pupils.

Year 9 pupils have been selected (14 year olds) as concerns are frequent about drop off in interest, levels of attainment and lack of confidence and self esteem and this is a critical time to effect exam choices and career paths. These pupils will continue to be involved in the project in year two in peer teaching. The proposal of arranging satellite activities for other groups in the school to promote this culture was also part of the original proposal but has only been adopted by the third school. In all schools a member of the Senior Management Team was involved in the project planning in order to support the status and potential of the project in schools.

Each school has drawn up its own criteria for the selection of pupils and for the use of time. The intentions common to all are to develop a stronger drama culture which celebrates pupil achievement, promotes creativity and confidence. However documentation for the first of the schools reveals aims which were exclusively concerned with raising self-esteem. Here the 10 artists days in school were planned as separate weeks for different groups of children at each end of the spectrum of the school population: one disaffected, one able and interested. The rationale for this was that both groups, who were typically mixed together in daily school life would benefit from natural peer support. The disaffected pupils, 86% boys, would have no audience to ‘clown’ to and instead might be strengthened by building a new group identity. The able and interested pupils, (45% boys), might be encouraged to extend themselves
uninhibited by the peer pressure of ridicule for their ‘boffish’ interest and ability. Neither group was an extant group and some did not know each other. A mask theatre company with some 10 years of experience working in schools led this project doing mask-making and mask theatre with the first group and a devising mask theatre project with the second.

The second school stated a number of objectives which centred upon the development of a stronger drama culture and the raising of self esteem. Here the 10 days, spread over three weeks were for year 9 drama pupils who had selected drama a GCSE in year 10. As in the first project this was not an extant group but would remain one. It reflected a typical drama GCSE group at this school with 70% boys, where the choice of drama for GCSE mixed enjoyment with avoidance of more formally taught subjects where writing dominates. In the group were a handful of more physically mature boys led by one character able to control the group and the year. A theatre company who devise experimental ritual-physical theatre and who have twelve years of experience working with children in schools and in running a youth theatre began the project. They withdrew after four days and younger dance-theatre company took over, working in a more choreographed fashion and, like the mask theatre company drew heavily upon games to teach skills and deal with the varying energies and engagement levels of the group.

**A Dramatic Effect? The issues and indicators to date**

The performance work of all students in these projects has been impressive. Enjoyment was high and the increase in pupils’ confidence and self-esteem within the life of the projects has been visible. The Year head of the ‘disaffected’ group was struck by the maturity in the way the group received applause at the end of their performance, standing tall and still and, significantly for her, leaving the performance space to return to a classroom quietly, sharing comments but not in a rowdy way – their usual behaviour. A member of the senior management team closely involved in the project commented that he wondered whether he had got the people in the groups wrong – he felt he would not see the performance of some children in this group bettered the following week, due to the talent evident. Within the project and to those
staff who visited or spoke to pupils outside the sessions in school about the work, every pupil gave positive feedback. Everybody felt special to be in the project. The ‘able and interested’ group were articulate about how this experience would help them present themselves to other people generally and re-new their interest in and commitment in drama. They were excited and breathless to explain what confidence, skill and inspiration they had developed. It was clear that for them, having this experience alongside similar children had enabled them to show what they were capable of and given freedom to speak. This was not quite so marked with the ‘disaffected’ group where there were no models of alternative behaviour to lift the group and the drama teacher spoke of using a mixed group model in next year’s work. However when we combined the two groups to discuss the next year’s plans, typical school behaviour resumed. The ‘disaffected’ group resumed their usual ‘clown’ roles and dominated the time whilst the formerly articulate ‘able and interested group’ fell silent.

Some of the ‘disaffected’ group in the first school mentioned feeling a bit bored by long mask-making sessions although in practice these were sessions of focus, calm and quiet and pupils worked with unprecedented success and ability. Staff commented that they had never seen these pupils concentrate or work with such engagement before. All of this group were fully committed to the crafting of their mask and were proud of the finished product. All spoken or written feedback suggested that pupils had valued the experience. Only this group gave signs of the short-termism of the experience. One particularly vocal boy who often appeared to touch the nerve of the group, within minutes of coming off stage where he had been proud and confident, was telling the artists how much better the ‘other’ group would be than them. This group were desperate to know if the artists had preferred the work of the ‘other’ group. Their response to the idea of their involvement in peer teaching - a responsible role – was greeted with disbelief. They knew that they were typically distrusted by the teachers in school – a point which had been forcibly made on two occasions during the week when two teacher’s expectations of theses pupils had clashed with the ideals of the project. When I spoke to this group at the end of the project they were already looking gloomily towards next week and normal timetable – the glory of the performance had faded fast.
By contrast the incoming GCSE class in the second school were looking forward to being able to use their increased physical skills and confidence is in their drama next year. This group had had a difficult experience with the first artists they had worked with and although they had actually learnt a lot about their physical presence and use of space, they had not enjoyed the work with the artists concerned. This had actually heightened the sense of success and comfort with the second group of artists who were younger and more playful in their work. There was here a clear channel for the work to progress and be consolidated – the GCSE drama course.

There is still a lot to unpack in this project and comparative evidence to be gathered when considering the process in a very different type of school with different objectives. However the immediate impact has been positive. There are lessons to be learnt. In our planning for next year we will be considering:

• The need to ensure that all information is circulated to all partners concerned: the education authority via the inspector, the administrator, the arts complex, head teachers and senior management team in schools, drama teachers involved, artists, researchers and parents.

• Greater transparency with pupils involved about the processes and aims of the project in order to engage them as collaborators rather than recipients of the work. If pupils are aware of the longevity of the project and the commitment and investment made by all partners it is a demonstration of the belief and value for pupils’ potential and achievement. It may foster and invite pupil creativity and initiative in supporting the project aims within and without the project frame.

• Strategies need to be considered for extending the work more into the pupils’ local and wider community. This could build a better community profile for the work in schools, both artists own and pupils work which may contribute to the engagement of a wider audience in the arts and their potential – performance and participatory work.

• Better understanding of the models of artistic practice available, the characteristics of such models and where to gain information about artists work in schools

• Better understanding of peer teaching models which might be used to cascade the work and growing drama culture throughout the school
• Creative strategies for channelling and building upon artistic practice throughout the curriculum, beyond the performance forum

Common indicators across the two projects

What have we learnt?

Both of these projects drew upon current understandings of the ways in which successful initiatives are realised. Both focused upon the investment in people and development of the human dimension in cultural regeneration. Both engaged partners with related interests to support the achievement of their goals. Both have showed signs of success in improving the culture of their context and indicators that the success may outlive the life of the project. The Arts Alive festival continues to grow and features the work of CTN and new theatre companies alongside site-specific work from international companies with whom collaborations continue. The impact of the CTN upon year-round programming is noticeable with a comparison of the Belgrade programme three years ago and then today. This autumn the Belgrade began its autumn season with a main-house play featuring professional actors and actors with learning difficulties: this too is a first which has grown out of the CTN experiment and growth of community work within this time.

Of course there have been difficulties and setbacks. Not all partners have been ready to maximise the opportunities, some consider the CTN project to have failed because theatre has not been transformed by the experiment and due to the level of difficulty in making some of this collaborative work. Some artists considered that they were put in a position of personal risk that was too high to be tolerable, i.e. that they were unsupported by their supposed ‘partners’. Of the companies involved, half have expressed frustrations and disappointments about what was realised, one to a high level, whereby future partnerships may well be affected. So there are lessons to be learnt. What appear to be significant factors in the success of such initiatives?
• Keeping all partners informed at all stages of the project, regarding administrative matters, new developments and consulting or giving reminders of issues to be or being discussed. E-mail was/is underused by partners in both projects. Investment in e-mail and prompt administrative habits (prompts by phone to look at documents if necessary can speed up and improve the quality of face-to-face interchange). Young people are significant partners and must also be fully engaged. Partnerships are key.

• Both projects are using consultants and advisers to support partners realise the goals of the project and these roles have been vital to the running of the projects. The importance is in having an interested, informed and sympathetic adviser whose role it is at times to support, sometimes to instigate and organise. This enables the partners to focus on their own needs whilst learning about others’

• The forum and framework for dialogue has been a difficult issue on both projects and clearly is a sensitive issue. Again there are possibilities for using e-mail to sound out initial responses or to gather collective responses and thereby ensure informed engagement in debates at meetings. However there is the more delicate issue of the typical social dynamic of partners’ natural context and how differences between these might make a particular forum more or less comfortable or useful to some partner rather than others. The focus needs to be on the purpose of the group meeting in facilitating dialogue, but creative alternatives might be considered.

• In both projects it is clear that the success of the project would have been strengthened had there been a better understanding by partners of each others’ practice. There is more scope for sharing of information, joint training sessions or workshops where values and beliefs can be expressed, heard and respected. Forums need to be found for participants to demonstrate their principles, practices and context in order that areas of common ground / difference can emerge in advance of the collaborative projects.
• Longer preparation and development of collaborative projects / initiatives to develop better insight into the constraints and possibilities offered by the way of working and contexts of partners: to allow values and beliefs can be expressed, heard and respected.

• We need to be open in planning to new ways of developing initiatives; facilitating reflection time in creative ways e.g. two ideas which have just been piloted within the Dramatic Effect project are firstly the use of a Big Brother room for pupils to articulate thoughts using a form familiar to pupils - popular culture; secondly for pupils to be responsible for teaching the incoming cohort during drama workshops in school. Work will also be performed in a community venue. These initiatives are concerned with drawing upon the insights and ideas of all partners so that others can learn from them and value their contributions as collaborative planners.

• There have been opportunities for celebrating and sharing the work of these projects more widely in the community which have not been fully realised. Some of these might have been better prepared for in the planning, others require on-going receptivity to this possibility. There is a vital need for such initiatives to cascade through their local and wider communities. Which is, I think, almost where we came in.
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