Renegotiating resilience, redefining resourcefulness

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Abstract:

Applied theatre and performance practice offers persuasive illustrations of the ways in which dominant conceptions of resilience and resourcefulness – frequently aligned with neoliberal values – may be critiqued, challenged and displaced. As the contributions within this issue illustrate, such potential resides in a complex ecology of embodied knowledges and contested value, unfolding within located scenes of constraint and complicity. By drawing on a range of practices from different national and cultural contexts, this issue explores the conditions within such renegotiations become possible, in and through performance.

Keywords:

resilience, resourcefulness, neoliberalism, relational aesthetics, solidarity

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This issue traces the ways in which applied performance practice might manifest – and make possible – located and embodied practices of resourcefulness and resilience that counter dominant, neoliberal conceptions of individuated responsibility, sustainability and exchange. In this editorial, we briefly outline a dominant neoliberal model of resilience and its intersection with the field of applied theatre and performance, before considering how applied theatre and performance practices might nonetheless provide for resistance, critique and the imagining (if not practice) of alternatives. We then introduce this issue's contributions in the context of these debates and concerns, locating their publication in a moment of suspended but persistent hope amid the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

First coined to describe the potential for stability or equilibrium in ecological systems, the concept of resilience has migrated into the domain of social policy and political theory as a highly influential paradigm for understanding the potential for adaptation in the face of unpredictable challenges or 'shocks' (Walker and Cooper 2011). It is a concept which describes the capacity of individuals, organisations and complex systems to 'bounce back' to a state of stability following a disturbance as well as the potential for 'bouncing forwards' through forms of transformative growth triggered by adversity. As a number of our contributors identify, resilience has developed since the 2000s as a concept that has served to rationalise and naturalise the redistribution of responsibility for social and systemic problems from the state to communities and individuals. A broader dynamic of individualised responsibility is perhaps most clearly evident in the discursive space of healthcare and personal well-being where Sally Baker and Brian Brown have traced the construction of an 'idealised, responsible individual' who manages their body to minimise the chance of illness, and to merit medical intervention upon becoming sick (2012, 2). A similar structure can be traced in the reframing of education as a practice of self-enterprise in which young people are

required to invest in education or training in order to leverage the possibility of a better future in ‘circumstances that mostly escape our differing, individual abilities and capacities to shape these circumstances’ (Kelly 2017, 58).

Understood as highly desirable repertoire of skills for managing and responding to risk in an uncertain world, resilience has taken on the quality of moral virtue with ‘resourcefulness’ reframed as praise for one’s ability to continually adapt to doing the same (or ideally more) with less, and with one’s performance ultimately gauged in economic terms. As front-line workers within often complex and challenging social contexts, applied practitioners may experience this dynamic as a demand to evidence social change and value for money at the same time. As Jenny Hughes and Helen Nicholson observe, economic imperatives may uphold an emphasis on applied theatre ‘as a mode of personal and social problem-solving in which predetermined goals are realised, and this can mean that applied theatre is conceptualised in ways that serve neoliberalism’ (Hughes and Nicholson 2016, 4). In this respect, the rehabilitative and transformative intentions of applied practice may mark a particular vulnerability to co-option by neoliberal priorities insofar as neoliberalism emphasises the desirability of entrepreneurial individuals and communities who ‘take charge’ of their own destinies without making demands on the state.

Following the global financial crisis of 2007/8, resilience has become an imperative: a practice of flexibility and adaptation deemed necessary for surviving what are imagined to be unavoidable crises (even when such crises are the result of political choices in the form of specific approaches to financial regulation or austerity-led cuts to public spending). Across the arts and culture sector and in publications produced by one of the UK’s funding body Arts Council England, resilience talk most often emphasises the financial health of organisations and their capacity to adapt to seemingly unavoidable systemic shocks by reducing their dependency on state funds and developing multiple private and philanthropic income streams

(so as to better survive the loss of any one source of revenue). As Gupta and Gupta (2019) observe, this shift has involved the coupling of market-based management strategies to the moral impetus of ecologism, and the concurrent framing of resilience as an inherent quality of the arts and culture sector that nonetheless requires a continuous effort to sustain. If resilience is legible only in the aftermath of trauma, we might similarly follow how resourcefulness also manifests as a response to an absence, shortfall or precarity in available resources. In both instances, the terms may mark compulsory practices of change demanded by neoliberalism's distribution of responsibility for managing intractable 'risk' without granting access to the resources or structures of power that might enable that duty to be fulfilled (see Joseph 2013).

In critiquing the normative dimensions of this dominant model of resilience, Brad Evans and Julian Reid have sought to outline a political project which resists insecurity as the natural order of things and thereby sacrifices any political vision of a world 'in which we might be able to live better lives freer from dangers' (2013, 95). For Evans and Reid, such a politics requires us to entertain the possibility of outliving the 'catastrophic imaginary' of the contemporary moment, and imagining a subject 'which affirms and follows the paths opened up to it by the visions of other worlds which the play of images creates for it' (2014, 195). In turn, Isabell Lorey has argued for the necessity of breaking open 'the binary of security and protection on the one side and the dangerously precarious on the other' (Lorey 2011), while recognising the subversive potentiality of the 'small sabotages and resistances of precarious everyday life' (Lorey 2015, 212).

These and other critical perspectives have been taken up by researchers within the broader field of performance and cultural studies – notably, Jennings, Beirne and Knight's (2016) exploration of precarity and resilience among applied theatre and community arts workers in Northern Ireland. This work considers the creative, financial, and psychological forms of

‘tactical adaptation’ that may be invoked to sustain one’s practice without becoming burnt out (Jennings, Beirne, and Knight 2016, 21). Conversely, Pasquinelli and Sjöholm (2015) have traced the ways in which artists based in London have deployed forms of ‘strategic adaptability’ by engaging with – and developing – networks and spaces outside of the mainstream art system. Pasquinelli and Sjöholm’s research illustrates the ways in which the development of a resilient career might involve both individual and collective forms of agency – both within and outside of established institutional spaces. In turn, Heddon and Porter’s (2017) discussion of the *Walking Interconnections* project (engaging with the lived experiences of people with disabilities) offers understanding of how arts-based practices might position resilience as recognising ‘the value of vulnerability rather than seeking to overcome it’ (2017, 197) and thereby provide ‘sustaining grounds’ for a fairer and more inclusive society.

Such work often emphasises the located, contextual nature of resilience, as in Michael Balfour, Penny Bundy, Bruce Burton, Julie Dunn and Nina Woodrow’s *Applied Theatre: Resettlement: Drama, Refugees and Resilience* (2015) which centres on practice undertaken within refugee communities in Queensland, Australia. In this work, resilience appears less a quality or trait of individuals than a dynamic process, something which might be ‘resourced’ rather than constructed, and manifest not in ‘heroic strategies that can be put in place by skilled practitioners, but rather mundane, fragile and quiet processes embodied in each individual and environment’ (Balfour et al. 2015, 199–200). This body of work runs alongside Sheila Preston’s consideration of resilience as enabling a pedagogical practice in which applied arts practitioners are better able to acknowledge and work with ‘uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity’, to reflect critically on their motives and choices, and gather the courage to ‘act in the moment when there is no obvious “right thing to do”’ (Preston 2016, 80).

This special issue speaks to, from and against these possibilities, providing concrete instances of resilience and resourcefulness within applied practice that resist and refuse the normative qualities of resilience as a mode of neoliberal governmentality. Concrete may not be quite the right word, and we go in search of softer language as performance leads us to understand the affects, rhythms and forms of exchange that might build more sustaining relations to the world, our communities and our bodies. In presenting that frame, we are mindful of the (sometimes self-congratulatory) ways that performance might narrate itself as presenting the radical alternative to hegemonic systems and values. While many of the projects captured here describe modes of resistance and critique, our contributors also reflect upon the ways in which performance might mediate rather than directly challenge neoliberal imperatives. Sometimes the embrace of resilience in its normative forms is a tactical choice which enables access to arts funding: we might understand how an active engagement with resilience discourses enables resourcefulness by leveraging resources – or in plainer terms, money. We are also conscious that the geographic scope of the issue (engaging with practice and practitioners in England, the Republic of Ireland, Scotland, Singapore, the USA, Palestine and New Zealand) offers a relatively narrow snapshot of a wider field of practice and may especially reflect the forms that resilience has taken in the global north. At the least, our approach to editing this issue and framing its debates has been informed by our own location in north western Europe and, more specifically, the ways in which more than a decade of austerity economics has shaped the UK's socio-political landscape. Put simply, we have been most able to recognise and critique the forms of resilience and resourcefulness which are most familiar to us.

Nonetheless, we are drawn to the possibility of sustaining practices that are incompatible with (and even potentially immune to) market logics, which insist on forms of relation which are not transactional and that affirm alternative ethics of encounter and exchange. To that end,

this issue engages with a range of practices, each of which offers a different response to the questions ‘resilience to what?’ and ‘resilience for whom?’ The issue opens with a consideration of how marginalised or vulnerable communities of different kinds have sought to re-imagine and practice resilience through collaborative, participatory modes of applied performance. In opening the issue, Cathy Sloan draws on posthumanist philosophies to consider the place of a pop-up ‘Recovery Arts Café’ in contributing to the creation of social environments that might support recovery from addiction. In this work, resilience is not viewed as a hallmark of individual robustness but instead understood as a dynamic practice in which a recognition of shared forms of precarity might enable a collective awareness of the social conditions of addiction and recovery. In turn, Ben Dunn explores the relational qualities of ‘becoming’ at stake in the work of Bolton-based community drama group, Melodramatics, where a collaborative devising project centred on experiences of domestic violence suggests an ethics of ‘collective entanglement’ that allowed its participants to turn away from the demand for individuated resilience and consider the innate potential of their being-together in sustaining alternative forms of agency and self-expression. Nadine Holdsworth’s exploration of Coventry’s ‘Homeless Monopoly’ pilot project continues this conversation by considering the ways in which a modified form of the popular boardgame might call attention to the multiple forms of resource and resourcefulness needed to address the risks associated with homelessness. Here, the dynamic of ‘gamification’ (understood as an extension of applied theatre’s desire to stimulate debate, raise awareness and imagine other worlds) suggests new and alternative models for the intersubjective sharing of knowledge and experience through performance.

The second section focuses on the how the pursuit of alternatives to a dominant, neoliberal rendition of resourcefulness and resilience may nonetheless involve and demand participation within value systems, structures and other practices of cultural production that applied

practitioners may be seeking to challenge and displace. Opening this section, Ben Walter's interview with Simon Casson, Dicky Eton and Emmy Minton of London-based queer performance collective *Duckie* considers the resourcefulness necessary to sustaining a varied and experimental arts practice in austere times, and the forms of resilience that have emerged from its community projects with older people and for young working-class queer, trans and intersex artists of colour. John Yves Pinder's shorter provocation extends recognition of the ways in which arts and social organisations may be called upon to engage with and even incorporate neoliberal values into their practice in order to secure the funding resources that will enable them to become resilient. Focusing on the relationship between technocratic definitions of resilience and those emerging from arts practices within the permacultural movement, Pinder considers how both perspectives may naturalise social relations in a manner that inadvertently guards against the possibility of social change. In the following pages, the work of Natalie Lazaroo and Molly Mullen extends this issue's awareness of how negotiations with dominant conceptions of resilience unfold in the context of specific cultural values and vocabularies. Centred on the practice of Singapore's The Community Theatre group, working with young people and families living in low-income households, Lazaroo's dialogue considers the role that applied performance might play in the relationship between resilience and precarity against the backdrop of a national cultural emphasis on meritocracy. In turn, Mullen's article suggests how the 'enforced resourcefulness' of a competitive, marketized arts funding system might fail to account for the organizational and financial survival strategies of Auckland youth performance companies – and considers how concepts from within Māori culture may animate an alternative economy grounded in an ethics of solidarity.

The third section shifts in focus from organisations to bodies to continue thinking through how applied performance might (re)value resilience by paying closer attention the

experiences, aesthetics and practices of those found to be in a position of difference from able-bodied, neurotypical norms. Here, Margaret Ames reflects upon moments of rehearsal practice with Speckled Egg Dance Company to explore how micro-instances of learning disability dance might enact resilient forms of social kinaesthesis. By paying close attention to the movement of bodies with disabilities in the personal space of a domestic living room and kitchen, Ames invites us to attend to the micro-instances of dance that might mark a political aesthetic capable of rerouting normative reifications of intelligence and capacity. In the following article, reflecting on her own performance practice and lived experience of chronic pain, Sarah Hopfinger considers the prospect of approaching pain as a source of skill and experience (rather than as a barrier or inhibitor to performance making). Informed by a research collaboration with dance theatre maker Raquel Meseguer, Hopfinger's work makes the case for how diverse 'crip' skills and embodied knowledges might be developed and celebrated through performance and its audiences. Continuing this exploration of resilience as form of embodied and relational knowledge, Chloe Bradwell considers the dynamics of touch within applied practice involving young people collaborating with older people living with dementia. Reading against social and biomedical accounts of dementia as 'lack', Bradwell's close examination of subtle, nonverbal behaviours illustrates the role of performance in facilitating forms of relational citizenship that might redress the real and imagined social barriers surrounding adults with dementia.

The final section of the issue considers the circulation and operation of resourcefulness and resilience in contested sites – that is, in locations which advertise the entanglement of theatre and performance's spatial practices within regional, national and globalised power dynamics. Opening this section, Annecy Lax considers ASHTAR Theatre's work within the complex geopolitical context of Palestine to question how discourses of resilience may work to naturalise the demand to withstand and absorb oppression. In seeking to untangle the terms of

resilience and resistance, Lax's discussion highlights the role of applied practice and political theatre in sustaining an 'infrapolitics' that builds the structures and conditions for visible political actions to take place. In turn, Sarah Bartley explores how a contemporary movement of people's theatres across the UK may offer spaces of community and resistance following more than a decade of cuts to social welfare and cultural spending. Through discussion of Brighton People's Theatre and Slung Low's work at The Holbeck in Leeds, resilience is considered as a practice of solidarity which refuses the drive for individuated resourcefulness in the face of precarity, and which emerges from the creation of spaces for participatory and inclusive culture. Finally, the work of Stuart Andrews and Patrick Duggan traces the significance of performance within conceptions of city resilience or, more sharply, an understanding of the performance of strategy as a critical form of 'strategy as practice'. In recounting key moments of a collaborative research visit to New Orleans, Andrews and Duggan highlight uneasiness with the term 'resilience' in the context of profound issues of inequality, racism and environmental change – and trace the forms of conversation and public engagement that might enable the city's authorities to reflect on the uneven distribution of risk and vulnerability, and create contexts of mutual benefit for arts and hazard mitigation practitioners as well as the communities they serve.

This issue has been developed over a longer than typical period, with an initial call for papers circulated in the summer of 2019 and first drafts accepted in January 2020. Our hope was that this extended process might allow our contributors – and both of us as editors – to discover ways of working that would make lighter demands on our time and energy, and allow for a peer review process that could be generous and responsive to changing conditions in all of our lives. We wanted to explore how this approach might feed and inform our own personal resilience as researchers working in the highly pressured space of higher education. One immediate consequence of that approach is that the essays in this issue have been developed

both before and within the span of the Covid-19 pandemic. While future issues of RiDE will address the impact of Covid-19 directly, this issue occupies a strangely suspended moment in the mapping of practices and locations for resilience and resourcefulness that may provide for future understanding of the pandemic's consequences for our field, and the communities within which it finds purpose. Though Covid-19 (and its impact) is not addressed in substance by any of our contributors, it nonetheless forms a significant – and unavoidable – context for how the implications of this research may be understood and carried forward. We are especially conscious that many of the deleterious dynamics traced in our contributor's essays have been exacerbated by the pandemic and that, closer to home, responses developed by arts and cultural funding bodies in the UK have failed to adequately acknowledge the already precarious nature of a field dominated by freelance and solo workers.

In responding to commentaries on their book *Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously* (2014), Evans and Reid have suggested that the problematic of resilience is politically and intellectually exhausted, and that new ways must be found to resist a prevailing nihilism of life lived through perpetual risk and 'imagine better worlds to come' (Evans and Reid 2015, 158). In working on this themed issue for RiDE, we have found that this demand is indeed being responded to and taken up. Our evidence lies in the rigour of thought and practice in applied theatre and performance that we present for the issue: a range of locations, practices, actions and approaches which manifest resourcefulness and redefine and re-negotiate the concept of resilience. These writings signal that Evans and Reid's hope for a poetics that might 'inaugurate a different concept of the political' (2015, 158) is being enacted and developed in concrete terms. In each of the contributions a sense of possibility emerges, a possibility that must be worked for and that is not easily accessible but which nonetheless emerges in the detailed thought and determined sense of hope that each contributor allows through their discussion.

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