

Mick Wallis

Amateur Village Drama and Community in England, 1900–1950

In the interwar period, amateur drama was actively promoted as a means to create or repair, sustain and develop community consciousness in English villages. In this article, Mick Wallis maps such promotion across various fields of practice at their intersection with the village drama 'movement' as a field itself. These include gentry patronage, post-war and rural reconstruction, adult education, and women's self-advancement. He also charts the emergence of interwar village drama from its precursors since 1900, and the emergence from it of the system of local government Drama Advisers that persisted until the 1990s. Time and again, drama is presented as a vital tool in the improvement of the lives of individuals, the development of national citizens, and the restoration and celebration of local communities. Finally, he suggests the important insights that this work can offer future researchers. Mick Wallis is Professor Emeritus of Performance and Culture at the University of Leeds.

Key terms: class patronage, citizenship, post-war reconstruction, Women's Institutes, Rural Community Councils.

Village theatre must be a thing of the community if it is to mean anything.¹

IN THE INTERWAR period, amateur drama blossomed in rural as well as urban England, with a number of agencies such as the Village Drama Society and the British Drama League supporting its development and organization. That rural blossoming drew on initiatives that had actively involved villagers in amateur drama since around 1900. Just as the ruptures wrought by the First World War intensified such initiatives and their organization, the years immediately following the Second World War saw such organization develop into a national system for the promotion and support of amateur and educational drama under the aegis of local government.

The main focus here is specifically on the promotion of amateur drama in rural villages, where the pursuit of 'community' was a significant concern. For example, some used drama as a binding force to restore and maintain decaying village communities. Others used drama as part of an 'education for citizenship' of the national community, from cities to villages. Definitions of 'community' have been various and disputed.

Useful here is the experiential perspective of cultural anthropologist Anthony P. Cohen, who specifies a community as a cultural field to which one 'belongs' through 'community consciousness'. Community members share a 'symbolic repertoire' that binds them while affording differences of interpretation; and the boundary of the community marks its internal integrity and its difference from others.² Another pertinent binding agent here is Victor Turner's quality of *communitas*, namely, a 'spontaneous, immediate, concrete' sociality in complementary antithesis to the social order.³

The promotion of amateur village drama can be considered usefully as a field of practice, mapped at its intersections with others. Thus the narrative below moves between such fields as class patronage, rural and post-war reconstruction, women's self-advancement, adult education, war-time resilience, and the amateur drama movement. To do this, the article explores three successive periods – 1900 to 1915, 1915 to 1939, and 1939 to 1950 – drawing on particular instances of practice. It attempts neither to tell the whole story of amateur village drama nor to review all pertinent research.⁴

1900–1915

Before 1900, the nearest most English villagers might get to amateur theatre was watching the children of the Rectory or Hall play a farce at a parish celebration, or a private production by adults at the big house – if the invitation to a segregated performance for the non-elite went beyond the tenantry, estate workers, and servants.⁵ One exception in the 1880s was in Castle Acre in Norfolk, where the vicar's wife, Helen Augusta Collyer (born 1848), formed a small company 'from all classes' who met on winter evenings to rehearse extracts from Shakespeare and others. These were performed at fortnightly 'At Homes' to villagers on a stage built by the village carpenter – one of the company – in the vicarage drawing-room.⁶ In the winter of 1900, rector's wife Judith Agnes Lear (born 1862) of Mells in Somerset likewise inaugurated fortnightly meetings at the manor house for invited inhabitants to read works by

Shakespeare and other standard authors. From these meetings the Lears developed a Mells Dramatic Society, which gave primarily Shakespearean performances in the rectory gardens from 1910. By 1914, these constituted a noted festival. Throughout, the consistent aim was, as far as possible, to select the performers from among the villagers (Figure 1).⁷

Both of these examples constitute a late phase in the restoration of what might be called the 'performative parish', that is, a stable hierarchized village community bonded by mutual obligation and trust. It also informed Mary Kelly's early work, as discussed below. Squires and clergy built this revived paternalism in order to replicate the 'moral economy' that had been destroyed by eighteenth-century agrarian capitalism as it developed into neglect and repression in the 1830s and 1840s. The second half of the century saw, for example, the building of parish meeting and reading rooms, the provision and repair of labourers' cottages, and the Anglican



Figure 1. *Much Ado About Nothing* at Mells Rectory, 1913. 'From the beginning the society has had the invaluable help and advice of Mr. F. R. Benson, who has done more than any other man living to popularize Shakespeare, and whose companies have frequently visited Frome. This year Mr. Benson kindly lent the whole of the dresses' (*Somerset Standard*, 25 July 1913, p. 7). Postcard, courtesy of Catherine Henley.

Church's capture of the traditional communal Harvest Home as Harvest Festival.⁸ Collyer and Lear arguably echo the role of earlier wives and daughters of clergy in taking responsibility for educational, social, and philanthropic work in the parish.⁹

Patronage had, however, become less formal. While the declared aim at Mellis was to lighten monotonous winters for villagers, the Lears were skilled amateur actors and took leading parts. Thus, as well as cultivating similar talent in others and providing both pleasure and 'a means of real culture to the villagers',¹⁰ the Lears were arguably indulging in an opened-out form of those private theatricals that had percolated down from the elite to the middle class.¹¹ Similarly, Collyer opens out the bourgeois 'At Home' to villagers as guests.

The principal impetus for new-gentry Charlotte King (born 1886) was straightforwardly a private enthusiasm. Enthused by Gilbert Murray's University Extension Lectures, she proposed to her classmates that they perform Euripides' *Hippolytus* in Murray's translation on the terrace of her home, Stonelands, near West Hoathly in Sussex. Having insufficient response, King turned to the villagers and household servants, who provided the crowd, some of the chorus, and relatively important speaking parts for the performance in June 1910. A long series of similar productions followed annually, with villagers taking more principal parts. Charlotte's mother, who was cherished in the village for her neighbourly philanthropy, had inspired the venture but died the night before the first production. The performances became a memorial to her and were 'treated as a serious matter' and played in 'a spirit of loyalty to the community'.¹² In the wider frame, the Kings regarded it their duty 'to improve the lives of those less fortunate than themselves. And so, all the household staff from Stonelands were simply told that they had to take part . . . several of them against their will'.¹³

Rather than introduce the villagers of Grasmere in Westmorland to Shakespeare or Euripides, the rector's daughter, Charlotte Maria Fletcher (born 1854), chose in 1893 to write a play in local dialect titled *The*

Dalesman. Further dialect plays were produced in Grasmere until the Second World War, three of which were written by Fletcher and the rest by other locals. Around 1900, Grasmere was a close-knit rural community where traditional performances such as Merry Neets and the Pace Egging play held strong. These were woven into the dialect plays, which were based on everyday life in the Lakes with great attention to authentic detail and simplicity in presentation. Thus the plays themselves became cultural performances for locals, especially as migration to urban areas threatened the integrity of the community.¹⁴

Grasmere became a famous exemplar of dialect drama, which became a standard genre in the interwar years. As well as affirming the rootedness of both actors and local audiences, it helped construct rural culture and community as distinct from standardized urbanity.¹⁵ Tied up with this was the observation, espoused by both proponents of Village Theatre such as Mary Kelly and educated urbanites, that village players had the capacity for a naturalness of expression that surpassed technique.¹⁶

The migration of rural workers to urban areas and abroad had begun in the 1870s during the agricultural depression, and would continue until 1950 and beyond.¹⁷ But, by the 1900s, an urban-rural migration had begun, much of it by middle-class people drawn by the idyllic image of the countryside that had been constructed since the 1880s.¹⁸ When Constance Smedley (born 1876) and Maxwell Armfield (born 1881) moved from London to the Cotswolds in 1908, however, they were surprised and distressed to find 'country slums' and a 'lack of cultural amenities'. One of their responses was to launch the Cotswold Players in 1913 to perform plays by Constance 'where the plot turned on issues of importance to the community'.¹⁹ The company was 'strictly local and from every class'.²⁰

In 1907, Charles McEvoy (born 1879), a playwright with an established metropolitan reputation for social drama, moved back to rural Wiltshire where he partly grew up, created The Aldbourne Players with locals, and converted a barn and malthouse to create the

Aldbourn Village Theatre.²¹ He had two key aims. One was to harness the capability of these 'born actors' sincerely to express 'the elemental emotions that are common to all humanity' as a source of enjoyment to the local community. As a press report remarked, such might be 'at least a partial cure' for rural depopulation. The other was hopefully to 'revivify the national drama, by giving it new and healthy roots in the countryside'.²² The theatre's inauguration in February 1910, with the Players premiering McEvoy's *The Village Wedding*, was reported widely nationally and abroad. It had been pitched as a significant event: Granville Barker (born 1877) presided, with Lord Howard de Walden, William Archer, Charlotte and George Bernard Shaw, and the local MP in the audience. Barker identified village drama as a necessary complement to the urban repertory and planned national theatres.²³ While the Aldbourn Village Theatre closed in 1913, within ten days the launch had reportedly inspired plans to establish 'uncommercial, unpretentious little theatres . . . run by the people themselves for their own amusement and edification' in at least fifty villages.²⁴

In 1931, *The Times* published a review of 'the new spirit' in amateur theatre – one of 'experiment . . . independence and adventure' – and identified The Village Players of Hildenborough in Kent as one of the few examples of that spirit from before the First World War.²⁵ Reviewing the first production at Hildenborough Drill Hall in January 1904, a London newspaper declared that 'the history of English drama' had been 'enriched by another and an entirely novel chapter'. The Players comprised members of the Hildenborough Institute, and the cast included 'several cricket-ball makers, a grocer's assistant, a blacksmith, a blacksmith's improver, an engineer, a rural postman, a waggoner's mate, and a gardener's boy'.²⁶ So, by 1904 patronage was already giving way to 'a labour of good fellowship',²⁷ arising from the body of the community, although all were men and, unsurprisingly, a co-author and the producer were both from a principal Hildenborough family.

1915–1939

Rural reconstruction before the First World War had primarily focused on who grew what and how, trade tariffs, and proposals for a specifically agricultural education. Post-war rural reconstruction included significant effort in the social and cultural fields, including music and drama, with statutory and especially voluntary organizations playing a major role. The problem of worker migration to the towns had been exacerbated by the changes in 'outlook and expectations' of both men and women wrought by military service or war work.²⁸ Some troops got their first experience of amateur shows as audiences to, or players in, the many concert parties organized in the war zone. A few, for example, made scenery and props, or took the male parts in productions by Penelope Wheeler's (born 1868) all-female Repertory Company for 'Concerts at the Front'.²⁹

Levelling

Many upper-class women had been brought into more direct contact with people from other classes and communities during their voluntary war work, a process which Devonshire gentry woman Mary Kelly (born 1888) called being 'shuffled'.³⁰ In December 1918, Kelly launched the Village Drama Society (VDS) to encourage and assist the production of plays 'acted by country folk'. Her model was one of community initiation and control. A village should select 'what they consider to be a representative committee: the carpenter who puts up the stage, the dressmaker who superintends the dresses, the fiddler who represents music, and so forth'.³¹ This committee makes all of the arrangements, perhaps subscriptions, arranges lectures on the play and Shakespeare readings for winter, and elects one person to cast the play. Rather than pay a VDS-affiliation fee itself, the committee elects one or two VDS vice-presidents, who then pay an annual subscription to its central fund. As such, a degree of financial patronage is encouraged, but without any implication of control.³²

At this early stage, the VDS offered a 'trainer' to conduct rehearsals to ensure that no village would be excluded for lack of local skills. But there was an urgent need for more people to deliver training in acting or music in their own district. To address this, Kelly appealed to those 'educated and artistic women, thrown out of work by peace, who have returned to country life, and feel the lack of human interest in the loneliness of their homes'.³³ If this appeal chimes with the commitment of Mary's generation at Kelly House to women's suffrage, it also, perforce, admits that most villagers were excluded from the role of producer due to class difference.

As the Society expanded rapidly, the central provision of 'trainers' became untenable, and the first VDS summer school for producers was mounted in 1926, offering a 'strenuous fortnight' of lectures, practice classes, and group rehearsals.³⁴ The British Drama League (BDL) – founded in 1919 – launched its first, week-long, school in 1927, expanding to a fortnight in 1928.³⁵ However, the National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI) found that such provision excluded the majority of its members, namely, 'the wives and daughters of agricultural labourers, small farmers, and village shop-keepers – women unfitted by education and circumstances to take part'.³⁶ Having experimented with short schools for producers on a county rather than a national basis, its 1927 application to the charitable Carnegie United Kingdom Trust (CUKT), for support of Women's Institute music and drama, included funding to develop these further.³⁷

NFWI policy and practice in drama exemplified its self-identity as a community of women of equal worth, notwithstanding the preponderance of upper-class women in positions of leadership at all levels.³⁸ The CUKT application had also requested support to take a selected WI Shakespeare production to London at the time of its annual general meeting, 'to show our members what can be done'. It would necessarily involve a large number of players, where, 'instead of a few educated women forming a star caste, the rank and file of the Institute take part'.³⁹ This first NFWI Drama Festival in May 1928 also included

four half-hour shows. The press release foregrounded one particular show in which the two principal parts were played by a great-grandmother and grandmother, neither of whom had acted before, or even set foot in a theatre (Figure 2).⁴⁰

Monthly meetings of village Institutes concluded with a social half-hour, often including short sketches. These not only contributed to a sense of *communitas* but also eased otherwise timid women into relaxed self-expression. Lady Freda Listowel (born 1885), Chair of the NFWI Drama Sub-Committee, declared that 'the purpose of all teaching and training in drama . . . is simply to help people to express better what they themselves would like to say in speech or gesture'.⁴¹ In these decades it was a common observation that rural people were especially reserved. Diagnosing this taciturnity as a deep resentment of the historic abuses by her class, Kelly wrote that drama was probably 'the only language by which [they] will speak' their 'understanding and apprehension of life'.⁴²

Community/Theatre

In a series of lectures and articles on theatre in the United States from 1915 to 1920, Barker articulated the relationship between community and theatre. Theatre was the 'living art of community imagination' and perhaps 'the highest type' of expression of its feelings. Acting was not a 'falsifying of human nature' but 'the only way you can express yourself'. Peoples needed to learn how to express their 'national feelings' so that their children could 'best learn their destiny in the world'. Thus, theatre 'should come from the community' and not its 'experts'. The 'art of the theatre' required 'constant and intimate community of effort', and the future of American drama in 1920 rested on those working 'in schools, universities, settlements, and away at the back of theatrical beyond' in the belief that 'the art of the theatre must be in its inception a social and, therefore . . . a co-operative activity'.⁴³

The idea of 'community drama' had been evolving in the United States since around 1913, covering a range of forms from

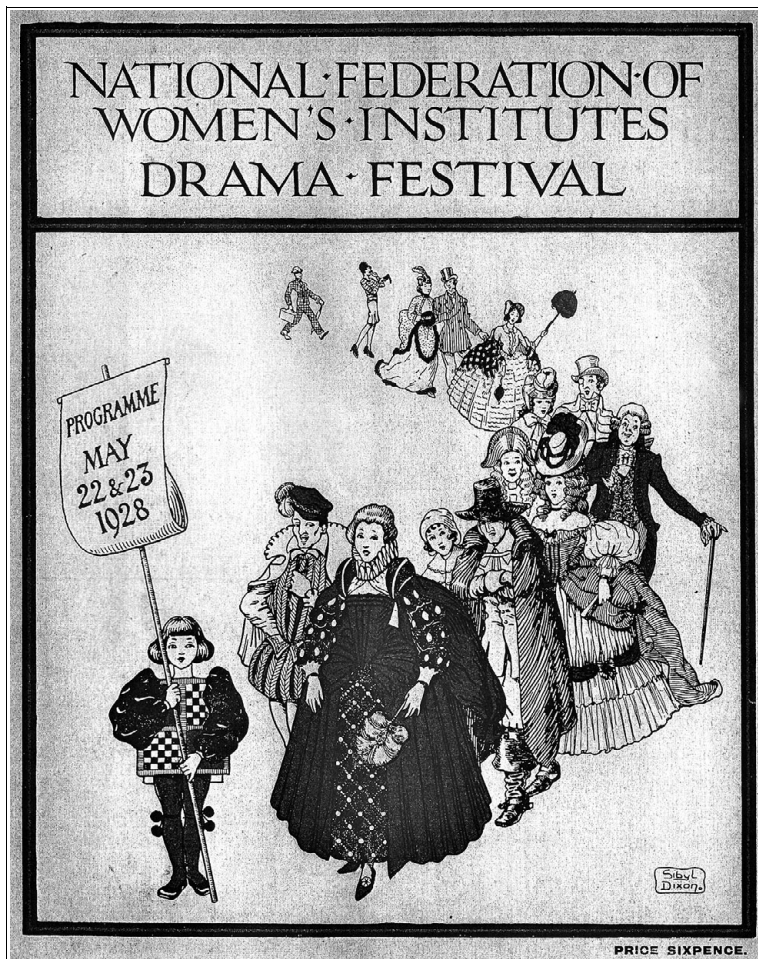


Figure 2. Programme front cover of the first NFWI Drama Festival, 22–3 May 1928 in London. Photograph reproduced with permission of the NFWI Archive and the Dixon Family.

pageantry to plays. Louise Burleigh's portmanteau definition was a 'house of Play in which events offer to every member of a body politic active participation in a common interest'.⁴⁴ Canadian Roy Mitchell identified the 'community player' as a new kind of amateur who, unlike the 'embryo actor' of recent years who 'forgot everything but his own department of the work', was committed to the recognition that 'the drama, above all others, is a community art, depending . . . upon the combined effort of playwright, actor, musician, designer, and craftsmen'.⁴⁵

Mitchell's dictum is echoed in the pioneer rural adult education work of F. G. and D. Irene Thomas (born 1901, 1902) as Tutor Organizer and Drama Tutor, respectively, in the Workers' Educational Association's Devon Extension Scheme that launched in

1927.⁴⁶ Reasoning that there was no prospect of raising a class by offering a menu of subjects in villages of under one thousand people, they experimented with drama as a single activity to deliver multiple outcomes.⁴⁷ For example, Francis Beaumont's 1607 play *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* was the central activity of D. Irene's thirty-week course in 1928–9. A group of men gained an understanding of theatre history by converting the village hall stage into an Elizabethan one, drawing on Johannes de Witt's sketch of the Swan, while a group of women studied social convention by designing and making costumes, working from contemporary prints. For the performance, both groups joined the acting group, costumed and engaged in by-play as stage-sitters.

Both the implications of an Elizabethan playhouse on acting and the questions of

translating Renaissance conventions into the twentieth century were discussed. The play was read and discussed as a whole before cutting it for production. The performers were encouraged to apply 'intelligent thought' to questions of plotting and character, and the stage action was determined through 'group intelligence and collaboration' rather than having the producer block it in advance. The process delivered a range of specific content such as social and literary history, and developed skills in analysis and synthesis. Almost imperceptibly, 'diction, enunciation, and graceful motion' developed in the players, while the habit of 'practical self-government' was rehearsed by the whole group, which was arguably a rehearsal for self-government by the village community.⁴⁸

Barker, who was appointed Chairman of the BDL Council at its inauguration in 1919, was doubtless one route by which the notion of community theatre entered its discourse; and Wheeler, shortly to be appointed Chair of its Community Theatre Committee, wrote that it was important to adapt the North American models to 'English conditions'.⁴⁹ The BDL's nationwide tiered competition, inaugurated in 1927 to select amateur companies from six Areas to compete at a London final, was duly named the 'National Festival of Community Drama'. In the dominant discourse of what would consolidate as the 'amateur theatre movement', 'competition' and 'festival' are here complementary rather than antithetical, as some found them – one designating a shared pursuit of standards and the other the *communitas* of this community of practice.

Facilitating Community Theatre

From its early days, the VDS encouraged the formation of County Committees to organize festivals, schools, and classes and to coordinate local needs and efforts. The BDL continued this when it incorporated the VDS as its Village Drama Section in 1932, with Kelly as Secretary. Where they existed, Drama Committees of Rural Community Councils (RCCs) took the role, usually affiliating to the BDL.⁵⁰ The RCCs emerged in the early

1920s as autonomous, informal bodies designed to coordinate and stimulate pioneering work by voluntary agencies and government departments in the social betterment of the countryside. Their work was swiftly coordinated under the National Council of Social Service (NCSS), alongside its own (urban) councils of social service. An early task was to facilitate the often CUKT-funded provision of village halls, since a suitable central meeting place was a fundamental requisite for village communal and cultural life.⁵¹ Where they existed, village halls became a principal venue for rural drama societies.

Many of these were generated and developed by non-vocational adult education classes pioneered through the agency of RCCs. A virtuous circle of classes stimulating schools, competitions, and festivals, themselves stimulating a demand for more classes, generated both 'a revival of village music and drama' as 'a lively community activity' and 'an interest in education for its own sake'.⁵² Such was the case with University College Hull (UCH), where of the 262 courses in Dramatic Literature delivered to villages and rural towns across North Lindsey and East Yorkshire during 1929–39, 64 per cent were arranged by RCCs. WIs – with whom the RCCs had an active relationship – arranged a further 21 per cent.⁵³ A distinctive innovation in the UCH courses was the inclusion of practical work in class to examine the theatricality of dramatic texts from Shakespeare to the modern canon. Beyond the course, many tutors guided students in their independent productions, the best being selected for the BDL heats (Figure 3).⁵⁴ The classes were made possible by the Board of Education's 1924 regulations for adult education, which liberalized the type and length of courses that were eligible for grant.⁵⁵ Some Local Education Authorities made direct provision of adult education in drama. Kent, for example, provided classes in Dramatic Literature from 1923 and a Dramatic Library offering playtext sets for loan to amateur groups.⁵⁶

Grace Hadow – a prime mover of the RCC movement – identified three ways in which drama and similar work had community impact beyond individual pleasure and



Figure 3. North Kelsey Drama Group at the Church School Hall in 1938 with Louis Napoleon Parker's *Their Business in Great Waters* (1929) (Lincolnshire Archives, MISC DON 1263/8/8). The Group was created by part-time tutor Gladys Witty's class in the village for University College Hull, and guided by her. Having studied Frances Mackenzie's *The Amateur Actor* (1935), Witty's class understood that being natural on stage was a matter of training and technique. By permission of Lincolnshire Archives.

enrichment. First, running clubs, societies, and village halls – often through a village social council – helped mould community initiative, self-help, and resourcefulness. Second, these outcomes empowered village communities to make use of their parish councils, which had been introduced in 1894 but to little effect, and to engage with county representatives. Third, touring village productions to neighbouring villages helped create and sustain a multi-parish community.⁵⁷

Around the time of the new Board of Education regulations, the scale of both the difficulties faced and the opportunities to grasp were being rehearsed. Two sociologists identified an 'apathetic' habitus in working-class Oxfordshire villagers, bred by the persistence of feudalism, stagnating 'social development' and 'corporate life'.⁵⁸ In the view of the literary academic who would in 1927 be founding Principal of UCH: 'The recrudescence of village life and rural culture . . . not least in dramatic activity, encourage the hope that

the folk may once again play a part in giving vitality to English drama.'⁵⁹

A significant outcome of the NFWI's application to the CUKT was the founding in 1928 of a Joint Committee for Music and Drama in the Villages (JCMDV) under the direction of the NFWI and NCSS. Its remit was to disburse CUKT funding for pioneering and developmental work in consultation with the BDL, VDS, and music organizations. Rather than outright grants, the JCMDV mostly offered guarantees against loss. Maurice Farquharson of the NCSS later reflected that this 'austere' approach was 'admirable in its almost fierce determination not to undermine the self-reliance of the local village group'.⁶⁰

The regional press was a persistent instrument of local identity in the period that had a symbiotic relationship with amateurs. Recognition and publicity were traded for copy with pictures; live events lived on in print; individuals were named, often in long lists; community and festivity and the occasional

reach to regional or national success were celebrated; and community leaders affirmed. In 1939, F. G. Thomas outlined the potential for BBC regional broadcasts to develop a sense of valued regional belonging in rural areas, mediating between parish and county levels and national belonging. Drawing on local culture while avoiding parochialism, they should have a developmental aspect.⁶¹ In May 1933, the North Regional Station had broadcast an amateur performance of Margaret Cropper's (born 1886) 1931 Westmorland dialect play *A Dose of Physic* from a farmhouse kitchen.⁶² The play is a 'Comedy': a curmudgeonly old farmer is tricked into behaving reasonably by his sharp-witted niece to the salvation of his wife. Yet it also conveys potential tragedy: by its midpoint, poverty and ruin cast an ominous shadow.⁶³ Many women in the village audiences would have recognized this patriarchal sclerosis, enjoyed its overcoming and perhaps taken resolve. But what role might such village plays have had in improving community life? Playwright Ida Gandy (born 1885) suggests little, complaining of the 'depressing unreality' and 'tameness' of the majority – in the south and western counties, at least.⁶⁴

Adult Education, Community, and Citizenship

The Final Report of the Ministry of Reconstruction's Adult Education Committee (known as *The 1919 Report*) argues that the solution to the ongoing rural problem, whether 'economic, social, or political', is essentially a matter of 're-creating the rural community, and of developing new social traditions and a new culture'.⁶⁵ This is 'inextricably interwoven with . . . the spread of education'.⁶⁶ It does not foreground the arts with respect to rural adult education, but declares that, since life 'cannot be divided into compartments', education in general must 'draw its materials from the natural impulses of common life, including its labour and recreations'. Without doing this, it will be 'sterile' and a gateway to 'materialism'. The arts, 'which unite thought with emotion and action', are 'the natural bridge between the discipline of the mind and practical

activities'.⁶⁷ Thus, adult education as a whole should include music, literature, drama, and, if possible, crafts. In this context, an 'increasing part . . . will and ought . . . to be played by the drama' as 'the form of literature which has the greatest popular possibilities'.⁶⁸ The Board of Education's own Adult Education Committee was instituted in 1921 and reported on both *Adult Education in Rural Areas* (1922) and *The Drama in Adult Education* (1926). *Rural Areas* judges that 'Dramatic form is a most effective means of education' and that 'proceeding from the informal to the formal applies with particular force to the countryman'.⁶⁹

The 1919 Report commends Theodore W. Grubb (born 1873) for having his village students prepare dramatic performances to end a session's work. This intensification of their experience of literature as 'cultivation of the imagination', being 'penetrated by some great writer' and thus 'acquir[ing] insensibly some inner standard of excellence', will, in some, develop the 'creative power' to express their indigenous 'popular culture'.⁷⁰ Grubb, however, later stated that he chose drama simply because of its 'wide and powerful appeal', and that the importance of literature was that it stimulated 'discussion of the great problems of life'. Amongst these problems was how to assure that the rural community played an active part in determining its own future.⁷¹ Nevertheless, the annual Easter Play became an icon for the Askrigg community with whom he worked.

Addressing the question of national community, *The Drama in Adult Education* foregrounds its conclusion that 'the study of great plays and particularly the attempt to represent the characters created by a master mind . . . confers the quality of imaginative sympathy, which is the supreme gift of a liberal education'.⁷² The concept of imaginative sympathy as a universal human attribute was developed by Adam Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) to specify the generation of emotion in an onlooker when they imagine themselves to be in the situation of another, and find that person's emotional response to it reasonable. Smith suggests that imaginative sympathy is both the basis of our emotional self-knowledge and underpins the

self-regulation of civil society. The concept emerges with some strength in writings on 'natural' acting from the 1810s to the 1860s, to be deployed by William Archer to dismantle Diderot's *paradoxe* in the 1880s;⁷³ and an unascribed article assesses various European dramatists on its basis.⁷⁴

The group that laid the foundations for university-level adult education in 1908 urged 'drawing teachers and students of different classes and conditions together and promoting sympathy between them'.⁷⁵ While a gesture of levelling up, this can be and was then read as an attempt to mask structural class antagonism. On the same model, *The Drama in Adult Education* not only observes that drama binds people to each other, to the cultural heritage, and to wider ideas, but also concludes with the hope that, through imaginative sympathy, it will 'bring some element of healing and reconciliation to the warring elements in our national life'.⁷⁶ One implication is that if imaginative sympathy is the basis of civil society, then both require workers to end their class struggle for rights and better working conditions.⁷⁷

1939–1950

The outbreak of war in September 1939 raised the question of how amateur drama might help sustain resilience in local communities and thereby the national community. The Ministry of Information called meetings in seven regional centres, where Geoffrey Whitworth (born 1883), founder and Honorary Secretary of the BDL, led discussions with local BDL officials and other representatives. His brief was to advise the Ministry on what class of entertainment people wanted during the war and how this might determine the policy of the amateur movement.⁷⁸ In December, the President of the Board of Education, Earl De La Warr, welcomed the BDL's determination to continue, but to focus on the stimulation of 'home-made entertainment of a kind in which everybody can take part'. It was already clear that 'there is more need than ever before for certain kinds of recreation and leisure activities, especially in the reception areas'. Amateur drama and music would thus

form 'one of the best antidotes to boredom and listlessness' and so 'play an important part in keeping up the Home Front'.⁷⁹

The BDL was represented on the Joint Committee for Drama (JCD), formed in 1939 by the National Council of Social Service as an iteration of the Joint Committee for Music and Drama in the Villages. In October, the JCD urged County Drama Committees and RCCs to ensure that Village Welfare Committees were set up and that they took drama seriously. Grant-aided drama work should continue, in the understanding that the JCD had suggested the use of less restrictive criteria to the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust. It proposed informal sessions incorporating mass speech, movement, acting games, improvisation, mime, and mixed drama and music. Variety shows 'somewhat on the lines of the old Arts League of Service programmes' could also be staged, perhaps with individual items from different sections of the community.⁸⁰

From 1919 to 1937, Eleanor Elder's (born 1888) Arts League of Service (ALS) Travelling Theatre had toured contemporary professional work in stage performance, music, and design to local communities, both brightening village life and assisting amateur companies.⁸¹ In 1941, the JCD formed a Combined Arts Group sub-committee, and its Travelling School for Variety Entertainment, led by Elder, toured nationally to instruct amateurs in the production of combined arts programmes in the ALS style of ten or so items performed 'on a bare stage with screens or curtains'. Programmes might include 'serious dramatic fare among the light and gay', while one rationale for including mime, acted songs, or poems with music was to help first-time performers move and act.⁸² The Group published *Entertain Yourself*, a guide to combined arts for amateurs, in 1945, before republishing an enlarged edition four years later to help 'small places and groups . . . make their own contribution to the Festival of Britain' in 1951.⁸³

Since many amateur drama societies had to close after losing members to the armed forces and war work, means were sought to deploy and thus maintain their cultural capital. In 1940, for instance, Yorkshire RCC formed

twelve selected amateurs from York and neighbouring villages into a Travelling Theatre. They toured twenty-six small villages every January to May during the war period with either a Shakespeare or a George Bernard Shaw production. The aim was not only to counteract isolation – a costumed singer and mobile cinema toured with them – but also to demonstrate that ‘even in wartime amateur drama is both possible and desirable’.⁸⁴

At the start of hostilities, the BDL shed 65 per cent of its staff for ‘dispersal to various forms of war service’, which saw the closure of the Village Drama Section and two other of Kelly’s departments.⁸⁵ She relocated to Devon to work with the University College of the South West’s Rural Extension Scheme in which the LEA was a partner, becoming county Director of Drama in 1940. Kelly was soon directing tutors in leading group play-making – cycles of improvisation and scene-making either from found material such as historical accounts or personal material initiated in mime – with villagers across Devon. One suggested use for such activities was to help integrate self-evacuees – mostly women – into the villages where they were billeted. She also proposed setting up play-reading groups for a mixture of soldiers and ‘other men and women’ so as the soldiers were ‘not made to feel they are a separate community’.⁸⁶ While group creative process is of itself conducive to *communitas*, Kelly reflected that the war ‘has the effect of quickening the sympathies, of breaking down inhibitions, and of heightening emotion, so that creative work becomes, in a sense, the natural thing to do’.⁸⁷

In 1945, the JCD was channelling CUKT financial support to ‘over forty county drama committees and thirteen county organizers in England and Wales’.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, the 1944 Education Act had stipulated that after the war Local Education Authorities would have the statutory duty ‘to contribute towards the spiritual, moral, mental, and physical development of the community’, including ‘leisure-time occupation’ for adults through ‘organized cultural training and recreative activities’.⁸⁹ This would have relieved the CUKT of their commitments in music and drama. However, as the inevitable onset of austerity limited the capacity of LEAs in this

direction, the CUKT provided both finance and organization to build a machinery for them to inherit. In 1946, it replaced the JCD with a Carnegie Committee for Music and Drama, which included representatives of the BDL, the Arts Council, and the Ministry of Education. Leo Baker was appointed its full-time Drama Adviser with the brief to encourage county drama committees to appoint their own.⁹⁰ This laid the foundation for the system of salaried LEA Drama Advisers that continued into the 1990s, bringing urban areas into the rationales established for rural areas. During the 1948 British Theatre Conference, it was noted: ‘Amateur activity is very widespread and in well-nigh every town and village is to be found some kind of drama circle or group’.⁹¹

Conclusion

In his 1950 retrospective of ‘the county drama movement’, Maurice Farquharson argued that the public funds that were essential to its success had been secured only once drama became ‘widely recognized as being educationally valuable’.⁹² By contrast, Margaret Macnamara criticized how village drama was ‘forced into educational rather than artistic channels’, and Nora Ratcliff mocked the assumption that anyone who was simply motivated to get up a play was automatically part of a ‘movement’.⁹³

Still, the question remains, what actual effect did village theatre have on communities in the period, whatever the motive? While the notorious difficulty of demonstrating such a causal link makes an objective answer impossible, case studies of specific villages or campaigns might reveal indicative evidence. These need not focus only on community, and would be most useful if they specified the provenance and, as far as possible, aims and methods of village practitioners, although much of this evidence is family-based and so ephemeral. Such studies might be mapped against criteria such as the type of village, its situation, region, and history, for instance whether it is grown from a manor or from farmsteads; firmly within the *pays* of a market town or not; the degree of industrialization, and so on.⁹⁴ One sub-field of interest

might be those villages where middle-class urban-rural migration resulted in effectively two communities, of 'residents' and 'villagers'.

The aim would be neither to dismiss the promoters and practitioners of village drama as patronizing 'do-gooders' nor uncritically to celebrate them as progressives; rather, it would be to understand them with some degree of complexity and particularity. As F. G. Thomas put it: 'the village play, which is in one village a sop to the poor, in the next village is of such different quality as to waken a new creative enthusiasm.'⁹⁵

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