Creative Practice for Change: a micro-example of people and places.

I'm a researcher, an academic.

The "Making Things Happen: Cultural Leadership, Creative Practice and Change" I'm going to talk about today – all from that position. Of a researcher – working with communities in, broadly, the field of applied theatre/community drama. I'm not someone who works in the industry …

My take on this – and my example – is from the perspective of a researcher academic.

So – three immediate points as the headers for the session – and they raise interesting problematics straightaway, *because* of the researcher position – one that some of you here will probably recognise.

SLIDE
Leadership – (not management. Alongside; persuasive)
Creative practice – research; whose practice?
Change – community changing their perceptions of place and artists changing their practice.

That's the trailer – that's what I'll talk about in more depth later.

Before getting to these – let me explain the research project I'm using as my example here.
So – I'm going to use one example of something from my role of a practical researcher – that problematises those terms. I'll return to leadership, creative practice and change, and set out the project.

SLIDE
   1. Challenging concepts of 'liquid' place through performing practices in community contexts 2011-2014 (AHRC).

What was the theoretical premise of this work?

That place is an important conceit in contemporary lives where mobility might be perceived to dominate, that we might challenge the trope of mobility or liquidity (from Zygmunt Bauman) and how people actually lead their lives and that performance practices both offer a useful research tool into this academic debate as well as suggest ways that people can re-engage with their location positively.

So:

   SLIDE
   The aim of the project was to investigate the research questions:
   ◉ What can practical intervention tell us about how abstract concepts such as place, community, dislocation and belonging, as theorised by contemporary academics, map onto the 'real life' experiences of vulnerable social groups?

- ◉ Can one or more models of performance practices help ease feelings of 'dislocation' among community participants, where such feelings exist?'
- ◉ How might such models be evaluated, disseminated and made fully accessible to community theatre organisations?

I'm claiming that place and location are at the forefront of contemporary lives – something I talked about in the grant application. This is set against or partly because of the debates and actuality of Mobility, transience, temporary places, deterritorialisation, - and a range of forms of nomadism.

> So, I have been asking
> 1. That there May be a need for locating in 'special places' … movement;
> 2. how to ease location – whether as part of new places, prisons, territorialisation, or
> 3. How to encourage a re-enlivening of place because some are too embedded in many ways.
> Not easy to 'get results'. Sometimes just a slight shift in consciousness.

Just to pause for a moment - What do I mean by place? – physical location with which one has a relationship – even if a temporary one.
Transforming space or site into place.

French philosophers (incidentally all male, all dead) saw Place as operations, behaviours, actions = make place

Challenging Place was testing particular practices and theories of performing place but also allowing for different thoughts and ideas to influence as we went along.

Where did we start – that is, we as a steering group that included researchers and practitioners.
- That place mattered today
- That place could be shifted in one's perception through performing practices.
- That this could happen in a number of ways
- That we wouldn't have a clue about some of the outcomes.
- Some of key tenets held included:
- [Talk to each of these]
  - • Using performance that subverted or shifted the everyday, such that the quotidian everyday place was re-viewed.
  - • Repeatedly 'performing' a place added a number of layers of memory and 'enriched' the meaning of that place, therefore.
  - • That places of fear might be shifted through performing them
  - • That a person's identity might be reconceived by those living there through performing a place.
  - • That this is a participatory activity and is most interesting/effective when those who live there are the 'performers' of place.

All the above would also help the theorisation of the performance of place too, as a result of the grant.

So what actually happened? In addition to articles, websites and a symposium, outputs from this AHRC-funded research project included three practice as research projects constructed within the field of applied theatre. These were at the core of the research project. The two Challenging Place projects I was most involved with took place in community theatre organisations, Half Moon in Limehouse, London, UK, and Oldham Theatre Workshop (OTW) near Manchester, UK. (3rd Margaret Ames – Cyrff Ystwth. Explain – Mags and Mike P were the co-investigators.) Each organisation engaged a group from the local community to undertake place practices. I worked with staff from Half Moon and OTW as the principal investigator (or lead researcher) which included several intensive sessions exploring how research would be undertaken and discussing the larger questions around place that exist today. Aged between 13 and 17, Half Moon's senior youth group participated in a term's worth of weekly drama sessions, producing a final short performance piece, *Place*, for audiences. OTW created a new weekly drop-in drama session for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants for six months, finishing the 6-month Place project with a week's intensive workshops.
Let me show you examples of the work.

Show lots of examples of work.
Practices – On Sites – HM Playing with Place. 1.36 – Tuwaine

OTW Outside Tea Party

So, I was endeavouring to promote *change* in people's understanding of and response to place, perhaps warding of boredom, perhaps persuading them to review a place with different feelings/expectations, perhaps creating an atmosphere of belonging.

That's just a brief introduction to the work.
Let me return to Leadership, creative practice and change now.

SLIDE
Leadership – (not management. Alongside; persuasive)
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Leadership.

Running a research project has its own peculiar leadership challenges.
Running a research project that is focused on working with community groups and arts organisations is additionally complex in terms of leadership.

In the Challenging Place project, this was not management. You are not 'line managing' people. The community arts organisations – mates and colleagues and 'in kind'. You've asked people to offer in-kind funding; they have invested in this. You are the proposer of the work, the person behind the hunches or the ideas but the organisations you work with aren't under your management – not at all. But for the research to work, I had to hold the thrust of what the practice was – because these were the ideas of performing place.

iPhone recordings!
15.46 03/07/2012 8m 0s 3.00 on.
13.40 24/05/2013 -3m 48s beginning better extract.

Leading the project from such a tangential position was a real challenge.
Bringing the ideas to the fore was important.

For me, then, this process had, necessarily to be as a persuasive and an 'alongside' process. It was finding all sorts of ways to 'persuade' and bring people into the project working alongside in many different ways.

Talking to David about leadership vs management and he said … not the same … gave me a slide. Explain it. Rather wish I'd had this at the outset!?
SLIDE

Creative practice

So, one of the issues here in making things happen was the ideas for the practice. On the whole, I wasn't delivering.
I worked closely with industry partners at Oldham Theatre Workshop and Half Moon. Input into the practical research projects from these partners was important; there is little point in working with industry partners unless clear, mutually appreciated, reciprocity exists and I was fortunate enough to be working with high quality practitioners whose work I knew and admired. These practitioners had close knowledge of the geographical context and the communities they work with, far greater than mine, and would bring useful contextual knowledge into the project. I am aware, too, that in some settings, I no longer have the immediate practitioner skills that I might have once claimed. Different from career academics, many of us in applied theatre or drama education at university level once worked in schools or community settings but, even so, many are now more adept at working with university students. I am older, too, than when I consistently worked

with youth and don't necessarily have the languages or presence that will draw out the most productive work - from young people in particular. It was entirely appropriate that the organisations' practitioners would lead the facilitation, therefore.

But they weren't the people who had the performance of place in their blood! We managed…

Show 'training' session and discussing place from Ch Moon site.
SLIDE
http://www.challengingplacehalfmoon.org/concepts.html

Show the one with the Half Moon practitioners.
Next link on slide

Continuing the development of ideas, linking the practice to the research and so on…
Conversations with Vishni on Challenging Moon.
SLIDE – actually the same link – Planning 6 and Reflecting on Cornflakes…

But, in terms of 'making things happen', the routes to creative practice from the perspective of a research project were complex.

Change
Part of the Challenging Place project was to identify the impact of performing place practices on inhabitants of place. Change is a big term. Perhaps a shift in perspective is a better way of pointing it. And, of course, that's one of the issues, isn't it? How do we mark change?

Slide
We're not so good at this.

Clips from advocacy video 8.46 precisely. Then could go to Emanuel etc.

But does this count as change? Problematic.
One interesting adjunct to this is the 'change' or impact on the artist practitioners.
Facilitator's words + e-mail.

Summary
Problematising leadership, creative practice and change in the light of a research project – and from the perspective of a researcher – attempting to make change happen.