

HOSPITALITY AND THROWING AWAY THE THEATRE RULE BOOK

2017

I want to start by talking about a publication which is basically the transcript of a conversation between Myles Horton and Paulo Friere, both radical educators who worked in the United States and Brazil respectively in the last century. The publication *We Make Road by Walking* describes a radical approach to education that resonates with my own practice. In it Horton describes how he loved to read and gave a lot of authority to the written word and was shocked and surprised to discover that he did not learn how to work with people through reading books, rather he learnt from the people.

I like the notion of *Making the Road by Walking*, the idea that as we begin a project the road is not yet built, that we have not written a plan before we meet and that working with the people and walking side-by-side is how we make the road.

Those who know me will know that I've spent the last 30 or so years working on participatory arts projects and in the last two decades or so, particularly with young migrants. Lately I've become particularly interested in the notion of hospitality and how it relates to arts practice as well as attitudes to migration.

Apparently the ancient Greeks invented hospitality and a moral code that required people to be hospitable to strangers. If you do a Google search for images of hospitality from the UK the predominant images are of an industry, of people training to work in the hospitality sector. If you do a Google search for images of hospitality in Iran for instance predominant images are of families and friends sharing food together. People I know who have travelled widely, describe a hospitality they have experienced in other countries that no longer exists in the UK. They described being invited into stranger's homes and being treated like an honoured guest

I find it really interesting that in this country we have turned hospitality into something corporate, whereas in other cultures it still part of moral code, cultural practice, and an obligation.

The contrast in how we view hospitality in different cultures is also marked by how we prepare and eat food, how in some cultures there is always a huge pot of food that can stretch if the stranger comes to the table, while in other cultures food comes in ones, one hamburger, one pizza, one stake, one chop and so on.

I actually think people in this country struggle with hospitality, and I'm really interested in interrogating this further as I think the struggles with hospitality are yet there are some spaces and places part of the picture around people's difficulty with migration.

Yet, there are some spaces and places where a culture of hospitality is strong and I believe that the arts can be one of these spaces, a space of sharing of acceptance and most important exchange and change. When we invite the stranger to our table we share what we have, the stranger often brings a contribution and we exchange stories and listen and as a result we change.

I have thought hard about how arts practice needs to change in order to accept the stranger at the table. How the stranger may challenge our aesthetic, our methodologies, hierarchies and

perceptions. I have tried to resist making the road before I walk and allow my encounter with the many strangers who have become my collaborators and my artistic family to redefine the process of making art.

For several years I collaborated with a small group of young migrant artists called The Paper Project. We made four pieces of theatre together, some of you have seen them. The Paper Project's approach to making art is non-hierarchical, there is no director and no writer. The group always either begin or end a devising session by eating together and see this as an essential part of the creative process. The majority of the time is spent catching up on people's lives, what's happening for them and reconnecting. In order to make art together, that works around people's life challenges, we have had to rewrite, or perhaps reject all the rules of theatre making, all the hierarchies and all the preconceptions. Outsiders coming into the process find it quite disconcerting and confusing.

In Horton and Friere's *We Make the Road by Walking*, they use the metaphor of the illegal still where people made Hooch in the mountains where Horton was running a radical education centre. Horton and Friere describe their educational methodology as a kind of Hooch, a kind of illegal or unofficial way. I like this, I like that working with the strangers at the table has made my work unorthodox, unofficial a kind of theatre hooch. The methodology or approach is always in flux. There is a constant, and that is a set of values that are shared by the team whoever they may be.