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Staging *Maralinga* and looking for community (or why we must desire community before we can find it)

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Abstract

The concept of ‘community’ is often presented as a way of overcoming exclusion and this dominates many community cultural development projects including those drawing on the tradition of ‘applied theatre’. Drawing on personal experience of staging an applied theatre project, *Maralinga*, which details the exposure of veterans to nuclear fallout, this paper problematises the concept of community based on some ‘natural’ affiliation or recognition. It argues that a more complex analysis is needed to understand how communities come together and expand based on reciprocated desire. Community based on desire, rather than recognition, allows people from vastly divergent experiences to come together and connect despite differences. The paper concludes by reflecting on the implications for applied theatre practitioners.

Keywords: community, reciprocated desire, *Maralinga*, alterity, performance

Introduction

In August 2006, the world premier of *Maralinga*, a theatrical play about veterans exposed to nuclear testing, was held at a Return Services League (RSL) club on the Central Coast of New South Wales, Australia. In Australia, the place name ‘Maralinga’ is synonymous with nuclear testing though the exact historical detail is not widely known.

Maralinga comes from the tradition of ‘applied’ theatre, telling the story of some of the 30,000 British and Australian nuclear veterans and their journey – both to Maralinga and beyond – as they discover over a number of decades that they were ‘guinea pigs’ and ultimately betrayed by the very countries they were serving. This is a form of theatre that has been inspired by Augusto Boal’s ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ whereby policy directions and even social interventions are informed by drama interactions and social exchanges (Boal 2001, 339).

In the 2006 production of *Maralinga*, the director, Wesley Enoch, and the stage manager orchestrate the flash of a nuclear explosion. This is one of the most striking parts of the play and prompts the audience to consider what it would be like to witness a nuclear ‘blast’. Although today’s technical expertise allows moviemakers to easily simulate such blasts, the impact on the audience during a live production was palpable. Just prior to the simulated explosion, the audience is confronted with the dialogue of those exposed to the nuclear tests, many of which were originally undertaken in the middle of the night:

Ric: It was totally black and dark out there.
Ken: And off she went.
Ric: Suddenly it was the middle of the day. And then the flash would come through your eyes.
Rick S: You actually see daylight through your hands.
Chris: Straight through the back of your head, the light, the flash, and . . .
Dawn: He said his fingers . . .
Baz: It looks like an X-ray.
Dawn: The bones in your fingers.
Doughey: It was just like as though you had no hands¹.

The veterans, many of whom were exposed to dozens of nuclear explosions, have experienced various traumas. In addition to the exposure that has had many adverse health effects, there has also been the trauma of being denied full veterans' rights by both the Australian and British Governments – all themes that the play interrogates. This paper, however, focuses on the trauma that has resulted from the nuclear veterans being *denied* recognition of their experience and an attempt, through the processes of applied theatre, to overcome this. That is, the veterans' community who have been exposed to 'real' war zones have not accepted the experience of nuclear veterans as equal to their own. In the process, the nuclear veterans have been denied access to the broader veterans' community: the support networks that exist as well as the ability to share their stories of trauma. Consequently, the nuclear veterans have discovered that the concept of 'community', while offering the promise of comfort, can also be the source of betrayal.

Using the case study of *Maralinga* specifically, and applied theatre more broadly, I investigate the nature of community. In so doing, I argue that the belief that community can be created by any 'natural' affiliation is deeply flawed. Reflecting on the implications for applied theatre practitioners who often see their work as promoting community building, I argue that such visions of community are problematic and can encourage divisiveness and exclusion. Rather, the production of *Maralinga* managed to bring together communities that one would expect to be politically and socially 'world's apart' with different ethical and value systems. Consequently, I put forward the position that inclusive communities are formed through a process of 'reciprocated' desire rather than any form of natural recognition or affiliation.

***Maralinga*: the production**

Maralinga, the play, comes from the tradition of verbatim theatre that has emerged over the last few decades coinciding with the questioning of the 'truth' behind (mainstream) news reporting. In both the UK and Australia, important social, historical and political issues have been explored through plays that take documentary materials and transcribed interviews as their starting point and main source of the actors' dialogue.

¹ *Maralinga*, August 2006 production, Act II, Scene 17, 'Exposure'.

This is part of the broader movement referred to as ‘applied theatre’, whereby productions take stories – both macro and personal – beyond the four walls of theatre halls (Thompson, 2003: 35). Applied theatre aims to document and educate, often taking production into ‘strange’ places (Thompson, 2003: 35). As noted, this is a form of theatre that has been inspired by Augusto Boal’s (2001) ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’, though not applied uncritically (Thompson 2006, 8). According to the University of Manchester’s ‘Applied Theatre Project’, this is theatre that ‘engages with areas of social and cultural policy such as public health, education, criminal justice, heritage site interpretation and development’².

Applied theatre, such as *Maralinga*, can also aim to overcome failure in recognition by bringing various groups together to promote a sense of ‘community’ (Mills and Brown, 2004: 27). One way that this occurs is by encouraging conversations between different groups not in dialogue (Thompson, 2003: 14). In the case of *Maralinga*, this was attempted by bringing together the nuclear veterans with the broader veterans’ community. Working closely with the playwright, Paul Brown, to document the production and use its political messages to pressure politicians to acknowledge the suffering of the veterans, I was also involved in attempts to promote the play. We hoped that by bringing together the various war veterans’ communities it would assist in overcoming the trauma of the events by encouraging dialogue. It was a process we believed would assist the nuclear veterans in building a ‘natural’ community by having their stories recognised: that is, building communities around mutual affiliation or experience.

This partially drove our decision to locate the production at the mid-north coast of New South Wales, which has a high proportion of war veterans and widows. This population was thought to be ‘naturally’ attracted to this story despite past denials, and thus allow the nuclear veterans to have their struggle for recognition and suffering acknowledged. The dialogue was sourced from hundreds of hours of transcripts by researchers who interviewed veterans as well as gathered secondary material from various sources including the 1985 Australian Royal Commission³. While the interviews provided the base dialogue, the interactions between the characters were workshopped by the playwright, director, producer and the actors up until the week before the production. Despite a number of last minute changes, the production received positive reviews. Along with the encouraging publicity and strong promotion within the broader veterans’ community, we expected the production would be well attended. As I will discuss, however, this did not eventuate, and in many ways, the betrayal experienced by the nuclear veterans continued as the broader veterans’ community maintained their refusal to recognise the plight of the nuclear veterans.

Storytelling – overcoming forgetfulness and betrayal

The theme of recognition – or lack of it – is one that echoes throughout the production of *Maralinga* and takes two broad forms. To begin with, the production highlights how successive Australian governments have refused to acknowledge that nuclear veterans experienced life in a ‘war zone’ (Brown, 2007: 39). That is, despite the fact

² Sourced from <http://www.arts.manchester.ac.uk/catr/about/index.htm>, accessed February 2008.

³ See the National Archives of Australia for detailed information about the 1985 Royal Commission: <http://www.naa.gov.au/about-us/publications/fact-sheets/fs129.aspx>, accessed November 2006.

that the veterans were exposed to nuclear fallout, their efforts and experiences have never been recognised as being equivalent to those who have served in a 'conflict zone'. Consequently, the nuclear veterans have been denied appropriate compensation (Windle, 2002: 16).

The play also emphasises the Australian public's lack of recognition. Here, the broader public has allowed this story to slowly disappear through a form of purposeful forgetfulness: Maralinga veterans are not seen as part of Australia's military history. Though no one 'individual' has deliberately chosen to overlook this account, the forgetfulness takes the form of selective memory employed by both governments and the broader public that limits understandings of what is a 'combat veteran'.

We can think of this as a selective memory that takes the form of framing 'our' soldiers in a single dimension: soldiers that we see portrayed as tall, brave and fearless, willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for their nation and 'mateship'. We want to see them standing proud and walking down the street on national days of remembrance such as Anzac Day on 25 April. As Sydney's tabloid, *The Daily Telegraph*, reminds us every year, our 'heroes' must be remembered for their sacrifices at Anzac Cove⁴.

Maralinga, like other such applied theatre projects, is a process of storytelling that confronts this selective memory, acting as a vehicle to overcome forgetfulness. The production was, therefore, conceived as a way to respond to a lack of recognition through the telling of real stories of suffering that demand remembrance. The audience listens to veterans and their families describe how, after being exposed to the nuclear blasts, their bodies slowly succumb to radiation poisoning quietly, hidden away from public view. Kay, the widowed wife of a nuclear veteran (Bob), presents one such example:

They put a tube down Bob's throat, through his nose and down his throat, and it was like big lumps of fat. Inside his throat and the doctor said Bob you've got cancer of the throat . . . He was in the theatre for nine hours . . . and he had all these tubes coming out of him, ah they were feeding 'im through a tube in his neck.

All the time feeding through the tube. And that wasn't us. We've always been independent, but Bob couldn't work. And then he had to learn how to speak, how to swallow. He did develop a voice, a really good voice, a clear voice and by just putting his finger, his thumb to his throat he tried . . . But he had so much phlegm and mucous that he couldn't keep it in there long he had to keep on blowing all the time and he had that all the way through. He couldn't go out . . . He felt . . . too embarrassed to do that so that actually cut off all our life . . .

Then he started to get this . . . thickness in the throat and not being able to swallow. It used to all come out the stoma tube and then it would back up and come out the nose, it was terrible, poor bugger . . .

And then when they took these tests, they found out the cancer had gone to his bones, and it had also gone into his bloodstream, so he couldn't have any more chemotherapy . . . it was it was dreadful to see him like that and he'd say I'm

⁴ See for example, *The Daily Telegraph's* 'Free Resources Anzac Day Special' (23 April 2007), available at: <http://www.news.com.au/sundaytelegraph/story/0,,21603939-5011660,00.html>, accessed April 2007.

sorry honey and I'd say to him don't worry about it I'll clean it up it's all right . . .
He said to me in hospital, he said, don't give me any peas, he said, because I
shoot them right across the room . . . No peas!⁵

In addition to Kay and Bob's story, there is the description of suffering by those parents who saw the long-term effects of radiation exposure manifest in their children. From Chris:

When our daughter was a young baby, she had double teeth, teeth growing out of teeth. Which the Hospital said they've never seen before, and it turned out since I've met two other veterans who also had, the children had the same thing. If it's a coincidence or if it's a part of that, we'll never know⁶.

Unfortunately, while these stories are unique, the theme of 'forgetfulness' is not as the play subtly contrasts the stories of Bob, Kay and Chris to the hero warriors storming enemy shores. National celebrations such as Anzac Day highlight the heroic soldier confronting the enemy on foreign soil, not the citizen-soldiers exposed to radiation by their own governments. Such broken bodies are neatly kept from view and slowly slip into obscurity, as they are neither heroic nor aesthetically pleasing. The national memory likes to hide away broken and cancerous bodies as well as the anguish that accompanies them.

Hidden and tucked away in our memories, then, are soldiers who are suffering from the mistakes of our governments that have become 'shameful' memories. In addition to Maralinga, these mistakes include the war in Vietnam (still considered an unjust war despite attempts to re-write history)⁷ and the current war in Iraq (though Australian casualties have been limited). There is also the national embarrassment that soldiers serving their country are used as guinea pigs – something which is neither unique to Australia nor a thing of the past (see Dyer's 2006 investigation on how British soldiers in Iraq are being treated for injuries with unlicensed blood-clotting agents). With such memories hidden from view, there emerges neither an opportunity for empathy nor understanding, which according to Wessells who looks at peace building in post-conflict societies, is an important basis for re-establishing a functioning community (Wessells, 2005: 368).

The purposeful forgetfulness and lack of recognition is also a form of betrayal as the veterans are denied the importance and relevance of their experience. The telling of a shameful and forgotten event, then, is also an important mechanism in overcoming this betrayal. The veterans and their families were able to listen to their own stories reflected back to them with passion and humour. This gave the veterans the rare opportunity to reflexively consider their experiences from the perspective of a third party. A story that had been denied for so long was acknowledged and in some ways, vindicated the struggles of the veterans and their families for both recognition and compensation.

⁵ *Maralinga*, August 2006 production, Act I, Scene 2, 'Death'.

⁶ *Maralinga*, August 2006 production, Act II, Scene 14, 'Body, Mind'.

⁷ See for example, Paul Sheehan's (2003) discussion of the Vietnam conflict and his response to the comments made by Australia's Governor General, Major General Michael Jeffery.

Understanding community

Before discussing the role *Maralinga* played in attempting to overcome this betrayal by ‘building’ community, it is important to reflect on the concept of ‘community’ and its associated meanings. According to community worker, Jeremy Brent (2004), community is something that we want but never seems to arrive. Community is, as Brent goes on to argue, something that is always called for whenever social problems are experienced. Zygmunt Bauman describes this cultural craving for community as being like: ‘a roof under which we shelter in heavy rain, like a fireplace which we warm our hands on a frosty day’ (2001: 1). Despite such a longing for the stability and warmth of community, it is something that eludes our grasp.

Brent (2004: 214) believes that the concept of community is a double-edged sword: having the potential to produce both co-operation and mutuality, as well as be divisive and create conflict. This prompts Brent (2004: 214) to ask, ‘What phenomenon is community?’ While it is something that does not have a concrete manifestation, its sense of existence has a real impact on people’s lives.

The dominant, orthodox conceptualisations of community revolve around the concept that there exist ‘natural communities’ based on recognition (Brent, 2004: 218). This position is one that views the concept of community as unproblematic and uncontested. According to Oliver (2001: 38), ‘recognition’ dominates contemporary theory and practice regarding ‘community’ and centres on Hegel’s conception of a dialectical struggle for recognition. While a detailed discussion of ‘dialectical struggle’ is beyond the scope of this paper, what is important here is the position that we form natural communities with people we recognise as being ‘like us’. That is, community is established through ideas of ‘natural’ formation, relying on shared identity, recognition and social formations arising out of mutual beliefs, understandings and practices – all seen to create a stable sense of identity and subjectivity (Taylor, 1994: 25).

It is from this position that the related communitarian and libertarian schools of community emerge that includes theorists such as Taylor (1994), Sandel (1998) and Francis Fukuyama (1989, 1992). Fukuyama (1992: 5-8), for example, links community with both the modern liberal state and neoliberal economic policies, arguing that ‘recognition’ is achieved through citizenship and consumer culture: which he argues are the ‘twin pillars’ of community. In this view, communities are formed through ‘rational’ self-interest and materialist desires which are at the base of the liberal nation-state and associated liberalised markets. While expanding markets driven by self-interest provide the opportunity to fulfil all the material desires of individuals, it is the nation-state that allows neatly defined communities to form as citizens have similar experiences, desires and self-interest. Such a position echoes Benedict Anderson’s original position that a nation forms an ‘imagined community’ because of some conceived notion of shared experience and comradeship, ‘regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail’ (1991: 8).

While this prompts Anderson to argue that ‘this fraternity that makes it possible . . . for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings’ (1991: 8), others celebrate the emergence of the nation as the pinnacle of human development. For Fukuyama (1992: 8), for example, the nation is such a powerful form of recognition that it cannot be improved, and he thus declares the end

of ideological history⁸. As a result, Fukuyama (1992) dismisses alternative understandings of community. Reflecting the same point, Taylor argues that liberal democracy has also reached the pinnacle of history as it has ‘ushered in a politics of equal recognition’ (1994: 27).

It should be noted, however, that such an unproblematic understanding of community is not limited to the communitarian school and conservative commentators such as Fukuyama. Many progressive academic and community development activists also embrace the concept of community as natural. For example, in their important contribution to the discussion of cultural community development, progressive activists Deborah Mills and Paul Brown (2004, 1) discuss how communities evolve through certain practices associated with artist and community partnerships. One case Mills and Brown discuss is ‘community development’ through production knowledge in an applied theatre project based around one of Australia’s largest rivers, the Murray (Mills and Brown, 2004: 43). In so doing, Mills and Brown describe community as something that naturally appears through such a production but do not problematise the concept of community, seeming to accept it as something inherently positive.

Theatre, then, is seen as having the potential to ‘create’ community particularly across groups that may not necessarily communicate. It is this dimension of dialogue across groups that Thompson (2003) describes as one of the strengths of applied theatre, and it was reflected in the very aims of *Maralinga*. In the grant application to the Cultural Development Board of the Australia Council, the production team clearly states that one of the key aims of the project is to build ‘a sense of community amongst veterans’ by presenting the stories of the nuclear veterans to the broader veterans’ community⁹.

Problematizing ‘natural’ communities

I believe, however, that there are a number of important limitations that emerge when relying on natural community formation based on recognition. Each of these leads to denial of community, and in the case of the *Maralinga* nuclear veterans, further betrayal. The first of these limitations is based around ‘exclusion’, whereby the processes of recognition establish an inside for the privileged and an outside for ‘others’. This is the divisiveness that Brent (2004) alludes to because such a privileged community only comes to accept those to whom it can relate and who it can recognise. In this instance, the broader veterans’ community can be seen as the privileged group: ‘gatekeepers’ who refuse to allow others the same status. Consequently, while Fukuyama argues that recognition by peers fulfils a key element of community, others remain sceptical. For Hage (2001, 2003) and Diprose (2003), rather than being a key to social harmony, recognition as a basis of forming community simply promotes exclusion.

The second limitation of relying on ‘recognition’ revolves around one individual or community judging whether another is worthy to be recognised and, therefore, accepted. Cornell (1992) and Diprose (2003) remind us that it is usually the dominant group doing the recognising and, therefore, the judging. For Oliver (2001), this is a

⁸ Importantly, though Fukuyama has reviewed his position a number of times, particularly after the New York terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, the essence of his argument remains the same (see Fukuyama, 2002).

⁹ Source: *The Australian Nuclear Veterans Association Verbatim Theatre Project: Stage Three*, 2004.

symptom of oppression as it reinforces hierarchies since one group is making all the judgements. Those wishing to be recognised must ensure that they meet the value judgements of the dominant group.

Such an example is highlighted by the story of Australia's nuclear veterans. The nuclear veterans are not 'recognised' as having experienced the same 'war' conditions as those exposed to 'enemy fire'. This is reflected in both the broader veterans' community as well as the Australian government that has refused compensation. This establishes a 'value hierarchy' by which to judge different experiences. In this case, some events are deemed worthy by the broader veterans' community, and therefore accepted, while others are not.

The third insight extends the above two and relates to the homogenisation of difference. Since the dominant group judges and reinforces its position, both Oliver (2001) and Cornell (1992) argue that such a process ultimately homogenises and effaces differences. In this way, the broken and cancerous bodies of the nuclear veterans can only be considered 'war' victims if they reflect the wounds of orthodox conflicts where the 'good guys' are over here and the 'bad guys', somewhere over there. In other words, bullet wounds are 'recognised' and therefore seen as acceptable, while cancer and abnormalities born by the children of veterans are not. The production attempted to confront this by challenging any perceived hierarchy of suffering amongst veterans.

A fourth insight is provoked by a reliance on the liberal nation-state that, according to Connelly (1999), further explains the process of exclusion and homogenisation. Connelly reminds us that the nation was originally related to 'biological race' (Connelly, 1999: 74). It is hardly surprising then that race is invoked when there are calls for national unity or when the aspirations of a nation are threatened. Connelly (1999) notes that with 'race' now generally dismissed as a myth or fable, the stability of what holds a nation-state together is questioned. As a result, Fukuyama (1992) and Taylor's (1994) assertions that the nationstate is the pinnacle of recognition have questionable foundations.

The result for Connelly is that the nation can only be 'kept pure . . . [through] selective memory' (1999, 75). That is, the 'myth' represented by the 'pure' nation is constantly 'polluted' by events which must be ignored (or purposely forgotten). This usually involves the population embracing a sense of forgetfulness, particularly of any violent and exclusionary past, and homogenising a complicated and diverse history. This can then be used to exclude those who threaten visions of unity and a single, stable subjectivity. The purposeful exposure of Australian troops to radiation by the very country they are serving is one such memory that is difficult to confront.

Desiring 'community' and reciprocity

A radical departure from 'recognition' is the school of thought that argues that community is propelled by *alterity* or essential difference. Here, community does not emerge by some natural process but rather through 'desiring'. This school has its origins in the theoretical positions presented by, amongst others, Emmanuel Lévinas (1981), but it is the work of Rosalyn Diprose (2003) that I will focus on here. In essence, Diprose argues that we are propelled towards each other because of our

desire to form a community with the ‘other’ who is unique or radically different, rather than (solely) with those we recognise as ‘like us’. The individual is present within a community not as a ‘self-atomised being’ seeking recognition but rather through a desire to share difference as a fundamental expression of uniqueness (Werhane 1996; Milberg 2001).

An ‘authentic’ community is formed from different individuals who might not understand each other’s subjectivity but rather exist with *reciprocal desires* to both establish and maintain community. Such a conceptualisation of community is formed through the desire for alterity, subjectivity and agency between another and me. This is an alterity that is promoted not subdued. This results in a heterogeneous rather than homogeneous community, as the individual is never reduced to a uniform subjectivity.

To understand exactly how this occurs, Diprose (2003) draws on the metaphor of the handshake. This is the ‘hand of friendship’ that signifies the bond of community as it is extended to the stranger. Central to Diprose’s claim is the issue of *what* is exchanged and shared. The handshake that brings together different bodies has an important meaning. I would argue the exchange in Diprose’s handshake involves more than just the offer of friendship but also the *desire* to share hope, trust, a sense of safety, and possibly intellect. (See Arvanitakis 2006 for a more detailed discussion.)

The open hand does not necessarily indicate an invitation to dinner, a place to sleep or even a conversation. In the case of a hand exposed to radiation as described in the opening section of this paper, the gesture may even prompt uncertainty. Rather, it presents my desire to live together in an open, peaceful and authentic community. I may never understand the stranger or recognise their experiences, and they may never understand me, but I offer an open community. All I expect in return is the open hand of friendship to be reciprocated¹⁰. Building on this, I argue that an open ‘community’ is established through the reciprocal (non-commercial) sharing of desire. Based on Gudeman (2001) and others, the argument is that the *act of reciprocity* is a way of making community by extending its desire without discrimination.

***Maralinga* – creating the desire for community**

Given this, we must consider what lessons exist for *Maralinga* specifically, and applied theatre more generally. That is, what do ‘cultural community development’ projects such as *Maralinga* tell us about promoting community? Are Mills and Brown (2004: 1) correct when they argue that communities develop through such cultural practices?

To answer this, let me begin by reflecting on where the attempt to bring and develop community failed. The initial process of confirming the location of the play at the Central Coast, as I noted above, was because it was believed that there was a ‘natural’ community that would support the production. This natural community would include various veterans’ and support groups that pepper the Central Coast of New South Wales. Due to both the location and the topic we would expect to see the formation of a natural community.

¹⁰ It is important to note here that the ‘hand of friendship’ can be symbolic or virtual rather than physical.

However, although we found some sympathy, there was little interest in the story of the nuclear veterans. Despite exceptional promotional efforts and a high-profile cast, the various veterans' groups targeted largely ignored the production. As it worked out, we received no group bookings and only limited support from the broader veterans' community. Consequently, the groups viewed as a 'natural' support base lacked the desire to form a community with the veterans whose stories were being told. For example, it was noted that the local 'war' veterans did not believe that the nuclear veterans actually were in a 'real' conflict. In this way, there was no desire to share a common history or a community: the broken bodies of the nuclear veterans were not 'recognised' by the broader veterans' communities as being equal to those that have appeared through conventional conflicts. The concept of 'natural' community based on recognition failed and in fact, perpetuated the betrayal and exclusion discussed above.

In contrast, the desire for community came from places that would not be considered 'natural'. The play built its audience mostly from anti-war and anti-nuclear campaigners who came to learn more about this aspect of Australia's history, as well as the ranks of established theatre-goers, both local and afar. Those attending did not only want to view the production, but many waited to meet and talk to the nuclear veterans who were often present – with some audience members even returning a second time and bringing further supporters.

Importantly, the nuclear veterans whose stories are told in *Maralinga* take no 'antinuclear' testing position, and remain deeply patriotic. In contrast, those who offered the hand of friendship and showed desire for community, have almost oppositional politics. Despite there being no 'natural' affiliation, these groups interacted and showed a desire to form community.

This has a number of implications that are relevant to the work of both community builders and practitioners of applied theatre alike. Firstly, this means that community can be built across time and space. Both Polanyi (see Dalton 1968) and Sahlins (1972) argue that reciprocity allows for both close and distant social relations to be built and maintained as they are stripped of time and space. Thus, 'community does not necessarily rise from proximity, nor a common language, religion, culture or even blood . . . these are secondary factors' (Lietaer, 2001: 181).

The result for applied theatre then, is that there exists the potential to develop community across both time and space if desire exists. As practitioners then, we must consider the role that theatre can have in promoting such a desire beyond those perceived to have some 'natural affiliation'. For *Maralinga*, this desire failed in some ways but was stimulated in unexpected ways.

This was highlighted by one nuclear veteran, Murray, who was originally recalcitrant about the play because he was not exposed in *Maralinga* but at another test site. In a conversation with me, he indicated that the *Maralinga* veterans were in fact 'grandstanding' or showing off, and did not see the value of the production. However, after attending one of the performances, he was not only moved and desired to share his story with those associated with the play, but returned with his family including his granddaughter.

Significantly, Murray informed me that this was his chance of explaining his fears and nightmares that up until now had not been possible. Murray used the production to narrate his experience to his granddaughter. The narrative told through the play stimulated a desire that crossed generations: something Murray said was not possible until he had seen the play. This then returns us to the importance of storytelling in confronting the selective memory emphasised above. Such a process of sharing stories demands remembrance and encourages the desire for community.

In addition, applied theatre has the potential to bring together fractured communities if the desire to do so can be stimulated. Those who attended, such as Murray, had the ability to share their own story with those who desired to listen. Through *Maralinga*, we see the desire shared and reciprocated, establishing and expanding community not limited by recognition. Rather, this is a free and open sharing of desire that allows one community to be heard and the sense of betrayal to begin to recede.

Conclusion

Towards the end of the play, the nuclear veterans share the following exchange:

Doug: You get two explosions with an atomic bomb going off. You get the initial bang then you get the . . . 'nother one, the shock wave rolls in after the flash . . . ya know, bang. The shock wave hit us. Knocked me over, on the face, it was that heavy.

Rev John: It really knocks you over, the power of this atomic bomb.

Rick S: You could lay on the blast, and it . . . [was] . . . like a big wind that went through you.

Doug: You could feel the heat . . . and the all the heat, when it pushed out and the crush.

Dawn: It was like having a hot bucket of water thrown on your back.

Terry: It didn't burn [indicating the back of his neck] but you felt it.

Rick S: That heat on the back of your neck. That heat is tremendous! It frightens you! You think you're going to set on fire, it's so hot!

Rev John: You're just thirsty.

Doug: And all the backs of our necks were seared.

Rick S: And then it's gone.

Doug: And then you get this, ah like it's, as if it's created a vacuum, and then it blows back towards ground zero again . . . and then the drag back when it all . . . the debris comes back again to ground zero.

Bryan: And ah you could see the cloud went y'know, across the edge of the village 'n past, where . . . over where the airport was, the airstrip.

Rev John: Now, this was just an enormous thing to see and to witness, at 19 you don't realise the significance, you're not even thinking that this was something that killed 70,000 people at Nagasaki. That isn't, there's nothing like that ever in your mind, you're not thinking about anything like that, at all. You're thinking oh that's a powerful sight oh and I did something . . . and where's this blessed drink, I'm thirsty¹¹.

¹¹ *Maralinga*, August 2006 production, Act II, Scene 17, 'Exposure'.

The imagery of a nuclear explosion is one that haunts a generation. The decision by the governments of Australia and the UK to participate in the wilful exposure of its soldiers is a story of betrayal and suffering. It is a story that needs to be told but has been neglected – including by those who would appear to have a natural affiliation with the veterans.

This paper has argued that such natural affiliations do not automatically create a community. Rather, a reliance on natural communities built on recognition can lead to exclusion and ultimately further betrayal. During the production of *Maralinga*, a number of different worlds came together with nothing really ‘in common’ except for a desire to share community. It was this desire that emerges through the hand of friendship – even one exposed to nuclear radiation – that is the most important ingredient in establishing community. And if nothing else, this is exactly what the play producers managed to achieve.

Biographical Note

James Arvanitakis is a lecturer in the Humanities at the University of Western Sydney and a member of the University’s Centre for Cultural Research. A former banker, he changed his politics and career and has since held various positions with human rights organisations in Australia, throughout the Pacific, Indonesia and Europe. He is also a research associate with the Centre for Policy Development and founded the Commons Institute. His research focus now includes economic and environmental justice, political theatre and difference under the complex nature of contemporary citizenship. James’ latest book, *The Cultural Commons of Hope*, was launched in May 2008.

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