Absent Amateurs

Helen Nicholson, Royal Holloway, University of London

Amateur is a powerful word, eliciting strong emotions. To call someone an ‘amateur’ in the theatre or to suggest that a performance is ‘amateurish’ is often taken as an insult, conjuring images of self-congratulatory thespians and poor production values. The negative associations of the word are peculiar to theatre; it would be unusual to describe a band as ‘amateur’ and amateur gardening and craft activities are often encouraged rather than derided. In this short piece I am interested in reflecting on the implications of the amateur for this journal, and in questioning and how far distinctions between amateurs and professionals can be maintained in the cultural landscape of the 21st century.

Any discussion about amateurism as a concept is inevitably drawn to its apparent opposite, professionalism. In the journal’s twentieth year, there is an element of self-interest in debating this distinction. As a member of the editorial board for the full twenty-years of this journal’s life and co-editor since 2005, I have witnessed at first-hand how authors, reviewers and editors from across the globe have worked tirelessly to encourage and produce high standards of research and academic writing. Along with others, this journal has contributed to professionalising the broad area of applied theatre and has extended the research-base of drama education. The journal’s emphasis on capturing high quality research has, perhaps, served to legitimate applied theatre as a field of study within the academy, with many new degree courses providing intellectual challenge and training opportunities for researchers and practitioners. Despite the many positive aspects of robust research practices, however, it is worth pausing to reflect on the political implications of the legitimation of knowledge that the professionalisation of research can construct. Writing about education, Basil Bernstein pointed out that languages of legitimation are crucial in the emergence, institutionalization and development of academic subjects—they carve out and sustain intellectual and institutional spaces within the field of higher education (1990, 166). This perspective is usefully read alongside Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of the professionalised ‘field’ where he suggests that modes of knowledge production that are similarly classified create their own boundaries and orthodoxies, protected by different forms of social, cultural and economic capital (1996, 225). With this in mind, my question becomes this: how far has an emphasis on professionalised research created a fluid, critical community or has it constructed the conditions through which orthodoxies are guarded and knowledge becomes commodified?

This is not a question to which I can do justice here, but I should like to chip away at its parameters. One way to test the boundaries of our field (if such it can be called) might be to re-assess the beleaguered concept of the amateur; it is intriguing that a journal that is committed to investigating theatre in community settings has largely ignored the contribution of amateur theatre-makers. Over the years there has been plenty of discussion of professionally-led community-based theatre, where paid theatre-makers develop new performances with local people, often in response to local stories and the circumstances of a particular community. Graham Woodruff’s insightful article about his theatre work with Telford Community Arts in 2007 offers some explanation for how amateurs have been

perceived. In describing the democratic working practices of community theatre, he caricatures amateur theatre as pretentious, competitive and hierarchical, values that (understandably) his work seeks to challenge:

Amateur theatre tends to reproduce this [mainstream theatre] hierarchical structure. In community plays, the processes of creativity are far more democratic and the material for the play evolves from workshops with the participants (2007, 36)

Woodruff’s observations about the equalitarianism of his working practices are familiar territory for regular readers of this journal, and perhaps suggest one of the orthodoxies of the field: professional theatre practitioners create the structures in which local and creative hierarchies are apparently eroded. Woodruff also reports that one of the cast members contrasted amateur and community-based theatre, 'where [in amateur drama] you bloody audition people, and if you've been in it for 20 years, darling, you get the best parts. Here there's no one-upmanship or any of that rubbish’ (2007, 41). Of course this is a stereotype of amateur theatre-making that is widely recognised, and it neatly sidesteps the economic argument that amateurs make theatre not for material benefits, but for the love of it. What is interesting here is that distinctions between the amateur and professional are characterised not by who benefits from paid labour, but by other measures: political commitment to particular ways of working, professional knowledge of inclusive forms of theatre-making and, perhaps, by aesthetic preferences for particular kinds of theatrical performance.

My interest here is not in claiming that amateur theatre is itself politically radical, nor in singling out Woodruff’s article for criticism, but considering what can be learnt from reflecting on why amateurism as a concept, and amateur theatre as a practice have been largely absent from the pages of this journal. Bourdieu’s analysis of judgements of taste remains apposite here, where he argues that no preferences – aesthetic or otherwise - are innocent, and all judgements of taste are socially stratified. Internalised as *habitus*, aesthetic tastes and dispositions are powerful markers of what (or who) is excluded from symbolic systems of privilege. This hierarchical ‘system of dispositions’ that Bourdieu attributes to judgements of taste is reminiscent of the claims made by nineteenth century artists who, keen to ensure a professional role for themselves, sought to distance themselves from amateurs on the basis of their (superior) imaginative sensibilities. As Marilyn Butler points out, the Romantics’ professionalisation of the artist was ‘not so much the quest for a certain literary product, as for a type of producer’ (1981, 70). It is interesting in this context that Nicholas Ridout’s recent book, *Passionate Amateurs: Theatre, Communism and Love* (2013) offers a compelling analysis of the commitment of ‘passionate amateurs’, whom he describes as ‘romantic anti-capitalists’ who apply their creativity and critical powers to resisting a commodified theatrical industry (2013, 6). Nonetheless, I am left wondering whether professionalised academics have ignored many other forms of amateur creativity in the theatre because they find it distasteful or politically unpalatable.

The twenty-first century is challenging old binaries between professionals and amateurs, conceptually, artistically and economically. In one re-assessment, amateur creativity is conceptualised as a valuable alternative to the commodified culture industries. In an engaging collection of essays, Tim Edensor and his colleagues chart forms of ‘vernacular creativity’ (a term he uses to describe cultural activities such as gardening, garden gnomes, suburban poetry groups and decorating homes with Christmas lights) that, they argue, offer an alternative to both the commodified products of the creative industries and to the ‘cool’ tastes of the metropolitan creative classes. The more self-consciously political craftivist movement has developed practices such as guerrilla knitting, gardening and embroidery as a form of ‘slow activism’. In a different vein, distinctions between professional and amateur have been eroded by some contemporary theatre-makers, whose performance practices invite new forms of cultural participation, some of which are designed to challenge participants to make decisions in role that have political consequences – a practice reminiscent of much theatre-in-education. Yet as with all cultural re-imaginings, this amateur turn brings with it a need to exercise caution. There is nothing inherently virtuous in amateurism, and it is perhaps paradoxical that the increasing professionalisation of research has also coincided with a period of uncertainty in which the status of professional training for drama teachers in some parts of the world (including the UK) is precarious, and where economic precarity is turning jobs for paid artists into ‘volunteering’ roles or internships.

The word ‘amateur’, of course, invokes the word love, and love has seductive powers. This opens a whole new set of debates in which love, as Sara Ahmed points out, is an emotion that is culturally and politically ‘ambivalent’ because it is simultaneously inclusive and also necessarily excludes others (2004, 125). Reflecting on the twentieth year of this journal provides a moment to pause on this ambivalence, and to recognise the professionalism of researchers who have enriched its pages and the care of reviewers who provide so much invisible (and unpaid) labour. Thinking through what is valued (and perhaps legitimated) by this journal in its first twenty years, opens questions about how it can set new agendas that are alert to any orthodoxies that have been established, and vigilant about what (or who) has been omitted, ignored or overlooked. Perhaps the best we can all do is to undertake research as professionals, but with the love of an amateur.

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