**The Sociable Aesthetics of Amateur Theatre[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Erin Walcon and Helen Nicholson**

**Abstract**

This article explores the balance of sociability within three amateur theatre groups, each with different working artistic processes and diverse aesthetic repertoires. These amateur groups enable participants to assume fictional identities within sociable encounters, a site for playing a fictional role in the company of friends. Drawing on Georg Simmel’s analysis of sociability, and Bourdieu’s ideas of social capital, this article considers sociable encounters as cultural practices that are integral to aesthetic engagement with the specific qualities of making theatre. Not only are participants engaging in regular imaginative play, where they can try on new voices, selves, and roles, but they are also constantly finding a valued and valuable ‘relational self’ through the shifting social sands of the amateur group, forming new bonds and friendships and solidifying older ones. This article postulates that this does meaningful work within the lives of the participants – both in terms of social capital but also in creating an affective space for individual agency.

**Keywords:** amateur, sociability, participation

**Biographies**

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*It was a laugh at first. No, it was serious. It was a serious intent to start a theatre group. It wasn’t “Shall we give it a go?” It was, no, let’s actually do it. I’m quite pernickety – things have to be just so, so if I’m going to get involved in something, it has to be just right. So the word “amateur” I don’t like. My perception of amateur theatre is the ham side of it – wooden acting, props falling off, staging going wrong, lighting going wrong. Some of Ramon’s plays are really serious, and if the audience is going to end up laughing, that won’t work… if we’re going to do it, it’s got to be right. We don’t have a huge budget, but it’s got to be right.[[2]](#footnote-2) (Maurice Newbery, Managing Director, Philippine Theatre UK)*

The image of amateur theatre invoked in this quotation is well-known, and confirms a stereotype of ‘am dram’ that is embedded in the popular imagination. Yet the practice of amateur theatre is taken very seriously by participants, who appreciate the creative challenge of making theatre as well as the sociable atmosphere of the working collaboratively. Local audiences are often loyal, and amateur theatre makes a vital contribution to the cultural provision of an area, both within non-metropolitan places where a visit to the nearest professional theatre may involve significant travel, and in cities, where amateur companies may serve specific communities. The epigraph that opens this article, an extract from an interview with a leading member of the amateur company Philippine Theatre UK, captures the sentiments we have encountered regularly in our research. It reflects amateur theatre-makers’ desire to make work with high production values that can be enjoyable for audiences and seriously engaging for participants and their community.

In his essay ‘Creativity, space and performance’, David Crouch argues that creativity is integral to everyday life, finding expression in friendship as well as making artworks. He suggests that ‘sociable creativity’ is inherently performative, and can ‘emerge through the experience or practice of doing’. [[3]](#footnote-3) This article takes up the challenge to consider the sociability of amateur creativity as part of ‘the practice of doing’, and addresses how amateur theatre touches the everyday lives of people who participate. It derives from a wider study, *Amateur Dramatics: Crafting Communities in Time and Space*, a research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council that aims to shed new light on this neglected area. By engaging in an empathetic study of amateur theatre in England and taking it as a cultural practice on its own terms, our intention as a research team[[4]](#footnote-4) is to look beyond the stereotype. Rather than seeing amateur theatre as the incompetent or inauthentic other of professional theatre, we recognise its multiplicity and plurality as well as its long and vibrant history and heritage. In this article, we are interested in the dynamic between sociability and artistic processes that underpins the work of many amateur companies that have contributed to our research project. The reasons for attending to this aspect of amateur theatre are two-fold. First, it questions how far amateur theatre is shaped by the sociable qualities of its creative practices, and, secondly, we are interested in teasing out how far sociability in amateur theatre has, in itself, an aesthetic dimension.

The article foregrounds Erin Walcon’s engagement with three amateur theatre companies over a two-year period from 2014 to 2016: Philippine Theatre UK (PTUK) in Fulham, London; TOADS Little Theatre in Torquay, and Acting Out in Birmingham. Each of these three companies construct the craft of community in different ways, with different relationships to sociability. PTUK was established in 2002 by Ramon Castillanes Teñoso, and he directs a company with a strong representation of Filipino participants, many of them first or second-generation Londoners. There is also an equal number of non-Filipino members who joined after attending their productions as audiences. TOADS exemplifies amateur theatre companies with a longer history; when TOADS Little Theatre was inaugurated in 1980 it extended the repertoire of TOADS Stage Musical Company which (in common with many amateur companies in England) has an unbroken tradition of entertaining local audiences since the heyday of amateur dramatics in the 1930s. Acting Out is an LGBT amateur theatre group based in Birmingham. When it was established in 2000, it was known as GAPP (Gay and Performing Proudly) and was exclusively composed of a small social circle of gay men, but in 2003 the company changed its name to Acting Out to represent its increasingly inclusive approach to membership. The relationship between the resources, locality, venue and the demographic of the participants inflects the repertoire of each company, as well as defining the balance between theatre-making and the sociability of the company.

Our conceptual guide for negotiating this territory are theorists of the everyday. One of the distinctive qualities of amateur theatre is that it is often both integral to the everyday lives of participants and yet its activities are somehow separate from the quotidian or mundane realities of ‘normal’ living. This means that amateur theatre is not only a spatial practice – in that it takes place in rehearsal spaces, backstage workshops and in the theatre itself - it also creates temporal experiences that distinguish time spent theatre-making from other aspects of life. The concept of sociability offers one way to understand the different temporal and spatial registers of amateur creativity, and pushes us to consider how encounters in amateur theatre are differentiated from other forms of social interaction. Theoretically, the work of sociologist Georg Simmel provides the touchstone for this inquiry, whose work on sociability engages with both the everyday and the symbolic attributes of relational encounters. Writing at the turn of the twentieth century, Simmel was concerned to analyse how everyday interaction between individuals create social structures and shape society. He identified sociable relations as those that are experienced outside the trappings of ordinary life, playful interactions in which pre-existing status differences might be resisted. In Simmel’s words:

Sociability is the art or play form of association, related to the content and purposes of association in the same way as art is related to reality. While sociable interaction centres upon persons, it can occur only if the more serious purposes of the individual are kept out, so that it is an interaction not of complete but of symbolic and equal personalities. [[5]](#footnote-5)

Simmel’s description of sociability as ‘a special sociological structure’ explicitly references art and play, which, he suggests, ‘draw their form from realities but nevertheless leave the reality behind them’.[[6]](#footnote-6) This relational ontology contributes to a contemporary emphasis on sociability as a cultural practice, and this is both illustrated and tested in this analysis of amateur theatre, not least because the practice of making theatre entangles the fictional world of the play with the ‘real’. For many amateur theatre companies the ‘real’ extends to the practicalities and economic pressures of making theatre. It is here that the idea of social capital, as integral to the materiality of everyday experience, offers one way to analyse how these imperatives impact on the aesthetics of sociability. By assessing the relationship between the materiality of theatre-making and the immateriality of the imagination, we hope to engage with questions of social context, as well as make a critical intervention into debates around sociability and aesthetic engagement that lie at the heart of Simmel’s work.

The research methods employed mirror our interest in the ways in which creative encounters are refracted in everyday life. Methodologically, therefore, this research draws on ethnographic methods that capture the everyday flow of being and doing, bringing our experiences of amateur theatre into dialogue with theoretical concepts related to sociability. In this, Erin Walcon’s study followed Sarah Pink’s suggestion that, rather than undertaking empirical research to define the particular *qualities* of a sociable environment, we are seeking to understand the ‘intensities of everyday social relationships, materialities, sensory experiences, practices, representations’ that (in our case) are embodied in the practices of amateur theatre-making.[[7]](#footnote-7) Drawing on Pink’s methodological approach, this analysis will therefore reference and frame Erin’s role in the research as a sociable participant who is attentive to her presence within the rehearsal space. To represent the richness of these encounters, part of this article documents the spontaneity of Erin’s voice in her field notes, a strategy we use to honour her role as an active agent within the process. In reflecting on these experiences, we hope to bring Simmel’s sociological study of the aesthetics of sociability into the contemporary moment by recognising how, as researchers, we are inevitably imbricated in the liveness of the encounter.

In each example that follows, it is noticeable that these groups were hospitable and welcoming to Erin, their porous boundaries emblematic of the balance between sociability and artistic process within these different groups. The next section focuses on the work of PTUK, told in part through extracts from Erin’s field notes, and dwells on the aesthetics of sociability. We will then move to reflect on how TOADS is generative of social capital and the ways in which Acting Out’s relationality is integral to the dynamic between self-narration and collective affirmation. Part of the methodology involves recognising that this work is never done, the balancing act between social and aesthetic registers is never quite complete, and that, as Pink suggests, as researchers ‘we are always in movement and always making representations.’[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Aesthetics of Sociability: Philippine Theatre UK, Fulham, London**

Fieldnotes: 19 July 2014, Fulham, London

I’m sitting within the circle of Philippine Theatre UK (PTUK), many of whom have a glass of red wine in their hands and are laughing at a slightly naughty pun that John (cast member and costumier) has just made. It’s been about three hours since everyone arrived in a slow trickle, hugged, chatted and caught up, and we’ll be here for another four hours. PTUK meets on Saturdays at the Lady of Perpetual Help Church Hall in Fulham, usually once a month when they aren’t having a show and more often when they’re rehearsing something. Most people are reading their scripts directly off their mobile phone because director and playwright Ramon Teñoso has just sent it out on email this week. I’ve been handed a preciously rare paper copy, since printing is expensive. Since inception in 2002, PTUK has only staged original pieces by Ramon – they’ve never done a traditionally copyrighted script. Today they’re starting a new show based on a traditional Filipino folktale– *Ibong Adarna: The Enchanted Bird,* and everyone is excited because it is read-through day.

Today, others are new to the group too – and we all been warmly welcomed, hugged, and introduced, regardless of age or prior experience with theatre. Walking into the space, I feel an enthusiastic warmth towards newcomers – but there is also a clear sense of group identity here, one which has coalesced and deepened with time, honed through the crucible of the pressurized experience of putting on a show. I am sitting there, thinking to myself ‘What an open-door, welcoming group,’ when Ramon briskly turns on his ‘director voice' and tells us all that the read-through is about to begin. Ramon’s word is law here in this circle – he is charismatic and drives the group forward. Maurice, his partner, sits quietly at the head of the circle, ready to keep things moving and keep everyone to time. Keeping to time is something that PTUK finds a challenge, he tells me with a chuckle. I start to relax, anticipating that I’ll be able to sit back and enjoy hearing the script, but this is short-lived. ‘Erin!’ he shouts, pointing at me. ‘You’ll be reading the role of the Queen to start! Stand up!’ Being the only researcher in the room is no escape hatch. I am reminded of Sarah Pink’s declaration that contemporary reflexive ethnography must be engaged ‘in ways that are practical, creative, imaginative and empathetic’- and I rise to my feet.[[9]](#footnote-9)

This account of Erin’s initial encounter with PTUK opens questions about the ways in which the craft of making theatre is interwoven with the sociability of the experience. We have found that the atmosphere and friendliness of the group has particular significance in amateur theatre, where time is given freely and attendance is voluntary. The constraints of time for many amateur companies mean that rehearsals are often sharply focused on the job-in-hand, but for PTUK, sometimes ‘the work’ of the sessions does not start until two hours after the group has gathered. The balance between art-making and sociability is indicated by different temporal rhythms at play. On the one hand, this rehearsal appears to be largely a social affair –through drink, food, and informal banter, there is a celebratory togetherness – a performed sense of belonging. As such, PTUK enact a key tenet of Simmel’s description of sociable groups, ‘above and beyond their social content, all the associations are accompanied by a feeling for, and a satisfaction in, the very fact that one is associated with others and that the solitariness of the individual is resolved into togetherness, a union with others’.[[10]](#footnote-10)On the other hand, however, as a rehearsal for a play there is a further shared objective. When the company is asked to attend to the rehearsal, actors move quickly from an atmosphere of sociable conviviality to one of focused concentration. In the context of PTUK’s rehearsal, there is an intersection at the crossroads between artistic purpose and the aesthetics of sociability –– a seriousness of shared purpose and structured playfulness that co-exist comfortably together.

The aesthetic dimension is integral to Simmel’s social theories, and throughout his work he draws analogies between art and society. When he turns his attention to sociability, he locates it squarely in the nexus between the aesthetic and the sociological. Taking his lead from Kantian theories of aesthetic autonomy, Simmel argues that an ideal of sociability is free from social constraints and that it is this separation from the conventions of everyday life that enables a temporary equitable dialogue. For Simmel, ‘pure’ sociability has an aesthetic dimension; each sociable encounter follows ‘a special structure corresponding to the artistic impulse’.[[11]](#footnote-11) Making an analogy between sociability, performativity and art, he suggests that:

It is a game in which one "acts" as though all were equal …. This is just as far from being a lie as is play or art in all their departures from reality.[[12]](#footnote-12)

At PTUK, there are clear hierarchies within the company, and the authority of director Ramon Teñoso is accepted in the rehearsal room. Following Simmel, however, Sandra Jovchelovitch further suggests that this sense of being detached, of shifting the routines of daily experience, enables people to ‘playfully engage in the game of sociability, of enjoying the presence of others, or playing the conversational and relational games that make conviviality and shared experience.’[[13]](#footnote-13) This way of thinking about sociability as relational game suggests that an aesthetics of sociability is created outside the social and temporal rhythms of much paid work - some members of PTUK work at the hospital as registered nurses, others are professional chauffeurs, psychologists, night custodians, and stay-at-home mums . But in the rehearsal space,on that Saturday, everyone was engaged as script-readers and engrossed in the theatrical task of becoming someone else.

Fieldnotes: 19 July 2014, Fulham, London

I’m standing. I’m being the Queen. 14-year old Daniel stands next to me, because he’s reading the prince. He smiles at me. Daniel is used to Ramon’s abrupt and commanding shifts in presence… he’s been coming to the group since he was a young child because his dad, John, is one of the members. He points to a place on the script. ‘Start here…’ he whispers to me. The tone in the room has shifted drastically. What was a wholly social space has suddenly become all-business – there is work to be done here. The mobile phones are still out - but there is a focus in the room, and scripts are being scrolled on them. Ramon looks round, all eyes trained on him. ‘Let’s begin,’ he says with an eyebrow lift. We read through the script. Roles change regularly. I sit down, relieved to be done reading the Queen’s part, but am startled back onto my feet again in several pages. ‘Erin, you will be the second brother!’ Ramon bellows, grinning at me. There are no passive participants here in this social circle – everyone is there to learn, everyone is there to take part. As a researcher within this space, the rules of engagement are clear – I am here to be present, and awake to the joy of the moment – and here, now, that means my job is to read this role to the best of my ability, to play pretend with great seriousness, and to do so on equal footing with everyone else in the circle.

As we progress, it’s clear that Ramon is testing people out in roles – seeing who fits. He’s explaining the show’s concept as we go along: *Ibong Adarna* is a traditional Philippine folktale, which the Filipino members of the company are familiar with from childhood. Ramon’s script is an original adaptation, and he’s sketching out costumes and scenic design ideas, asking for group contributions, describing projection and possible dance sequences. There are frequent pauses in the read-through to discuss ‘the look’ of the show – and these are largely democratic and open with the whole group participating, voices layering and interrupting with enthusiasm. People’s ideas are welcomed and there is much laughter, but each time we return to the script with the same militant crisp precision – and it’s clear that Ramon is leading things. Over the next six months, I will watch PTUK go through a demanding process of staging *Ibong Adarna,* eventually performing the work at the Chelsea Theatre in front of a sold-out audience over a full week.

For PTUK, the double ontology afforded by temporally distancing oneself from everyday life to enact an imagined or fictional role takes on another layer of entanglement; there is a group identity forged by both their shared identification with Filipino culture and by being amateur theatre-makers. Individual identities are responsive to this sociable environment, and in all these relational encounters, PTUK members actively cast themselves in roles where they felt valued and valuable. PTUK member Vicky Gigante, for example, was at once the company props maker, a seductive mermaid in the fairy story, and, as she confided to Erin, a playful version of herself in the company of friends. In the sociable activity of making amateur theatre everyday life is refracted, a process acknowledged by Simmel, who recognised that ‘sociability may easily get entangled with real life’.[[14]](#footnote-14) For costumier John Beglin, involvement in PTUK led him to develop new creative skills, both practical and performative, and participating in the work became increasingly interwoven in his life story. In John’s words, taking on additional responsibilities like costuming became a joyful part of his involvement with what he terms ‘his family’:

I’ve learned all this, purely because of Philippine Theatre UK. This is my family now. {…} It’s given me a lease of life I didn’t know I had inside me. I love it to bits. And when Ramon asked me to do the costumes, I took it on with an open mind and an open heart. [[15]](#footnote-15)

John’s experience is particularly poignant because he lives with a major health condition, but this is not how he story-tells who he is, choosing instead to concentrate on his role as costumier to frame his identity. As such, PTUK members illustrate what de la Fuente defines as ‘above life’ and Simmel as ‘more than life’. [[16]](#footnote-16) This is an aesthetics of sociability that is both integral to their life stories and yet provides relief and liberation from the more troubling or routine aspects of daily existence.

Simmel’s aesthetics of sociability offers one way to understand the balance between everyday life and the experience of making amateur theatre. The hard work and artistry involved in staging new works on a very small budget is integral to the atmosphere of sociability at PTUK– a common collective purpose that circumvents the ‘pure’ social sphere described by Simmel, providing aesthetic encounters that require focus, risk, aspiration and challenge. This balances the aesthetics of sociability, drawing on Simmel, with the purposeful activity of amateur craft and serious leisure attributed to Stebbins.[[17]](#footnote-17) As Erin states in her field notes, ‘this is what makes the circle I am sitting in more than simply a social circle, not just satisfying, but ultimately personally fulfilling’.

**Sociability and Social Capital: TOADS Little Theatre, Torquay**

*I didn’t actually start doing anything for an amateur dramatics society until seven years ago, when I was 43. And how I came into it was sort of in error, in a way. I happened to bump into the chairperson in a mutual friend’s shop and got introduced, and they were desperate, as always, for a bloke in a play, and the rest is history. (Jon Manley, TOADS, Torquay)*[[18]](#footnote-18)

Simmel’s suggestion that sociability has an aesthetic dimension captures the emotional commitment that amateur theatre involves. On its own, however, Simmel’s account of pure sociability as removed from external concerns provides only a partial account of the ways in which amateur theatre works. Over a century has elapsed since Simmel developed his theories of the sociability of aesthetic encounters, and his Kantian insistence on ‘pure’ sociability as detachment from everyday life has been subject to critical scrutiny. In his analysis of Simmel’s sociological aesthetics, Eduardo De la Fuente explains that it is the autonomy of both art and sociability that give rise to a ‘feeling of liberation and relief from the forces of reality’, but he also cautions that ‘it would be a mistake to take the “stylized” qualities of autonomous forms as a sign of their superficiality. It is precisely the “serious person” who takes delight in sociability.’[[19]](#footnote-19) This emphasis on seriousness, as a quality of sociable encounters, complements Richard Stebbins’ taxonomy of amateur activity. Simmel noted the seriousness of sociability, but Stebbins well-known description of amateur activity as ‘serious leisure’ requires hard work, sacrifice, conflict, devotion, and involves gaining hard-won skills and expertise.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The conviviality of being-together can be shaped by the materialities of place and environment, and defined by the cultural economies of making theatre. TOADS Little Theatre, the second example of an amateur theatre company in this article, tests the boundaries of Simmel’s theories of ‘pure sociability’ and invites a consideration of how external pressures, both economic and aesthetic, exert their influence on sociability. TOADS is a well-established company based in Torquay, Devon with a large membership, and a repertoire that is programmed a year in advance by committee. In common with all other members of the Little Theatre Guild, TOADS owns their own theatre, in this case a converted church with rehearsal rooms, wardrobes, workshops, a bar, coffee shop and a 240-seater auditorium. This brings financial demands and an increased set of administrative duties which all need to be undertaken by volunteers. Consequently, TOADS is less focused on sociability *per se* (or pure sociability, in Simmel’s terms), and its business-like footing has an impact on its ways of working.

Fieldnotes: 3 September 2014, Torquay

I’m sitting in an enormous converted stone church, curled in a plush red velvet seat and wrapped in my coat because it’s a bit chilly in this cavernous space on this dark November evening. I’m here to watch a rehearsal of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Director Stephanie Austin is standing at the front, looking through a script in an enormous green binder. The cast is standing round in small pockets, chatting quietly. There is a dog in the front row, lying curled in a contented mound on the red velvet paisley carpet. I’m not alone, sitting in the house – there are a handful of us seated here. But I *am* alone in that no one, apart from Stephanie has spoken to me. Several have waved politely, or smiled, or looked a bit unsure about why I’m there. My presence is largely accepted and unquestioned. They have a serious job to do, and only a two-hour rehearsal on a chilly November evening after work to complete it in. It’s all business here. Stephanie taps on her script, ‘Right, folks! Let’s get going. Scripts open to page 32 – we’re working Act II tonight.’ The rehearsal rattles along at an efficient pace – the director is letting them have a run-through tonight, so she doesn’t stop for much. Tonight, no one is going to ask me to stand up and read the Queen.

Constraints on members’ time influence the ways in which social interaction takes place, and the focused atmosphere of the rehearsal is determined, in part at least, by the necessity to create productions that will not only entertain, but also sell. This has an enduring impact on their repertoire, as Roger Heath, Chair of the Board, explains:

When we put on a play here, the cost is £3,000, on average. And we make a surplus and that runs the theatre. We do ten plays a year, while many companies around here will only do four. So we’re very much an amateur company, but we run along professional lines. It’s actually quite difficult. Talk about blurring of lines. It’s very difficult sometimes. In terms of artistic productions, the pace can only be described as punishing.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The need to generate income leads to very specific mandates about what they can undertake artistically, and creates a ‘punishing pace’ as productions follow each other swiftly to maximise use of the theatre. Jon Manley describes the annual ten-play repertoire as ‘a complete cross-section’, and Roger agrees, ‘You say Ayckbourn and they flock in. You say Agatha Christie and they flock in. If you go too much up-market, intellectually, they don’t flock in so much. They enjoy a good night out – a good laugh or a good thriller.’ The imperative to please the aesthetic tastes of local audiences and fill the theatre is not a rare pressure within the amateur sector, and it can limit the company’s repertoire. Pierre Bourdieu famously connected social capital with judgements of taste and, in this instance, it is aesthetic taste, rather than the aesthetics of sociability, that drives the economics of the theatre and shape the company’s repertoire.

It is here that the limits of Simmel’s aesthetic sociability become evident. For Simmel, sociability is detached from everyday concerns and, as we have observed, he sees this autonomy as a prerequisite for social equality, albeit on a temporary basis. He is, therefore, unconcerned with how the cultural, economic or autobiographical context of the encounter might determine the parameters for sociability. The idea of social capital, perhaps most widely associated with Bourdieu, offers one way to extend Simmel’s account of the aesthetics of sociability. Social capital, as it has come to be understood, describes the networks and social structures that are integral to everyday life and support (or sometimes constrain) social activity. For Bourdieu, writing in 1970s Paris, social capital was regarded as a mechanism of exclusion, one of the ways in which distinctions of class were internalised and upheld, often articulated as judgements of taste.[[22]](#footnote-22) David Putnam, writing about the culture of individualism in North America in the 1990s, offered a more positive reading of the term, suggesting that social capital is a collective resource that creates enduring social bonds.[[23]](#footnote-23) What each position shares is an understanding that sociability is contextually defined, sited and visible in relation to other social fields, and although the activity in itself may provide a break from extraneous concerns, it is inevitably constrained by other social practices.

Following Bourdieu, the context in which amateur theatre takes place creates particular qualities of sociability. During our research, we have found that many company members have great affection for their theatres, and the sociable environment often has a spatial dimension as well as a relationship to time. Members of TOADS see the ‘huge commitment’ of running a theatre building as ‘part of the enjoyment’, something that is ‘something worth getting up every morning for’. [[24]](#footnote-24) In her ethnographic study, Erin observed that attending to the fabric of the theatre created affective attachment to the building, and becoming involved in behind-the-scenes activity created opportunities for sociable encounters in its quiet corners.

Fieldnotes: 2 February 2015, Torquay

When I visit TOADS more regularly I begin to see the more informal playfulness which permeates the stone walls of this building and which hint at the deeper friendships which hold the building together like mortar. While rehearsals may be all business, the atmosphere in the wardrobe store is positively chatty, as I discover sandwiched between seven women, all squished together in a tiny attic space. And when Jon stops by on a break from work to fix a bug with the online ticketing system, the whole exchange with the volunteer on box office is done entirely in humorous and playful banter, laced with sarcasm, micky-taking, and even coquetry. ‘Watch out for him,’ the 75-year old box office woman warns me, eyes twinkling, ‘He’s trouble, he is!’ Jon, easily 20 years her junior, smiles at me and winks over her shoulder. The warm camaraderie in this building is hidden but still very present. Flirting and coquetry are part of the rules of social interaction.

When visiting on site, I am struck by how the role play extends to the off-stage jobs people do on site – Jon’s role as a board member, IT expert, and the perennial detective in whatever murder mystery is being staged that season are all equally valid and important roles that he takes on within this building. These are all, in a sense, performed and playful.

This extract from Erin’s field notes illustrates the ways in which the building itself becomes integral to the social dynamics of the company. The relational qualities of the space determine the aesthetic dimensions of this sociability; old theatres, such as the Little Theatre in Torquay, often have a special atmosphere that amateurs find alluring. Having privileged access to backstage areas furthers both a sense of belonging and attachment to the theatre, and separates activity undertaken in the theatre from other aspects of life. Simmel recognised that all sociable encounters predicated on this kind of insidership follow their own codes. He suggested that kind of verbal and communicative play is a key element of sociability, cautioning that for such interactivity to be purely sociable, it must be remain outside everyday concerns and stay in the realm of non-action.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The social capital afforded by working with an amateur theatre company thus becomes entwined with an aesthetics of sociability that exist only in the intimate spaces of the theatre, and the banter conforms to its rules. In their very large and expensive building, small pockets of friendships form around various ‘jobs to do’ – like box office or wardrobe. In an interview, Roger Heath and fellow board-member Jon Manley confirm that the off-stage administrative work is, in itself, part of the enjoyment and satisfaction of amateur theatre. When asked what triggers their motivation to stay involved, Jon answers in a single word: ‘Addiction.’ Roger agrees: ‘I think that is the word. It becomes addictive.’ Jon adds:

I think initially, it is a case of you are doing it for you. And I think most people if they were brutally honest, would admit the same. For myself, it was a case of I was very appreciative of being allowed to go on stage and act and do what I wanted to do, and I morally felt obliged to give something back to the theatre, to do other voluntary duties. That’s just the way I’m built. I think that’s true for a lot of other people, to be honest. But for a lot of people in am dram, there’s more to it, there is a social side. It gives you something to do and it keeps you very mentally active.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Throughout our research we have encountered participants for whom the craft of theatre-making becomes an absorbing passion. As Jon describes, over time this interest in performing deepens into an act of generosity, when ‘giving something back’ creates positive social capital.

There is a reciprocity between sociability, social capital and the artistry found within the amateur theatre sector. In terms of social capital, it balances evenly between what Putnam terms ‘bridging social capital’ and ‘bonding social capital’. Writing about community engagement, David Gauntlett defines the difference between these two forms of social capital:

bonding social capital can be pictured as a tight-knit circle of comrades; whereas bridging social capital has its arms outstretched, to welcome people in.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Furthermore, as TOADS illustrates, the theatre building carries its own affective force, and attachment to its fabric exerts a powerful influence. The intensity of working in the theatre can create a strong ‘bonding capital’, particularly where there are economic imperatives to generate a profitable programme of work and maintain a theatre building. But this is often matched by social capital that is welcoming and outward-looking, a ‘bridging’ social capital that aims to give something back to the theatre and to the local community.

**Vital Existence: Acting Out, Birmingham**

*I joined about four years ago. I think Kevin and I were both bored with our careers and decided let’s turn up and have a bit of fun. That first play was called Cinderfella. In Cinderfella, basically, instead of a normal Cinderella going to the ball, she was going to Eurovision. Well, I say she, it was a he. (Alex Wrightson, Secretary, Acting Out, Birmingham) [[28]](#footnote-28)*

The three amateur theatre companies discussed in this article serve and represent very different communities, and this means that the balance between art and sociability is differently weighed. For PTUK, whose repertoire is usually related to Filipino folk culture or contemporary experience, sociability is integral to the company’s culture and welcoming people to the group is central to the experience of participating. For TOADS, although attention is primarily focused on the business of running a theatre, sociable encounters are found in the satisfaction of doing a job well, whether this is as acting in a play, working backstage or monitoring the budget. In this section, we shall turn our attention to Acting Out, an LGBT company in Birmingham, to consider how representing imagined identities punctuates the everyday lives of participants, and how this creates encounters that are socially significant as well as sociable

The quotation with which we begin this section illustrates a central strand of this argument – that, following Simmel, the sociability of taking part in amateur theatre offers an alternative from the routines of everyday life. The founder members of Acting Out defined their identity as theatre-makers by rehearsing at Birmingham Repertory Theatre, but the company took up residence at The Wellington pub (the Welly) in Birmingham’s gay quarter in 2005. Once distinctive as a counter-cultural space exclusively for gay men to make theatre, changing social attitudes to LGBT communities has left its mark on the company. Alex, society secretary and social organiser, explained that when the company wanted to open membership to women, some of the ‘Old Guard’ protested and ultimately stepped away. Acting Out is now debating whether they should describe themselves as ‘LGBT-friendly’, instead of LGBT:

Our chair at the moment is a straight woman. But I think that just shows that we can grow and evolve as a group… that we’re not afraid of change. When I joined, I brought with me a bunch of my chums, and a lot of them were women, so that really changed the make-up of the group.[[29]](#footnote-29)

As Acting Out has become more flexible in its membership, the origins of the group as an inclusive safe space for gay men have been left behind. The repertoire has also changed in response, and the group has now staged *Caucasian Chalk Circle* and original scripts, rather than the pantomimes that heralded GAPP’s early work.

Fieldnotes: 19 February 2015, Birmingham

The diminutive stage of the Back Room Theatre is nearly filled with the two lead actors, who are eating ham and chips while running lines, clearly having come here straight from work to rehearse a short sketch for Birmingham Pride week. *Bicycle Face* is a Victorian melodrama involving a lesbian couple named Beatrice and Ethel, two bicycles, a conniving servant named Edgar with 42 children, and ultimately, a tragic ending involving a barn fire and some rose bushes. The company improvises under director Suzie’s encouragement, amplifying the farcical melodrama and searching for new innuendos.

Later, company chair Rachel leads an efficient meeting which brings the group together to plan for Birmingham Pride. The pub allows the group to use the back room stage for free, with the unspoken understanding that the 30 regular members will buy drinks on the bar when they come in. ‘It’s our one rule,’ Alex jokes. This final meeting has largely emptied the bar, and despite the half-full pints and hard work of the last two hours, it is a focused atmosphere as the group works through the details for next week’s festivities.

Acting Out members are vocal when they don’t agree, and the meeting is punctuated by protesting shouts, insults, and sarcastic barbs flung vocally across the room when people don’t like a decision. The presence of conflict and banter marks group closeness, but also represents a particular set of rules to the social game enacted here. Here, my role as a researcher is regarded with more suspicion and wariness – I have not earned the right to engage in the playful banter and sarcasm which laces the conversation. Rachel adjourns the session, but many stay to chat, some filtering off to continue the sociable session at another pub down the road.

Sociable spaces may have the effect of muting or camouflaging differences, including those in theatrical expertise or training; a number of the current members of Acting Out have drama training or teacher training in the arts, and this impacts on their evolving artistic focus. Alex has an MA in theatre and four other group members are trained drama teachers, but although other members of the group have no formal training, in rehearsal this difference is largely ignored. The process of making theatre bonds the company tightly – creating communities of interest and identity that can sometimes seem impenetrable from the outside. In the case of Acting Out, the gradual opening out of company membership has changed the dynamics of sociability, moving boundaries and territories which some may see as safety bulwarks, and others as exclusive and divisive.

One aspect of theatre-making is that it involves playing a role, this marks is distinctive qualities as a form of amateur creativity, providing opportunities to be or become someone else. This relationship with imagined identities – playing someone else - is missing from existing analyses of sociability. For Alex Wrightson from Acting Out, participating in theatre provided creative opportunities not available at work, as well as the chance to adapt heteronormative stories for an LGBT community. The company blend activism and theatre, and regularly perform at local events such as Shout Festival and Birmingham Pride. Their repertoire of plays, pantomimes, revues and comedy sketches directly speaks to the LBGT community they serve, and offers opportunities to inhabit new roles. The fulfilment found in performing a role, and the creative experience of taking a part in a show, was emphasised by Roger Heath at TOADS, who offered a clear account of the personal significance of creating a character:

It’s not just because we want to be on stage, prancing around, for some personal fulfilment. It’s actually creating a character, drawing it out of yourself and that’s valuable.[[30]](#footnote-30)

This immersion in narrative and character is commonly cited as a key reason for involvement in amateur theatre. But the process of performance is not regarded as entirely escapist, with many amateur actors noting that it enriches other aspects of life. Jon Manley, for example, describes the translation of skills from performance back to his working life:

What it taught me was that quite a large part of life is an act. And you can actually get through it. I was working in a customer-service orientated job and it taught me to deal with people a lot better, in a social aspect.[[31]](#footnote-31)

The idea that ‘quite a large part of life is an act’ strikes at the heart of debates about the relationship between the fictional and the ‘real’ has parallels to Simmel’s concept of sociability. In a telling passage at the end of his essay on sociability, Simmel sums up the balance between sociability, everyday life and feelings of liberation:

To so many serious persons who are constantly exposed to the pressures of life, sociability could not offer any liberating, relieving, or serene aspects if it really were nothing but an escape from life… Yet it is precisely the more serious person who derives from sociability a feeling of liberation and relief. He can do so because he enjoys here, as if an in art play, a concentration and exchange of effects that present all the tasks and all the seriousness of life in a sublimation. [[32]](#footnote-32)

Perhaps in part because new identities can be performed – both on and off stage – and company loyalty is often strong, and many participants maintain a life-long involvement in amateur theatre.

Amateur theatre-makers often tell a continuous life story of their involvement, often characterised by strong identification with a sense of purpose, creativity, drive, and motivation. Alex’s social circle and amateur theatre circle overlap, and his involvement with Acting Out is part of a larger life narrative of continuing theatre participation. This intensity of experience is integral to the challenge of performing a role, an aesthetic encounter reminiscent of Simmel. De la Fuente describes this in emancipatory terms, as the ‘liberating and relieving powers of both art and sociability’.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Participants in all three companies are clear that imaginative role play – a kind of permissible ‘playing pretend’ for adults is an important reason for involvement – a socially condoned creative space to explore identities in a collective social space, and to be applauded and recognised. This is amplified in Acting Out, where the performers’ sexual identities had been marginalised by homophobic attitudes and legislation. Writing about Simmel’s relational self, Monica Lee and Daniel Silver describe this kind of active engagement with collective identities as a ‘vital existence’, a ‘dynamic interplay between a lived experience of reality and the interpretation of that experience as a moment in a unifying narrative’.[[34]](#footnote-34) In other words, the sociability that happens within the confines of amateur theatre can help to build a sense of identity, enabling participants to re-write their individual stories playfully and seriously in relation to others. This ‘relational self’ requires interaction with other people, and importantly, imagination. As David Crouch argues in his discussion of creative sociability in everyday lives, ‘Creativity appeals because it is vital’. [[35]](#footnote-35)

**Balancing Sociability**

In all three of these case studies, sociability is plaited inextricably with the sense of a common creative purpose, crafting a site where participation can both encourage debate and sometimes minimize differences from other social experiences. This freedom to engage with people under social rules that are generated outside everyday routines, to encounter people whom would not meet otherwise, and to meet them under fictional conditions, creates not only sociable space, but a socially concentrated one, where a focused and collective purpose can nurture intense friendships and vibrant communication, humour and warmth.

Sociability, as one product of amateur theatre, might redefine its social significance and help to explain its affective power. Participating in amateur theatre takes time, it involves enacting fictional roles, and relies on the spatiality of being present. Taken together, these different components of space, time and identity create an aesthetics of sociability that has, in itself, performative qualities. It is embodied and kinaesthetic, affording affective relations between the human and material world of the theatre. The concept of sociability combines the immateriality of the imagination, human interaction and friendship with the material aspects of making theatre and the physical space of the theatre. Aesthetic encounters are both sensed and cognitive, and being together create the conditions in which sociability might thrive. According to Simmel, the senses are central to sociability, as a ‘precondition for social relationships’. [[36]](#footnote-36) In amateur theatre, creative participation is in itself a sensory practice, whether this lies in rehearsals, making costumes or props, attending to the fabric of the theatre or building the set, taking place in between the routines of everyday life. David Crouch notes these qualities of amateur creativity, suggesting that it is in these special interstices that the energies and vitalities for change and self-actualisation might occur:

Creativity is thus informed through combinations of different times and life durations and rhythms, different registers and intensities of experience. [[37]](#footnote-37)

The metaphorical and symbolic spaces of theatre afford this ‘spacing’, enabling participants to find and perform another side of themselves both artistically and socially. Simmel’s idea of sociability as an aesthetic force, when brought into dialogue with Bourdieu’s concept of social capital, recognises the complexity of the material and symbolic world which is both integral to everyday life and aesthetically framed in the differential time of amateur theatre-making.

In all three case studies, sociability emerges as a fragile process that is in perpetual motion. The activity and experience of amateur theatre in the three case studies discussed in this article illuminates how roles are performed, whether these roles are social or artistic, and the ways in which life is enriched and maintained through sociable practices. The social capital developed through this feeling of being valued is not necessarily what Bruno Latour describes as ‘happy glue’ that bonds people together in harmony.[[38]](#footnote-38) These three amateur groups also encounter artistic and personal conflict, territoriality, and at times, negative talk which can exclude rather than include. The process of making theatre bonds groups tightly, creating communities of interest which can seem impenetrable from the outside. As David Gauntlett argues, social capital is not necessarily always wholesome, kind, and ethical’.[[39]](#footnote-39) However, through their participation in amateur theatre, these three groups engage in convivial artistic processes in which sociabilities bubble quietly, and this can be transformative in their very ordinariness, perhaps more impactful because there is no interventionist intent. This balance between art and sociability infuses amateur theatre companies, whether the group is performing *Oklahoma*, Agatha Christie, or an original sketch about Victorian lesbians.

1. The research for this article was supported by the AHRC, Grant Ref: AH/K001922/1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Maurice Newbery and Ramon Teñoso, Philippine Theatre UK. Unpublished interview with Erin Walcon, 6 June 2015, Fulham, London. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. David Crouch, ‘Creativity, space and performance’ in T.Edensor et al, *Spaces of Vernacular Creativity: Rethinking the cultural economy,* (London: Routledge, 2010), (pp.129-140), p.130. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The research team for this project comprises Helen Nicholson (PI), Nadine Holdsworth and Jane Milling (CoIs), Erin Walcon, postdoctoral researcher, and PhD students Cara Gray and Sarah Penny. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Georg Simmel, ‘The Sociology of Sociability’, in *Simmel on Culture*, ed. by David Frisby and Mike Featherstone, (London: Sage Publications, 1997), pp. 120-129 (p. 122). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Georg Simmel, ibid., p. 120 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Sarah Pink, *Situating Everyday Life: Practices and Places* (London: SAGE Publications., 2012), p.38 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Sarah Pink, p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Sarah Pink, p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Georg Simmel ibid. (p. 121). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Georg Simmel, ibid. (p. 121) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Georg Simmel and Everett C. Hughes, ‘The Sociology of Sociability’, American Journal of Sociology, 55.3 (1949), 254–61 (p. 257. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Sandra Jovchelovitch and Jacqueline Priego-Hernandez, Underground Sociabilities: Identity, Culture and Resistance in Rio de Janeiro’s Favelas (Brasilia: UNESCO, 2013). P.30 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Georg Simmel and Everett C. Hughes, p. 258. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. John Beglin. Unpublished interview with Erin Walcon, 16 June 2016, London. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Eduardo de la Fuente, p. 351. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Robert Stebbins, *Serious Leisure: A Perspective for Our Time* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. John Manley, Unpublished interview with Erin Walcon, 7 August 2014, Torquay. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Eduardo de la Fuente, ‘The Art of Social Forms and the Social Forms of Art: The Sociology-Aesthetics Nexus in Georg Simmel’s Thought’, Sociological Theory, 26 (2008), 344–62. (p. 351). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Robert Stebbins, ‘The Semiotic Self and Serious Leisure’, *The American Sociologist*, 42.2-3 (2011), 238–48 (p. 242). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Roger Heath, Unpublished interview with Erin Walcon, 7 August 2014, Torquay. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. by R. Nice (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Roger Heath, Unpublished interview with Erin Walcon, 7 August 2014, Torquay. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Georg Simmel. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Jon Manley. Unpublished interview with Erin Walcon, 7 August 2014, Torquay. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. David Gauntlett, ‘The Value of Connecting: Social Capital and Communities’, in Making Is Connecting: The Social Meaning of Creativity (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), p. 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Alex Wrightson. Unpublished interview with Erin Walcon, 5 March 2015, Birmingham. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Alex Wrightson in interview with Erin Walcon, 5th March 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Roger Heath, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. John Manley. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Georg Simmel, Sociability as the Autonomous Form of Sociation, in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. By Kurt, H. Wolff. (New York: The Free Press, 1950) pp. 40-57, (p. 57). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Eduardo de la Fuente, p. 351. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Monica Lee and Daniel Silver, ‘Simmel’s Law of the Individual and the Ethics of the Relational Self’, *Theory, Culture & Society,* 29.7-8 (2012), 124–45. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. David Crouch, 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Georg Simmel 110 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. David Crouch, 135 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005), p. 38 italics in the original. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. David Gauntlett, p. 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)