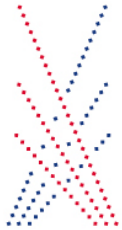

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Constructing the contemporary theatre director in UK online media

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Abstract

Cultural industries are crucial to creating representations of individuals and communities. Theatre directors are key gatekeepers in this respect, determining whose work is performed, by whom and how. However, theatre directors are predominantly white with upper-middle or middle class backgrounds. Part of a wider project examining career decisions and experiences of those from under-represented backgrounds in UK theatre directing, we analyse how UK online media represent the contemporary theatre director. Decisions about cultural and creative careers are embedded within societal perceptions and industry context including how roles such as theatre director are socially constructed. Online media are a key context in highlighting how subject positions, as socially constructed and legitimated categories, emerge from discourses, and normalize certain ways of being. Qualitative Internet methods are used to collect our dataset. Preliminary findings are presented with three constructions of the theatre director: *the visible success, the enabler of voices and the storyteller.*

Introduction

The phrase '*if you can't see it, you can't be it*' sums up the belief that cultural industries are crucial to creating representations of individuals and communities (O'Brien et al., 2017). With theatre a core cultural output that shapes and organises our understandings of society (Tyler, 2015), directors are key gatekeepers determining whose work is performed, by whom and how. The importance of connecting such occupations with broader issues of inequality is well established, with culture recognised as both 'an explanatory factor and a site for the replication of social inequality' (O'Brien et al., 2017, p. 272). It is therefore critical that theatre directors are drawn from a wide range of backgrounds.

There is increasing awareness, however, of the lack of diversity within the creative and cultural industries (Eikhof, 2017). Middle class actors dominate (Thorpe, 2018) with working class actors incurring a significant class pay gap (Friedman et al., 2017). London's cultural dominance also reinforces social class disparities in employment in this sector (Oakley et al., 2017). The loss of regional producing theatres, closed recruitment practices and networking culture all contribute to a lack of opportunity for those from under-represented backgrounds (Brabin et al., 2017). Low or no pay entry routes provide those from affluent backgrounds with unfair advantage. A rare industry survey of theatre directors found them predominantly educated to degree level or higher (92%), white (89%) and from upper-middle or middle class backgrounds (79%) (Hescott and Furness, 2018). Those from less privileged positions are adversely affected by the rise of gig economy structures for emerging theatre directors, e.g., regional 'emerging artist' schemes which fall outside the employment model (Hescott and Furness, 2018). Nevertheless those in the most privileged positions within cultural and creative industries hold the strongest belief as to their meritocratic nature,

suggesting access to occupations in these industries may be resistant to change (Taylor and O'Brien, 2017).

The study reported here is part of a wider project examining diversity and the experiences of those from under-represented backgrounds in UK theatre directing. In relation to this role, we lack transparency regarding factors affecting careers in the face of reduced opportunities for secure employment, university tuition fee debt, and rising housing costs (Hescott and Furness, 2018). Theatre directing has not been a focus of management studies beyond exploring analogous principles shared between theatre production and organizational life (Lehner, 2009). However, theatre directing exemplifies gig-based work pre-dating the precarious work enabled by digital technologies (Fleming, 2017). However, the prevalence of relative social and economic privilege of those who have traditionally dominated this occupation has masked the gig-like nature of much theatre directing work.

Our focus here is how UK online media represent and construct the contemporary theatre director. Individuals do not start their careers in a cultural vacuum; they may find themselves placed into specific categories based on existing societal perceptions. The media plays a critical role through shaping individuals' realities, providing frameworks for interpreting and reproducing culture (Mazza and Alvarez, 2000). It helps organize knowledge that informs images of occupations (Grandy and Mavin, 2012) and determines how individuals, organizations and communities make sense of and give sense to different occupational groups (Hellgren et al., 2002). Research has examined how the media create and reproduce representations of occupations as diverse as women leaders and managers (Mavin et al., 2016), elite sports starts (Tulle, 2016), figure skaters (Ho, 2017) and exotic dancers (Grandy and Mavin, 2012). These studies demonstrate the media's significance in highlighting how subject positions, as socially constructed and legitimated categories, emerge from discourses, and normalize certain ways of being (Bell and Leonard, 2018, Machin and Van Leeuwen, 2007).

Research methodology

Here we analyse online media representations of theatre directing to identify how the media portrays the contemporary theatre director. With news increasingly accessed online (Ofcom, 2017), online news is characterized as 'a theme-based group of news objects held together graphically . . . and undergoing progressive updating' (Lewis, 2003, p. 97). Content can be generated and exchanged across national, spatial, and temporal boundaries (Bell and Leonard, 2018), making it a significant location in setting agendas for debate (Machin and Van Leeuwen, 2007).

As part of the broader research, we used Internet methods to construct our dataset. First, using search engines we identified key websites of UK theatres and organizations involved in widening participation in theatre directing and accounts of contemporary theatre directors. Second, we used Internet tools in daily automated searches for 6 months in 2018/2019. Search terms were piloted to determine their efficacy (Pritchard and Whiting, 2012). Those used were the following composites: theatre director*, theatre directing career, theatre working class, theatre #metoo, theatre direct* under-represent*, theatre directing disability, theatre directing gender, and theatre directing diversity. Online media texts were automatically identified via these automated searches with details (media headlines and hyperlinks to the online text) returned to a dedicated e-mail account. We reviewed each day's

return to select relevant texts. For both collection methods, further data were collected via snowballing (where original texts included links to related articles).

All materials were imported into NVivo to support data management and analysis. Early analysis was inductive as we worked to make sense of these data and develop an initial descriptive coding framework using thematic analysis (King, 2012). Our intention, however, as the project continues, is to use discourse analysis, an approach founded in social constructionism, applying 'insights from Foucault and/or Fairclough' (Hardy and Grant, 2012, p. 558) to open up new understandings of theatre directing for scrutiny.

Outline findings

In this section, we outline three constructions of the theatre director based on our initial analysis of online media. Further analysis is ongoing so these are presented as illustrative not exhaustive findings.

The visible success

This construction positions individual theatre directors as visibly successful, in professional and financial terms. This is invoked by terms such as 'esteemed', 'celebrated', 'renowned' or 'legendary' as in the following data extracts:

> *'PETER BROOK is a theatre director who truly deserves the name legend thanks to two game-changing productions in the 1970s: The Mahabharata and A Midsummer Night's Dream'* [London news website, 19 September 2018]

> *This Grade II listed Georgian townhouse in London will appeal to lovers of the stage as the current owner is a renowned award-winning theatre director. Sean Mathias, one of Britain's most celebrated theatre directors, has worked across the world, including in the Royal National Theatre, the West End, Broadway, Los Angeles, Paris, and Sydney*. [UK house interiors website, 30 June 2018]

> *'Tomorrow night a play that was close to the heart of renowned writer, director, actor and teacher Sam McCready will open at the Lyric Theatre, but he will not be there to see it.'* [Regional news website, 12 February 2019]

A feature of the successful director construction is the relatively porous boundary of the theatre director role which allows it to be combined with other theatre-related roles (*writer, director, actor and teacher).* Success in a related cultural occupation (such as acting) appears to open up access to the position of theatre director, as here:

> *Hawke's work ethic and quality control mean he's largely side-stepped "stupid stuff". After all, he's a novelist, theatre director, Oscar-nominated screenwriter… and has been hailed this year for both First Reformed … and his third film as director* [UK listings magazine website, 13th July 2018]

This construction offers a highly visible category of theatre director, acclaimed, and moving with ease between different roles; success in one field creates opportunity in another (*novelist, theatre director, screenwriter, actor)*. Success is often international and financially rewarded on a scale compatible with a *Georgian townhouse*. It is legitimated by creative credits (*two game-changing productions*), awards (*award-winning, Oscar-nominated)* and institutions worked for (*Royal National Theatre*). Media representations, particularly success

stories such as these (predominantly white men), influence the acceptance and legitimacy of beliefs about particular occupational roles; these constructions may restrict access to a theatre director identity for those who fall outside these representations.

The enabler of 'other' voices

A second construction positions the theatre director as enabling voices being heard, often of those who might be 'othered' in society. This typically involves engaging with political issues. The construction entails a combination of privilege and responsibility around speaking up on behalf of others, as in the following extract:

> *In his six years at the Bush, former filmmaker Younis put on the Black Lives, Black Words season — a response to the Black Lives Matter movement which began in the US as a protest against police violence.* [London newspaper website, 5 September 2018]

This example features a director from an ethnic minority; we noted the construction (in texts written about them by others) of a particular expectation or responsibility on directors from non-traditional directing backgrounds (for example, by reason of ethnicity, gender or class) to speak up for others in society with similar identities.

Specifically in relation to class, we noted tensions around its definition. Its uncertain conceptualisation was associated with debate about who had the right to speak on behalf of others, here, in relation to representations of working class life in the theatre:

> *'if a playwright is legit working class, I guarantee this will come through in their writing. There will be heart, sincerity, a world which you know they lived and breathed. And the best way to test this is if a piece is shown to the audience which it is supposedly depicting.* [Online theatre magazine, 24 September 2018]

This positions a working class writer as the only legitimate voice to portray working class life in the theatre and whose authenticity could only be recognised by a working class audience. Struggle over authenticity of class identity ('*do you have to be it to say it?*') positions working class theatre directors as having a responsibility to challenge inauthentic work:

> *'Another reason we're subjected to such inauthentic depictions of working class life is, like the majority of playwrights, a lot of theatres, venues and artistic directors don't actually know what it's like to be working class. As a result, writers can perpetuate stereotypes and get away with it as there's nobody to call them out'* [Online theatre magazine, 24 September 2018]

This raises the question of whether constructing working class theatre directors as having a specific responsibility to call out inauthentic representations of their class is matched by equivalent demands of say a middle class director. Might the construction limit the remit of work seen as legitimate for the working class director to pursue?

The storyteller

We observed a potential tension between the director as enabler of 'other' voices with the construction of director as storyteller, one noted in media texts authored by theatre directors themselves:

> *I was specifically drawn to directing because a director has the chance to decide exactly what story they get to tell, or through what lens to tell an existing story.* [Theatre directors/tumblr]

> *I absolutely love telling stories and always have. I love that as a director you have the chance to share so many different stories with your audiences, and what I find most exciting is the challenge of making people care, changing their minds and /or provoking discussion.* [Blog]

In these extracts, opportunity (*the chance to share…)* and freedom of choice (*the chance to decide…)* over which stories to tell is highly valued. These voices are drawn from media forms distinct from mainstream news outlets, an important feature of web-based media that allows new voices to be heard.

The paper will be developed to reflect further analysis of the dataset. Decisions about cultural and creative careers are not made in a vacuum but embedded within societal perceptions and industry context including how roles such as theatre director are socially constructed (Eikhof, 2017). Online media are a key context for analysing these constructions. Our aim is to conduct interviews with early career theatre directors from non-traditional backgrounds to gain greater understanding of their decision-making through analysis of individual narratives of career and occupational identity (Eikhof, 2017). We are also considering the application of further literatures that might be relevant such as leadership in temporary organizations (Tyssen et al., 2013)

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