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My Town, Your Town, Our Town: Community Theatre and Autoethnography
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Abstract

Community Theatre, broadly defined as theatre created by amateurs with a similar geographic or socio-economic background, has existed for centuries alongside Professional Theatre as a means for untrained individuals to express themselves through performative means. In contemporary practice, however, Community Theatre is more completely defined as a mimicry of professional practice. Theatres strip popular plays from their cultural milieu and insert them in a new world without consideration of the effects thereof, consequently failing to recreate the original power of the work. It is the aim of this paper to show that this failure has less to do with training and budget on behalf of the community theatre and more to do with disconnection with the core thematic content of the piece. Broadway productions, when originally conceived, convey the emotional and philosophical moment of the creators. The separation of time, distance, and experience by the later Community production robs the amateur production of the same power. The solution to this disconnect is to use theatrical production as a means for community groups to be introspective and to encourage them to create works that have a direct relationship to their own immediate experience. This autoethnographic approach to amateur theatre-making is crucial to providing Community Theatre participants with the ability for artistic expression. Looking at Medieval pageant plays as an historic basis for autoethnography in Community Theatre and showing how a similar approach in a contemporary context—specifically Maryat Lee’s 1985 *Hinton Play* with the West Virginia-based EcoTheatre and my own 2011 production of Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* with Riverside Theatre Works of Hyde Park, Massachusetts—can result in expressive productions that reach the core of a community’s experience and serve to tap the inherent artistic potential within amateurs.