

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> University of Edinburgh		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> Panel D - UoA 27: English Language and Literature		
<b>Title of case study:</b> “Sewing society together”: Realising the healing potential of applied theatre in areas of conflict or inequality		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2005-2008 and 2011-2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b> Nicola McCartney	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b> Reader, Writing for Theatre and Performance	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b> 2005-2008 and 2011-present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2016 – December 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>		
<p>Working within the field of Applied Theatre, Nicola McCartney has developed a unique, research-led methodology that helps people affected by conflict or inequality to better interpret and address their life circumstances. Her research has underpinned the significant international expansion of Edinburgh’s Traverse Theatre’s flagship education project <i>Class Act</i> which, since 2016, has developed 55 new plays by 120 young people working with various cultural practitioners in Russia, Ukraine and India. Described by leading playwright Mikhail Durnenkov as “<i>one of the most important methods of social theatre in Russia</i>”, <i>Class Act</i> has had a profound effect on professional practice, as well as young people’s personal development, particularly in relation to addressing trauma in their lives. Other plays emerging from the research have toured to critical acclaim and received high-profile accolades for their challenging explorations of intertwined issues such as the refugee crisis, war, mental health and the care system.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b>		
<p>During two periods at the University of Edinburgh (2005-2008 and 2011-present, the intervening years spent as an Associate Playwright at Playwrights’ Studio Scotland), Nicola McCartney has developed a unique, practice-based methodology within Applied Theatre, a widely-recognised term in Performance Studies for the use of the theatrical process outside the mainstream, often to address social issues. Rooted in the scholarly principles of dramatic narrative, the research draws on ideas and techniques from playwriting, directing, dramaturgy and related disciplines to posit four levels of dramatic conflict – internal, interpersonal, social and extra-personal. Beginning with “active listening”, and culminating in performance-based collaboration with actors, plays are developed through a five-step process wherein the writer/researcher works with participants over many weeks, treating their real life stories dramaturgically – that is, as if they were characters in a written drama involving complex interrelationships between characters, forces of antagonism, motivations and belief systems. The principal insight is that enabling individuals to frame their life stories in this way can help them better interpret their life circumstances and, in turn, develop a more considered, constructive response to situations of conflict or deprivation.</p> <p>Through Traverse Theatre’s flagship <i>Class Act</i> programme, in which young people are mentored by professional playwrights to develop scripts for performance, McCartney has been able to test her methodology with younger participants from a range of backgrounds, including in complex international contexts such as Moscow and the Caucasus in the aftermath of the Beslan school siege (3.1). She is an official ambassador for the programme, and her dramatic exercises on “language [being] rooted in the body of both the writer and the character” are published in the <i>Class Act Handbook</i> (2005), with selected examples published annually in <i>Class Act Information Packs</i> for workshop leaders (3.2). Until 2019, she worked on <i>Class Act</i> most years while continuing to use similar techniques and themes in her own plays, including <i>Crazy Jane</i> – the story of real-life Moulin Rouge dancer Jane Avril and her lifelong battle with mental illness and the trauma of childhood abuse, which is particularly innovative in its incorporation of sign language in its writing (3.3). The research also comprises work with other playwrights, for example a 2015 season of new plays on the</p>		

socio-political situation in Russia and Ukraine produced by Glasgow Lunchtime Theatre and the University of Edinburgh, in association with National Theatre Scotland, which involved a hybrid process of working both with text and with professional authors who had suffered trauma due to war and human rights violations (3.4).

McCartney's most recent practice-led research is with Dritan Kastrati, who was smuggled by people traffickers from Kosovo to the UK as a child and then spent many years in the care system. Testing McCartney's theory of "listening [to marginalised voices] with the whole body", *How Not to Drown* (3.5) is a co-written piece of physical theatre interweaving interviews between the two playwrights with Kastrati's own writing; he is also a member of Thick Skin Theatre Company's five-strong ensemble cast (playing himself). The play was funded by a BBC Emerging Artists Award as part of Frantic Assembly's programme in 2019, but Kastrati (originally an actor) was struggling to write it because he had not previously addressed how he felt about his experiences, either of fleeing conflict or of being in care, only feeling comfortable with what he could articulate through humour. Using her four levels of dramatic conflict, McCartney helped him to frame his life story, first in a group workshop with other young male writers, then in one-to-one work from which his voice emerged.

### 3. References to the research

3.1 *Beyond the Thundercloud* (2006) – a BBC radio docudrama based on *Class Act Caucasus* written by and starring Nicola McCartney, and first broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on 10th November 2006. BBC listing: <https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/8ab72ea2df1c437fb0402cac40948347> (DVD and script can be supplied by HEI on request)

3.2 *The Class Act Handbook* (2005). Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh. McCartney authored the Handbook's dramatic exercises, selected examples of which are published annually in Traverse Theatre's *Class Act Information Packs* for workshop leaders. (2014 *Class Act Information Pack* can be supplied by HEI on request)

3.3 *Crazy Jane* (2015) – play written by Nicola McCartney. Commissioned by Birds of Paradise Theatre Company and staged at the Tron Theatre, Glasgow and six other Scottish venues. (Submitted in REF2)

3.4 *Take the Rubbish Out, Sasha* (2015) – play written by Natal'ya Vorozhbit, translated by Sasha Dugdale and directed by Nicola McCartney. Premiered at Óran Mór, Glasgow – in association with National Theatre of Scotland – in March 2015 as part of a season of three new works from Russia and Ukraine curated by McCartney. Transferred to Traverse Theatre. Subsequent productions in Moscow, Ukraine, Lithuania and Belarus and, as rehearsed readings, in London and New York. Russian production nominated for a Golden Mask (equivalent of Olivier/Tony Award). (DVD and script can be supplied by HEI on request)

3.5 *How Not to Drown* (2019) – play written by Nicola McCartney and Dritan Kastrati. Published by Samuel French Ltd (ISBN 9780573116728). Premiered at Traverse Theatre as a Made in Scotland Showcase selection for the Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2019. Won a Scotsman Fringe First Award, a Herald Angel Award (for Dritan Kastrati), and the Scottish Society of Playwrights' Hector MacMillan Award (for Nicola McCartney and Dritan Kastrati). Toured to Tron Theatre, Glasgow and Lawrence Batley Theatre, Huddersfield in September 2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic halted its touring schedule. (Submitted in REF2)

### 4. Details of the impact

#### Impact in Ukraine and Russia

*Class Act* "has always had the power to help young lives, but rolling it out to Ukraine took things to another level". So begins critic Joyce McMillan's report on *Class Act Kiev*,

published in *The Scotsman* (print circulation approximately 19,000) in July 2016, noting how the flagship theatre education project successfully brought together young people from East and West Ukraine following the country's divisive revolution (5.1). Having first explored the potential to use *Class Act* in conflict resolution in the Caucasus in 2006 (3.1), McCartney travelled to Kiev in June 2016 for ten days of intensive collaboration with around 40 local playwrights, actors and directors, and 20 young participants. What followed between 2016 and 2018 was the development and performance of 30 new plays by 60 young people, a body of work that underpinned the future international direction of the *Class Act* programme.

The initiative for *Class Act Kiev* came from a group of Ukrainian playwrights, led by Natal'ya Vorozhbit who had worked with McCartney on *Take the Rubbish Out, Sasha* as part of the 2015 season of new works from Russia and Ukraine (3.4; production directed by McCartney pictured below, with Jill Riddiford [left] as Katya and Jenny Hulse [right] as Oksana). Produced by the Theatre of Displaced People, the uniqueness of the cross-community venture attracted public debate and prominent supporters, such as the country's Minister of Culture, Yevhen Nyshchuk, who played the father of a budding artist in one of the performances (as noted in *The Guardian* [print circulation 157,317] [5.2]). Reflecting on how playwrights are using *Class Act* and its underpinning research in Ukraine, Vorozhbit comments that "*using Class Act techniques, we are trying to sew our society together, seek dialogue and break stereotypes, help[ing] adolescents to cope with psychological traumas caused by the war*" (5.3). She describes *Class Act Kiev* as having "*acquired its own characteristics and scale ... the project has truly exceeded all my expectations – I never thought that it would cause such an outcry in our society*".



An essential part of the research's underpinning of *Class Act* is the training of playwrights and theatre professionals in its methods. While McCartney has collaborated with playwrights like Vorozhbit for a number of years, the programme's international growth has allowed her to reach and train previously uninitiated practitioners at scale. Through Moscow's Lubimovka Theatre Festival, in particular, the research has placed *Class Act* at the heart of Russian theatre's current focus on theatrical pedagogics, as testified to by playwright Vyacheslav Durnenkov who notes that it "*is constantly mentioned in all discussions ... as one of the most effective methods. It is now difficult to imagine that the project previously has not happened in Russia*" (5.4). The crucial part that *Class Act* continues to play within Russian theatre is suggested by Durnenkov, who observes that "*the project has become a kind of*

*exam for professionalism*" (5.4), while his playwright brother, Mikhail, describes it as *"deeply rooted into Russian soil"* (5.5).

### **Impact in India and the UK**

As testified to by Sunniva Ramsay, former Creative Producer and Engagement Manager at Traverse, *Class Act* has given the Theatre the opportunity to *"form further partnerships and reach new participants and audiences."* *"Nicola ... was instrumental in shaping the project ... her commitment to the project has expanded the programme's potential immeasurably"* (5.6). Hence the importance of a Class Act International Symposium co-ordinated by McCartney in Edinburgh in 2017 at which – along with other participants – the Durnenkov brothers and Natal'ya Vorozhbit spoke about their involvement and the impact it had. With specific reference to the symposium, Ramsay added *"We are particularly pleased at [its] outward-looking and reflective nature .... [It] was in part a celebration of the impact and longevity of the Class Act project, but crucially it remained a place for constructive conversations about the future of the project, with a focus on its place as a socially-conscious model for encouraging creative and community engagement"* (5.6).

Following the symposium, and with the support of the British Council, Creative Scotland and the Scottish Government, Traverse was able to take *Class Act* into South Asia in January 2018, with McCartney travelling to India to work with Rage Productions on *Class Act Mumbai*. Described by Shernaz Patel, Rage's co-founder, as a *"career defining project"* and a *"natural and necessary extension"* of the company's programme to train and mentor young Indian playwrights (5.7), *Class Act Mumbai* has so far worked with 60 young people and a range of professionals to create 25 new plays. This is the first time that young people's playwriting has been professionally staged in India, where the craft is not taught in schools, and young voices – especially those of young women – are not often publicly heard. Patel has praised the project's reciprocity, stating that *"the playwrights learned a great deal in terms of collaborating with young adults and treating them as equals"*. She has also pointed out that, because McCartney worked with Rage to encourage participants to write in Hindi rather than in *"aspirational"* English, *"their plays turned out to be so much stronger"* (5.7).

For the many young people involved in *Class Act Mumbai*, the experience has been about working through emotions, gaining empathy and feeling valued, as much as learning about the craft of writing for performance. As Neil Cooper wrote in *The Herald* (print circulation approximately 26,000), the project *"foster[ed] a radical form of artistic exchange which has developed into an inclusive aesthetic, through which young people get to express whatever is on their minds"* (5.8). By working with young people from across the Caste system – from Dalit to Brahman – and with those from a lower socio-economic background, *Class Act Mumbai* effectively opened up the theatrical arena to people who had previously been excluded. Summing up the impact of *Class Act* on them personally, a young Indian playwright wrote: *"Watching my play was a very proud moment for me ... I enjoyed every part of [it] ... I had never considered the idea of script writing until now"; "I definitely do plan on taking this forward"* (5.9, pp. 20-21).

For Dritan Kastrati, who emerged as one of the standout theatre practitioners at the 2019 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, winning a Scotsman Fringe First Award and a Herald Angel Award for his work on *How Not to Drown*, the impact of the research has also been both personal and professional. *"To have the opportunity, as a minority in this country, to tell my story, and that of so many other young people from around the world, on an international platform, is such a privilege"*, he has said (5.10). Although a planned UK and international tour of the play was postponed due to COVID-19, Kastrati recorded an extract from it for *The Scotsman Sessions*, a specially-commissioned series of short online video performances released throughout the pandemic, with an introduction by critic Joyce McMillan. The session aired on the same day that the ensemble cast were shortlisted for a Critics' Award for Theatre in Scotland. To continue her work on the positive impact of creative responses to experiences of the care system, Nicola McCartney was named as lead artist on the National

Theatre Scotland project, "What does 'care' mean in a contemporary Scotland?", in October 2020, an initiative which will involve local authorities, carers and cared for young people.

#### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

5.1 Joyce McMillan, How the Traverse reached out to Ukraine, *Scotsman*, 9th July 2016.

<https://edin.ac/2lxPkE2>

5.2 David Lepaska, Kiev's new revolution: Young Ukrainians spur cultural revival amid the conflict, *Guardian*, 31st August 2016. <https://edin.ac/2KBIKhg>.

5.3 Interview transcript, Natal'ya Vorozhbit (translation provided).

5.4 Interview transcript, Vyacheslav Durnenkov (translation provided).

5.5 Interview transcript, Mikhail Durnenkov (translation provided).

5.6 Interview transcript, Sunniva Ramsay.

5.7 Interview transcript, Shernaz Patel.

5.8 Neil Cooper, Hands across the ocean – Scots delegation from Traverse Theatre head to India, *Herald*, 12th January 2018. <https://edin.ac/2lw3w07>

5.9 *Class Act Mumbai* feedback forms.

5.10 Traverse Theatre wins big in week one... *Traverse Theatre*, 10th August 2019.

<http://edin.ac/2UFcf7N>