

<b>Institution: Sheffield Hallam University</b>
<b>Unit of Assessment: 29 English Language and Literature</b>
<b>Title of case study: From One Extreme to Another: Theatre in Education</b>
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>This case study focuses on impact achieved through the widely-seen performances by GW Theatre of Mike Harris' commissioned play about extremism, <i>From One Extreme to Another</i>, in schools in the UK. The project:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Used drama to open up for discussion by young people and teachers a sensitive topic which can be difficult to approach in classes or other public spaces</li> <li>2. Contributed to a government policy intervening in a serious social and political issue</li> </ol>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Mike Harris is a Writing Partner for GW Theatre. The research consisted of the process of writing the play itself, which had to find an accessible contemporary form of theatre for school students from white and ethnic minority backgrounds (including white working-class, Afro-Caribbean and British Asian communities) which could dramatise potentially uncomfortable and divisive material for these audiences in ways which could help them understand extremism's origins and dangers for all communities. The artistic challenge was to produce a script that would deal with the kind of controversial issues that might appear in a play for, say, the Royal Court, but for young audiences requiring the pace of Hollywood, whilst being unaccustomed to (and usually entirely ignorant of) any of the conventions of theatre. Furthermore this had to be achieved without lecturing or hectoring or assuming any previous knowledge. Additional challenges were presented by having to write for a company that does not use stage lights because blackouts cannot be guaranteed in school and community performances. The script had to meet the further aesthetic challenge of performances in 'difficult' schools, where the attention and silence of the audience, unlike those in attendance at The Royal Court, cannot be guaranteed unless the work immediately captures and sustains interest. The play needed to create understanding for each set of characters and to present convincing and recognisable behaviours, while also critiquing where these might lead. This is done by intercutting swiftly between parallel communities whose fears, loyalties and assumptions can be seen to have much in common.</p> <p>The project drew on earlier writing by Harris over a period of 20 years which sought to represent in community theatre perceptions about immigration, Islam and the far right in the UK, with a particular focus on the North West of England. This research produced three sets of scripts. These were <i>Up the Hill</i> (1984-5), a large-scale community-play about 100 years of immigration into Manchester, <i>Strangers in Paradise</i>, a four part drama series broadcast on BBC Radio Four (1991) and <i>Spin</i> (2000-01), another community play performed by local people to audiences in Oldham. In all three cases, background information and attitudes were gathered by reading relevant historical, cultural and political sources (including all the official reports on the Oldham riots) and through interviews with a cross-section of people living on local estates, some involved in Islamist politics or in the BNP but most occupying the more moderate points in between. In the case of <i>Up the Hill</i> and <i>Spin</i>, directing their large multi-ethnic casts was in itself invaluable and the perfect preparation for writing <i>From One Extreme to the Other</i>. The writing of <i>One Extreme</i> began shortly after '7/7' and built on all of the above. The play itself and the performances were commissioned and then supported to tour schools by funding from central government agencies and local councils, which together allocated £260,000 to support development of the play and the tours. A pilot draft was performed in November 2007 and the script was then revised for tours beginning in 2008. The key researcher (Mike Harris) was a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing (0.3 fte) at SHU during the entire REF period 2008-2013, having been first appointed in 1994.</p>
<p><b>3. References to the research</b> (indicative maximum of six references)</p> <p>The main research output of the project was the play itself. Quality Indicators: Funding of production by PREVENT and Communities Leadership Funding, 2008-13. Script can be provided.</p>
<p><b>4. Details of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 750 words)</p> <p><i>One Extreme to Another</i> was toured nationally in UK schools/other community spaces (2008-13)</p>

## Impact case study (REF3b)

by GW Theatre (circa 500 performances, total audience of circa 100,000 people). The play was advertised via the GW Theatre website and a linked 'Extreme News' site and was especially staged in cities where there had been recent inter-community tensions (e.g. Bury, Oldham, Rochdale, and Luton). The direct beneficiaries have been secondary school pupils, college students, their teachers and members of community groups who have been enabled to discuss issues of far-right and Islamic extremism raised by the play (in schools and colleges using pre- and post-performance resources: <http://www.gwextreme.com/resources.html>). Feedback was collected via the play's website (<http://www.gwextreme.com/feedback.html>) and there were positive evaluation reports. A number of government documents also referred to the play's effectiveness. Evidence of the two types of impact is provided below.

### 1. Used drama to open up for discussion by young people and teachers a sensitive topic which can be difficult to approach in classes or other public spaces.

Feedback to the GW website (Source a) suggests that the play had impact on awareness of extremism and of its complex origins, as selected quotations show:

'I have been involved in anti-racist work all my life and thought this was one of the best plays I have ever seen. Dealing with complex issues the play moved along quickly and held the attention of all our Key Stage 4 pupils. It was very "real" to our pupils'. (Peter, teacher, Burnley 10/03/2008)

'I watched the play in a predominantly white school ... I dislike the fact that they have been sent to a predominantly white school where they have not met many people of other backgrounds and therefore have extremely narrow minds. I hope the plays opened the minds of a few people' (anonymous pupil 25/2/2008)

'A well-researched play bringing a lot of political/cultural issues to the forefront and encouraging community cohesion. A very true image of what is going on and how we are being brainwashed (Najma, 30/04/2008)

'The play tackled a very difficult subject and made you think about your own opinions and communities. The hot seating at the end gave everybody an opportunity to participate in the content of the performance (J, 30/04/2009)

These individual responses can be put in context by two evaluations with detailed quantitative and qualitative analysis of the impact of the play on student attitudes. The Bury Report (Source b) concisely summarises teachers' views: 'theatre productions provoke discussion and reaction more than any other input', 'It took the lid off a controversial area and allowed open discussion', 'the play allowed pupils to discuss sensitive issues through the characters, taking it away from the personal', 'they found that the parallel stories in the play made them feel "more comfortable" about dealing with the issue of violent extremism, which was shown to be an issue for all groups rather than just for one (paragraphs 5.3, 5.5). It also reports on 1200 questionnaires completed by students to evaluate the effects of the play, as in these three (of seven) questions:

Questions	%Pre	%Post	% Shift
<b>I understand what is meant by Political Extremism</b>			
Yes	35	73	+37
No	33	10	-23
Not Sure	31	17	-14
<b>Being British is about being white and speaking English</b>			
Yes	16	12	-4
No	75	82	+7
Not Sure	9	6	-3
<b>Any young people may be drawn into the extremes of political activity</b>			
Yes	40	68	+28
No	16	9	-7
Not Sure	44	23	-9

The Greater Manchester schools' report, July 2011, ([Source c](#)) draws on data collected after performances at Abraham Moss High School, Burnage Media and Arts College, Chorlton High School, Little Lever Languages College and Manchester Health Academy. Quotations from the key findings of the Manchester report occupy the remainder of this section (emphases as in original):

### **'What the play has to say to young people**

One of the main things young people commented on was how the play had **increased their awareness of their own vulnerability** to exploitation by extremist political and religious organisations. The play made them realise that religion can be used as a manipulative tool... The play had made them more wary as a result; many commented that it had made them realise the **importance of making up their own minds** and **not being blinded by prejudices** which are often reinforced by the media and sometimes by parental views. They felt **empowered to question things more**. A positive feeling was that pupils recognised through the play that there was **more that united people in communities than divided them**. They felt that the play encouraged them to find out more about other people's cultures, which would lead to greater understanding and tolerance. Many pupils followed up the idea of **cultural identity**, particularly what it means today to be 'British' and whether we truly have a 'multicultural' society: **this would seem to be a fruitful avenue for schools to explore with their students**. There was a definite sense in the interviews that pupils felt that the play 'filled a gap' or met a need in the curriculum. They are aware of how difficult it might be for teachers, who often steer clear of these difficult topics; pupils see this as 'unhelpful' as school is probably the only place where the issues could be discussed safely and in a balanced and informed way.

### **The play's effectiveness**

Pupils said that the play's effectiveness was partly owing to the fact that it was **even-handed**; the issues were presented as common to **both** the Asian and the white families: it was clear in discussion that this was a key factor in the play's being taken seriously by young people. They were able to identify especially with the two young boys in the play, and commented that they found all the **characters realistic and credible**. They also commented on how well the play demonstrated the fact that children are often more open-minded, and that we become more closed as we get older and are exposed to prejudice. Many pupils felt that the play offered a **hopeful ending** and that this was important as it gave them the idea that things might change for the better... Some pupils commented, however, that they would have liked more exploration of the class and religious issues raised in the play. It was appreciated that presenting the issues in an **entertaining and humorous** way made them more **accessible** to young people. Humour was seen as a **release valve** in a play which dealt in essence with very serious subjects. Pupils felt that the use of **racist language** was a **useful** way of **highlighting a contentious issue** and that this allowed discussion in follow-up which might otherwise have been difficult. It reflects the way language is often used socially and lent **authenticity** to the play. Pupils were very appreciative of the **openness** of the play and of the fact that it did not talk down to them or gloss over difficult areas. Some pupils recognised that there were **wider issues** beneath the main storyline, such as personal and social problems, prejudices, cultural differences, all of which influenced the characters' actions. They appreciated the **multi-layered aspect of the play** and felt that it gave them much material to think about and discuss.

### **The play's impact**

Pupils made **links** between the play and other areas of PSHCE such as **bullying and domestic violence**, commenting that these too were forms of violent extremism. They realised how **easy** it would be **for anyone to be radicalised** and that they were **especially vulnerable** as young people. The play was presented to them at the right time in their development, when they were adult enough to be made aware of these topics, but still flexible enough to work out their own views. They had been forced to **re-examine their own prejudices** and made to realise that they too stereotyped people...: The play illustrated ... how **we use generalisations** as excuses to dislike and persecute others, lumping them together rather than seeing them as individuals. Interviewees had been stimulated to recognise the **difficulties inherent in different communities living together** and of making disparate groups aware and appreciative of one another's

cultures... The issue of '**Britishness**' was **no longer clear-cut**, and it may not be the 'be-all and end-all', although most pupils felt that it was necessary to **hold on to their culture as a means of identity**. They felt that people should be proud of and celebrate their cultures but that **no one culture should be valued exclusively** above the others.'

In Appendix 2, the Report also discusses a performance for an audience from two schools ('Little Lever Languages College, a school with mainly white pupils and very few from ethnic minority groups, and Burnage Media Arts College, a single-sex (boys only) school whose pupils come from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds') which had a marked impact on students: '**Prior** to the performance the pupils felt **apprehensive**. They thought that the experience would be '**nerve-wracking**' and were very unsure of what to expect or how they would be received. However, as a result of the **support and guidance** they were offered on the day when they split into groups for follow-up activities after the performance, pupils gradually relaxed and **worked together** on their own presentations. The project was so **successful** that quite a number of pupils exchanged mobile phone numbers and have continued their contact, and there are plans for the two schools to work together again in the future.'

## 2. Contributed to a government policy intervening in a serious social and political issue

The play was performed for MPs at Portcullis House on 26/3/2009 as an example of initiatives which might help communities resist extremism. The effectiveness of the play in this role was discussed in relevant national fora, including *Youth Work Now* ([Source d](#)), *Eastern Eye* ([Source e](#)) and the British-Asian *redhotcurry* site ([Source f](#)). *Youth Work Now* says the 'power of theatre has been harnessed in a production that encourages young people to explore complex topics'; *Eastern Eye* comments that the play 'is an attempt to get people to openly debate extremist views and challenge them' while *redhotcurry* refers to Hazel Blear's announcement of funding for projects including this play which 'have mainly national reach and scope'. Hazel Blears (as Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government) judged the play to be effective, saying 'I am delighted to be supporting G. W. Theatre to deliver their play...on a national basis. We have seen that extremists promote a world-view based on division and difference and prey on people who feel ignored or frustrated about their chances in life and confused about their identity. [The play] provides a means through which issues are brought to light, where they can be acknowledged, discussed and addressed' ([cited in Source g](#)). The play is similarly cited as a successful example of counter-extremism in the government's *Prevent Strategy - a Guide for Local Partners* ([Source h](#)): 'it is a hard-hitting but also a very entertaining and funny piece of theatre which stimulates debate around extremism amongst young people'. Indeed, performances of the play have also been part of local government initiatives to address community cohesion, including the *Leeds Bringing Communities Together* Conference ([Source i](#)).

Dates of impacts: 2008-2013.

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

For audit / corroboration of impact claims we can supply details of 9 references as follows:

Source a. <http://www.gwextreme.com/feedback.html>

Source b. Bury Project Report; PREVENTing Violent Extremism, 2009, can be provided by the University.

Source c. Manchester Schools 2011 Report, 2011, can be provided by the University.

Source d. [http://www.gwextreme.com/images/GW\\_Youth\\_Work\\_Now\\_April2010.jpg](http://www.gwextreme.com/images/GW_Youth_Work_Now_April2010.jpg)

Source e. 3/4/09: <http://www.gwextreme.com/pdf1.html>

Source f. 7/10/08: [http://www.redhotcurry.com/news/2008/muslim\\_funding.htm](http://www.redhotcurry.com/news/2008/muslim_funding.htm)

Source g.

[http://www.avonandsomerset.police.uk/information/documents/cache/PDF/Document4610\\_406246.pdf](http://www.avonandsomerset.police.uk/information/documents/cache/PDF/Document4610_406246.pdf)

Source h. p.38,

[https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/Prevent\\_Strategy.pdf](https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/Prevent_Strategy.pdf)

Source i. 19/3/2008: p.6,

[http://www.leedshousingpartnership.co.uk/uploads/March08seppagesfinal2\\_14032008112728.pdf](http://www.leedshousingpartnership.co.uk/uploads/March08seppagesfinal2_14032008112728.pdf)