

## ***Webs***

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‘Man is an animal suspended in *Webs* of significance he himself has spun.’

Geertz, 1973: 5



These overlapping *Webs* of significance, or meaning, which humans create for themselves spin together to make up culture. Each individual person lives in a unique position wherein they place different meanings on various symbols and actions, each of whose meanings overlap to varying degrees with those of others around them. Though the individual nature of cultural perceptions is sometimes masked by a shared use of symbols, it is still there (Cohen, 1989:73). There is no one bound culture, either universal throughout humanity or even shared between only a few. Instead there is a multitude of individual human interpretations of the world around them – as interpreted through, and shaped by,

these imagined *Webs* of significance. In my Ethnographic Encounters project, I will be looking at these individual yet interrelated *Webs* within *Webs*, a student run theatrical production.

*Webs* was performed in the Barron theatre in mid-April this year. With it being written and directed by one of my closest friends, Alex, I had been aware of the upcoming play, and decided to focus my Ethnographic Encounters project on the community created through this play. I went to *Webs*' rehearsals, cast-bonding outings, was a member of the audience and attended their after show party.

### The Director & Connections

One thing that struck me when I first went to one of their rehearsals was how little my presence was questioned by the actors in the group. I, unsure of how to go about introducing myself to fieldwork informants and not wanting to appear completely out of place, had introduced myself to most of them individually as they had each arrived, and said that I'd be doing an ethnographic project on the play if that was alright with them. While a couple of people asked a few questions about what my project would be on (which I didn't know at that point) no one opposed or seemed upset about my being there at all. One of the actors, Ben, arrived late to the rehearsal and didn't even ask me or anyone who I was despite the fact that to him I was some random stranger joining in that rehearsal's warm up dramatic games. When I did introduce myself to him, later, he told me that he'd just assumed I was crew.



A big part of this, I feel, was that I had arrived at my first rehearsal with the director. She hadn't told the others about my plans to focus my project on them beforehand, but they took it in stride because she was their director. In this way, even while not within the boundaries of the play itself, Alex played the role of director all the way to the wider limits of the play as a social context.

Choosing games. Choosing which scenes to rehearse when. Advising performances. Organising rooms and times to rehearse in. Coordinating schedules. Inviting people out for drinks after rehearsals. The vast majority of everyone's activities in the creation of *Webs* were done at Alex's discretion. Even when she was not actually coordinating scenes or things relevant to the performance of the play itself, the others still looked to Alex for guidance. I found this especially peculiar and interesting because I know Alex well outside of this context – and she is, while practical and organised enough to be a leader, a rather shy person. Alex was even aware of it herself, once asking me to go to a rehearsal because it was 'easier for her to be confident when [I] was there too'.

Even when directing scenes, she had a very laid back approach – often times it was one of the actors, usually Ku, who would come up with specific suggestions about a performance of lines or accompanying actions; not just for her own character, but for the others' too. In this way, the final performance was collectively formed through dialectic mediations between the written play and the various members of the group creating it, and also within the group between the different people in it. Schechner phrases this phenomenon as a 'ritual by contract'. Formed through rehearsals which narrowed down the 'choice' element in each actor's performances of the pre-written script, the interaction of everyone participating fixed the *restored behaviour* ('restored' from the original text, because the performances, both in rehearsals and in the final show, were repeated – and altered - transmissions of the behaviour written down in the script, which acted as the initial factor in narrowing individuals' creative choices) which they all agreed upon (Schechner, 1985: 37). As well as being explored anthropologically, these layered levels of different amounts of choice are discussed in dramatic theory, such as in Dean and Carra's guide for theatrical directors (1989:274). However, in the *Webs'* rehearsals, I would say that the performance was less universally collective than may be true in other theatrical productions. While there was some external input, questions regarding performances were

almost entirely initiated by the relevant individual performer rather than by Alex or the other actors: thus, most of the techniques used in the restored behaviour were chosen by each individual actor.

Yet, despite this laid back manner, it was Alex to whom the others still for guidance when they were together in this social group. Even on non-rehearsal social nights out for example, she would be the deciding judge on which bar or chip-shop we'd go to next. This interesting bleed-through of Alex's role in the play as director to her behaving as director outside of the play itself was a point of curiosity and helped me to choose my project's focus - to explore how the social context of *Webs* influenced the behaviour of those involved.

### My Introduction to the Field

Looking back, telling everyone that I would be doing an ethnographic project on them from the outset may not have been the optimal way to begin fieldwork – it probably initially distanced me from them. I felt I owed it to the people I'd be studying to give them some idea of what I'd be doing, and my tone was almost asking their permission to use them and *Webs* as ethnographic subjects. In some ways this introduction, which served as a warning that I'd be observing them, probably put the whole point of ethnographic fieldwork at risk: after all, if people know they are being watched won't they behave differently? The notion of conscious behaviour and performance once ethnographic subjects, or other groups of people, know they are being watched - like indigenous groups shaping their behaviour to those 'folk-life' types they think tourists want to see - is an important methodological concern. Gaze is everything. But indeed, how relevant can questions of social 'performance' like this be in contexts of theatrical productions, which are so full of performances already. Luckily, despite this slightly awkward initial encounter, I managed to get quite close to everyone – helped, I think, by the fact that everyone spent time with me almost as frequently as they did with each other.

### Community Formation: Ritual at Rehearsals

This social group was brought together by and for a common goal: to create a theatrical production, to bring a script to the stage. While to this outside, etic, view this was one coherent community, it must also be stressed, as Cohen (1989:72-74) does, that this community was internally rebuilding, redefining and reinterpreting itself in a dialectic process – in which each individual had their own interpretation of the meaning behind the ‘symbol’ of this particular, *Webs*-based community. One way in which I saw this community define itself was through pre-rehearsal games. In each meeting, before the rehearsal of actual scenes, everyone (including me!) would take part in group games. Some were dramatic, such as the ‘alphabet game’ where each line in an improvised, themed scene (eg. a day out at the carnival) had to begin with the next alphabetically consecutive letter. There would occasionally be activities – not quite games, not quite rehearsals – which would explicitly involve the characters or plots of the intended production.

Examples included actors’ creating and performing scenes explaining how their characters met, or ‘hot-seating’, wherein the actors had to improvise answers, in character, to interview questions. Another game combined general improvisation with kinaesthetic activity, requiring the actors to move around and sound like ‘buzzy bees’ until the director (and myself a couple of times) called out a letter and everyone would have to transform themselves into something which began with that letter, first as individuals, then in pairs, and finally as one large group. Since the person in the group who consistently called out those letters and made decisions about what games we’d all play was the director, the pre-rehearsal games also differentiated her, marking her out as holding a particular social position within the group – ie. in charge. Furthermore, many of the more specifically drama-based games, where scenes were improvised, followed Schechner’s proposed model of paratheatrical work as the preparations and process based around ‘as-if’ performances that will not actually happen (Schechner, 1985: 41). A few games weren’t specifically dramatic, but were often reminiscent of children’s games; the aim and effect was to make everyone comfortable with one another, lessening inhibition and allowing the actors to get into more open, creative moods from which they could get in to character.



I do think that this lessening of inhibition through funny, often childish games played a big role in the fostering of a sense of community in the group creating *Webs*. Moreover, reading suggests that this lowering of inhibitions is thought of as a required precursor to the ‘Western’, or at least British, view of friendship. This is due to a conceptual dichotomy between self-controlled, efficient, polite presentations of the self and spontaneous, emotional disclosures when people are truly ‘being themselves’: the former associated with obligatory, public, hierarchical activities at workplaces; the latter related to notions of private life, informality and actively sought-out friends (Rezende, 1999:89-91). Thus, there is a British tendency to feel the need to ‘lessen inhibition’ in order for people to truly be themselves, and thus able to form meaningful friendships. In my own experience of British social life, I definitely feel that there is an underlying assumption that lowering inhibition – usually through alcohol – goes hand in hand with social interactions to an extent where it is considered almost necessary for them to occur.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Although, this may not be as much a wholly British, or Scottish, trait as it is in my point of view – I moved to Scotland from the U.S.A. when I was quite young and so the contrast I see between American and Scottish notions of socializing is exaggerated by my socialising in American contexts mainly with older, family members.

Bringing this point back to my ethnography, I offer a comparison with Rezende's ethnography on a group of young professionals in London. I posit that the pre-rehearsal games discussed above served a similar purpose for my group as drinking after work did for Rezende's. It created an atmosphere wherein the efficiency-oriented activity of studying or classes was contrasted with a conceptual (and thus, physically reflected) ability to be 'spontaneous' and 'be oneself' which allowed for a build-up of friendliness and group cohesion, bringing the comfort necessary for every individual to get into an artful state of mind.<sup>2</sup> As each individual actor within the community was able to move into their own dramatic mind-set, everyone was reaffirmed into the increasingly cohesive overall group. In this way, it is useful to think of these pre-rehearsal games as a ritual, through which *Webs*' boundaries as a community were symbolized and reaffirmed (Cohen, 1989: 50).

As well as in rehearsals, the community was set apart through social drinking outings. Rather than defining this social group as a community, this emphasised the *social* rather than the *rehearsing, play-based* context and meaning. Indeed, even during the bar outing after a rehearsal which the director referred to as a 'cast-bonding session', the group included, as well as the cast, the director, and myself, others more tangentially related to the play. For example Lizzie, the producer who was only at a few of the rehearsals, was there, as were an actor's (Ben's) then-girlfriend, Aly, and her three friends. While these individuals were not regulars at rehearsals, the relations were based on *Webs* the play or at least the generally theatrical side of student social (Lizzie knew Alex from directing an earlier play that the latter had written, while Aly had acted in other student plays and met Ben at the *Webs* auditions). So, directly or indirectly, what brought people together was still their shared involvement in creating and performing *Webs*.

#### Privatized Friendship: Class Friends vs. Social Friends

One thing I have noticed as a student at St Andrews, which is relevant to this ethnography, is the somewhat unspoken distinction between in-class and out-of-class

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<sup>2</sup> However, given that rehearsals were not always directly after classes, and the group rehearsing together were not necessarily in the same classes, the overall contrast of my group was less extreme than that of Rezende's.

friendships. This distinction may be prevalent in lots of university contexts – I don't know because I've only experienced university life at St Andrews – but is certainly different from my experiences at school. What I mean here is the difficulty which seems to arise when trying to make time outside of class to socialise with friends you have met through classes, lectures or tutorials, even if you get on very well with each other then. Looking at my own, close-knit, group of friends at St Andrews, we all know each other through living in the same university hall in first year, not from attending classes together. Of the friends I've made through classes, while I do socialize with some people whom I've known for a long time, it mostly seems to be that friendships made through classes only last the extent of the module. Some of my informants have mentioned this to me too, or how even during the same semester or even day that you have the classes, socialising outside of classes with the friends one has made in that class seems awkward. So, I propose, contexts of meeting within a university setting provide an important role in mediating future relations and behaviour between friends.

Apparently, this distinction is an already discussed feature of social life, especially amongst European and North American cultures. Anthropologists such as Bell & Coleman have discussed this privatisation of friendship (1999: 8). In this trend, friendship is defined by the voluntary nature of the relations on the part of the people between whom friendship is shared. As such, friendship is collectively conceptualised as a relationship that is characteristically based in sentiment, not a sense of duty or obligation, and as such a relationship which is not embedded in a network of other relationships (*Ibid.*:8-9). Though friendship, especially in a small community like St Andrews, is in reality most likely involved with a multitude of other relationships or friendships, it is this conceptualization which is most likely at the root of this distinction between class (or work) friendships and the friendships formed outside of these institutions.

Relating this distinction back to my main topic, the social group formed by *Webs*, while close and friendly, was mostly contained within and structured by the events surrounding the play's creation and performance. In the period of time (around a month) I



spent with the *Webs*' cast and crew during the play's production, there were two purely social cast meet-ups, compared to eight rehearsals. This wasn't to do with lack of affection amongst the group – the atmosphere at the rehearsals was light, laid back and friendly with only a little bit of seriousness and hints of stress at the rehearsals immediately preceding the play's first performance. Rather, I think the Western, perhaps with the added more particular St Andrews-ian, aspect of friendship made people partially revert back to the behaviour of in-class versus out-of-class friendships. In this case, the differences in behaviour were part of a wider-ranging distinction between friendships in their own particular context and those same friendships outside of that context. This can perhaps be related to the Cameroonian Bangwa distinction between 'friends of the heart' (chosen allies) and 'friends of the road' (ascribed allies) (Bell & Coleman, 1999:8). The community and social context formed by *Webs* and its production created many 'friends of the road' during its creation – however, now that the performance is over and there are no longer 'ascribed' structured meetings of biweekly rehearsals for this community, the friends forged by it have parted paths. One poignant example is perhaps the romantic relationship between one cast-member and another theatrical student who was part of the wider *Webs*' community: having met at the auditions for *Webs*, their relationship ended the day after the final performance and after party. However, this description exaggerates the finality of the friendships created through *Webs* – people still get on easily when they see each other, such as through involvement in other theatrical productions, it's just that the *reason* behind that particular group originally coming together is no longer there.

### Conclusion

My Ethnographic Encounters project has been based around my active involvement in the creation of a student theatrical production, called *Webs*. From mid-February to mid-March I went along to the group's meetings, taking part in the dramatic games, observing and filming rehearsals, helping the crew set the stage, seeing the play performed and attending the after party. Initially, as I began my fieldwork, I didn't have a particular question in mind and just tried to let my experiences help give me an idea of what my focus

could be. Perhaps influenced by the *Webs*' plot, which centres around four St Andrews students and their comedic and dramatic relationships, whether friendly or romantic, I thought that I would centre my Ethnographic Encounters project on comparisons between the actors' relationships on-stage and off-stage, or further outside of the context of the play. Eventually, I settled more generally on an exploration of the community and friendship built from the interrelationships formed and grounded in the creation and performance of *Webs*. Drawing this together with other ethnographic and theoretical works surrounding friendship, and drama, I have discussed above the permeability of the director's role beyond the play itself, the formation of a sense of creative community as contributed to by the boundary-defining ritual of pre-rehearsal games, and the privatisation of friendship and distinctions between friendships of different contexts in St Andrews.

This project has introduced me to various difficulties in fieldwork. For example, I have personally felt the initial confusion as to how to explain to your subjects what your ethnographic research is about, and how much you should even let your subjects know what it is you'll be studying – in case they are then influenced to behave differently. Moreover, writing this has been difficult and strange because even when nothing negative is being said, writing an ethnography about people with whom you've become close feels sneaky, almost like you're betraying them somehow, even though studying them was the reason you became close in the first place. While this ambivalent feeling towards authoring ethnography is perhaps heightened for me since I focussed on a very small social group (of only 9 people, including myself), I suspect it is something that all ethnographic researchers feel to a certain degree. I think I will read ethnographies as much more *personal* works of writing in future, now that I've had this experience of converting fieldwork into literature.



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**Photographs**

Photographs One, Two & Three taken by Katharine Philp; Photograph Four taken by Alexandra Mullarky. March 2012.