



## Laboratories of Culture

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**ABSTRACT – Laboratories of Culture** – This article situates the theatre laboratory in the history of social innovation and attempts to show how the twenty-first century phenomenon of social labs productively offer modes of thinking that can usefully inform contemporary conceptions of the theatre laboratory. Through an examination of Maketank, a fledgling organization in Exeter, UK, the article proposes a new organisational approach called *the cultural laboratory* that combines principles of both the theatre and social lab with the aim of extending the theatre laboratory into broader realms of cultural action.

Keywords: **Theatre Laboratory. Social Innovation. Social Labs. Design Thinking. Maketank.**

**RÉSUMÉ – Laboratoires de Culture** – Cet article situe le laboratoire de théâtre dans l'histoire de l'innovation sociale et tente de montrer comment le phénomène du vingt et unième siècle des laboratoires sociaux offre des modes de réflexion féconds, susceptibles d'influer sur les conceptions contemporaines du laboratoire de théâtre. À travers une analyse du Maketank, une organisation naissante à Exeter dans le Royaume-Uni, l'article propose une nouvelle approche d'organisation appelée le laboratoire culturel, qui combine des principes tant du théâtre que du laboratoire social, dans le but d'étendre le laboratoire de théâtre à des domaines plus larges d'action culturelle.

Mots-clés: **Laboratoire de Théâtre. Innovation Sociale. Laboratoires Sociaux. Réflexion de Design. Maketank.**

**RESUMO – Laboratórios de Cultura** – Este artigo situa o teatro laboratório na história da inovação social e busca mostrar como o fenômeno dos laboratórios sociais do século XXI proporciona modos de pensar que possam efetivamente informar concepções contemporâneas de teatro laboratório. Ao examinar o *Maketank*, uma organização incipiente em Exeter, no Reino Unido, o artigo propõe uma nova abordagem organizacional, denominada *laboratório cultural*, que combina princípios dos laboratórios teatrais e sociais com o objetivo de estender o teatro laboratório para esferas de ação cultural mais amplas.

Palavras-chave: **Teatro Laboratório. Inovação Social. Laboratórios Sociais. Design Thinking. Maketank.**

## Introduction

In the July 1923 issue of *Theatre Arts Monthly*, Richard Boleslavsky, former member of the First Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre and soon to be artistic director of the American Theater Laboratory made an impassioned plea for the pedagogical imperative of the theatre laboratory: “The establishment of such a laboratory in every country which recognizes the tremendous significance of the theatre as a social force, is essential, is indispensable – is as important as the school and the university” (Boleslavsky, 1923, p. 246).

While commonplace in scholarship to focus on the laboratory as a site for the training of the actor<sup>1</sup>, Boleslavsky asserted that theatre laboratories were much more than a space for developing one’s acting talent. In fact, in this one sentence Boleslavsky appears to be arguing for the theatre laboratory as an essential mechanism of social innovation. As part of a special issue on theatre laboratories in flux, this article proposes to build on Boleslavsky’s nascent insight and offer a provocation: What if a theatre laboratory consciously embraced twenty-first century principles of social innovation? Might such an embrace create a hybrid organization capable of countering the artistic and culturally damaging aspects of neoliberalism?

A term with a robust history, social innovation emerged two centuries ago within the progressive movement and other social enterprises that occurred in response to the industrial age, resulting in various events and activities commonly taken for granted today, such as women’s suffrage, national health service, kindergarten, recycling, etc. (Mulgan, 2019). Yet, the contemporary social innovation movement, which has populated business and social science scholarship over the last few decades, has arisen from a sense that civic and political institutions are failing to meet the world’s most complex challenges and that those best placed to contribute solutions to these problems are not just the “[...] well-educated and well-connected” (Mulgan, 2019, p. 7) but a range of people who contribute to diverse communities of creativity<sup>2</sup>. This has led to the appearance of a variety of labs: civic labs, fab labs, design labs, policy labs, living labs and social innovation labs, to name but a few (Papageorgiou, 2017), that aim to tackle a range of problems and generate social innovation<sup>3</sup>.

This “[...] plethora of processes and organizations, often with markedly different goals and employing distinct methods and approaches” (Westley; Laban, 2015, p. 1) is reminiscent of the many thinkers, artists, clubs and laboratories that comprised the revolutionary project which informed the social, cultural and political activity of early twentieth century Russia<sup>4</sup>. As part of this milieu, Boleslavsky and his colleagues perceived the theatre laboratory as a place where the innovation of aesthetics was intricately linked to ethics, where the relationships between practitioners and between practitioners and audiences were meant to be elaborated into other social and political activities<sup>5</sup>, and where the practice of culture itself was meant to inform and model the types of social and political institutions being built. The theatre laboratory was, in their understanding, a laboratory of culture.

In reassessing this broader conception of a theatre laboratory within the contemporary framework of laboratories in flux, this article proposes a new organizational structure, that of *the cultural laboratory* – a hybrid organization rooted in the histories and principles of the theatre laboratory, informed by the principles of Art Thinking (Ars Electronica, 2021), and influenced by the agile, iterative and diverse nature of the social lab. By social lab, we refer to a distinct organizational approach to social innovation that tackles local and global systemic problems by breaking down the pervasive silo-mentality of contemporary institutions, encouraging experimentalism comprised of both hands-on trial and error and rigorous debate (Hassan, 2014; Leadbeater, 2014; Papageorgiou, 2017).

The idea of a cultural laboratory was proposed to me by Olya Petrakova during a framing discussion for the fledgling organization Maketank, based in the city of Exeter, in the South West of England. Petrakova and I come from a laboratory theatre tradition; we created our theatre laboratory, ARTEL (American Russian Theatre Ensemble Laboratory), in Los Angeles in 2006 with the aim of developing a horizontal leadership model as well as our own ensemble training and devising processes (Brown, 2016). However, Maketank was established in 2019 with a very different remit. The intention was not to begin a new ensemble-led theatre, but rather to address a number of perceived gaps in the local performing arts ecology. These revolve around the more common needs of time, space and mentorship to allow for the incubation of new work; the facilitated connection between artists of different mediums to generate interdisciplinary performance work;

and the education of audiences towards the reception of process rather than finished product. Furthermore, Maketank also tackles some less common concerns, such as a pervasive scarcity-thinking (Zander; Zander, 2000), which fosters a sense of disconnection between local artists, companies, organizations and the various communities they aim to serve. This scarcity-thinking is fueled by an over-reliance upon retail to comprise the identity of the city centre. As anchor stores shutter at significant rates (Shaw, 2020), the city's redevelopment proposals overlook the value arts and culture contribute to the wellbeing of its residents. Maketank therefore seeks to generate a renewed cultural agency in Exeter's residents, what cultural theorist Homi Bhabha refers to as "cultural citizenship" (Shaw, 2014; Bhabha, 2017)<sup>6</sup>, and asks: What would happen if we made cultural citizenship an essential aspect of our city centres?

Turning to social labs for inspiration and practical guidance, Petrakova has been reconceiving the role a theatre laboratory might play in the strengthening of a modest-sized UK city. Through an examination of the ideation phase of Maketank, as well as the key components of the social lab approach, this article aims to map the contours of the cultural laboratory in the hope of provoking additional ways in which the theatre laboratory in flux can extend into cultural and social action.

### **The Social Lab Revolution**

Five years before Boleslavsky's article appeared in print, the world was ravaged by an influenza pandemic that compounded the devastation caused by the first World War. Just two years shy of the centennial of Boleslavsky's article, the world is again gripped by a coronavirus pandemic compounded by systemic social, economic, political and environmental crises. The last eighteen months have made it more apparent than ever that our current global issues are entangled in ways that a symptom-based approach to problem-solving cannot unravel (Hassan, 2019). Rather, a systemic approach is required. Fortunately, such an approach has been evolving since the first decade of the twenty-first century through various organizations applying, documenting and debating their practical solutions to local and global challenges such as water and food shortage, children's malnutrition, education innovation, financial systems transformation, sustainable energy, aboriginal-settler relations, and public management. Just as there are multiple tech-

niques and organizational structures within the broad category of the theatre laboratory, the social lab has no unified technique nor definitive organizational structure. It has, however, coalesced around common attributes and practices which can be deemed a distinct approach.

It is recognized that social labs comprise “[...] an emerging family of hybrid organizations” (Tiesinga; Berkhout, 2014, p. 9) and cannot be reduced to a single origin; nevertheless, leading social lab practice has come from, and been articulated by, the Dutch foundation Kennisland and its affiliate partners; the combination of MIT and Generon Consulting, who supported multiple labs including the Sustainable Food Lab and the Bhavishya Alliance; and, Zaid Hassan, who was a key facilitator at Generon and has since developed a series of spin off next-generation enterprises aimed at catalyzing innovation<sup>7</sup>.

Hassan (2014; 2019) identifies three characteristics of a social lab: 1) they are social, meaning they engage with complex human-centered challenges that demand a diverse, multiple owner solution rather than that generated by a homogenous group (i.e., academics, civil servants, artists, etc.); 2) they are experimental, in that they test solutions early and often, embrace failure and operate from a prototyping-mentality rather than a project or planning-based mentality; and, 3) they are systemic, meaning they attempt to address the root cause of the challenge rather than the symptoms.

The social lab approach understands that systems are emergent, meaning their “[...] properties arise from the interaction of the many parts” (Hassan, 2014, p. 19). Such an approach requires an initial stepping back from the apparent problem and “[...] asking big questions about the values that underpin an existing system” (Tiesinga; Berkhout, 2014, p. 27). The tactical necessity of stepping back comes from systems thinking which “[...] consists of three kinds of things: elements (in this case, characteristics), interconnections (the way these characteristics relate to and/or feed back into each other), and a function or purpose” (Arnold; Wade, 2015, p. 670).

Within the theatre laboratory tradition, the purpose of an individual or collective’s work is an emergent question that is at the same time the foundation of the laboratory’s activity. Rooted in the *sacred tasks* of creating a more profound interconnectedness between an individual’s spirit-soul-body and the collective coming together in spiritual communion (Brown,

2019; Shevtsova, 2020), the big question for a laboratory is encapsulated in the Russian phrase *radi chego* which can be translated as *what for* or *for the sake of what* (Malaev-Babel, 2011; Brown, 2019). This question is connected to the individual and company's creative mission and the purpose that emerges from its asking becomes the driving force behind every cycle of activity.

The social lab's approach has been specifically informed by systems thinking through its incorporation of human-centred design thinking. Coined by David Kelley, founder of positive design leader IDEO and Stanford's *d.school*, design thinking extends the core processes of design into an approach capable of producing not just innovative consumer products but consumer experiences. It is human-centred because it focuses on human users and human challenges and "[...] relies on our ability to be intuitive, to recognize patterns, to construct ideas that have emotional meaning as well as being functional, and to express ourselves in media other than words or symbols" (Brown; Wyatt, 2010, p. 33). Design thinking has developed significantly in the decade-plus since its coinage but often has three phases – the inspiration phase, the ideation phase, and the implementation phase<sup>8</sup>. These are not linear but cyclical or "overlapping spaces" (Brown; Wyatt, 2010, p. 33). The empathic and cyclical nature of design thinking has been central to the operational structure of the social lab approach in that labs seek to prioritize participant agency and allow for work on a stuck problem to happen in cycles rather than the more linear timeframe of a project-based model<sup>9</sup>. Additionally, the essential prototyping mindset that is the *modus operandi* of the social lab approach comes directly from design thinking. As explained by a group of social labs that collaborated on the 2014 book *Labcraft*:

[Social labs] don't define the strategy for solving the problem up front, but rather we do so while synthesizing the needs, motivations and mindsets of our users and stakeholders. After really honing in on the questions that matter, we aim to prototype and iterate possible innovations and interventions. Our mantra here is 'fail fast, fail often, and fail early' (Tiesinga; Berkhout, 2014, p. 28).

One of the key features of a theatre laboratory is the ability to fail – Leopold Sulerzhitsky, the pedagogue of the First Studio, famously decried the success of the box office (Brown, 2019) – and the iterative or prototyp-

ing mindset is essential to artistic innovation. Yet, Boleslavsky's 1923 model for the theatre laboratory still ultimately aimed for a new repertory theatre (his exemplars being the First and Third studios of the Moscow Art Theatre which became the Second Moscow Art Theatre and the Vakhtangov Theatre respectively). While a large institutional structure and venue may not be the end goal of a twenty-first theatre laboratory, a consistent ensemble with a repertoire of work often is; but, what if a cultural laboratory eschewed completely the notion of an end goal where a theatre ensemble or one artist's work becomes recognized and influential, and instead focused on the participatory agency of multiple artists and culturemakers to effect meaningful change in the everyday cultural practice of local residents?

### **Taking Two Steps Back – The Idea(tion) of Maketank**

Similar to the convening of a social lab where various stakeholders are gathered to analyze and prototype solutions to a complex problem, Maketank began from a series of conversations that were generated by the sudden closure of The Bike Shed Theatre, a small performing arts venue in Exeter city centre that not only presented national touring work but supported the creation of new local and national performance from its link with the University of Exeter's Drama Department graduate scheme and its own empty storefront artist residency program, the Unit. Over the course of a year, Petrakova organized and/or facilitated a range of conversations on a variety of scales: intimate conversations with producers and directors of existing and former Exeter performing arts organizations; a medium sized gathering of alumni of the Drama Department who remain active in the area; and, a large half-day event that brought the breadth of the area's performance ecology from National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) to freelance artists together for concerted action planning. These conversations provided an insight into the various needs and perceived gaps in the city as well as the shifts in funding structures that played a significant role in the current landscape. They also revealed a sense of the fractured nature of the ecology and the prevalence of scarcity-thinking that hindered participants from committing to action steps.

While it was clear that a new space would be a beneficial support to a range of practitioners, Petrakova was wary of the call for a new production-led venue, seeing it as a symptoms-based approach to fixing the ecology's

more systemic ills. Rather, she believed that a malleable space housing an emergent organization capable of responding to the needs of the users would have more potential to build a cohesive, generous and empowered ecology, one that might then be capable of combining aesthetic innovation with a larger remit of developing cultural citizenship in a variety of audiences and participants.

Exeter is a unique locale within the UK. In terms of party politics, it is strongly Labour-led in a majority Conservative county and its council held for a number of years an impressive Culture portfolio, which many comparable councils do not have the funds or the ambition to foster. However, Exeter cannot compare itself to the much larger, neighbouring city of Bristol with its artistic and cultural diversity, and a repeating pattern occurs where many younger artists from Exeter eventually move to Bristol. Additionally, in recent years other local cities and boroughs have seen significant national investment in arts and culture, whilst Exeter has not.

Despite its staunch political opposition, Exeter appears to be trapped in similar neo-liberal policy and urban planning approaches more indicative of the current right-wing, Conservative-led UK Parliament. This government has spent a decade actively de-prioritizing arts and culture through the creation of a new secondary school curriculum that effectively removes arts subjects from any *endorsed* education, alongside systematic cuts to funding for arts and cultural practice in schools, including, at the time of writing, another significant cut to university arts and digital media courses as non-strategic priorities<sup>10</sup>. Furthering the government's standpoint, in 2020, it launched the *Rethink. Reskill. Reboot* campaign to promote cybersecurity jobs with a poster depicting a ballet dancer tying her shoes and the caption *Fatima's next job could be in cyber. She just doesn't know it yet*. Moreover, the various paths out of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns during 2020 and early 2021 prioritized the *great tradition* of British pubs and restaurants, allowing them to open at various times while theatres and other cultural spaces have been forced to remain shuttered, despite the international cachet of British theatre. This has had a detrimental effect on freelance workers and reinforced notions that art and culture are luxuries rather than essential components of the social fabric.

To extend posthuman and feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti's assessment of the crisis in the humanities, the UK government's downgrading



of the arts “[...] beyond the ‘soft’ sciences level, to something like a finishing school for the leisurely classes” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 10) is a significant factor in the local systemic issues Maketank is attempting to identify and address. In this reduced worldview, arts and culture are no longer an essential component of creative problem-solving, nor part of the rich philosophical history of humankind, but rather an occasional artifact to consume. If arts and culture are to be slotted into a neo-liberal consumption model, we need look no further than UK city centres to see what the future holds.

Although a modest-sized city, Exeter’s High Street is a large regional centre of commercial retail. Nevertheless, as with many UK city centres, the High Street is undergoing significant reconsideration (Shaw, 2020). Anchor retail corporations such as Debenhams and House of Fraser have closed, leaving large properties vacant. Alongside this, many of the buildings in the area are demonstrably past use. Built in the aftermath of World War II, these buildings were not conceived to have a long shelf life: their architecture no longer inspires, many are filled with asbestos, and few of them meet the current environmental standards. The city council is therefore rightfully assessing how to demolish rather than upgrade many of these spaces; however, the redevelopment strategy relies on international developers transplanting large hotel and retail venue schemes onto one of only five areas of archeological importance in the UK. Added to this, an earlier redevelopment plan based on a new retail area to support an ambitious new bus and leisure centre fell through and the city has had to fund the development itself.

It is within this context that Maketank began operating within a former storefront in the city centre; in fact, in one of the shops earmarked for demolition in the larger failed bus and leisure centre redevelopment. The initial concept for Maketank was to bring interdisciplinary makers into a single facility in the city centre in order to make visible the process rather than simply the products of that work. Foregrounding process would, it was hoped, allow more residents to be inspired by and value the work of artists and culture makers, and encourage audiences to develop a richer curiosity around a finished piece of performance or other artwork. Of course, it was also hoped that having multiple interdisciplinary artists working in the same facility would affect the processes of each and lead to more complex collaborations.

However, as mentioned, Maketank has always understood itself as an emergent entity, an organization created to be responsive to its users' needs. Although the facility has been a place for theatre-makers, dancers and musicians to practice and develop new work, as well as a space for photographers and a haptic technology researcher, it quickly realised that the initial remit was too narrow.

In order to broaden the organization's ability to serve multiple users, Petrakova turned to what the Linz-based new media art, science and education organization Ars Electronica calls Art Thinking, a next generation approach to design thinking. As Hideaki Ogawa states:

Design is a solution to shape a service or product, it is like a direction. Art is a compass. Quite often, we tend to forget the fundamental question: What is the design for? What is the direction for? And this is where Art Thinking comes in. [...] Art Thinking is not a methodology, but an attitude – it helps to open up our senses like artists. We want to see society in different ways, and Art Thinking allows us to have our own compass, to see society from a critical perspective, in different ways (Ars Electronica, 2021).

Art Thinking allows for what might be seen as extreme divergence, in other words, it encourages participants to stay in a space of deep questioning and exploration for an extended period of time. For Maketank, this is essential as the stuck problems it aims to tackle require a community of practitioners to discover the answers together, and this is where the social lab approach most usefully aids the theatre laboratory tradition. Petrakova did not conceive Maketank to solve her own artistic and aesthetic questions, but the collective social, economic and cultural problems of Exeter and its surrounding area.

As mentioned, one of the central problems identified is the way that local arts and culture practitioners are siloed into various disciplinary forums which hampers experimentation and aesthetic innovation. It must be remembered that the prototype of the theatre laboratory, the 1905 Theatre-Studio on Povarskaia Street (Syssoyeva, 2009; Brown, 2019), was a space for rich interdisciplinary conversation that pointed towards the theatre's innovation. Inevitably informed by such revolutionary work and trends in practice, Maketank nevertheless approaches questions of aesthetic innovation as part of the hyperlocal conversations happening around the future of the city: its redevelopment designs, its capability to offer more cultural and

artistic access, and its identification of core values from the city's ancient history that its citizens wish to see taken forward into the twenty-first century.

For one of its first public openings, Maketank commissioned and curated a festival, *Living Spaces*, that aimed to bring a range of artists together to reanimate the disused retail shop in the city centre but also to apply Art Thinking to these larger civic questions. Storytelling and boardgame designers Circle Tales turned the first floor of Maketank into a dynamic but receptive installation space where, through various layers of shadow and silhouette, audiences could experience a blossoming paper cherry tree and cardboard wild animals while listening to a previously recorded short tale created by players of the boardgame. While this tranquil installation remained constant throughout the festival, the ground floor space was host to a variety of performances; from a new queer live art exploration of the myth of the local patron St Sidwell, to mothers exploring how to keep making theatre with the demands of newborns, to a live performance of a large-scale video collage accompanied by spoken word poetry and a John Cage-inspired interactive soundscape played by the audience with chalk on slate and the composer on organ and various metal. This piece, *Ouroboros Dumnonii*, combines a William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*-like approach to the first inhabitants of the area, the Dumnonii, with the controversial development choices of the city council over the last few decades. Moreover, in the spirit of emergent conversation, the performance inspired ARTEL's contribution to the festival, *Evidence Room*, to incorporate discussion from the audience Q&A as text placed in relation to found objects from the streets of Exeter in a former bank vault meant to be experienced by a single audience member at a time. Additionally, nearly 21 months later Maketank commissioned *Ouroboros Dumnonii* composer Emma Welton to create a music-sound response to the Covid-lockdown using the same organ which had been stored at Maketank. *The Lonely Organ* was then digitally promoted as part of a larger online *Creative Circle* project, which encouraged artistic responses to Welton's piece in another medium to foster interdisciplinary collaboration.

While Maketank aims to fill gaps by encouraging interdisciplinary conversation, another significant stuck problem, also previously mentioned, is a prevalence of scarcity-thinking. All too often, local practitioners per-

ceive each other as competitors for available funding, rather than a united community capable of advocating for more resources. Coming from the United States, where funding for arts and culture operates from a significantly different model, Petrakova has been consistently struck by the overreliance on government funding by UK practitioners. Such overreliance reinforces a project and planning-based approach; instead of committing to the work or the organization because it is a vocation, a calling that must be fulfilled, potentially viable and innovative artworks and organizations collapse simply due to not receiving the next round of funding<sup>11</sup>.

The theatre laboratory has from its earliest conceptions been equated with a spiritual vocation. Meyerhold called it a hermitage, Sulerzhitsky and Stanislavsky a theatre-temple and the actor a high priest. Even the revolutionary project was fueled by such zealous language, with historian Nikolai A. Gorchakov framing the many theatre-studios that appeared in the 1910s and 20s as a *theatre epidemic* where “[...] [t]he studios were almost like hermitages or monasteries, and the devotees who worked in them were a mendicant order of the militant faithful of the theatres” (Gorchakov, 1957, p. 244). In social labs as well as theatre, this zealousness is an essential principle for innovation.

### Principles for Innovation

Reflecting on a psychological rehabilitation project for low-income people in Topeka, Kansas that generated new techniques and procedures, lasting inter-community agency and a new social institution, head of research James B. Taylor identified five principles for successful interdisciplinary social innovation. Published in 1970, Taylor’s article is a remarkable early assessment of social innovation that resonates with much of the twenty-first century literature. His principles are direct and could easily be transposed to the operating procedures of contemporary social labs such as those of Hassan’s Roller Strategies (2019) and are reminiscent of the mechanisms I have identified elsewhere for the generation of *studiinost*, the daily procedural commitment each member has to each other and to the purpose of a theatre laboratory (Brown, 2019).

The starting point for effective interdisciplinary social innovation according to Taylor is the principle of maximum investment. As Taylor states:

I do not think that innovation would have taken place had the staff been less keenly involved [...] Especially in the early days, the staff seemed almost religious in its commitment, as if nothing else in the clinical world were of any worth. [...] There was] a spirit of great in-group solidarity. This high investment gave impetus to the application, as research drew to a close, of newly learned skills in different settings (Taylor, 1970, p. 74).

The principle of maximum investment is obviously akin to the religious zeal of the theatre laboratory mentioned above and can be perceived within the internal rules that inform team-building at Hassan's previous social lab/consultancy firm Roller Strategies. *Practice 01: Set Intention* and *Orthodoxy 05: Skin in the game* ensure an investment in the work of Roller Strategies through personal commitment to bettering oneself, to the team and to the problems all face. Additionally, *Practice 02: Find your game*. *Practice* is an incentive towards higher personal investment, as it provides the opportunity to uncover, challenge and change personal limitations:

All too often we are born into a game and we play it unconsciously. Here's an opportunity to pick your game, to play it consciously, to aspire to mastery and virtuosity. If you're here it's because you're good at something. In some cases it's obvious and in other cases it might not be. The bottom line is that you are here for a reason. Trust that reason (Roller Strategies, 2019).

Petrakova's enacting of a horizontal leadership structure at Maketank is a tactic aimed at fostering individual recognition of each team member's own calling, what Roller Strategies refers to as *game*, and what Sulerzhitsky and Vakhtangov considered upbringing or cultivating the members of a laboratory (Malaev-Babel, 2011; Brown, 2019).

Recognizing what you are good at and practicing it feeds directly into another of Taylor's principles: the principle of egalitarian responsibility. This principle, Taylor believed, "[...] was most responsible for the development of group solidarity and commitment. Each member of the research team had an equal hand in formulating, and later in reformulating, the research issues" (Taylor, 1970, p. 75).

Egalitarianism is a defining feature of *studiinost* (Brown, 2019) and the concept appears throughout the history of the theatre laboratory in such

phrases as brotherhood, *sobornost* (congregation) and *obshchina* (commune). Egalitarianism's twin, mutual responsibility, is essential for every individual "[...] to hammer the rivets into the frame of the new ship called 'The Studio'" (Malaev-Babel, 2011, p. 240). Of course, not all theatre laboratories operate in a way that allows research to be formulated by each member, but the majority of laboratories depend upon the commitment of each member to the research and the findings made within by specific team members can influence the current and future research.

Similarly, social labs are driven by a variety of factors, but the development of individual agency from all participants is embedded within the social lab approach. The Financial Innovation Lab's description of their operating procedure is indicative of many:

[...] our core team builds the strategy of the Lab and nurtures each of these communities. We have spent a great deal of time deepening our relationships, because one of our key learnings is that a strong core becomes a positive attractor for others. The more we understand each other, know our strengths and weaknesses, the better work we do and the more the lab flourishes (Tiesinga; Berkhout, 2014, p. 42).

Similarly, Roller Strategies *Orthodoxy 06: As above, so below* places the importance of internal bonds within a systems thinking framework:

If we are not personally individually resourced and healthy, we can't expect to support that condition in the client system or expect to be creating outcomes that are. If the client system is one where power collects at the top, you can bet we will start to see that dynamic within the project team. This places a responsibility on us as practitioners to do our own work, to take dynamics that show up in us and in the team seriously and when we see something in a part of the system that is working or not working, being intentional about whether we take action to mitigate it or amplify it (Roller Strategies, 2019).

Again, through an active horizontal leadership strategy, Maketank encourages team members to take responsibility for their own investment. There is ample opportunity for members to lead on individual projects, which might be essential aspects such as facilities management, marketing, community-building, but could also be artistic or cultural activities such as developing individual practice, running a youth theatre, designing and/or programming the spaces including the storefront windows, setting up a larger consultancy operation, etc.

This does not mean that there is no conflict or that there is no attrition. In fact, like most start-ups, Maketank's team has changed often over its initial ideation phase. However, the principles allow for relationships to be maintained with relative ease and indeed for the organisation to continue to support former team members in their new endeavours when appropriate. Additionally, as Maketank incorporates into a more formal non-profit status, its executive directors have been recruited from previous cycles of work within the organization. Three of the five directors (myself and Petrakova round out the directorship) were interns at various points in the last 18 months, through which they developed an investment in the organization and its core activities. These three directors come from very different backgrounds and bring a range of networks and experience to the organization.

This broadens the capacity of Maketank and is in line with another of Taylor's principles: the principle of co-optation, which is essentially, the "[...] interpenetration of personnel from other groups and agencies" (Taylor, 1970, p.74). The social lab approach generally embeds such co-optation into its process through its gathering of various stakeholders and ensuring multiple voices are heard when tackling problems. A specific example is Roller Strategies *Practice 06: Integrate Minority Voices* which states:

Every time a group comes together, minority positions come into being. [...] One way of understanding a minority view is as representing wisdom that the majority cannot see. All too often, decisions in groups are made on the basis of power. This might look like a leader making decisions, an alpha male dominating decisions or at best a majority vote determining the outcome of a decision. The challenge with these approaches is that failing to incorporate minority views into decision-making has consequences. [...] Integrating minority views into decision-making ensures better decisions. Doing so also addresses budding conflicts and dissatisfaction almost at a root cause level (Roller Strategies, 2019).

To return for a moment to egalitarianism: there has, in my experience, existed an ethos of generosity and support between various practitioners across the globe that manifests as an informal laboratory theatre network, a kind of extension of the intra-laboratory egalitarianism to an inter-laboratory egalitarianism. Maketank draws on this generous network and aims to strengthen it by providing support to develop and/or present work in Exeter for the benefit of the visiting laboratory practitioners as well as the

local artists and audiences. This has led to the presentation of *Achilles* by Glasgow's Company of Wolves to a sold-out audience. This solo, physical, song and text-based performance had been seen as too aesthetically risky for Exeter audiences by other venues in the area, but the Maketank audience feedback revealed an eagerness to see performance work crafted with intense rigour and that challenged conceptions of what a theatre performance might be.

Maketank also hosted Valerie McCann, a former ARTEL member and practitioner working at the intersections of dance, somatic movement, text and theatre, to develop her own solo performance *On Leaving the House*. This was the inauguration of Maketank's Performance Incubation Program and was presented across three spaces in the facility just before the first UK lockdown due to Covid-19. As with *Achilles*, *On Leaving the House* challenged and inspired audiences and the artist received substantial feedback from post-performance discussions that will feed the future development of the piece.

As part of Maketank's ambition to mentor, support and present new performance work, it is also in conversation with various venues and theatres to generate alternative models for incubation, residency and presenting. Again, just before the first lockdown, London-based Fourth Monkey began a larger conversation about hosting the ensemble for the final development phase of their new work, premiering it in Exeter alongside a gallery installation and other activities that have grown organically out of the performance and devising processes to engage local audiences in new ways. While such a model is not new, it is rare for a small or modest-sized city in the UK to premiere work that will tour nationally and internationally, and the aim is to further build a sense of cultural investment in the performance from Exeter residents, and with it, a greater sense of their city's value through such cultural production.

Taylor's fourth principle, that of research as creative play, is fundamental to the activities of Maketank and the majority of theatre laboratories, although it may not always be apparent immediately. For Taylor's multiple-user psychological rehabilitation project, research was for some, a "[...] behemoth – foreboding, superhuman, fault finding, arrogant, and carping" (Taylor, 1970, p. 76) and for others, such as social workers and clinicians, something out of their daily remit. As the project demanded par-



ticipatory agency and emergent inquiry, all of the members found their relationship to research changing and, eventually, a freedom to play with ideas “[...] and to question eternal truths” (Taylor, 1970, p. 76) informed all of the group’s work. This type of shift in perspective is highlighted in *Follow the Rabbit: A Field Guide to Systemic Design* created by the Canadian government innovation lab, Alberta CoLab. The guide foregrounds core elements of the social lab approach that further corroborates the essentialness of Taylor’s principles and comparative theatre laboratory mechanisms.

Like much of the literature created by social labs, the *Field Guide* was created to be a tool for others’ use more than a polished scholastic artifact, and is therefore presented more like a PowerPoint presentation than an academic article. Nevertheless, it is worth quoting the guide directly to foreground the important connection CoLab make between improvisational theatre rules, laughter and insight:

Follow improve [sic] rules. Show up fit and well. Say ‘yes’ and contribute. Make your partner look good. Go from A to C. AH HA = HA HA Laughter is important. So is play. People who are having fun are more engaged, more open to learning, and more creative (Alberta CoLab, 2016, p. 11).

The connection of laughter with realization is such a viscerally wonderful encapsulation of *research as creative play* as well as what I have termed elsewhere the “holiday mechanism” (Brown, 2019, p. 86) for the generation of *studiinost*. Laboratory theatre is often seen as serious, rigorous work, but, once again, Leopold Sulerzhitsky offers insight into the relationship of laughter to the necessary mindset for laboratory practice: “[...] before starting to work (even before a drama) it is necessary to burst out laughing properly in your soul, so that pleasure fills your entire being” (Brown, 2019, p. 86). Similarly, the Russian experimental artist and world-famous clown Slava Polunin is the exemplar of playful research. Polunin barred the term *work* from his studio and has spent decades cultivating a mindset within his collaborators and himself that all creative activity is a holiday, and that such a holiday can eventually become a daily sense of wonderment and happiness (Brown, 2019). The gardens of Polunin’s experimental house Moulin Jaune are opened regularly for new explorations into what he terms *Celebrations of Life*, mini-festivals where the line between audience and performer is blurred. Polunin will set a theme, such as *Dreams of Flight*, and a

vast assortment of international professional artists/performers and non-professional friends as well as local residents will descend upon Moulin Jaune to create a festival in response to the theme.

Inspired by experiences at Moulin Jaune, Petrakova has been developing opportunities for a broader range of Exeter's residents to engage in cultural activity. One of these was a socially-distant promenade through the city centre led by a combination of African-infused drumming and Italian accordion, and infused with a ritual movement series enacted in three spaces, intended to reclaim the importance of cultural practice in-between the UK Covid-19 lockdowns. This promenade was part of the larger impetus to use Art Thinking to provoke deeper questions about the city's future. Another commission, *Exeter Voices*, saw artist Mark Parry interview a diverse range of Exeter residents over Zoom during the January 2021 lockdown to envision the future of the city. This May, as lockdown eases, an edited audio track plays on the street outside Maketank while Parry's circular light installations swirl and pulse to the voices. Passersby in the busy city centre are able to stop for a moment to reflect on the purpose of the city centre and consider how residents might have more say in its redevelopment. Next month, Maketank will lead and contribute to *Kinder Exeter*, a festival intended to develop compassion through play in Exeter's residents that will also further contemplation on Exeter's future through a series of interactive sessions, capturing this data on an idea board visible through the street windows.

All of this activity has emerged from Petrakova's own synthesis of the perceived gaps, needs and challenges the local performance and artist ecology faces, as well as the various strands of research interests articulated by Maketank members. In this way, Petrakova is developing her conception of horizontal leadership, actively stepping into the role of ideologist of the organization while supporting the creative play of the team through structuring it and advocating for its existence. In so doing, she is exhibiting the final principle Taylor identified in his assessment of interdisciplinary social innovation in 1970: the principle of leader as spokesperson and ideologist. As Taylor (1970, p. 77, emphasis in original) states:

[...] once the patterns for interdisciplinary cooperation have been established and the major parameters of the problem defined, research demands structure and discipline. The person responsible for the technical aspects of re-

search must be able to demand and obtain a willing adherence to the research design. To gain this willing adherence he must act as coordinator, ideologist, and taskmaster. [...] If research is indeed creative play, then the *researcher has to be the leader* of the game; he has to give direction, boundaries, and rules to the players. The researcher cannot be only a technician, but rather must take on the additional roles of administrator and theoretician.

By providing multiple channels for the many voices and concerns raised by Exeter's performance ecology, Petrakova is not only steering Maketank's activities in ways that serve a broader coalition of needs, but she is consistently raising these concerns at local, regional and national conversations around civic and cultural policy. Additionally, she has been developing a bottom-up network to do this work in a more cohesive and fully representational way, one that is owned by its members and not by an organization, such as Maketank.

Similar to a spin-off from a social lab or other start-up, Performance in Exeter (PiE) is supported by Maketank, but is not defined by Maketank. Rather it is a bottom-up network, created by, and adapting to the needs of, regional artists. Comprised of members, PiE also holds larger assemblies with and for local NPOs (Nonprofit Organisations), city councilors and officials, freelance workers, theatre-makers, visual artists, musicians, and students. PiE aims to operate as a supportive structure for generating new ideas, as a connector of people for inspiration as much as for collaboration, and importantly to serve as a voice of advocacy for future resources and funding support. Its larger remit is to encourage a step back from immediate feelings of scarcity and precarity, to reconvene and recollect as a community the enormous history of innovative and powerful work that has been made in the city and region, to identify gaps in current resources and pathways to cultural practice, and to value the efforts and work of each aspect of the ecology.

In a recent conversation with American laboratory theatre director Andre Gregory, Todd London highlighted how a number of theatre companies such as Mabou Mines, The Wooster Group, and others placed a consistent advertisement in *The Drama Review* in the 1980s to raise awareness about the existence of experimental theatre as an important cultural activity in American life. In doing so, London highlights how they were a

precursor to the significant contemporary advocacy organization, the Network of Ensemble Theatres (NET), and importantly how both of these enterprises appeared from the essential notion of “[...] gathering together to protect one another” (London, 2021, p. 40-42). In a similar fashion, Hassan highlights how a social lab is at its core “[...] a gathering, a coming together of people across the silos that characterize dominant social structures in order to attend to a social challenge for as long as a necessary to shift the situation” (Hassan, 2014, p. 146).

As Maketank moves towards a new cycle of implementation, it aims to inspire even more agency and responsibility from its stakeholders. As the UK moves out of the pandemic lockdown, a variety of Exeter organizations that serve multiple artforms and disciplines will be taking up residence in, and/or strengthening their commitment to, existing facilities with the aim of being change-makers in the city centre and in terms of its relationship to cultural practice. These include ArtsLab, a social enterprise that uses visual art to educate and inspire positive change; Yalla Theatre, a youth and women’s community organization; Toby Chanter, a haptic technology researcher; and of course, Petrakova’s and my own company, ARTEL. Through these functions, as well as continued cycles of new activity, the organization hopes to generate a rich and diverse networked ecology, one that begins to celebrate its variety of practices, and perceive individual funding and other successes as boons for all.

### **The Adjacent Possible**

In the summary of her report on Lab2, an intensive two-day event organized to assess how labs that claim to *shift systemic social challenges* practically operate, education reformer and researcher Marlieke Kieboom states unequivocally the role social labs play in our increasingly uncertain times:

Labs matter because they are new and promising spaces to reshape the public realm and improve the quality of our lives in the 21st century. In delivering daring perspectives and unconventional partnerships and ideas labs can transcend incremental change and enable our society to move towards what Steven Johnson calls, ‘the adjacent possible’. This is ‘a kind of shadow future, hovering on the edges of the present state of things, a map of all the ways in which the present can reinvent itself’ The adjacent possible future is achieved by actual exploration: ‘the boundaries of the adjacent possible grow as you explore them. Each new combination opens up the possibility of oth-

er new combinations'. This is why labs grab our interest: they operate as experimental concepts in which we learn by doing (Kieboom, 2014, p. 42).

Within intellectual and socio-political debates, prior to 1930, social innovation was equated with radical or revolutionary change as opposed to “[...] the conservative ambition of maintaining societal relations” (Moulaert; Mehmood; Maccallum; Leubolt, 2017, p. 13). As one of the tools of the Russian revolutionary project, the theatre laboratory was a means towards rethinking individual and collective experience. The significance of the theatre’s role in cultural and civic life meant that the theatre laboratory was an essential social force in the early twentieth century, as Boleslavsky claimed. Moreover, early laboratory practitioners, including Stanislavsky and Meyerhold, aimed to effect radical change in the society through the creation of aesthetic innovation as well as the replication of the values and generosity contained in the intrapersonal bonds developed and maintained between laboratory practitioners. In this way, they saw the work of the theatre laboratory influencing the larger theatre and cultural practices in the country and eventually manifesting what Johnson refers to as the adjacent possible future.

Maketank, as conceived, by Petrakova is similarly driving at systemic change, albeit one on the local ecological level. The systemic change being addressed attempts to shift how the community sees itself and how the city sees the role and value of cultural practice. As a theatre laboratory practitioner, Petrakova has enriched her embodied and organisational understanding of the laboratory theatre tradition with the principles of the social lab approach in the hope of effecting more broad systemic change. Of course, Maketank is still in a cycle of inspiration and ideation and it is too early to tell if any of the work outlined here will have lasting impact. Nevertheless, Petrakova’s vision for a cultural laboratory aims to be a place where the practice of culture in its broadest sense gathers diverse practitioners for bottom-up organization in order to define and agree upon the values held by a local community.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Stanislavsky and particular colleagues affiliated with the Moscow Art Theatre Studios were interested in the art of the actor as the focus of specific laboratory

research, a conception which later influenced Grotowski, Barba and subsequent practitioners to use laboratory as a term for research into the actor's craft; however, the actor's craft in this context has always been seen as developing both expression and communion: combining *techne*, aesthetics and ethics.

- <sup>2</sup> It is important to note that interest in, and promotion of, social innovation has also come from policy makers intent on introducing a palliative for neoliberalism. This has been termed *caring neoliberalism* by Peck and Theodore (Moulaert; Mehmood; Maccallum; Leubolt, 2017, p. 11).
- <sup>3</sup> In the literature on social labs, design thinking and social innovation, complex problems are also referred to as wicked or stuck problems variously (Tiesinga; Berkhout, 2014; Hassan, 2014; Blok; Gremmen; Wesselink, 2015).
- <sup>4</sup> Here, I mean the artistic, cultural and philosophical wrestling with revolution as mediator of individual and collective experience as distinct from the historical revolutions of 1905 and 1917. See Zamyatin (1974), Clark (1995) and Leach (1994).
- <sup>5</sup> See the concept of *studiinost* in Brown, 2019.
- <sup>6</sup> Bhabha has been developing various ideas around cultural citizenship for decades. For the purposes of this article, I interpret his 2017 conversation with William Kentridge to mean both an active curiosity for developing one's cultural literacy as well as a broad embrace of all cultural activity as a citizen of the world in order to foster a deeper accountability and responsibility for cultural practices and artifacts that may be in danger of irreparable loss.
- <sup>7</sup> Hassan (2014) has worked on projects including Reos Partners, Roller Strategies and 10in10, as well as being the author of *The Social Labs Revolution: a new approach to solving our most complex problems*.
- <sup>8</sup> See the *Understanding Innovation* series for a robust interrogation of the history, research and application of design thinking. Available at: <<https://www.springer.com/series/8802>>. Accessed on: 17 May 2021.
- <sup>9</sup> Roller Strategies (2019, p. 15) *Practice 03* encourages employees to work in cycles rather than “[...] a project [which] has a beginning and an end but it never repeats”.
- <sup>10</sup> The highly contentious EBacc was introduced in 2010 and continues to have significant impact on students' perceived choice of subjects if they wish to ap-

ply for university. See <<https://www.edsk.org/publications/a-step-baccward/>>, for an overview and counter recommendations.

- <sup>11</sup> This is of course an issue across sectors in neoliberal supercapitalism. Hassan's newest social lab-based venture 10in10 makes this explicit in its vision and strategy: "There is no functioning marketplace for solutions to complex social challenges. The nonprofit sector is the closest thing to a marketplace for solutions, but it is dramatically underperforming. [...] Teams usually struggle with seed funding to start things. They then find themselves lacking growth funding to support talent development and without ongoing funding which would give them a stable runway to develop and grow". Available at: <<https://www.xinx.co/strategy/>>. Accessed on: 18 May 2021.

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