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Being poor and performing poverty at Christmas: a sideways response to *The House*

But only his mother, in her maiden bliss

Worshipped the beloved with a kiss.

What shall I give him, poor as I am

If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb

If I were a wise man, I would do my part

But what I can I give him: Give my heart. (Rossetti 1872)². From the Christmas carol ‘In the bleak midwinter’, originally based on a poem by Christina Rossetti, performed in *The House* with new lyrics. [View all notes](#)

Hearing Carran singing this alongside so many other songs in *The House*, especially those with religious elements, had a powerful effect on me. The whole performance, in fact, touched on so many aspects of my own biography, both personal and professional, about which I am accustomed to keep, if not silent, at least a little quiet. In *The House* they are being enquired into, through performance, with compassion and humour. It was impossible for me to articulate my reactions on the night of the performance, and it remains hard now, but the annual return of Christmas has shown me a way to write in response.

Like Carran in *The House*, the singing of hymns, carols and popular songs – in my case, ‘Songs from the Shows’ – formed a huge part of my childhood. I attended a Church of England Primary School in the 1960s and had a strong belief in God until I was confirmed at about 12 years old. Almost immediately after that, my faith began to waver but it never disappeared completely. So now – near to the end of my working life – I sing hymns and carols in Church again on a regular basis as well as attend performances of community arts projects across Manchester, such as those supported by TIPP, an arts organisation hosted – like the research initiative that led to *The House* – by the University of Manchester.³ TIPP facilitates participatory arts projects with a range of groups, particularly with groups inside or connected to the criminal justice system. For more information see www.tipp.org.uk [Accessed May 27 2016]. [View all notes](#) I took many ‘STEPS’ to escape poverty and have supported, in my role as an educator and Principal Lecturer in Youth and Community Work, many others to do so. I do ‘DIG DEEP’, into my pocket and my heart, in the work I do. And so it was that I found myself thinking again about *The House*, and Poor Theatre, and Theatre among the Poor, when I was singing carols this Christmas.

When I was at school my family quite often received a Christmas Parcel, with the special Christmas foods and also presents already wrapped up for us children. I also learned to take great pleasure in singing carols at the local geriatric hospital and thinking of ‘those less fortunate than ourselves’.

The performance of *The House* has provoked me to think further and to enquire a little more into both being poor and performing poverty at Christmas. The men in my family had been coal miners and steel workers, and my grandfather, who worked at Firth Brown Steel, until

our family flit to Lincolnshire, had performed in the works' performances of Gilbert and Sullivan. He could sing his way through *The Mikado*, and *The Pirates of Penzance*, and *The Gondoliers* and, when he left Firth Brown, he was given a copy of the Gilbert and Sullivan libretti by Arthur Firth on behalf of the firm. The book is still in my possession. He would sing this song from *The Mikado* to me. The wandering minstrel was poor but delightful:

A wandering minstrel I

A thing of rags and tatters

Of ballads, songs and snatches

And dreamy lullaby.

As a Brownie, I learned the main part in a Band of Hope play, performed on the stage of the local Salvation Army Citadel. Church of England churches had altars but church halls and chapels had stages, for singing, music and sketches.

Having to 'sign on', to be on the dole, was the worst thing that ever happened to my Grandad. Every Christmas, after dinner, he would take down the book of the season, Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, and read it by the fire. The fire was lit in the front room only at Christmas and only for Grandad to read and perhaps snooze there. I also saw the Lincoln Repertory Company perform *A Christmas Carol* one Christmas in my teens.

'Business' cries Marley's Ghost. 'Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance and benevolence were all my business ... At this time of the rolling year' said the Spectre, 'I suffer most. Why did I walk through crowds of fellow beings with my eyes turned down and never raise them to that blessed Star which led the wise men to a poor abode? Were there no poor homes to which its light would have conducted me?' (Dickens ([1843] 2004) Dickens, Charles. [1834] 2004. *A Christmas Carol & Two Other Christmas Books*. London: CRW Publishing. [[Google Scholar](#)], 31)

So I remember being poor at Christmas, recognised as such by the receiving of the food parcel and presents. I remember the indignity that this state of poverty brought with it. And I remember performing actions and songs towards and about poverty, that allowed me power as a poor child, but also oddly positioned me as 'other' than poor. It is about this that I have found myself thinking about again this Christmas, as I reflect on the performance of *The House*.

With the poor and mean and lowly

Lived on earth our Saviour Holy.⁴⁴ From the well-known Christmas carol, 'Once in Royal David's City'. [View all notes](#)

Why should it be mean and low to be poor? Most poor people I know are very generous. They share what they have. They are far from mean. And why low? It is not a matter of height surely, but of status. But why should having little or not enough money mean you are of low status? Of course God becoming poor and little does help improve our status; but Joseph did have a good job actually. He was a skilled worker. A carpenter.

(la la) ... fell the snow that night

Though the frost was cruel

When a poor man came in sight

Gathering winter fuel ...

So good Christian men be sure

Wealth or rank possessing

Ye who first do bless the poor

Shall yourselves find blessing.⁵⁵ From the well-known Christmas carol, 'Good King Wenceslas'. View all notes

The point is, it seems, that if we are there, as poor children, to receive the good done to us, we will be a blessing or able to give a blessing to those who are already it may seem blessed with riches, but in fact lacking something: the gift of benevolence which our presence as those in need enables. Oh what a tangle! As Tiny Tim says at the end of *A Christmas Carol* 'God Bless Us Every-one'.

The point I took – perhaps still take – from the Christina Rossetti poem cited in the epigraph – was that, in some mysterious way, to be poor was, in this mysterious frame presented only at Christmas, to be THE BEST. Other people did not give of their whole selves, their innermost, truest, most loving part: their heart.

However, the rest of the time being poor was not the best. It was difficult and shameful and rather looked down on by other people, it seemed. Especially in Church. It made you hungry. I would do my best to pass exams and leave off being poor as soon as I possibly could. I would also keep on the lookout for 'those less fortunate than myself' who could be on the receiving end of my love and benevolence. I would never flaunt my benevolence however. School provided opportunities to perform and to raise money for charity whilst doing so, and to sell pictures of 'little black babies' via Sunny Smiles for charity: poor though we were, we were not abject African babies; we were white.⁶⁶ 'Sunny Smiles' was a charitable scheme prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s in the UK. Books of photographs of children in need were distributed via churches and charitable organisations, and children were encouraged to raise money for charity by exchanging photographs for a small donation. View all notes

No wonder Carran's performance of *The House* was difficult for me to respond to. I don't know whether my awareness of the *performance* of poverty – which, it seems to me, has always been required – is sharper now with the impact of sanctions and the increased prevalence of Food Banks in the UK, where the food parcels people can be given and the number of times they can be given them, is strictly regulated. People are driven to buy more and more presents for their children, to outdo or outperform one another in their present giving. But the young woman who put a photograph of her pile of presents for her children on Facebook this year was mercilessly trolled. Youth Projects all over Manchester are asking young people to write their CVs, to develop their CVs, to progress up the 'levels'. I regularly attend performances by The Men's Room (a Manchester arts and social care project highlighted elsewhere in Jenny's research) and have been glad to be an audience at events that I had thought of as non-stigmatising, as moving away from the stigma and vulnerability.⁷⁷ For more information see www.mroom.co.uk [Accessed 27 May 2016]. Also

see Batsleer, Janet and Hughes, Jenny. 2014. 'Looking from the other side of the street: youth, participation and the arts in the edgelands of urban Manchester.' In *Design in the Borderlands*, edited by Eleni Kalantidou and Tony Fry, 156–172. London & New York: Routledge. View all notes Carran's performance made me wonder about that. I've seen a good deal of Forum Theatre and related theatre practices used in the interests of improving services for those that need them. Like Christina Rossetti in her poem, this work often appears to give 'the poor' agency and voice and impact; and yet, dishearteningly, another generation of young people are raising the same issues about how they are treated by the services that are supposed to facilitate their care and development as were raised ten and twenty years ago. I think that this is because all too often it is the poor children who are invited to perform and not the service providers. And so the potential to create a shift in practice is undermined. Which is not to say that it is not a great joy and even perhaps a blessing to dance and sing and make merry. Is that Poor Theatre too?

Notes on contributor

Janet Batsleer has worked at the Manchester Metropolitan University for many years and has taught, written and published in the field of Youth and Community work, in support of the formation of critical and compassionate practitioners (or that was the idea!). She has undertaken a good deal of charitable work in the city of Manchester, especially as a member of the Board of Trustees at 42nd Street. She currently holds the position of Head of Centre for Childhood Youth, and Community in the Faculty