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0521817293 - Theatre and Empowerment: Community Drama on the World Stage

Edited by Richard Boon and Jane Plastow

Excerpt

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1 Introduction

RICHARD BOON AND JANE PLASTOW

Several years ago we published *Theatre Matters: Performance and Culture on the World Stage* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), a collection of essays which argued – forcibly, we hope – that ‘theatre, in a variety of forms and contexts, can make, and indeed has made, positive political and social interventions in a range of developing cultures across the world’. The present book rests squarely on the same conviction: to its contributors as well as to its editors, theatre *still* matters.

It matters in its power to bring together divided communities of different kinds (and in one case described here, perhaps to save a particular community from outright extinction) and to engage creatively, productively and meaningfully with a wide range of issues from extreme poverty to AIDS, violence, human rights, sexual, racial and political intolerance and the power of the state. As in the earlier book, diversity is celebrated. Material is drawn from a wide and varied geographical range: from Ethiopia and South Africa, from Bangladesh, Pakistan, India and Nepal, and from the British Isles, Italy and America. The inclusion of the three essays from the ‘developed’ world is important because it is our contention that the kinds of performance often referred to as ‘Theatre for Development’ (TfD) are by no means relevant only to the political South. It is assumed far too often that development is something which needs to be ‘done’ (economically and/or ideologically) to the South, whereas the West has already achieved some higher level of enlightenment. The essays in this book not only contest the notion that development can be ‘done to’ anyone, but also demonstrate how performance may be used in a plethora of ways to address issues of injustice,

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prejudice and cultural and economic poverty. Compare, for example, the work practised by Gerri Moriarty in Northern Ireland and by Bongani Linda in South Africa, work exploring similarly divided communities and taking place in the most difficult and even dangerous circumstances.

The writers commissioned for this book were asked essentially to describe and discuss their own experiences *in the field*. We brought no overarching theoretical agenda to the task of gathering material; nor did we insist that our contributors locate their work within particular theoretical traditions or paradigms. We do not for a moment underestimate the importance of theory, and indeed hope that the practices discussed here will contribute to the development of theoretical understanding, but this is not a book which seeks to describe 'practice-as-example-of-theory'. There are already a number of texts which seek to fulfil that particular function.¹ This is a 'ground-up' book, and what we have discovered is that while many of 'our' contributors (like Sanjoy Ganguly) have indeed seized upon a particular practitioner/theorist such as Augusto Boal as vitally important to the way they approach their work (and Boal's ideas recur throughout this book and across a wide range of kinds of practice), what has interested us more is the diversity of motivations, ideas, perspectives and approaches, and ways of describing and accounting for them, which can be incorporated into – and debated within – practice.

For example, in terms of political orientation, Ganguly began his work from a clear socialist perspective. Similarly, the socialist heritage of the Tuscan peasants played a key informing role in how their theatrical cooperative was formed. In South Africa it was armed political struggle which had a key influence on how Linda has trained his 'cultural combatants'. However, in each case political analysis *alone* has come to be seen as insufficient for meeting the needs of those to whom the work is addressed. ANC/Inkatha rivalries are seen as only further reinforced by those in search of political power bases, and in India Ganguly moves further and further away from the kind of overbearing political dogmatism which he sees as antipathetic to inclusive 'dialectical development'.

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Development theories can be similarly problematic. Sometimes this is apparently a question, as in Ethiopia, of different or competing discourses and jargons inhibiting understanding. But it is also the case that when theory is applied with insufficient understanding or, worse, when power bases – political, developmental, religious – feel themselves to be threatened, then the real problem of the subjugation of the rights and needs of already marginalised people arises: genuine participation from those whom such agencies claim to serve means that *all* involved must be open, flexible and willing continually to learn, and this can fundamentally undermine the status of the ‘expert’ and the authoritative institution. Ganguly expresses an understanding which we believe many in this field are feeling their way towards as a result of their participatory practice: ‘Experience constantly teaches us new lessons that institutional education cannot match.’

What unites the practices explored in this book is that they are all profoundly subversive of established power. They distrust, even abhor, dogma, and have the humility to realise that they have never achieved ‘truth’ but are always part of the profoundly stimulating and fundamentally human process of learning from their actors, participants and spectators.

Many of the practitioners speaking and described here did not come to community-based theatre from a theoretical, still less an academic, basis of understanding, or even from an arts background, though all have to varying extents borrowed from a range of empowerment-oriented discourses: socialism, Freirian development theory, Christianity, Schechner’s ideas on the roles of the arts, black liberation theory, Hinduism, and so on. A number have had to operate for many years in relative isolation, teasing out for themselves ideas of what makes empowering arts work, before they found kindred groups or bodies of useful, established theory. This can be a weakness: progress may be slow as dead ends are explored or wheels reinvented. But it is also a great strength, insofar as practices develop that uniquely reflect and are closely tailored to the cultures and needs of the communities they serve. What seems to us vital, and what unifies the diverse practices described here, is that by working directly with the

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disempowered, all those involved have been forced to question their sense of their *own* expertise or authority – in that sense, willingly to disempower themselves – in favour of more open-ended, democratic and meaningful learning processes.

What we present here are, we think, some of the most exciting and empowering experiments with community-based arts that we know of. There are bound to be many more, just as there are certainly plenty of examples of bad practice. The form has already been dogmatised by many who will argue at length over whether a particular project is ‘properly Boalian’ or, worse, who seek to use formulae to deliver TfD, dance or video that reinforces a ‘message’ decided upon by a government or development agency. If this book has any importance, it lies in encouraging resistance to such doctrinaire thinking in any area purporting to support the humanisation of humanity and the empowerment of marginalised people, wherever they are, and in demonstrating that this struggle goes on simultaneously in America and Africa, in Italy and Nepal. After all, no nation has yet got anywhere near liberating the full potential of its people.

Some aspects of the work describe art forms which are expanding as tools of rights and development practice. The increasingly sophisticated use of video and other, more modern technologies in some of the projects discussed (Michael MacMillan’s experiences with black youth in Britain, and Michael Etherton’s work with children’s rights in the Indian subcontinent, for example) reflects the use of forms which are rapidly being appropriated for community use. The use of dance as a developmental arts form is, however, still rare, at least in the context and on the scale described by Jane Plastow.

As we suggest above, this is a ‘ground-up’ book. We have also tried, where possible (and this is a further development of one of the themes of *Theatre Matters*), to address practice *from the inside*. Of the eight chapters which follow, five are written by practitioners who are directly involved in leading the work they describe and discuss. Their passion for the work, and the commitment they bring to it, are evident (and are shared in no small degree by those of our contributors who are not themselves practitioners). It is this which lends, at times, a deeply personal tone to the writing, a tendency we have

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encouraged the better to express the realities of involvement in the various projects described. What is also striking is the degree of self-questioning, self-criticism, doubt and ambivalence that characterises the way in which many of these figures practise: all, in different ways, are acutely conscious of the risks, problems and pitfalls involved in their work. Indeed, this is one of the things that makes them, we believe, *good* practitioners. It is also evident that, in many cases, engagement in performance practice which has sought in one way or another to transform the lives of individuals and their communities has also had the effect of transforming the lives of those leading that work. If TfD and its related forms are always in a real sense 'works in progress', then, for the practitioners involved, it is also true that (to borrow Michael MacMillan's words) the self, too, is a work in progress, and this casts a particular light on our understanding of what we mean by 'empowerment'.

Establishing just what *may* be meant by 'empowerment' is a – perhaps *the* – key question in this book. Who is being empowered by whom, and to what end? How can practitioners in the area prove that what they do *is* empowering? These are questions asked often, and quite legitimately, by project funders. Here arts practitioners concerned with notions of rights and empowerment can quickly find themselves in awkward, and at times confrontational, debate with both funders – government bodies, national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs and INGOs), United Nations organisations and well-meaning individuals – and with political states. In the experience of many who have been working in this area over the past twenty years or so, what funders usually want is issue-based theatre (preferably concerned with an issue of their choice) which is contained within closely defined parameters.

Theatre informing people about HIV/AIDS, for example, has been widely used in recent years in Africa. It is obviously essential that people understand the nature of the disease and the means of its transmission, and are urged to modify their lifestyles in order to stay healthy and inhibit its currently relentless progress. Stephanie Marlin-Curiel's essay on the work of Bongani Linda demonstrates for any who may yet need convincing how important this educational work is in

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places like South Africa, and Linda has been able to attract considerable funding for his AIDS plays. But Marlin-Curiel also makes it clear that the problem of HIV/AIDS is related to the massive incidence of rape and the pressure for young people to appear sexually active and attractive in the South African townships. This is in turn linked to the need to acquire status in material terms, in a context where South Africa's current economic conditions and political history militate against black rural and township youth having the opportunity to improve their lot through conventional means, and therefore turning to drugs and crime. Sex becomes a means for girls to acquire material goods in return for their favours, and for boys to assert their manhood. (The latter point finds an echo in Michael MacMillan's essay on young black British men who have swallowed the colonially induced myth that black men have especial sexual prowess, and who then feel that this becomes the only area where they can assert a sense of self-worth.)

The point is that 'issues' never exist in isolation. Yet this is how funders and governments appear to want to tackle them. Why?

First, because it is easier for accountancy purposes. We can count how many condoms are given out and demonstrate that 'x' number of people are therefore moving towards safe-sex practices; we can list how many wells have been dug, and tell the publics and states which back an aid programme that so many more thousand people now have access to clean water. This is increasingly a path being followed by NGOs and INGOs, which neatly categorise and delimit their particular areas of concern – health, gender, good governance, the environment and so on – because they do not wish to make themselves vulnerable to charges of woolly do-goodery, or being vague and 'scattergun' in approach. The perceived risk is that politicians and the public will not tolerate work that does not quickly show unambiguously quantifiable and concrete results. But we would argue that such a policy will only ever have limited impact. It may ameliorate dire living conditions, but it can never truly transform lives. The clearest example of the limitations of such an approach comes in Michael Etherton's essay on his work with Save the Children in the Indian sub-continent. Etherton is the only contributor who has worked as both

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practitioner and aid worker, but we see a beautiful illustration of the limited perspectives of even some of the most progressive agencies in the programme manager who throws up her hands in horror when a children's rights workshop identifies drug abuse as a key source of oppression in the children's lives. 'Oh no!' she says, 'Not drugs! Please not drugs! Save the Children won't allow us to tackle the drugs problem!' Yet drugs are key to a whole range of problems experienced by those whom Save the Children specifically dedicates itself to helping. The single-issue approach is exposed as an absurdity.

The second reason for the desire to ring-fence areas of concern and to fund only immediately and obviously related arts activities, is, we fear, to do with 'domestication': the desire to control people rather than to liberate communities and individuals. The process behind much of the arts work described in this book necessarily pushes people to think and to analyse. It also encourages the taking of space (literal and metaphorical) and the raising of self-esteem, so that participants come both to question the root causes of their problems and oppressions – a process that leads from the micro to the macro, and from the particular community to the wider polity – and to believe that they can take centre stage to give voice and expression to their understandings. In Jane Plastow's essay on the Adugna Community Dance Theatre in Ethiopia, a five-year project with street children is described wherein the young people concerned move from being huddled in corners, effectively obliterating themselves from view, to the point where one of them says he feels 'like God', creating art on stage in front of an audience. Gods are not notably humble. They believe they have a right to create, and what they seek to create may well conflict with the (at best) paternal and (at worst) dictatorial regimes run by organisations ranging from governments to the World Bank to churches and to (I)NGOs. Empowerment is to do not with the amelioration of oppression and poverty *per se*, but with the liberation of the human mind and spirit, and with the transformation of participants who see themselves – and are often seen by others – as subhuman, operating only at the level of seeking merely to exist, into conscious beings aware of and claiming voices and choices in how their lives will be lived.

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Such empowerment is challenging, difficult to quantify, and an ongoing process affecting facilitators, participants and audiences to varying degrees at various times. In many of the projects we see, it has resulted in improved material conditions for participants: for the people of Monticchiello in Italy, for the South African actors who have gained training and subsequent employment, for the Adugna dancers who now have a regular income (though the facilitators – Royston Muldoon in Ethiopia and Sanjoy Ganguly in India – often lose potential income themselves in pursuing community arts objectives). But instead of taking the usual economics-led line on development programmes, arts practitioners here find themselves following avenues of discovery which mean that they are searching ever more intently to understand the communities with which they work in ways that combine the personal, the political and the spiritual. Ganguly's movement from disaffected left-wing political activist to a man eschewing all absolute, doctrinaire ideologies and calling on not only political thought but also the Hindu scriptures he had scorned as reactionary when a young man is the clearest, yet not the only, example of this. Ultimately it seems to us that the various practitioners whose work is discussed in this book all have in common one central idea: that by enabling people to discover and value their own humanity, both individually and in relation to others, they seek to empower those involved to claim the status of creative, thinking beings who have agency over the shaping of their lives and those of their families and communities.

None of which is to suggest that practitioners always get it right. Not only are most projects dependent on external funders, they are also led by facilitators who are on their own journeys of exploration. We feel that one of the most fascinating and useful aspects of this book is the transparency offered by the writer-practitioners regarding the learning processes – processes which include failure – they experienced themselves through the work. The project Gerri Moriarty describes in Northern Ireland led to a cross-community play widely acclaimed by audiences and critics. But from her viewpoint as an insider and key participant, Moriarty criticises the varying perspectives of some of the writers and directors employed on

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the project who, she feels, compromised the confidence of the participants, and thus the potential achievement of the play, through their sometimes unsympathetic relations with aspects of the community theatre groups involved. She also wonders whether the group took enough risks, or whether it pulled back through fear of repercussions from pursuing some of the most difficult but real questions dividing Protestant and Catholic communities in sectarian Belfast. Moriarty concludes by suggesting that she would not again involve herself in a similar project, for all its ostensible success.

The Wedding was a one-off play, but in Italy and India we are given stories of theatrical ventures covering decades. The people of Monticchiello are certainly the theatre activists in this book who have evolved most 'organically', working exclusively from within their own extended community and for the most part without external subsidy. Yet even here we see the people of the village, after a number of years being led by an expatriate son, gently moving him aside as their increasing self-confidence allows them to challenge his apparently over-rosy view of their peasant heritage. Ganguly meanwhile offers a meditative essay that shows him continually reinventing himself in response to the challenges thrown up by those with whom he works and whom he seeks to serve. The theatre, and the humanity here, is always in a process of *becoming*. The process is dynamic, never static or 'achieved'.

Moreover, this kind of theatre is inherently not 'safe'. A number of contributors wrestle with what seem to us very interesting – and difficult – questions of what is 'safe' or 'unsafe' in this sort of work. At the literal level there are moments of absolute unsafety for the theatremakers. Linda sees members of his group shot at when they challenge the divide between ANC and Zulu Inkatha identities. Villanueva describes how marchers in the American Day of Mourning Procession clash with Pilgrim enactors in America. Etherton has to withdraw from a village where the sons of the ruling class threaten low-caste children who dare to question the status quo. Theatre that challenges power bases and identities founded on bigotry is never going to be allowed to develop without resistance. It asks questions that are too unsettling for those who only want old certainties

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reinforced, or those who see with horror that the poor might be about to claim their human rights. As Fanon and Freire, Boal and Brecht all argued, such direct action is at least a rehearsal for revolution.

There is another issue, however. Those of us involved in theatre that seeks to empower are often aware that even from the inside it is not always safe. When people start to explore and test their histories, their experiences, their beliefs and their emotions, they can become very vulnerable. In Northern Ireland Moriarty describes how pushing the boundaries between Protestant and Catholic identities led to violence between women participants. Linda has to ask his young actors to negotiate whether they feel 'safe' enough in themselves to declare their HIV status to audiences, and Ganguly describes how an actor is devastated when he finds that he has himself relapsed into the wife-beating practices that his theatre denounces. For all of us this theatre is likely to provoke inner turmoil, and for all of us there are likely to be moments when we have to decide how far such theatre is going to venture in challenging participants, audiences and the authorities. Even more problematically, we may have to decide who makes the decision. Claiming human rights is a very unsafe business; in the words of MacMillan, 'letting go of existing structures, however oppressive, is a risk'.

There is no one way, form or kind of content that is 'right' in making theatre for empowerment, though there are a host of 'wrong' ways. This book is written partly in the hope that someone in an aid or funding agency may read it, realise that to keep commissioning work of banal simplicity from undertrained young theatre groups is not good enough, and start agitating for an understanding of the potential and methodologies of arts in development and rights contexts. It also comes out of a rather rueful sense of despair we felt when a student from a 'developing' country recently solemnly recited to us the eight steps necessary in making effective theatre for development. Any arts process reducible to a simple and repeatable formula has to be wrong.

However, it is fascinating to note how much of the work described has the claiming of space as a central aspect of the form of the theatre. The dancers Royston Muldoon and Adam Benjamin and playwright and multi arts creator Michael MacMillan all talk about