



Participatory Drama for Gender Transformation

Overview of approaches and some initial ideas for the WEMAN process

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Introduction: Why Participatory Drama?

Many WEMAN partners have been involved in developing drama and theatre as a means of gender awareness-raising. This has usually been done by local theatre groups with varying degrees of audience participation. These have often been effective in raising awareness. But there remains a tendency for audiences to sit back and be entertained, and for the actors to retain control of the story. They have generally not been an integrated part of a change process or used as a catalytic moment which also helps build bonds between people to support each other in change.

Role plays are part of most capacity building and workshops, with issues and topics generally designed in advance by the facilitator but workshop participants then being in control of the story. These often have more potential for catalysing changes in attitude and behaviour as well as highlighting issues. But they can become flat and boring unless well designed, and the audience is limited to the workshop participants.

This short paper attempts to lay out a wider range of experiential possibilities based on different approaches to participatory theatre, clarify the issues in designing experiential processes and propose how they might be used for different purposes in a gender transformation process.

What is Participatory Drama? Overview of approaches

The term 'drama' comes from a Greek word meaning "action". It is commonly associated with theatre and 'actors'. In traditional theatre, performance is limited to a designated stage area and the action of the play unfolds without any interplay with audience members, who function as passive observers. But recent developments in participatory theatre have experimented with approaches where anyone can be an 'actor' and drama does not have to take place in a theatre. There are currently a range of approaches which are interlinked in different ways but also have rather distinct focuses as indicated in Box 1¹.

Many of these innovations have been made since the 1960s by the Brazilian theatre practitioner, Augusto Boal as part of his 'Theatre of the Oppressed' which was inspired by Paulo Freire and Antonio Gramsci's critique of cultural forms (See Box 1). Boal emphasizes that as much as we can, to prevent the isolation of the audience.

'The term "spectator" brands the participant to be less than human hence is necessary to humanize them, to restore them their capacity of action in all its fullness. They must also be a subject, an actor on equal plane with those accepted as actors, who in turn must also be spectators. This will eliminate any notions of the ruling class and the theatre solely portraying their ideals while the audience being the passive victims of those images. This way the spectators no longer delegates power to the characters either to think or act in their place. They free themselves; they think and act for themselves. Boal supports the idea that theatre is not revolutionary in itself but is rehearsal of revolution'. (Wardrip-Fruin, 352 quoted on Wikipedia)

¹ Much of the discussion is based on material on Wikipedia obtained through following links from 'Participatory Theatre', but also the author's own work writing a participatory theatre script on dementia for performance in UK.

Boal's ideas have been very influential in many countries. Boal's ideas were used by theatre groups in Mozambique after the end of the civil war in 1992 to explain the need for reconciliation and to discuss topics such as avoiding landmines, voting in the first democratic elections and the rights of peasants under the new land law. Alvim Cossa with the Mozambique Grupo de Teatro dos Oprimidos - Maputo (founded in 2001) presented plays such as (My Husband is in Denial) which discusses HIV/AIDS avoidance and treatment. This play is presented in public places - markets, schools and businesses - and the public is invited to attend and present their own solutions to the unequal power relations shown in the play. In India they are used in community theatre by Janasanskriti, Kolkatta and The Centre for Community Dialogue and Change in Bangaluru. In UK his ideas are used as part of management or diversity training to help participants imagine different responses and outcomes to common problems.

BOX 1: Theatre of the Oppressed

In the Theatre of the Oppressed, the audience becomes active, such that as "spect-actors" they explore, show, analyse and transform the reality in which they are living. In this process the actors or audience members can stop a performance, often a short scene in which a character is being oppressed in some way. The audience suggests different actions for the actors to carry out on-stage in an attempt to change the outcome of what they are seeing. The spect-actor attempts to overturn the oppression using some method unused by the actors, whilst the actors portraying the oppressors improvise to attempt to bring the production to its original, scripted ending. If the audience believes that the spect-actor's actions are too unrealistic to be utilized in reality, they may call out "magic!", and the spect-actor must modify their actions accordingly. If this spect-actor fails in overthrowing the oppression, the actor resumes their character, and continues the production until another spect-actor calls out "stop! or freeze!" and attempts a different method.

If and when the oppression has been overthrown by the spect-actors, the production changes again and the spect-actors now have the opportunity to replace the oppressors, and find new ways of challenging the oppressed character. In this way a more realistic depiction of the oppression can be made by the audience, who are often victims of the oppression. The whole process is designed to come to a conclusion through the consideration of opposing arguments, rather than where an argument is one-sided and pushed from the actors with no chance of reply or counter-argument.

Much of Augusto Boal's theatrical process requires a neutral party to be at the centre of proceedings. This individual is usually called the **Facilitator**, although in Boal's literature this role is referred to as the **Joker**, in reference to the neutrality of the Joker card in a deck of playing cards. In most cases, but not all, this would be a drama workshop leader. This person takes responsibility for the logistics of the process and ensures a fair proceeding, but must never comment upon or intervene in the content of the performance, as that is the province of the Spect-actors.

Source Boal, Augusto. 2000. Theatre of the Oppressed. 3rd ed. London: Pluto. ISBN 978-0745316574.

For Boal *theatre 'practice is not intended to show the correct path, but rather to discover all possible paths which may be further examined. The theatre itself is not revolutionary, instead a rehearsal of revolution. The spectators learn much more from the enactment even if done in a fictional manner, since it stimulates the practice of the art in reality. When encountered in reality with a similar situation they've rehearsed in theatre, forum theatre evokes a desire in people to be proactive since they feel much more prepared and confident in resolving the conflict. The practice of this form creates an uneasy sense of incompleteness that seeks fulfillment through real action'*. (Wardrip-Fruin, 346)

There are however a range of different approaches and techniques which have been developed by Boal and others under the broad umbrella of 'Theatre of the Oppressed' as summarised in Box 2.

BOX 2: Participatory Theatre: Forms and Variations

Forms of participatory theatre

Forum Theatre/Interactive Theatre: where the audience participate actively in the story and actors socialise with the audience. Participation ranges from supplying performance/story suggestions to the actors at specific points through to becoming full 'spect-actors' in the drama. Forum Theatre varies in the extent to which certain portions of the play are pre-written and exactly when, where and how the spect-actors determine what the fate of the actors will be. The spect-actors frequently join the play by adding themselves as new characters or replacing older characters and then interact with the actors to find a solution. As the major portion of the play is to be performed impromptu, forum theatre requires profound acting skills from the actors.

Community theatre : theatre made by, with, and for a community. It may refer to theatre that is made entirely by a community with no outside help, or to a collaboration between community members and professional theatre artists, or to performance made entirely by professionals that is addressed to a particular community. Community theatres range in size from small groups led by single individuals that perform in borrowed spaces to large permanent companies with well-equipped facilities of their own. Many community theatres are successful, non-profit businesses with a large active membership and, often, a full-time professional staff. Community theatre is often devised and may draw on popular theatrical forms, such as carnival, circus, and parades, as well as performance modes from commercial theatre. Community theatre is understood to contribute to the social capital of a community, insofar as it develops the skills, community spirit, and artistic sensibilities of those who participate, whether as producers or audience-members.

Legislative theatre : bringing stakeholders together : created by Boal when he was a city councilman to give his voters the opportunity to voice their opinions. The objective is to open up a dialogue between citizens and institutional entities so that there is a flow of power between both groups. Boal called this type of legislative process a "transitive democracy," which lies in between direct democracy (practiced in ancient Greece) and delegate democracy. It is similar to forum theatre; however, the subject of the production is based on a proposed law to be passed. Spect-actors may take the stage and express their opinions, thereby helping with the creation of new laws. Some 13 laws were created through legislative theatre during Boal's time in government. The technique has since been used overseas in countries including Canada and the United Kingdom.

Invisible Theatre : where ordinary places become theatres and passers-by are invited to become 'spect-actors' as they participate in and think about issues.

Image theatre: where people act out issues raised around concepts/situations - portraying thought in a concrete form without language – a type of charade. Each word has a denotation common for all as well as a connotation that is unique for each individual. For example different people have their own interpretation of "revolution", and demonstrating such idea provides a clearer understanding of their intention in definition when shown rather than told.

Analytical theatre: A story is told by one of the participants and immediately the actors improvise it. Afterward each character is broken down into their social roles and the participants are asked to choose a physical object to symbolize each role. For instance for one community the head of the symbol for the head of the family may be a wallet, since that individual is the one who controls the finances (power). Having analyzed the characters, a fresh attempt to tell the story is made, however this time removing some of the symbols from each character, and consequently some social roles as well. For example, the story would be perceived differently if the robber had the police uniform and the hostage possessed a revolver. Through this method, the participants will realize that human actions are not the exclusive and primitive result of human psychology: the individual speaks of their class as well. Similar processes can be devised using rituals and masks, or common proverbs and myths.

Newspaper theatre: A system of techniques devised to give the audience a way to transform daily news articles or any non-dramatic pieces to theatrical scene. The strategies are as follows

- *Simple Reading*: news item read, detached from the context of the newspaper (which makes it false or controversial).
- *Crossed Reading*: two news items are read in alternating form, complementing or contrasting each other in a new dimension.
- *Complementary Reading*: information generally omitted by the ruling class are added to the news.
- *Rhythmical Reading*: article is read to a rhythm (musical), so it acts as a critical "filter" of the news, revealing the true content initially concealed in the newspaper.
- *Parallel Action*: actors mimic the actions as the news is being read. One hears the news and watches its visual complement.
- *Improvisation*: news is improvised on stage to exploit all its variants and possibilities.
- *Historical*: data recurred from historical moments, events in other countries, or in social systems are added to the news.
- *Reinforcement*: article is read accompanied by songs, slides, or publicity materials.
- *Concretion of the Abstract*: abstract content in news is made concrete on stage, i.e. hunger, unemployment, etc.
- *Text out of Context*: news is presented out of context in which it was originally published.

Other prompts for similar activities might be photographs or video clips.

Introspective techniques: Rainbow of dreams/drama therapy: where people act out their wishes and desires, often as protagonist in relation to antagonist, in an attempt to resolve them helped by a facilitator or counsellor.

Participatory Drama for gender transformation in the WEMAN process: some possible adaptations

There are a range of ways in which these different approaches to participatory drama could be adapted specifically for gender transformation. To paraphrase the quote from Boal above:

'participatory drama is not intended to show the correct path, but rather to discover all possible paths which may be further examined. The drama itself is not gender transformative, instead a rehearsal of gender transformation. The spectators learn much more from the enactment even if done in a fictional manner, since it stimulates the practice of the art in reality. When encountered in reality with a similar situation they've rehearsed in drama, participatory drama evokes a desire in people to be proactive since they feel much more prepared and confident in resolving the conflict. The practice of this form creates an uneasy sense of incompleteness that seeks fulfillment through real action'.

The aim is not a polished theatre to raise awareness, but to directly engage participants in identifying and rehearsing changes, and new ways in which women and men can relate to each other, and new ways of addressing inequality. The various innovations potentially have a range of uses in the WEMAN process:

- Capacity-building workshops
- Multistakeholder negotiation
- Monitoring and Evaluation and Impact Assessment
- DisseminationCapacity-building workshops

Role Plays: Possible Steps

Step 1: Issues are identified through use of GALS Tools eg from the Gender Justice Diamond or from Visioning or examples of action fruits from the Challenge Action Tree. Possible examples would be relating to land, violence and other dimensions of CEDAW and to facilitation and peer training processes – what will participants do when they get home?

Step 2: Roles are then decided and allocated through voluntary or random methods – in some cases all participants will be actors, in others they will intervene as 'spect-actors'. In some cases there will be a gender swap with men playing women and women playing men, or swapping of other statuses eg rich/poor.

Step 3: At certain key points in the narrative there will be possibilities for audience intervention to pose questions, change the direction of the plot or explore possible solutions or endings. At other points the actors may be asked to change or swap roles.

Step 4: At the end there should be a process for strengthening the friendships and networks formed and deciding on concrete actions which will be taken. This could be for example through forming small groups to do a Challenge Action Tree or a Road Journey.

Mutli-stakeholder negotiation

Any of the above approaches can be used as part of multistakeholder negotiation:

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- Activities which encourage stakeholders to put themselves in the place of others and experience that position 'from the inside' eg in swapping roles of women and men
 - Activities which encourage stakeholders to envisage and change how they behave towards others and to practice these new behaviours
 - In some cases these activities could be done by stakeholder groups separately at first and then brought together as a collaborative drama involving all stakeholders

Monitoring and Evaluation

Combining drama with the Most Significant Changes methodology and the role play suggestions above, people could be asked to enact what they see as the most significant changes which they have seen in their lives. This could either be for themselves, or there could be a comparison of changes which people themselves have experienced compared with changes which others have perceived.

Dissemination

In place of the standard theatre for awareness-raising, participatory drama could use:

- the interactive techniques from the Theatre of the Oppressed, engaging the audience directly in the story.
- Invisible Theatre with people who have been through the previous processes then taking their ideas and drama to markets, streets or even local government meetings.

In designing these innovations there are some key questions which need to be considered – in particular ensuring that the outcomes are real changes in behaviour and networks for change, rather than just passive observation of outside actors.

BOX 3: Participatory Drama for Gender Transformation: Key questions

- **Who participates** – communities of people who know each other? Unsuspecting passers-by? People brought together because they have come to the theatre? Professional actors and writers?
- **What are the issues** and how are they chosen – by people themselves or by facilitators/actors/writers
- **When does participation take place** – what are the critical action points where participation will be most useful?
- **What form does participation take** – how far do participants control the action and decide the outcomes?
- **How far does the participation transform behaviours** and enact actual change and build communication and networks rather than just raise awareness? Are participants encouraged only to imagine change or to actually practise that change, reflect collectively on the suggestion, and thereby become empowered to generate social action.

EVERYONE NEEDS TO BE AN ACTOR AND HAVE FUN WITH CHANGE.

Resources and Further Reading

Augusto, Boal (1993). *Theater of the Oppressed*. New York: Theatre Communications Group. [ISBN 0930452496](#).

Wardrip-Fruin, Noah and Nick Montfort, eds. *The New Media Reader*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003. [ISBN 0-262-23227-8](#).

Wikipedia: *Theatre of the Oppressed*; *Participatory Theatre*; *Interactive Theatre* and links therein.

