

Participatory dramaturgy in theatre for development

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Abstract

This study is an inquiry in dramaturgy when analysed in a creative environment where participation and collaboration form the essence of the theatre. The paper focuses on the devising process in Theatre for Development (TfD). Most inquiries in TfD are often result-oriented, such that they tend to focus on “development”, thereby sidelining the importance of “theatre” which gives the practice its power and appeal. The paper argues that the devising process in TfD is an important stage which allows for participatory dramaturgy that is key to transformation. By looking at participatory dramaturgy in the TfD devising process, I seek to re-establish the theatre form as central to the process of transformation in TfD.

Introduction

Take a Theatre for Development (TfD) report from any of the leading practitioners in Malawi and you will notice that it will discuss the impact of the project’s initiative at length: in terms of numbers of people reached through its research and interventions and what type of development was achieved. If such a report discusses the theatre at all, it most probably will detail information about the performance event in terms of how many people attended and what they said in the post-performance interviews. Little or no attention is given to the performance itself in theatrical terms, let alone the devising stage, as an important part of the process of transformation in TfD.

This scenario is not unique to Malawi, however. Other African theatre scholars have expressed similar concerns elsewhere. Writing from a Zimbabwean TfD context, Kennedy Chinyowa questions the implications of “using theatre”. He argues that once the theatre is confined to an instrumental position *in* or *for* development, there is a tendency towards privileging the final outcome, over and above the means by which development was achieved, if at all (Chinyowa

2005: 57). Frances Harding also problematises the concept of “using theatre”. She reckons that “as well as recognising in itself ... [as] processes of communication, TfD may need to exploit more fully its identity as ‘theatre’ since much of its strength and attractiveness is the very fact that it is ‘creative’, ‘theatrical’, ‘dramatic’ and ‘spectacular’” (Harding 2002: 171).

In arguing for the “theatre” in Theatre for Development, my study is therefore a case for the form. Utilising previous knowledge in dramaturgy, the study explores how the devising process in TfD provides insights as to how “development” is realised through the theatre process. By looking at dramaturgy in the devising process, I seek to re-establish the theatre form as central to the process of transformation in TfD. The paper not only investigates play composition and structure, it also pays attention to the overall community structures and poses pertinent questions on research in TfD. I argue in this paper that the devising process in TfD is an important stage which allows for participatory dramaturgy that is key to transformation.

The next two sections of the paper will introduce the key terms; “Theatre for Development” and “dramaturgy”. These will be followed by a section on TfD models in Malawi and their potential for participatory dramaturgy. Finally, using an example of a TfD project I undertook in 2009 in the area of Group Village Headman Chopi, Traditional Authority Kuntumanji in Zomba, Southern Malawi, I will demonstrate the importance of the devising process in TfD and its potentials for transformation through participatory dramaturgy.

Theatre for Development

Theatre for Development has come to be widely accepted in Africa and other parts of the developing world as a theatre of the ordinary people used to address their own problems, in their own terms, from their own perspectives and from within their own art forms. It uses the indigenous performative forms of the people to define the aesthetics of its operation. TfD practice has been widespread since the 1970s in sub-Saharan Africa, the Indian subcontinent and Latin America (Abah 2002:159).

TfD in Malawi is believed to have mushroomed in the context of a re-orientation away from an elitist, towards a popular theatre, in the environment after Malawi gained its independence (See Kerr 1988, 1989 and 1993). From the late 1970s and the early 1980s, the Chancellor College Travelling Theatre was involved in

experiments in which drama was used as a tool for focusing on issues such as health, literacy, nutrition, urbanisation and agriculture.

There has been a wave of interest in Tfd by international organisations and non-governmental organisations since the early 1990s in Malawi. These organisations choose to use participatory theatre methods in bringing social change to developing nations. Malawi witnessed a rapid increase in such organizations especially after the change to a democratic system of government in 1993 (Manyozo 2002: 3). Tfd has undergone crucial developments since its initial take-off in Malawi. It is these developments that have allowed a discussion of participatory dramaturgy in Tfd in the present day.

Participatory dramaturgy in Tfd

The term “dramaturgy” is charged with a plethora of associations which have been accumulated from its historical and contemporary usage and practice. This is because over the years, dramaturgy has been used in different contexts: it has been defined as a profession, a set of tasks, and as a theory (Haedicke 2008: 125). Writing about dramaturgy in participatory contexts is even more problematic. Amongst the many definitions of dramaturgy is the view that dramaturgy is an “engagement in the actual practical process of structuring the theatre work’s composition” (Turner 2008: 4). This is similar to Michael Shanks and Mike Pearson’s description of dramaturgy as an “art of assemblage” in theatre (Pearson 2001: 55). Marco De Marinis, on the other hand, defines dramaturgy as “the set of techniques and theories governing the composition of signs/expressive means/actions which are woven together to create the texture of the performance” (De Marinis 1987: 100).

Two concepts have shaped my understanding of dramaturgy and my usage of the term in this paper. These concepts are “having dramaturgy” and “doing dramaturgy”. The notion of “having dramaturgy” is best understood when one dismembers “dramaturgy” from the “dramaturg”. The role of the dramaturg (which refers to a professional position within a theatre or opera company), as opposed to the concept of dramaturgy, has its roots in the practice of mainland European theatre, specifically that of Germany (Turner 2008: 7). The two terms, “dramaturgy” and “the dramaturg”, have become implicated together in their historical development. It is only when dramaturgy is de-linked from the dramaturg that one begins to comprehend the fact that, most non-Western performances do not have a “dramaturg” but *have* “dramaturgy” (Turner 2008:

3). As Cathy Turner argues, “[i]t is impossible for a play to be entirely without a dramaturgy any more than it can be without structure or compositional strategy” (Turner 2008: 4). Following this premise, the devised play at Chopi and all other TfD plays “have dramaturgy”: that is, structure or compositional strategy.

The notion of “doing dramaturgy”, on the other hand, is best understood as an *activity*. This understanding is in line with Susan Haedicke’s description of dramaturgy as “a creative and critical activity”. Haedicke argues that, as a creative and critical activity, dramaturgy existed as an essential part of the production process long before the term came into use, and that role remains the same today (Haedicke 1998: 125). Dramaturgy as “a creative and critical activity”, firstly suggests “an engagement in the actual practical process of structuring a work’s composition” (Turner 2008:4). Secondly, it suggests the reflective (*and reflexive*) analysis that accompanies this process.

The devising process of the TfD at Chopi serves as a good example here. Animateurs and local performers were collaboratively involved in a practical process of devising a piece to be performed to a larger audience. This process of devising in TfD was not guided by a professional dramaturg, instead both the animateurs and participants from the community, shared dramaturgical roles at different stages of the process. This act of sharing dramaturgical roles during the devising process is what I refer to as “doing dramaturgy”. It is in this “doing dramaturgy” that, through their individual experiences, participants of the devising process “feel a sense of having gained some intellectual, emotional and political control over their lives” (Harding 2002: 182).

As with all devising processes in theatre where the form, content as well as the roles within the creative team are not defined from the outset, the devising process in TfD demands a collaborative and collective process. As such, TfD demands participatory dramaturgy where, besides roles such as directing and acting, among others, the participants take on a variety of dramaturgical roles and tasks. The discussion on participatory dramaturgy in this paper, therefore, describes a set of dramaturgical tasks and roles in TfD rather than define who (should) take/s the roles and tasks.

Participatory dramaturgy also demands utmost participation from community members more than from the animateurs. Also writing from a participatory context, Susan Haedicke stresses that community-based dramaturgy places the authority for the artistic process primarily in the hands of the audience

community (Haedicke 1998: 127). The community plays a major role in formulating the what, the how, and the when of the process, often taking the lead in providing the stories from their own personal lives or the research within their own. “These stories, in the exact words of the teller, are then woven together... by the community itself, to narrate the life of the community.” It is also the community that finds the theatrical means of expression and re-forms themselves through that knowledge (Haedicke 1998: 127). This characteristic echoes the movement towards the “endogenisation” of Tfd, which recognises that the processes of empowerment and transformation are internal to the mechanisms of the community’s social structures.

But what is the role of the animateur/external interveners in this critical process? Haedicke asserts that the theatre practitioners (all other types of external interveners can be included here) do begin in a leadership role: acting as guides through the artistic process (Haedicke 1998). However, the dramaturgy and, in fact, the whole theatrical event belong to the community. In discussing the Tfd devising process, the paper will limit itself to the dramaturgical tasks associated with research, play development and rehearsals and the importance of these stages to “development” in Tfd.

Tfd models and participatory dramaturgy

Tfd has been categorised in three different models depending on the degree of engagement with the people. These models are: theatre *for* the people, theatre *with* the people, and theatre *by* the people. The potential for participatory dramaturgy in these models varies.

In theatre for the people animateurs assume control of the process. Research on the problem, its analysis, play development, performance and facilitation of post-performance discussions are done by animateurs. The main emphasis is on the presentation of a product, a ready-made play for consumption by the audiences such that the process puts more emphasis on the spectacle than the message and audience participation (Mwansa 2003: 11).

The beginnings of theatre *for* the people in Malawian Tfd lie in the experiments by the Chancellor College Travelling Theatre in the late 1970s and early 1980s. During these earliest experiments, the plays of the travelling theatre tended to be adaptations from established theatre canon such that throughout the 1970s, the University-led theatre had an elitist feel to it (Kerr 1998: 214). This was partly due to the almost exclusive use of the English language. Later on there

had been a major re-orientation from this elitist auteur drama, based upon European models and the English language, to a more people-oriented theatre using indigenous cultural forms, African languages and a collective workshop method of creativity (Kerr, 1998: 98).

Presently, the Creative Center for Community Mobilization, CRECCOM¹ uses this approach in some of its projects. CRECCOM recruits and trains TfD research assistants from Chancellor College, a constituent college of the University of Malawi, to collect data, analyze it and conduct sensitization and mobilize performances (CRECCOM: 5). Since the entire process of devising in this model is done by the external animateurs, the model leaves little room for participatory dramaturgy in the devising process. The model, nevertheless, relies on the performance event as a space for the dramaturgical interventions by the audience.

In the second model of TfD, theatre with the people, animateurs invite a select group of people to participate in the theatre devising process. Animateurs work jointly together with this select group, from the beginning to the end. Together they present the play to the community and facilitate discussions. Animateurs can also work with local theatre groups in this model. Animateurs inculcate group dynamics, social mobilization and theatre skills into the local groups and together with local groups they engage communities in the TfD process (Mwansa 2003: 12).

The TfD project I undertook at Chopi falls in this category. The project involved an animateur team that worked together with a mobilised group of local participants. Both the animateurs and the local participants underwent a process which required the shifting of roles such as: observer, researcher, dramaturg, spect-actor², and facilitator. Theatre with the people allows room for participatory dramaturgy in the devising process since the selected group from the community is included from the beginning to the end of the process. However, this depends on whether the group of community members take a leading role in the artistic process.

In the third, and last TfD model, theatre by the people, animateurs/experts from outside train a select group of artists drawn from the community. The trained group in turn organizes, performs and disseminates information. The role of animateurs is limited to that of trainers. Local groups identify and analyse problems, create and perform plays and conduct discussions under the guidance

of amateurs. In theatre by the people, the message is more important than the spectacle. Artists use minimal props and act more or less on empty stages and use their own physical and emotional resources to create spectacles that carry the message. At the end of the process, there is some plan for follow up to deal with identified solutions to the problems (Mwansa 2003: 12).

Most contemporary theatre companies/organisations use this method, following the wave of endogenisation in Tfd. For example, Nanzikambe Arts has developed a network of “activators” for its development projects in specific areas across the country. Nanzikambe project officers train community activators in theatre methods to become social-change actors based in their communities. It is these activators that form drama groups, conduct research, identify problems and devise plays for performance, while the trainers play a guiding and monitoring role. Theatre by the people allows room for participatory dramaturgy in the devising process since it involves utmost community participation from the research stage to rehearsals. The role of the amateurs in this case is to equip the activators-in-training, with skills in performing dramaturgical tasks during the devising process (among other skills).

Participatory dramaturgy in the Tfd devising process: the case of Chopi

The Tfd project I undertook at Chopi falls under the theatre *with* the people category. The amateur team comprised of six theatre practitioners; three male and three female (including the present author), who worked together with a mobilised group of ten local participants. The local participants were representative of the five villages under Group Village Headman Chopi, namely, Ngundende, Ibo, Chopi, Paulosi and Mang’anda. There were a number of dramaturgical roles and tasks in the Tfd devising process. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the dramaturgical tasks associated with research, play development, and rehearsals, in that order, to demonstrate the importance of the devising stage in Tfd and its potentials for transformation through participatory dramaturgy.

Research has historically been an essential dramaturgical task in theatre. However, it is the question of research approach that is the centre of this discussion. The research at Chopi drew from performance ethnography as a research methodology. Performance ethnography is a process-based and participatory research methodology for investigating an artistic medium that has close links with people’s lived experience (Chinyowa 2005: v). Performance

ethnography translates fieldwork experiences into performances among the researcher, artifacts from fieldwork, and audiences. The research at Chopi was conducted using different participatory methods such as informal discussions, homestead visits and interviews with the larger community.

The first task for the local participants of the devising process was the sharing of individual stories around common themes of oppression. One major concern that was brought forward was accessibility of education in the area. Besides the problem of distance between home and school, it was also uncovered that parents were required to pay a fee for their children's education despite the fact that Malawi has a free primary school education policy. After this initial discussion, both animators and local participants agreed to extend the research parameters to randomly-sampled homesteads in their villages, to understand how the communities experience this problem. The team, therefore, divided into smaller units of three (consisting of one animateur and two community members) for research into the five villages mentioned above.

This research approach was particularly fruitful to the TfD process. The community members heading the research units took the lead in initiating dialogue with their fellow community members during the homestead visits, inviting the home owners to contribute their personal experiences on the problem at hand. This ensured that community members took charge of the discussion and spoke up on issues that concern them at an early stage in the TfD process. Participatory dramaturgy created a space in which issues could be voiced out and discussed amongst community members in a conducive environment as the animateurs played a guiding role. Later on during the performance event, the community members were able to link their own contribution to the themes discussed and to participate in the discussion further as a synthesis of ideas and actions. Their spect-actor participation was thus an extended discussion through performance, on subjects which had already been introduced in their homes. The idea of copformance was at the centre of their community participation during the performance event. Co-performance has been defined as a collaborative process rather than the mere gathering of information (Denzin 2003: 72). The observer and the observed became co-performers in the performance event.

This approach is in contrast with TfD research approaches that encourage an "invader" or "top-down" approach to research. In the top-down approaches, the researcher takes a view from above the object of inquiry to empirically observe

and critically analyse the object from a distanced perspective (Conquergood 2009: 146). The sight of TfD research assistants moving door to door with lengthy pre-designed questionnaires in the communities is certainly reminiscent of this empirical research approach considering the fact that pen and paper are considered authoritative discourses in aural/oral cultures (Conquergood 2009: 146). The irony in this approach is that the animateurs expect community members to open up and take charge of the TfD process during the performance event, after sidelining their participation in the research process. TfD practitioners that use this top-down approach miss an important moment which nurtures community participation and ownership of the development process in the research stages of TfD.

With regard to play development and rehearsals in the Chopi TfD project, the animateurs and local performers were collaboratively involved in a practical process of devising a piece to be performed to a larger audience. Both the animateurs and participants from the community shared the role of the dramaturg at different stages of the process. The community, however, played a major role in providing the stories from their own personal lives on themes that were collectively established through research among themselves and in the community at large.

There was interplay between fiction and reality in one of the stories, with one of the characters modelled after an infamous teacher from the nearest school. The teacher was well-known for sending children back home for not paying a K70 fee meant for development at the school. Mai Jafali, a participant in the workshop, was first to narrate her encounters with the notorious teacher. Make Shakila, another participant, concurred with Mai Jafali and narrated how she had always been concerned by the school's demand for the K70 fee. Make Shakila narrated how three of her children didn't seat for their exams that year because she could not afford the fee. Mai Jafali questioned the fairness of the not-so-free primary education system as she explained her difficulties in sourcing the K70-K100 fee that was asked from the parents for each student, every term. Two more women informed the group that they were told that the fee was for developmental work at the school. The entire team responded sarcastically, arguing that they had not witnessed any improvements in the conditions at the school, not even the construction of toilets!

During the play rehearsals, the two women had the opportunity to rehearse for their real life predicament. Mai Jafali and Make Shakira, in this instance, had an opportunity to physically confront their make-believe oppressor in ways they never did in their lives, exploring alternative solutions to the problem. Although the play may not have provided immediate solutions to the problem (during this devising phase), the women are provided with a chance to rehearse their real life problem and to explore alternative options for gaining control over their problem.

Even though similar opportunities for the community to rehearse their real life situations arise during the performance event, the devising process in TfD provided a much more intimate laboratory atmosphere where community members developed life skills and a drive towards personal improvement in their lives. This affirms that the devising process in TfD is an important stage which allows for participatory dramaturgy that is key to transformation.

The personal narratives of the two women, Mai Jafali and Make Shakila, developed into a patch for the devised play. This narrative and other narratives shared by the community participants were woven together into one performance. Both the animateurs and community members were engaged in the practical process of structuring the assemblage of the play. However, the primary aim was not to create a complete piece. Rather, the final product was a skeletal frame which was constantly reworked on during the performance event, allowing the community members to experiment with different solutions to the problem at hand. Improvisations, adaptations, discussions and alterations were carried out through to the performance event as the community of spect-actors played a big role in structuring the work's composition.

While the community members took the lead in providing the stories and the means of communication, the animateurs performed a guiding role throughout the play development process. Besides keeping track of the progress of the devising process, animateurs assumed the dramaturgical task of the outside eye: someone overlooking the overall arc of the work. This is in contrast with TfD models that allow animateurs to "invade" the community, imposing predetermined ideals, models, and solutions; intending "to teach or to transmit or to give anything, but rather to learn, with the people, about the people's world" (Freire 1989: 181).

Nevertheless, the main dramaturgical task in TfD extends beyond the structures of the play towards societal structures in the community. A subtle moment that took place in the casting process at Chopi illustrates that participatory dramaturgy during the devising process could promote the subversion of societal structures. During the casting process, the facilitator informed the group that casting was to be done on voluntary basis. Make Shakira volunteered to “play a man” in the play. Conscious of the reality in their existing social order, the group denied her the opportunity to re-think the prevailing societal structures in the following conversation:

FACILITATOR: So, who will be husband and wife in the play?

WOMEN: You can choose from any of us.

FACILITATOR: Anyone can volunteer for the roles.

MAKE SHAKIRA: Really? Could anyone say ‘I’ll be man or woman?’

FACILITATOR: Yes of course. However we can also all agree who we want for a particular character.

MAKE SHAKIRA: I will be the man.

CHORUS OF WOMEN: No! WOMAN! (Laughter!) We already have the man.

MAKE SHAKIRA: Woman is it? Alright, I will be the woman.

FACILITATOR: Have we chosen the man already?

WOMAN: Don’t we have men here? Let them decide amongst themselves who the husband will be.

As a way of interpreting this moment of encounter and to demonstrate the richness of the moment in terms of its dramaturgic possibility, I will draw from Frances Harding’s notion of “fixed masterpiece” and Judith Butler’s gender performativity. Harding describes the “fixed masterpiece” as “that which is unresponsive to contemporary needs: structures that are fixed and unchanging” (Harding 2002: 171-191). According to Harding, the use of local forms of performance in TfD runs the risk of confirming the social stratification implicit in them, because it is often in them that the most important religious, political and economic relationships are articulate. TfD performances therefore, serve

to confirm the status quo because it leaves intact the most powerful forms unchallenged and unreformed (Harding 2002: 178).

On the other hand, Butler argues that gender is not a stable identity (Butler 1988: 519), that “one is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, *one does one’s body* and, indeed, one does one’s body differently from one’s contemporaries and from one’s embodied predecessors and successors as well” (Butler 1988: 521). From the dialogue above which occurred during the casting process, Make Shakira expresses her wish *NOT to do her gendered body* in the play, but rather “to do” (perform or enact) someone else’s gender by taking the male character. The theatre frame, according to scholars (Chinyowa and Butler), *should have* allowed her to “revise” rather than “copy” from the existing situation thereby creating a new frame of existence or “a restored behaviour” that act as a rehearsal for action (Chinyowa 2005: 238). Chinyowa argues that the meta-message, “this is play”, seeks to question the social order rather than to validate it.

Clearly no sense of freedom created within the play frame was experienced by Make Shakira, as she was not granted the opportunity to feel liberated from the fears, constraints and obligations of ordinary reality (Chinyowa 2005: vi). In short Make Shakira does not experience “play” as a metaxis; “the state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different autonomous worlds” (Boal qtd. in Chinyowa 2005: v). Rather, her body even within the theatre frame is conceived as firmly rooted in one world: the real world. TfD, in this instance, had maintained the “fixed masterpiece” and confirms the gender stratification implicit in it.

This example illustrates the opportunities for the transformation that could arise when participants of a TfD project assume dramaturgical roles that extend beyond the structures of the play. The example is one of the lessons from the project. The moment which arose when Make Shakira volunteered to play a man required a dramaturgical eye, that looks beyond the internal structures of the play to the overall social structures that perpetuate oppression. What dramaturgic possibilities would there be if Make Shakira had the freedom to “play” the man? The author can only speculate here, but chances are that Make Shakira would have experimented with alternative versions of her reality and that this experience could have been empowering for her. The rehearsal frame in the devising has the potential to allow for experimentation of alternative realities that are otherwise impossible in the participants real life or even the performance event.

Conclusion

The paper has defined participatory dramaturgy in Tfd as a dramaturgy that places the artistic process primarily in the hands of the community and where participants take on a variety of dramaturgical roles and tasks. The paper has also discussed at length, dramaturgical roles and tasks of the animateurs and community members in the devising process, focussing on the research, play development and rehearsals stages. Using the Tfd project at Chopi in 2009, the paper has illustrated that the devising process of Tfd allows the space (both literally and metaphorically) for the “transformations” that lead to development in Tfd for selected members of the community who take part in devising and ultimately an entire community. By looking at participatory dramaturgy in the Tfd devising process, the paper has re-established the theatre form as central to the process of transformation in Tfd.

Notes

1. CRECCOM is a Malawian NGO and a creative catalyst that empowers individuals and mobilizes communities so that they themselves ensure that their human rights are fulfilled. <http://www.creccom.org/>
2. The ‘spect-actor’ is a term created by Augusto Boal in Theatre of the oppressed to refer to the dual role of those involved in the process as both spectator and actor, as they both observe and create dramatic meaning and action in performance.
3. Nanzikambe is an Arts Development Organisation based in Blantyre, Malawi. It operates in Malawi and the region to produce and tour innovative theatre, and to use theatre for education, development and social change. <http://nanzikambearts.org/>

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