

From Passive Spectatorship to Critical Citizenship: Towards a Paradigm Shift for Community-based Theatre Practice in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The practice of community-based theatre in Zimbabwe has tended to be dominated by a top-down development model that seeks to promote passive spectatorship. This article examines the major trends in Zimbabwean community-based theatre beginning with *pungwe* theatre during the liberation struggle, through the post-independence transitional period up to the present. The article argues that the Zimbabwe Association for Community Theatre (ZACT) left a legacy of theatre practice in which individual artists and their theatre groups continue to promote passive recipients of messages rather than active citizens, who can think, feel and act for themselves. The article opts for the integration of community-based theatre with Boal's *forum* theatre to create dialogue, reciprocity and praxis – all designed to transform passive spectatorship into critical citizenship.

Introduction

Helen Nicholson (2005:20) describes citizenship education as the capacity to deal with people's apathy, stimulate debate, promote awareness and encourage political literacy and competence. In the case of community-based theatre practice, citizenship education would involve the collective exploration of ideas, values, beliefs, feelings and actions. Such education provides the space in which individuals, the community and society can be reshaped, reconstructed and revitalized through the creative imagination of concerned citizens. This paper focuses on contemporary community-based theatre practice in Zimbabwe and seeks to examine how such a theatre can develop a renewed concept of critical, if not radical citizen-

ship. The paper takes off from the premise that the current practice of 'taking theatre to the people' rather than 'making theatre with the people' has tended to promote a passive rather than active citizenship.

To a large extent, community-based theatre practice in Zimbabwe has played a limited role in promoting active citizenship for various reasons. The theatre has been used as a tool for promoting the dominant discourse of Western neo-liberal ideology through the agency of donor funding. As Paul Treanor points out, neo-liberalism is not just an economic structure but it is also a philosophy based on the 'market metaphor' (2005: 8). If applied to Western donor funding, for instance, neo-liberal policy would relate to local communities in terms of market driven transactions. The donor agency and theatre practitioner treats the community as 'an entrepreneur selling a product' (Treanor, 2005:9). The social transaction tends to become market based due to the donor-driven economic approach. More often than not, such a dominant discourse has resulted in the continuation of the top-down development model that has tended to promote passive spectatorship. In such an 'outside-in' model, most decisions are often made from outside the community in question. Such decisions will not be effective in changing established attitudes, beliefs and practices. The target community feels as if the externally driven interventions are being imposed upon them. Thus as a development strategy, the top-down approach underestimates the target community's ability to shape their own destiny. The community remains passive since it feels manipulated by an exogenous approach that lacks dialogue, reciprocity and feedback, what Nicholson calls, "participant citizenship" (2005:23) - where the community contributes to the process of social and political change as active citizens. The question to be asked is: *How can community-based theatre encourage people to become active citizens rather than passive spectators?*

Pungwe Theatre and the Zimbabwe Association for Community Theatre (ZACT)

Pungwe Theatre

To answer the above-mentioned question, one has to begin with an examination of how community-based theatre began in the country in order to see where things might have gone wrong. *Pungwe* theatre - the all-night theatrical performances that villagers and guerillas engaged in during the national liberation struggle (1966-79) - should be regarded as the starting point for community-based theatre activity in Zimbabwe. As Eugene van Erven has argued in his book, *The Playful Revolution* (1992), it

is by exercising the ability to think *for* and act *by* themselves that a people are able to resist and fight against oppression. *Pungwe* theatre enabled the oppressed masses of Zimbabwe to replace a culture of silence with a culture of liberation. This culture of silence was inimical to Oga Abah's description of 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" (2002:159). Using the example of the Mau Mau liberation struggle in Kenya, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) also explains that it is when people are involved in the active work of resisting an oppressive system and building a liberated one that they begin to see themselves. They are re-born during the process of releasing their creative energy through imagination and action. Likewise, through *pungwe* theatre, the armed liberation struggle became a rehearsal for freedom and democracy, a means of questioning the colonial system, a display of people's responsibility in shaping their own history and a conscious awareness of the need to strive for social justice, human dignity, self-respect and equal opportunity. In other words, the *pungwe* enabled the masses to become aware of their oppressed condition through collective participation in theatrical performances that mobilised them for action against the colonial regime.

Pungwe theatre made use of local cultural performances such as *bira* (ancestral thanksgiving ceremony), *ngondo* (war dances), *ngano* (storytelling), *nheketero* (oral poetry) and *dzimbo* (songs). Although colonialism and missionary Christianity had tried to suppress these indigenous modes of expression, the cultural forms managed to survive by employing different strategies of resistance. For instance, the *bira*, as an ancestral thanksgiving ceremony, was and is still regarded as a process of communal healing. It allows believers to dialogue with their departed ancestors through spirit mediumship. The power of such rituals as the *bira* ceremony lies in how they can make participants believe that their ancestors are living among them. Since ancestral religion forms the basis of most African people's spiritual values and beliefs, it was not surprising that during the liberation struggle, freedom fighters took advantage of the *bira* and transformed it into the *pungwe*. By virtue of its ritual origins, the *pungwe* became a powerful weapon for mobilizing and educating peasants and workers about the aims of the liberation struggle.

Like the *bira* ceremony, the *pungwe* became a long communal journey through the night. It was a highly participatory and spontaneous celebration spiced with political indoctrination, nationalist sloganeering and cultural renewal. By means of performance, feelings of solidarity, courage and determination were instilled into the hearts and minds of villagers as they 'united' with their heroic ancestors against the colonial regime. More

often than not, *pungwe* theatre was accompanied by war dances such as *kongonya* and *toyi toyi*. Such dances were an enactment of what the people desired to happen during the struggle for liberation. Thus the *pungwe* provided a forum for people's involvement in the shaping of their history. In fact, Alec Pongweni (1982) has gone as far as to assert that it was the songs that were sung during *pungwe* that won the liberation struggle. *Pungwe* awakened the people's inner craving for self-determination and political freedom. The demands of the Second *Chimurenga* required an ongoing dialogue with and active participation of the masses. Long speeches could turn the masses off, but when they became the major actors of the event, their interest and support increased. The *pungwe* skits, songs, dances and poetry served to convey the spirit of the revolution as villagers and freedom fighters acted out their political commitments and aspirations.

As a precedent for community-based theatre, *pungwe* laid a solid foundation for an alternative mode of communication that involved the oppressed masses in removing conditions that were responsible for their oppression. The masses themselves were directly involved in the making of a 'poetics of the oppressed' (Boal, 1979). They assumed the role of protagonists fighting against the existing colonial system, trying out alternative solutions and deciding plans for action. *Pungwe* theatre may not have been the revolution itself but, in Boal's view, "it (was) surely a rehearsal for the revolution" (1979:122). According to T. H. Marshall's (1964) classification, *pungwe* theatre would fit into three categories of citizenship, namely:

- Civil citizenship – concerned with fighting for individual liberty, freedom of expression and social justice
- Political citizenship – involves people's participation in the exercise of political power
- Social citizenship – provides social welfare such as the right to education and fulfils the needs of the disadvantaged and marginalised.

Although Marshall's concept of citizenship involves these three categories, one cannot rule out economic citizenship as the masses were not only fighting against an oppressive political system but also the exploitation of their labour and access to economic opportunity. For these reasons, *pungwe* theatre can be considered as a form of active citizenship, where the people united to forge a collective sense of identity as citizens struggling for their rights.

The Zimbabwe Association of Community Theatre (ZACT)

The actual transition from *pungwe* theatre to community-based theatre practice should be attributed to the work of the national theatre association that came to be called the Zimbabwe Association of Community Theatre (ZACT). From an interview with the Kenyan adult educator, Ngugi wa Mirii, who was one of the founding members and executive artistic director for ZACT, the association was born out of a combination of forces that ultimately led to its paralysis.

The attainment of Zimbabwe's political independence in April 1980 ushered in a new era that called for national reconstruction and cultural transformation. The new black government wanted to continue with socialist ideals that had been adopted during the time of the liberation struggle (1966-79). The new Minister of Education, Dzingai Mutumbuka, sought to revitalize culture, in particular to adapt the *pungwe* as a way of mobilizing the people for what became known as Education with Production. The *pungwe* had enabled the guerillas to concretize the ideology of socialism as a means of transferring political power to the people. Likewise, Mutumbuka saw the *pungwe* as a starting point for communicating government policies on national reconstruction. In January 1981, his ministry decided to form a semi-autonomous organization called the Zimbabwe Foundation for Education with Production (ZIMFEP) whose task was to launch educational experiments that would link theory and practice, mental and manual labour, schooling and the needs of society.

This was the same period that the Kamiriithu community in Kenya was at the peak of success with its community theatre experiment. The Zimbabwean government had heard glowing reports of how the Kamiriithu theatre project was engaging peasants and workers to address their social and economic development. The government then decided to invite the leading organizers of Kamiriithu, namely Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Kimani Geacu, Micere Mugo and Ngugi wa Mirii, to come and share their experiences. As Ngugi wa Mirii explained in an interview:

First of all, I want to say that when I came to Zimbabwe from Kenya in 1980, it was as a result of the newly independent government, the Zimbabwean society and the ruling party that requested support to develop community theatre. Or to put it correctly, they wanted experts in the area of community theatre to facilitate and help to integrate the performing arts in development activities, to conscientize the people to continue understanding their role and place in participating in development, to participate in the social change that independence had ushered in. The second thing they wanted was to continue with the African performing

arts in Zimbabwe, the way they were done before colonialism, during the struggle for independence and after colonialism (Interview with Ngugi wa Mirii, Harare, 12 February, 2003).

Since Ngugi wa Thiong'o had been detained and the Kamiriithu Community and Educational Cultural Centre (KCEC) destroyed by Kenyan authorities, wa Mirii, Gecau and Mugo ended up in exile in the newly independent nation of Zimbabwe and began to work under the government-sponsored ZIMFEP. By September 1982, they had managed to launch the Community-Based Theatre Project (CBTP) whose nationwide theatre training workshops necessitated the formation of ZACT in 1988.

On the question of what he regards as the best model for community-based theatre, Ngugi wa Mirii, in his capacity as artistic director of the national umbrella organization, ZACT, explained as follows:

Community theatre is where the community itself is engaged, it's involved and it's participating. In that way it becomes true community theatre because they are dreaming it themselves, they are the creators, they participate and act it with their own colleagues, they critique it and it becomes a continuous process. When it comes to that level, they call it community theatre because now it's liberating and communicating to everybody. Everybody is there and getting involved. That's what we did at Kamiriithu where we were working in and with the community, they acting in the plays, performing to their own people, at their own time, controlling and deciding what was right. (Interview with wa Mirii, Harare, 12 February, 2003).

In theory, Ngugi wa Mirii's approach sounds laudable because it fits into T. H. Marshall's category of active social citizenship. But in practice, the ZACT tradition tends to emphasize the training of individual artists rather than the mobilization of the community. Most of ZACT's work falls within the 'taking theatre *to* the people' tradition which makes it an exogenous or top-down development approach. Far from being the kind of 'true community theatre' that Ngugi wa Mirii describes in the interview, ZACT left a legacy in which artists prepare their own script, rehearse it *by* and *for* themselves, then look for a donor, if they have not yet been commissioned, and finally take the play to the people. In the ZACT tradition, individual artists and their theatre groups take the lead in deciding what the community needs in terms of education, development and transformation. The community remains passive recipients of mes-

sages rather than active citizens, who can think, feel and act for themselves.

At present, ZACT seems to have folded with the passing away of Ngugi wa Mirii in 2007. By that time, the umbrella association no longer enjoyed the popularity that it had during the 1980s and 1990s. Although Ngugi had plans for ZACT's revival by venturing into filming and broadcasting, relying less on donor funding and transforming the organisation from an association into a trust, the infrastructure that used to hold it together had almost fallen apart. At the time of the interview, Ngugi was running the association by himself. With the rising political and economic crisis in the country, the lack of a national cultural policy, the absence of government and donor support, the apparent mismanagement and misappropriation of funds, and the splintering of members to form independent community theatre groups, the prospects for ZACT's recovery were not encouraging. If citizenship is a dynamic social practice, an identity that is constructed through active participation and identification with others, the ZACT tradition left much to be desired in terms of developing critical citizenship.

Forum Theatre as an Alternative

Citizenship does not only refer to an individual's entitlement to legal rights and obligations, but also implies a set of social practices. Such practices indicate how citizenship can be regarded as a social construct dependent on historical circumstances and cultural contexts. If citizenship is a social construct subject to processes of negotiation and renegotiation, it is possible to shift such a construct from one state to another. As Nicholson (2005:36) has noted, the place of theatre in the construction of an active, participant citizenship lies in experiencing or embodying different social or political dilemmas, narratives and perspectives.

In this section, I want to argue that Augusto Boal's theatre of the oppressed (1979), in particular forum theatre, can be integrated and enhanced with community-based theatre practice to create a more engaged and critical citizenship within the contemporary Zimbabwean context. Following in the footsteps of his fellow Brazilian colleague and mentor, Paulo Freire, Boal formulated a series of theatre strategies such as image theatre, forum theatre, legislative theatre, invisible theatre, newspaper theatre and the rainbow of desire that he collectively called Theatre of the Oppressed (TO). Most of these strategies are based on Freire's (1970) principles of dialogue, interaction, problem-posing, problem-solving, critical awareness and reflection – all designed to enable spectators to

contribute in the making of their own history. For Boal, the defining moment took place during one of his theatre performances when a woman in the audience became so outraged by actors who could not understand her suggestions. The woman came onto the stage and acted out what she meant. From that day, Boal was convinced that spectators were not passive beings but active agents capable of changing the outcome of the dramatic action.

Boal's forum theatre may be compared to what takes place in the traditional African village when people gather in an open space under a large tree or other semi-enclosure. This open space, called *dare* among the Shona speaking people, acts as the nerve centre for the African communal philosophy of *unhu* or *ubuntu* (humanism). It is at the *dare* that court sessions are held, stories are told, drums are beaten, and songs and dances are performed. For most African people the open space is where culture is produced, protected and celebrated. The essence of being human is closely associated with what happens at the *dare*, regarded as the place where moral values, beliefs and attitudes are shaped and imparted. More importantly, however, is the fact that most problems facing the people are discussed and deliberated at the *dare*, thereby making it a forum for resolving people's problems.

Boal (1979, 1992) appears to have had a similar idea like the *dare* in mind when he came up with the notion of Forum Theatre. The purpose of forum theatre is to create a public space where people can express their ideas, feelings and concerns on problematic issues through dramatic action. The main character, or protagonist, will be faced with an oppression/dilemma, analyses his/her problems and takes action to change the situation. The spectators will collectively debate the problems confronting the protagonist, which are being caused by the opposing characters, or antagonists. The spectators take part in helping to solve the problems of the protagonist. In the process, both the main character and the spectators will be training themselves on how to break the oppression caused by the antagonists who represent the oppressor. In a way, forum theatre encourages critical thinking on the part of spectators and leads them to a renewed sense of personal and collective responsibility that can motivate them to take action in real life. Because the spectators play the dual role of being 'spectators' who also 'act', Boal (1979) has described them as 'spect-actors'.

The ultimate goal of forum theatre, therefore, is to encourage autonomous expression of ideas, to set a process in motion, to stimulate a theatrical debate, to change spectators into active participants who can change oppression into liberation. Boal (1995:245) has described forum theatre as the initiator of changes, the culmination of which is not the

aesthetic phenomenon but real life. In other words, the focus is not so much on the artistic form but on exploring the ways and means of breaking the oppression. The forum facilitator, or joker, acts as an intermediary between the actors, spect-actors and audience. The joker can be regarded as the playwright whose task is to lead audience members in critically analyzing the structures of oppression and to intervene in the process of rehearsing for action in real life.

It is not the purpose of this paper to delve into further details on the structure and content of forum theatre but rather to find out whether it has the capacity to enable the audience to become critical citizens instead of passive spectators. Boal's codification of the 'spect-actor' is that of a creative subject who can look at the world and act in it at the same time. In his own words, Boal explains the characteristics of the spect-actor as follows:

Spectator is a bad word! The spectator ... must be a subject, an actor on an equal plane with those generally accepted as actors, who must also be spectators. All these experiments of a people's theatre have the same objectives – the liberation of the spectator, on whom (the) theatre has imposed finished visions of the world. ... The spectators in the people's theatre ... cannot go on being passive victims of that theatre (1979:155)

The Boalian 'spect-actor', as an audience-turned-actor, possesses a creative vision of the world, an active imagination which has been lost to the passive spectator. The purpose of forum theatre, therefore, is to humanize the spectator, to restore his/her capacity for action, to discard his/her uncritical encounter with theatre as a finished product. Once freed from passivity through the liberating power of the theatre, the spect-actor's renewed self-knowledge will enable him/her to act against the forces of oppression.

Implications for Community-based Theatre

Can forum theatre enable the audience to become critical citizens? Such questions have been asked by critics who doubt the efficacy of forum theatre. While some have viewed Boal's separation of the oppressor and the oppressed as artificial (Burton, 2006), others have criticized him for individualizing social change through the self-liberation of the spect-actor (O'Sullivan, 2001). But, in spite of these criticisms, Boal's forum theatre has continued to appeal to those who believe in the essential goodness of human nature, that it is the social and political system that dehumanizes the individual rather than personal prerogative. Because forum theatre

depends so much on context, some practitioners have opted to integrate it with other modes of theatre such as process drama (O'Toole, Burton and Plunkett, 2005). In African contexts, for example, forum theatre has been integrated with 'folk media' forms such as storytelling, song, dance and ritual to deepen the exploration of ideas and avoid the superficial portrayal of oppression.

The efficacy of forum theatre, its capacity to develop an active citizenship, has positive implications for community-based theatre practice, especially protest theatre, in various ways:

- (i) Since change rarely takes place through intellectual argument or physical force, forum theatre creates space for spect-actors to cross the border from knowledge to action, from objects to subjects, and from personal to collective consciousness.
- (ii) The combination of critical thinking with practical intervention enables spect-actors to explore sensitive political realities through the safety of personal stories.
- (iii) The actions of spect-actors demonstrate how the act of transforming not only transforms the one who acts but also the one who decides to be the change he/she wants to see in the world.
- (iv) While real change can be hard to realize in the short term, spect-actors become aware that many problems have solutions, and difficult situations can be changed even if people may not be easily changeable.

Thus forum theatre has the potential to expose and unpack oppressive social structures and hierarchies by using the agency of the spect-actor to encourage active citizenship. As Boal (1979) himself once argued, if the oppressed can perform an action, rather than the artist in their place, the performance of that action in theatrical fiction will enable them to activate themselves to perform similar actions in real life.

Conclusion

There is need for a paradigm shift if theatre practitioners truly believe in transforming community-based theatre into an authentic practice that will enable communities to 'dream' the impossible and make it come true, rather than a tool or instrument of donor patronage, political propaganda and popular entertainment. As demonstrated in this paper, the spontaneous and participatory precedent laid by *pungwe* theatre during the liberation struggle may be regarded as a pioneering model for active citizenship education.

However, the persistent culture of 'taking theatre to the people' that began with the ZACT tradition has tended to reinforce a 'top-down' development paradigm that creates passive spectatorship. An integrated theatre model that combines community-based theatre with more interactive theatre strategies such as forum theatre will be a progressive step towards 'making theatre with the people'. By creating a forum for the collective exploration of ideas, values and beliefs, the integration of forum theatre with community-based theatre can create an active, participant and critical citizenship.

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