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Children and Theatre of the Oppressed

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The collaborative power of people coming together as a community is one of the most important methods of creating social change due to its wide base and appeal. One method of bringing groups together is to stage performances that are political, allegorical, or philosophical in nature, and can act as a form of strategic nonviolent action. Many artists around the world have followed this path to create a better, more humane world. Artists take on a second identity as activists and integrate their artwork with their morality to become actor-activists. This concept can also be applied to children who are just discovering their own potential in all aspects of life.

Childhood is a time of exploration free from judgement, a time to experiment without commitment or limitations. Children who are introduced to the arts and given the opportunity to express themselves at a young age grow up to be more confident, creative, and innovative, in addition to becoming stronger leaders. Theatre in the context of social justice is important because it is a tool that can positively influence a child's development while introducing the child to different social issues that foster engagement in critical thinking. Children are involved in creating a just and humane world, empowering them to better their lives and the lives of those around them. This paper will describe the theory behind using drama as a method of social change, and will document the author's efforts to put theory

A true actor-activist immerses herself in the community with which she is working, living with the community to partake of similar experiences and gain an understanding of what it is like to see things from a different perspective. This also helps foster a relationship of trust between the actor-activist and the community because the actor-activist shares the same vulnerabilities as the community. Trust is necessary and extremely important throughout the art process because it encourages openness and establishes a safe space where no one involved feels at risk, and everyone can be honest. The sooner trust is established, the sooner the process can be used to identify the root causes of injustice.

Theatre of the Oppressed is an example of an organization that strives to identify the roots of injustice and create meaningful artwork to encourage peace. It was started by Augusto Boal in Brazil in 1971, and since then has grown to encompass many subcategories including *Image Theatre*, *Forum Theatre*, and *Legislative Theatre*, among others. These practices are always evolving, one form giving birth to the next through experimentation and revisions. For example, Forum Theatre asks the audience to become spect-actors who, after the seeing the performance one time through, can stop the performance, replace one of the actors onstage, and change the performance itself. This empowers the audience, allowing them to identify the cause of problems or illuminate a previously obscure opportunity. Forum Theatre gave way to Legislative Theatre, which takes the process a step further by writing a new law, or changing a current one, based on the performance process. These laws are then presented to government officials to creatively showcase the public's opinion on a specific issue. The process of Legislative Theatre can be adopted by different organizations and communities to increase participation in community decision making, and it increases the likelihood that legislation reflects the desires of the community at-large. It empowers ordinary people to make change as a community through art.

Theatre of the Oppressed has roots in many different practices of theater from different points in history. In West Africa, two forms of theater emerged in the 1920's as methods to resist colonialism: Concert Party from Ghana and Yoruba Opera from Nigeria. Concert Party combined the traditional Ghanaian theater traditions with the colonial theater form to educate the illiterate on national and social issues. Each production was performed throughout the country and depicted contemporary issues in Ghana from the view of a Ghanaian playwright. Through this process, the performances helped communities press the government to support local development issues. The Yoruba Opera of south-west Nigeria had a similar effect on collective mobilization. This style of performance uses miming and musical folklore to create characters whose experiences are similar to those of people in everyday Nigeria. Yoruba Opera also has some Christian influences, including ritual prayers, in the performances as part of a larger system of African separatist churches which worked to end colonialism. This increased their collective sense of community and strengthened the support of the Yoruba Opera form. During a period when governments were not representing the interests of the governed, the people found an alternative way to express their need for change, and gained popular support to resist colonialism.

Theater was also an important factor in resistance to apartheid in South Africa. Because the white minority population dominated the main forms of commercial theater, smaller, popular theater movements started to pop up to meet the needs of the majority. Township Musicals gained popularity, giving the people living in overcrowded shanty-towns the opportunity to raise questions of poverty, inequality, discrimination, and safety to the government through their performances. These musicals fought against the ongoing tradition of producing shows that were funded, written, and directed by whites. Even though these shows were managed by white South Africans, they usually featured an all black cast in an attempt to appear to be popular theater. This practice exploited black talent so that the whites could make money. In South African history, theater has been seen more as an entrepreneurial opportunity than a way to bring people together for political causes and community empowerment. This is exhibited by the high proportion of black Africans who start a theater company and then find themselves the sole fundraiser, writer, director, set designer, stage manager, light designer and sound designer. Township Musicals broke from this tradition and viewed theater as more than an economic opportunity. This occurred hand-in-hand with the rise of the Black Consciousness movement in the 1960's, which was similar to the concurrent Black Power Movement in the United States. Black Consciousness sought to value the pre-colonial African theater traditions and put them back on stage for avowedly political purposes.

In Uganda, theater has also been used as a mechanism to reclaim the cultural identity of Ugandans from the legacy of colonialism. The National Theatre Company in Kampala was originally run by the white

colonial minority of the country but has since transformed into a space for all Ugandans. However, performances at the National Theatre represent the utopia which Uganda could become rather than an accurate depiction of life as it exists. While colonizing Uganda, the British combined four separate kingdoms with different traditions, languages, and customs to make the country as it is known today. To this day, there are still divisions based on different kingdoms, religions, and regions of the country. Much of the divide is due to British favoritism, especially towards the Buganda kingdom which is centered on the fertile western shores of Lake Victoria. During Uganda's time as a British protectorate, the ruling structure of the Buganda was used as a mechanism of indirect rule over the entire colony. This magnified regional divides and made the other kingdoms resentful of the Buganda. Regional differences continue to this day, manifested in political divisions that still roil the country. Many politicians favor their own people and direct resources to their own kingdom. This has led to widespread political corruption, violence, and discrimination. Ugandan actor-activists have responded by creating new works to directly address these issues, such as Okello Kelo Sam's *Forged in Fire* and Alex Mukulu's *Thirty Years of Bananas*, written after Museveni was elected President in 1986 and censorship was relaxed. Mukulu took advantage of this change to write the play, which shows how the different leaders since independence have destroyed the potential for Uganda to become a successful, independent state. Although leaders such as Obote and Amin wreaked havoc on Uganda, increasing dialogue about the harm they caused presented opportunities for the people to collaboratively think of solutions and steps to move forward. *Forged in Fire* was written as a first-hand account of what it was like to live in a state of near-constant violence. Okello Kelo Sam was living in northern Uganda when violence broke out and forced him to flee his homeland. He wrote the story of the internal conflict he suffered between his search for peace and his desire to return to his blighted home in northern Uganda. *Forged in Fire* shows how war disrupts ritual traditions and destroys communities as people flee to safety. This theme is pertinent in a society that has been experiencing violence since the end of colonialism. Both *Thirty Years of Bananas* and *Forged in Fire* have used theater to increase popular support for non-violence movements, government transparency, and accountability.

Theater has been used in various forms to address national political issues. In 2010, a study was published which showed the role of Legislative Theatre in schools in Kenya. This experiment asked youth to create skits about issues that needed to be included in Kenya's new constitution. These young leaders will be the ones who create future change, and it is imperative that they are included in the decision-making process. The youth created several skits on a variety of topics, demonstrating the realities of their lives in Kenya, describing how government policies affect people at the local level, and presenting solutions to important problems. Brainstorming new solutions to problems was part of the process the youth went through to develop their performances. This space is often unexplored at the governmental level because many see it as "wasted time" that could be used to start implementing projects. However, in reality, this is the most important part of the process of Legislative Theatre, developing the new law that the community would like to see put into action. By discussing the issue in detail, the community can ensure that the law will stay true to its desires. The youth understand this need because they will be the ones who will need to fix the law in the future, and since they are the ones directly impacted. Therefore, the youth want to deal with many issues now, so bad government policy will not affect their ability to live and work peacefully.

Case Study: Step Up Primary School, Uganda

With thoughts of prior movements that combined drama and political change, I boarded a plane and spent the summer of 2013 interning at Step Up Primary School, located in Nakayiba, Masaka, Uganda. The school was founded in 1999 and educates around 500 children ranging in age from 3 to 14. After observing the school for a week, I saw that the majority of the teachers either administered or were open to the use of corporal punishment as a method of discipline in the school. Corporal punishment is defined as any action performed with the intention of causing harm, discomfort, or pain to the receiver. The most common methods I observed were physical hits on the head or the behind using a stick. Corporal punishments were used when children answered questions incorrectly, refused to answer questions, weren't dressed smartly, were talking or playing in class, or whenever the teacher thought they were necessary. I began to notice that children who were being hit were less likely to participate in class voluntarily and more likely to talk and play in class more frequently than children who received less corporal punishment. Seeing the children in pain made me extremely uncomfortable and I decided to bring it up in my daily tea with the headmaster. I quickly learned that although corporal punishment in common in Ugandan schools, it is controversial. The headmaster was very knowledgeable about the use of corporal

punishment because he had previously attended a week long conference focusing on the use of punishment in Ugandan schools and preferred alternatives. He had several booklets from the conference that clearly stated that the Ministry of Education discouraged the use of corporal punishment in schools. In fact, the national government passed the Uganda Children's Act in 2003 which explicitly made corporal punishments illegal. So why is it still the most frequently used discipline method in schools?

After discussing the negative effects I had observed in the classrooms, the headmaster and I decided that it was time for corporal punishments to end at Step Up. The headmaster explained to me that many teachers continued to use corporal punishments because they had experienced it while they were in school and they did not realize that there was anything wrong with it. The practice of administering corporal punishment is ingrained in Ugandan culture and commonly used in the home. We began to develop a multi-faceted project that would address the issue in three ways. First, we would hold two workshops with the teachers at the school to increase sensitivity to the negative side effects of corporal punishment. Second, we would make three wooden signs with messages discouraging corporal punishment to be hung in the school compound. Lastly, we would start a social justice drama club at the school which would give children the opportunity to express themselves, be exposed to different social issues, and form a smaller community within the larger school wide community. The impetus for this last step was the *Theatre of the Oppressed* model, which fit well with the goals of the project. To facilitate a discussion of corporal punishment against children, we decided that the drama club's first performance would be about the rights of children at school and at home. We also decided to limit the club to thirty members to start off as a pilot group. Ten children were selected from three different classes with equal gender representation.

During the first several weeks of the project, I worked with the students to build trust and introduce them to the concept of using drama to mimic real life situations, first in small groups, and later with all thirty participants in the pilot project. By the fourth week, I introduced more complicated topics, including portions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is the first legally-binding document that protects children's rights in four core areas: the interests of the child, the right to life, protection for survival and proper development, and respect for a child's opinions (UNICEF). I selected several Articles from the Convention, including those covering the ability of children to speak for themselves, take responsibility for their own well being, freedom from abuse, and the right to an education, among many others. Each group of children acted out the topic of an Article. After watching all the scenes, the children wrote a short summary of the performances, paying specific attention to the main themes of the Articles.

The following week I paired the groups to make four large groups with seven or eight students in each, and gave them each two Articles, asking them to consider one narrative that addressed both rights. At this point in the project, the children had notably developed their acting skills. Even the headmaster remarked that he was shocked both at the creativity of the stories that the children created and their ability to perform, something that was relatively new to them. Those who had any experience were used to dance and music performance, not drama, which requires a higher understanding of how to represent a distinct person.

By the fifth week, we were fine tuning some of the more technical aspects of performance, such as remembering to face the audience, staying in a designated stage space, and always remembering to act like a "real life" version of your character. I often observed that the children would represent how they wanted their character to act instead of how their character would act. This is due to children having a heightened sense of play, and seeing even the most absurd options as possible when they are immersed in the environment of "make-believe." Secondly, the children were including their own observations about their lives in their character choices. A child playing a police officer became more aggressive than a "real-life" police officer because that was how the child saw police officers and their grown-up actions. By including their observations in their character, the children represented how they felt about other individuals in society, especially authority figures.

During the sixth week, I asked the children to write a story about a time when they felt that their rights had been abused or neglected. I received narratives from home and incidents that had happened in school. A few children wrote about how the school gatekeeper would hit them for standing around the gate without first asking them verbally to leave. Others wrote about grandmothers who would force them to wake up early and serve tea, or how they would be late to school because they were forced to work in the family garden before they could leave the home compound. These firsthand accounts were raw and insightful,

and enabled me to tailor my project to the experiences of my young charges, changing one of the scenes to incorporate some elements from a painful story written by a girl in Sixth Grade about staying with her grandmother over the school holidays. Her mother left her with the grandmother, where the girl was treated as a servant, forced to cook all meals and do all of the gardening. This brought a more personal narrative to the final performance.

I plan on visiting the school again in early 2014 to evaluate how the drama club is running and how successfully the project has sustained itself. It will be fascinating to see how the program has evolved since my time there and to see the influence of the program on the children's relationship with each other and with teachers in the classroom. It is my hypothesis that the program has increased awareness of the negative side effects of corporal punishments and empowered the children, not only the ones in the drama program, but school-wide as students are exposed to the legal protections already in place. Ideally the program is running smoothly with the joint leadership of five chosen student leaders and the headmaster.

Throughout my time at Step Up Primary School, I found it impressive that the students could create improvisations that stood alone as performances. The final performance definitely took advantage of the student's talents, and showcased their creativity and skills. Giving the students the chance to bring their own stories to this project to share their opinions in a creative and safe manner allowed them to explore a space where anything was possible, an experience that was empowering to the students because they had very few limitations placed on them. Often it easy to forget where minds may wander when mouths are silenced. What children may lack in experience or education can be made up by honesty, openness, and curiosity. Instead of accepting things the way that they are, children are always asking "Why?" and freely give their opinions. Getting children involved in Legislative Theatre has given these children an outlet to express their opinions and be heard. Ideally, this will give the children more hope and promise that they have the ability to make change and contribute to community decisions.

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