THEATRE AND DEVELOPMENT: AN APPLIED COMPARATIVE HORIZONTAL MODE OF COMMUNICATION

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This paper seeks to discuss the values and potentialities of indigenous theatre as a horizontal mode of communication. It challenges the top-down, or vertical, mode of communication as a problematic strategy for solving the socio-political ills of people. This will be done in the form of case studies. Each case study attempts to bring the reader very close to the ways in which oral traditions as theatre were, and are, used for community development. The case studies are based on some Latin American, Asian and African countries. The strategy behind using these countries is to suggest some lessons that can be drawn by South Africa as a newly democratic country by means of formulating a South African model or modifying foreign models to suit South African needs.

INTRODUCTION

Today, South African disadvantaged people in both urban and rural areas are more aware than they were, in the wake of independence in 1994, of the fact that the politicians in parliament are only working for their own families. Ordinary people are observing the grabbing of power and the ridiculous amassing of wealth by those who promised a better life for all when campaigning for elections. The promises of a better life for all, including social development and cultural emancipation, made during the liberation struggle are dwindling. Indeed, the fruits of independence and promises seem to have bypassed the majority who sweated hard to bring down the might of apartheid. Strategies and efforts are still needed to free themselves from all forms of social ills, such as homelessness, health problems, cultural bondage and other numerous reactionary forces of exploitation, suppression and antagonism.

This crisis has created a fertile ground in South Africa for the consolidation of African theatre tradition or oral art, if you will, and for using it as an effective tool in the struggle against the forces of socio-political ills such as lack of, or inferior, education, inadequate health care and/or facilities and poverty. This paper attempts to discuss the values and potentialities of African theatre as a pedagogical institution. This will be illustrated in the form of case studies. Each case study tries to bring the reader very close to the ways in which oral traditions as theatre were, and are, used for community development.

CASE STUDY 1: LATIN AMERICA AND ASIA

It was in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s that India, Brazil, China, Jamaica and Mexico recognized indigenous theatre as a powerful tool that could be used for community development. Ranganath (1980:245-248) found that India, after a long and agonizing period of foreign domination, was faced with numerous far-reaching and profound challenges such as adult education, rural upliftment, health and sanitation, homelessness, poverty and over-population. The top-down and Eurocentric strategies used by government agents failed to address these challenges. By Eurocentric strategies we mean European programmes and approaches that were developed by...
government agents like social workers, adult educationists, mid-wives and medical doctors who were produced by the colonial education system. These government agents imposed the pre-packed programmes on ordinary Indian people. These pre-packed programmes and government agents were seen as a dangerous and vertical mode of communication that was difficult to accept. Indian people argued that these strategies were destroying their traditional beliefs and values. They made it clear that they did not want the government and the elite to interfere with their personal affairs since they were too impersonal to trust. For example, the fashionable young women who were regarded by ordinary Indian people as totally inexperienced in the joys of bringing up children were told that they had no business insulting the Indian wives and meddling with family lives. The ordinary people lost confidence in the government agents and their vertical mode of communication.

It became clear that top-down, Eurocentric strategies and vertical modes of communication could not be employed for developmental purposes. Subsequently, the horizontal mode of communication was developed as an alternative strategy for community development. Oral traditions like theatre were identified as a potential tool for addressing some of the above problems. For example, oral narratives were used to teach children from the age of four the days of the week, months of the year, seasons of the year and stars, addition, subtraction, division and multiplication. Together with songs and proverbs, oral narratives were used for pedagogical purposes. The children were taught by their own grandfathers or old uncles (who were regarded as performers) and the time of learning was in the morning. This approach was seen as laying a good foundation for formal education (Ranganath 1980:249).

Apart from teaching children, indigenous artists or performers, doctors, nurses and mid-wives were used for development purposes. They proved to be effective because the ordinary Indian people regarded them as their own. They listened to them without reservation because they were widely travelled and experienced and did not hesitate to discuss any problem with them because they were held in high esteem and very influential on personal matters. While these indigenous cultural or developmental workers were highly regarded by the peasants, they were ignorant of hygienic practices. This caused the government to develop a programme that was intended to upgrade the skills of indigenous practitioners, giving intensive training. Some of them, for example, were trained as mid-wives and received certificates for having attended a training course on family planning. They became effective indigenous communicators in family planning (Ranganath 1980:249).

In her article, *Theatre and Development*, Ellen Judd (1980:380-395) discusses how oral traditions like theatre were employed in China during the 1930s and 1940s for community development and transformation purposes. She argues that various cultural performances, such as songs, music and oral narratives, were performed in streets and open spaces. They were seen by the Chinese Communist Party as a reflection of the economic base of the society as well as the vehicle for cultural impact on the peasants. The literati and artists were encouraged to leave their cities for the countryside in order to empower and interact with the peasants. The strategy of this was to uproot the culture of undermining peasants and their oral traditions. The tendency to collect data from, or research, the peasants was not encouraged. Instead, the literati and artists helped the peasants to look at life from a different point of view. The peasants also taught the literati about oral literature because the literati were inexperienced when it came to oral literature. The marriage between the literati and the peasants contributed to the process of dramatic creation which, in
turn, was used as a strategy for communication. The well read people and peasants succeeded in formulating models and standards from principles that benefited Chinese.

A similar approach was used in Brazil, Mexico and Jamaica. In these countries, too, theatre was used to carry messages of adult education, health care, family planning and child care, especially in rural areas (Kidd 1980:280). Indigenous theatre was seen as the best mode of communication which existed long before modern mass media such as radio, print, film and television. Peasants in these countries were suspicious of the modern mass media and the literati who were obsessed with the top-down or vertical mode of communication. The peasants felt that the university or college-educated people were inexperienced in the area of oral traditions.

In Brazil, in the 1940s and 1950s, oral narratives were printed and sold to the public. The animals used in the stories were given human characteristics, virtues and vices. Some stories dealt with poverty and injustice. Socio-political ills were analysed and criticized. The socio-political ills included the high cost of living, the divorce law, the working conditions of taxi drivers, student revolts and exploitation. Since many people in Brazil were illiterate and could not read newspapers or books, oral narratives were also performed. It was through performance that ordinary people got to know about the first man on the moon, corruption and other socio-political ills (Bordenave 1980:312-315). In terms of the research conducted in the 1950s by Campos as mentioned by Bordenave (1980:318), oral narratives, as theatre, were a powerful mode of communication that could provide many people with information, entertainment and aesthetic experiences. They actually succeeded in making people stand up against the socio-political problems with which they were faced.

CASE STUDY 2: SOME AFRICAN COUNTRIES

The values and potentialities of indigenous theatre in the above-mentioned countries made many African countries review their attitudes towards oral tradition as theatre. In the 1960s and 1970s Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, O. Bitek, Bob Leshoai and P. Mlama were among the African scholars who started the debate on whether or not African theatre exists in Africa. It was agreed that it does exist. Various forms of oral literature, such as oral narratives, oral poetry, songs, music, riddles, proverbs, festivals and initiation ceremonies, were identified as theatre. Nigeria, Ghana, Tanzania, Uganda and Malawi started to teach these forms of theatre in their drama schools. The theatre and development movement emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. The universities of Ibadan in Nigeria, Legon in Ghana, Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, Lusaka in Zambia were more active in this movement (Mlama 1991:63). Village-based theatre groups came into being in Kenya, Nigeria, Zambia, Uganda, Ghana, Botswana, Tanzania and Cameroon in the 1970s.

For example, in Kenya, the Kimiriithu villagers created a play, entitled I Will Marry When I Want, based on oral traditions. This was a collective effort and it played an important part in Kenyan cultural and social struggles. It was about people, for the people and in the people's own language. The message in this play was well received by both the government and ordinary Kenyan people. For example, it succeeded in cutting down some negative social practices like drinking alcohol. Some unemployed young people who had tried to commit suicide, because they thought that their lives were useless, repented. Their participation in the rehearsals of this play made them discover that they had wonderful voices and talents. While it succeeded in educating the rank and file, Ngugi wa Thiongo and Ngugi wa Mirii, the brains behind this play, were forced...
into exile and the play was banned after only a few performances. (Bjorkman 1989:45-53)

In Uganda, Ntuuha Drama Performers became aware that, in the olden days story-telling, songs and dances were used to conscientize the younger generation. This included also issues like discouraging young girls from premarital sexual contact and encouraging them instead to preserve their virginity. They argued that nowadays this approach is even more relevant in the face of the rapidly spreading HIV epidemic. This awareness led to the coming into being of 20 plays based on oral traditions. The focus was on health problems such as AIDS, tuberculosis, whooping cough and polio. According to an evaluation done during the performance of these plays, 85% of the persons interviewed had understood the messages of the plays in the way intended by health team members and drama performers. All communities were enthusiastic about the plays and requested more shows (Kaliba et al. 1994:20-21).

I am not suggesting that these countries did not have problems in using the theatre for development and as a horizontal mode of communication. My personal opinion, however, is that these countries did not wait for other countries but they attempted to develop models based on sound and justifiable foundations.

WHAT LESSON CAN SOUTH AFRICA DRAW FROM LATIN AMERICA, ASIA AND OTHER AFRICAN STATES?

Since South Africa has great leeway to make up in developing new human resources (or whatever), the time has come to learn from other African countries. While many drama schools and departments, especially in the historically English universities, acknowledge the existence of indigenous theatre in South Africa, their acknowledgement is lip service because indigenous theatre is not included in the drama curricula. Their focus is on European theatre. Even African languages departments, cultural centres, literature departments and cultural organisations are obsessed with European approach, top-down and vertical modes of communication in this country. The criticism levelled at culture and development is based on Eurocentric strategies. For example, Sarafina 2 is a programme imposed on people by the government and its agents. It exploits the voices and energies of the people and neglects their ideas in that the performers are instructed to perform by the directors and playwrights. Furthermore, people on the ground were never consulted so as to identify their needs and the type of strategy to be used in solving particular problems. In fact, the programme is meant for the elite and the few who stay in the cities, especially if one takes into account that it is performed mainly in urban areas. This neglect of rural people implies they are not affected by the HIV epidemic.

In view of the above observation, it becomes clear that drama schools in this country ought to be Africanized. By Africanization I mean the changing of the syllabi and curricula in the drama schools and literature departments because the teaching in these institutions or departments is dominated by European culture and approaches. African cultures ought to be the core of the syllabi and curricula and European ones be on the periphery. According to Herbert Vilakazi (1996:8), Africanization means ensuring that the Eurocentric academic focus of institutions is changed to a more multicultural approach so that South Africa can recover from its lowly status as a despised appendage of the west and make its much needed contribution to national culture. Africanization is a must because the drama schools in South Africa are the most powerful institutions for inculcating the totally irrelevant cultural values of the West. They must be shaken
up and challenged. A call for the cultural revolution must be made in these schools (Bitek 1973:17).

Once they are Africanized, automatically indigenous theatre forms will be accommodated in the school and university curricula. The approach of teaching this kind of theatre should not be a painful way of investigating or acquiring knowledge about theatre. It should be freed from the prison of examination into which other studies were put by the class-ridden society of the Western world in order to get a certificate. It should be made into a festival as it is in the countryside. Having Africanized the drama schools in this country, theatre could then be adapted to the contemporary context and referred to as theatre for development. A theatre for development involves the whole community, both the educated and uneducated. It uses the local languages which are best understood by the majority of the community. It is based on indigenous culture and is accessible to the majority of people. A theatre for development places the emphasis on understanding problems from the perspective of those directly affected by the problem. An overriding concern has been to find ways of getting people to look at problems in terms of the social structure within which they live, and to attempt to find ways of involving communities in creating and acting out plays about their situation. In this respect, the medium of theatre is demystified and becomes a tool that the people themselves can use, own and control (Byram 1991:2).

It is against this background that I consider the African theatre to be one of the tools that can be employed to accomplish one of the programmes enshrined in the Reconstruction and Development Programme of the newly democratic South Africa. My belief in African theatre as a powerful tool of communication is based on the fact that theatre in general can speak and appeal directly to all people, old and young, without ducking their social and political ills. It is very close to the life of the rank and file. It does not wait to be written to become a mode of communication.

Theatre for development is characterized first, by members of the community together with theatre practitioners who do research into what the community thinks are its problems. Second, the community analyses the problems with a view to pinpointing their root causes and possible solutions. Third, the ideas are criticised through artistic forms familiar to the community. Artistic forms familiar to the community include oral poetry, oral narratives, songs and dances. Fourth, a performance is then held, after which there is a discussion with the audience on the appropriate action to solve the problems (Mlama 1991:21). The discussion is followed by the implementation of the decisions taken by the people in the discussion. The participants are engaged in the evaluation of the whole project.

**HOW DO WE TRANSLATE THE DISCUSSION INTO ACTION?**

The cases studies outlined above do not suggest that South Africans must copy and imitate them like parrots without questioning. The culture of imitation has serious implications. For instance, it may imply that South Africans are not capable of formulating their own standards and models that are relevant to the South African situation. Furthermore, it may imply that South Africans are trained and developed for the international needs and export markets.
We can, therefore, use these models as a basis on which to formulate our own models by way of modifying them to suit South African needs, or we can formulate our own by making use of cultural performances as they are performed in the countryside. Cultural performances as they are created, controlled and owned by the ordinary people can be used by well-read people as well as peasants to formulate a South African model. This is highly possible, especially if one considers the meaning and function of cultural performances or oral traditions.

For example, I have observed that in some Xhosa societies, for example, during the *intonjane* celebration, there is an episode that is performed on the mountain. A fire is made, and the girls and women start to sing. After some time they go to the *ijaka*. In the *ijaka*, the boys and the girls sing and dance to entertain themselves and educate the initiate. In fact, the girls and women come together, in the mornings and in the evenings, to sing and dance. These are popular songs that are sung for joy and for sex education:

1. Solo:

   Iqhakuva lidl'umntu ubenani.

   Chorus:

   Lumkel' iqhakuva.
   Lumkel' iqhakuva.

2. Solo:

   Uze uliphephe ubhonyo.
   Uze uliphephe ubhonyo.

1. Solo:

   Disease affects a careless person.

   Chorus:

   Be careful of disease.
   Be careful of disease.

2. Solo:

   You shall avoid penis.
   You shall avoid penis.

   Chorus:

   You shall avoid penis.
   You shall avoid penis.
The songs and dances by the boys and the girls are meant to send the message of both ululating and congratulation to the initiate. They also serve as a contribution to cultural living, to entertain and to be enjoyed by performers. Since this is a preparatory phase, the whole performance could be viewed as a rehearsal for the actual celebration. The songs and dances by the women are intended to express joy and they also serve as a token of appreciation to the parents of the novice. At the same time the songs that are sung are regarded as popular songs for they are sung for joy and for sex education, family planning, hygiene and avoidance of AIDS. This song is directed to the initiate and teaches her about certain diseases that might be caused by premarital sex. It teaches her to avoid sex before she gets married and expresses the concern of her community, who expect her to refrain from sexual relations until she gets married. Observing this performance very closely it becomes clear that it is a collective effort by the people, for the people and in the language of the people. It is a horizontal mode of communication, in that it is not imposed on anybody.

For South Africans to formulate or modify their models and integrate them with a horizontal mode of communication as opposed to a pre-packed approach, a workshop on culture or theatre and development could be held. Such a workshop could aim at training cultural workers and local villagers in skills and processes of culture for development. The methodology could be: introduction into culture and development; method of information gathering, method of data analysis, research and data collection; analysis; story writing; performance; discussion; evaluation and follow up.

With regard to the introduction to theatre and development, a brief history of the theatre for development is outlined by a theatre historian, whose talk includes experiments of other countries who tried this approach. Method of data collection refers to discussion on the methods to be used for data collection, such as the flooding method. The flooding method means that a whole group 'floods' a village, meeting with villagers by means of holding informal discussions with them. Another method is the homestead. This involves living with a family and trying to pick up as much information as possible through discussion and observation. The interviewing method is another method through which interviews are held with designated people in the villages.

Although I have not discussed other aspects of such methods of data analysis and data collection, there is no doubt in my mind that this approach can make the participants formulate a dynamic model relevant to the South African needs. Furthermore, the participants can identify the problems they are faced with, such as poverty, family planning and health and can, in turn, use indigenous theatre to address them. For this approach to contribute to the formulation of a South African model and identification of socio-political problems, it must not be imposed on people as a predetermined programme which undermines people’s thinking abilities. It should not be a package that flows like rain-water pouring from the sky. People should decide on how to celebrate their theatre and make it a festival.

CONCLUSION

In closing, it is to be emphasized that in order to integrate the vertical mode of communication with theatre, cultural institutions such as literature, language and drama departments should come out of their ivory tower. They ought to demonstrate that there is no place for an ivory tower in history and in practice. These institutions have to uproot the culture of marginalizing the oral
traditions that are known, owned and controlled by the ordinary people. The practice of exploiting the energies and voices of the people, while refusing to use their ideas should be done away with. South Africans should commit themselves to the formulation of their own models and standards that are relevant to South Africa. They must move away from the habit of depending on international standards, and imitating other models without questioning, for no country effectively achieves success by copying from other countries.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


