

Theatre and Development

What is development? Does theatre contribute to the development of a society? If so, how? Should we be talking about the development of theatre as much as about theatre for development? What about aesthetics? How much focus should there be on process, and how much on product? And what about children in the world of theatre and development?

These were the important questions addressed by the “Theatre and Development” Forum, chaired by Yvette Hardie (South Africa) and Hope Azeda (Rwanda).

Yvette Hardie opened the forum with a few points. She proposed a working definition of development, which is used by Arterial Network (an African network of artists and cultural operators): ***‘the ongoing generation and application of resources to create and sustain the optimal conditions in which human beings may enjoy all the rights and freedoms enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights’***. And she noted that Article 27 (1) of the declaration states: “Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts.”

She then described three broad categories of artistic practice that have relevance to the ‘cultural dimension of development’.

- a. the arts practised for their own sake and in their own right as creative means through which a society or community reflects on itself, and is challenged to move on or is affirmed in where they are – this category contributes to personal development
- b. the arts utilised for overt developmental purposes or for socially good ends such as the use of theatre to spread health messages, or to promote intercultural dialogue – this category contributes to social development
- c. the creative industries where the primary drivers are the generation of profit and other economic benefits through the arts – this category contributes to economic development

She then opened the floor to the assembled group to speak about how theatre and development are connected in their own contexts. The discussion included but was not limited to theatre FOR development, which tends to imply a particular set of artistic practices, process and products.

It was said that in the USA there is a strong tradition of community theatre, and of making theatre for “at risk” groups – in prisons, juvenile delinquents, etc. Argentina also has had a very strong independent theatre tradition, where theatre is made in factories and schools, or in response to political issues such as those who went missing. Now under democracy, there is a new crisis, as people try to find a synthesis of the period, which was described as the “destroyed society”. This has resulted in the new government making laws to support theatre, and the introduction of theatre into the schools’ programmes. Theatre is now considered as supporting freedom, human rights and democracy, and is considered a basic right. There is still a great deal of socially conscious theatre, which the government must support.

Imran Khan described how in India there is a limited audience for mainstream theatre productions. Much theatre work happens in the area of education and social development. There is a strong debate between theatre artists: do we consider theatre as an art form meant for people who enjoy the art or is it something which speaks to the masses? The traditions of Indian theatre start with theatre for the masses, where there are audiences of 1000s. However who can afford to watch theatre? There is a divide between those who can afford, and those who can't. But theatre is being made in many different conditions, in the metros, for example, as a way to reach ordinary people and connect people through theatre.

Hope Azeda said that in Rwanda, theatre is not used as a tool for economic development, but rather as a tool for social transformation. It creates a space where people can meet and talk about what is most important to them. It responds to a need. For a long time, justice was the immediate need, but then other issues also emerge – those infected by HIV Aids as a result of situations during the genocide. Theatre was in fact created to encourage people to come forward to speak the truth, so that justice could be achieved. People feel relieved to speak about their burdens.

She described how artists would be thrown into a soccer stadium where there are 25 000 people, and each individual is a bomb about to explode. As an artist, they need to perform and find ways to connect people in that enormous space. The primary question for her as an artist in that situation is “How do I connect with you?” Every 7th April, there are genocide commemorations, where there are politician's speeches and people get very moved by remembering the past. Music, movement, drama can become pillars of peace in that situation. Artists need to understand that the situation for audiences is one of “thorns and roses”, where “our blessings are very close to our wounds”. This means that there has to be immense sensitivity and understanding in the creation of artwork.

The theatre in Uzbekistan was described as being challenging. Under Soviet rule, theatre was so roped with political ideas that audiences became very tired of it. The most important thing today, is for Uzbekistan actors to create a level of art, and raise the level of professionalism in the theatre. This problem was described as “How to cancel bad theatre”! Theatre plays a role in the development of the brains and souls of the spectators; this is the kind of development we need. The plots should not be connected to containing answers to questions in ordinary life, but rather spectators should be made to feel how deep their souls are, how deep their minds are, and how rich their lives can be made through beauty.

In Argentina, development is needed for each artist to achieve the best level of his art. This calls for different tools, for example, the need for cultural exchange to enrich the local practice of artists and open their minds. It is important for Argentinian artists to think about realities other than their own.

In South Africa, often it is said that “theatre IS development”. In research it has been found that 65% of people in South Africa don't even know that theatre exists; they have never seen a

theatre performance. So while there is a vibrant theatre culture, we are talking about a small group of privileged people, black and white, who are able to enjoy theatre, have access to it and participate in making it. Reaching out to the broader audience through theatre is an important development issue. Yvette spoke about how there had been a crisis of content in South Africa, in the transition to a new democracy. During apartheid, theatre was used very much as a weapon and a tool to enlighten and reimagine a democratic society where there were other possibilities of living together. When democracy came, people wondered what they would make theatre about...so for some time, artists were floundering and struggling to find interesting content. Now artists are beginning to answer that question in exciting ways, but there is always a question about what should we be trying to communicate.

Hope Azeda then asked “Will there be a time in Rwanda when we too won’t know what to make art about? I often ask, ‘Do I do art for art’s sake? Or do I do arts for humanity?’” She answered her own question by saying that she believes that in the context of Rwanda, she HAS to do arts for humanity, since the victims of yesterday can become the killers of tomorrow.

Cheela Chilala spoke about how theatre in Zambia often means theatre for instrumental purposes; for example, theatre dealing with cholera and teaching people to behave in ways which will prevent contraction of the disease. However, there needs to be proper research in order to make sure that the theatre is useful. The community needs to be involved in identifying the needs; they need to have joint authorship and determine problems and solutions with the artists who are making the works. The tool of theatre of the oppressed is used very often in South America, Africa and in other parts of the world.

Louisa (Brazil) described how she works in Portuguese speaking countries in Africa, using theatre of the oppressed methodologies to work with social/psychological problems. This technique creates theatre that gives space for powerful subjects like rape, sexuality, amputees.

There were artists from first world countries who disagreed with this instrumentalisation of the arts. Peter from Denmark stated, “We are all artists; what we can contribute with is Art!” He called for the best possible art that enables artists to engage, persuade and develop their audience.

In Germany, theatre is seen as food for the heart, the brain. There is a need for structures to tell stories to the children. Often the only way that all cultures will come together is in the schools, and so we need the schools to have theatre for young audiences. Cultural ministries need to work together to ensure that theatre happens in schools. But it is also believed that good theatre is always educational. It is important for young people who have small problems, to become aware of the fact that 95% of peoples have bigger problems than them, and that we are all interconnected.

In Ireland there is talk of another kind of development; the development of the child and particularly, the development of the very young child. There was some description of the development of the brain of the child, and how from 0-3 years, the synapses of the brain are

firing and firing and the child is absorbing information on so many levels. How does this affect the artistic mind of the child and his/her experience of theatre? From 3-14 years, if the child is not exposed to the arts, these synapses slow down until they are atrophied. So the youngest children MUST have exposure to the arts in order to develop this part of their brain.

The point was made that all theatre is educational and that bad theatre is also educational, but perhaps in educating people in bad habits, making them even more lazy. We need to fight against that. We need to ask the question, what can theatre do for people that films, television and music can't do. The role of theatre in the society is different from these other forms.

Barry Brown from England spoke about how in London the theatre scene has been hugely enriched by new populations who have come to England (Jewish, Indian, West Africa, Caribbean), who have become major dynamic forces in British theatre and in young people's theatre in particular. This has enriched the field. There is now a sense of mainstreaming cultural diversity. However disabled people and artists are still presented with many barriers to the theatre, both in terms of attitudes and in physical barriers. There is a lack of transport, a lack of facilities and a lack of understanding. The problems with both "Stairs and stares" need to be overcome.

This is also true in Cameroon, where Imelda Samba, of Yaoundé, has written about the question of "disabled children and theatre" and about taking theatre to disabled people.

In the USA, there have been a lot of positive contributions on this; there are now theatregoers of all abilities in the audience, with issues of access to theatres having been addressed through the American disability act. For example, there are theatres where the audience lights are never fully dimmed, and theatres where there is soundproof room for children who need to be able to watch and make a noise. There are also many more theatre pieces using artists of varying abilities, and what has been interesting is the artistic impact of this. For example, the effects of casting actors with physical disabilities in roles that are not specified for those roles... What became apparent is that very largely children didn't see the disabilities. They just felt that it was a part of the character. The integration of actors in wheelchairs and actors not in wheelchairs becomes a part of the play, and a part of life. There is no pity for those with disabilities, but rather acceptance and tolerance.

In Rwanda, there has been work done on integrating children with learning disabilities into workshops and play development with artists. This was a challenge but also brought things that made the artists even better. Working with the kind of energies that the children had promoted new ways of working.

Vicky Ireland (UK) spoke about the fact that at the 2011 World Congress for the first time, there had been a real discussion of these issues (integration across all abilities). A network has been created and the work that has been done in the day-long engagement was joyful and inspiring. She asked that we focus on work that deals with disability: disabled audiences and disabled artists over the next period up to and including our World congress.

Stefan (Germany) believes that we are not only artists, but are also researchers; as artists we have to research the social reality deeply and find out what is going on. Perhaps the dramaturgic question should not be how to show disabled people onstage, but rather how to question whether there is anyone who is not disabled. No-one is perfect – a plot could bring this out.

Robert Chirima (Zimbabwe) spoke about how theatre needs to be about changing the attitudes, perceptions and behaviour of the audience.

There was also general agreement about the focus on all abilities over the next three years of ASSITEJ. The final statement that all agreed upon was that “theatre IS development”, in many complex and diverse ways.