Power Plays:

The Use of Forum Theatre in Senegal and Kenya to Perform Participation and Rehearse Change

Claire Sorrenson

Program II Department
Duke University

28 April 2013

Thesis submitted for graduation with distinction in the Program II Department, Duke University

Dr. Catherine Admay, Thesis Advisor
Dr. Charlie Piot, Committee Member
Bruce Orenstein, Committee Member
ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the possibilities and limitations of theatre as a development intervention by exploring its contested execution on the ground. Ethnographic investigations compare NGO-directed “Theatre for Development” initiatives in Senegal to community-directed theatre projects in Kenya. In Senegal, a theatre troupe’s implementation of top-down theatre fails to align with the ideals of the participatory “forum theatre” approach on which the troupe models itself. In Kenya, the process of creating forum theatre uncovers problematic moral attitudes and replicates pre-existing power dynamics. Ultimately, the thesis finds that successful theatre work is premised on strong relationships between facilitators and participants and the ability to facilitate stories that contest and challenge hegemonic versions of reality. Theory and practice align in the final chapter, which provides actionable insights for hopeful and questioning practitioners and practitioners-to-be.
This work is dedicated to the memory of Joseph Okang’a Njeri, a dear friend and
colleague who died in a car accident on December 15, 2012.

To Joseph: enthusiastic voice issuing from behind the video camera, colleague
encouraging those around him to dream big, insatiable questioner, father who toiled in
order to send his children to school, friend who could joke or talk feminism or laugh his
infectious laugh or simply listen on long walks along the dusty rutted road towards home.

*It dawned on me, then, that determination combined with hope can bring change in one’s life. Lack of enough finances/material assets stood as blocks in my way but I refused to give up. Over and over, in my life, I have had to rely on that ability…to share ideas with varied personalities in search for sustainable development.*

--Joseph Okang’a Njeri, “Story of Self,” March 2010
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you,

Admay, for mentorship imbued with a spirit of generosity and mutual respect; for supporting my interdisciplinary ambitions; for your constant questioning; for your capacity to deliver necessary critiques wrapped in a smile and words of encouragement; and for the daily inspiration that you provide to me and so many others.

Lia, for guiding me around the stumbling blocks of community organizing with patience and grace; for giving me a model of how to enact activist anthropology; and for your continued support (and commiseration) throughout the writing process.

Charlie, for introducing me to critiques of development that would inform my direction over the next three years; and for exemplifying how to build genuine and lasting relationships through ethnographic fieldwork.

Bruce, for sharing your knowledge of community organizing; and for your firm tugs to land my thesis back on earth whenever it took off on the “overly intellectualizing” route.

Mama Eunice, for giving me renewed faith in the phrase “pole pole” when I saw how you applied it to your life, building from the ground up; for your acceptance of my vegetarianism; and for welcoming me so unconditionally into your home and family: your husband George and your children Mary, Kevin, Pauline, Victor, Mercy, Yvonne, and Faith.

Joseph, for the laughter and hope that survives grief.

Jesse, for keeping us sane in moments of madness; for sharing your unparalleled rally car driving skills and the egg-and-potato special; and for your ability to connect deeply with every person you meet.

Jethro, for your capacity to bring people’s skills to light; for your words to me at dinner the first night in Sauri; and for putting up with my frenzied whispers of, “Jethro, what are they saying??”

Members of Kaddu Yarakh: Mohammadou, Leity, Seydou, Cheikna, Daba, Xadi, and the others, for welcoming this sweaty and stressed toubab into your midst with copious amounts of laughter and, of course, attaya tea.

Members of Geno, Hera, Sinani, and Straight Talk: in particular Maureen, Mary, Hilary, Henry, Samson, Fred, Magdalene, Jane, and all the others, for giving so much to your work; and for making sure that I never stopped learning and listening.

Mum and Dad, for letting me go on this crazy adventure; and for somehow knowing, Mum, when I needed your words of wisdom, comfort, and – of course – writerly advice.
# CONTENTS

| ABSTRACT | iii |
| DEDICATION | iv |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | v |

## INTRODUCTION

Setting the stage ................................................................. 1
Negotiating the potential pitfalls of theatre .............................. 4
Aims of the thesis ..................................................................... 6
Methodology ........................................................................... 8
Layout of the thesis ................................................................. 12

### CHAPTER ONE: Defining and Contextualizing Theatre for Development

Introduction ........................................................................... 14
Defining a theatre of and for development ................................. 15
An evolving rhetoric: tracking the aims of TFD from UNESCO to Sauri, Kenya ................................................................. 17
Participation: constructing a discourse and practice .................... 19
Perceived advantages of Theatre for Development ....................... 22
Characteristics of Theatre for Development ................................ 24
Control over content .................................................................. 26
Conclusion ............................................................................... 27

### CHAPTER TWO: Observing NGO-Driven Theatre in Senegal

Introduction ........................................................................... 28
Theory of forum theatre ............................................................ 29
Rules of forum theatre ............................................................... 30
Background and setting of TFD in Senegal ................................. 32
The Kaddu Yarakh forum theatre model ....................................... 34
Oppression unresolved: structuring the play ............................... 36
Establishing dialogue: the forum ................................................ 38

### I. FIRST PLAY

*La baie n’est pas une poubelle* .................................................. 40
The setting ............................................................................... 40
The plot ................................................................................... 41
The forum ............................................................................... 43

### ANALYSIS

Processes of appropriation .......................................................... 45
Processes of distancing ............................................................... 47
Conclusion ............................................................................... 48

### II. SECOND PLAY

*L’espacement des naissances* ..................................................... 49
The setting ............................................................................... 49
The plot ................................................................................... 51
The forum ............................................................................... 53

### ANALYSIS

A tool for debate rather than dialogue ....................................... 56
A missing audience ................................................................... 58
| Frame the agenda                       | 62 |
| Theatre as a reductive force           | 64 |
| Countering reductionism: an alternative forum | 65 |
| Conclusion                            | 68 |

**CHAPTER THREE: Creating Community-Directed Theatre in Kenya**

| Introduction                        | 70 |
| Background                          | 70 |

**I. FIRST GENO YOUTH DRAMA**

| Confronting morality and gender norms             | 73 |
| Defining oppression                             | 76 |
| Portraying oppression                            | 78 |
| Gender swapping                                   | 80 |

**II. SECOND GENO YOUTH DRAMA**

| Playing the blame game                          | 81 |
| The plot                                         | 83 |
| Contesting morality around HIV/AIDS              | 84 |

**III. SAURI THEATRE FOR DEVELOPMENT**

| A didactic theatre precedent                  | 85 |

**IV. HERA AND SINANI PLAY**

| Replicating oppressive processes               | 89 |
| Forming a plotline                             | 90 |
| Sinani story sharing                           | 91 |
| Rehearsal: the dangers of an open process      | 92 |
| Practicing forum theatre                       | 94 |
| A threat from outside                          | 95 |

**V. CASE STUDY COMPARISONS**

| Mali and Nigeria                               | 97 |

**VI. REFLECTION AND SYNTHESIS**

| Reflections                                     | 99 |
| Factors of success                             | 100 |
| Conclusion                                     | 102 |

**CHAPTER FOUR: Actionable Insights**

| Introduction                                    | 104 |

**ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS**

1. Humanity transcends a person’s value as a research subject | 106 |
2. Outsiders wear an aura of expertise              | 108 |
3. The invisible should be made visible             | 111 |
4. “Organizing is a fancy word for relationship building” | 116 |
5. Effective organizing uncovers historical and current power networks | 119 |
6. Participatory practices can help push a dominant agenda | 122 |
7. Reflection informs action                        | 126 |

**WORKS CITED** | 128 |
INTRODUCTION

“The silent cannot be heard.”
--Robert Chambers (1984, pp. 141)

“If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life…”
--Henry Thoreau (1910, pp. 96)

Setting the stage

Today is the day of the building of the stage.

Young men huddle together, consulting in endless circles of conjecture about how to complete the epic task. The young women of the group fragment and wander off one by one, left out of this particular game.

The wood for the stage has finally arrived and we watch as a man trudgingly delivers it by the wheelbarrowful. This in itself is a huge achievement, as we have spent the last three days organizing its delivery.

I have been living in Sauri village, Kenya, for eight weeks; for the past two weeks, I have worked with 10-15 members of the Geno Youth Group to create and rehearse a play. Three days from now, they will perform the play to an audience of approximately 200 community members during a “Community Togetherness Day” that will include small-group dialogues, interactive plays, and a screening of the documentary that community members have helped film and edit to portray their experience with poverty and development.

But for now, the stage. A week ago, in some planning committee, someone alighted on the idea of building a stage and the idea caught on like wildfire. Eager nods
and fervent planning all round. And why not? The Geno Youth Group will be one of three groups to perform theatre pieces that day, and a raised platform will ensure that everyone in the large audience can see the actors onstage.

And so a small group of youth group members (all men) sit down to plan the dimensions of the stage. They tell me an amount that it will cost; I protest that this seems like a great deal of money. They revise their calculations and return to inform me that it will cost less than expected, after all.

Tudruok Collaborative Anthropology, the community-based organization that I am working with, is paying for most of the costs for the “Togetherness Day.” In reality, this means that my mentor Lia, an anthropologist and co-founder of Tudruok, will pay for it out of pocket. I have decided to use a small amount of leftover summer funding to help pay for the event. And so I give Jethro, my co-worker and member of the core Tudruok research team, the quoted cost for the stage – about $40 US – with his assurance that he will keep track of costs and give me the change.

Paul, another member, is given a small amount of money, enough to pay for a motorbike ride to the nearest town and nails for the wood. He promptly disappears; for the next two days, he is incommunicado, his phone switched off. Various group members take it upon themselves to report his defection to me, and on the second night they go to his house and confront him. The next day he turns up on a motorbike, surly-faced, bag of nails in hand.

Meanwhile, group member Billy has contacted a carpenter and asked for wood. But he “misunderstands” the directions to get a quote and instead gives the carpenter all the money, resulting in an excess of wood. Jethro tells me that Billy will sell the excess
wood later. He tells me that the carpenter is Billy’s friend. We try to get a refund; the carpenter refuses. Jethro, meanwhile, has “forgotten” to write down all of the expenses, and informs me that we have spent all of the money. There will be no change.

The men spend an entire day constructing the stage. The building drags on, and a final rehearsal of the play is cancelled because they must finish the stage. The women are excluded from this decidedly gendered activity.

The day of the community event arrives. Chairs ring the stage, a squat structure elevated less than a foot off the ground. With the first performance it becomes clear that community members could have seen perfectly well without the elevated stage. The actors shuffle across the uneven wooden floorboards, inhibited in their movements by their unsure footing. When the play ends and the audience is invited to participate in a discussion-based forum, the stage acts as a barrier to their interactions with the actors.

This obstruction presents a special problem for the interactive “forum theatre” model that the actors are using, which intends for audience members to come onstage, replace characters, and act out their vision of how to challenge the power abuses and inequities shown in the play. Instead, the first few volunteers stand in front of the stage, speaking to the audience. The actors, who should be engaging the audience members in direct dialogue, sit elevated onstage in the background. In the end, due to delays and long speeches by various dignitaries and community leaders at the beginning of the event, time runs out and two groups cannot even perform their plays.

After the event, a critical question emerges: what to do with the stage? Eventually, the men hustle it into the nearby room that serves as a community meeting space, propping it awkwardly against the wall. They shove the excess wood behind the
stage. Now, every time community members want to hold a meeting in this room, they will have to edge around this barrier by the door, the small room reduced further in size by the bulky wooden structure. The excess wood may never be used, for fear of accusations of personal profiteering. The stage may be dragged out once or twice for another event, where it will reinforce the same hierarchies of difference and exclusion that permeate every event.

**Negotiating the potential pitfalls of community-based theatre**

The saga of the stage tells a story of community-created theatre done poorly. It also illustrates some of the potential pitfalls of theatre performed in the community development context. The impulse to build a stage echoed a perceived need to present outcomes – in this case a physical stage together with the finished play – as markers of the project’s success. In stretching towards this outcome, the group diverted its energies from improving the play to hastily creating a product that would literally elevate the actors’ standing in the community; the quality of the play gave way to the wooden structure it would be acted upon. The activity excluded women, ironic for a group creating a play about the oppression of women in the community. The introduction of money sowed dissent and mistrust, endangering the relationships that I had worked hard to build.

The rush to perform “community togetherness” at this event contributed to the group’s inadequate preparation, which in turn led to chaotic facilitation and the omission of two groups’ theatre performances. The stage reinforced implicit hierarchies that
inserted another obstacle between modes of passive observation and the desired participation from audience members.

This “desired participation” stemmed from my convictions about what audience members ought to gain from a play highlighting their community’s “problems” and how they should behave in order to reap the benefits of participatory play-acting. My positioning as an outsider, pressing my own agenda upon community members, further contributed to the failure to work from their needs and desires.

This thesis interrogates the conditions that lead to these and other problems frequently and repeatedly encountered in theatre interventions that address community development, here referred to as “Theatre for Development” (TFD). I seek to position myself as a student practitioner and researcher within these analytical frameworks, questioning the nature of my participation in scenarios that blur the line between understanding and intervening. To speak in theatrical terms, I found myself questioning both the boundaries of the stage and the observer-actor binary.

I examine the implications of how theatre, whether commissioned by NGOs in Dakar, Senegal or created by community members in rural Kenya, is produced and performed. In Senegal, I observe the performance of several plays by a professional troupe and the ensuing forums with community members, while in Kenya I focus on the process of creating plays with community members. In both cases I analyze the power dynamics embodied in interactions and relationships that are both insider-insider (between community members) and insider-outsider (between community members and the non-governmental organization (NGO) workers, actors, or students purporting to help them).
Aims of the thesis

In writing this thesis, I intended to fulfill three objectives. First, I aimed to derive meaning from my own experiences as a participant-observer in Kenya and Senegal. Having left both locations plagued by disappointment and frustration, I wanted to examine my role as a student-researcher and an outsider.

In Kenya, I engaged with community members as they conducted their own critical development initiatives in the face of an international NGO project that refused to listen to community members’ wants and needs. However, in trying to create alternatives to the oppressive NGO practices, I simultaneously helped to replicate the same processes of oppression. The date of my departure from the community corresponded with that of the “Community Togetherness Day.” I left feeling dejected, the community day having largely failed to achieve the objectives we had set. I imagined how much more productive these theatre initiatives might have been had they not had to adhere to my own, arbitrary, travel deadlines.

I deliberately swung in the other direction when approaching research in Senegal, positioning myself as an observer on the fringes of activity. Yet I could not act in isolation, as I lived with actors from the troupe and interviewed community members. After attempting to remove myself from the action, I came away from the experience even more troubled by my lack of genuine connection to the community. My in-and-out research felt as though it did more harm than good to the community, and I wished that I could have contributed something to the troupe members or the wider circle of the community. Within these frustrations and seeming failures, I wondered, were there lessons to be gleaned? I hoped that a close analysis of the processes that I had
participated in would reveal why these two experiences seemed fraught with misunderstandings and unrealized goals.

Second, I wanted to place theatre, envisioned as a tool for community transformation, under the analytical spotlight. Acknowledging that theatre represents but one mode of participatory storytelling, I examined the worth of interventions seeking to harness the soft power derived from facilitating people to tell their stories. I was drawn, like many practitioners before me, to the seemingly revolutionary nature of the participatory “forum theatre” model that I first helped implement in Kenya. However, I witnessed the ways in which power interests, first in the community and then in the NGO world, appropriated these goals of community transformation for their own ends. While acknowledging the potential for failure and misappropriation, I wished to examine the value of initiatives that manage to achieve dialogue in spite of these challenges.

Finally, I aimed to appeal to my peers who similarly struggle to negotiate the balance between understanding and critiquing these complex issues on the one hand, and feeling compelled to confront inhumane and oppressive power structures on the other. The fourth chapter of this thesis seeks to – if not reconcile – then bring into conversation these tendencies towards reflection and, simultaneously, action. I recognize my limitations as a student researcher and practitioner in a community, but also want to understand how to form genuine relationships as a basis for collective action. I continue to grapple with such questions as, what value can come from my intervention if I leave forever? How might I negotiate my role as an outsider in the community, showing respect while also recognizing limitations that will not be overcome in the short time span often allotted to this type of work? How do I avoid inflicting more harm than I do good?
The ever-popular phenomenon of college students undertaking service trips, often over the summer time period, generates continued relevancy for these questions and concerns. I hope that my thesis, in particular the fourth chapter, will encourage students to step beyond the mantra that “this experience will benefit you more than it will benefit them.” At the same time, I cannot fully reconcile the tension between the fact that, on the one hand, short-term work is by its nature limited in impact and, on the other hand, my own set of “actionable insights” might work most effectively in the long term.

Methodology

I conducted the first part of the fieldwork for this thesis over eight weeks during May-July 2011 in Sauri village, Kenya, and the second part during the month of November 2011 in Dakar, Senegal.

A brief explanation of how I entered this topic and the two fieldwork sites helps inform my discussion of methodology. In the fall of 2010 I took a course on “Development in Africa” under the tutelage of Cultural Anthropology professor Dr. Charlie Piot. Dr. Piot asked his advisee Lia Haro, a PhD candidate in the same department, to speak to our class about her fieldwork in Sauri village. After hearing Lia speak I approached her, expressing my interest in this area, and she agreed to take me on as an intern over the summer in Kenya.

Lia, having lived and worked in the community for two years at that point and knowing that I wished to live with a local family, improve my Swahili, and learn the local language of Dholuo, arranged for me to live with Eunice Atieno Otieno, a local Sauri woman who had been working for the Tudruok Collaborative Anthropology project as a
researcher and community coordinator for two years. I lived for eight weeks with Eunice, her husband George, and their seven children Mary, Kevin, Pauline, Victor, Mercy, Yvonne, and Faith.

Working with the Tudruok Collaborative Anthropology research team, referred to by its members simply as “Tudruok,” I benefitted from a pre-existing organization and a strong network of relationships that Lia and her co-collaborators had worked to build and sustain. The details of this community work and my relationships with my co-workers are further explored in Chapter Three; here I note that my work in Sauri integrated action-oriented community storytelling efforts with intentionally ethnographic fieldwork.

Lia introduced me to the model of what has been termed “activist anthropology” (Hale 2006, Earle and Simonelli 2005), whereby the anthropologist aligns herself with “an organized group of people in struggle and accompan[i]es them on the contradictory and partly compromised path toward their political goals” (Hale 96). Lia incorporated into her fieldwork both collaborative research and critical development initiatives focused on presenting an alternative discourse about development and repairing damaged community relations caused by the practices of the Millennium Villages Project (MVP). My methodology thus fell heavily on the “participation” side of the participant-observer paradigm of anthropological fieldwork. However, this participation was simultaneously informed by discussions with Lia and my co-workers about fieldwork methods and assorted theoretical frameworks.

---

1 For an account of how such an activist anthropology might unfold, see especially Duncan Earle and Jeanne Simonelli’s Uprising of Hope: Sharing the Zapatista Journey to Alternative Development (2005).
I used a recorder pen during the meetings and took notes; I generally reworked these into fieldnotes written up on my laptop later that night. The majority of my analysis in Chapter Three springs from participating in these meetings and observing other events (for instance, play rehearsal), rather than structured interviews. Finally, I did not enter the field with the explicit intention of synthesizing this material into research. Primarily, I focused on facilitating storytelling initiatives with community members. It was only a year later, having perceived the relevance of the experience to my wider research interest in narrative as a means of transforming development practices, that I returned to my field notes and recordings as research material. I was also fortunate to be able to draw from meetings that had been filmed by community members and miscellaneous fieldnotes taken by Tudruok researchers.³

I entered my fieldwork in Senegal from the opposite end of the research spectrum. My work in Kenya had sparked an interest in the possibilities and limitations of forum theatre and I decided to further examine theatre as a means of carrying out development initiatives in a Senegalese setting. My study abroad program finished coursework a month early to accommodate students’ pursuit of independent research projects. In this context – with the explicit expectation of producing a graded research document – I undertook my work with the Kaddu Yarakh theatre troupe in the Dakar neighborhood of Yarakh during the month of November 2011. I interviewed theatre troupe members, NGO workers, and other people affiliated somehow with the practice of forum theatre: nearly thirty semi-structured interviews in total.

³ Namely the Constitution of Sauri Theatre for Development, transcriptions of plays performed by Sauri TFD, fieldnotes about the performance of these plays, and Joseph Okang’a’s interview with Paul Owino, all included in Chapter Three.
A note on language in both settings is also pertinent. In Kenya I spent a good deal of time with members of the Geno youth group, almost all of whom had completed high school and therefore spoke English at a relatively high level. With other groups, language became a more complicated transaction: in the Sinani widows’ cooperative, for example, almost all of the women exclusively spoke the Dholuo language of that region. I had studied Swahili for the equivalent of two semesters and continued to learn it in Eunice’s household while in Sauri, but most meetings with non-youth community members took place in Dholuo, since Swahili was taught through high school and not many older community members had undergone this education.

Translation took place informally and haphazardly, sometimes provided by one of the few youth members who fluently spoke Dholuo, sometimes by my co-worker Jethro if he was not facilitating meetings. I still encountered those instances when a community member would stand up in a meeting and speak passionately for some minutes and the person translating would eventually turn to me and say, “he was welcoming the community members,” or something to that effect. I attempted to find a middle ground with these translations; often, this meant paraphrasing rather than directly quoting community members. The exception to this rule took place with the exchange between Geno youth members that I analyze in Chapter Three, where I quote directly from the members speaking in English.

Translation in Senegal similarly took place on the level of the informal; Leity Kane, the troupe’s coordinator and planner, provided translation for most of the plays that I observed. My interviews were conducted in French, except for two with professors that were in English. Some interview subjects, particularly the actors, were not educated
through high school and did not speak a high level of French. The fluency of their expression was thus reduced, as was my own capacity to respond to new situations as quickly and fluently as I might have done in English.

In both Kenya and Senegal, I maintained awareness of how translation mediated meaning; people serving as translators in both places had clear incentives to translate in a certain direction. Jethro, for instance, would sometimes act dismissively towards community members that he did not like or agree with or would simply provide me with a cursory explanation that could not possibly have encompassed everything said. Likewise, it is possible that Leity could have provided translations that positioned his troupe in a more favorable light. I attempt to recognize the potential skewing of information by acknowledging when translation took place and by whom. In addition, I narrate in the first person in an attempt to situate myself firmly within the context of these limitations.

**Layout of the thesis**

Chapter One presents various discourses and definitions of Theatre for Development. From these, I explicate the current function of many TFD interventions as extensions of a neoliberal project that pays lip service to “participation.” I locate the popularity of TFD in its perceived advantages, using a case study from a multinational NGO evaluating TFD as a means of driving community change. Finally, I lay out the broad characteristics of TFD projects.

Chapter Two confronts the tension arising from the fact that on-the-ground methodologies do not align with the ideal model of “forum theatre” practice. I examine
two plays, performed by a local Senegalese theatre troupe, that seek in each case to disseminate a specific development agenda. Oriented by these examples, I explore some of the critiques of TFD.

In Chapter Three, I describe the process of creating theatre with several community groups. Through my interactions creating a play about gender dynamics with a youth group, I surmise that the most valuable interactions might come from the informal conversations that theatre helps facilitate.

I structured the thesis such that I present one “official” version of Theatre for Development in Senegal, echoing similar practices elsewhere by NGOs, before turning to an alternate vision in Kenya that, while similarly dogged by unforeseen complications and failure to achieve certain goals, does present small glimmers of hope. Chronologically speaking, however, I worked in Kenya first and then Senegal; a fact that may appear confusing to readers unless explicitly stated.

Finally, Chapter Four lays out a set of “Actionable Insights” that draw from my experiences in Kenya and Senegal to suggest methods for future first-time practitioners to better negotiate the complicated dynamics that arise in community-based work.
CHAPTER ONE

Defining and Contextualizing the Contesting Forms of Theatre for Development

“A handful of peanuts is thrown to a monkey
When the baby it is holding is about to be stolen!
If all the wealth we create with our hands
Remained in the country,
What would we not have in our village?”
--The character Gicaamba from *I Will Marry When I Want*
  by Ngugi we Thiong’o and Ngugi wa Mirii
  qtd. in *Barrel of a Pen* (1983, pp. 35)

“Drama cannot instruct. It confronts, perplexes and intrigues
  imagination into recreating reality.”
  --Edward Bond (1996, pp. 44)

Introduction

This chapter surveys the literature landscape on Theatre for Development (TFD),
seeking to define the varying forms, practices, and objectives of TFD. It then situates
theatre interventions within the wider development landscape and narrates the history of
TFD projects in the African context. Finally, the chapter explores the perceived
advantages of TFD in order to account for its sustained popularity in many development
schemes.
Defining a theatre of and for development

Definitions of Theatre for Development establish the parameters of its practice: will it serve as colonialist propaganda or a call to action; “edutainment” or the collective articulation of a community’s varying visions for change; confidence-builder or consciousness-creator? TFD has indeed been implemented in all the versions described above: the first term in each pairing reflects a colonial/neoliberal agenda and the second, a more radical/liberatory agenda. Theatre for Development in its simplest definition describes any form of theatre that seeks to engage with issues linked to community development. Zakes Mda, a South African novelist, poet, and playwright, locates a fundamental contradiction of TFD in its mode of application: either as a means to “disseminate development messages” or as a tool to “conscientise communities about their objective social political situation” (48).

Definitions based on the latter mode of theatre practice abound amongst academics and practitioners, summoning goals of consciousness-raising and liberation and contrasting with an NGO parlance of “education” and “behavior change.” This hopeful discourse is captured well in L. Dale Byam’s account of “stumbl[ing]” upon the field of Theatre for Development in a library: “I was in search of something dynamic, something that prescribed hope for regenerating an authentic African theatre” (xvi). Such hope pervades available accounts of TFD; theatre as a base for action is lauded for its

---

4 “edutainment” combines the words “education” and “entertainment” to describe mediums of entertainment designed to convey specific educational messages; this strategy is also called “entertainment-education,” bearing the acronym “EE.” For a more in-depth discussion of the issue, see Chapter 9 (pp. 159-74) of Thomas Tufte’s Media and Glocal Change: Rethinking Communication for Development (listed in full in the bibliography and also available for free online at: http://biblioteca.clacso.edu.ar/subida/clacso/coediciones/uploads/20100824061923/glocal.pdf)
“dynamic” and “authentic” qualities, even if authors later acknowledge that events went awry.

Some practitioners highlight the potential of TFD to challenge “the culture of silence” that exists within oppressed communities (Iortion 229) and catalyze “critical analysis…[and] the growth of identity and self-confidence” (Eyoh 58). Augusto Boal, the creator of participatory “forum” theatre, posits an even more radical agenda: “truly revolutionary theatrical groups should transfer to the people the means of production in the theater so that the people themselves may utilize them. The theatre is a weapon, and it is the people who should wield it” (122).

Boal’s edict found fulfillment in Kenyan novelist and playwright Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, who in 1977 helped enact what many scholars and practitioners still view as the most successful example of a community appropriating dominant “means of production” for their activist ends (Kidd 1982, Ndigirigi 2007). For Thiong’o, theatre is “about people celebrating their struggle to change their social environment and in the process changing themselves. It is about communities in motion performing their dreams for a better tomorrow” (XV, Foreward in Byram). Thiong’o’s project was overtly political; the play written and performed by the community, Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want), implicated the oppressive government in its depiction of the problems destroying Kenyan society.

Theatre for Development has swung full circle in the revolutionary spectrum: from its beginnings as an extension of the propagandist colonial project; to liberation projects closely linked to notions of the post-independence African state; to its current integration into the NGO world. The rhetoric used since the 1980’s to describe TFD
marks a departure from the explicitly political nature of Thiong’o’s project. Ross Kidd, a prolific TFD practitioner and scholar, calls TFD a process of “problem-solving” and “a means of expression, which is traditionally being used to educate the young, unify the community and articulate the community felt concerns and aspirations of the people” (204).

Kidd’s definition is informed by study and free of the bias that might be present in an NGO report seeking to project success. Nevertheless, his characterization denotes a shift from challenging power (government or otherwise) to addressing and “solving” problems; the impetus for change moves from a specific target to larger social issues such as HIV/AIDS. If theatre is indeed a weapon wielded by the people (assuming their control even over that process), against whom are they wielding it?

An evolving rhetoric: tracking the aims of TFD from UNESCO to Sauri, Kenya

The goals for Theatre for Development, whether couched in aspirational or radical terms, inevitably clash with on-the-ground applications of theatre interventions. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) encourages the use of theatre as one “culturally appropriate” method of educating people about HIV/AIDS (“Using Theatre and the Performing Arts” 2013). UNESCO Director General Irina Bokova, speaking at the World Theatre Day, attributes to theatre “the power to move, inspire, transform and educate in ways that no other art form can” (“International Theatre Institute” 2012). Bokova includes the word “educate,” yes; but
places it last in a string of grander expressions: the “transformational” aspect of theatre comes to the fore.

From the Director General we shift to a UNESCO-sponsored “Workshop on Theatre for Development as an Effective Tool for Social Development” held at Port Elizabeth, South Africa in 2001. Here, the instructive aspect of TFD reasserts itself as an intervention “aimed at educating its audience on using creative ways to solve pertinent social issues in order to boost community growth” (Sosu 1). TFD becomes an educational tool to “solve” problems and increase an undefined “community growth,” hearkening back to Kidd’s “problem-solving” parameters (204). The measures of success, echoing economic terminology, stand several steps removed from Bokova’s depiction of theatre as “inspir[ing]” and “transform[ative].”

The final step in this rhetorical evolution settles upon a theatre intervention in Sauri, Kenya. The Sauri Theatre for Development troupe was created in 2006 and trained with the help of a Millennium Villages Project facilitator. While not linked to UNESCO specifically, the troupe mentions the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in its constitution; it seems reasonable to posit the Sauri TFD troupe as representative of the translation process when the lofty goals by organizations like UNESCO are carried out on the ground. Sauri TFD aimed to “educate the community about the Millennium Development Goals” and “change youths and adult’s behavior in…positive ways geared for development” (2006 n.p.).

Here, the educational purpose of theatre has been diverted towards disseminating the agenda of an organization (MVP). Community change is framed as “positive” behavioral change that adheres to a desired course of “development,” presumably
towards a preexisting end goal. The first three possibilities of theatre laid out in Bokova’s original speech – to “move, inspire, transform” its audience – describe attitudinal change; yet, after various filtering stages, we are left only with a didactic education strategy angling towards specific behavioral change. Following from this desired control over behavior, we turn now to the troubled discourses and practices surrounding participation in theatre interventions.

**Participation: constructing a discourse and practice**

Participation-oriented theatre gained popularity as a tool for development from the 1990s onwards, riding the wave of neoliberal development interventions targeted towards capacity-building and human development. Tim Prentki characterizes this movement as a “paradigm shift in development from modernization to participation” (40). In the modernization phase, NGOs viewed theatre as an efficient means of disseminating messages from the “centre” to rural populations targeted for the passive consumption of these messages; an extension of what Prentki calls “the colonial assumption that ‘we know what’s best for you’” (40).

The 1980s heralded the so-called lost decade of development, whereby the spectacular failure of structural adjustment programs to alleviate poverty across the developing world created a “structural crisis” in the development establishment (Rahnema 117). This failure warranted an alteration of the development agenda; “participation” became the buzzword, a tactic that was seen as both politically and financially lucrative in development circles (ibid.). As new policies sought to counter the damage done over the past thirty years, a “transformational” rather than “instrumental”
approach emerged, converting the local populations into “primary stakeholders” (Nelson and Wright 5). Participatory techniques, in theory, would include the poor in the planning and implementation of the development projects taking place in their communities.

Critics of participatory development have sought to establish a distinction between “participation as a means (to accomplish the aims of a project more efficiently, effectively, or cheaply) as opposed to participation as an end (where the community or groups sets up a process to control its own development)” (Nelson and Wright 1). The second form of participation generates opportunities for the empowerment of the local population, whereas the first form limits them. Nelson and Wright follow this assertion by cautioning that while “participation” attracts numerous definitions, practitioners concerned with shifting the balance of power in communities towards the marginalized and disempowered must fully explore the making of meanings around the word, how these meanings translate to action, and who profits or loses. Currently, most participatory development approaches implement “participation as means” (17).

Within this paradigm of participation, theatre holds particular appeal. What better way to engender participation than through people’s bodily actions? If top-down communication typified the modernization phase of development, then participation flipped this communication model. Community members discuss, debate, learn, and make their opinions known about a subject; the stage creates a space “where all people have the possibility and the right to be heard” (“Act, Learn and Teach” 6).

Prentki attributes the emergence of the term “Theatre for Development” to the 1990s and the simultaneous rise of participatory tactics to engage local populations in what Majid Rahnema terms “genuine processes of dialogue and interaction” (121). These
tactics continued to warrant a certain type of behavior; community members might now participate with their bodies in theatre projects, but their enactment of this participation still took place within the parameters defined by the organization in control of the process. South African theatre practitioner Lynn Dalrymple notes that, whereas in apartheid South Africa theatre projects aimed to liberate rather than domesticate the audience, “after the political change in South Africa in 1994, the emphasis in educational drama projects began to shift towards achieving individual behavior change especially in such fields as health, human rights and environmental education” (203).

Theatre practitioners and scholars are themselves well aware of the potential of theatre to reinforce the “dominant discourse of development practice” (Prentki 39). Rahman notes the adherence of many theatre projects to the development agenda du jour: “It is not a mere coincidence that all these issues can be grouped under sectors which attract foreign donation: good governance, women’s empowerment, safeguarding the environment, primary health care, universal adult and primary education” (211).

Education scholar Michael Etherton warns, “Drama in the context of these development programmes is like any other communication medium. It is objectively neutral. Drama will reinforce the ultimate aims of the development programmes in which it is being used. Theatre will not, ipsofacto, transform the development programme either into what its superficial rhetoric declares it to be or into something else” (320). Oga S. Abah, a Nigerian playwright and Theatre for Development practitioner, raises a final important point: the success or failure of a project depends on community ownership and control; specifically, the “question of who identifies the problems and finally decides what development a particular community needs” (15).
Different terminologies within the field of community and development-based theatre abound: “Community-Based Theatre,” “Popular Theatre,” “Applied Theatre,” “Theatre for Peace,” to name but a few. I apply the specific moniker of “Theatre for Development” for two reasons. First, the name “TFD” ties theatre to a specific development agenda and makes masking it as supposedly “neutral” a more difficult task. Second, the theatre with which I have worked and that I have observed has taken place within a context dominated by development discourse and practice. Finally, the term “Theatre for Development” links this type of theatre to the rhetoric of participatory development. While TFD is not by definition participatory or interactive, the interventions that I describe involve physical performance of the part of audience members. Thus, it is important to distinguish from earlier theatre-based movements like popular theatre, whereby actors often took theatre “to the people” with populist messages and aesthetics but did not incorporate participation on the part of audience members.

**Perceived advantages of Theatre for Development**

Theatre incorporates cultural elements that were present in pre-colonial African societies, namely song, dance, and other performative behaviors. Thiong’o writes, “drama in pre-colonial Kenya was not…an isolated event: it was part and parcel of the rhythm of daily and seasonal life of the community” (37). Abah believes that TFD can use traditional storytelling performance as a base for “tapping community wisdom and information” and democratizing the process of participation (143). Part of this democratization lies in the accessible nature of theatre to non-literate populations,
enabling theatre to reach a broader audience than development interventions relying on recipients’ ability to read and understand written messages.

Theatre is popular particularly amongst children and young people, who are often its target population. And there is a social function in gathering community members together; Joy Morrison, in her ethnographic research into TFD in Burkina Faso, noted the perceived importance in the eyes of villagers for this “communal approval” and group experience (161). However, Abah distinguishes between traditional forms of theatre and TFD in the sense that, with “folk tale performances” in his village, audience members would interject and challenge the teller if the story began to “deviate from the norm.” But whereas “this age old moral position…affirms” normative beliefs, the strength of TFD for Abah lies in the fact that it “problematizes” social issues instead (143).

Moreover, role-playing (the act of physically enacting a role) is perceived to be an effective means of pushing participants to take ownership over a process. Johansson, writing about TFD in Tanzania, surmises, “spectators are reminded of their double roles as theatrical witnesses and social players in the communal events” (64). Johansson further suggests that this physical enactment frees people of social norms: “The way to get this close to issues of sexuality and disease [when discussing HIV/AIDS] is to get past language by using bodily actions that irrefutably resemble everyday life routines” (67). Morrison notes that role-playing frees participants to “express all sorts of opinions…on a subject with impunity, an aspect unavailable through any other medium of communication” (160).

Finally, the feedback element of many participatory dramas particularly appeals in terms of staging debates. Dalrymple, speaking to theatre in South Africa, proposes that
theatre “immediately allows for different points of view to be presented and for some of the debates around the news of a new disease to emerge. The barriers of disbelief, myths that emerge, and fear that is aroused can be addressed by characters with whom young people identify (83).” Many development practitioners appreciate the forum model for the immediacy of its feedback: “more than any other medium,” this model allows for “an immediate dialogue to take place” (Etherton 320).

**Characteristics of Theatre for Development**

With the dominant discourses surrounding Theatre for Development now established, broad characteristics of its practice can be highlighted. While recognizing that blanket assumptions cannot be cast over every theatre interventions associated with NGOs, I seek to establish common frameworks of reference for the practice of TFD as I have noted them throughout the available literature.

Educational messages pervade the content of many Theatre for Development plays, revolving around changes in attitudes, or behavior, or both. The lexicon of “devspeak” often refers to these two modes of hoped-for change as “sensitization” and “behavioral change” (Diol 2011, Betiang 2010, Abah 2002, Ross and Byram 1982).

The available literature reveals play themes that fall into the following categories:

1. Family (marital conflict, family planning)
2. Gender (household roles, domestic abuse, girls’ education, condom negotiation between sexual partners)
3. Health (Tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, Sexually Transmitted Infections, nutrition)
4. Environment (waste management, stray cattle)
5. Agriculture (land reform, farming techniques)
6. Sanitation (human waste disposal, hand washing)
7. “Social issues” (migrant labor, “youth problems,” migration away from villages, corruption propagated by village elites and local government officials)

These themes share a central focus on the management of behavior and/or movement. STI’s must be controlled through changed sexual behavior and contraceptive use. Land must be farmed differently; cattle contained with new techniques. Waste (of garbage, of feces) must be deposited in different places. Men must marshal their behavior towards their wives, and so on. Audience members find themselves propelled ahead on dual tracks: pushed not only by the pace of the play as the plot unfolds according to a certain formula, but also by themes of moving forward, onward, upward, towards an improvement in behavior and even character.

Educational messages often slip into a didactic mode of expression or intent. Ideas about “good” and “bad” characters, for instance, can easily be governed by actors’ modes of dress and expression. A woman wearing a tight leopard-skin dress triggers as many associations as a “big man” whose large belly protrudes from under his suit. A fundamental tension arises: although these interventions purport to be open and participatory, participants are still expected to do so in a certain way and to glean specific moral “truths” from the plays.

There are, of course, purely didactic forms of theatre that do not pretend to be anything but: a sketch about where to go for HIV testing, for example, or how best to dispose of your family’s waste. But when interventions target more complex modes of behavior, such as conflict between spouses or corruption endemic in village leadership,
the pedagogical lines blur together. Suddenly the intervention can target “bad” behaviors like apathy and fatalism (Kidd and Ross 99, Abah 160), without acknowledging that these behaviors are manifestations of deeper societal issues that cannot be attributed to a morally “bad” character or someone who took the “wrong” action.

**Control over content**

A brief examination of the power dynamics between different entities helps illuminate the question of how play content is selected, and by whom. The flow of power and resources is almost exclusively uni-directional: from NGOs to theatre troupes, from facilitators to community members. While a single figure may not be obstructing politically subversive content, institutionalized power structures can make sustained attempts at subversive theatre a challenging task.

The extreme example of this suppression arrives with the case of the Kamiriithu theatre project in Limuru, Kenya (the hometown of Thiong’o), which the authoritarian Kenyan regime found subversive enough to warrant banning public performances of the seminal play *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want)* a month after its first performance in 1977, jailing Thiong’o a month later, and finally returning in 1982, after the community’s continued attempts to enact theatre, to burn down the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre’s open-air theatre (Thiong’o 59).

Existing power structures can also be mobilized to silence protesting voices in more subtle ways. For example, when members of the Kaddu Yarakh troupe in Senegal decided to stage a play protesting the pervasive power cuts and examining their link to political corruption, they could not find funding and financed the play out of pocket.
Before the staging of their first play on the topic, a disgruntled politician contacted the president of the neighborhood to express his disagreement with the play. The neighborhood president quickly mobilized resources to stage a “community day” in the neighborhood with free food and entertainment that, coincidentally, took place the same day as the play. Although the troupe staged several performances, the approach was not financially sustainable and they returned quickly to creating plays on commission for NGOs (Diol 2011).

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, in considering these questions of power dynamics and participatory trends in development, Rahman’s warning rings true: development “has emerged as a self-perpetuating industry serving the needs of globalization…Underneath all subterfuges of “development” and Theatre for Development, if one listens carefully, the haunting question it asks is ‘development for whom’?” (215). When participation becomes about simply moving bodies onstage and off, TFD risks paying lip-service to the transformational ideals of theatre while failing to touch the hearts and minds of the participants. In Chapter Two, I begin to unpack the effects of an imposed development agenda on play participants in Senegal.
CHAPTER TWO

Observing NGO-Driven Theatre for Development in Senegal

“Pour nous les africains, tout c’est le théâtre”
(“For us Africans, everything is theatre”)
--Oumar Ndao
Professor of Literature
Cheikh Anta Diop University
October 2011

Introduction

This chapter examines the alignment of practice and theory behind Theatre for Development; that is, how theatre as a development intervention both intersects with and diverges from the model of interactive theatre known as “forum theatre.” Beginning with an explanation of the theory and rules of forum theatre, the chapter sets the scene in the Yarakh neighborhood of Dakar and explains and analyzes the practices of the Kaddu Yarakh theatre troupe in Dakar, Senegal. The specific Kaddu Yarakh model of implementing theatre is explored, with references to two plays that the troupe performed. The implementation of these plays, particularly the interactive “forums” immediately following a performance, leads to a critique of the various ways in which the troupe stages the plays, frames social issues, and facilitates audience participation. When practitioners base their interventions on the assumption that theatre “gives voice to the voiceless,” they risk bypassing the crucial questions of whose voices are being heard, what interests those voices represent, and in what spaces those voices are heard.
During November 2011, I conducted observational research and interviews with the Kaddu Yarakh troupe of actors and additional NGO workers involved in commissioning the pieces that Kaddu Yarakh created and performed. Kaddu Yarakh works from a model of theatre known as forum theatre; to reach an understanding of their methods, we must begin with a basic understanding of the theory and practice of forum theatre.

Theory of forum theatre

Falling under the wider umbrella of the “Theatre of the Oppressed,” forum theatre transforms drama into a problem-posing forum between the actors and the audience members (referred to as spect-actors).

Developed by the Brazilian activist and theatre director Augusto Boal during the 1960’s to help mobilize the illiterate and dispossessed population of peasants, forum theatre has increasingly gained recognition in the development sector as a way to introduce new information and ideas in a compelling and participatory format. A well-worn anecdote illustrates Boal’s moment of recognition that theatre must speak the language of its audience and express their “own reality” (Babbage 20).

After Boal’s troupe performed a revolutionary play that ended with a rousing call to action, the peasant audience failed to recognize the actors as anything but the revolutionaries whom they played. The community members exhorted them to take up their guns and fight with them that very day, and the actors, mumbling frail excuses, realized the hypocrisy of a theatre model that “preach[ed] revolution for abstract audiences…How should we speak to this real people? How could we teach them what
they knew better than us?” (Boal 194). From this point onwards, Boal became focused on developing theatre techniques that were grounded in local conceptions of reality.

Boal questions our passive acceptance of a system based on catharsis: “Tragedy, in all its qualitative and quantitative aspects, exists as a function of the effect it seeks, catharsis…Catharsis is correction: what does it correct? Catharsis is purification: what does it purify?” (23). Boal sees this traditional model of theatre as politically “coercive”; it conditions the audience to find emotional satisfaction through a constructed resolution (the catharsis). They therefore continue to accept their passive role in life as subjects of someone else’s narrative. Boal follows the Brechtian notion that theatre should “[hand] on the achievements of the section now leading to the section of the people that is struggling for the lead” (Brecht 108), contending that audience members should analyze the events of a play even as they are swept up in them; a play is a dialogue, not a monologue.

**Rules of forum theatre**

Forum theatre transforms drama into a problem-posing forum between the actors and the audience members. The spectator assumes the role of “spect-actor”: someone with his or her own agency and vision for social justice. Boal calls this process a “rehearsal for change” (38); the stage provides a forum for participants to practice enacting the change they wish to see in the world. In forum theatre, the core actors develop a short 15-25 minute sketch about a type of oppression relevant to the community in which it is performed. The play ends with the oppression continued rather
than resolved; for example, the scene might end with a husband beating his wife, or a factory owner firing a worker unjustly.

The facilitator, or “Joker,” then explains the rules of forum theatre before the actors repeat the play. During the second performance, spect-actors can stop the play at any point and replace one of the actors in the play who represents an oppressed character. The spect-actor then acts out his or her version of how the character should act to question and change the oppressive power relations. According to Boal, the spect-actor cannot create “magic” solutions; that is, solutions that would not happen in real life. Instead, the spect-actor is enacting their particular vision of how change could take place, but within the parameters of the “real world”; they still face the same oppressive situations that exist in their reality, but must strategize about ways to overcome these.

As the play progresses, other audience members can stop the action and replace the last audience member as one of the actors. The Joker continues to act as a facilitator, stopping the actors if necessary and relaying doubts and questions to the audience members about the events taking place on stage. The other actors onstage stay in role, so that participating audience members continue to struggle against oppression. If the audience members succeed in overcoming the oppression in a realistic way, the play can then be repeated a third time with audience members replacing the oppressor and devising new methods for challenging the oppressed.

This process is designed to mirror reality: often the powerless do not have the capacity to change the behavior of the oppressor, but must work within the limitations imposed by structural oppression. Paulo Freire notes, “only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficient to free both” the oppressed and the oppressor.
(21). Following Freire, forum theatre intends for spect-actors to function in a system paralleled to reality: working first to transform their own actions in challenging the oppressors and regaining agency before the oppressors themselves can be worked upon.

The forum process aims to create a rich debate rather than come to a single conclusion; if a conclusion is reached, it results from a variety of arguments and opinions. Moreover, as Frances Babbage points out, “Forum is competitive in that it presents its audience with the challenge of an unsolved problem; one that will matter to them since it impacts on their own lives, directly or indirectly” (69). At the same time, however, the audience must be able to derive some energy from the situation: rather than confronting a problem of, say, structural oppression at the level of government, audience members can more productively work from within their own milieu on problems that effect their lives on a tangible level. The forum theatre process, according to Boal’s theory, should push spect-actors to simultaneously situate their own lives in the context of oppression and to enact solutions for change.

**Background and setting of TFD in Dakar**

The theatre troupe Kaddu Yarakh (“Voice of Yarakh” in Wolof) derives its name from its location in the historic fishermen’s neighborhood of Yarakh in Dakar, Senegal. The troupe began as a popular theatre group focused on staging plays that entertained the local populace while also highlighting problems in the community, but without the interactive element of forum theatre.

Kaddu Yarakh started practicing forum theatre in 2002 after the president, Mohammadou Diol, attended a forum theatre workshop hosted by UNESCO (Diol 2011).
Now, the troupe is contacted by NGOs who want to develop a piece of forum theatre. Generally, Diol discusses the project aims with employees of the NGO, writes a play examining those themes, and returns to the funders with the play to obtain their approval or recommendations for change. During the rehearsal process, the actors improvise based from the script, changing their roles as they deem appropriate.

The troupe has a rotating cast of 10-15 actors. They own a community center, located down a sandy alleyway near one of the main roads in the Yarakh neighborhood. Several of the actors – the younger, unmarried men – sleep in this building most nights. I stayed in the center with these actors for two weeks while I was conducting my research, which helped me familiarize myself with the actors and the community.

Many nights I would wander around the neighborhood with Seydou Ndiaye, one of the longest-serving members of the troupe who had trained to play the role of “Joker,” or facilitator, during the troupe’s plays. My role in the wider community went as deep as could be expected in the space of three weeks; because Kaddu Yarakh had hosted theatre troupes from around the world, the inhabitants of this neighborhood were used to seeing toubabs (white people) around for a week or so at a time. Community members seemed friendly and welcoming, but language was often a barrier to deeper interaction.

Within the actors, only half spoke French to any great degree; many had not finished their secondary schooling where French is taught. The three most active women in the troupe spoke almost no French; an issue that came to light most prominently when the troupe put on a play for the French Institute in French, and some of the actors had to memorize French to play their role.
The actors work on a commission basis, negotiating with NGOs who want the troupe to create and stage plays. Generally, the troupe was paid on a play-by-play basis, then this money was distributed to the actors by the president, Mohammadou Diol, or the acting secretary and co-founder of the troupe, Leity Kane. In addition to this sporadic income, most of the actors work full-time jobs. This income stream limits the troupe to what they can afford to stage: often, their plays revolve around health messages, rather than the more revolutionary fare that they sometimes talked about. For instance, one member had been arrested and held in prison in the Casmance region for staging forum theatre plays addressing the rapes and thefts committed by both rebels and government soldiers. However, like the rest of the actors he had to make a living and so dedicated his energies to rehearsing plays on topics like birth spacing and nutrition.

The play that the troupe conducted for the French Institute was to some degree an attempt to reconcile the need to make a living with the desire to create subversive material. Mohammadou Diol told me of how they had created the environment play at least ten years ago to depict the degradation of the Bay of Hann; they were now able to adapt it to the French Institute’s requirements, as a play to be put on during “Earth Week,” and so achieved both advocacy and income generation at once (2011).

The Kaddu Yarakh forum theatre model

The two pieces that I witnessed were both overtly concerned with behavior change for the audience members. The first piece, which I saw performed three times, was intended to educate men and women on the benefits of “birth spacing” (practicing family planning to prolong the time between each birth); the second piece, which I
watched on four occasions, encouraged Hann residents to protect the Bay of Hann from further environmental degradation.

For the piece on birth spacing, Kaddu Yarakh was contacted by the organization Intrahealth, which then worked with a partner NGO, ACDEV ("Action and Development"). Together with ACDEV, Kaddu Yarakh developed a play about birth spacing. Other people became involved in coordinating the plays with ACDEV: leaders of the neighborhoods, presidents of several women’s groups, mediators working for the local post de santé (health clinic), and members of the Organisations Communautaire de Base (Community Based Organizations, or OCBs). The play *La baie n’est pas une poubelle* was commissioned by the French Institute as part of a program of activities for “World Environmental Week”.

Kaddu Yarakh seeks to translate the methods of Augusto Boal into a Senegalese context. The actors incorporate song and dance and perform largely in Wolof. They have also developed a model for a process of “judgment,” taking place after the play and prior to the forum, where audience members decide whether the characters’ behavior merits a seat in the shade as reward or a seat under the sun as punishment. Seydou Ndiaye, the troupe’s “joker,” explained that the judgment is intended to ease the way into audience participation in the following forum; to break the barrier that exists between the actors and audience members. The structure of the judgment provides a neat example of how local understandings come into play: rather than equating light with “good” and darkness with “bad,” the punishment/reward scheme corresponds to the reality of the context, where sitting in the shade is a privilege and sitting in the full glare of the sun constitutes a punishment.
Because Kaddu Yarakh works with a range of partners, the practices for a play vary from setting to setting: a spontaneous event in the street of Yarakh presents different challenges and opportunities than a play performed at the French Institute for the “grand public,” a play aimed at French-speaking high school students, or a play for a women’s group in the courtyard of a member’s house. However, my observations of seven performances in total allowed me to gain an understanding of the underlying frameworks to Kaddu Yarakh’s methods regardless of the specific context. Leity Kane, a longtime member of Kaddu Yarakh who is involved chiefly in managing the logistics and coordination between NGOs and the troupe, was an observer, like me, to many of the plays. He translated the proceedings from Wolof into French to me verbally as the plays unfolded. I translated his words myself from French into English. Some inaccuracies may exist within these three layers of translation. However, having seen each of the plays several times, I am confident that any mistakes are minor and do not detract or deviate from the main message that the actors were seeking to convey.

**Oppression unresolved: structuring the play**

Both plays that I observed begin with a humorous and striking scene involving all of the actors, who wear their normal clothing in order to distinguish themselves from their later roles in costume. This act corresponds to Boal’s insistence that the actor “be guided by criteria of verisimilitude (the appearance of the truth), as well as having his clothes and other personal items as authentic as possible” (65). Seydou Ndiaye, Kaddu Yarakh’s Joker, interrupts the actors and asks them what they are doing. The dialogue shifts to include the audience and establish a rapport as the actors explain the rules of
forum theatre to the Joker in a comical fashion. An actor says that the first part involves the play; then Malick Mbaye, a well-known actor on several Senegalese soap operas, steps forward. His tiny frame and stutter attract laughter and cries of recognition from the audience, especially children, as he tells them that the play will end “very, very badly!”

Another actor explains the second part of the play: the judgment. Bad characters will be placed “under the sun” and good characters “in the shade” and characters who are neither good nor bad in the middle. Finally, another actor tells the audience about the forum, where “you will become the actors.” Seydou reiterates what the actors have explained and motions to start the play, but is stopped by the actors who tell him, “It is necessary to sign!” Seydou asks, “Sign what?” The actors reply as one: “Sign the protocol first!” The actors make their way into the audience, introducing themselves and asking members if they agree to these “rules” of participation, illustrated by waving imaginary sheets of paper. This done, they come back to the stage. Seydou asks the audience once more if they agree, to which the response is typically a resounding “Waaw!” The actors reply, “The promise is a debt!” before exiting the stage.

The actors return in costume to perform a piece 15 to 20 minutes long. While the actors work from a basic memorized script, they often improvise according to the environment and atmosphere. Cheikhna Djiré, a troupe member, explained that his acting style varies based on the audience: when a street performance attracts mostly children, the actors place more emphasis on physical comedy (Djiré 2011). However, for “la grand publique” at a venue like the French Institute, “The level [of acting] is elevated [because] they understand better [than the women and children on the street]” (ibid.).

---

5 “Yes!”
6 “important public”
piece finishes on an unresolved note; the oppressors triumph while the oppressed characters remain downtrodden and subjected to hardship.

**Establishing dialogue: the forum**

The “judgment” immediately following the play encourages the audience to think critically about the events that just took place, providing a technical bridge between the actors performing and the spectators taking on the roles themselves. In the judgment, Seydou calls forward each character and asks the audience who he or she is. Once the audience has shouted a reply, he asks whether the character “behaved him or herself well.” The audience generally agrees quickly on a response, after which Seydou asks them whether the character should be placed in the sun or the shade. The process is generally comical and lighthearted as audience members shout out their suggestions. The actors often act offended if they’ve been told to sit in the sun, and sometimes argue with the audience members. In both plays that I observed, one of the “oppressor” characters would refuse to go to the sun or try to sneak to the other side, at which point Seydou picked out a young volunteer to drag the unwilling actor to his rightful place, accompanied by laughter and heckling from the audience. By connecting with the audience through humor, the troupe breaks down communication barriers and establishes precedence for participation later in the forum.

After the characters have been placed under the sun or in the shade, Seydou asks the audience a series of questions: Are the people in the shade worthy of our help? Are you happy with how the play has gone? Who can help this character? With a combination

---

7 “avait le bon comportement”
of coaxing and pressure, Seydou persuades someone to come take the place of an actor. If the crowd is unwilling, he first asks for suggestions of what the oppressed character can do; from this discussion he cajoles one of the contributors onto the stage. The audience member takes the place of an oppressed actor to discuss with the oppressor. The actor playing the oppressor stays in role, contesting the suggestions of the audience member.

Seydou steps in after a few minutes if the conversation has run its course. He thanks the audience member and asks the others whether he or she has found a solution. One or two other volunteers try the role; with each one the actor playing the oppressor generally concedes a little ground. The forum usually does not extend beyond half an hour.

After the forum Seydou tells the audience that the things they have discussed today must be continued. Several organizers of the event then reiterate the message, telling the audience with varying levels of forcefulness that they are now responsible for continuing the conversation. The play over, the audience quickly disperses, the organizers stack chairs, and the actors ready themselves to leave.

With this basic structure in place, we can begin to examine the particularities of the two plays and the facilitation of the forums.
I. FIRST PLAY

La baie n’est pas une poubelle

I observed The Bay is not a Garbage Can four times: during a practice in Yarakh, a formal performance at the French Institute, an informal performance in Yarakh, and a performance at a high school in Pikine. According to Seydou, the troupe has been performing variations of this piece for many years, even before the troupe began using the forum theatre model in 2002. Originally the play was one and a half hours long; Seydou and Mohammadou edited the script down to a twenty-minute performance to facilitate the interactive forum that they incorporated after the performance (Ndiaye 2011). Mohammadou highlighted La baie and general advocacy for the Baie de Hann as one of the troupe’s most important activities (Diol 2011).

The setting

The troupe was well received each time they performed, although the formal atmosphere at the French Institute and the lycée in Pikine contrasted with the two times the troupe played in Yarakh.

Both times in Yarakh the performance took place in the street; children participated in games beforehand; and the audience overwhelmingly consisted of children with a scattering of curious adults who stopped by, sometimes for a few minutes before moving on. The troupe performed mostly in French, although they explained the rules of the forum in Wolof as well. The audience, mostly rowdy young boys, laughed hard at the

---

8 “The bay is not a garbage can”
funny parts and grew restless during the longer dialogues. They participated enthusiastically in the forum, shouting and pointing towards the “shade” or “sun.”

These two “community performances” in particular highlighted something of the incongruities of NGO funding. The troupe was required to perform this play (disseminate the development message) in the local community several times in order to secure funding from the French Institute, yet they obviously treated the performances as a chance to refine their techniques in preparation for the big show at the Institute. This attitude was further demonstrated through the fact that the majority of the performance was in French (so as to appeal to the elite audience at the Institute for whom they were practicing) and yet many community members in Yarakh, and indeed some of the actors themselves, struggled to understand the French dialogue.

The casual approach that the troupe applied in Yarakh contrasted sharply with the two other performances. At the French Institute, to a seated audience, the players gave their best performance yet. The timing and dialogue were well executed and without mistakes. The actors had by this time mastered the French script, but they also included asides in Wolof that only the Senegalese audience members understood; a technique that appeared to be a tongue-in-cheek way of creating rapport with the Senegalese members of the audience and reclaiming some of their competence as actors in an unfamiliar setting and language.

The plot

The play begins with a fisherman, Cheikh, who comes on stage and starts casting his net. His sister Dior joins him and asks him why there have been no fish for days. They
have a conversation about how once the sea was full of fish but now there is nothing. They pause, and two factory workers enter the stage from the other side carrying a long pipe. They get to work releasing the toxic fluids from the pipe into the ocean. Their boss, Malick, enters and tells them that they cannot keep the toxic fluids in the factory but have to dump them all in the ocean.

Masseye, the guardian of the bay, enters and circles the factors workers skeptically, then sees the fisherman. He approaches him and asks him why he is fishing with his back facing the sea. The fisherman replies that there are no more fish and laments that he has no way of surviving. Malick, the boss, re-enters giving orders in a walkie-talkie to release more waste from his pipes into the ocean. Masseye approaches and confronts him about his actions. A testy exchange follows as Malick warns that he could take away his job, and Masseye retorts impudently.

Malick leaves the stage and Daba enters carrying a bucket full of household trash. She tries to throw it into the ocean but is stopped by Masseye. He warns her that dumping household trash is forbidden. They argue, with her demanding him to tell her what she should do. He and the fisherman mention the trash collection that the city council has started up, but she dismisses it because it does not always come and “then what can I do?” They exchange more heated remarks, with Daba questioning his virility and suggesting that a real man does not have a job stopping women from throwing away their trash. Finally, she exclaims, “Here is forbidden, there is forbidden, so…” and throws the bucket of trash on him.
The forum

The consensus during the first two forums held in Yarakh was the same: the two workers, the factory owner, and the woman were put out in the sun; while the fisherman, his sister, and the guardian (receiving a resounding round of applause) were allowed to rest in the shade.

Both forums were short, with only one participant each time. During the first forum, an actor from another troupe came to speak with Malick the factory owner, telling him that if the bay were his house he would not throw his trash there, and that if he had not acted as he did there would be fish in the sea now. After a short, heated exchange, during which many audience members lost interest, Leity (acting as Joker) ended the play, telling the crowd that the troupe would be playing at the French Institute the next day. During the second forum at Yarakh, several young boys fought amongst themselves to replace the guardian and confront Malick. The boy who donned the guardian’s distinctive joker’s cap told Malick that he should not be doing that. He made some jokes that made everyone laugh, and they had a short argument before Leity again stopped the forum and the crowd dispersed.  

By contrast, from the beginning of the forum at the French Institute, audience members expressed their views confidently and enjoyed debating against one another. The judgment of the characters and their place in the shade, sun, or middle, were constantly referenced and adjusted during the forum.

When Seydou asked the members who had a solution for confronting the behavior of the “aggressors,” the factory owner and the woman with the bucket, a woman

9 Note that translation was not available to me at this time and so I do not know exactly what was said during the forum.
immediately shouted out, “she [the woman apprehended for dumping her garbage into the bay] can find a lawyer,” revealing her knowledge of and confidence in her rights according to the law. Other suggestions followed and people clamored to come onstage. Suggestions for change were creative and went beyond blaming the factory owner for bad behavior: pay people to collect trash, or create an association. A man came onstage and spoke passionately: the factory workers ought to be placed in the sun as well because survival was no excuse for ruining the lives of others. Another man suggested that the authorities needed to be implicated and the population educated. A woman took to the stage and talked at length about eco-neighborhoods and the problems causing pollution.

After this spect-actor’s speech, the direction of the forum subtly shifted. With a few exceptions, the volunteers held positions in the government or on environmental associations. Evidently well-versed in the problem of the Baie de Hann, they discussed how to change people’s behaviors and the issue of “sensitization.” The forum became a platform for them to exhibit their knowledge of the subject matter and advance their personal agenda. One of the most astute comments came from a student who came onstage at the same time as the mayor. He said that we must stop the production of plastics and asked, “What stops women from going to the market carrying traditional calabashes [instead of plastic bags]? Tell people, ‘Thank you, but I brought my own plastic bag.’” Appreciative murmurs and discussion amongst audience members followed his comments.

The mayor of Hann then took to the stage and talked at length about the council’s policies of collection and the “problem of behavior” amongst the population. He quoted numerous statistics about Hann, thanked Kaddu Yarakh for their work and reiterated that
the collection process was under control. Another student volunteered to come to the stage once the mayor had sat down; however, a woman in the front row objected, telling Seydou, “It is not the protocol.” Presumably, she was referring to some protocol of etiquette whereby other people’s opinions (especially young people’s, as with the student volunteer) should not override or even be shared after the mayor has spoken. Seydou obliged, ending the forum and thanking everyone for coming. The woman vocalized what had already been happening onstage, whereby hierarchies of power and rank became apparent in who felt entitled to speak and for how long.

ANALYSIS

Processes of appropriation

In this performance to the elites of Dakar, powerful audience members appropriated the stage – a supposedly neutral political space – in order to promote their own personal agendas. The word “sensitization” was leached of all meaning; the play itself had been created to “sensitize” the local population to the problem of pollution in the bay, yet the audience at the Institute refused to include themselves in the category of intended recipients of an educational message. When a student did attempt to shift the tone of the forum towards a more productive discussion of how individuals can take ownership over their actions (in this case by bringing calabashes rather than plastic bags to the market) his comments were ignored and further contribution from one of his classmates overtly silenced by an arbitrary hierarchy of authority (the “protocol” cited by the one woman).
A similar process of appropriation took place during the forum process at the lycée in Pikine. Although students were generally eager to participate and say what they thought, the desks that had been set up around the playing area hemmed them in, impeding them from entering into the stage and replacing a character. The forum became more of a forum in the traditional sense, a discussion devoid of any acting element. An overenthusiastic teacher bearing a terrible microphone exacerbated the problem: he came over to students to hold the microphone under their face and thus removed any incentive for the students to move into the center. Moreover, both the teacher and Mohammadou Diol, the president of Kaddu Yarakh, spent a significant portion of the forum speaking. The teacher, who had also participated in the forum at L’Institut Français, kept asking questions into the microphone that he was holding and Diol often responded to the questions. As at L’Institut Français, participants spoke often about changing the behavior of “the population” through a “sensitization” campaign. Towards the end of the forum, the other professors also took the microphone to make sweeping statements: “We must ask the question: what can the state do?” And, “We must reflect on how to organize society.”

These empty statements served to further reinforce the atmosphere of appropriation; the empty stage became the amphitheatre for teachers’ empty professions of goodwill and understanding. Encouraged by Diol, who was supposed to be facilitating but instead frequently took the microphone to contribute his opinions, these teachers projected their own power and expertise into a space that was supposedly reserved for students. This mode of contribution combined with the inhibiting spatial factors to silence
the voices of the students, themselves the supposed beneficiaries of the “participation” part of the forum theatre model.

**Processes of distancing**

The two environmental plays held at L’Institut Français and the high school at Pikine contrasted with the street context in which Kaddu Yarakh often plays. In these two more formal environments, participants commandeered the space of the stage to transmit their own politically oriented messages; whether those politics involved the city council of Hann or the subtle displays of importance in the context of a school administrative hierarchy. Both cases involved students, yet the voices of those with more standing in society at times overpowered the voices of the younger generation.

The setting of the stage allowed participants to absolve themselves of responsibility and distance themselves from the source of the problem. To my knowledge, no polluting factory owners attended the performance at L’Institut Français; however, if they had been there would they really have come up to the stage and denounced their own practices? Or would they have used the stage as a means of promoting their philanthropy in the community while emphasizing the need for a reinforced education campaign for the population of Hann? Dr. Keval Keur Khalsa, a theatre professor at Duke University, talks about the danger of “reductionism” in forum theatre, where the subtleties of a problem are obscured by the strict dichotomy of the oppressor and oppressed (2011). In the case of *La baie*, two clear antagonists emerged: the evil factory owner and the hysterical woman who threw trash at the guardian of the bay. Yet the Dickensian, menacing figure of the factory owner who threatens his workers
by saying he will reduce their families to poverty seemed at odds with the intelligent and eloquent technocrats who spoke passionately about sensitizing the “population,” a vague yet oft-used term used to signify those who are simply too ignorant to know that they are harming the environment.

**Conclusion**

These processes of appropriation and distancing combined to shift the focus of the forum away from discussing responsibility for behavior and abuse of power and towards vaguely defined educational goals. Of course, the lack of education was deemed to be necessary only in “the population” at large, rather than the elites present at L’Institut Français. Most ironic of all is the fact that the target audience, at least in the eyes of the audience at L’Institut Français, could have been present at the two plays actually performed in the Yarakh neighborhood; instead, the audience was largely composed of children, the French-language delivery inhibited understanding, and the forums were cut short.

The potentially subversive nature of the forum was muted by the use of the stage as a platform rather than a space for dialogue. These lost possibilities were evident when the schoolboy’s comment about plastic bags elicited a positive reaction from the audience, but the mayor took the stage and ignored what had been said before. The positioning – and treatment – of these elites further highlighted the hierarchies of power and privilege: the Kaddu Yarakh troupe was receiving funding from L’Institut Français, and Seydou in his role of Joker could hardly stop the mayor in his tracks and remind him
to engage in dialogue (although it would have been fascinating to see the “protocols”
evoked had he done so).

This engagement with the elites of Dakar provides a contrast to modes of
audience engagement and participation during performances of Kaddu Yarakh’s second
play about birth spacing.

II. SECOND PLAY

L’espacement des naissances\(^{10}\)

I observed Birth Spacing three times in the suburbs of Guediawaye and
Yeumbeul, two poor neighborhoods located on the outskirts of Dakar. The play focuses
on a specific aspect of family planning: allowing adequate spacing between births.

The setting

The play took place in a street tucked away from the main road. Under a large
tent, chairs had been arranged on either side of a space for the actors. As with all the
plays, the location could be determined by the sound of music pumping from streets
away. While the music attracted some onlookers who appeared to have arrived
spontaneously, members of the women’s group and local children made up the majority
of the audience. People filtered in during the hour leading up to the play, and still more -
mostly children - flocked to the sides to watch the action once it began. By the end of the

\(^{10}\) “Birth Spacing”
play there were approximately fifty seated women and other guests, over sixty children, and several curious neighbors who hung out of windows or stood in doorways to watch.

Kaddu Yarakh performed the same play twice more in the following week. The second play was held in the courtyard next to a member’s house, which provided a more intimate space. Because the play was held in this contained space and for a specific women’s group there was no music or warm-up, since there was no crowd that needed to be attracted as would be the case at a street performance intended for the entire neighborhood. Women trickled in and sat on mats laid out in front of the clearing where the actors would play.

However, the third play was performed in the middle of a street, which attracted many more people but also led to a distracting and unsettled atmosphere. The combination of open space, many children, and activities like beignet selling made it difficult to hear the actors or closely follow the action.

The opening remarks preceding the play took well over half an hour. Ousman Mbacké, a community health worker at the Guediawaye Post de Santé who was also acting as MC, talked about the importance of the subject matter before handing the microphone to the Imam, who welcomed everyone and conducted a short prayer. The Imam said that it is important to “behave well” and to “sensitize” others about family planning and spread this information to those who are not here. He thanked the organizers of the event. An organizer then spoke at length about the spacing of births and why it is beneficial. Ousman returned to talk about how Islam accepts the spacing of births. The president of the women’s group spoke more about the importance of birth control for the health of the mother and child. The community coordinator for ACDEV,
Mbarka Ndaw, also spoke, reminding the audience members to, “listen well. If you don’t understand, ask questions. If the actors here can’t respond, we will send you to the experts.” Ousman thanked everyone again and handed the microphone to Seydou, who made a short announcement about the necessity of family planning before the actors burst onstage to start the piece.

The plot

Before the plot begins, the actors come onstage arguing vigorously. A man shouts, “Waaw, waaw, waaw,”\(^{11}\) to which a woman replies with, “Déedéet! Déedéet!”\(^{12}\) They continue to argue, men against women, the actions and cries becoming more dramatic. The men shout, “It is important to have a lot [of children],” and the women respond, “Planning is better.” They use this interaction as a pretext to turn to the audience and explain the rules of forum theatre.

Following the explanation, the sketch opens with the harried-looking father, Masseye, complaining about the constant expenses of having nine children. He rattles off a list of their annoying and expensive habits: this one eats too much, this one listens to loud music, et cetera. His son Cheikh enters looking dejected and feeble. He tells his father that he is sick and that he must pay a CFA 8,000\(^{13}\) prescription for medicine. They argue for a while, with Masseye finally refusing to pay.

Cheikh leaves and his daughter enters, saying that she was sent home from school because the family had not paid her fees. She says she wants to leave school to open a

---

\(^{11}\) Wolof: “Yes, yes, yes!”
\(^{12}\) Wolof: “No! No!”
\(^{13}\) Approx $16 USD
hair salon, but Masseye wants her to become a domestic worker for a low monthly salary. They argue, and it emerges that she has three children by three different fathers.

The daughter leaves and the heavily pregnant wife Xadi enters, asking for money to buy gas. Masseye refuses to pay and they argue before he tells her to find wood to burn for the fire instead. As Xadi goes about her tasks, singing comes from backstage, imploring husbands not to mistreat their wives: “Do not keep me like a prisoner. Wives are not prisoners. Do not treat me like nothing. If you do so, it is not good.” In the next scene, Masseye continues badgering and abusing Xadi for small mistakes she has made. She asks him to sit down and proceeds to list her household chores, saying she cannot do all of them. When she broaches the subject of “planning,” Masseye reacts vehemently: “Spacing and stopping births is the same thing!” He comes from a family with 25 children but “only” has nine children himself. He tells her, “This is not a hotel. You came here to work.”

The father of Masseye arrives to advocate on her behalf; after an argument, Masseye shoves him unceremoniously from the room. Masseye tells Xadi that he wants to divorce her and that she must leave. The singing starts again, this time telling Xadi that she is alone and does not have anyone to support her. She leaves the stage carrying her belongings on her head and crying. When she arrives at her father’s house, he tells her that she must stay with her husband until she dies, just like her mother before her. He brings her back to the marital home, protesting to Masseye about the way his daughter has been treated. Masseye, unapologetic, tells them that he has a new wife; Daba, playing this newcomer, comes forward in tight-fitting clothes and lists all the tasks she can do.
The play ends with Xadi’s father admonishing Masseye for being like a port; as soon as one woman leaves, another comes in like a boat.

**The forum**

From the beginning scene where the men and women take strong sides for and against family planning, the audience demonstrated an easy rapport with the actors. Comfort was found in solidarity, as all the women yelled together in unanimous support of the forum process or condemnation of the intractable husband. They laughed in all the right places: at Masseye’s complaining about his children, when Xadi’s father asks her if Masseye feeds her and sleeps with her and she gestures at her huge stomach; when Masseye says that women are only good for getting pregnant; at the indignant and tiny figure of Malick, Masseye’s father, as his son hustles him off the stage; at the father’s line about Masseye being like a port with too many boats (wives). When the play finished, they clapped enthusiastically.

Seydou began the forum by asking the spectators to judge each of the characters based on their behavior. The women reached almost instantaneous agreement about where each character should go: the son, father of Xadi, father of Masseye, and Xadi (who received an extra round of applause) were sent to the shade. The second wife and Masseye were sent to the sun, Masseye having been unsuccessful in his attempt to sidle over to the shade. Next, Seydou asked if the people in the shade deserved help. Everyone responded yes. Seydou asked if someone could come help them, but everyone remained seated. Seydou asked if people were happy with the way things went, and they responded that they were not.
A woman suggested that the wife talk to her husband, and Seydou told her that she must come on stage to talk to the husband herself. She took a seat next to the husband and told him that he must help his wife and “do planning.” He, in response, insisted that more children meant more money because of the gifts given at baptisms. This conversation continued, with both stubbornly maintaining their positions. Seydou stopped them after several minutes and asked if she had found a solution, to which the audience responded she had not. Another woman volunteered to take the place of the wife and tried to persuade Masseye that family planning would be better for her and for him. He responded that she was only speaking for women. The woman told him that the woman’s good health was better for him; everything he was spending now on prescriptions for his children he could keep. Masseye conceded: he would give the wife two months’s break. The woman argued that she needs two years, not two months, and they debated this back and forth. Seydou intervened, asking the woman if two months is enough. She said no; besides, “There are many methods. It is necessary to show him all the methods and explain how to take different medications.”

Seydou brought the forum to a close at this point, saying that everything discussed here needed to be continued in their houses, in the market, and in any public spaces. “If you want to help women, this is your mission.” After closing remarks from the facilitators for ACDEV and the leader of the women’s group emphasizing the role of these women as agents for change in their own community, the show was finished.

The second and third forums went similarly to the first, with women advancing similar arguments and the husband continuing to resist. Despite the crowd at the third
play losing interest during the forum, several spirited women took to the stage and challenged the husband although they never fully succeeded in convincing him.

Arguments advanced during the two forums included:

• Life is expensive so birth spacing makes sense fiscally
• When you do birth spacing you do not have to buy a sheep for another baptism
• If your wife continues to have children every year, all the work she does will be late and done badly
• Too many pregnancies endanger her life and the lives of your children
• With too many children you will always have children crying and bringing you prescriptions
• You do not understand that birth spacing means giving your wife a rest, not stopping forever
• Birth spacing is a part of life that you have to accept.

It is interesting to note how adeptly the women altered their arguments to play into the interests of the husband. They tell him that having children is too expensive; buying sheep for baptisms is too expensive; housework will be done to an inadequate standard; your other children will bother you; and you can still continue sexual activities (while practicing birth spacing). These points made up the majority of the women’s arguments at each forum, reflecting their pragmatic views on the reality of oppressive gender relations. Their responses indicate that they see the futility in attempting to convince the oppressor about the morality of his actions (“too many pregnancies endanger [the wife’s] life” or telling him that what he is doing is wrong) and instead appeal to his self-interest. This technique is in itself a valuable bargaining skill.
ANALYSIS

**A tool for debate rather than dialogue**

Mamadou Mbaye, Project Coordinator with the Initiative Sénégalaise de Santé Urbaine (Senegalese Initiative for Urban Health, or ISSU), spoke in an interview about using forum theatre to overcome resistance to family planning, especially amongst men. He explained that even though there was a high level of comprehension amongst “the local population” about how to practice family planning, desired behavior outcomes (practicing some form of family planning) did not naturally follow. ISSU, working as part of a consortium of eight NGOs focused on health issues, aimed to shift people from, first, awareness and comprehension of the issue to, second, the intention or desire to do something to, finally, action: taking steps to address the issue on an individual level.

Mbaye addressed the heart of the problem when he said, “The study [that we conducted] showed that couples do not talk much on the subject of family planning. Even if people speak generally, it's the woman who starts the conversation. The study also showed that women don't have the capacity to convince their husbands...they start the conversation, but don't have the capacity to convince their husbands.” Mbaye depicted forum theatre, in this context, as a capacity-building tool: it would “give” women arguments and justifications for family planning to use in debate with their husbands, increasing their ability to reason with their husbands. Yet this framing avoids the real problem: not the wife’s inability to raise family planning issues with her husband, but the reality of an unequal power dynamic where the husband has the ultimate say over his wife’s body and her decision to bear children.
For Augusto Boal, the power and potential of forum theatre lies in the way that it facilitates a “rehearsal for change” (45). The women were practicing debating skills for a situation that could very well transpire - may indeed already have transpired - between themselves and their husbands. In this public space, they were able to hear the opinions of their friends and neighbors on the topic and perhaps gain a more comprehensive arsenal of reasons to practice birth spacing and other forms of family planning.

According to Mamadou Mbaye, the forum theatre plays are part of a longer-term initiative by ISSU to improve women’s debating and advocacy skills on the topic of family planning. The play on birth spacing thus served primarily as an educational tool that aimed to create a group of educated women who could advocate for family planning, as Seydou in his Joker role says, “In your house, in the market, in public spaces.” The process of debate reinforces solidarity amongst the women and encourages them to take ownership over their arguments.

Finally, Mbaye mentioned an alternate route that women took to undermine a process that was in some cases beyond their control. Sometimes, he said, women seek out birth control on their own and take it without telling their husbands. These women were in fact successful at circumventing the dialogue that an initiative like forum theatre supposedly seeks to create. They both subvert the system and avoid challenging the deeply imbedded imbalances of power that prodded them to act with such secrecy.

This act could be framed within the tradition of “appreciative inquiry,” where the first step of covertly disobeying the husband builds upon other steps in a process of social change (Cooperider and Whitney 37). In the language of community organizing, this is known as “asset-based development,” where organizers “work to build collaborative
partnerships among the neighborhood’s stakeholders in order to strengthen the
community’s internal capacity to solve its own problems” (Smock 18).

We can appreciate the community-building aspect of forum theatre and the ways
in which it takes subjects from the private sphere (an argument between husband and
wife) and pushes the audience to acknowledge the community-wide nature of an issue
such as birth spacing. However, while theatre interventions may effectively facilitate
debate, the larger aim of dialogue is largely impossible due to a key constituency missing
from the intervention.

A missing audience

A problem highlighted by partners working with Kaddu Yarakh was improving
the participation of men (Ndaw, Mbacké, Mbaye 2011) in events like the forum theatre
play. Mbaye explained, “Men think that health is only for women.” He gave the example
of a poste de santé (health clinic), asking, “How many men do you see inside? Even when
a man is sick, it is the woman who brings him to the hospital. With all other situations –
for example sick children – women go to the hospital.”

Mbaye claimed that men “listen more to religion” than to other health initiatives
such as a forum theatre. He cited research from an unpublished study conducted by
Intrahealth that showed that men take into account religion – often in the form of what
their marabout (religious teacher) prescribes – when making decisions about health, more
so than women. As such, Intrahealth conducts other initiatives targeted specifically at
men and how their religious beliefs affect their practice of family planning and other
health-related issues. However, while women and men are targeted separately, no effort
was made to create a space (theatrical or otherwise) that would bring these two groups together to facilitate a discussion of these issues.

The three plays on birth spacing were performed to an exclusively female audience with the exception of the male actors, organizers, and the imam who was present at two of the plays. None of these men saw themselves as positioned to receive education on the matter (paralleling the attitude of the audience members at L’Institut Français during the environmental play). The mission of trying to convince any male audience members about the merits of birth spacing and family planning was thus rendered invalid, while the women were assigned the task of further educating themselves and building their capacity for dialogue and advocacy.

By falling into the trap of “constraint analysis” highlighted by Kidd and Byram (94), whereby an issue is framed as a (technical) problem with a definitive (technical) solution, the forum theatre practitioners ignored why certain societal structures existed in the first place and eliminated the opportunity for dialogue around these systemic problems. Even if we were to elect the technical solution (ie convincing men and women to practice family planning in order to space the births of their children) as the basis of the theatre intervention, a key component is still missing: male buy-in. For the organizers of this intervention (Mbaye and his colleagues), the need for behavior change around this issue is clear. Yet, as discussed in the section above, the intervention functions mostly to prepare women to advocate for the issue. Without an attempt to engage a male audience, the organizers must know that male buy-in is lost. And the play itself demonstrates the potential dangers of a situation where the husband is not convinced of the need for birth spacing.
Women participants offered varying and nuanced arguments to the incalcitrant husband while trying to convince him that he should adopt family planning. Masseye’s role as the husband is to galvanize the women watching into action and argument; he continues to put forth deliberately inflammatory remarks (women are only good for having children, etc) to provoke a reaction even during the forum. At the same time, he is somewhat of a caricature of the archetypal selfish and narrow-minded husband. Yes, men like his character undoubtedly do exist, and his actions struck a chord with the audience (when Seydou asked the crowd if they knew someone like him, the response was a resounding “yes!”). This identification of the oppressor is an important first step; the true achievement would come when men recognized the oppressors housed within themselves, but they were not members of the audience and thus not a part of this acknowledgement and naming process.

It is important to acknowledge the effect that conversations could have outside the confines of the stage. Seydou evokes this trickle-down effect when he asks the women to spread the word about birth spacing in their houses and at the marketplace. The question to consider is: what message? From the standpoint of the NGO commissioning this play, they want women to walk away with a certain message about the merits of birth spacing; to rely on people “spreading the word” means relinquishing this control. A woman might tell her neighbor that she saw an entertaining play about an evil husband, or that the play was about why men should not have sex with their wives (as opposed to using birth control methods).

This spillover effect is hard for NGOs themselves to measure, unless they conduct focus groups or surveys later – a costly and labor-intensive task. If Intrahealth or another
organization did have the capacity to investigate the appropriation and reiteration of these messages by community members outside of this event, the findings might indicate whether the intervention addresses a need for education and dialogue around the issue of birth spacing. In addition, the organizers could mobilize the networks used more commonly by men in combination with theatre: for instance, in a meeting organized by a local imam, at a youth group (which tends to have a higher representation of men) or with neighborhood associations. Even an event staged later in the day, when men are returning from work, or in a more public place frequented by men might garner a better male representation.

Paulo Freire, in his work with community education and empowerment, describes a continued circulation of action and reflection that allows people to “work and, in working, transform their world” (Freire 24). Seydou alluded to this process when he said in an interview, “If you see your neighbor [participate in a forum theatre play], you start to understand his opinions on a subject that you do not normally discuss.” Presumably, this shared understanding forms the basis for action. However, such transformation in the context of forum theatre cannot take place without, first, a reflection of the current reality: an audience composed of gender, age, and background representative of the demographics of the community. The ways in which the issues of the play are framed also contribute to its transformative effect.
Framing the agenda

The structure of the forum dictated the analysis of the issue, with the “solution” essentially resting on the ability of the woman to convince her husband to practice (undefined and unexplained) birth spacing methods. In the forum following the events audience members were invited to take the role of the abused wife. The women invariably argued with the intractable husband, producing good points about the need for birth spacing but not achieving action beyond that. In effect, all of the women failed in their task of convincing the husband to practice birth spacing. This failure implicitly placed blame upon the women: if only they had pushed harder and developed their capacity more, perhaps they could have succeeded in changing the husband’s mind.

The burden of action placed upon the women was reinforced when, at the closure of the forum, Seydou said that everything discussed needed to be continued, “in the house, in the market, in any public spaces…If you want to help women, this is your mission.” By casting the issue in such stark terms, he implicitly labeled as immoral and lazy anyone who did not follow through with the suggested actions (although they could just as well not find the message of the play convincing and thus not adopt those behaviors). Closing remarks from other community organizers further emphasized the role of these women as “agents of change” in their communities, without acknowledging the enormity of the task they had been assigned or suggesting alternative visions of how unequal power dynamics within the community could be framed and analyzed.

The power dynamics visible in the play were reflected in the structure of the event itself. In the three plays that I witnessed, several people involved with the organizational process made speeches before the play started. Anywhere between three to eight
speeches, all variations of the same theme, preceded an event that the same organizations
promoted as a way to “give voice to the voiceless” (Diol 2011, Diop 2011). From the
beginning, the parameters of the debate had already been set by the speakers: women
must make the right decision (i.e. space the births of their children); spread the message
to others in the community; and take responsibility for convincing their husbands that
family planning is good. Any voice that fell outside of this paradigm - for instance, in
asking why women must have children at all, or why the wife should return to her
abusive husband, or why women must be the sole spokespeople – is pitched against a
variety of community leaders who hold significant influence in the community and
possibly over the individual herself. Processes of silencing and “domestication” (Kidd
and Byram 97) are built into the structure and outcome of the event.

Moreover, no clear methods of contraception, natural or artificial, were discussed.
Women, who seemed unwilling to discuss the specifics, repeatedly referred to the issue
as “family planning”. An audience member with no knowledge of family planning might
draw the conclusion from the play that “family planning” and “birth spacing” mean
abstaining from having sex. This indeed appears to be the husband’s understanding of the
subject, which goes a long way towards explaining his indignation if he has to wait two
years before sleeping with his wife again. While the women participating in the forum
were clearly knowledgeable about birth control - one woman referenced the fact that
there are many different methods - this information was not referenced either before or
after the forum by the “experts” apart from one facilitator saying that women must visit
the doctor (presumably to discuss birth control methods there).
Theatre as a reductive force

No attempt was made at analyzing oppression outside of the narrowly defined parameters of the forum. The audience accepted other problematic behavior in the face of the ogre husband. For example, after Xadi’s husband forces her to leave the house and she returns to her family, her father tells her that women must stay with their husbands until death, no matter what the consequences. He reminds her of the bravery of her mother, who bore many children. And then he takes her back to her abusive husband because he does not wish to challenge the status quo and his perception of what marriage should be. Yet, likely because he confronts the husband and restores his daughter to her place in the household, during all three judgment processes the audience unanimously voted for him to go in the shade. The option for audience members to confront him was never presented, and nobody requested to speak with him instead of the husband.

By casting the problem in such totalizing terms, more subtle and insidious forms of oppression were left unquestioned and, implicitly, accepted. Tradition and male ego loom over the play as the vague and threatening forces that push the husband to procreate so vigorously; he tells his wife that he must produce enough sons to “name after each of my friends” and so that he can continue to receive goats at each child’s baptism. Beyond these casual asides, the play never delves into the other pressures that the husband faces; we are left to draw the conclusion that he is ignorant and thus clings to tradition, which is presented as a static and oppressive force.

The second wife, appearing in a leopard-skin dress, embodied the fears of older, hardworking women: she was young, beautiful, sexy, and eager to bear many children with her new husband. She represented the seemingly natural consequence of challenging
established power norms: step outside the boundaries dictated to you, and even the power that you wield at the level of the household will be taken.

**Countering reductionism: an alternative forum**

An alternative to the totalizing force of this particular brand of theatre emerged during the “niche” discussion run by Aliou, a facilitator employed by ACDEV. With his facilitation, several stories emerged as a counter to the black-and-white, sun-and-shade oppressor-oppressed dynamic portrayed in the birth spacing play. Another community organizer named Daoud translated the discussions for me; the quotes I provide are translations from French, based on his paraphrasing of the rapid-fire dialogues taking place in Wolof.

Youssou, the only man present who was not in a community-organizing role, contributed a man’s perspective to the debate for the first time. Daoud translated, “when his wife had a baby, she didn't want to sleep with him. He didn't know about condoms or things like that,” there was laughter from women at this, “so he told her to practice family planning [get birth control]. However, she fell ill and he thought that perhaps she had fallen ill from the birth control.”

This candid description of his experience drew laughter and sympathy from the women. Here was a man who was willing to heed his wife’s wishes, but was unsure about the effects of some birth control methods. His uncertainty allowed for the discussion to open up further. The facilitator asked the participants if these were rumors [about birth control making the wife sick] or if there was another cause for her sickness. Did family planning make Youssou's wife sick? One woman warned: don't buy bad pills in the street.
Another woman said that women think family planning is only pills, but you have to see if the pills work. For the first time, the participants were discussing birth control in an open and specific manner, for example distinguishing between birth control and other methods of family planning. Youssou’s sharing laid the groundwork for other women to present their personal stories. Furthermore, he ended with a question that the facilitator, with the help of other women, was able to answer: some forms of birth control were less effective, and pills you bought on the street might not be reliable. The facilitator then outlined some of the steps the organization was taking to counter these problems, such as making health posts more decentralized. Youssou replied that if access to medicine was made easier and if the organization conducted another training about it, he would come and buy “the things” (i.e., birth control) for his wife.

Aliou then introduced another dimension into the discussion: family planning is not just for married women. He told the story of how, one time, a young unmarried woman came to him. She was from the Casamance region, where rebels come and rape women; she wanted medication to protect against getting pregnant in the case of rape. He finished this anecdote by saying that we must not be categorical about the people who want to do family planning.

Aliou’s example presented a deviation from the narrow definition of who practiced family planning, as assigned in the play and the ensuing forum (and in the niche discussion up until this point). This example is an extreme case, especially in this health intervention’s context of urban Senegal, but the facilitator cautioned against being “categorical” or too narrow in our assumptions about who should and should not be practicing family planning. Until this point, the conversation – especially around the
unmarried daughter in the play with three children out of wedlock – had laid the blame squarely on the daughter for being irresponsible about practicing family planning.

The facilitator’s example was followed by a woman whose words were translated by Daoud as: “family planning is not just for married women. Everyone must be allowed to do it. Her sister did after one child. She divorced after 4 years. If she hadn't, she would have had four kids and be divorced. She doesn't see her ex-husband anymore.”

For the first time, the financial implications of having many children was framed as a potential problem for the wife as well as the husband. This was also the first time that anyone acknowledged divorce as a social reality; participants in the forum following the play never even presented divorce as an option, perhaps because they recognized the unfeasibility of the wife doing so with nine children to support. One of the women in the forum had told the husband that “your wife will leave you if you keep forcing her to have your children,” but this was clearly an empty threat; he had already thrown her out of the house, and she had been forced to come back by a father who told her that “marriage is until death.” During the forum, no one had raised the possibility of challenging the wife’s father about his rigid conception of marriage. By contrast, the story told during the niche discussion highlighted female agency, because the woman’s sister made a decision based on a calculation about her future.

This same woman shared her own story, translated from Wolof into French by Daoud as, “She is married. Just after getting married, she had a child. One year later, she had another. She asked her husband if they could practice family planning. He accepted, but the problem was her mother-in-law. In the house of [the husband’s] family, which is a large family, the wife is obligated to get pregnant. She asked her husband to talk with his
mother because she was very tired already with two children, but this achieved nothing. So in order to get her mother-in-law to leave her alone, she told her that she was sick and would risk dying if she had another child.” Knowing laughter came from the women listening.

This account presented an alternate vision of oppression where the mother in law was the person forcing the wife to conform to her idea of what a family should look like. The wife found a way around this by lying rather than through dialogue or debate; hearkening back to the women described by Mbaye using the little they have to thwart an unfair system.

Overall, the open format of the discussion group provided the space for a more nuanced dialogue about the situations of oppression that women face. The relative success of this program suggests that forum theatre initiatives could benefit from incorporating certain elements into the forum. These include making a concerted effort to include men in the discussion, creating an atmosphere that encourages open dialogue and camaraderie, not framing the issue with opinions from powerful community members whose voices may silence others’, and drawing upon the actual stories of the members present as a way of encouraging a diversity of opinions and perspectives.

**Conclusion**

The attempt to confront a host of complex factors and characters contributing to resistance to family planning or environmental degradation will never be an easy task, and Kaddu Yarakh succeeded in the role that its president Mohommadou Diol ascribed to forum theatre: to “show a situation and create a debate” (2011). Yet without ongoing
reflection and the establishment of genuine dialogues between NGOs, theatre practitioners, and the communities in which they work, Theatre for Development will continue to confront problems of reductionism, lack of representation form certain constituencies, victim blaming, and problematic modes of framing and participation.

The close analysis of events provided in this chapter reveals that modes of participation can both reflect current power relations (for example, in the hierarchical structuring of speeches and advice given before and after the play) and simultaneously reinforce them (as in the moment when a student who wanted to volunteer was reprimanded for not adhering to “protocol”). Couched within its current neutralized language, Theatre for Development can act as an accomplice to modes of domestication, diverging from the revolutionary dialogical tradition in which it was created.

Conversely, the niche organization, part of the same health initiative, provided an alternative vision for how dialogue could be better incorporated into discussions of family planning and other health initiatives. In the niche, we saw strong relationships and rapport facilitate the emergence of stories that complicate the dramatic yet two-dimensional representation of oppression that was portrayed in the play. If theatre interventions created a similar space for dialogue rather than debate, they might yield a more nuanced exploration of the topic at hand, shifting from a didactic representation of events to one more reflective of participants’ lived reality.
CHAPTER THREE

Creating Community-Based Theatre in Kenya

“The true seeker of truth never loses hope. The true seeker of real justice never tires. A farmer does not stop planting seeds just because of the failure of one crop. Success is born of trying and trying again.”

--Ngugi wa Thion’o (1987 pp. 84)

Introduction

Forum theatre attempts to cultivate a multiplicity of voices and create an open space for challenging oppressive figures and forces. However, this supposedly collaborative process, taking place in Kenya, replicated and even reinforced pre-existing power dynamics. The process of play creation provides a window into many of these issues. Beginning with a brief background of the context in which I undertook my Kenyan fieldwork, I examine the challenges associated with creating a play about gender and facilitating the resulting conversation with the Geno Youth Group. I then explore the didactic theatre precedent that had been set in the village, before examining the case of another community group where the open process of creating theatre transformed into a space for commandeering power interests to come to the fore.

Background

Sauri Village was the first site of the Millennium Villages Project (MVP), introduced by economist Dr. Jeffrey Sachs in 2004 with the intention of using intensive
agricultural and health inputs to push the community out of poverty and “towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals” by 2015 (Mutuo et al 2). Lia Haro, the anthropologist with whom I was working, began exploring in her ethnographic research the extent to which the voices and contributions of community members were ignored or appropriated by the implementers of the MVP.

Working with Lia, three community groups formed in response to this perceived injustice and with the goal of healing community rifts caused by MVP and embarking on projects of critical counter-development in order to rethink ways that development could be better practiced. The first group, Hera (“Love” in Dholuo), was a community-wide group aimed at fostering stronger relationships within the community; the second, Sinani (“Perseverance”), was a widows’ support group and business cooperative; and the third, Geno (“Hope”), was a youth group with the goal of countering the hopelessness confronted by youth in Sauri.

The overarching umbrella organization, “Tudruok Collaborative Anthropology,” formed to guide these groups and conduct ethnographic research. While in Sauri, I worked with members of the core Tudruok research team: Jesse Thomas, a friend of Lia’s from the United States who was a community organizer and researcher throughout the two-year research process; Joseph Okang’a, a research assistant from a nearby town; Jethro Moyii, Geno Youth member, researcher, and community organizer from Sauri village; and Eunice Atieno, also a community organizer and from Sauri.

From 2009-2011, the Tudruok team had been coordinating collaborative research initiatives with the other community groups. This had included training youth and other group members to conduct interviews while paying them as researchers; training
participants to film interviews; and bringing together groups to discuss community problems. The Tudruok researchers were engaged in a project of “activist anthropology”; they conducted close readings and discussions of relevant texts with the aim of not only understanding the power dynamics and history behind oppressive structures in the community (such as the development apparatus) but also to reflect on ways to engage with and challenge these structures.

Any characterization of the following attempts at creating forum theatre is thus grounded in the radical articulation of and action towards a community-driven development agenda over this two-year period. Participating community members came together to dialogue about problems that they identified as important, flying in the face of the MVP non-participatory mode of development. At my time of entry into the community, many people were struggling to create solidarity in the event of conflict.

Early in 2011, two Geno Youth members collaborated to steal a significant amount of money that had been won by the group for a video that they submitted to a World Bank competition. This divisive action created a legacy of mistrust and disillusionment that community members were still grappling with when I arrived with Lia in May. The following events reflect the legacy, not only of invasive and disempowering development measures, but also of the still raw wounds of community members still striving to create an alternative vision for change in their community.

The first six weeks of my work in Sauri consisted of coordinating teams of participants to organize video footage, filmed over two years by community members on flip cameras, into storylines based on different themes. I held numerous workshops on storytelling and documentary methods. The aim of this collaborative project was to
collate these segments into a full-length documentary portraying the community’s experience with poverty and development, specifically MVP. I spent the majority of my time in the office coordinating amongst these groups.

Frustrated by the slow progress made on the documentary and numerous complications, I began seeking alternative storytelling mediums. In my online research, I stumbled across the theatre model known as forum theatre. Two aspects of this model appealed to me: both its interactive forum where audience members take to the stage after the initial play, and the themes of oppression and power relations that forum theatre generally tackles. When I introduced the idea of forum theatre to Geno youth members, they responded enthusiastically. Members of Hera and Sinani then approached me about creating their own plays, such that we were working on several different plays during my last three weeks in Sauri.

I. FIRST GENO YOUTH DRAMA

Confronting morality and gender norms

The creation of a drama about gender-based problems with Geno Youth members opened a unique space for conversation and debate. As discussion graduated from small incidents of sexual harassment to larger issues like pregnancy and moral norms, participants put forth sometimes-opposing versions of what oppression looks like. Ultimately these conversations, held in an informal venue, reveal one of the most useful aspects of forum theatre: in requiring actors to imagine concrete representations of power
dynamics, forum theatre compels participants to listen to but also challenge the lived experience of others.

Geno Youth members first began creating a play with the aim of performing it to an audience of 40 high school-aged girls at a weekend “Girls’ Empowerment” retreat. The drama aimed to spark debate about issues faced by young women in the community and motivate the audience members to intervene in the scenarios and counter the problem of silence in the face of oppression.

The youth began discussing gender norms and specific instances that illustrate oppression. One of the men raised the example of schoolboys using mirrors to look up girls’ skirts and touching them inappropriately while waiting in lines; these suggestions elicited a great deal of laughter and sexually tinged banter. The men’s mode of engagement at the level of comedy and sexual humor seemed to reflect their discomfort with discussing these issues. The women present were more willing to bring up complex issues affecting women.

Maureen, one of the group’s few vocal female members, proposed a common scenario: whereas young women who become pregnant outside of wedlock are subjected to judgment and are sometimes thrown out of their house, the father of the child is not held accountable and is even congratulated “for being a real man.” Another member, Nick, elaborated on this, saying, “the boy will go on in the schooling as usual, but evidently the girl will have to [leave school].”

This discussion of a gendered double standard brought up questions of responsibility and morality. The following exchange took place:
Henry: That is immorality [laughter].

Me: What’s immoral?

Helen: Not pregnant…mothers are the one who bring support to kids, but not the father [banter amongst members in Swahili].

Me: Let’s explore that further. What’s immoral?

Henry: I was talking on the case of Maureen. She was saying that when a girl becomes pregnant…they are sent away from their home. And that is the immorality of that. It’s what the girls in that…uh…stage [of pregnancy] decide.

Maureen: Decide?! Eh!! And what about men? [laughter, banter] And what about men?!

Me: How moral is it then…so there are two people who are equally guilty, right, because it takes two to make a baby, yeah? [laughter] And the girl gets kicked out of home and the man gets congratulated…

Henry: But you know what. The girl knows that she’s disadvantaged when she gets pregnant. She’s just…chilling [laughter].

In this conversation, Henry offhandedly referred to the unequal treatment of two unmarried lovers as “immoral.” When pushed to elaborate, he explained that girls “decide” to leave their homes, saying that a woman accepts the risk of social ostracization when she has sex because she “knows that she’s disadvantaged” by societal norms that place the burden of guilt on the woman. His assertion opposed group members’ previous testimonies that women who fall pregnant outside of marriage are
often forced to leave their homes, usually at the command of their fathers. Although Maureen challenged him jokingly, he did not respond to her question, “and what about men?” Rather, Henry placed the responsibility of pregnancy solely on the woman, even going so far as to say that she’s “chilling,” that is, enjoying herself or taking it easy.

Although both Maureen and Helen continued to challenge him – often breaking into Swahili – even that act of confrontation contained a performative element: each gender played their expected roles in mock outrage, following a push-and-pull dynamic where the men made sexually inappropriate and sexist comments and the women rebuked them for it. I played the ignorant questioner, stepping outside of this gender binary in my role as an outsider.

**Defining oppression**

However, this scenario diverged from, say, a discussion group about the oppression of women because the group members needed to create specific examples of oppression for the play. The formation of these examples pushed the group to overcome interchanges of gender performance in favor of a collective agreement of how oppression was physically manifested in their community.

For instance, further discussion pushed the group to consider what actions qualify as “oppression.” The group unanimously agreed that teachers who expect girls to fail tests but berate boys for doing badly are oppressing their female students. Then a group member, Jackton, introduced a more problematic claim. He said, “Maybe you’re sitting in class…The ladies in front, yeah, they sit just…aimlessly. They sit [indicated sitting with spread legs].” (Maureen protested at this point, saying, “Not all ladies! Not all ladies!”)
and everyone laughed.) Jackton continued, “When you turn to look from the board, what you see is [indicated with spread legs that he sees girls who are deliberately showing their underwear]. It is a form of oppression.”

The girls continued to protest loudly, while other men chimed in with similar thoughts. Nick brought up his teacher friend who told him that “He never wanted to teach again…because there would be some things [girls in sexually suggestive poses] to interrupt his teaching.” Henry affirmed, “You see them sitting like this at the desk, legs open,” and then repeated Jackton’s claim by saying, “The ladies are…ah…oppressing the teachers.”

When pressed to explain further, he said, “They are oppressing in that, by the way [she is] widening her, ah, thighs intentionally, is directly diverting the mind of the learner…Now, he is not concentrating on what is being taught, but on what he’s seeing. So, at that time, she is oppressing the seer.” Finally, another male group member added that female students who act in this way are “actually oppressing the other students as well as the teacher. If the teacher diverts his attention from whatever he is teaching, then the students will not learn.”

The youth had been conducting close readings of Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed simultaneous to these theatre exercises, and they had also discussed the function of forum theatre and how it seeks to illustrate situations of oppression. They had spent hours talking about the concept of education as a pedagogical exchange and identified many instances of oppression imposed upon them in the spheres of education (at school) and development (in the wider community). Yet, in this context, the men insisted on defining oppression within the narrow paradigm of women wielding their
sexual power over men, implicitly dismissing arguments made minutes before about the debilitating consequences of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy on a young woman’s life.

I attempted to pose questions that would require group members to rethink their claims. It is worth noting that I likely missed some of the more subtle undertones of the conversation that took place during the member’s constant asides in Swahili. Maureen, after hearing the male members’ assertions about girls “oppressing” their teachers, began saying, “And why is it that he [the teacher] is concentrating on –” but then switched into Swahili to finish her point as one of the men attempted to interrupt her. With continued questioning, the men conceded that these power dynamics were uneven – that, for example, women do not feel the right to sexually harass men. Jackton acknowledged, “Actually, in most of the cases, the men are the oppressors. The man oppresses the lady most of the time.” However, the exploration of this double standard never fully moved beyond this grudging admission.

**Portraying oppression**

Time constraints dictated that the group shift to forming the play itself. In debating whether to portray oppression in school (such as sexual harassment) or at home (such as a young pregnant woman who is forced to leave her house), the group members decided that the play would be more appealing to their intended audience of high school girls if they placed it in a high school setting. Thinking about the needs of their audience so explicitly pushed the group members to prioritize the issues they wanted to address, but within an empathetic framework: what specific stories and devices could be used to engage the audience?
Further value came from identifying the “choice points,” that is, specific instances where characters choose not to confront oppression. The group members thought about certain events and placed themselves within that narrative; for instance, Maureen noted that male classmates had tried to shine a mirror up her skirt during class before, but that she took the mirror to the teacher at the end of class and reported the instigators. After some discussion, the group established that most girls would not act like Maureen; they would normally ignore the mirror or kick it away, but not confront the guilty party either on a personal level or through official channels of authority as Maureen had. The group members identified this event as one “choice point” where audience members could suggest solutions that involved confrontation rather than silence.

From personal testimonies in the previous discussion, the group members wove together a series of events for the play. The play opens in a classroom, where several boys are seated at the back. Two girls enter, to whispering and whistling from the boys. As they sit down, one of the girls realizes that the boys have placed a small mirror by her chair in an effort to see up her skirt; she kicks the mirror away. The teacher enters the classroom, announcing that he has the results of their latest exam. He names the results of the boys first, berating them for not doing well, and then announces, “all the ladies have failed, but it’s ok.” Class finishes and the students line up for lunch; the girls have a place at the front of the line, but the boys start pushing up against them and “accidentally” touching their breasts, so the girls concede their place at the front of the line to the boys. The girls then walk home at the end of the day, passing a group of boys who comment loudly on whether the girls are fat or skinny.
Gender swapping

Earlier, I had proposed an additional gendered element that the group members had accepted with much hilarity: the women would play male characters, and vice versa. I hoped that this gender swap would encourage both genders to think through power dynamics by physically experiencing their reversal. During rehearsal, this gender swap emerged as both a complement to and distraction from the aims of the play.

The male actors were required to physically enact uncomfortable gendered norms, specifically around how women dress. The men wore lesos (scarves) around their waists, and made much of moving around the room exclaiming how restrictive the clothing was. While this was clearly done in jest, they still had to experience in the literal ways in which women move. Hilary, attempting to spread his legs wide under his tight leso, exclaimed, “How do the mothers [older women] live like this every day?” The setting of theatre rehearsal facilitated a scenario that the men would almost certainly never have otherwise encountered.

By having the women harass the men (in character as women), the actors were able to bypass what might have been awkward or unpleasant sexual actions; for instance, touching the “women’s” breasts became a joke because the actors were clearly male. If the actors had been female, the group would have negotiated those boundaries of sexual discomfort more carefully. As it was, the actors were able to exaggerate their actions because they were so clearly ridiculous, with any “traditional” norms of sexual propriety removed. Theatrically speaking, the actors were thus freer to engage with the comedic content of the play.
However, the gender-swapping and ensuing comedy also freed the actors to a certain extent from potentially productive experiences of discomfort. Rather than facing up to the actions that some of the men freely admitted to have engaged in, they were able to circumvent the discomfort that might come, for instance, from pretending to graze the breasts of one of their female friends in this more formal environment. The novelty of the actors swapping genders diverted attention from more subversive critiques being made. Finally, the light treatment of this subject matter trivialized the serious implications of the constant stream of sexist remarks and actions portrayed in the play as happening on a daily basis.

In the end, the youth were unable to perform the play for the high school girls because the retreat schedule was too crowded. Because of this, the youth wanted to create another drama; one that involved forum theatre, which they could perform at the upcoming Community Day.

II. SECOND GENO YOUTH DRAMA

Playing the blame game

While creating a play about causes of hopelessness in Sauri, a discussion about oppression yielded disturbing moral attitudes ascribed to HIV positive people. While Geno members were able to identify structural oppression that caused various social ills, they struggled to frame HIV/AIDS in a way that did not place blame on the person who
contracted HIV. These personal convictions conflicted with the aims of the forum theatre play and revealed the difficulty of exploring issues along moral lines.

After a lengthy discussion about issues facing youth in the community, they decided to explore the theme of hopelessness. Specifically, they wanted to illustrate how issues like drug and alcohol abuse and HIV/AIDS were symptomatic of a deeper problem of hopelessness. The group members discussed the root causes of trends like alcohol abuse: what makes a person so hopeless that they want to spend all day at the bar drinking? However, the youth struggled to articulate a clear oppressor, and they talked about how oppression could in fact appear faceless, as a long chain of events. One member, Fred, attributed this “cycle of hopelessness” back to the government: he identified a link from government to schools to homes (parents) to individuals (youth) to issues that youth struggle with, such as alcohol abuse.

As the youth discussed the high rates of HIV infection in the area and the stigma attached to getting tested, Henry asserted that “promiscuous” men slept with many women and then contracted AIDS. When I asked him whether it was only promiscuous people who got AIDS, he said yes. Maureen, meanwhile, was shaking her head no, and, when asked, said that it could happen to other people, for instance, “a woman who was with a man for two years and then found out that she had contracted it from him.”

It soon emerged that the Geno youth identified the problem of HIV transmission with a certain brand of man: someone defined by his many vices, namely laziness, alcoholism, infidelity, violence, and sexual promiscuity. The youth unanimously viewed this archetypal HIV-positive figure with an unsympathetic eye. However, they acknowledged that other types of people could also contract HIV. They moved to a
discussion of this supposedly “typical” man who was reckless in his sexual practices. What sort of oppression caused young men in the community to become this man? Specifically, the youth thought about an abusive husband and attempted to track the series of events that led to the abuse.

**The plot**

The group eventually came up with the following story: Quinne is a 17-year-old schoolboy when his father dies. Soon after, his uncle comes to visit and take the land deeds away from the new widow and her son, leaving them destitute. The mother is forced to take Quinne out of school. Quinne searches for a job, but finds none. He falls in with a group of youths who spend all their time drinking and smoking. There, he meets Bianca, who he starts going out with. One night, while he is out at a club and Bianca is at home, he meets another woman and goes back to her house. In the next scene, he is sitting in a bar with his friend when he is approached by a health worker giving out HIV tests. Quinne refuses to get a test because he does not think that “real men” should get tested. He is later confronted by his wife, who tells him that she has been tested and that she is HIV positive even though she has been faithful to him. He becomes angry, telling her that she must have been unfaithful, and beats her. The play ends here.

In contrast to the “gender drama,” the youth worked on this play with the understanding that, not only would they be performing it as a forum play, but they would also be improvising in their roles as characters when they interacted with participating audience members. After several rehearsals of the play and a discussion about improvisation, the members began practicing the forum component of the play, with
other youth members playing participating community members. Two moments in these improvisational scenes throw into sharp relief the moral stances of the actors.

**Contesting morality around HIV/AIDS**

Henry chose to take on the role of the protagonist, Quinne, and reenact the scene where he meets the “other woman” in a bar. Henry, in character, berated the woman for coming to a bar and not having “good moral character” and then demanded that she leave. Fred stepped in to play Quinne at the scene where the health worker offers free HIV testing. He willingly got tested, proclaiming to the audience that all men should do the same. Then he went to his mistress’s house and told her she should not be sleeping around with men and having unprotected sex, and that he was leaving her.

The actors’ actions created a moral paradigm of blame focused on the person who transmitted HIV; in this play’s case, someone constructed as a morally “loose” woman who frequented bars and slept with married men. This character was as much an archetype as the original abusive husband figure that the youth had imagined. The actors’ inability to summon empathy for these characters reflects the dominant attitude towards HIV positive people held in the wider community.

The rehearsal space represented microcosmically the same moral arguments made on a wider scale. The play creation process illuminated views that are not often explicitly expressed; the actors, forced to articulate their opinions through action, inadvertently revealed the deeply held beliefs that transformed the play into a moralizing tale of the dangers of consorting with HIV-positive people. For me, an outsider attempting to open up a productive conversation around these issues, the actions and opinions of the actors
revealed the deeply ingrained attitudes held by youth, which could be extrapolated to the rest of the community.

If I were to engage with work around HIV/AIDS in the future, I had this insight into how many community members conceptualized the HIV/AIDS epidemic and placed it within a specific moral framework. That is to say, the process of play creation allowed me a new window into community interests and concerns that could potentially help health-related or “behavior change” work in the future.

However, the play reinforced rather than challenged existing stigma that HIV-positive people already face. Presented as illuminating the social problems faced by youth in Sauri, the play was inherently elevated to a position of moral rectitude. The righteousness of the position propagated in the play could not be questioned as a whole, only the actions of certain characters during the forum process. It was only later that I began to understand the history of similar theatrical moralizing projects in the community.

III. SAURI THEATRE FOR DEVELOPMENT

A didactic theatre precedent

The structure of the play created by Geno Youth reflects the tradition of didactic and educational theatre that some community members had previously participated in. According to an interview with former member Paul Owino\textsuperscript{14}, the Sauri Theatre for Development troupe was created in 2006 as a way to address community-wide health

\textsuperscript{14} conducted by Joseph Okang’a on August 5\textsuperscript{th} 2008
problems: “Because of water and sanitation being a major issue at [the] household level, we decided to form the theatre group for others [who] could not understand what sanitation was.” The plays ranged in topic matter from HIV/AIDS prevention and proper hygiene techniques to the problem of “youth misbehavior.”

Paul’s account of the beginnings of Sauri Theatre for Development, as being created to help community members understand good sanitation practices, neglects to mention the troupe’s affiliation with the Millennium Village Project. The theatre troupe started with 47 members and was trained with the help of Millennium Village Project (MVP) facilitator Dr. Patrick Mutuo. The Sauri Theatre for Development constitution includes as its first four objectives:

(1) To educate the community about the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) through drama and training.
(2) To do activity mobilization in the village.
(3) To educate community gatherings about the roles MGD [sic] to future lives.
(4) To change youths and adult’s behavior in the community through Poems [sic], narratives, dramas and many other positive ways geared for development.

(Italics added for emphasis)

The content of the plays mirrored these objectives. Paul described the aim of their first play: “sensitize [community members] on the risks involved in either using bad or untreated water.” A similar play, performed in 2008 in the nearby town of Nyawara, examined a family’s improper use of unpurified water, ending with a doctor lecturing the
father of a sick child, “Water has to be boiled whether it comes from a well or not, whether it is rain water or not because boiling water kills germs.” The father responds in gratitude, “Yes, doctor, you have taught me what I didn’t know,” and goes on to question the doctor about where he can obtain water purifying substances (for free, at the Health Center). The content of the play clearly aims to both instruct audience members in better hygiene techniques, and motivate them to improve their own habits.

At the end of this play, the actors recited a poem, part of which reads, “people of Nyawara, this is not a simple matter. The daughter of Okilo has refused to construct a latrine and she has brought backwardness in Nyawara. But we want to deal with those who have refused to observe cleanliness.” Here, the didactic message takes on an almost threatening tone: it is unclear how the actors will “deal with” community members who are not only ignorant, but who have actually “refused to observe cleanliness.” Not participating in a project morphs into an act of resistance and deliberate obstruction. Furthermore, these resistant participants are dragging their community into “backwardness,” an undefined concept that is posed in contrast to positive “development” of the community. The poem makes explicit the play’s moralizing tone, equating good conduct with following hygiene measures, and bad conduct with a “backward” refusal to engage in this beneficial development scheme.

Sauri Theatre for Development acted as another tool in the development inventory, disseminating information (“educate the community about the Millennium Development Goals”) and promoting participation in various projects (“change…behavior” through “positive ways geared for development”). Members paid dues and received compensation from MVP for performances. Affiliation with MVP
could reap other benefits: Joseph Okang’a recounts that the troupe performed a play at the 2008 Annual Sauri Harvest Festival to Dr. Mary Nyasimi, MVP’s Community Coordinator and Ecological Anthropologist based at the Earth Institute, Columbia University. At the end of the play, they requested her help with continued funding for their activities. “The scientist promised to seek support…from colleagues and well-wishers.” Paul, in his interview with Joseph, listed the troupe’s “major problems” as “how to get our props, drums, uniforms, and transportation, which will assist us [to] reach many of the community members.” The theatre troupe activities ceased around 2010, when funding seems to have dried up.

The forum theatre experience, over the three weeks in which I worked with community members, did not happen in a vacuum; participating actors and audience members held preconceived notions of the “work” that theatre should do. This involved disseminating a particular message about development, usually along moral lines of “good” and “bad,” that governed community members’ behavior. Seen in this context, the tendency of Geno Youth members to focus on, for example, HIV transmission adheres to their previous experiences of what “theatre for development” should look like.

Although I had discussed the previous theatre initiatives with the youth, I only retroactively discovered the messages broadcast through the plays and learned more about the specific history of Sauri Theatre for Development. It seems likely that, in the context of Tudruok’s broader critical development initiatives (specifically critiquing the practices of the MVP), the youth may have been hesitant to reveal their close affiliation to MVP through Sauri Theatre for Development.
Based on this history, I can also speculate that the involvement of some of the community members may have stemmed from their hope that income-generating activities might materialize as they did with Sauri Theatre for Development. The legacy of the community’s previous experiences was further illustrated while rehearsing a forum play with Hera and Sinani members.

IV. HERA AND SINANI PLAY

Replicating oppressive processes

In creating forum plays with members from the Hera and Sinani groups, I intended to create a space of collaboration and participation but failed to question or problematize these terms beforehand. This open and unregulated space allowed certain powerful individuals to commandeer the process of articulating problems and concerns to depict in the plays. Community members unintentionally replicated reality, yet this reality remained oppressive. The fact that participants did not have adequate time to grasp concepts of oppression, forum theatre, and improvisation became abundantly clear as the original aims of forum theatre were diverted into a literal performance of oppressive power dynamics amongst participants.

Once Geno Youth began rehearsing their play, several community members from the Sinani widows’ group and Hera community group mentioned that they, too, wanted to create plays. When a group of interested Hera members gathered for an initial rehearsal and brainstorming session several days later, obstacles to creating a forum play quickly emerged.
Forming a plotline

After a lengthy discussion and several drama exercises that illustrated aspects of oppression, we turned to determining the content of the play. The participants did not readily volunteer stories that they thought were reflective of oppression in the community. Instead, we began compiling a list of people who we could identify as oppressors and the oppressed. Participants then developed short stories for each relationship; for instance, if a doctor was oppressing his patient, they created a story to illustrate this relationship. Many of these relationships were reflective of social issues that community members deemed important to identify, such as the disabled, prisoners, or orphans; participants struggled to come up with stories from their own experiences related to these people, but seemed to feel that they should be mentioned.

I asked everyone which relationships excited them the most, and which ones they thought had the most potential to be developed into a story. The majority of participants decided on the lender-lendee relationship and the community member-developer (e.g. MVP facilitator) relationship. We then moved onto writing down the storyline, a process that started off slowly as people appeared unwilling to contribute in the large group present.

Jesse introduced the idea of starting with him as Jeffrey Sachs coming in carrying sacks of money: money falling out of the sacks, with community members scrambling to pick it up. This suggestion generated laughter and increased energy. Group members identified the main characters and focused on the opening scenes before moving on to the various “choice-points” that would form the series of events in the play. I explained the
importance of these choice-points, since these are opportunities for audience members to intervene in the action and take on the role of community members. The participants eventually came up with the first two scenes.

The first scene depicted the arrival of Jeffrey Sachs, the community’s performance to welcome him, and a short speech that he gives about bringing development to the village. In the second scene, an MVP facilitator began distributing fertilizer in unfair ways that made community members angry; however, the facilitator did not listen to these dissenting voices.

The workshop participants identified the protagonist: a small-share farmer, named Mama Okebe, who was happy at first when MVP came. Due to timing constraints the meeting came to an end, with members agreeing that they would come to the next meeting with suggestions for the following scene.

**Sinani story sharing**

I also held a workshop with interested Sinani members. They spent two hours sharing their personal stories and began thinking about some of the emergent themes that might serve as the basis of a play. However, when it came to discussing concepts like power and oppression, the group did not make headway. Even after a long discussion about oppression drawing from examples in the community, participants struggled to grasp how those concepts applied to the drama they were creating. This lack of understanding was illustrated when a Sinani member stated, in response to the question of what did they think the word oppression meant, “Oppression is [the same as] drama.” I took her comment as an indication of how participants had interpreted our discussion up
to that point; namely, that “oppression” belonged in the same abstract category as playacting.\textsuperscript{15}

After this relatively unsuccessful session, I decided to merge the Hera and Sinani groups together; not only in the interests of time (we were now a week away from the big “Community Togetherness Day”) but also because of the overlapping membership and interests between the two groups. I raised the issue with the two groups and they both consented – in reality, this meant the one bigger group was composed of primarily Sinani members with a scattered number of other Hera members. At this point, the group was composed of members who had participated consistently and enthusiastically in the process; the real problems began to emerge when other community members (three older men who had thus far been uninvolved) joined the next rehearsal uninvited.

**Rehearsal: the dangers of an open process**

The Tudruok research team, meeting before the next planning session with the newly merged Hera-Sinani drama group, decided to create our own short forum skit to perform as an example to the drama group. We designed a scene where community members complain before an MVP meeting but say nothing during the actual meeting, where the facilitator berates them and calls them stupid. The facilitator then gives the elder (Joseph Okang’a) the task of making the list of who will receive fertilizer. One community member (Lia) receives fertilizer and the other (me) doesn’t. We fight, the fertilizer falls on the ground, and we end up with nothing. We rehearsed this twice to

\textsuperscript{15} The full extend of her meaning cannot be verified; Jethro mentioned the comment to me only after I pushed him on what had been said, and he translated it dismissively – literally with a wave of his hand – before quickly continuing to elicit feedback from the other widows.
refine the concepts (especially for Jethro’s facilitation in his role as the Joker) and left for
the meeting an hour late.

Upon arriving, we found that the members of Sinani had joined together with
some other community members who had not been present at the last Hera meeting. In
less than an hour they had made an entire play about the history of MVP in Sauri. An
erlder named Joseph Ogunda had selected himself to play the role of Jeffrey Sachs. A
widow named Jane Omolo, an outspoken community member and leader of the Sinani
widows’ group, played the role of the principal community member. Almost everyone
else had been relegated to the role of background dancers and singers celebrating the
arrival of MVP.

These “background” players were both parodying and replicating their own roles
in the community. In part, the eager acceptance of the new arrival poked fun at the role
they had performed as the grateful villagers receiving aid from a foreigner. At the same
time, they willingly took on these roles without contesting the fact that doing so would –
quite literally – deprive them of a voice in the play. Instead, they would sing as an
indistinguishable group of people in the background without having any input in the play
itself. Similarly, two very vocal and domineering members of the group had unironically
assumed the very roles that they played in reality. The players had moved into place,
reenacting an existing reality instead of rehearsing for a new reality, as forum theatre
aims to do.

This shift was all the more frustrating because it contained elements of the
empowerment that we had been trying to foster, but in a way that simultaneously divested
the widows of any real say in the process. While we had envisioned speaking roles as
tokens of empowerment, these women conceptualized the stage in a wholly different light. What was for us a space for dialogue, was for them a space for performance; whereas we wanted critique, they wanted to display their talent in singing in dancing.

These two wholly different approaches highlighted my own arrogance in assuming what they wanted without considering what their perception of the creative process might be.

A balance needed to be struck between the relentless social critique that we wanted to spark and the simple enjoyment that people derived from performing, the comfort in resuming the roles they had always performed.

**Practicing forum theatre**

After watching this new play, we performed our short skit and Jethro explained the rules of audience participation. People volunteered almost immediately: first, Jane took the role of Joseph Okang’a, the community elder. She hadn’t participated for long when Joseph Ogunda volunteered, without a trace of irony, to again represent the oppressor (i.e. the facilitator). Things were already getting confused; there is only supposed to be one audience member onstage at a time. But we still went with it, as first I and then Lia were replaced. Joseph was very good in the role of the oppressor; even taking the elder into the corner to make a secret deal that benefited both of them.

But their behaviors continued to simply reflect reality: the three villagers argued directly with Joseph, but never did they stop and consult each other. Never did they simply refuse the fertilizer and walk out. They just argued back and forth. Lia took the place of the chief. She immediately turned to the other two villagers and began asking them for their opinions. Then she threw the chair that only the chief had been sitting on
away so that she could join them on the ground, and began to dialogue with Joyce and Jane, the two villagers.

We stopped there and asked how each of the different villagers had acted. People did pick up on the changes that Lia made, but hadn’t thought to make them themselves. Jethro, a Tudruok researcher from the community who had taken on the role of the Joker, seemed oddly reticent, especially once the most vocal audience members had taken all the roles; I realized later that perhaps he was afraid to be seen as criticizing or trying to uproot any of his elders.

A threat from outside

The group began rehearsing their drama again. Having seen the forum model now and understanding what it could add to the play, the group planned to incorporate the forum model into the play. However, the energy of the group took a distinctly negative turn when an MVP facilitator, who had not been invited to the meeting but had been informed nonetheless, came and sat watching the play. His presence immediately impeded the efforts of the group to continue rehearsing the play that was highly critical of his organization. This same man ran committees on which some community members present sat, where resources were distributed to those in favor and his displeasure would undoubtedly be felt.

In addition, an elder who had never been involved with the community-building activities of this group over the past two years and was known to be antagonistic towards the Hera and Sinani community groups arrived and set up a chair on the other side of the
road to watch.\textsuperscript{16} He then approached during the rehearsal of the play and interrupted to give a speech, saying that he was “glad that you are speaking on your own.”\textsuperscript{17} His speech, presented in neutral language, was evidently meant to remind participants of his presence and power in the community. He left and went back to sit on the side of the road, removed from everyone else. From talking to Lia and Eunice about the situation later, I gathered that the community members present understood his actions as an attempt to subtly disrupt proceedings, assert his control over the participants gathered, and illustrate his own position of difference by sitting removed from the group.

Neither the facilitator nor the elder had interacted constructively with the group before, nor had their other activities intersected with those of the group.\textsuperscript{18} Certain members within the group who were sympathetic to MVP interests (or simply saw the chance to further their own interests) had clearly informed the two intruders that this play was being rehearsed. Their very presence changed the tone of the meeting, as community members who were indebted or wanted to stay in their favor (to receive advantageous positions in the next MVP committee, for example) shied away from the content with which they had been engaging.

In my interpretation, the elder’s passive-aggressive speech indicated that he was, in fact, the opposite of “glad” that they were “speaking on their own.” Uttered in such

\textsuperscript{16} I was not present at this moment, having left the rehearsal for an hour to attend to a burn from a motorcycle. This information was relayed to me later and I was able to re-watch the events on video footage captured by a Geno youth member. According to Lia, this man perceived the Tudruok collaborative projects as a threat to his interests, since he had benefitted from the distribution of MVP resources.

\textsuperscript{17} I don’t have a direct translation for this; this quote came anecdotally from Lia, who was receiving translation from a community member during the speech.

\textsuperscript{18} MVP had perceived Lia as a threat from her first visit to the village to investigate its potential as a fieldwork site. Facilitators with MVP had attempted to block permission for Lia to conduct research in the village, and continued to employ disruptive tactics; one day we returned from a meeting elsewhere to find that MVP had scheduled a meeting to take place outside the center at, conveniently, the same date and time that Tudruok had scheduled a meeting. Even more blatantly, the facilitator had taken the wooden benches and seats out of the Tudruok office and used them for his own meeting.
tones, the elder’s seemingly innocuous statement contained threatening undertones: what consequences would arise from community members speaking out on their own? Why was this act of speaking out deemed enough of a threat for two powerful figures from the community to arrive and insert their presence into the situation? The actions of these two men played into Chamber’s explanation of powerlessness and “robbery” against the very poor: “Open violence against the poor may be the last sanction not often needed, but it can represent the visible tip of the iceberg of very widespread subtle and not so subtle intimidation and the fear it creates” (133). While no violence was carried out, the elder and the facilitator knowingly violated the supposedly safe space in which the community was dialoging about the problems they faced. And, as Chambers explains, the possible consequences of speaking out against such powerful figures remain unseen, bound by a culture of fear.

V. CASE STUDY COMPARISONS

Mali and Nigeria

Mavrocordatos and Martin, in their exploration of theatre interventions in Mali, noted “the actors usually slid away from exploring the internal tensions within their village – which may have been the most significant factors affecting their work with the project” (Mavrocordatos and Martin 70-1). The above anecdote in Sauri Village, Kenya presents one such reason for why community members would want to “slide away” from confronting community tensions; there was a shifting scale of silencing taking place, from, first, the poorest and most desperate community members who were unable to
come to meetings in the first place (Chambers notes that the poorest community members are always the least visible, 141); to the widows, youth, and other marginalized groups on the bottom; to the more powerful community members within that group; to the elder and facilitator who had the ability to dispense or withhold so many resources.

Betiang, writing about theatre practiced in rural Nigeria, believes that for an “effective intervention” to take place practitioners must “negotiate with and commit all interests in the local communities (leadership and youth) as a way of reducing such distracting conflicts; even when these conflicts are built into the total process of playmaking as was the case in the project” (75). It is true that these conflicts “distract” successfully from the main work; that afternoon, the practice petered out quickly and community members began trickling home. However, I question the notion that you can “negotiate with and commit all” interests in the community without compromising the challenge posed by the theatre intervention in the first place.

One possible outlet for these tensions is the performance itself, where the stage provides a safer space for negotiation. The presence of the two men on that afternoon in Sauri served as a reminder to all present that the repercussions of speaking out could extend far beyond the initial performance. Nonetheless, the stage mediates between reality and fiction: just as the women participants in the birth spacing forum in Senegal were able to practice debating against a fictitious character, so an audience member participating in controversial subject matter can take refuge in the role they are assuming.

This extension beyond the stage must be considered in any work that seeks to genuinely engage with deeply rooted social issues: we must all go home. For the wife going home to her husband, the youth going home to his elder, or the committee member
facing a development worker in a meeting the next day, the possibility of reprisal might outweigh the temptation to mount the stage and express frustration.

VI. REFLECTION AND SYNTHESIS

Reflections

I will now tie together my discussion of Theatre for Development in the last two chapters with a reflection on the modes of participation and practice of TFD. I have identified various factors that obstruct the aims of a community-based theatre (particularly a participatory forum theatre) performance. In Senegal, where I observed the performance of plays and the facilitation of forums, I highlighted the problems of audiences that do not reflect the target of the interventions (in this case, men who do not want to practice birth spacing); poor staging that obstructs participation; a didactic framing of issues that prevents a resolution towards anything other than the identified “issue” and moral position; a burden that is placed upon the “habitual ‘soft’ targets” (Prentki 50) of development interventions such as women and children, rather than the oppressors themselves; facilitation that defers to authority and thus allows those in power to commandeer the agenda; and the reduction of nuanced and complicated realities to a black-and-white depiction of an extreme story.

Similarly, in Kenya, I was able to identify problematic factors during the creation of forum theatre plays: inadequate time to rehearse the concepts of forum theatre; the expression of dominant opinions that may serve to silence others; powerful members of the group taking control over the process; attitudes towards morality that conflict with the
aims of the performance; and a tendency to create didactic, rather than open-ended theatre.

Similarities between these two processes abound, despite the fact that they take place under such different circumstances. The two starkest similarities show the tendency of the most powerful community members to use these interventions to further their own ends; and the inclination for outsiders or powerful community members to impose an agenda for change on the powerless. Initially, I hoped that an analysis of these issues would bring me to a point of being able to make simple recommendations about how to avoid the pitfalls of so many Theatre for Development projects.

Factors of success

Looking at the two moments of relative success that I encountered during my experiences, I realized that these moments of occurred because of two less tangible factors. The first involves having strong relationships that allow you to challenge people rather than aggravate them. The second is the ability to facilitate stories in a way that allows contradictions to emerge, rather than hiding behind the sort of master narrative that is often implicitly propagated when we talk about “community issues.”

In Kenya, I had the most success with the Geno Youth members because I knew them well. I could also meet them more equally on the level of language because all of them spoke English at a relatively high level, as opposed to the older community members (especially older women) who by and large spoke very little English. In addition, we were close in age and at similar points in our lives. Thus, I could dialogue with them from a place of a more equal understanding of their experiences, but also
challenge them in a half-joking, half-serious manner. On the basis of these relationships, I was able to open up a conversation about gender norms that otherwise would not have taken place. With the conversation, the advantage of forum theatre became evident: I pushed the youth to conceptualize these experiences through storytelling and the formation of a narrative for use in a play.

In the second encounter, my experience in Senegal at the “niche” several days after the forum theatre performance shows the need for strong relationships. Prior to the community facilitator taking over the meeting, I attempted to conduct not only a focus group to get at community understandings of and attitudes towards what happened, but also to begin to get the participants to articulate the needs that they wanted to see addressed in future theatre interventions. I was attempting to see if there was a contrast between the needs that they articulated and the needs identified by NGOs. Of course, this attempt failed dismally – I did not know or understand these community members at all. The facilitator effectively dismissed my haphazard intervention, then took over the meeting. Immediately, his relationship with the community became clear in comparison to my own. He was able to facilitate a conversation where contradictory stories emerged in comparison to the ones given by the Kaddu Yarakh actors – based on his relationships and prior interactions with the group members.

Ultimately, much of the discourse around development and even theatre fails to capture the importance of relationships rather than interventions. Even the most well-known and actively self-reflective theatre practitioners like Michael Etherton, Ross Kidd, Tim Prentki, and Martin Byram are most often in the position of entering into communities and then leaving, often within the space of a few weeks.
The second factor in success, the ability to bring out contradictions within community narratives, is predicated on strong relationships. But it also comes with practice: the facilitator at the niche in Dakar evidently knew how to draw out these stories. Prentki describes how the role of the facilitator of these conversations is to “hear these stories and to refrain from mediating them…the facilitator should ensure that all sectors of the community are encouraged to offer their stories…contradictions will emerge, reflecting sectoral interests; one story will be countered by another as different realities contend for attention” (42). Of course, each person carries inherent biases, even as a supposedly neutral mediator. However, the success of the two examples offered above is grounded in the relatively unmediated nature of people’s stories; the sharing of these stories enabled to group to separate “myth from reality, truth from assertion” (Prentki 42) and engage with a continual process of collective meaning-making.

**Conclusion**

One of the main values of forum theatre may lie in its ability to reflect the oppression present in the community. Two productive processes emerge: first, the way in which events are “dramatized” clarifies their oppressive nature (although this could also make them easier to dismiss). Second, as these processes become evident, they reveal dynamics that are useful to “outsiders” working in the community, providing a vehicle for expression of opinions that might not readily be shared, or so blatantly shared as in the case of dramatic reenactment of people’s values and interests.

The process of creation in particular has the most value for the participating actors, as it gives them opportunities to engage in discussions about social issues, define
the issues through specific examples, and anticipate audience reactions. However, more
time and discussion of the concepts would be needed for this process to be truly
productive and collaborative.

The Kenyan theatre was working in a context of trying to not simply analyze but
also transform the dominant development discourse; in that sense, even the elders
unironically reenacting the oppression that they take part in can be seen as a radical
departure from the everyday normalization of this oppression. Although community
hierarchies ultimately took precedence over major change (and we were not able to
surmount these hierarchies in the timeframe allotted to allow real transformation to take
place), the process of critiquing development ought to be seen as a radical departure from
the uncritical acceptance that preceded it; especially in the context of the history of the
performance of development in Sauri village prior to this point.
CHAPTER FOUR

Actionable Insights

This chapter attempts to unite the theory and analysis of the previous chapters with accessible and practical advice for students who aspire to carry out development work or have already done so. My experiences stem from being a college student conducting work and research over a limited period of time in both East and West Africa. In writing this chapter, I imagined a reader in a similar position: whether planning to conduct service work, research, or study in an unfamiliar setting, or seeking to synthesize his or her experiences. I assume as the baseline a timeframe of at least eight weeks.

Introduction

As a sophomore at Duke University, I made the sweeping decision to spend fifteen months – the entirety of my junior year – abroad: the summer in rural Kenya, the fall in Dakar, Senegal, and the spring and following summer in Cairo, Egypt. Before embarking on this trip, I foraged for all the available advice that would allow me to do “good work.” I knew that I had to be culturally sensitive; that I must be adaptable, patient, and flexible against unanticipated setbacks; that I alone would not be able to solve poverty or other issues in the areas I visited; that many people would view me as a source of money and resources; that I would be hot and lonely and uncomfortable, and eat strange food. I had taken several Africa-focused cultural anthropology classes. I had read a memoir by a former Peace Corps volunteer along with nonfiction books and
articles about development by anthropologists, economists, and development practitioners. Like any good Duke student, I plunged into this latest test with what I deemed to be the appropriate preparation, inoculated against every disease and mentally prepared for every challenging scenario.

But no one told me about the nuances of each experience, of the latent symbolism contained within each interaction that I had with a community member. For all of my anthropological preparation, I still arrived in my first “African village” to be blindsided by the fact that the village comprised of meandering fields and paths rather than a ring of huts in a dusty clearing. Like this initial reality check, my ensuing attempts at community work saw my imposed values butting heads with unanticipated realities, such as hidden agendas held by community members.

I hope that the following “actionable insights” might prepare aspiring practitioners and students of development to walk in with their contact lenses on: with a sharper-edged focus on the contradictions and tensions inherent in community work, in ways that prepare them to better understand and negotiate these dynamics. The insights arise from specific problems that I encountered; I then draw from well-known thinkers in the fields of development and community organizing to make my claims.

These insights are based on two encounters with arts-based development. I lived with a local family in Sauri village, western Kenya, for two months during May-July 2011 while working with community members to create documentary and theatre projects that critically examined the community’s encounters with development and poverty. I then chose to dedicate a month at the end of my study abroad program in Senegal in November 2011 to conducting independent research with a theatre troupe, the
members of which used interactive theatre to disseminate development messages from NGOs.

In this chapter, I lay out seven adaptable and actionable insights. Each begins with a description of my experience. I then explain the theory behind the insight and follow with “the actionable”: how might reader, as a practitioner in comparable situations, take action to tackle each of these problems in their own work with communities in which they are outsiders?

**ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS**

1. **Humanity transcends a person’s value as a research subject**

**My experience**

While working and living with a theatre troupe in Senegal, I was reprimanded by one of their members for not “getting to know us better.” It was a humiliating moment, not least because he acted out, in true theatrical fashion, each of the *toubab* (“white person”) characteristics that I exhibited in my relentless quest for interviews and information. More than the personal embarrassment, however, I was unsettle by the realization that I let cynicism and the pressures of a project deadline get the best of me. I had been seeing the actors solely as research objects while forgetting their humanity.

Viewed through my research paradigm, even a simple conversation became a fraught experience. Once, while sitting on a bus next to a troupe member, I found myself holding back from asking questions that I was deeply curious about because I wanted to
ask them at a time when I had a tape recorder. In carefully measuring my interactions with the people who ought to be my friends, I dehumanized both them and myself. They, unsurprisingly, picked up on my calculations and challenged me. As much as I attempted to repair my relationships with them after the actor’s admonishment, I had lost a crucial element of trust, which affected the scope of my abilities both as a researcher and as a friend.

The insight

As students, it’s easy to get caught up in trying to achieve the goals of a project. Many supposedly “immersive” projects are structured to support the idea that interactions with certain groups of people should somehow supplement students’ cultural experiences; for example, by staying in a homestay for two weeks in a more rural area of the country. In these situations, community members become mere objects, receptacles of our cultural imaginings and mythologizing. A group of children transforms into a photo opportunity; an old woman becomes the object of charity. Students conduct interviews with community members without taking the time to understand them as human beings, rather than objects of research.

The actionable

The following are questions that might help guide readers’ perceptions of their interactions with community members:

1. Am I valuing this person as a person or as a conduit to something else?
2. Would I be ethically comfortable with this action if it were taking place in my hometown? Or if someone was doing this to me?

2. Outsiders wear an aura of expertise

My experience

While training community members who wanted to make a documentary about their experience with poverty and development, I assumed the role of the “expert” on filming and video editing. My expertise did not stem from special training; I had never taken a class on documentary making or used a video camera. However, I had watched and studied countless movies and documentaries over the course of my life. I was computer literate: everything from typing fast to navigating menus to understanding the controls on a video being played. I knew how to frame a shot well because I had owned a camera for years and understood the basics of photographic composition.

Moreover, this expertise only flowed in one direction. I was never taken to a farm by a villager and told that I had to know how to sow sweet potatoes in order to be more successful in life. My modes of knowledge were assumed to carry more value; not only in the areas of photography and technology, but in all areas (for instance, as a teacher and learner). These experiences combined to give me an aura of expertise. In “bringing” my sparse technical knowledge to the community members, my worth became tied to being the source of knowledge.

I alone did not create this perceived knowledge dichotomy. The community members I worked with bought into the idea too; over the years the message they had
received from wave after wave of development workers that they were vessels waiting to be filled with this outside knowledge. My own positioning created an environment potentially unwelcoming to dissenting opinions. A participant with an idea or question that differed from my own might not have wanted to be seen as challenging the person who really “knew” what she was talking about.

**The insight**

In community development, a reliance on technical forms of knowledge (as opposed to locally-generated, shared knowledge) creates a false dichotomy of “expert outsider” versus “naïve local.” Outside experts monopolize what development scholar Michael Edwards terms “technical interpretations of reality.” In this version of reality, “knowledge, and the power to control it, becomes concentrated in the hands of those with the technical skills necessary to understand the language and methods being used” (118). Technical interpretations of the “problems” outsiders are seeking to “solve” devalue indigenous, experiential knowledge by reducing dynamic and complex local relationships to narrowly defined problems that beg a solution.

People’s reactions towards others are based in their experience of the world: in their previous relationships and in the events that have come before. Saul Alinski, the father of modern-day organizing tactics, reminds us, “communication with others takes place when they understand what you’re trying to get across to them” (81). That understanding comes from how well organizers can frame things in terms of the experiences of the people they are working with. Outsiders to a new community often fail to remember that communication “is a two-way process” (Alinski 81).
The actionable

Paulo Freire, a famous Brazilian educator and community activist, offers one example of how we can reframe expertise to reflect the value of lived experience. While teaching a group of peasants in rural Brazil in the 1960s, Freire presented a game that they would play to see who was more “knowledgeable.” He would ask the peasants a question; if they couldn’t answer it he won a goal. They would do the same and the side with the most goals won the game. Freire went first, asking them a complicated question about philosophy. The peasants couldn’t answer. After conferring amongst each other, they asked Freire, “What’s a contour curve?” Freire could not answer. The game went on like this, until they both reached a tie of ten “goals,” proving all types of knowledge equally valid (60).

Practically speaking, upsetting the expert-naïve dichotomy means making people experts of their own knowledge: In the words of community organizer Ernesto Cortes, “allow[ing] people to become expert enough to challenge the experts” (qtd. in Roberts 63). Robert Chambers, a development scholar, advocates for a “reversal of roles” (111); that is, “putting first the wishes of the poor themselves” (145). A useful exercise might involve brainstorming with a group about the different types of knowledge that they possess.

It is also helpful to think through questions like:

1. What educational/technical language am I speaking right now? Is it inclusionary or exclusionary?
2. What layers of difference am I placing between myself and the people with whom I am interacting? E.g. what language is this workshop/lesson/interview taking place in? Who chose the space? Who selected the topic?

3. Is there a transfer of knowledge taking place? Is one person or group “depositing” knowledge into the other? Or is knowledge being exchanged between people or groups?

4. How well do I understand the problem(s) that I am seeking to solve? Who could I talk to in order to better understand the problem(s)?

5. What do I still need to learn in order to approach people through their experiences?

3. The invisible should be made visible

My experience

While living in Kenya and Senegal, I primarily interacted with those community members directly involved in existing groups. Tired from long days at the office, I rarely deviated from my set routine of walking back and forth between my home and work. Late into my stay – seven weeks in – one community member accused me publicly of not sharing my knowledge with those around me. He also pointed out that I rarely visited other members of the community at their houses. Yes, I had reasons for doing so: one was a fear of imposing on people’s busy routines. But his accusation mostly shocked me because, from my viewpoint, I had been seeing a broad spectrum of the community every day at the office. I realized the fallacy of this illusion and attempted to counter it by
visiting new places further afield, but realistically I took these actions too late in my stay to gain applicable knowledge and forge meaningful relationships.

**The insight**

Robert Chambers’ observation that “the silent cannot be heard” also extends to the fact that the invisible cannot be seen (141). Outsider are constrained by “core-periphery perception and thinking” (141), meaning that they foreground the community stakeholders with whom they work directly, while other stakeholders recede into the background as theoretical figures whose interests they fail to perceive. Perceived potential for action thus stems from this double-edged perspective. Say, for instance, that I am working with the “community” to solve a problem, but in reality this community is comprised primarily of the old men or married women or unemployed youths who attend meetings. My formulation of the problems to be addressed will be based on what is easily visible, that is, the problems being brought up in these meetings, while the concerns of those who are not present will not be seen or known to exist at all.

The worst of rural poverty is often hidden. Outsiders are shown a scattering of success stories: the entrepreneurs whose small businesses have succeeded, the farmers who have benefited from fertilizer inputs, the schoolchildren who now receive lunch due to a new school meals program. They stick to the main roads, paths that are traversable by Jeep or bus or bike. The poorest people do not own businesses. They may not own land. Their children may not be in school. They live far from the main roads and easy access points. The poorest people cannot always attend meetings. Mothers may have
children to look after. Widows may feel prohibited by social stigmas. Poor farmers may have to work their fields all day.

In addition to the success stories, community members may frame issues in terms of needs. The narrative becomes: success is possible, but only with your help – and here are all the other needs waiting to be addressed. An example of how this narrative gets constructed emerges in a documentary about the Millennium Villages Project (MVP), a non-governmental organization (NGO) which began a poverty alleviation scheme in Sauri village, where I was also working. The documentary features Angelina Jolie touring the village with MVP founder Jeffrey Sachs, marveling at what has been achieved and seeing problems still unsolved.

In one scene, she sits with an old woman in her tiny hut. She asks the woman when she last ate a meal, and the translator relays the reply back to her: “Yesterday.” When my co-worker showed this documentary to community members in Sauri, the scene outraged them. In reality, when the translator posed the question to the woman, she replied in the local language that she had eaten earlier that day and had two bowls of food waiting that she wanted to share with her guest. The translator, knowing why Jolie was in the village, chose to foreground the woman’s need as an added impetus for the project to stay in the village.

I do not mean to imply that all community representatives lie to outsiders. Instead, I wish to highlight the business of storytelling: the people that outsiders meet in connection to an organization will likely represent the story that the organization wants to tell, whether that is framed in terms of success or neediness. In only listening to this
The actionable

Chapter 6 in Chambers’ *Putting the Last First* gives several pointers on how to begin making the invisible visible. This requires a shifting of action and judgment towards the poor after they have oriented themselves towards power and outsiders for so long. For instance, students could strike out on long walks through inaccessible paths, closer to the poor people who don’t make it to meetings.

Similarly, Lee Staples advises beginning community organizers to find the “gatekeepers” of a community, who often act as “an intermediary between [the community] and the outside world” (68). Staples lists clergy members, social service workers, and nurses as examples of common gatekeeper roles. From these gatekeepers, students might ask who else they should talk to and thus gain access to people who they would not otherwise be able to establish contact with.

Students might also begin their work in a new environment by envisioning a timeline for their stay. For instance, if I were to stay in a new community for eight weeks, I would spend the first two weeks engaged in an intensive project of getting to know people and letting them see my interest in hearing about their experiences without imposing any sort of agenda on them. The following four weeks would be dedicated to implementing my plan of action. The final two weeks would provide space for reflection with community members and the creation of a plan for follow-up action. Had I followed official narrative, outsiders risk never finding out the stories that, for now, remain silent and untold.
this timeframe, I would not have taken too many tasks on, delayed the final community event I was helping to organize, and then had to leave the same day of the event.

Chambers advises development practitioners to take the time to sit with community members and talk. This advice can, in practice, be hard to follow. A widow stops a student who is walking to a meeting because she wants to talk for an hour about her leaky roof and her grandson at a faraway university. Sure, the student could stop and talk with her out of a desire to humor her or offer her some token gesture (as I offered token gestures to the actors in Senegal through my surface-level interactions). But poor people are alert to when they are being humored or condescended to, and such an attitude will negatively impact students’ ability to work in that community.

Chambers’ advice should be seen as a challenge to shift our paradigms around socialization and perceived productivity. Community organizing is the business of relationships (as I explore further in the next insight); processes of relationship building are fundamental to the process and ought to be recalibrated as “productive.” Instead, students are often encouraged to view social interactions as supplemental or complementary to the “real work” of their service-oriented jobs: they might spend the day at the office or field site, then attend a cultural event or get drinks at a bar with newfound friends after – and only after – a hard day’s work.

In the context of development in sub-Saharan Africa, jokes about “Africa time” frequently emerge. Yet we rarely stop to consider:

1. Why does this phenomenon exist?
2. What value judgments do I carry about time and productivity?
3. How are productivity and the social conceived locally? What value might be derived from this conception?

4. “Organizing is a fancy word for relationship building”

My experience

The level of effectiveness and depth that I achieved through my work in Kenya and Senegal correlated to the strength of my relationships. In Kenya, I lived with a family in the community for eight weeks and worked with a relatively broad cross-section of the community through various groups. I formed close relationships within my host family, the team of researchers I worked with, and members of the local youth group. These relationships allowed me to leverage support, for example when I wanted to introduce a theatre intervention and the youth group enthusiastically agreed.

By contrast, my relationships with community members in Senegal were not as strong. I only worked with the actors for a month, and lived with them for two weeks. To them, I was simply another student researcher who had wandered into their lives for a few weeks. I did not have the community buy-in that Alinsky talks about. The actors tolerated me – we were friendly – but we did not form close bonds. Because there was not a strong precedent for trust, I felt that some of their interviews with me were done in a cursory fashion. In the wider community, I attempted to implement focus groups but did not know the participants in these intended focus groups; my research efforts in this area fell through. While my research was not focused on organizing to the same level that
it was in Kenya, I learned in both cases that work couldn’t be done effectively without strong relationships that had been built over time.

The insight

The quote in the title of this insight comes from veteran community organizer Ernesto Cortes, who says, “Organizing is a fancy word for relationship building. No organizer ever organizes a community. What an organizer does is identify, test out, and develop leadership” (qtd. in Rogers 17). If organizing really is just another way of portraying relationship building, as Cortes would have it, then relational meetings form one of the principal tactics of organizers who want to work effectively. The stories that emerge give insight into the person’s “deepest commitments and the experiences that gave rise to them” (Chambers 45).

Relational meetings are face-to-face encounters between the organizer and a community member “for the purpose of exploring the development of a public relationship” (Chambers 45). Edward Chambers characterizes a successful relational meeting as “one that wakes somebody up” (44) to the possibilities of organizing. Mary Beth Rogers calls this act “a commitment on the part of an organizer or leader to work with other people – on a one-on-one basis – to help them grow beyond themselves and participate as a full citizen in the public life of their community” (100).

The actionable

Cortes depicts his organizing tactics thus: “[I] try to find out what’s your interest. What are your dreams? I try to kindle your imagination, stir the possibilities, and then
propose some ways in which you can act on those dreams and act on those values and act on your own visions” (qtd. in Rogers 17). Cortes adds the crucial element of ownership: “You’ve got to be the owner. Otherwise, it’s my cause, my organization. You’ve got nothing!” (ibid.).

Edward Chambers, veteran organizer with IAF, sets further guidelines for relational interviews in Chapter 2 of his book *Roots for Radicals*, calling the practice “the most radical thing we teach [to organizers]” (44). According to Chambers, relational meetings should take no longer than 30-35 minutes. There’s no space for “chit chat” because “you’re checking people out, piquing their curiosity, and looking for talent, not for friends of ‘dialogue’” (48). Moreover, the meeting is reciprocal in the sense that people will often “turn the tables” and question the organizer. Finally, the questioning approach is probing rather than prying: what Chambers calls “an attempt to find the other’s center” (51).

Students hoping to engage in relational work would aim for the emergence of questions such as:

1. Why are things like this?
2. Why am I doing what I do?
3. Why don’t I spend more time on what I say is most important to me?

(Chambers 49)

Chambers recommends short questions to draw out the other person:

1. Why do you say that?
2. How so?
3. What’s that mean to you?
4. How come it matters?”

(Chambers 50)

At the end of a relational meeting, students should be able to gauge whether the person they talked with is committed to a cause and where they are positioned in community power structures, a positioning explored in the next point through power analysis techniques.

5. **Effective organizing uncovers historical and current power networks**

**My experience**

If I had questioned more diligently, I would have discovered crucial information to inform the way I conducted theatre initiatives in Kenya. Because I did not ask, none of the community members volunteered information about their past interactions with theatre. I knew that some of them had participated in plays before, but did not know the nature of that participation.

It was only later that I found out about two past theatre initiatives: a three-year partnership with the Millennium Villages Project (MVP) to disseminate information about MVP development projects; and a week-long workshop held by a group of Swedish university students who wanted to teach forum theatre techniques and learn about local theatre techniques. If I had known more about these previous projects, I would have better understood why participants leaned towards creating didactic, health-related plays with a moral at the end: because their previous interactions with MVP had
taught them to conceptualize theatre through that framework. I could have started my
lessons about forum theatre with a request for participants to show me what they already
knew; we would have begun the creative process with recognition of their knowledge,
rather than me teaching them information that they already knew and would have been
able to tell me (for instance, about the basics of forum theatre based on their interactions
with the Swedish students).

The insight

If previous projects in the community have foundered due to lack of resources, or
researchers have flitted in and out without establishing reciprocal relationships, then
students will likely confront residual skepticism and resentment. These feelings find
expression in various behaviors: people may want to extract as many resources from
students as they can because they suspect that the students will abandon them just like the
other foreigners before; or they may frame their needs in terms of what they know
appeals to foreigners. For instance, they might have seen the success that orphans have in
attracting NGO support, and so might highlight the number one issue in their community
as being the plight of orphans because this might be the best way to secure resources (in
Kenya, there was much talk of “the girl-child” and her troubles; in Senegal, the term “the
population” was used to highlight those in need). Only through constant questioning can
students begin to peel away the layers of previous relationships and failures.
The actionable

Uncovering history and power networks involves two primary tactics. I would characterize the first as “acting the historian.” Lee Staples notes that the outsider to a community has a “license to ask questions” (38). In this vein, students might question people belonging to different groups in the community about their life experiences, listen, and ask follow-up questions. Students could ask about people’s previous encounters with development projects and try to discern the attitudes that have resulted from these interactions.

The second tactic, commonly employed in community organizing, is to conduct a power analysis aimed at understanding “the nature and distribution of power” (“Power Analysis” 24). According to the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), “Power analysis seeks to map the informal political landscape, including its rules and structures” (24) in order to identify points of influence and power. Numerous toolkits can be found online to help structure a power analysis: the organization Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education (SCOPE) offers a set of guiding questions to help chart community power structures:

1. What power does the decision-maker have to meet your goal/demands? By what authority?
2. What is the decision-maker’s background and history?
3. What is the decision-maker’s position on your issue/goal? Why?
4. What is the decision-maker’s self-interest?
5. What is the decision-maker’s history on the issue?
6. Who is the decision-maker’s boss?
7. What/Who is the decision-maker’s base and support?

8. Who are the decision-maker’s allies?

9. Who are the decision-maker’s opponents/enemies?

10. What other social forces influences the decision-maker?

6. Participatory practices can help push a dominant agenda

My experience

One afternoon in Kenya, my colleagues and I arrived an hour late to a meeting to find that several elders had influenced the other participants towards reworking the content of a play. Instead of the original, participatory format where people took on many different roles, only three people had speaking roles: unsurprisingly, they were the three most powerful and vocal people there.

Again and again, I came up against the problem of a select few powerful members commandeering the agenda of meetings. Because I did not always solicit the voices of other people present, and because I did not proactively recruit and listen to other, more diverse interests, these powerful voices came to dominate the agenda and thus, the action.

The insight

In every meeting, each person present is representing certain power interests. If only a certain segment of the population is there, those interests risk becoming represented as the interests of the entire community.
The following example from theatre for development practitioners Ross Kidd and Martin Byram illustrates the problem of power interests. Working on a project in Botswana that aimed to use theatre as a tool to discuss and work through community concerns, they discovered instead that, “the whole process is controlled by the more powerful members of the community—the government workers and community leaders. They attend the pre-campaign community workshops and decide on the issues. While the additional involvement of community leaders in this process is better than government workers doing this on their own, it still represents a grouping of interests within the village which are not representative of those of the majority” (97).

With only the interests of the powerful evident, this select group of community members gained control over a specific narrative about the “issues” facing the community. “This is demonstrated by the choice of issues—in 1974, for example, this group selected cattle theft as the major problem, an issue which is clearly not a high priority for the majority of rural families who own no cattle at all. In 1976 the choice of health issues—VD, nutrition, sanitation —was clearly influenced by the large and vocal participation of the government health staff” (97).

Rather than “providing a voice and an organizing tool for marginal groups” (97), the theatre projects implemented and later analyzed by Kidd and Ross continued to propagate the views of a wealthy and influential few. If the practitioners had strategized about reaching less vocal and less mobile segments of the population – married women who might be too busy to attend meetings, for example – then the theatre project might not have morphed into such an alienating and elitist viewpoint.
The actionable

Students conducting participatory initiatives could begin by asking:

1. Am I listening to and including the voices of a wide cross-section of community members?
2. Have I heard the opinions of young and old, women and men, poor and better-off, unemployed and employed, different religious sects and clans or tribes?
3. Has everyone in this meeting spoken?

A “no” in response to any of these three questions likely indicates the need to recruit those not currently represented; students might engage in community outreach to target an underrepresented demographic and hold a meeting specifically for that group.

Robert Chambers, in his book *Participatory Workshops*, gives specific advice on “dealing with dominators and helping the silent speak (if they want to, that is)” (180). His advice includes bringing up the problem (of some people talking too much and others staying silent) at a meeting and hearing people’s opinions; taking turns to speak in meetings; and giving the dominant person a role that involves observing or recording the proceedings (181-2).

Meeting directly with people (in the same vein as the relational meetings discussed previously) presents an opportunity to confront them without sparking the defensiveness that could arise if they felt challenged in a large group setting. A student might ask the domineering individual: “How are you feeling about this project? What are you hoping to achieve from it? What is your experience with these types of projects? Do you think that everyone in the meetings is getting a fair chance to speak? If not, how do you think we might encourage others to speak?” This pedagogical technique engages
people and pushes them to express their own opinions without lecturing in a manner that appears paternalistic, condescending, or threatening.

It is worth noting Saul Alinsky’s distinction between agitation and irritation of a constituency. Agitation aims to “get people pregnant with hope and a desire for change” (103). Such techniques might involve interrogating community members as to why they put up with bad living conditions and proposing alternatives:

Organizer: “What if you didn’t pay your rent?”
Constituent: “They’d throw us out in ten minutes.”
Organizer: “Hmm. What if nobody in that building paid their rent?”
Constituent: “Well, they’d start to throw….Hey, you know, they’d have trouble throwing everybody out, wouldn’t they?”

(the full exchange is captured well on pp.103).

However, Alinsky cautions that such agitation can only take place when the organizer’s legitimacy is established and he/she has a solid base of relationships in the community. Without strong relationships, the organizer will lapse into irritating the constituents, which brings us back to the defensive behaviors explored earlier. Thus, agitational tactics can be employed effectively (in concert with the more conciliatory techniques espoused by Chambers) but should be done so in the context of strong relationships between the facilitator and participants.
7. Reflection informs action

My experience

I kept a field journal while in Kenya. At the end of yet another long day, I would resist the temptation to collapse on my bed but would instead write for at least half an hour before dinner, recounting the events of the day and how I felt about them. It might have been a big meeting, or it might have been a small interaction that I had with someone in passing. I couldn’t capture everything, but I would look back on the brief notes that I had written in meetings and use them as the basis for my writing.

Seeing an instinct emerge as a concrete thought on the page helped me strategize about how I could tackle the particular problem. The reflection wasn’t always action-oriented; sometimes it was simply a space to vent all of my pent-up emotions from the day. Not only were these notes invaluable for my research later on, but they also forced me to confront the existence of uncomfortable issues that I might otherwise have let sweep over me.

The insight

The experience of reflection in order to act upon it is integral to any sort of social justice work; Paulo Freire termed this constant cycle of reflection and informed action praxis (24). Reflection helps bridge what we sometimes see as a binary: either analyzing and understanding an issue, or blindly taking action without adequate understanding. Both ways of seeing the world can paralyze in their own way: whether through a feeling
that one individual alone cannot possibly confront the enormity of a problem, or through failure and the consequent fear of repeating mistakes.

Active reflection might vary based on the aims of students’ work. For instance, fieldnotes that an anthropologist writes to later synthesize into analysis would look different from notes that a community organizer writes about his/her day. Regardless, written reflection plays an important part in community-based work.

The actionable

Students might compose a list of questions that help them think more deeply about an issue. For instance, students engaged in community work could ask:

1. What risks did I take today?
2. What relationships did I form today?
3. How was I curious today?
4. What made me uncomfortable, and why?
Further reading

Below, I list a selection of chapters from books that were instrumental to my thinking about oppression, development, and my role as a privileged student aspiring to engage with community development in an international setting.

**On Western biases towards poverty in developing countries:**

**On structural oppression and pedagogical techniques:**

**On the basics of community organizing:**

**On ideas and activities for participatory workshops:**

**On stories of community organizing:**

**On the how and why of taking fieldnotes:**
WORKS CITED


Khalsa, Keval Keur. Interview with the author over Skype. Dakar, December 2, 2011. Tape recording.


