



Theatre for Development – What makes it work?

- 1. Overview of Theatre for Development**
- 2. Participatory Performance Practices**
- 3. cdcArts - profile**

Below is a short overview of Theatre for Development, followed by an account of Participatory Performance Practices (developed, among others, by Alex Mavrocordatos and Dave Pammenter, the speakers at the Exchange lunchtime discussion on 1 July 2003), which have attempted to move away from the top-down tendencies in some Theatre for Development work. At the end is a short profile of cdcArts, the organisation with which our speakers/performers are affiliated.

1. Overview of Theatre for Development

Adapted from the KIT (Royal Tropical Institute, Netherlands):

http://www.kit.nl/specials/html/td_theatre_and_development.asp

Theatre as an educational tool

Theatre is frequently used as a tool for communicating information across a range of sectors, particularly health, to bring about attitudinal and behavioural change, and changes in life style. Subjects that are dealt with include family planning, safe motherhood, safe drinking water, environmental degradation, child abuse, violence against women, rape, and HIV/AIDS education. In this kind of theatre, a group of actors or puppets perform a play containing a particular message, and this has often been done with little or no audience participation or discussion.

Theatre as a learning process

Theatre is also used to analyse, discuss and identify problems and to seek solutions with the participation of the community affected by the specific problems. Both local workshops and public performances represent a process of learning. Through dialogue, it raises the level of awareness and contributes to the empowerment of all involved. It may also mobilize people to take action and support them in processes of social and political change. This type of performance may be devised through community workshops and participatory research. Theatre for Development activities of this kind may be performed by community members or by a group of actors/facilitators. The audience may participate by acting on stage or even in writing, and in discussion. Such an approach is characteristic of Participatory Performance Practices (PPP) as is outlined below.

Not a new concept to developing countries

The use of theatre as a tool for development is easily accepted in developing countries. It builds upon the culture and traditions such as the travelling theatre, story telling, puppet shows, socio-dramas, mimes, songs, dance and riddles. For generations, rural populations have relied on the spoken word and traditional forms of communication to share knowledge and exchange information on social, health and agricultural themes, and to provide entertainment.

Advantages and disadvantages

The potential to entertain gives theatre an advantage over some other information and communication methods. Advantages of the use of mainstream theatre for development, identified in the literature, include:

- it can be culturally appropriate and context sensitive
- it can be a means to listen to the voice of the silent sectors of the community and allow expression of issues by peer groups rather than by agents of the development organizations
- it is a public, non-intrusive vehicle to communicate information
- it can foster ownership by the partner community, of strategies that have been developed together
- it can serve as a social lubricant for those changes
- it is portable and thus can be presented in many places
- it is recordable and thus useful for broader dissemination
- it is cost-effective in terms of one performance reaching many people
- its methods can be used by field-workers to facilitate dialogue and ensure ownership of cultural action and change
- performances may be adaptable to local contexts, especially when accompanied by workshops
- it can be used with other media to reinforce its message (e.g. pamphlets, radio)
- it does not require a literate or otherwise specially educated public.

It does have some disadvantages (some of which are addressed by PPP):

- the cost of development and implementation, by outside performers, can be high if scriptwriting and actor fees are costly
- the time required for development and implementation means that messages requiring immediate dissemination may be slow to be released
- the effectiveness of the drama may be dependent on the abilities of the producers and actors. This is not true at local community level, where the presence of peers in the drama has its own contextual impact.

Need for support

Despite the potential of theatre to involve and reach audiences, it is perhaps misleading to expect too much from the performance alone. If people have become aware of the disadvantages of certain behaviour and are willing to change, or if people are empowered to act but their actions are blocked or given little support, then the performance without support and follow-up will only serve to generate frustration. Theatre is perhaps best used as part of broader projects or programmes which can provide opportunities and the incentives to change.

2. Participatory performance practices (PPP).

PPP draws together a range of Theatre for Development and Participatory Research methods. It is process *and* product, and avoids the tendency for Theatre for Development to be perceived as a 'bolt-on accessory', a message service. Using participatory performance practices, Theatre for Development explores a full and participatory engagement with local culture, cultural action and change.

PPP exists as a discipline within TFD, distinct in its fusion of research process and performance product. More often than not, TFD is used as a tool, whether it be for extension worker or community member - and sometimes the priorities get confused. Often, NGOs will invite existing performers to create plays to illustrate or reflect local realities and 'solutions' to local or universal obstacles. PPP workshops have trained

performing artists as researchers and facilitators, so that their performances are built with the collaboration of community partners, and the emphasis shifts onto the process whereby community actors are allowed their own freedom to create and express reality through their own eyes.

PPP casts outside performing troupes in the role of facilitators, integrating research and community collaboration at all levels in working towards cultural action and performance within a Community Development initiative. It allows community artists to tell their own story, highlight their own concerns and develop their own strategies amongst themselves, with their neighbours or with those policy makers in the wider world who have power over their lives. At the same time it still allows for the outside facilitator/artists to weave their research outcomes into their own performance that can be used in turn to generate a recurrent and parallel cycle of PPP activities - another PPP campaign.

Messages Prevail

Theatre for Development in practice has tended towards the presentation of developmental messages by outside performing groups to community audiences who did not necessarily ask for these communications. It is the task of most Development workers to address specific issues and they have generally welcomed the notion of playlets that would pass on their viewpoints and propose their solutions. For their own part local performing groups have been glad of a chance to help their community, or of a job that used their skills as artists.

Research and performance are perennially viewed as separate parts of a mechanical sequence, not as a marriage whose offspring would take on its own characteristics. A subtle point it may be, but it is the bottom line of a truly participatory process. The data collection model is still alive and current.

By and large TFD in India, Africa and the Pacific is still run on conventional message-bearing terms, often using existing groups of performers, storytellers, puppeteers and musicians. Indeed, cdcArts have come across examples in Nepal where some of the NGOs actually discouraged a participatory approach from their theatrical messengers, and where participant groups have even had plays written for them by their International NGO employers, complete with several messages all writ large in the one dramatic oeuvre. It was to address this lack of participatory basis that the PPP methodology was developed.

More on Participatory performance Practices can be found at:

<http://www.cdcart.org/ppp/htm/home/intro.htm>

3. cdcARts

cdcArts promotes the practice and understanding of cultural action for social transformation and development. We work with Arts and Development practitioners, teachers, children and community members the world over. We provide participatory training programmes that combine action research and performance; we offer consultancy and grass roots projects that respond to the needs identified by both local people and development agencies that support them as resource.

cdcArts is a consultancy unit of the School of Community and Performing Arts. It serves as a base for a number of practitioners and trainers with extensive experience, at home and abroad, in the field of Theatre for Development (TFD) and Cultural Action for Change. cdcArts also publishes print and electronic resources,

and houses an extensive historical archive, on development communications especially TFD.

The guiding principles are democracy, participation and sustainability. In keeping with this, cdcArts' work incorporates aspects of trainer training and the sharing and exchange of transferable cultural and artistic skills through participatory performance practices (PPP).

MA in Theatre for Development: All this is underpinned by the running of vocationally oriented academic programmes at graduate level. The MA (PGDip) Theatre for Development and graduate research programmes run within the School of Community and Performing Arts at King Alfred's. cdcArts' academic links with universities in Zambia and Bangladesh are leading to the availability of similar awards in Africa and Asia.

<http://www.cdcartarts.org>
info@cdcartarts.org

Further information

[Source Quick List: Theatre for development](#)

Key resources relating to participatory performance practices and theatre for development.