

“Reconsidering the Validation, Efficacy and Title of Applied Theatre”

As you may have noticed, my paper has a quite hyperbolic title but its key word is *reconsidering*, while the rest follows from a typological reduction of validation, efficacy and title sifted through the concept of *partipation*.

I will start by mentioning two premises related to typology and participation and then go on to analyse and finally exemplify what is at stake in the abstract (even though I won't follow the abstract precisely, but my presentation will run tangent to it).

TWO PREMISES

The **first premise** has to do with a concern about applied theatre as a discipline of design and delivery of theatrical models. I have seen plenty of examples of this but also found myself in a situation where I get an increasing amount of assignments from educational institutions and communities that want introductory crash courses in applied theatre models such as forum theatre, image theatre and playback theatre. And of course it is very tempting to deliver such pieces of practical knowledge and skills; they are pedagogically viable in a range of international contexts and once delivered the instant gratification is often overwhelming in terms of feedback from participants who testify to transformative experiences and who are now willing to take on the role of facilitators of similar courses and workshops themselves (cf. one of my students at the University of Hyderabad in India, who wrote back to me a while ago saying that she conducted a project with terrorists in a prison in Kashmir). For international facilitators who parachute into foreign contexts with the models, the feedback can quite easily be quantified in exponential terms if one considers not only how many participants that attend one's own sessions but also the participants of the participants' subsequent projects, and so on. It is hard to imagine an applied concept that meets the Hefce criteria of impact case studies in a more efficient way than that. The question, though, is what this has to do with the sources and early incentives and intentions of applied theatre and participatory performance practices. So this is one of

the reconsiderations of the paper: *what are the relations between the legacy and rationale of AT and its contemporary design and delivery of models?*

The **second premise** to the paper is a hypothesis in my own current research which is, again, motivated by some incipient sources and incentives of AT that I dealt with in a presentation in July at the IFTR conference in Hyderabad. The hypothesis, and in this case the reconsideration of the basic components of AT can be formulated quite simply as follows: *is the fundamental rationale behind AT motivated by democratic trials, methods, aims and objectives?* As I suspect this to be the case (minus certified therapeutic drama), the question can be straightened out into an assertion and perhaps function as a provocation. If it is right to assume that the fundamental impetus of AT is democratic, it begs a lot of new questions about the participatory conditions of AT, which are currently discussed in policy studies on democracy where reforms are assessed in line with direct, radical, deliberative, effective although primarily in terms of *participatory* democracy. One of the most renowned recent cases of participatory democracy is of course the occupy concept, motivated by prefigurative politics and activism, which in many ways optimizes the participatory potential by inviting people not only to partake in its site-specific activities but also in the planning and development of the occupations, for instance through general assemblies. Such forms of exploratory meetings and open-ended decision-making bodies are pretty far from any kind of predetermined “design” or “model”, I would say.

So if the premises are combined the basic research question behind the paper would be: *what are the relations between the legacy and rationale of AT and its design and delivery of models and what consequences does this have on the pursuit of democratic practices and reforms?*

TWO SOURCES

Let me just mention a **couple of sources** I have in mind, namely John Dewey and Paolo Freire.

As Helen Nicholson writes in her book *Theatre, Education and Performance*, Dewey “can be credited with providing one of the first theoretical justifications of including artistic experience in education.” (ibid, 41) Nicholson is mainly referring to Dewey’s seminal work *Art as Experience* (1934), where the American pedagogue takes an interest in the spatial organization of learning and suspends the line between education and society by claiming that children’s learning “should take place within the context of their environment and everyday experiences so that they might learn to interact productively with the world around them” (ibid.).

This communal approach to participatory pedagogy was later transposed into the establishment of the community college Black Mountain College in North Carolina, where artists like Cage, Cunningham, Tudor and Rauschenberg did experiments that had a decisive effect on American performance and postmodern art and eventually various kinds of community-based activism via mutations of participatory performance practices like happenings, fluxus, feminist performance, institutional critique and a range of socially engaged art.

Dewey explicated a concept of education as a micro-democratic society that used participatory practices from agriculture to dramatic play and collaborative conflict resolutions (not least in *Education and Democracy*, 1916). Behind Dewey’s well-known pragmatism, often reduced to the slogan “learning-by-doing”, he also made serious attempts to justify pedagogy in terms of a scientific method. As early as in 1910, in a work called *How We Think*, Dewey described a sequence of problem-posing questions which assumes the form of a hypothetical deduction but branches out into an experimental procedure that resembles a devising process. The so-called Dewey sequence starts with the recognition of a problem, followed by a contextualization and analysis of its culture-specific conditions; in the next step learners hypothesize a problem solution and thus go on to acting out possible scenarios and solutions through dialogue in an open-ended experimental fashion. As far as specific methods or models are concerned in the sequence, they play a minor role as they are contingent

on the specific group that takes on the exercise as well as their living conditions. Dewey is in favour of pragmatic enactments of problem resolutions, but not before the culture-specific, individual and social conditions of the actions are examined.

The Dewey sequence preceded Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by about half a century, but probably didn't have a direct impact on it and hasn't had the same impact on AT as the Brazilian pedagogue, mainly due to the fact that Augusto Boal provided an inverse introduction to Freire's pedagogy by the publication of his *Theatre of the Oppressed*. I would say, however, that in terms of a progressive and performative problem-posing method and exercise, Freire's pedagogy has more in common with Dewey's pedagogy than with Boal's theatre.

I don't have to describe Freire's pedagogy to this working group of course, but let me just mention a few commonalities between Freire and Dewey. Freire's so-called banking concept opposes an authoritarian teacher-to-student learning hierarchy and instead favors dialogue between formative subjects in education. Just like Dewey, Freire proposes a methodological sequence that focuses on the experience and cultural background of the learner, who, regardless of educational merits, can acquire an ability to contextualize subjective and societal issues in dialogue with collaborators and consequently elevate explorations to a reflexive level and further onto a level of *conscientization* which is possible to adopt into a praxis whereby critical actions are enacted in social life. The fact that Dewey calls his pursuit democratic while Freire calls his liberational or revolutionary is a contingent linguistic and geopolitical variation – their egalitarian philosophies have a whole range of features in common, especially the ones that link progressive pedagogy with politics – and that link would not be meaningful without the performative means of bringing the learning process into intersubjective actions in public life. (Both Dewey and Freire writes about possibilities to catalyze pedagogical processes through dramatic exercises, but I won't go into that here.)

PARTICIPATION

When Boal mentions participation, he generally refers to the access to cultural activities, the possibility to access alternative cultural practices such as alternative theatre and interactive methods such as the theatre of the oppressed.

However, this is different from using the concept of participation to imply ways to engage, as a subject, in an experience to alter the course of social life. The latter terminology is taken from Paolo Freire, but might as well be ascribed to John Dewey.

“The central problem is this: How can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic beings, *participate* in developing the pedagogy of their liberation?” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 48, my italics)

It is worth noting that Boal was not the first theatre practitioner to adopt Freire’s pedagogy to theatre; adult educators at the University of Lesotho, Swaziland and Botswana established a project called **Laedza Batanani** in connection to outreach campaigns in rural Botswana with significant impact from Freire as early as 1974. This kind of community empowerment and decolonization through theatre by so-called extension workers would eventually become known as Theatre for Development. Laedza Batanani has been quite criticized by people like David Kerr and Dale Byam, mainly due to a lack of participatory involvement by the peasant target groups – but it was at least an early attempt to catalyze Freire’s consciousness raising methodology through popular theatre and a whole “package” of so-called “folk media” practices (Kerr 1995: 149-50). Their work comprised of the following sequence:

- a general introduction to popular theatre for the whole group;
- intensive work by the participants one of the four performance skills (drama, dance, song puppetry);

- information gathering in the villages;¹
- preparation and rehearsal of the performances;
- performing in the village;
- evaluation and preparation for follow-up programme. (Kerr 1995: 153)

This is a typical format of TFD that was dispersed between theatre workers across large parts of Africa in the 1980s. Over time it tuned into a model which was discussed as well as criticized in regular multilateral workshops in Africa. Despite that the academic extension workers had the ambition to involve local participants and tap into their cultural practices, it is quite obvious that their approach looks more like applied anthropology than a locally devised performance project on Freirian premises.

A significant break with the Laedza Batanani notion came in Tanzania in the mid 1980s where outreach scholars and facilitators like Penina Mlama and Amandina Lihamba at The University of Dar es Salaam created the so-called **Tanzanian model of popular theatre**. (I would not call this a model, but a sequence.)

Mlama describes the model (or sequence) in her book *Culture and Development* (1991) in reference to a seminal case called the 'Malya popular theatre project' which got its name after a village in the Mwanza region on Lake Victoria in Tanzania. For reasons of time I can't go into detail about that project here but it lasted for more than one year was unique at the time due to an organization where

- (1) community members participated in all stages, from the social mobilization to the resulting follow-up programmes
- (2) the elements of the projects emanated not from preconceived ideas but local modes of discourse and performance, and

¹ If the participants agree both to the investigation and to the subsequent process, the investigators should call for volunteers among the participants to serve as assistants. These volunteers will gather a series of necessary data about the life of the area. Of even greater importance, however, is the active presence of these volunteers in the investigation. (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 110)

(3) it drew on an already established national movement of dance and theatre in Tanzania. (Mlama 1991; Johansson 2006)

This might not be a Copernican turn in TfD, but it is definitely a tipping point towards a recognized social agency and project ownership of local groups applying their own performance practices to deal with their own problems with the help of the mediating role of an outreach facilitator.

I think the degree of participation comes and goes in trends and that these trends correspond with societal and institutional conditions. The TfD sequence eventually became instrumentalized into models and it was interesting to see that the more elaborate these models became, the less participatory their conception turned out. More power, skills and knowledge was allocated and eventually ascribed to the academically merited facilitator (sort of like the status of directors in conventional theatre or curators in visual arts).

Then came the AIDS pandemic and once again the societal challenges became so overwhelming that the participatory momentum oscillated back to the local and popular agency. (I wrote “The Lives and Deaths of Zakia” in 2006 for *Theatre Research International*.) AIDS implied extraordinary challenges in terms of participation (cf. Rahnema, Pratt).

Under the present conditions of applied theatre in the UK I think it's quite natural that a discipline like applied theatre gets institutionalized and instrumentalized, especially with incentives like the impact case study validation of HE. But I think challenges will mount up from the growing crisis of democratic representation in the educational system, civil rights society as well as on top policy levels.

CONCLUSION

As I have reconsidered the validation, efficacy and title of applied theatre by re-reading some of its sources, such as Dewey, Freire and Mloma, it strikes me that the family resemblance concept between their work is “participation” and that the different approaches to and notions and methods of participation indicate cognate aims and objectives in terms of democratization for the subjects and social groups on the ground. This has a certain bearing on the key concepts in my title:

Validation: There is no doubt that applied theatre models can serve egalitarian and just causes in communities, institutions and public life – the public school system, for instance, needs to offer more democratic practices through exercises combining critical reflection and practice-based life skills, in line with suggestions for democratic reforms in society combining deliberation and participation. However, the validation of applied theatre needs to be conducted as much from societal and participatory perspectives as the perspectives of pedagogy, facilitation and artistic methods. In other words the validation needs to be multi-perspectival and prismatic in the position of a nexus between HE, creative industries/stakeholders, social movements and public life.

Efficacy: There is no way that the affective turn can substitute aims and objectives of efficacy. Nor can efficacy be reduced to the notion of impact in HE. Attaining a multi-perspectival case study of participation is just as significant as to be able to reproduce and disseminate models behind a participatory ethos.

Title: The ‘title’ is at stake, but not the title as a designation, but title as in “something that justifies or substantiates a claim”, for instance, a land title. The fault-line demarcates a difference in agency and ownership.