

11

From acting to taking action: forum and legislative theatre

Adrian Jackson

- **Introduction**

Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed provides a number of useful techniques for working in development situations. This article attempts to give a very brief glimpse of two linked techniques.

- **Forum theatre**

The best known of these is Forum Theatre, in which the audience from a particular community is shown a play which illustrates a problem of concern to that community; this could be anything from how to limit the spread of the HIV virus by practising safer sex to how to combat racism. The play is devised in consultation with the people themselves and ideally will be performed by them. Many different techniques exist to establish what the issue to be treated will be; one way of starting this debate is to encourage participants to make images using their bodies, to show what oppressions they are facing (see also Searle-Mbullu and Kate Norrish, this issue).

The play shown first is called 'the model': it shows a central character failing to overcome whatever oppression he or she faces and failing to solve the problem. The model is a provocation, an invitation to disrupt the play and to change the outcome. The showing of this play is a way of asking a question: 'What can *we* do about this?'

In the second part of a Forum Theatre presentation, the model is shown again, slightly speeded up and whenever members of the audience feel that the central character

might pursue a different course of action, they are invited to shout 'Stop!', come on stage, take the character's place and show what they might do if they were in that situation. When a Forum Theatre piece is well chosen, it will usually be the case that many people in the audience are in a similar situation to the central character, so they have a direct interest in solving the problem.

Through the Forum session, many people will come on stage and show their ideas. These will be tested in the context of the play, as the other characters on stage will make it difficult for the ideas to succeed (just as in real life it is not easy to solve problems, it is not easy to overcome oppression). But by the end of the session, hopefully lots of different ideas, tactics and strategies will have been played out and the community will have more potential solutions to their problems. Sometimes a single clear solution will emerge; more often lots of different ideas will each offer a piece of the jigsaw and, at the very least, we will have a better understanding of the problem.

This technique can be used as 'a rehearsal for real life', so that after the Forum Theatre show, the community can get right down to putting the suggested solutions into practice.

- **Legislative theatre**

Augusto Boal's most recent work focuses on devising and changing laws. This new stage in the Theatre of the Oppressed is called 'Legislative Theatre'. In Rio, where Boal lives, he was elected to the powerful regional council as a *vereador*, a legislator. He immediately set up a number of small local theatre companies which used Forum Theatre as a way of asking

people what laws they would like invented and/or changed. A number of laws which were arrived at by this method have now been passed by the council - small but significant laws, such as guaranteeing disabled people certain rights of access or building platforms under phone booths so that blind people won't bump into them.

Can we use Legislative Theatre even if we don't have a co-operative member of the government on our side? Yes, though maybe on a more local level. In Britain I did a project with people with learning difficulties and/or mental illness. The project was commissioned by a local housing association which provided supported housing for a number of people. What they wanted to know, the question they were asking, was 'what sort of policy should we have for making complaints?'. So the play showed one of the residents unhappy with his treatment and the audience's interventions showed ways of complaining to the housing association. After the production had played in a few venues to some very creative audiences of people, who were themselves living in supported accommodation, the housing association drew up a complaints policy to reflect everything they had learnt from the Forum Theatre pieces.

The same technique might easily be used by a development group or charity, for instance trying to establish what a particular community's priority needs were, or where workers should concentrate their efforts. After showing a play which perhaps might involve some development workers going in heavy-handedly and enacting their own priorities without proper consultation, the audience might be invited to show how such an organisation might more usefully go about consultation. This way, the community takes charge of its own affairs and the development group gets the best possible information directly from the people with whom it is going to work.

The only difference between Forum Theatre and Legislative Theatre is that at the end of the latter, the audience is invited to suggest rules or laws or guidelines which have arisen naturally during the performance. There must be someone whose job it is to transcribe these suggestions and set them out clearly; ideally,

once this has been done, the group would go back to the community responsible for the ideas and make sure that its version of the suggestions put forward (and now translated into policy) is acceptable to the originating community.

The advantages of such a technique are obvious. Not least among them is ownership. If a community has made suggestions which are then enacted in policy, it is much more likely to work whole-heartedly for the success of the policy - it is their policy, it came from their ideas. Another advantage is that local people know much better what their problems are (and possibly how to solve them) than outsiders coming in with good intentions. This century is littered with examples of well-intentioned but misplaced development projects inflicted on communities. This method avoids such pitfalls.

• Conclusion

Theatre can involve people who might otherwise steer clear of involvement in local issues through more conventional means (like discussions or questionnaires). Forum Theatre has the great advantage that it enables us to try things out for ourselves, to see that we can change things ourselves - within a format that is provocative, entertaining and FUN! We are all actors, we all act our parts in daily life - but few of us get the chance to act, to take action on a larger stage, at a decision-making level which can affect our and others' lives. Legislative Theatre gives us this opportunity: the opportunity for genuine, creative, participative democracy.

Try it!

- **Adrian Jackson**, Associate Director, London Bubble Theatre Company, 5 Elephant Lane, London SE16 4JD. E-mail: londonbubble@gn.apc.org