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Awareness Community Theatre

by

Gabriel Kepas
Awareness Community Theatre

Paper by : Gabriel Kepas.
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Background Information:

In 1986, Papua New Guinea’s rich and prized theatrical tradition was identified, supported and encouraged to be used as a teaching tool by the government, NGOs and independent individuals.

The NCD theatre group, the founding member of the present ACT network believed that the rich and varied customs of PNG, full of traditional expressions, arts and crafts which have been in existence for hundreds of years were in fact a theatrical expression which could be harnessed. Papua New Guineans could use their own folk tales, myths, dances, singsings, art work, artifacts and handicrafts and integrate it for awareness creation by street and village theatre.

1987-1991, having successfully achieved it’s goal to use theatre, not only for entertainment purposes but also as a communicating tool to disseminate information for awareness raising. The theatre groups began many a time at their own initiative to perform a number of issues of community and public concern to help various government and private organisations to convincing individuals and communities of the issues at large. Interest in theatre as a potential tool to disseminate information started to grow this encouraged the NCD theatre group especially myself in organising mini workshops and setting up a Popular Theatre Conference For Creating Our Future Network.

It’s goals are listed below:
1) - to perform and bring vital information about the outside world to target communities and to provide feedback from those communities about how effectively messages are being communicated to the target communities by various media sources,

2) - to work to empower communities and their individual members to make educated decisions on their own about various social problems that they face in a complex and interdependent world.

3) - Facilitate communities, awareness and sensitivity around issues that affect their everyday lives and often prevent the fulfillment of basic needs and sensitizes communities to their responsibility to deal with social problems that could eventually have an impact on their province, their country or on the world as a whole.

Papua New Guinea like any other country is going through a tough transition as it is incorporated into the world economy. But as we develop monetarily, we need to realise that any real progress can only occur if it is founded on healthy people. The pace of modernisation that is occurring in PNG today is very disturbing to the traditional beliefs and cultures of our people. This is where theatre can be and should be used as key for this transition. A key because the majority of my country’s population is illiterate and they need to be educated by a medium about the future, that is not alien to them. Theatre, being integrated with PNG’s traditional lifestyle and belief could therefore be the most appropriate tool for such an exchange to occur.
As a newly established and fast growing NGO, in 1992, the Foundation of the Peoples of the South Pacific, an independent Papua New Guinea NGO and a member of FSP international, who having had 28 years work experience in PNG helping set up programs and building small NGOs engaged in environmental and health issues, collaborated with NCD theatre group and it's partners from the Popular Theatre For Creating Our Future in forming the now existing Awareness Community Theatre Network.

The Awareness Community Theatre

Introduction

The overall objective and aims of the collaboration between FSP and NCD theatre’s Popular Theatre Network for Creating Our Future in forming the now existing Awareness Community Theatre network was to provide an appropriate mechanism to promote awareness issues in Papua New Guinea (PNG). ACT has developed a nationwide network of trained local and provincial theatre groups capable of disseminating information, in the local language, on specific subjects to identified target audiences.

ACT presently consists of 29 local theatre groups that are in all but 3 provinces of PNG. The theatre group members of all ages with the average being 12 to 30 years. ACT is presently running awareness and training programs on environmental and health issues concerning industrial logging and alternatives, slash and burn subsistence farming, AIDS, primary health care, family planning, and general election issues promoting and raising awareness on issues of public importance through drama into the rural and urban communities of the country

ACT - Awareness Community Theatre:
The Human Communication Network of PNG.
Based on a paper presented during the Papua New Guinea National Communication Policy seminar 25 - 29 January 1993, Port Moresby.

Papua New Guinea with it's multitude of cultures and large number of languages is an unique country. Unfortunately, development has occurred here in a disproportionate manner which has given rise to a number of social problems we face today in our country. This unequal distribution of equitie s cannot be blamed on any one cause but for the problem to be solved, people at the grass root level need to be aware of the various development choices available to them. But having the right type of communication to reach such a diverse audience seems at the first glance impossible.

Fortunately there is a solution inherent in PNG culture, THEATRE. Theatre enjoys traditional popularity and offers an interactive opportunity between actors and the audience, not possible with other forms of modern media. Awareness Theatre is one of the most appropriate and practical communication mediums available in Papua New Guinea today. Many provincial governments as well as some departments of the central government have already realised the important role theatre can play.

PNG is a country with more than 869 different languages, one can easily imagine the cost involved in translating different messages 869 + times for the whole of the population. The option that has been used in the past is translate a particular message into-either Pidgin or Motu (Two of the three official languages including English). The procedure is not 100% effective since it has been shown that for many people to truly understand a message, it needs to be delivered with local examples and stories in the local language. The solution once again points towards theatre since
most actors and actresses hail from the area in which they perform. Translation is not the formidable problem it appears to be today.

Health related information for example, needs to be broadcast continuously to keep up with the new discoveries made by the medical world, about cures and new diseases. Yet if we used conventional methods this task would be highly laborious and costly since the job of updating and translating new information into information leaflets would be endless. Even if this was possible we have another major problem, only 8.5% of the women and 12.6% of the men have been able to complete schooling up to Grade 10. This would mean that a large section of the population is functionally illiterate and has little access to medical information published by the different government agencies.

The difficulty of communicating to the majority of PNG's population which live in small scattered settlements, often isolated geographically can be easily imagined. Therefore we need to ask ourselves, how can we effectively communicate to every person in our country when most do not live in urban centres or are illiterate or speak a different language or cannot afford a TV or a radio or even a newspaper? The importance of using theatre as a medium of communication in Papua New Guinea needs to be seriously considered.

Awareness Theatre is alive and can be used to convert educational messages into an entertaining performance that is watched and enjoyed by and entire village. Village based theatre has always been a part of PNG's traditions and as such provides culturally sensitive medium for awareness raising. Actors and actresses are able to utilize the various local dances and folk lore to convey their messages. In urban centres Awareness Theatre is equally effective. Whether it is performed in settlement areas or the market place, Awareness Theatre has an immediate and powerful impact. People are captured initially by the show business aspect of theatre but are soon absorbed in the message being dramatized.

Awareness Theatre does not need batteries, electricity, cables, satellite receiving stations, foreign or subsidized government ownership to operate. It is a 100% PNG owned and operated system of communication. And there are no land compensation claims.

The Awareness Community Theatre (ACT) program aims to increase awareness on health, environment, literacy, AIDS, birth control etc. in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Television and radio are not readily accessible to the majority of PNG's population of 3.7 million and it is extremely difficult to communicate in a country with 869 different languages and traditions. The majority of the population live in small scattered settlements, often isolated geographically. Moreover only 8.5% of the women and 12.6% of the men have completed schooling up to Grade 10. The difficulty in reaching such a diverse population can be imagined. But there is a solution inherent in PNG culture. Theatre enjoys a traditional popularity and offers an interactive opportunity between actors and audience not possible with most forms of modern media.

PNG is a country with more that 800 different languages, one can easily imagine the costs involved in translating different messages 800 + times for the whole of the population. The option that has been used in the past is to translate a particular message into either Pidgin, English or Motu. That procedure is not 100% effective since it has been shown that for many people to truly understand a message, it needs to be delivered with local examples and stories in the local language. The solution once again points towards theatre since most actors and actresses hail from the area in which they perform. Translation is not the formidable problem it appears to be today.
The Awareness Community Theatre (ACT) Program was created by the Foundation of the Peoples of the South Pacific, Papua New Guinea to provide an appropriate mechanism to promote awareness on health, environment, literacy, AIDS, domestic violence and other social issues affecting Papua New Guineans today. ACT has developed into a nationwide network of trained local and provincial theatre groups capable of disseminating information, in the local language, on specific subjects to identified target audiences.

Theatre has served the community by providing local employment to youngsters who, if not for the ACT network might be out on the streets. In addition to creating employment for a disadvantaged section of the population we have also contributed to creating self-worth amongst these young men and women. Their work involves creating awareness amongst others but to do so effectively they must also become aware. This on-going process of education and skill training contributes towards producing better citizens. Through Awareness Theatre these young men and women gain a sense of responsibility towards their community and the country as a whole. Additionally many of the women performers have gained a better understanding of their place as equal partners in community development.

Having shared with this seminar my paper which I recently presented at the National Communication Policy seminar in Port Moresby, PNG, I would also like to inform this seminar of some achievements of the ACT program especially issues the program have covered or achieved.

**Achievements:**

The success of the ACT program to date has seen the network growing from 7 groups in 4 provinces in 1987 to 29 theatre groups covering all but 3 of the 19 provinces in the country.


**Environmental awareness plays**
- Mining
- Logging
- Dynamite Fishing: Supsup (Spear) Script produced to stop dynamite use and encourage traditional fishing methods to preserve the marine life.
- Orchid Farming
- Preserving biodiversity
- Protecting Queen Alexander Birdwing
- Walk-about Sawmills
- Land mobilisation
- Planting Trees
- Keep Port Moresby clean
- Coastal Pollution
- Settlement Pollution
- Rural Pollution
- Pollution and poor Health

**Health Awareness Plays:**
- AIDS Awareness
- Immunisation
- Typhoid
- Diarrhea
- Malaria
Law and Order Awareness Plays

Political Awareness: Election Issues
Prevention of rascal behavior
Domestic Violence
Unemployment awareness

Development awareness Plays
Sustainable Development

Highlights

ACT members are presently running programs aware of environmental and health issues concerning industrialization and alternatives, slash and burn subsistence farming, AIDS, primary health care, family planning, and general election issues. The founding ACT member, NCD Theatre Group performed skits promoting AIDS awareness to a very attentive audience at the June Port Moresby show, the country's largest annual cultural festival. More recently, the ACT network was asked to perform awareness plays for the "International Day to protest against violence against women". The performance by the founding ACT member groups was very successful. It left many people in the audience in tears.

Media outreach

- Helped in producing the first AIDS video in Papua New Guinea.
- Produced AIDS songs for radio and national TV.
- Supported and acted in a video produced on Domestic Violence and Law and Order.
- Attended talk back shows on the national radio stations. The topics discussed were AIDS, environment and Law and Order.

Philosophy:

While we (THEATRES) may have much to gain from the economic and the technical strengths of other societies in other parts of the world, we believe that it is becoming more and more apparent that the rest of the world could profit just as much from the human strengths utilised in popular theatre productions in our societies. In the process of industrialization, most of the world's peoples have lost touch with their natural environment, their social support system and their own humanity. Theatre could play a key role in training humanity to be human again, to respect and preserve it's cultural heritage it's social harmony and it's ecological balance.

We believe that all truly beneficial relationships are reciprocal. The awareness community theatre therefore do not see itself as aid workers, experts, or even helpers. We see ourselves as transmitters of messages and skills of vital importance to
communities in which we work. We come to our communities with the knowledge that 90 percent of the resources needed to successfully implement almost any viable development project already exist in the community.

Community development projects which have involved massive infusions of resources from outside of their target communities have almost invariably failed in the past and they will continue to fail, as long as they exaggerate the weaknesses and dependence of these communities and fail to recognise and take advantage of their strengths and leadership potential. Our aim in our work is to put ourselves out of a job as soon as possible. Community responsibility and community control are the top priorities at every level and at every stage of our projects.

Finally, although each of us by necessity has concentrated our efforts in a particular domain of human experience, we all agree that little of our work as individuals or organizations will be successful in the long term without the active cooperation of organizations working in other domains. Our ultimate goals involve the creation of a bright future for Papua New Guinea and for the rest of the world by communities of integrated, whole, healthy, aware, organized, self-directed, culturally grounded, responsible, accountable, ecologically conscious, literate individuals, living in harmony with themselves, each other, and their environment.

RESOURCES: Popular Theatre For Creating Our Future.

Our primary resource is the people of the communities in which we work: Their rich traditions, deep wisdom, lively intelligence and creative genius, the high value that they place on human life and human interaction, their deep respect for their own humanity and the humanity of all other persons, and love that they show themselves, their fellow human beings, and the world around them.