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<th>Theatre as alternative media for communication and development: a case study of the &quot;Young theatre project&quot; - Five arts centre - Malaysia.</th>
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<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Pillai, Janet.; Rajendran, Charlene.</td>
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Theatre As Alternative Media For Communication
And Development: A Case Study Of The
"Young Theatre Project" -
Five Arts Centre - Malaysia

by

Janet Pillai,
Charlene Rajendran
THEATRE AS ALTERNATIVE MEDIA FOR COMMUNICATION AND DEVELOPMENT:

A CASE STUDY OF THE "YOUNG THEATRE PROJECT"

- FIVE ARTS CENTRE - MALAYSIA.

WRITTEN BY: JANET PILLAI & CHARLENE RAJENDRAN.
INTRODUCTION:

Many people seem willing to concede that the child or young person is an agent of change, responsible for the unfolding directions of the future. But few seem to be actively involved in improving and enhancing the young person's ability to enact change and be meaningfully involved in the processes of change. Often the young person is treated as an entity to be changed according to the needs and demands specified by adults in society, with little regard for the young person's views or wishes and his/her ability to execute change. In this way the young person is marginalised from the decision-making process.

A theatre by young people provides an environment in which the young person can explore a variety of issues and themes and be involved in problem-solving and decision-making processes under the auspices of play, improvisation and dramatisation. The open, free and safe context of the theatre allows young people to enact personal perceptions of their problems, conflicts and possible resolutions, without the boundaries of logic or 'the norm'.

Deciding what to do and how to do it are choices made by young people when they create their own theatre. Instead of the normal director, the role of the facilitator in this type of theatre is to guide them through a series of exercises and improvisations that give understanding and experience in developing their sense of self and ability to decide. The decision-making then ranges from identifying the problem and its source, how to resolve the conflict, what makes such situations dramatic and how to communicate this drama to the audience.

Whilst the written and spoken media are used most often in the formal education system to facilitate learning and development of self and environment,
the media of drama, music, movement and visual are are less used. Being more tactile and sensual, these media elicit a response that is important in the development of the young person's sensitivity, alertness and imagination. It is not just-concern with writing and talking about a problem or situation, but being engaged in living the experience, sharing it, communicating it and working towards a resolution of its problems. Emotions and wishes are an important part of these media, not to be negated as subjective and illogical but given validity as part of human experience.

The range of entry points for dealing with an issue is expanded when young people are allowed to choose the media they are most comfortable with and use its qualities to their advantage. If rhythm and music make little impression on a young person but movement and dance are elements that he/she is able to explore with enthusiasm, then through this media the young person comes to use one of the elements of theatre to express and communicate his/her views.

In a finished product, young people with differing abilities and preferences are engaged collaboratively in the various elements of theatre eg. movement, music, visual art, etc. Despite the fact that each one expresses themselves through a different media, they are able to communicate their common problems in a unified piece of creative work.

In this paper, which is jointly written by Janet Pillai and Charlene Rajendran, we shall first give a brief historical overview of Young People's Theatre in Malaysia, then move on to discuss the "Young Theatre Project" - its aims, rationale and approach - as alternative media for communication and development among young people in Malaysia.
BACKGROUND OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S THEATRE IN MALAYSIA:

The 1970's marked the beginnings of a movement committed to the creation of theatre specifically for young people in Malaysia. In this particular year, adult theatre in Malaysia adopted a more activist and nationalistic stand, instigated by the shock of the 1969 racial riots. Mature artists experimented with traditional forms, images and elements in an attempt to create a self-determined social identity. A few of the young theatre enthusiasts, inspired by the experiments, began working along similar lines with young people. Dissatisfied with the staid and non-creative westernised school drama tradition, they instead worked with voluntary groups of children outside the confines of the school. These committed individuals set out to create an alternative theatre for young people which could reflect contemporary and traditional values, aesthetics, imagination and realities.

Between the years 1970-1985, young people's theatre received the support of teaching and cultural institutions. This support was mainly in the form of physical space, specialised manpower resources and most importantly non-interference. Institutions like Universiti Malaya, Universiti Sains Malaysia and the National Cultural Complex sanctioned and encouraged the works of pioneers like Vijaya Samarawikrama, Zainal Latiff, Elizabeth Cardoza and Janet Pillai.

Young people's theatre within the institutional setting was committed more towards research and experimentation rather than continuity and dissemination. Vijaya Samarawikrama, "located the content of fantasy in a distinctly Malaysian ambience". ¹ Local legends, myths, folktales were "graft(ed) with locally derived aural and visual sensations."² Zainal Latiff dramatised folktales using the stylised movements of silat (Malay art of self-defence). Elizabeth Cardoza and Janet Pillai working specially with children emphasised the creative process.
in play-making. The latest of these experiments occurred between 1986-1989. Janet Pillai and colleague Sugu Kingham, a visual artist from Universiti Sains Malaysia experimented further with an integrated arts approach to dramatisation. The use of other media such as music, movement, drama and design to communicate themes and dramatic content was a point of fascination in the works of all the pioneers mentioned. 'Total' theatre (amalgamating many art media) which is a form common to traditional theatre instigated the idea of an alternative means of expression for young people which allowed room for the iconic mode of expression to develop as legitimately as the linguistic mode.

Although the 'search' for a viable local form of theatrical expression is significant, the individual theatre enthusiasts whose contributions were confined to ad hoc experimentation, failed to propagate their findings beyond the institutions. By the 90's it became obvious that young theatre would remain an elitist intellectual exercise unless efforts were made to concretise the years of experimentation into viable method which could be disseminated more widely.

In 1992 Janet Pillai approached a non-government non-profit organisation, the Five Arts Centre to help produce a programme to develop this 'integrated arts' approach into a module that could then be documented. A short-term programme, "Young Theatre" (Teater Muda) was started in May 1992 towards this purpose. The "Young Theatre Project" is now in its second phase of execution and is being documented in both written and audio-visual format. Once complete the draft 'methodology' will be retested in the field before publication and distribution to persons interested in working with young people through the arts.

AIMS:

The aims of the "Young Theatre Project" (YTP) are twofold. On the one hand we aim to develop a new approach to theatre which gives young people an opportunity
to explore and enact social change. Thus for the participants, it is
i) to encourage a critical exploration of self and others within the young
person's physical and cultural environments
ii) to provide a creative platform for expression and discussion that incorpo­
rates conformist and non-conformist views on themes and issues that are
directly relevant to young people.

On the other hand we aim to develop a new form of exploring the theatre using
an organic process-oriented approach. This is still at an experimental stage and
thus its methodology is still being evolved. Its main concerns are
i) to develop an integrated arts methodology for the theatre
ii) to encourage individual and ensemble approaches in the work process and
performance.

RATIONALE:

Socialisation mechanisms in Malaysia generally discourage strong criticism,
questioning or expression of bold views let alone acting on them. Rather, the
socialisation process controlled by parenting, the school system and the media
encourages the accumulation and acceptance of given facts rather than question,
analysing and the applying of facts. As a result of this very consumer-orientated
culture, young people tend to be rather apathetic towards critical issues.

Their creative and expressive energies operate at a shallow level. For the urban
young especially, the notion of the arts is closely associated with the tourist
and entertainment industries - a development nurtured by government policy and
support. This means that young people are almost ignorant of the more critical
and reflective qualities which characterise the traditional arts and the contem­
porary fringe performing arts scene.

It is for this reason that we have chosen to use Augusto Boal's approach to
theatre, the main objective of which is "to change the people - 'spectators' - passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon - into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action". 3

For too long, what Paolo Freire calls "the banking concept of education" has prevailed. "In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry." 4 It has numbed the senses and muted the voices of young people and thus the need to re-define the modes of education to include problem-posing education which does not deny the power of the young person to intervene with reality, to look at the past in order to understand the present and thus build a future is an urgent need. This will lead the young person to "apprehend the situation as an historical reality susceptible of transformation". 5

There is also a dire need to provide exposure and opportunities for the young to learn and understand the foundations and forms which provide the association for the existing local cultures, local values, actions, symbols, etc. They also need to discover for themselves a synthesis between local and imported form and content which have such a large impact on their lives.

This project is concerned with both the contemporary images of self and community and the historical background from which these images arise. For this reason, the project incorporates contemporary art forms with traditional art forms. Teaching and learning also incorporate contemporary and traditional methods of transmission.

It is envisaged that the young participants will compare contemporary images, values and concepts with those mirrored in traditional forms. Dealing experientially with contrasts enhances their sensitivity and understanding of the deve-
lopment of culture and identity. By studying and utilizing the traditional arts it is expected that stereotypes and myths will be challenged, enhancing a sense of value towards and an appreciation of local traditional forms.

The YTP has chosen the arts as means of developing and communicating a new culture with a distinct Malaysian vocabulary of images, designs, materials and thematic thrusts.

THE APPROACH:

An integrated arts approach is the working method adopted by the YTP. Specifically, it involves using the elements of drama, movement, music and visual art in an integrated manner to explore themes and issues related to the self, community and environment of young people. The manner of integration is by stressing shared artistic elements which happen to be the same for all the media eg. tone, shape, quality, texture, etc. In the traditional arts this is nothing exceptions be it in Wayang Kulit (Malay Shadow Puppetry), Chinese Opera or Bharatanatyam (Indian Classical Dance).

However in an age of increasing specialisation, reflected in the formal education system and in the job market, there is insufficient room for the integration of ideas and integration of individuals who are bracketed within a certain category and expected to function within these realms. This is clearly reflects in school where Geography is not related to History nor Biology and the Geography teacher is not expected to be able to integrate the disciplines of either into her teaching of Geography. Thus learning is compartmentalised and the young person's worldview is unhealthily boxed according subjects and categories.

In the Western tradition of theatre, there is also a clear specialisation of skills from design and directing to drama and dance. In the YTP we strive to do away with this as we feel that an integration of the elements enables the young
person to act more skillfully and competently in a more holistic and thorough fashion - able to use as many of the elements of theatre as necessary to make his/her statement.

A holistic approach to the young person includes seeing the young person as a physical, mental and spiritual being whose faculties do not operate separately but in relation to the whole. Unfortunately the school culture advocates Physical Education as separate from Moral Education and separate from Intellectual Education. Thus most of the time there is no real reason to be 'honest' on the playing field except perhaps in fear of the referee, nor to have an intelligence about the game, except in response to the coach. In the YTP, we use the concept of 'play' in work to integrate physical, mental and spiritual elements in order that the activity becomes meaningful at all levels and actions, emotions and values are working together.

The young person as a member of his/her family, community and nation is part of his/her physical and cultural environment. Integration into these spheres is important in strengthening individual identity and understanding community values. Whilst modernisation leads to greater alienation and a more individualistic approach, the harsh consequences of this include loss of extended family, self-centred and selfish value-systems and a severing from the past with no links with the present. Young people are faced with choices of lifestyles that are mere imitations of the West with little or no understanding of where these trends have come from.

In the YTP the young person is required to observe keenly and conduct research into herself, her family, her peers, her community and environment. This is aimed at forging a meaningful relationship between the observer and the observed. This goes towards strengthening a sense of self and the young person's sensitivity to on-going developments in the immediate and wider environments.
The material that is taken from the community is then returned to the community in the young person's performance. The YTP continuously works at strengthening ties with family and community through dialogue during workshop performances, participation of family and community in workshop activities and acknowledgement of support. The emphasis on this kind of integration is important in contextualising the young person's efforts and creating a meaningful platform from which to communicate and respond.

Most subjects learnt in school are little related to a functional application of their use. They are taught as theories and facts to be remembered by rote and not reasoned with nor applied to daily life. This often leads to a passive acceptance of knowledge that scarcely develops critical thinking and analytical thought. The integration of skills with ideas to produce art works that are functional eg. an environment for a story, a costume for a character, a movement for an emotion, a rhythm for a theme is explored through improvisation. The learning is therefore motivated by need and integrated with life.

In formal learning the exploration of themes and issues such as drug abuse, domestic violence, honesty, cleanliness and racial integration, is often based on what is given in a textbook. There is no emphasis on experiences and emotions in relation to these themes and issues and thus a young person's attitude is often non-committal and distant. The reality of these issues rarely hits the young person and thus the young person does not feel responsible or able to do anything about the matter.

In the YTP the themes that are used are based on a) physical surroundings eg. coffee shops, school, playground; b) emotions eg. anger, joy, sadness; and c) issues eg. fear of authority, unjust punishment, family relationships. They are explored in relation to artistic elements eg. tone, quality, shape, etc. for rhythm, movement, drama and visual art, then reconstructed in a theatrical manner. This involves using the theme and issue as a means of discovering and
exploring its relevance to the young person. The reconstruction is then a vision of the young person's world which integrates a perception of reality with imaginative re-structuring aimed at communicating a message.

The integration of contemporary Western images with local traditional art forms occurs at several levels in Malaysian society. In advertising and local popular music there is a blend of the two to appeal to the unique identity of Malaysians and the fashionable norms of the West. However young people are often taught these cultures as separate. The History texts will segregate the two and advocate a more purist attitude that preserves the traditions of both with no room for change.

In the YTP the adaptation of traditional and contemporary forms to each other is meant to be a means of forging new vocabularies to reflect the merging of cultures and values. That an alternative is made available then challenges ready acceptance of the dominant culture - be it popular culture or traditional culture.

THE PROCESS:

The process deals with two main resources - the material resources and the artistic resources. (Please see Table 1) There are 2 stages in the process which run alongside each other and in a progressive manner -

a) culling the material- which involves observation, recollection and imagination.

b) structuring the material - which involves selection, adaptation and organisation

Culling The Material:

a) a continuous research and investigation into self, others and surroundings.

b) learning of skills and theatrical elements that can be used in theatre.

c) acquiring a vocabulary of possible forms (contemporary and traditional) to use in communication.
structuring the material:

a) making a selection of ideas and images that are to be used in relation to a theme.

b) modifying skills and elements to embody the images and ideas used.

c) fashioning and forming a creative work that is complete.

d) using critical assessment to improve on the style or quality of work for performance.

young people's theatre is therefore the platform from which young people can express their views and values. it becomes the media via which they enact the reality they perceive and the changes they desire. it is the means by which they use information they absorb to indicate their understanding of it, its relevance to them and its effects — both positive and negative.

they in turn create a pool of information that is sorely lacking at present, that the views of young people are often not heard and the visions they see are viewed.

theatre is also the media via which they grow to identify the images and norms that surround their culture and traditions. traditional forms give historical background to current norms and the identification of the characteristics of experience and environment also give meaning to surroundings and relationships that are not sufficiently thought about.

the representation of self in relation to all these is the 'medium' that voices the hopes and fears, joys and sorrows, challenges and criticisms of young people.
EVALUATION:

In an attempt to evaluate the YTP as an alternative media for young people, we will consider its effectiveness in providing:

a) a platform for expression
b) a form of socialisation
c) a means of exploration.

These are based on some comments made by the participants of Phase I of the YTP and observations made by the facilitators.

Theatre As A Platform For Expression:

It would appear that the primary aim to enable young people to use theatre as a means of expression and communication was achieved in varying degrees according to the inclinations and personalities of the young people involved. Whilst some internalised the purposes of the project at a deeper level, others saw it as 'having fun' and 'learning something'. The differences of age perhaps account for the range of response.

The 3 dramas that were performed at the end of Phase I indicated a willingness on the part of participants to experiment with different styles of theatre to communicate their views. They used mime, music, non-verbal communication, movement and other elements of contemporary and traditional forms in the presentation of their creative works.

The participants also showed changed perceptions of theatre, which was no longer focussed on glamour and "how to make it to Hollywood" - but a more serious intention of "telling others how we feel".

The themes chosen for the 3 dramas were a) domestic violence, b) pornography and c) boy-girl relationships. These have serious significance for the participants and their statements were based on the conflicts they felt in each situation. Whilst the resolutions were not always complete, they were honest and
direct. Thus theatre became a way of stating how young people thought these conflicts would or should be resolved.

Theatre As A Form Of Socialisation:

In being exposed to the range of racial and social groups reflected in the group (please see Table 2), the participants were acquainted with a variety of attitudes and values. This is perhaps the only context in which some of them would have had to relate to others outside their social groups.

The participants were also exposed to forms of traditional culture, their histories and backgrounds - some of which may never have had any meaning for the participants before. Identifying these local art forms and making a link with them is valuable in the understanding of nation and self.

Their use of artistic elements and skills and the translation of ideas into effective dramatic forms and structure, showed their ability to use what they had learnt for creative works. Their increased critical and analytical skills were also evident and many grew to be more questioning and alert in their responses to issues of theatre and life as a whole.

Theatre As A Means Of Exploration:

In the exploration of self, community and surroundings the participants felt they had gained a deeper sense of self confidence and willingness to share. This also gave incentive to be actively involved in problem-solving and negotiation when difficulties arose among participants.

The exploration of ideas and themes in relation to self and others, led to challenged norms and responses that were intended to provoke thought. This meant a consideration of alternatives rather than an easy acceptance of
what is accepted.

Some participants had previously been involved in producing dramas in other contexts, namely school. They now felt that fancy props and elaborate costumes were no longer necessary and theatre was seen to be affordable and easily created with a little creativity and imagination. Also they felt that they need not depend on written scripts but had it in them to develop their own.

From the point of view of facilitators, the exploration of an integrated arts process proved to be valuable as it appeared to have had successful impact on the participants. However the problems of a lack of expertise and understanding of specific areas was evident among facilitators whose own 'specialisation' needed to be 'integrated' with other elements of the theatre.

It was also felt that the method needed to be tested and tried before it could be verified. As there were many changes of approach made along the way, the method is still at an experimental stage. Phase II is an attempt to learn from the mistakes of the past.

We also recognised the importance of sustained commitment to working with young people and enthusing others about the need and significance of this kind of work. Logistic problems such as a shortage of funds, no permanent space and a lack of trained expertise are just other manifestations of the basic problem which confronts us – that theatre for young people fails to receive its due priority.
CONCLUSION:

In considering the theatre as alternative media among young people we will now look at the YTP as introducing a) theatre as a tool

b) theatre as dialogue

c) theatre as truth.

Theatre As A Tool:

- empowers the young person with a means of enacting change. It can be used to fashion and form materials to create an environment from which to speak; to destroy and rebuild norms and conventions that are undesirable and oppressive; to bridge the gap between amusement that entertains and communication that conscientises.

This tool needs to be used responsibly and carefully as it can provoke changes that affect lives and relationships and therefore it can be a tool of development but also of manipulation and restriction. However it must not remain only in the hands of adults. Young people must also have the opportunity to learn its use.

Theatre As Dialogue:

- affirms the importance of the young person who engages in meaningful interaction with herself and with others. Theatre is about shared experience between a) performer and group – in their need to negotiate and work together and b) performer and audience – in their need to communicate meaning and intention.

The dialogue of the theatre is not merely alive on stage but extends to
who are present in the theatre space. This kind of media involves the performer and viewer in a self-searching, questioning way and the process of evaluation is the beginning of growth.

Theatre As Truth:

- validates the importance of artistic energy and creativity that is devoted to presenting emotional truth in the theatre. The truth of perspectives and representations of the reality of young people must be respected and highly regarded. It must be seen as a source of knowledge and a means of understanding. It is itself a true voice that needs to be heard, a true image that needs to be seen. Its prejudices, immaturities and flaws are part of its truth. That too must be heeded.

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2. (as in 1.)
3. Augusto Boal; 1979; Theater Of The Oppressed; Urizen Books; New York.
4. Paolo Freire; 1972; Pedagogy Of The Oppressed; Penguin; England.
5. (as in 4.)
APPENDIX A:

PROCESS DIAGRAM: TO SHOW WORKING METHOD.

TABLE 1:

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APPENDIX B:

PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS FOR YOUNG THEATRE PROJECT:

There are a total of approximately 25 participants involved in each 6 month programme of the YTP. They range from 10-16 years of age and are from mixed ethnic, gender and income groups from various parts of urban Kuala Lumpur. The participant group is intentionally heterogenous to encourage sharing and understanding of contrasting viewpoints.

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APPENDIX C:

PROFILE OF CREATIVE TEAM:

Young Theatre is produced and conducted by members of the Five Arts Centre in Kuala Lumpur. Five Arts Centre is a registered non-profit company dealing with original artistic productions. It has been committed and consistent in its informal support of young people's theatre over the last 12 years. Its members are mainly practising artists (in various media) who contribute a good half of their energies to the teaching profession.

The creative team of Young Theatre is made up of 3 Five Arts members specialising in specific theatre arts. They also share a strong commitment to the wider field of education. They are

1. Leow Puay Tin - playwright, actress, speech specialist, writer
2. Charlene Rajendran - teacher in literature, musician, actress
3. Janet Pillai - director of theatre for young audiences, teacher in performing arts.