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Telling Stories and Creating Participatory Audience: Deep Listening in a Feminist Popular Theatre Project

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Abstract: *Combining the understandings of popular theatre as praxis, with feminist scholarship on the struggles and power within the various women's movements, this paper reports on a community-based project which has created new opportunities for story telling and listening. Through this initiative, different understandings about creating coalitions for social justice have developed.*

Prologue

This paper presents the story of an ongoing, interdisciplinary and community-based popular theatre project located in the lower mainland area of British Columbia. The purpose of this project is to explore and document how popular theatre can be used as a tool to work with the challenges of creating inclusive organizations and activities within the women's movement. Another focus of this project is to re-imagine popular theatre in ways that both embrace its "roots" in social movements of the developing world and reshape key aspects to suit very different social and cultural conditions in North America. The project, entitled *Transforming Dangerous Spaces*, has proven to be a rich source for deepening understanding about feminist politics, theatre processes, and the creation of trust. In this particular paper we explore insights gleaned when we discovered theatre techniques that created new opportunities for high risk story telling and deep listening and how those practices relate to notions of "audience" in theatre and educational settings.

Conceptual Approach: Embracing Dangerous Spaces Through Popular Theatre

We argue that by reconceptualizing and re-imagining feminist organizing and theatre processes, the collaborating, the telling and listening to our stories, and the taking action that are at the heart of both activities can be more fully realized. We draw on feminist scholarship that has examined some of the struggles encountered within feminist organizations and coalitions, particularly in regards to practicing inclusivity and acknowledging and respecting our differences. Scholars like Young

(1990) suggest that the desire for unity "...generates borders, dichotomies and exclusions" (p. 301). Groups that seek mutual identification have left many women feeling excluded because of different racial, class, age and sexuality locations (to name only a few). Groups and coalitions have become dangerous territories and feminist activists and scholars have called for ways of creating equitable participation and pedagogies that recognize the inequalities of risk-taking (Razack, 1993). Familiar ways of working/conceptualizing are no longer effective when facing conflict in our struggles to create inclusive communities and organizations. Theatre, and in particular popular theatre processes, have something to offer those who are poorly skilled in the art of conflict. It offers, we argue, a useful model for practicing conflict constructively and creatively. This project hopes to contribute to the desire of many feminist activists to work more constructively, affiliatively and pleasurably with conflict and tension. "We need more written work and oral testimony documenting ways barriers are broken down, coalitions formed and solidarity shared" (hooks, 1994, p. 110).

We chose to use popular theatre as we pursued questions about coalition and community in women's action movements because of its potential for reaching depths of human experience, because of its holistic nature: it allows us to express and integrate our passions, insights, knowledge and ideas. We aimed to engage these human qualities in the most flexible and responsive way. We wondered if the quality of conflict that is imbedded in many theatre forms, that is a source of creation in the process of theatre making, might assist in the goal to

work pleasurable with conflict and tension. Popular theatre encompasses community education, community organizing and theatre making. It is chosen by people involved with education and development because of its participatory processes that recognize cultural forms, which engage body and mind, and which use specific stories to illuminate communal situations. It is a *process* of theatre making which involves specific communities in identifying issues of concern, analyzing current conditions and causes of a situation, identifying potential points of change, and analyzing how change could happen and/or contribute to the actions implied. A space is created where groups and individuals can afford to work on dangerous issues. This project explores theatre's potential to create a radical kind of empathy, one that recognizes the danger of story telling and the inequality of risk in the story telling process, one that creates spaces and relationships where stories are told *and* heard.

The Players

The idea of this project was originally conceived by Jan and Shauna who came together from theatre and adult education with a desire to learn from each other and work with community. The project facilitation and coordination was greatly enhanced when we were joined by two graduate students, Sheila James and Caroline White, who came with substantial knowledge, skills and experience in popular theatre and popular education processes. This group of four women became the "planning team". We were then joined by 10 other women all working in various aspects of the feminist movement. In the end, we created a microcosm of many feminist coalitions, varying in age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and class.

In the Beginning....

The project began in the fall of 1998 and has, to date, involved three phases. We began with an outreach phase, the focus of which was contacting women working in equality-seeking women's organizations and groups. Flyers were posted at key points and mailed out, and notices which advertised the project were placed in the local feminist newspaper. We experienced some resistance to a university-generated project, a "dangerous space" for some women. Interested participants were then invited to attend an introductory workshop where

more detailed information was given and the participants were introduced to popular theatre activities. A total of six introductory workshops were held in a variety of community centres, with over 50 people attending. Out of this initial phase, ten women indicated an interest in participating in a series of weekly workshops. This intensive phase continued for twelve weeks. During this time we used popular theatre exercises to group build and to explore some of the politics of the women's movement. At the end of this phase, we presented some of this work at an Interactive Performance Workshop to which we invited women who had attended earlier workshops or who were friends and colleagues of the core group. Rather than following the now familiar forum theatre format, the group sought forms which, though also performance and participatory theatre based, invited participation throughout the workshop. This proved to be a very powerful approach that opened up a space for deep and varied explorations of issues.

After a summer break, the group reconnected for an intensive weekend workshop where we considered what we'd learned so far and how to further develop the work and share it with a wider community. Several members of the original group were unable to continue which left a smaller group of six participants. This group then met for another intensive workshop period, meeting several times a month, with the goal of creating a play or performance that would be shown to an invited public sometime in the spring of 2000. This play built on some themes which emerged from our explorations of our experiences of the women's movement, on scenes and exercises developed for the earlier performative workshop and new processes encountered during the more recent intensive phase.

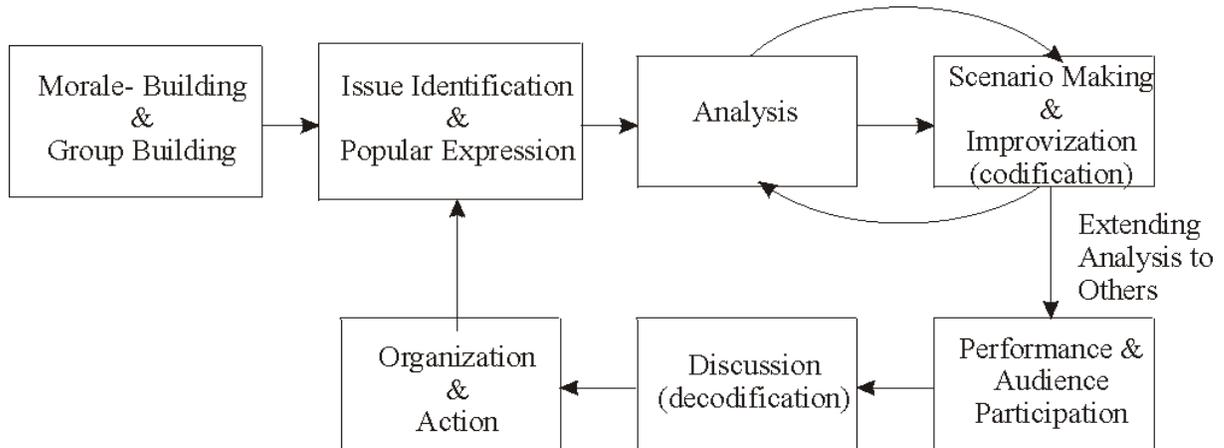
Throughout the project we used various methods to document the process and our reflections, including video and audiotaping, written feedback, photographs, and drawings. As the two coordinators, we conducted more traditional interviews early on with the ten women who joined the project. As a group we have also "interviewed" each other using a variety of character and plot development techniques. A feature of this project was the detailed evaluation and planning which we pursued between every session.

Reconsidering Performance and Audience

There is much to report on, but in this paper we highlight insights we had into notions of performance and audience that we believe have much to teach us about strategies for moving into dangerous

territory, by creating conditions for deep listening through participatory audience-making.

Although there is certainly debate in the field, the popular theatre process is often thought of as following particular stages (Kidd, 1989, p. 21):



During the first intensive workshop series the majority of our time was spent on group building and issue identification. Participants frequently expressed a desire to “go deeper” and, as time went on, we facilitators wanted to move into more dangerous territory, territory which exposed our differences, our assumptions, our resistances to “coalition.” Although the group did verbally debrief following most exercises, we came to understand that the potential to “go deeper” was missed at times when we silently observed others in action, keeping our responses, emotional and intellectual, to ourselves. It seems that despite the group’s intentions to enter the dangerous space of collaboration and investigation of our differences, we often chose *the prerogative of the audience to shield our reactions from one another*.

We came to believe that at least two factors were key in this choice. On one hand, the ideas, emotions and potential for conflict evoked by some performances made overt reaction seem more dangerous and more risky than we were always willing to take on. On the other, as individuals offered “dangerous views” via the safety of character and the impulsiveness created by theatre processes, there was a desire to support the risk of performance that individual group members were taking. There was risk

in the form of expression (theatrical performance, which involves exposure, physical and emotional revelation, as well as intellectual courage) and in the content. Our desire to support and recognize these risks at times led us away from fully confronting the meanings, opinions and divisions among us that were also revealed. We had spent much energy on creating a space that was “safe enough to be dangerous”; now we had to make the most of it.

By this time the group had worked with action/reaction and offer/yield exercises, in abstract, metaphoric and situational scenes. We had built skills in playing objectives and structuring playable improvised realistic scenes. We had worked with various forms of dramatic sculpturing and with a variety of fabrics within sculptures. Seizing on the desire to go deeper, the “planning team” decided to create a new exercise which directly addressed what was happening within the group, moving closer to the centre of our experiences within the women’s movement. We asked the group to reflect on our own group process. “Think back to a dangerous moment during our work together, a moment where you believe we could have “gone deeper,” but didn’t. Write a phrase that someone said or could have said, or thought but did not say, in that no-

ment. Put the paper in the hat.” Following this request, we set up a performance exercise similar to one pursued in an earlier meeting: a person picks a line from the hat, says it, a second person responds, a short scene ensues: offer/yield. Replay, trying alternative responses. This time the lines were selected from “dangerous moments,” moments that evoked strong emotion, contradictory views, challenges, expressions of varying status, etc. However, there was more to it. We designed a further element to this exercise because, in evaluation/planning sessions between our workshops we came to believe that, although theatre was enabling us at times to risk expressing dangerous views, to say the unsayable, the dramatic exercises’ very structure was inhibiting us from going yet another layer deeper. The element of performance, even within this process-oriented and highly participatory project, made room for *silent observers*. As *observers*, we were *not culpable for our silence*. When forming audience for one another, we could hide, even though we said we wanted to “go deeper.”

This time we asked the rest of the group, the “audience,” to stand in a circle, all holding on to a long piece of fabric, around the two “performers.” After the first exchange – the “dangerous moment” line and the response—the rest of us responded by physicalizing, “instant sculpturing” our response to the exchange. Externalizing our reactions, in relation to one another and in relation to the central exchange, linked by a circle of fabric. Suddenly we expressed the multiple reactions to moments of confrontation—challenges, appeasements, expressions of self in the midst of “dangerous territory”: moments of privilege, moments of anger, moments of racism. Suddenly even our silences were recorded, the meanings of our silences, our withdrawals as well as our enthusiasms. We were certainly “deeper.”

The process was invented out of a combination of known theatrical forms and application of theatre style and symbol to the immediate circumstance. We would never evade one another at this level again. We went deeper and faced the consequences. We had spoken the unspeakable *and* responded. Together. Overtly. There is more work to do.

This fusion of exercises was built out of deep investigation of group feedback, facilitator observation, passing comments, personal and group analysis of what’s working and what’s not, and the

opportunity to wonder aloud, in depth, about what was helping/hindering us. These new theatrical approaches raise important questions about the need for reconsidering *performance and audience*, within every phase of the process of popular theatre, and within the process of popular education. By capturing these silences and refusals, by inviting them to be performed through improvisation, we engaged in a quality of deep listening where we observed and heard not only other players, but also ourselves.

Listening to Others and to Ourselves...

In this project, we have argued that popular theatre offers a way to work with and acknowledge the creative aspects of the dangerous spaces within women’s movements. We have also explored the contradictions within some popular theatre processes. There is a deep analysis that can go on when observers, the audience, watch rather than live through the experience. Observers are able to objectify the problems and in so doing, think about possible solutions or alternative actions. However, within traditional popular theatre processes, particularly as practiced within northern countries, the audience response, within both intensive participatory workshops and performance settings, has not yet been fully tapped as another place to “go deeper.” In this project we are experimenting with this relatively untapped resource.

Working across and with differences requires that we create and support the conditions in which we can express our understandings and hear each other. Deep listening is a practice of radical empathy where we offer up our own experiences for critical and compassionate analysis *by ourselves and others*. This practice is crucial to creating communities of differences and strong coalitions that stand for social justice. The women’s movement is a place where new forms of citizenship are struggling to develop. Can popular theatre and its engagement with communities whose stories have not been heard, bring some insight into both listening and speaking which is central to citizenship and to movements for social justice, such as feminism?

Communication is an effort that acknowledges a more-than-one, a separateness, a difference that may be the source of conflict, and at the same

time foregrounds the possibility of bridging that gap by devising a means of relatedness . . . but it also means ceding the possibility of control and the certain achievement of one's current goals . . . we are sometimes overwhelmed by a passion for control simply because of our passion of the world, because we care about things. This difficulty presents one of the central challenges of politics: addressing a conflict through political interaction demands that we resist the desire for complete control, but what is behind that desire (a particular commitment) is what prompts us to political interaction in the first place. (Beckford, 1996, p. 4-5)

Perhaps through theatre and its power to express our conflicts, desires and passions we can find clues for listening across our differences. Perhaps we can find ways to recognize that our desire for social justice is based on an inherent contradiction: the need for sustained commitment and the desire for control. Our work suggests that creating a radical empathy may require a reconceptualization of the performance/audience relationship and a re-imagining of what commitment to social justice means. This project, we hope, helps us to reconsider our responsibility and accountability as "players" who must listen deeply to each other for our cues,

and who must acknowledge, overtly, our responses to those cues. Perhaps the conflict which seems inherent to our social justice efforts means that we are working "in the crack" of the contradiction, a contradiction that is not something to be transcended, but rather embraced.

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¹ Forum Theatre, developed and practiced by Augusto Boal (1979) and his followers, typically offers an audience a 15-20 minute play which has been developed around an issue or community story. It is performed without interruption, then when replayed, the audience is invited to intervene when they see a moment of oppression. Members of the audience who stop the action make an intervention by replacing a character who they believe is oppressed; they take a new action, something different, with the purpose of stopping the oppression. In the *Transforming Dangerous Spaces* group, it was decided that we wanted to create a workshop experience where the audience was, from the beginning, invited to become participants, rather than spectators, or even, to use Boal's term, 'spectators'.