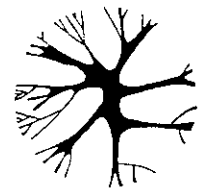


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POPULAR THEATRE

The editors of this research review have focussed mainly on the mass media of radio and TV, neglecting theatre. All of us may forget that most genres of popular performative arts – our soap operas, comedy and variety shows – have had their origins in the live audience experience of vaudeville and romantic melodramas. We forget, too, that many stars of TV and film feel the need, at least occasionally, to get back to the live stage and nourish their acting with the magic unity of actors and audience. And much of the creativity of dramatic performance today begins with more exploratory theatre ‘off Broadway’ or away from other sites of conventional, professional theatre.

Theatre is always entertainment, but in its most creative moments it is also an imaginative space in which to explore the human, social and political questions of the day. When theatre becomes too much of a trivial fashion of a leisure class, new forms of theatre spring up around the fringes to revitalise the dramatic experience and bring it back closer to the life of the community. It is not surprising that some of the most interesting theatre in recent years are forms of experimental theatre. Nor is it surprising that in countries or places where conventional, professional theatre dominates less – Pinochet’s Chile, Calcutta in the 1950s & 1960s, the West Bank of Palestine or the black, ‘apartheid’ communities of South Africa – theatre becomes an arena for vital cultural debate. Significantly, these new forms of theatre have come to be called ‘popular’, or, in better English, ‘people’s theatre’.

A recent issue of *Communication Research Trends*, ‘New Perspectives on Media and Culture’ (Vol 8/2) reported some of the current debates on communication and culture, but largely from an Anglo-American view. In many parts of the world, notably in Africa, India and Asia, similar questions emerge more pointedly in discussions about the role of theatre in society. This issue focusses on popular theatre in the light of communication and culture especially in non-Western cultures.

REVIEW ARTICLE

I: A Theatre One Step From Life

‘Popular Theatre for Change’, Special issue of *Media Development*, 3/1988.

Richard Schechner. *Performative Circumstances from the Avant Garde to Ramlila*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1983.

Augusto Boal. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. New York: Urizen Books, and London: Pluto Press, 1979. (Translated from *Teatro de Oprimido*, 1974.)

Victor Turner. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982.

Theatre is as old as human community, and it has emerged as religio-civic ritual, lyric poetry, popular entertainment or political protest in virtually every culture. Some, such as anthropologist Victor Turner, have suggested that for cultures to survive and grow we need exploratory moments when we can step out of the routines of life into a selective, dramatic re-enactment of key issues of our communities. We become so narrowly focussed on everyday, pragmatic efforts to make our communities and societies ‘work’ that we forget where we are going in life. We need a cultural space which is midway between the utopian, mythic aspirations of our communities and the daily struggle to survive. Drama is this

cultural space in which actors symbolically represent the struggles of the community, but in a frame of plot resolution that points these searching debates to possible idealised goals.

Today, in a complex society of many subcultures, we have many forms of theatre for many different tastes. Going to the theatre (for those who have the money or live close enough to centres of theatrical activity) is like going to an Italian restaurant one night or a French one the next, depending on which chef has the best reputation for interpreting a set of recipes. In conventional theatre the playwright defines his or her own personal insights, professional actors represent this script with technical perfection and

spectators give their critical evaluation. Many theatre critics would argue, however, that these conventions have ceased to provide an authentic exploratory space for our cultures.

A New Trend in Theatre

Michael Etherton in *Media Development*, Richard Schechner and the Brazilian, Augusto Boal, are among those who propose that the most vital theatre today is one in which the community is much more directly involved in 'writing' and acting out the story of their lives. This new theatre movement, which has arisen over the past thirty years, would move drama out of expensive theatre buildings, where only a moneyed elite have access, into places where ordinary people of the community meet to entertain themselves. The new theatre would attempt to de-professionalize and de-mystify the demi-god, 'star' aura of the theatre so that people of the community could decide the issues to be represented, the plot outcomes and the actors' interpretations. Implied in this is a de-commercialisation of the theatre and moving theatre out of the 'preserve' of literary, artistic and financial elites so that it can become a much more free, open questioning of the cultural and social exploitation of less powerful minorities. This is not a marginal movement in theatre circles. It is significant that in a typical textbook history of theatre in Western Civilization, the final chapter describing contemporary trends in theatre deals largely with what we are calling here experimental or popular theatre.¹

There are great variations in this new form of theatre as one moves from experimental theatre in New York or theatre among black, feminist and hispanic minorities in the USA to *teatro popular* in the barrio neighbourhoods of Lima, Peru, and to community theatre in Sierra Leone, Africa. But there are also important common denominators and a great deal of interchange of ideas across national and cultural boundaries. Augusto Boal, who was one of the early inspirers of the flourishing *teatro popular* movement in Latin American urban and campesino communities, now tours the United States and Europe giving workshops in people's theatre. Canadian Ross Kidd, who has been one of the international leaders in people's theatre for grassroots educational and developmental efforts in Africa, Indonesia, and India, has also worked with people's theatre in his native Ontario. Richard Schechner, an early initiator of experimental theatre in New York in the 1960s and 1970s, goes to India for further inspiration. Doctoral students from Nigeria and north India study people's theatre at the Drama Workshop at the University of Leeds along with British students. Institutions in Germany and the Netherlands hold international workshops on people's theatre.

Debated Terms: Popular and People's Theatre

In the late nineteenth century, with the concentration of a new industrial working class in the cities, there was a movement to take great works of drama to the 'popular classes'.² For playwrights and directors such as Romain Rolland and Eugene Pottecher in France, this form of popular theatre was the realization of a dream of Rousseau, Diderot and the cultural leaders of the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. Much preferred was classical drama which represented a high ethic and the great central values of Western civilization. The strategy was 'great authors, simple but large theatres and cheap prices'. In the early 1900s in Europe and in many other parts of the world, 'popular theatre' meant the Théâtre National Populaire in Paris, Lyon and Strasbourg, the Piccolo Teatro della Citta di Milano, the Teatro Popolare of Vittorio Gassman and the Teatro Popular in the capitals of many Latin American countries.

In the 1930s, however, playwrights such as Bertolt Brecht questioned whether this spoon-feeding of bourgeois art to the poor working classes by the bourgeoisie was in any sense 'popular'. For Brecht, the conception of the 'popular' refers to theatre *by* the

underpaid and exploited workers, *about* their situation, and *for* their political understanding of the causes of this impoverishment.³

Still another conception of popular is best exemplified in the mass entertainment of melodramatic theatre, music hall shows, Hollywood film factories, radio soap operas, and the endless stream of TV programming. For the scholars and defenders of this 'popular culture', all this is a celebration of the harmless, everyday pleasures of the 'common man'. It is a valid democratisation of culture simply because the millions enjoy it. For the critics, however, popular culture is addictive escapism because it plays upon baser human emotions and the morbid desire for sensationalism for the sake of crass commercial profit. More sinister in this view, are the populist political overtones of ideological manipulation and consumerism that distract from awareness of real human and social issues.

Current, commonly-held conceptions of 'people's theatre' are generally closer to those of Brecht or, more recently those of Boal and Etherton, but they recognise the validity of access to the heritage of classical culture – whether that be the culture of Nigeria, Poland or Iran – and the validity of popular culture.

Effective Grassroots Development Communication

In many parts of the developing world, people's theatre is increasingly regarded as one of the most attractive forms of small-group and community communication. In order to write the scenario, local people must analyse community problems with much more care. Bodily re-enacting the problems of introducing better health or agricultural practices or finding ways of overcoming exploitative injustices offers a much higher degree of personal involvement and *participation* than forms of group discussion. It is much less expensive than audiovisuals or other media and it requires less dependence on outside experts. The use of dramatic plot, character portrayal and re-enactment by people in the community are much more visually and emotionally powerful than didactic forms of communication. In many countries, people's theatre builds upon performative traditions of narrative story, dance, music and folk religio-civic drama so that it provides cultural continuity. Finally it is also an *entertaining* form of instruction and of exploring socio-cultural and political issues.

For all these reasons, many consider forms of experimental and people's theatre not just a passing counter-cultural fashion, but an important communication phenomenon which will bring more active performative traditions back to the people and possibly influence both the development of theatre and mass performing arts.

Characteristics of People's Theatre

1. Finding an Expression for Cultural Identity

As Richard Schechner insists, good theatre is always entertaining. Theatre involves colourful impersonation, wit and humour, satire, a poetic language with heightened emotion that captures moods, and a suspenseful plot. There is always an element of festival, leisure, emotional release, dreaming and celebration in theatre.

People's theatre emerges most strongly, however, in contexts where there is a combination of awakening cultural identity in a community of people and a degree of cultural and political repression that prevents the cultural identity from articulating itself in

Footnotes

- 1 Patti P Gillespie and Kenneth M Cameron. *Western Theatre Revolution and Revival*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1984. Ch 18
- 2 Domingo Piga T. 'El Teatro Popular: Consideraciones Históricas e Ideológicas', in *Popular Theatre for Social Change in Latin America*, Gerardo Luzuriaga (Ed.). Los Angeles: Univ of California in Los Angeles Latin American Center Publications, 1978. pp3-23.
- 3 Michael Etherton. *The Development of African Drama*. London: Hutchinson & Co (Publishers) Ltd. 1982. pp321-326

public media and conventional performance. As Sylvia Moore notes, 'especially in politically repressive regimes, where modern media are owned and controlled by government officials or wealthy landowners and industrialists, *live performance* is one of the few channels open for political expression, historical consciousness, the assertion of group identity and the source of alternative information.'⁴

People's Theatre is the Dramatisation of Hope

In many cases, people's theatre is the first articulation of a new cultural awareness that strikes a sympathetic chord in an ever widening circle of people. The vigorous, open dramatisation of repressed feelings of exploitation or other intolerable conditions may, at first, cause cultural shock. Nevertheless, as the following examples show, the cultural honesty eventually becomes the source for revitalising the tradition of theatre and the performing arts in general.

People's Theatre in the Palestinian West Bank

In the issue of *Media Development* on 'popular theatre' Dov Shinar, communications consultant with the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, describes how people's theatre became an important expression of the growing Palestinian national and cultural identity in West Bank society, especially after the 1967 war. Some of the first steps in community theatre were taken by Bethlehem-born François Abu-Salem who returned to his native Palestine in the late 1960s after studying and working with theatre in Paris. Under the initiatives of Abu-Salem, theatre became not only a vehicle for Palestinian nation building but also played a cathartic role as agent of social integration, mobilization, cultural innovation and artistic catalyst. When Abu-Salem helped to form the El-Hakawati (The Storyteller) Theatre group, he found that they were operating in a society without a theatrical tradition. Thus, the group sought to shape its own stories and style, drawing inspiration from Palestinian folklore. They developed a new symbolic language that served as a code between the theatre and the people of the West Bank. Earlier theatrical works, presented outdoors or in improvised facilities, typically featured individual anti-heroes taken from the folklore of life. Underneath the bumbling Woody-Allen-like characters, there is a serious search for Palestinian identity.

In a 1978-79 production, *In the name of the Father, the Mother and the Son*, Palestinians are symbolically portrayed as animals in cages with a symbolic tamer (whose Israeli identity few missed) sneaking into the cages to 'educate' and 'reform' the hapless animals. Another play, *Mahjoob, Mahjoob*, features an anti-hero, accidentally dropped on his head at birth by his father in a moment of excitement. Mahjoob in his befuddling way, outwits Israeli occupying forces in a series of hilarious adventures as a prospective member of the Israeli workers' union, but he also directs caustic criticism at the sterile security rituals of his Palestinian neighbours.

People's Theatre in Poland

Theatre groups emerged as early as the 1950s among young people's movements following the relaxation of Stalinism. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, there were more than 200 groups and these continued in new forms through the period of Solidarity. In the early period it was a reaction against the boredom and constraint of the 'official' professional theatre. The plays, over the years, have dramatised protest against repression, the hypocrisy of officialdom, the hollowness of catchword propaganda, the constant indoctrination, and the passive conformity of the mass of Polish people. A constant theme is the remembrance of Polish cultural history. At times, it is more lyrical – an attempt to catch the visual images of circus, carnival, street fairs and music halls. At other times, it is more political satire, inviting the spectators into a discussion and debate. In the 1970s the groups went in for more spectacular sets and elab-

orate lighting. More recently, groups have toured the rural towns and villages celebrating Polish folk history with songs, legends and old folktales. Some groups have taken advantage of the patronage of the Church, itself a network of alternative communication in Poland and deeply aware of dramatic symbolic actions. In general, people's theatre in Poland is strongly wedded to a tradition of fine arts so much a part of both literate and popular culture in Polish history.

India, Africa, The Philippines, Chile, the USA

In India, with a tradition of dramatic ritual and literate theatre stretching back thousands of years, it is not surprising that theatre became one of the most important expressions of cultural identity in the independence movement. As will be noted in greater detail later in this article, Badal Sircar and others developed a major new form of 'street theatre' in the 1950s and 1960s as a means of defining the political culture oriented toward profound social changes. Today, people's theatre is the most important grass-roots communication used by popular movements and social action groups to articulate the political culture of lower castes against the domination of classical Brahmin culture.

In the Philippines, people's theatre played an important role in the movement against the Marcos regime, and in South Africa people's theatre is one of the few forms of expression that can be maintained in apartheid communities. In Chile more than 100 to 150 theatre groups are operating at any given time, and this has been not only a form of political awareness but an articulation of the humour, pathos, human tenderness and neighbourly solidarity among the poor in an otherwise brutalising military police state.

In the USA, alternative, experimental theatre reached its peak in the late 1960s and early 1970s when the groundswell of public disagreement with the government's blind insistence on pursuing a disastrous war in Southeast Asia often could not find expression in the more public media. Types of people's theatre continue to be strong among black, hispanic, feminist and other popular movements in the USA.⁵

A Human Cry Against Relentless Modernisation

A common denominator in people's theatre in various parts of the world is a protest against 'modernisation', maintaining a space of freedom against the total mobilisation of human life in the name of rationalised progress and economic productivity. Modernity is our human accomplishment, but modernisation tends to obliterate distinctive subcultures and traditions with one world-wide consumer culture. Those who cannot enter the competitive race of productivity – the handicapped, the elderly, those who have less technical education or access to technical resources for productivity – fall to the bottom of the heap and are crushed. Blacks in America, peasant farmers in Latin America or India, Palestinians caught in the wake of Israeli cultural and economic aggressiveness, the Polish trying to maintain cultural freedom in the shadow of the Russian giant, villagers in Nigeria concerned that modernisation deprives them of a voice – all have something in common. People's theatre is one more attempt to restore the values of community and personal dignity in societies where technical progress and productivity threaten to become the only dominant values.

2. The Community Writes the 'Script'

Performative drama, like all storytelling, is always at least one step from life. The materials of drama are the confusing flow of events

4 Sylvia Moore, 'Music for Life's Sake: Mediatory Role of the Arts for Socialization in Non-Industrial Regions'. Seminar on Traditional Media and Community Media. The Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, June 22 1982, p13.

5 Gillespie and Cameron. *Western Theatre*. Ch 18.

that have no real beginning or end. Drama selectively frames and orders a section of this flow around a human problem and possibly a solution, highlights events and persons as symbols of crucial human struggles, and gathers together the scattered dialogues of everyday life into a more succinct and emotionally poignant statement. All this selectivity in dramatic storytelling reveals the constructed interpretation and intentional meaning that the author(s) of the story read into events and constitutes an innovative cultural exploration. As Etherton points out, conventional theatre allots most of this more analytic cultural search to the solitary genius of the playwright and, to a more limited extent, to the producers, actors and others involved in staging the performance.

People's theatre attempts to return this exploration, definition of meaning and cultural innovation to the community. In the approach developed by Augusto Boal, and now widely used in many parts of the world, local leaders with an interest in people's theatre, perhaps with some help from outside experts in people's theatre, detect a searching debate in the community, and suggest that this might be a theme for a dramatic performance. Next they engage the community, or key groups such as the young, in a discussion of how the community discussion can be transformed into drama, and then stage the drama at a convenient moment in the rhythm of community life. Immediately after the performance the players invite members of the community present to discuss whether, in fact, the drama did capture the real human and social problems and then they incorporate the suggestions into subsequent stagings of the play. In some cases, the action of the performance may be stopped and the audience discusses how the play should proceed. In a sense, there is no definitive script or resolution. The community is encouraged to continue the exploration and most important, to move toward a solution in *real action* to solve the problem.

People's theatre consciously avoids a cathartic satisfaction and emotional release in seeing the problem fictionally resolved on the stage. The script must be completed in the real drama of community action.

In the forms of experimental theatre that approach professional theatre in more literate, socially heterogeneous urban contexts, theatre groups may be less a part of a geographical community. In Richard Schechner's work with experimental theatre in New York, the *rehearsal* became a form of community exploration among the players, and was considered more important than the final performance. These rehearsals were carried out in places where passers-by or people in the neighbourhood could be invited to be present at the rehearsals and become involved with the players in a discussion of how the action of the play should unfold.

Theatre as a Form of Consciousness Raising

Augusto Boal was much influenced by the people's education methods of fellow Brazilian, Paulo Freire, and most leaders of people's theatre in various parts of the world are quite familiar with the writings of Paulo Freire. Freire, in his approaches to literacy and other basic education, attacked strongly the conception of education as passing on, in an indoctrinating fashion, a 'bank' of information. He started the educational process by having the students themselves define the key words and themes of literacy education from their lower-status perspectives. Freire and others found that the poor had learned to repress their real thoughts for fear of antagonising powerful figures who could deprive them of jobs and other basic necessities. The heart of the educational process was creating within a small group a space of *freedom* and mutual respect – especially the respect of the group animator – so that the people could 'raise to conscious cultural expression' the group's real perceptions of the causes of their problems and gain the confidence to reject the false explanations of poverty (their 'innate' ignorance, helplessness, etc.) that kept them in servile subordination. Within this group and within the network of hundreds of other similar

groups and community organisations, a new socio-political culture gradually emerges. Regina Festa, in her study of people's communication in Brazil, shows how the network of people's communication operating throughout Brazil in the 1970s and early 1980s was an important factor in bringing Brazil back to a democratic government and making labour unions or other people's organisations a more independent force in Brazilian society.⁶

A key method in Freire's 'education for liberation' is to focus the group dialogue around a photograph, poster or slide projection which represents symbolically central problems of poverty and dependence. This enables the group to look at themselves from a little distance and to discuss what they really think (not the standard interpretations) to be the cause of this situation. A new culture rises out of a very different reconstruction of the causes of their problems. Compared with a photograph, the dramatic re-enactment of key issues by people of the community is an even more striking representation of situations because it portrays social roles of power and dependence and is more visually and emotionally concrete. Drama is also a more flexible representation because the portrayal can be immediately changed and refined by the participating audience.

The Aesthetics of 'Uncompletion'

Consciousness raising in group communication or people's theatre can be a very striking cultural experience, but Michael Etherton suggests that leaders of people's theatre often mistakenly think that it is the performance itself that raises people's consciousness. In the hands of proselytising political activists or educators who want changes in a hurry, people's theatre becomes a not-so-subtle form of indoctrination. Opening a space of freedom often means that the group chooses a problem for discussion that the more expert outside animator thinks is less important or urgent. Moreover, Etherton argues, the tradition of literate theatre is so strong that many well-intentioned people's theatre groups think that it is their role to write the script in a much more incisive and communicable manner. They forget that the raising of consciousness comes from the *process* of creating drama rather than from the dramatic product. Among professional theatre people, there is almost a compulsion to present a completed, well-rounded solution that plays upon the audience's desire to see the question harmoniously 'wrapped up', at least in fictional representation. Etherton thinks that people's theatre must move away from the conception of theatre as a written work to a conception of theatre as part of a more oral tradition that is in continual process. People's theatre emerges out of a particular historical moment of questioning in a community and feeds back directly into the ongoing discussion. There is no completion.

3. Theatre Which Builds Community and Effects Social Change

Richard Schechner sees theatre as essentially *dramatic performance*, a cultural space separated from everyday life in which human and social issues are symbolically and fictionally re-enacted. To explain more clearly the nature of the 'new' theatre (including people's theatre), he distinguishes two basic elements of theatre: *entertainment* and *efficaciousness*. All theatre has something of both elements, but if placed on a bipolar continuum contemporary conventional theatre tends much more toward the entertainment end of the continuum while people's theatre tends toward emphasis on effecting socio-cultural and political change. In the performance people actually strengthen bonds of community. Social status is redefined so that people act differently toward each other, and there is a commitment to carry out the changes in the 'real historical world'.

In Schechner's view, the purest form of efficacious theatre is

6 Regina Festa (Ed.). *Comunicación popular y alternativa*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Paulinas, 1985. pp11-32.

socio-religious ritual. In religious ritual, the mythic harmony established by divinity or the history of salvation is symbolically acted out. The community of participants affirm their alliance with the divinity to carry out the divine plan, calling upon the assistance of the divinity in fulfilling this constituted nature of the universe. In social ritual there is more emphasis on the strong sense of community, the resolution of conflict and the definition of responsibility to the community for the harmonious welfare of the whole group. In both the focus is on the results.

In 'entertainment theatre' participants are more taken up with the aesthetic, emotional pleasure of the performance: the poetic expression, music, dance, the suspense of the plot, good impersonation, elaborate costuming and stage setting, and the overall cathartic relaxation in a moment of leisure. There is an increasing separation of audience and professional performers with emphasis on perfection of technical skills. While efficacious theatre is considered a central locus of symbolic actualisation essential for the maintenance of the community requiring participation of all, entertainment theatre is an optional choice. When entertainment theatre dominates, the symbolic exploration of socio-cultural issues is carried on outside of performative circumstances or in other forms of socio-religious ritual distinct from theatre.

Entertainment Theatre Becomes Commercial Theatre

Schechner and others think that the emphasis on entertainment brings commercialisation and a distancing of theatre from the community. Entertainment stresses the high degree of technical skills that only full-time professionals can supply much more elaborate staging and specially constructed buildings. Theatre then depends on profit and the need to sell access in the marketplace to those who can pay the price. This reinforces entertainment theatre's optional, class-oriented tendencies. Entertainment theatre also separates the actors' identification with the role they symbolize so that actors 'play' at being others or reproducing human and social issues, regardless of whether these are their real sentiments.

Efficacious theatre, on the other hand, is concerned that all members of the community be participants and that all, audience and actors, deeply identify with and intend to carry out the symbolic action. Commercial interests are seen, in some way, to be an obstacle to the authenticity of feelings. The performers are expected to become totally involved in the characterisation, unaware of the distance between one's personality and the personality of the play

characters. While entertainment theatre presupposes a heterogeneous and fragmented audience of individuals, efficacious theatre attempts to build community between actors and audience and among actors.

Seeking a Balance Between Entertainment and Efficaciousness

Schechner questions whether it is best to conceive of the emphasis on either efficaciousness or entertainment in terms of a kind of deterministic, linear evolution from the primitiveness of ritual to the modernity of entertainment. Both elements are always present in performance, and both elements exist in dialectical tension. When theatre shifts too strongly to purely aesthetic, commercial entertainment, a more strongly authenticating, efficacious theatre begins to appear. When entertainment dominates, performance tends to be class-oriented, individualistic, show business, constantly adjusting to suit the tastes of a fickle audience. Schechner thinks, as do many others, that today the most vital forms of theatre are experimental, people's theatre which have many of the elements of social ritual. On the other hand, when theatre becomes too ritualised and philosophical, it can also become tied to an established order.

4. Mixing Audience and Performative Space

Most people's theatre attempts to take performance off the stage and out of the architecture of proscenium theatre into a space where the public more naturally and habitually congregates. Richard Schechner, who has experimented with and written extensively on 'environmental theater', suggests that space, movement in an environment and the architecture of performative environments is as much a communicative medium as the spoken text. Proscenium theatre is a language which separates performance and audience; the stage gives the text an absolute authority. The audience is placed in a darkened 'house', relating individually and passively to the distant actors. People's theatre brings the performance into the midst of the audience where members of the audience can become aware of each other.

In people's theatre, actors do not speak to each other in a story distant from the life of the audience, but they speak to the audience and, in some cases, allow the audience to enter into the dialogue. The performative action may move around the large room, or a village square, or different scenes may suddenly pop up into the middle of the audience. The audience can move with the action or suddenly find themselves part of a scene.

II. India: People's Theatre in a Performative Culture of 3,000 Years

Madhu Malik. *Traditional Forms of Communication and the Mass Media in India*. (No.13 in the Communication and Society series of UNESCO). Paris: UNESCO, 1983.

Kironmoy Raha. *Bengali Theatre*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, India, 1978.

Ross Kidd. 'Domestication Theatre and Conscientization Drama in India' in *Tradition for Development: Indigenous Structures and Folk Media in Non-Formal Education*. Ed. by Ross Kidd and Nat Coletta. Berlin: German Foundation for International Development and International Council for Adult Education, 1981.

A recent study concludes that over the last few years there have been about 7,000 'street theatre' groups functioning in different parts of India at any given time.⁷ It is not surprising that in India social action groups, health and agricultural extensionists, student activists, political parties, religious reform groups and many other movements have all gravitated toward some form of dramatic, performative communication. India's theatre tradition has an unbroken line of development stretching back to the origins of

classical Sanskrit drama re-enacting the foundational religious-historical myths of the Hindu culture. In the 550,000 towns and villages of India, the yearly round of religious, agricultural or civic festivals is largely centred around performances of religious

7 This is based on the doctoral thesis research of Jacob Srampickal who interviewed leaders in the centres and movements promoting people's theatre in different regions of India.

pageants, hired folk-opera troupes, local balladeers, song and dance teams or political plays.

While the West has tended to cast its communication in rhetorical, persuasive discourse and in more denotative written and print media, in India a much more connotative, symbolic, mythic and narrative discourse of performance has continued to be central in the communicative culture. Also, as Malik points out, while Western ritualistic theatre tended to fragment into opera, ballet and drama based on dialogue, Indian theatre maintains a composite form of singing, dancing, verse, prose dialogue, and rhetorical speech with elements of social criticism.

When the British brought their own strong theatre tradition to Calcutta, Bombay and other colonial administrative-commercial centres, many of the more Anglicised literary elite in the cities of India quickly took to Shakespearean and contemporary English drama. Over 3,000 years, however, India has always absorbed and transformed the influence of Greek, Persian, Turkish and other invaders. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a series of brilliant Indian playwrights and theatrical troupes developed a unique amalgamation of Western proscenium theatre and different regional traditions of Indian popular folk opera. As the national independence movement developed after 1850, many of the plays written for the numerous theatres in Calcutta and in other cities risked British censorship with vigorous themes of Indian cultural and political nationalism. Gandhi himself was a master of dramatic symbolic action as a means to create a new Indian socio-political culture.

The flourishing film industry of India, since the 1940s often producing up to 600 feature films a year, also reflects the theatre tradition. Film has appealed to the masses by incorporating entertainment forms of song, dance, mythic themes, elements of political or social protest plays and the folk drama that people like so much.

The 'street theatre' movement has evolved most directly from the explosion of radical political theatre in the late 1940s which, for the first time in Indian theatre history, dramatised the injustices of capitalist and caste structure. But the widespread acceptance of and participation in forms of 'street theatre' has its roots in the Indian populace's love of theatre, from puppets to night-long rambling folk operas in village festivals.

Types of Indian Folk Media

One can hardly understand the attraction of dramatised social protest in 'street theatre' or attempts to use folk media in development communication in India – or in other parts of Asia – without reviewing some of the major forms of traditional folk performance.

1. Hindu Religious Folk Drama

For some observers, the re-enactment of epic religious myths in the yearly cycle of religio-civic festivals has elements of people's theatre because it has become, since the nineteenth century, an assertion of India's historic cultural identity in the face of Western cultural influence. It usually involves non-professional actors drawn from the local population with only a token payment, and it is performed in the 'natural' environments of the village square, temple precincts or in the gardens and palatial buildings of India's few remaining hereditary princely patrons.

One example is the *Ramlila*, an epic religious pageant performed over thirty-one days in the month of October throughout much of north-central India. Pre-adolescent children, selected from the Brahmanic caste and adorned with traditional symbolic costumes, dramatise the story of Rama, an incarnation of the deity Vishnu and a central figure in Hindu religious myth. The story line is typical of so much of Indian myth-based folk opera: Rama's birth and childhood adventures auguring a lifetime struggle with evil, his marriage to Sita, his exile to the jungles, struggles with the demon King Ravana across the length of India to Sri Lanka, the great

decisive battle with the evil tyrant Ravana, the victory of Rama, the triumphant return of Rama and Sita to the northern capital of Ayodhya and the beginning of the golden era of the reign of Rama.

One of the most striking performances of the *Ramlila* is at Ramnagar on the banks of the Ganges under the patronage of the Maharajah of Benares. The pageant moves over a space of seven square kilometres of the Maharajah's palace grounds followed by surging crowds of up to 100,000 pilgrims and presided over by the Maharajah from the vantage point of his throne mounted on an elephant or from his 1926 Cadillac. For thirty-one days the pilgrims, chanting holy men, food vendors and devotees of Rama live in a dramatic festival environment.

Although religious folk drama has populist elements, many leaders in the people's theatre criticise its reinforcement of the caste system and the definition of Indian cultural identity from the perspective of the Brahmanic caste. There have been historical cases of anti-Brahmanic movements reinterpreting the classical Sanskrit epic, but there is resistance to any introduction of a 'liberation theology'. People's theatre generally has developed outside the framework of Sanskritic culture.

2. Commercial Folk Theatre

Operatic folk drama is today performed by city-based troupes of ten to twenty actors, musicians and singers hired by village councils for major festivals of the year. Every major linguistic-cultural region of India has a folk drama form that generally took shape from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Although themes have a religio-mythic or romantic historical base, it is a very flexible form that has increasingly become secular entertainment and sometimes includes critical socio-political commentary. The Bhavi folk theatre of Gujarat (north-western India) originated in the fifteenth century as a protest against the injustices of the caste system. In the period of nationalistic independence movements, folk opera sometimes became a symbol of protest against British and other Western cultural penetration. Today, folk operas must compete with film and TV and have incorporated not only film stars but also a popular film style. At times, interpretations tend toward the salacious and melodramatic so that some more middle-class, Westernized Indians have considered it simply 'vulgar' entertainment.

Folk opera is performed in the open air long into the night with a great deal of intimacy between actors and the surrounding audience. Songs and dances are interspersed with prose interpretations directed to the audience, often with satirical applications, when the theme is appropriate, to the socio-political problems the audience is experiencing. For a change of dramatic pace, the chorus or a character representing 'conscience' may pose real or rhetorical questions to the audience. Some people's theatre groups have attempted to introduce the immensely entertaining form of folk opera, but the professional acting and musical skills are difficult to match.

3. Narrative Ballads

The most widespread and frequent form of folk entertainment are the long narrative songs performed more often by local villagers who have handed down the stories and musical skills for generations. In the *burrakatha* of Andhra Pradesh, South East India, the principal performer dances and recites the story while others play the drum or harmonium and provide refrains. The teams are usually hired by local village councils for simpler festivals, such as the harvest, in smaller rural communities.

The themes are myths or tales of heroic events and persons in the region, but following a long didactic tradition balladeers often seize upon an appropriate part of the story to bring in points of moral wisdom. Given the social and political ferment of India over the past one hundred years, the ballads are often the occasion for comment on recent political events or satirical criticism of the real or alleged

corruption and arrogance of regional politicians, shopkeepers and landlords – a kind of comic relief that the audience enjoys. Tradition has allowed performers considerable licence for criticism without questioning from notables in the audience.

4. Puppets and Other Forms

Puppet troupes, varying from a one-man team to seven or eight family members, are engaged for village festivals or travel about to market fairs, playgrounds or other places of congregation. Performances are usually accompanied by singing interspersed with stylised prose dialogue, generally using more humorous folktale themes.

Finally, brief mention should be made of folksongs which played an important role in the independence movement and are today much used in both development and social animation communication.

The Development of Indian Political Theatre in the 1940s

The political theatre movement, which was the forerunner of Badal Sircar's 'street theatre' approach, did not emerge from the folk theatre forms but from the tradition of Indian adaptations of Western proscenium theatre in major urban centres such as Calcutta in West Bengal. The major inspiration was not the national independence movement or the Congress Party, which many young idealistic writers and playwrights already felt was not confronting India's profound social injustices, but from Marxist-inspired currents of thought and from the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), promoted, initially, by people associated with the Indian Communist Party. A major catalyst was a disastrous famine in West Bengal which left 3,000,000 dead and created scenes of untold misery in the streets of Calcutta, then enjoying a boom among the middle class as a staging ground for the war against the Japanese.

In 1944 Bijon Bhattacharya, one of the founders of the IPTA in Calcutta, wrote the play, *Nabanna*, which dramatised the exploitation of Indian peasants by landowners, their gradual pauperisation and their death by starvation. The play was proscenium theatre in a more Brechtian mode, but it was a conscious break with the artificial literary style of Bengali middle-class theatre and eliminated the romantic sets and histrionic pyrotechnics of previous Indian theatre. The new style of theatre with its vivid portrayal of real events in West Bengal, its genuineness of emotion and its use of the rustic language of the poor proved enormously attractive. Given the reluctance of playhouses to co-operate, it was staged throughout the region in whatever makeshift space was available before tens of thousands of people.

A new generation of playwrights, principally in West Bengal but also in other parts of India, associated with the IPTA and other social change movements, began to experiment with three major types of socially committed theatre: 1) professional drama with literarily crafted scripts staged in conventional theatres; 2) fairly radical adaptations of folk opera traditions, but orienting them more to peasant folk rituals, religious observances and dialects than to the classical Sanskrit, Brahmanic forms; 3) non-professional 'street theatre' which at times adapted styles of village folk performances such as narrative ballads, but more generally were direct educational and political dramatisations.

In professional proscenium theatre, the Bengali, Utpal Dutt, was among the most influential. In 1959 he obtained a lease on the Minerva, one of the major old playhouses of Calcutta, and he set out to communicate his Marxist vision to the masses with epic productions, spectacular lighting and sound effects, huge sets, and catchy songs and slogans. In the play *Angar* (Coal), which dramatised the callous drowning of miners by exploitative owners flooding a mine to save it from fire, and other similar plays, Dutt stimulated what came to be known as the 'Theatre of Commitment'. Badal Sircar, in the 1960s, produced critical and political plays about

the social" group that he knew best: the cynical, guilt-ridden Calcutta middle class of would-be intelligentsia, caught between enthusiastic popular movements and opportunistic politicians and finding no role in the 'new India'.

Dutt also adapted the regional operatic folk theatre of Bengal, the *jatra*, to themes of political consciousness-raising, and reached large rural and lower-status urban audiences. Given the popularity of political theatre, well-known commercial *jatra* troupes in Bengal and other folk theatre traditions incorporated social criticism themes in other parts of India. In the south-India state of Kerala, a political play using the folk theatre forms of the region, toured the state for years, and helped a Marxist-inspired party win the elections for control of the state government.

Non-Professional 'Street Theatre'

The New Drama movement started with the cry of a people's theatre – a theatre of and for the people (but, significantly, not always BY the people). In the 1950s and 1960s hundreds of non-professional theatre groups, many of them associated with the IPTA, began to stage improvised plays of social criticism in public halls or, more often, under the open skies and on street corners in the tradition of folk theatre.

Utpal Dutt experimented with 'documentary plays' in which actors were spokesmen reading from newspapers, journals and books about current political events and carrying on a critical dialogue-debate about these events. Two or three actors dramatised political personalities and actions without props or make-up on street corners or in open parks. These 'living newspapers' often drew large crowds and set off hot debates in the street audience.

Improvised political theatre is credited with influencing elections and specific protest issues in the 1950s and 1960s, but the occasional one-off fiery performances in a neighbourhood or village usually had little impact. Rarely was there audience participation or post-performance discussion and it had no long-term linkages with peasant or labour organisation. Many so-called experiments with a theatre of critical realism had little quality as theatre experience or insightful political analysis.

Badal Sircar: Introducing Method and an Aesthetic in Street Theatre

By the late 1960s professional political theatre was waning because of increased production costs and competition from films. Badal Sircar set out to develop a theatre that would not require lavish sets or expensive stars borrowed from cinema. He wanted a theatre with an alternative, stronger aesthetic impact than popular films. He also hoped to revive the theatre of social relevance which was still seen by many to be the most interesting theatre in India. At this point he made a number of world tours that brought him into contact with 'theatre in the round' experiments in London and Paris, with Grotowski's 'Poor Theatre' developed in the theatre laboratory at Wroclaw, Poland, and with Schechner and others in New York. Upon his return to Calcutta in 1969, Badal Sircar began a series of experiments with his theatre group, Satabdi, out of which emerged some of the guiding principles of 'street theatre', these principles have been widely imitated, adapted and extended into the process of peasant and labour organisation throughout India.

- a) The most significant innovation was to replace the rehearsal slavishly following a director with a training workshop in which the actors would work together to re-interpret the problematic of a script in terms of their own experiences, perceptions and emotions. The workshop also emphasised learning to project emotions physically with the body and voice. These exercises gradually evolved into the model of a workshop in which the actors first analysed social reality, wrote the script and designed the play themselves.
- b) Following Grotowski's 'Poor Theatre', which Badal Sircar

thinks is especially appropriate for India, the production dispenses with lighting, costumes, and background sets in order to emphasise the symbolism of a few props but especially the bodily, facial and emotional expressions. The performance uses many elements of traditional Indian performance – mime, rhythmic movements, songs and dances, etc. – all of which reduce the importance of denotative language and highlight physical acting and symbolic gestures.

c) The performance is moved out into the midst of the audience and seeks to involve the audience either imaginatively or with active participation. The dialogue is directed to spectators rather than just to other stage characters.

Before reviewing how the ideas of people's theatre spread and were adapted in popular organisation efforts throughout India, it is important to note the parallel evolution of the Government of India's use of folk media for its development programmes. Significantly, official efforts tend to use the term 'folk media' rather than 'people's media'. The experience of the Government of India is not untypical of the problems and potential of folk media by other governmental agencies in Asia and Africa.

Folk Media for Development Education

As Malik points out, folk media has traditionally blended practical wisdom and ethical advice with entertainment and ritual celebration so that it has seemed an adaptable form for communication of improved health and farming practices.

Since folk media were also widely used in the nationalistic independence movement, it seemed logical to continue to use it in nation-building efforts. The success of the IPTA and the use of theatre by other political movements also spurred the newly organised Government of India, controlled almost continuously since independence by the Congress Party, to use performance to popularise its five-year development campaigns and carry out its own forms of political education.

In 1954 the Song and Drama Division (SDD) of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting was formed, and the SDD gradually developed a large central office in Delhi with eight branch offices in the major cultural-linguistic regions of India. By the 1980s the SDD had an administrative staff of some 250, more than 750 permanently employed producers, performers and musicians, and a register of about 400 private troupes contracted for seasons or for specific performances. The most frequently used form is puppets, but also used are narrative ballads, operatic folk theatre and folksongs. Folk media troupes are most frequently brought in for major government campaigns such as the family planning crusade of the 1970s, health education campaigns (hygiene, nutrition, preventative medicine, etc.), and for national civic education, especially where there are political separatist tendencies or other ethnic and communal tensions. Folk media have also been used for introducing agricultural techniques, rural co-operatives and social welfare education such as resolving family problems. Statistics from 1978-1981 report that in this period the SDD organised some 18,000 separate performances each year, an impressive record given limited budgets. The SDD has carried out only sporadic internal evaluation of the cost-effectiveness of folk media, but available evidence suggests that puppets, folk songs and drama are more communicative with largely illiterate populations than, for example, broadcast media. Sympathetic external evaluations point out, however, that the practice of having all scripts written or approved by central office personnel means that the scripts are often cliché-ridden, with little sensitivity to folk media forms and little understanding of the life-context of rural or lower-status urban people.

Often there is little that is truly 'folk' culture except that the message is cast in the form of song, dance and drama. The hired

troupes have little participation in the design of the material. There is not enough effort to locate and incorporate true folk performers and give them the same remuneration they would ordinarily receive at village festivals.

A study by Ross Kidd, comparing the SDD approaches with people's theatre in India, notes that the performances of the SDD personnel or their hired troupes are often under the supervision of local village elites, and there is rarely any attempt to stimulate open discussion of even innocuous health themes by the audience after the performance. The SDD would not seriously consider training the local village people to independently select their own themes and develop performances which would express their own critical reflection on local problems even though this would probably result in more effective communication of the government's own educational objectives. Many working in people's theatre contend that the SDD is often a top-down, propagandist method of popular education.

People's Theatre for Grassroots Organisation in India

In the 1950s and 1960s, the government of India established a series of extension bureaucracies organised at national, state, and district levels in a massive effort to introduce new health, agricultural and other improved technologies into the rural areas. Classical extension communication methods were used, and All India Radio supported this with intensive educational broadcasting.

Many observers quickly noted that the benefits of the extension services were going largely to the better-off villagers whose educational levels, land resources and incomes enabled them to take advantage of the new information and improved practices of agriculture or health. One of the most glaring examples of the rich farmers getting richer and the poor becoming landless labourers was the introduction of the 'miracle wheat' varieties in the northern Punjabi region, a move widely touted as 'The Green Revolution'.

Although 'The Green Revolution' may have helped India become self-sufficient in food, an increasing number of young, idealistic activists argued that technological advances needed to be accompanied by social change. They saw the need to organise the semi-subsistence farmers and landless labourers to force the government to implement the agrarian reform and minimum wage laws, the constitutional guarantees favouring *harijan* (lower or untouchable castes) and other legislation largely unenforced by a government unwilling to confront local elites. In the 1970s and into the 1980s, hundreds of social action group (SAG) movements formed all over India, many with grants from non-governmental aid agencies in the industrialised countries. Strategies vary immensely, but most have objectives of building solid pressure-group organisations among peasant-labourer sectors, and have programmes of sustained leadership training at the village level or in regional centres. Where SAGs have been able to work intensively in a specific area for five or ten years, the vindication of the rights of the poor and even the economic benefits have been impressive.

SAGs use a variety of small media such as audio-visuals and video for group conscientisation, but the primary medium is 'street theatre', adapting the ideas of the IPTA, Badal Sircar and others. To this they have added the 'conscientisation' and 'education for liberation' methods of Paulo Freire as well as the methods of 'theatre of the oppressed' developed by Augusto Boal in Latin America. Training courses given by international experts in people's theatre such as Ross Kidd and Michael Etherton, both with extensive experience in Africa, were also influential at the outset. SAGs have moved away from earlier IPTA approaches bringing idealistic urban-based theatre groups to villages to perform consciousness-raising plays *FOR* the villagers. The focus is generally on training villagers to produce their own social dramas. But there is much debate among SAGs as to whether they are

developing real cultural and communicative competence among the poor or whether it is just another form of vertical, superficial talking down to people.

People's Theatre in Harijan Mobilisation

In 'Domestication Theatre and Conscientization Drama in India', Ross Kidd argues that there is a striking difference between the government's use of folk media for social control and the SAGs use of theatre for independent popular organisation. Kidd describes in detail the application of people's theatre approaches by the Action for Cultural and Political Change (ACPC) initiated by six young *harijan* school graduates in the southern Tamilnadu region in 1974.

The ACPC team enters a district only when they are invited by fellow *harijans* and the team lives with and like the *harijan* villagers, working with *harijan* leadership. In the case described by Kidd, the ACPC began in a district where the Hindu-culture landowners, who were 5% of the population, had tracts of 6-8,000 acres each, and the *harijans*, who formed 80% of the population, lived in total economic, cultural and political subjection. Physical beatings of labourers and servant women were common. By the end of the first phases of the organisational work, however, the newly formed agricultural labourers movement had won two major wage strikes, obtained written agreements from landowners to stop all beatings, had taken possession of some farming land and housing sites, had released a number of families from bonded labour and had successfully pressured local authorities to provide to *harijans* the same basic government services available to others.

The ACPC has used drama in three different ways or stages, as the occasion presents itself. A first stage centres around literacy classes since literacy is a basis for further organisational abilities and is a more traditional form of collective discussion activity less likely to arouse opposition from landowners. Using the Freirian method of allowing the people to discover the key words and themes through which language skills are developed, simple role-playing dramas were helpful in listing the problems the people faced and in verbalising the language they ordinarily use in thinking about their problems. Role playing also revealed whether the language is truly their thought or whether it is the language they must use to please more powerful people. Skits quickly emerged in which landlords confront *harijans*. In the reflections on this role playing, the *harijan* participants gradually brought to consciousness their own repressed perceptions and language as well as awareness of reasons (fear, lack of organisation, etc.) why they had internalised the point of view of landowners and other powerful figures. This new 'literacy', which the *harijans* created themselves, became the medium not only of literacy education, but of a much broader and longer educational process.

A second stage is the more intensive training of a village leadership team. After about six months of literacy classes and discussions, a group of motivated young 'action-initiators' emerged. This group met in the evening after the literacy classes for deeper analysis of village problems and the concrete steps that might be taken. Here, social role playing and skits focus more on how the group can confront landlords and bureaucrats since most have never had the experience of, for example entering a government office to present a case. Nor have they had experience of leadership roles in organisations speaking to fellow *harijans*.

A third level is the encouragement of a new distinctive *harijan* culture which presents *harijans* in a positive light and which forms the basis for a broader culture lasting beyond any particular economic or political confrontation. In India's caste society *harijans* live in segregated colonies, but they are not allowed to have a culture of their own. They attend the Hindu festivals and worship in a caste temple or Christian church, but, in a sense, as outsiders beholding this from a separate, demarcated area. Some *harijans* have formed

folk theatre troupes, but their performances are simply imitations of Hindu puranic drama which deals with mythological themes legitimating the caste hierarchy and *harijan* debasement. The Tamil or Hindi films which attract *Harijan* labourers likewise reproduce the caste structure. Thus, in a third stage, the *harijan* villagers learn to produce their own folk theatre using drama, music, and songs but in the context of a new 'myth' which highlights their liberation. Unlike the short skits, these plays may take a whole evening. A performance described by Kidd consisted of a series of sketches prepared with only a rough unscripted scenario and interspersed with songs and musical accompaniment. The dialogue is aimed at the audience with pointed rhetorical questions, and, occasionally, a discussion breaks out in the audience or between audience and actors.

The ACPC team, like many SAGs, remains working in the district until an organisation of labourers is self-sustaining under its own leadership. An important point that Kidd's description does not make clear, however, is whether social action theatre becomes sufficiently a part of taste and competence to be maintained as a performative tradition after the outside social animators move on to another area of action.

People's Theatre in Larger Development Programmes

P. V. Poornachandra Rao. *To the Rural Masses Through Street Plays*. Secunderabad: National Council of Developmental Communication, Varanasi, 1986.

Proshika. *Popular Theatre and Organizing in Bangladesh*. Annual Report, 1980.

Ross Kidd and Mamunnur Rashid. Theatre By the People, For the People and of the People: People's 'Theatre and Landless Organizing in Bangladesh, A Study of Aranyak', in *Social Action*, Vol 34 (1984), Indian Social Institute, Delhi.

Tripurari Sharma. *Diary of a Theatre Workshop*. Sucheta Kripalani Siksha Niketan, Jodpur. Recorded by Lakshmi Krishnamurti, 1984.

Rao, in his booklet summarising years of training social activists in people's theatre with the Rural Development Advisory Service (RDAS), a co-ordinating body for social action groups, points out that most SAGs who think they are practicing 'people's theatre' are, in fact, preparing the plays themselves during the day and performing them at night FOR the people. Worse, many groups are using old scripts prepared by other people and rehearsed as conventional proscenium theatre with virtually no participation by the poor. Rao lashes out against middle-class catalysts who enter a village, impose their ideologies in the name of people's theatre, raise poor people's expectations and then depart from the village without any desire to share the risk of confrontation that the play may stir up.

Many SAGs are now shifting to the methods illustrated in Kidd's description of the ACPC, but often this depends on having a carefully selected cadre of dedicated workers able to leave families and go out to live in villages for an extended period. How do larger development efforts in more normal circumstances employ people's theatre?

From Theatre FOR the People to Theatre BY the People

Following Bangladesh's war of independence from Pakistan in the early 1970s, programmes of capital-intensive agriculture were introduced, but, as elsewhere, this favoured the rural elites. Proshika, a Bangladesh voluntary organisation founded in 1974, established a large programme to organise the victims of capital-intensive agriculture among share-croppers, marginal farmers and labourers. A network of more than 8,000 village-based groups, carrying on activities of animation and conscientisation, was developed in a few years.

Realising that the landless themselves are the best teachers and animators, a systematic programme of training para-professional village field workers evolved. As the programme developed, Proshika began to experiment with folk media and theatre. Initially, Proshika insisted on training middle-class, urban-based theatre groups to tour rural areas, perform plays and elicit discussion. Gradually, animators realised that labourers had the capacity to create their own plays about their problems and that this is a far more effective way of enabling them to analyse the causes of their problems. Workshops training villagers in methods of people's theatre were added to Proshika's activities.

Transforming Objectives of Theatre Troupes

Tripurari Sharma, herself a graduate of the National School of Drama, has developed workshop methods which have been successful in training not only government development workers but also students of professional drama.

She begins the workshops with a series of exercises in which people who are conducting similar theatre workshops can discover their prejudices, values and creativity in order to understand participatory methods of people's theatre. The workshop also trains development workers and drama students, who often come from higher status backgrounds, to become more sensitive to cultural traditions, feelings and experiences of the groups they will be working with. For example, to prepare students to develop a play about patients in a leprosy camp, she first presents the actors with

pen pictures of people suffering from leprosy and then encourages workshop participants to interview and share deeply the experience of leprosy.

The Future of People's Theatre in India

Although activist street theatre has flourished in India for more than twenty years, only recently has there begun systematic research on the social, cultural and political significance of this. A number of doctoral theses and university-based research projects are asking searching questions:

- 1) To what extent does people's theatre introduced by outside activists become truly a part of the local performative tradition of communities?
- 2) What kind of more profound cultural changes are happening as a result of efforts to raise social and political consciousness among *harijans* and other lower-status groups?
- 3) Is this activity, spread out among thousands of small communities, contributing in any significant way to the development of networks of stable, people-controlled-interest group organisations that can influence government policy on a long-term basis?
- 4) Can activist groups, at present fragmented and competing among themselves, be brought together in any form of coalition?

These are only some of the questions about people's theatre in India that remain, as yet, largely unanswered.

III: People's Theatre in the Philippines

Fajardo, Brenda: 'The Philippine Education Theatre Association', Sonolux Information, 1983.

Gaspar, Karl. 'The History of the Growth and Development of Creative Dramatics in Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference Secretariat, Davao, Philippines.

The development of a people's national theatre movement that is fully embedded in local culture is possible only if it is sustained by an on-going process of reflection on social theory, experimentation and concrete integration with the poor. Philippine Educational Theatre Association (PETA) possesses this unified single thrust – that of bringing about an authentic kind of culture representative of the toiling majority of the people and resistant to the domination of a foreign, colonial culture. This informative article by Fajardo who heads the Documentation, Research and Publications Division of PETA, highlights these aspects in PETA's methodology. Founded in 1967 by Cecil Guidote, PETA began by harmonizing and co-ordinating school and community drama groups that existed for many years. Gradually it began to concentrate more on the industrial and migrant workers, farmers, fishermen, students, tribals, etc. From then on it strived for artistic excellence and standards suited to the actual conditions and cultural expressions of the audience. The training arm – Central Institute of Theatre Arts in South East Asia (CITASA) – not only helped to realize this dream but also undertook the establishment of powerful theatre groups in schools, rural communities and urban institutions. PETA has gradually developed what is now known as the 'aesthetics of

poverty' i.e. a theatre aesthetics that concentrates more on imaginative representation rather than opulence. The Metropolitan Teen Theatre League, the youth wing of PETA, is also active in training and establishing groups and linkages that will mould its members into young artists and teachers. The documentation, research and publication offer a variety of newsletters, notes, scripts and book series on PETA activities and theatre in general.

The growth of the Mindanao-Sulu Creative Dramatic Group is the immediate result of the Church's concern for justice resulting in the conscientization of the poorer sections. In a situation where martial law prevailed, mass media were in the hands of the ruling class and media content emphasised consumerism, fantasy and individualism, people's theatre seemed the most appropriate way to organize the people and deepen their values. Since 85% of the people are Catholics most of these theatre activities rallied around the idea of building Basic Christian Communities.

Commenting on the necessity of micro media in a situation where oppression is re-inforced through the mass media Gaspar adds that people's theatre is totally community-based and is promoting people's participation.

IV: Sub-Saharan Africa: Popular, Political and People's Theatre

Michael Etherton. *The Development of African Drama*. London: Hutchinson & Co. (Publishers) Ltd, 1982.

Yemi Ogunbiyi. *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*. Lagos: Nigeria Magazine – Dept of Culture, Federal Ministry of Social Development, Youth, Sports and Culture, 1981.

African cultures also have an unusually strong performative tradition which combines dance, orchestral use of drums, choric singing, mime, oral poetry, public story telling and the elaborate use of masks. In the various ethnic cultures, public communication – especially in the yearly round of religious ritual and community festival – has been expressed largely in terms of dramatic performance. Pre-colonial African cultures rarely developed a highly literate theatre, and a formal theatre emerged only in a few places such as the Yoruba kingdom of present-day Western Nigeria where court opera and travelling entertainment troupes flourishing from about 1500 till the early 1900s. In the colonial period, classical and contemporary European theatre were introduced through the mission churches and through the schools to cultivate European cultural tastes and to provide entertainment for the small communities of expatriate colonial administrators and the Westernised African elite. European music-hall forms of entertainment also attracted a following among some more urbanised Africans.

The contemporary burst of unusually creative African theatre began largely in the 1950s when the national independence movements set in motion the quest for distinctive African cultural identities. Although the novel, poetry and political philosophy have been important forms of cultural exploration, it is theatre which has provided a major public forum for serious debate of socio-political issues, questioning of colonial influences, and discussion of the new cultural directions of Africa. Unique African approaches to theatre have developed in various forms: the immensely popular travelling troupes that have combined traditional performative dance and music with modern entertainment styles and have fashioned their own cultural industries of records, film and TV productions; a theatre of current political comment and social protest; a sophisticated art theatre: adaptations of classical Greek and European theatre to African contexts; and attempts to transform traditional ritual and festival into forms of contemporary theatre and popular entertainment. Africa now has a long list of distinguished playwrights such as Nobel-prizewinner Wole Soyinka in Nigeria, Léopold Sédar Senghor in Senegal, Kabwe Kasoma in Zambia, Yulisa Maddy in Sierra Leone, Ngugi wa Thiong'o in Kenya, Efuia Sutherland in Ghana, and many others less known internationally. The departments of theatre and drama that one finds in African universities have played an unusually active role in developing African theatre in more literary forms but also as popular entertainment.

People's Theatre in Africa

With so much theatre activity, it is not surprising that in virtually every country of Sub-Saharan Africa there have been movements to 'take theatre to the people' and a proliferation of centres, government departments and university-based projects supporting participatory people's theatre activities. Generally, participatory people's theatre has been introduced as a form of community problem analysis and as a basis for community organization. It is often done under the general umbrella of government development agencies. The kind of people's theatre found in Latin America, India or the Philippines, where theatre becomes the alternative internal communication of political consciousness within popularly-based

opposition movements is less common in Africa. Forms of people's theatre were used in the liberation movements of Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Mozambique, and people's theatre is quite important in the black liberation movement of South Africa. Professional theatre in Africa, both popular entertainment and more literary theatre, began with a strong central theme of satirical and moralistic protest against colonial political and cultural domination, and this quickly carried over into protest against the corruption, abuse of human rights, and bourgeois elitism of the new African governments. African playwrights have often defined themselves as the voice of the neglected and exploited peasants and industrial workers, and governments have often treated them as subversives. These playwrights, however, have tended to be lone, literary voices. Only rarely, as in the case of Ngugi wa Thiong'o in Kenya, have they left the university or artistic theatre circles to go out to rural communities and develop a political theatre with the people of those communities. It may be, as Michael Etherton points out, that the socio-political conditions for a theatre as the alternative communication of (popular opposition movements do not generally exist in Africa. African nations have been preoccupied with problems of colonial dependency and inter-tribal conflict. The forces of modernization in Africa, however, are rapidly creating a class structure with great social distance and exploitative relations between a privileged, more-Westernised elite and a neglected peasantry, between industrialists linked with transnationals and their underpaid employees. Where these conditions are becoming more evident, as in the case of Kenya, an alternative people's communication is taking shape.

The Mutual Influence of Popular, Literary and People's Theatre

Theatre in Africa is somewhat unusual in that commercial mass entertainment, more elitist literary theatre and grassroots people's theatre have not developed as three separate streams in opposition to each other but as different facets of one cultural movement. All African theatre shares some of the characteristics and objectives of people's theatre described in the first section of this review article. The Nigerian Hubert Ogunde, who became wealthy with his travelling troupe and record industry, began with and has maintained his objectives of expressing and preserving Yoruba cultural identity. More literary playwrights such as Kabwe Kasoma in Zambia have been concerned with 'taking theatre to the people', and Wole Soyinka experimented with street theatre. University drama departments are the home of the literary playwrights, but they also give priority to people's theatre in the rural areas.

The many forms of theatre in Africa all seem to be responding to a series of cultural forces operative in Africa.

1. The cultural memory of traditional African forms of dance, song, poetry, masquerade, etc. associated with religious ritual, the cult of ancestors, and the family and community festivals. This is deeply felt within personalities and is experienced as a symbol of African identity.

2. The spread of Islamic and Christian religions, introducing new belief systems while adapting traditional forms of African ritual, song and music. This is especially noticeable in the splinter African Christian sects.

3. The tradition of plays in the churches and schools, the drama societies, and other forms of popular entertainment continuing from the colonial period.

4. The popular commercial travelling theatres, folk operas and concert parties which mix the traditional with modern international pop entertainment styles and influence the development of popular record, film and TV industries in Africa.

5. The theatre of the African independence movements which has attempted to create a sense of African historical continuity and create new African myths of popular national identity.

6. The movement, supported by the literature and drama departments of the universities, to develop an authentically African artistic theatre which would gain the respect of international (Pan-African and European) theatre critics.

7. The post-independence drive for rapid development and 'nation-building' which enlists all the talents and resources including the playwrights and university drama departments.

8. The increasing awareness of the gap between the high ideals of the independence movements and the realities of dictatorial rulers, political corruption and increasing social inequities. This has brought out a deep vein of satirical comment and social protest latent in the African performative tradition. Especially poignant has been the awareness that the process of socio-cultural development is not encouraging what are thought to be the most authentic African cultural values. The masses of Africans who are the carriers of these values are being left out of the process.

All of these factors mixed together have formed a kind of agenda for the development of theatre in Africa, including an agenda for people's theatre. They also constitute a broader agenda for a debate of what should be cultural policy in African countries. The fact that this agenda contains many contradictions only enlivens the debate. To understand how the movement for people's theatre has developed, it is helpful to look at some of these streams of influence in greater detail.

Continuing Influence of Traditional Ritual and Entertainment

Some of the most characteristic forms of African performance are the use of elaborately carved masks in dance and mime, call-and-response song, graceful use of the body in dance and orchestral musical accompaniment of drums and other instruments. Although dramatic story telling and oral poetry were widespread, a more formal theatre with dialogue was found more often in the courtly entertainment supported by the more developed social organisation of African kingdoms. Performance was associated with religious cults, family and community festivals, ceremonies of religious and occupational societies, and with court social life. With modernisation, the introduction of a new socio-political order and the widespread entry of Africans into Islamic and Christian religions, the external performative expressions may continue, but with a greatly modified meaning as they are grafted onto other ritual, social and performative contexts.

Family name-giving ceremonies or community harvest festivals may maintain traditional songs, musical instruments, masquerade and mime, but younger people may not understand the background of meaning. Also, traditional and modern entertainment styles may be mixed in to fit the tastes of those exposed to international pop music. Virtually all African countries have ministries of culture which attempt to preserve traditional folk media, but, as Etherton notes, this takes on an entirely different meaning as a tourist entertainment, as professional folk performance on the international circuit or as the education of school children regarding their historical past. African literary playwrights often draw on traditional myth and story as a form of critical satire or to explore contemporary cultural dilemmas. Wole Soyinka weaves into his

plays many elements of ritual performance, especially rituals of spirit possession.

People's theatre in Africa, which may borrow approaches of Augusto Boal and be similar to Latin American 'teatro popular' in that it is a form of social analysis is often a quite different kind of performance in that it would use dance and mime, call and response singing with audience participation, the accompaniment of drums or even improvised masks. People's theatre might also introduce the traditional choric dance entrance procession and recession, traditional myth and story telling, or intersperse dialogue with well-known proverbs.

Perhaps the most striking and uniquely African case of the mixture of traditional and modern performance are the commercial travelling folk operas and travelling theatres. Etherton cites the development of the Yoruba travelling theatre, especially the work of Hubert Ogunde, as an example of traditional performance in contemporary society. Another example is the people's theatre in the black townships of South Africa.

Yoruba Travelling Theatre

Hubert Ogunde, sometimes referred to as the 'Father of Nigerian Theatre', was still a member of the Nigerian colonial police force when he produced his first operettas, *The Garden of Eden* and *The Throne of God* for his 'Church of the Lord', a splinter of the Christian Cherubim and Seraphim sect based in Lagos. The popularity of these plays led him to form in 1946 the first professional theatre company of Nigeria, the African Music Research Party, and to produce in Yoruba a series of plays that caught the spirit of the times with satirical attacks on British colonial rule and an exposé of the hopeless conditions of labour in Nigeria. Ogunde wanted to revive the Yoruba music that had been downgraded during colonialism, reawaken interest in the indigenous culture and show that Nigerians could be 'self sufficient' in the arts. He took old Yoruba stories and put them to lively folk opera tunes, introduced dance and mime, mixed indigenous Yoruba musical instruments with instruments from other parts of Nigeria and clothed his actors and actresses in Yoruba country dress. Ogunde himself was playwright, producer, actor, singer, financial manager and, soon, one of the most popular figures in Nigeria.

Ogunde states that he was originally inspired by the traditional Yoruba 'Alarinjo' theatre troupes which had their origins in the ancient Yoruba *egungun* societies and which were performed for the kingly courts or at village festivals. The Alarinjo theatre originated around 1400-1500 and had evolved by the nineteenth century into a more secular entertainment theatre. Their repertoire of plays was based largely on mythological themes or was comic, satirical sketches of Yoruba society. The performances combined symbolic masks and costuming representing stock characters, choreographed dancing, mime, drum accompaniment and singing but with little dialogue or oral story telling. By the early twentieth century the Alarinjo theatre was disappearing, but Hubert Ogunde states that 'as a youth I was playing drums with the masqueraders (Alarinjo groups) in my home town and these *egungun* people gave me the urge inside me to start a company of actors.'⁸ The result was a mixture of his Yoruba background, his Christian outlook and his genius as an entertainer in the mode of a twentieth century pop star.

Ogunde presented his plays to packed houses throughout Nigeria, and in 1947 he organised the Ogunde Record Company for the marketing of his own songs. In 1966 he set up the Ogunde

8 J A Adedeji. 'Alarinjo: The Traditional Yoruba Travelling Theatre' in *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*. Yemi Ogunbiyi (Ed.). Lagos: Nigeria Magazine - Dept of Culture, Federal Ministry of Social Development, Youth, Sports and Culture, 1981. p244.

Dance Company to manage his European and American tours. Later, influenced by the rival popularity of Ghanaian, Bobby Benson with his Concert Party Theatre, Ogunde modified his repertoire of plays to include fashionable new dance steps and rhythms that reflected the more jazzy American pop music. Over the years Ogunde has been in conflict with first the colonial and then Nigerian regimes because of his social and political satire, but this has only contributed to his fame and wealth.

Ogunde inspired (and helped to finance) many other Nigerian travelling theatre groups that also gained great popularity. Some of these have moved on to the film and TV world in Nigeria. By the early 1980s, there were estimated to be more than 100 Yoruba travelling theatre groups.

Ogunde and the other concert party or pop opera troupes are good examples of the 'popular' theatre in contrast to 'people's theatre', and Ogunde's traditionalism has provided a matrix of popular 'media' culture in Nigeria through which has filtered international pop culture. This pop culture can also influence the context of participatory people's theatre. For example, the people's theatre campaigns in Botswana had to face the fact that the young men returning from mining camps in South Africa brought with them a taste for jazzy Gumba-Gumba music. Now the music of the Gumba-Gumba entertainment features in the improvised plays along with the more traditional songs and hand-clapping.

Plays About Colonialism and the Struggle for Independence

When an indigenous African theatre began in the late 1940s and 1950s, whether it was the popular entertainment of an Ogunde or the more serious literary theatre, there was conscious intention of questioning the view that the 'popular' and the 'truly cultural' could only come from European sources. Although the independence movements were overtly political, with the intention of indigenous governments, in the background was a struggle to define a cultural identity that is truly African and somehow a continuity of African cultural history but that is also truly 'modern', worthy of respect in the international community of nations.

One stream of this questioning of European cultural dominance and the quest for African cultural identity in the area of performance occurred more at the level of popular culture. The mission churches had often encouraged, especially in the more urban colonial commercial-administrative centres, drama societies, in part, to cultivate a more refined European cultural appreciation in the schools and among young educated Africans. The churches were also concerned to provide more decent entertainment for the expatriate community and the small African colonial elite. This might include Shakespeare and Molière, or more contemporary European literary theatre, but more popular music and simple amateur plays were also introduced. And inevitably expatriate administrative-commercial representatives brought their music hall entertainment as well.

Although some African elites might join in with the recreations of a 'sophisticated' Europe and go to the races, the dress balls, to cricket and the theatre, this was also resented by many Africans. Often the price of a ticket to a concert or play was beyond their means. In the more urbanised context of early twentieth-century Lagos in Nigeria, the move toward an indigenous Afro-European culture was evident in the schism in the Protestant churches and the formation of Nigerian Christian churches. These churches spearheaded a movement to develop forms of religious music and popular church-related entertainment which was a mixture of Nigerian and European. Hubert Ogunde, who was a member of one of these churches, and began his theatrical career within his church, carried this idea over into the founding of a Nigerian tradition of popular entertainment.

Literary Theatre

A different stream of affirmation of African cultural identity developed among young Africans who had aspirations for an intellectual, literary career as novelists or playwrights. Many of these, such as Wole Soyinka, who studied drama at the University of Leeds and became immersed in the world of London's 'West End' theatre, got their start in European or American universities. Others entered the literary world through the literature and drama departments of the new universities established in the late 1940s and early 1950s and closely modelled after European or American universities.

Many of these young playwrights were much influenced by the post-World War II movements for a more vital, experimental and socially critical theatre. As Etherton notes, the influence of Bertolt Brecht was particularly strong, especially in East Africa, because Brecht's work was a major component in the universities of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania and in the University of Zambia. What Brecht had to say was matched by the new national philosophies of Zambian Humanism and Nyerere's Scientific Socialism in Tanzania. The style of the highly artistic plays written by these young African playwrights came from the contemporary conventions of plot, dialogue and stage design of European and American theatre. The intention revealed in the themes has been to affirm the values of African culture as the foundation for the culture of the new African nations. Many of the plays had historical themes: the values of wisdom, humanity, of valour but also the tragic flaws exemplified in the mythic heroes of great indigenous African kingdoms; the struggle against British or French colonial occupation and defeat, often because of the betrayal by Africans themselves. Although the plays projected a new myth for the emerging African nations, they also explored the complexity of the African personality leaving no simple answers. More often these plays have challenged Africans to think about what kind of modern African culture they want to create.

Playwrights such as Kabwe Kasoma in Zambia have identified strongly with the political movements for independence. Some were also associated with the new Institutes of African Studies or with departments of literature and theatre interested in African cultural history and the rediscovery of authentic African cultural values. These efforts were sometimes supported by the recently created ministries of culture which provided a budget for this. Most of the major African playwrights of today, at some stage of their careers, have explored the cultural meaning of the African independence movements.

What is significant is that the founders of African theatre were not content simply to entertain popular audiences or win the acclaim of the critics of artistic theatre. They saw theatre as directly related to socio-political processes, and in their own way they wanted to be part of this process of social change. In the plays related to themes of liberation from colonial domination, the heroes are almost never directly the historical figures of African independence but the African people with their embodiment of African cultural traditions. These beginnings, as we shall note below, pointed African professional theatre increasingly toward forms of 'people's theatre'.

Theatre of Social Protest

Although Soyinka's, *Dance of the Forest*, was written and performed in 1960 as part of the celebration of Nigerian independence, most of the plays that Etherton classifies as about struggles for independence did not appear until the 1970s, well after most of the new nations came into existence. A note of ambivalent critique of the real world of independent African governments is evident, and the transition of plays to themes of social analysis and social protest is emerging. Kabwe Kasoma's trilogy of *Black Mamba* plays,

extolling the role of President Kaunda in the Zambian independence movement, had its performance and publication banned by the Zambian government when the plays appeared in the early 1970s. In Kenya, the play, *The Trial of Dedan Kimanthi*, by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae Mugo, first performed in 1975, has a clear Marxist orientation and sees the Mau Mau war as not only a war against colonialism and imperialism but also a class war which is by no means over.

Most of the plays of Wole Soyinka, which have influenced theatre not only in Nigeria but throughout Africa, have themes of social protest. *Madmen and Specialists*, written during the Nigerian civil war while he was in prison, is a critique of the inhumanity of modernization in Nigeria. *Opera Wonyosi*, produced in 1977 is about the decadence of Nigeria's oil-rich elites. Although there is much political satire in Nigerian drama and even in popular TV programmes, Soyinka's plays, in Etherton's view, rise above passing mockery of individuals and events to analysis of the roots of inhumanity and injustice in the society itself.

Although much of contemporary African theatre is a form of social critique, and attempts to portray the masses as the real heroes of the plays, there is a great deal of ambivalence among playwrights about whether their plays are a service to poor Africans. They have proved to fellow Africans and to the world that they are capable of producing a literary and dramatic tradition which can be intellectually respected world-wide and that they can develop this out of the roots of their African culture. Nigerian playwrights such as Ola Rotimi and Dexter Lyndersay have built up an art theatre audience among more educated and urbane (or would-be-urbane) circles in southern Nigeria, yet the highly philosophical plays of a Wole Soyinka written largely in English for a pan-African audience are scarcely intelligible to any but a small African elite. Wole Soyinka, now that he is a Nobel-Prizewinner, is lionised on Nigerian TV talk shows, and he has become a symbol of what Nigerians can achieve for people who have never read or seen his plays. Many outstanding African playwrights, aware of the contradictions in their career, have been concerned about wider participation of the people in the African theatre.

Taking Theatre to the People

This movement has originated largely among playwrights, professors and students in university drama departments. Soyinka himself initiated in 1970 a street theatre unit working out of the University of Ife theatre group in western Nigeria. The unit produced loosely scripted, largely improvised satirical sketches and took these out to the street corners of the town of Ife during the Nigerian political campaign. One of the performers would announce the play in town-crier fashion and the sketch, always criticising the corruption of the incoming politicians, would commence. Soyinka's street plays had the drawbacks, however, of being presented to Yoruba-speaking audiences in English and of not involving the spectators and actors in a discussion of the argument of the play, much less bringing ordinary people in as actors.

In Zambia, Kabwe Kasoma has maintained the constant cry that African playwrights must design their plays so that they can be presented in provincial church halls and mining camps. Kasoma's own plays are carefully crafted and scripted, and many would say that he is speaking more to the cadres of government bureaucrats with his biting satire. Nevertheless, his plays are in the local languages and incorporate the local styles of dance and music.

Another Zambian, Stephen Chifunyise, has been more successful in gaining great popularity among rural and urban audiences with plays critical of the dominant culture of Zambia. Chifunyise's plays are short, in simple language, and without literary pretensions. One play, *I Resign*, is about a British owned Zambian company that summarily dismisses Zambian workers to replace them by capital-

intensive machinery. *The District Governor Goes to a Village*, widely and repetitively performed in rural areas of Zambia in local tribal languages by the University of Zambia's Chikwakwa travelling team, is about the Zambian government's hypocrisy regarding its high revolutionary ideals and the corruption in the government bureaucracy.

In Sierra Leone, Yulisa Amadu Maddy, a talented novelist and playwright, is also widely popular and accessible in the Krio language. Maddy's plays often portray the realities of life of the poor in the slums, their fantastic dreams and their survival strategies in the midst of a hopeless situation.

In the late 1960s the drama departments of the universities of Ibadan in Nigeria, Makere in Uganda, Nairobi in Kenya, of Zambia and Malawi all initiated the 'theatre of development', taking travelling student groups out to the rural areas to present plays on the conflict between tradition and modernisation as a form of 'cultural democratisation'. The University of Zambia eventually initiated a new direction in this activity when it began to organise drama workshops so that theatre skills could be transmitted to local people and local groups.⁹

Folk Media for Development and Education

A quite different form of 'taking theatre to the people' is the use of traditional forms of song, dance, puppets and very simple plays by government and private development agencies for health, agriculture and other forms of rural education.

Ross Kidd, in his survey of the use of folk media for rural education in Africa, shows that as far back as the 1950s the agricultural extension systems in Ghana and Uganda trained teams of extension workers to cover the whole country on a planned itinerary to dramatise the financial losses from pests and plant disease and to persuade farmers to join production schemes.¹⁰ Teams would stay in villages for periods of up to a week. The success of the Ghanaian and Ugandan programmes influenced the Ministry of Agriculture in Malawi to set up a permanent agricultural information programme based on thirteen mobile puppetry vans which toured the countryside putting on an estimated 4,000 puppet performances a year to 1.5 million people.

More recently, countries in central and southern Africa (Botswana, Malawi, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe) have trained agricultural extension staffs to use theatre as a communication tool promoting use of fertilizers, insecticides, improved methods of cattle production. In Nigeria the Ahmadu Bello University theatre group worked with agricultural advisory services to improve farmers' cooperatives.

In Botswana, popular theatre approaches were used not only to teach improved methods but to raise consciousness and to develop social analysis skills in order to improve the organisational ability of farmers and see the relation of improved agricultural practices to nation building.

Many African countries use drama, songs, puppetry and story telling in rural health education, for example, to demonstrate the cause-effect relationship of good and bad preventative medicine practices. In the Lardin Gabas Community Health Programme in northeastern Nigeria, drama and story telling are the sole means of instruction, and health workers are given a three-month course in drama and story telling. In Sierra Leone, drama is used as a means of involving the village health committees in the planning of health campaigns in the communities.

In Ghana and Nigeria, where entertainment theatre is especially

9 Ross Kidd. *From People's Theatre for Revolution to Popular Theatre for Reconstruction: Diary of a Zimbabwean Workshop*. The Hague: Centre for the Study of Education in Developing Countries (CESO), 1984. p.5.

10 Ross Kidd. Unpublished manuscript, 1984.

popular, commercial theatre troupes (Concert Party and Yoruba Travelling opera groups) have been commissioned to do short-term projects on family planning.

Tanzania and Botswana have used drama in literacy campaigns. In Kenya and Guinea-Bissau literacy classes were transformed through community theatre into discussion of the relation of literacy to the community's history and to building the political-economic power of the poor.

Kidd's survey does not give an in-depth evaluation of the effectiveness of the use of folk media in rural education, but the continuation and spread of these methods suggest that they are better than traditional teaching approaches. Kidd's trenchant criticism of the limitations of folk media in the hands of government extension agencies in India – because generally there was little local involvement – are certainly applicable in some cases to the African context. Etherton also points out that this kind of use of folk media for modernization, without deeper consideration of the cultural matrix of these folk media in rural communities, may be, in the long run, harmful to the cultural development because it destroys the real cultural meaning of folk media.

People's Theatre in Africa

Although participatory people's theatre may not be as extensive and as deeply rooted as, for example, street theatre in India, different African countries have been the site of some of the most innovative and widely publicised experiments in grassroot theatre. In part, this is due to the fact that Africa has been the area of work of such pioneers in people's theatre as Ross Kidd and Michael Etherton. Now a younger generation of Africans are providing the leadership: Ngugi wa Mirii, an exiled Kenyan now in Zimbabwe, D. J. Malamah-Thomas in Sierra Leone, Oga Abah in Ahmadu Bello University in Nigeria, and many others. Africa is also somewhat unique in that many university drama departments and government adult education offices are training their extension workers in participatory theatre with objectives of conscientisation.

In the years following the national independence movements, 'community theatre', involving a cross-section of the local leadership in the analysis of community problems, is more common than the theatre of political consciousness in opposition social movements.

Theatre for Community Self-Help

In the mid-1970s, the national office of adult education in Botswana invited Ross Kidd and Martin Byram to assist in the rural development programme of the arid, poverty-stricken area of northern Botswana. The programme had the title, 'Laedza Batanani', meaning literally, 'The sun is already up, Come and do your work', and was concerned with training government extension workers in health, agriculture, education, co-operatives and village renewal projects. The people's theatre approach that Kidd and Byram introduced was partly influenced by the Zambian Chikwakwa rural theatre workshops that Michael Etherton had worked with, but more so by the concepts of consciousness raising of Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal.

Etherton emphasises in his book that the Laedza community theatre was different from the university-based travelling theatre teams of the early 1970s in that it did not come to the community with ready-made plays presented by drama students or other professional theatre people.

The team would respond to invitations from communities and would live in the village for some time before actually beginning the process of community discussions. Then, a first step was to have the community collect data on the problems they perceived in the community. These problems formed the basis for working out together the scenarios of dramatic sketches, role-playing, songs and

dances. As much as possible, the extension workers tried to build on the traditional performative skills in the community. The Laedza campaign was, in fact, relatively successful both in developing skills of community analysis and in the action results.

Kidd is quite open, however, about problems encountered: 1) Although the people had considerable competence in song and dance, they did not always find easy the level of acting and other performative skills that were necessary to communicate in a truly entertaining, attractive way. The drummers had to have a sense of rhythm, the dancers needed to be lithe, actors needed more skill in voice projection and a sense of timing, and singers needed tuneful voices. 2) It was not always easy to combine the kind of deeper social and political analysis of community issues that Freire and Boal presuppose with the existing performative skills of the people. 3) In many cases the traditional performative skills in Botswana were declining due to the male labour migration to the South African gold mines and the introduction of modern pop music tastes brought from South African experiences. 4) The programme had to work within the development goals of the Botswana government and within the dominant sphere of influence of apartheid South Africa so resistant to any grassroot popular social organisation.

More recently, in many African countries, centres, institutes and government departments are being established with well-trained people to give workshops on community theatre. In Sierra Leone, D. H. Malamah-Thomas directs a programme in the Institute of Adult Education at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, training education and community development workers in participatory research methods as part of community theatre.¹¹ In Zimbabwe, Ngugi wa Mirii is director of ZIMFEP, an extensive programme of workshops in community theatre for youth movements, women's organisations and industrial labour unions.¹² The ZIMFEP programme aims to implement the socialist philosophy of the Zimbabwean independence movement, and stresses social analysis rather than community development. Similar workshop activity is found in Ghana, Nigeria, Tanzania, Zambia, Swaziland, Malawi, Lesotho and other countries. This growth of people's theatre activities has led to a strong African network in the International Popular Theatre Association.¹³

Theatre for Political Consciousness

The national liberation movements in Tanzania, Mozambique and Zimbabwe developed participatory theatre approaches as part of the training of followers to understand more clearly the political objectives. In the Zimbabwean struggle, fighters and villagers organised all-night *pungwes* in which the combatants and their supporters put on skits, composed songs, read poetry and adapted traditional dance as a way of strengthening morale.¹⁴ The *pungwes* played an important role in revitalising the performance tradition from community festivals which had been undermined during the Rhodesian colonial era. In spite of the rigid curfew imposed by the Ian Smith government, *pungwes* became a common occurrence.

It is evident that the installation of new independent governments does not mean automatically a change in the class structure and concentration of social power that has traditionally lodged in tribal chieftains and has been accentuated by modernisation. Most African playwrights and people working in participatory theatre are aware that with independence the real work of developing an infrastructure of participatory grassroots organisation, that certainly was never fostered in the colonial period, must now begin. Given the instability of new political institutions, the fear of national disintegration into tribal factions, and the weak legitimacy of governments in the national cultures, grassroot organization is treated with great ambivalence even by those who see its necessity. As Etherton notes, one does not often find in Africa cases in which people's theatre has become the alternative communication within

popular movements in a way that is more typical of Latin America and India. Such popular movements are not common in Africa, and, when people's theatre activity does begin in such movements, it is often brutally repressed.

This repression occurred in what is cited by Etherton as one of the most successful experiences of people's theatre in grassroots oppositional organisation in Africa. In Kenya, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, already a recognised playwright based at the University of Nairobi, decided to leave the ivory tower of academia to bring theatre to the people of his own native district. With Ngugi wa Mirii, the people of the village worked through discussions of the impoverishment and repression that they were experiencing. Eventually this led to the presentation of a community play which dramatised the neglect and hostility of public officials and demonstrated how the people could build up the community through their own efforts. In their enthusiasm the people of this community took their play to surrounding communities and districts performing before thousands of rural people in Kenya. The movement was stopped abruptly by Kenyan politicians when Ngugi wa Thiong'o was detained without trial and Ngugi wa Mirii barely escaped into exile.

Theatre for People's Pressure-Group Organisation

Many Africans working in people's theatre are aware of the importance of its role in developing a network of organisation to give the rural and urban poor a stronger collective voice. With the emphasis on the centralised state in nation-building in many African countries, there is relatively little organisational infrastructure of socio-political significance between the individual and the state which could demand accountability in governing institutions. Political parties are generally more interested in patronage and spoils than public social issues.

There are a number of important action research projects in Africa

which are exploring the use of theatre for activating political consciousness and for creating a base for people's organisations. Ngugi wa Mirii, associated with ZIMFEP in Zimbabwe continues to develop strategies of theatre for aggressive people's organisation that he began to work with in Kenya.¹⁵ This works within efforts to create a stronger democratic base in Zimbabwean socialism and has been effective among youth movements, women's organisations and labour unions.

The Drama Division of Ahmadu Bello University in Northern Nigeria, now directed by Oga S. Abah, has been employing methods of Freire and Boal to develop political consciousness and pressure-group organisations in towns and villages of the area.¹⁶

Much more advanced research on the role of theatre and other alternative communication is being done in South Africa by various groups working with the black political movement there.¹⁷ Particularly important is the Contemporary Cultural Studies Unit of the University of Natal in Durban, directed by Keyan Tomaselli.

It is likely, however, that some of the most significant use of theatre and folk media in grassroots political movements goes relatively unnoticed by researchers. For example, since the 1960s, the Kwagh-hir puppet performances have played a very important role in mobilising the Tiv people of North-Central Nigeria to gain greater political and cultural autonomy in the face of the Hausa hegemony in the region.¹⁸ The Kwagh-hir puppet performances were first worked out by a young uneducated villager who saw puppets as a way of combining traditional Tiv story telling and masquerade dance with commentary on the repression that the Tiv people were experiencing. The Kwagh-hir puppet performance swept through the Tiv land with the initiative and organisation of the Tiv villagers. Although this is one of the most striking cases of theatre for political and cultural action actually from the people themselves, it is still to be more thoroughly analysed and studied.

IV: People's Theatre in Latin America

Carlos Ochsenius et al. *Practica teatral y expresion popular en America Latina*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Paulinas, 1988.

Roberto Vega. *El teatro en la comunidad*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Paulinas, 1987.

The book edited by Chilean, Carlos Ochsenius, charts the rapid spread of people's theatre in Latin America, focussing especially on Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile and Peru. In virtually all these countries one finds networks of community theatre groups in larger cities and provincial towns, with federations of these groups and regular theatre festivals at the local or national level. Preparing and staging their own plays in a participatory manner has become customary in an amazing variety of groups: working-class women, industrial trade unions, youth movements, nursery schools, children's friend groups, peasant communities, indigenous 'Indian'

communities, and a host of popular organizations. In the larger countries one frequently finds two or three major centres for theatre training, promotion, action research and publication of theatre newsletters and plays. There are now scores of support centres for *comunicación popular* and popular non-formal education throughout Latin America offering training in the use of audio-visuals or video, publishing little newspapers, preparing programmes for local radio stations or even maintaining a 'people's radio station'. Many of these centres report that currently the training and guidance most in demand is in the area of people's theatre.

11 David H Malamah-Thomas. 'Community Theatre Uses Culture for Development in Sierra Leone'. *Media Development* Vol 35 (1988), No 3, pp25-27.

12 Ngugi wa Mirii. *Community-Based Theatre Skills*. Harare: ZIMFEP, 1986.

13 *Third World Popular Theatre Newsletter*. Vol 1, No 1. This first issue was edited by Dickson Mwansa in Zambia.

14 Ross Kidd. *From People's Theatre for Revolution to Popular Theatre for Reconstruction*. pp9-12.

15 Ngugi wa Mirii. *Community-Based Theatre Skills*. Personal correspondence and discussions with Ngugi wa Mirii.

16 Oga S Abah. 'The Samuru Street Theatre Project, Nigeria'. *Media Development*. Vol 35 (1988), No 3, pp22-24.

17 *Media Development*. Vol 32, No 3. Various articles in the special issue on 'Alternative Communication in South Africa' describe people's theatre activities.

18 Iyorwuese Hagher. 'Kwagh-hir (Nigeria)'. *Theatrework Magazine*, Vol 3, No 1 (Nov-Dec, 1982), p52.

The Popular Performative Tradition in Latin America

Most rural communities and urban *barrios* (neighbourhoods) in Latin America continue a long tradition of patron-saint festivals with processions, carnival-like fairs and forms of folk drama mixed with local civic celebration. Folk religion is an integral part of Latin American culture. In contrast with India, Asia and Africa, however, people's theatre in Latin America has fewer roots in religious cult and mythic history. The popular performative tradition is related more to the light-hearted, joyful (*alegre*) sociableness of family and community *fiesta*, carnival, and amateur community entertainment than to religious ritual. Theatre is an expression of the lyric, poetic sense of life so common in Latin American culture. People's theatre in this context does have a serious element, exploring the conditions of poverty and repression – 'rehearsal for revolution' – to use Boal's term. At its best, however, this touches a rich vein of the unfathomable tragi-comic – almost philosophical – dilemmas of human existence. Plays in Chile, developed and presented by the people of the community, have revealed strikingly artistic dramatic capacity: the dilemmas of the wife whose husband has 'disappeared' as a political prisoner in the regime of Pinochet, the despair and humorous strategies of survival of adolescents whose fathers are unemployed, the plight of a boy who brings income to the family as a homosexual prostitute among the new rich of Chile's 'economic miracle', or the desolate life of the millions in exile. The attractiveness of the medium lies in the discovery of one's poetic-dramatic talents, working together with a group, supporting a movement, entertaining one's neighbours and friends and discovering that a community or group can speak out about the inhuman conditions of life.

Factors in the Development of People's Theatre in Latin America

A first factor has been the rise of popular socio-political movements and the creation of a network of alternative communication controlled from within these movements. In the background is a dichotomous social division, originating in the Spanish colonial period, of elites with a largely European racial and cultural background and a peasant labouring sector of largely Indian racial background and village folk culture. By definition elites have had privileged access to education, a literate tradition and to media because they are the socio-political and cultural decision makers. Peasants have been defined as 'incapable' and 'unworthy' of education for access to the great literate tradition or use of media. Peasants have lived within the folk culture of their village, and any broader communication has been carried out through the patronage of the local landowners or through other intermediaries who speak for them, resolving problems on an individual basis.

As Latin America became linked into a world economy in the twentieth century, traditional elites found new economic opportunities and became modernising elites. They moved to take over the available land resources from semi-subsistence peasants and imposed exploitative labour demands. Peasants and urban migrants were no longer 'children' to be taken care of, but simply economic objects. As the situation of peasant farmers rapidly worsened and they could no longer get help from traditional patrons, peasant farmers began to speak horizontally among themselves and there began the great peasant movements of Latin America, first in Mexico from 1910–1920 and then in other countries. The structure of communication *within* these movements has been the foundation of people's communication in Latin America. For example, the miners' labour unions of Bolivia have set up their own radio stations.

The great wave of industrial and economic development from 1940 to 1960 greatly accentuated the problem, and, with massive immigration to the cities, it also became a problem of the *favelas* of

Brazil and the huge settlements around most Latin American cities. With the rising political unrest and political mobilisation in the 1960s, the modernising elites reacted with brutally repressive military coups, such as that of Brazil in 1964 and Chile in 1973. This eliminated some radical political parties and leaders, but it only drove the 'popular classes' back upon their own grassroots organisations and communication resources.

A second factor has been the reaction to the conception of development as an imitation of North-Atlantic Nations and to the massive foreign cultural influences this implies. This reaction has sparked the movement to develop an authentic, popularly-based, Latin American culture. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Latin America was sufficiently isolated geographically so that it developed its own tradition of local festivals, travelling theatre troupes, popular poetry and literature. Later, in the 1930s, especially in the growing cities, a tradition of popular film genres and radio melodrama emerged. During and following World War II, however, there was an increasing flow of American popular culture spearheaded by aggressive overseas expansion of the United States cultural industries within the Western hemisphere area of political and economic influence. Hollywood films, pop music records, US television programming (much more expensive to produce locally), versions of American popular magazines from *Reader's Digest* to *Cosmopolitan* – all flooded Latin America.

The increasing taste for North American pop culture that seemed to be linked with a modern style of life was viewed with increasing alarm and resentment by Latin American cultural leaders. During the 1920s and the 1930s, in Mexico and Peru, there had already begun a search for Latin American cultural roots in its folk and 'Indian' traditions. This re-surfaced in the 1950s and 1960s, but more strongly linked with the new popular socio-political movements then emerging. The Catholic Church, which had deep roots in the folk culture of Latin America and was also concerned with the secularising influence of modernisation, became an important new ally both of popular movements and the search for indigenous culture. A peculiarly Latin American 'liberation theology' was only one manifestation of this. Castro's political, cultural and economic 'declaration of independence' from the USA was another catalytic symbol of the search for a popular Latin American culture.

With the advent of the repressive military regimes in Brazil, Argentina, Chile and other countries in the 1960s and 1970s, many of the cultural leaders in theatre, literature, journalism and film were forced underground and into much closer contact with the grassroots popular culture. Some of the most creative talent in Latin America began to work with popular movements and drew their inspiration from these movements. People such as Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal developed new methods of popular education, popular arts, and theatre which would articulate the socio-political and cultural aspirations of the popular classes. The 'pedagogy of the oppressed' of Freire and the 'theatre of the oppressed' of Boal were both intended to enable the poor to recognize their cultural values and become participants in the creation of the history and culture of Latin America. People such as Freire and Boal believed that from the immense energy of the popular classes, rooted more deeply in the ecology of the region than the culture of elites, there would come an authentic Latin American culture.

A third factor in the development of people's theatre has been the evolution of many centres for experimental theatre that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s in many Latin American countries. These centres reflected but also contributed to the international experimental theatre movements mentioned in Part I of this article. Enrique Buenaventura and the group associated with the Experimental Theatre of Cali (TEC) in Colombia pioneered collective, participatory writing and staging of plays in the late

1950s.¹⁹ Cubans in the early 1960s introduced worker-farmer theatre, and Cuba sponsored an early Latin American theatre festival.²⁰ In Mexico groups belonging to the Free Centre for Artistic and Theatrical Experimentation (CLETA) developed new forms of political theatre. Venezuelans initiated forms of neighbourhood theatre.²¹ The Theatre Group of Ollantay in Ecuador was among the first in Latin America to introduce street theatre in the early 1970s.²² Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Peru, Paraguay, Bolivia and Central American countries all had similar groups and movements. Most of this was the presentation of political theatre FOR popular audiences. The methods developed by Augusto Boal in the 1970s, however, became by far the most important influence in turning this in the direction of a theatre OF the people.

Augusto Boal

In 1956 Boal began his experimental 'Arena Theatre' in Sao Paolo, a city symbolising Brazil's rapid industrialisation and burgeoning national spirit. The Arena Theatre was a response to the desire among a more sophisticated, educated middle class for an innovative Brazilian theatre which did not simply imitate the European classics slavishly down to the Gielgud-like diction of Shakespearean English. Boal began with Brazilian adaptations of the plays of Brecht, Steinbeck and other more overtly socio-political works. Arena Theatre then moved towards Brazilian playwrights, but Boal's genius was expressed more in new production techniques than in creating an indigenous Brazilian literary theatre himself.

After the 1964 right-wing military coup in Brazil, Boal encountered increasing censorship. After imprisonment and torture in 1971, he began his wandering in exile along with Paulo Freire and thousands of Brazilian, Chilean, Argentinian and other Latin American intellectual leaders. It was during these years, working with popular education programmes in Peru and other countries, that Boal evolved his design for a 'theatre of the oppressed'.

Boal's New Theory of Theatre

The most significant intellectual contribution of Boal in international circles is the series of essays which question the whole of Western theatre theory, especially the Aristotelian tradition of theatre poetics.²³ In Boal's view, Aristotle's catharsis theory is essentially a justification of a vicarious emotional release which fits well with the desire of Athenian and subsequent European socio-political orders to dominate and prevent a potentially volatile expression of social frustration in real political action. The theatre of Brecht, argues Boal, seeks to raise political consciousness, but still tends to delegate political action to playwrights, actors, producers, or other educated elites. Boal's great contribution was a series of very practical methods, developed with popular movements, whereby the poor and less educated not only create truly artistic, entertaining drama but discover the freedom to carry this over into the drama of real action for social change.

Boal wanted to make available to working-class people the kind of drama training that is usually the privilege of a few select students in elitist drama schools.

Overcoming Alienation of the Body

The principal medium of theatrical production, Boal proposes in his book *Theatre of the Oppressed*, is the human body.²⁴ Thus, the first step in giving the poor control over their theatre is helping them to understand the expression of the body and how to control this expression. Factory workers, housewives and peasant farmers ordinarily develop only those bodily muscles that their work demands, and they need special exercises to develop the wide range of muscular routines for creative drama. One of Boal's booklets has more than 200 bodily exercises and games to foster greater

consciousness of how movements of the body are governed by social class and how the body can be liberated for new socio-political roles.²⁵

Becoming Participants in Drama Production

Another series of exercises in theatre, proposed by Boal, represent different degrees or stages of becoming involved in the 'writing' of the scenario of a play. In a first step, *simultaneous dramaturgy*, the actor prepares a sketch with a theme of social analysis, acts it out up to the point that the problem needs a solution and then invites the spectators to suggest how the play should continue. The actor then dramatises what the audience proposes as appropriate endings.

In a second stage, *image theatre*, the participants are each asked to select a personal and a community or social problem and to express the problem not in words but by directing or 'sculpting' the bodily gestures of the actors so that these gestures express a particular opinion or problem.

The third and most widely used method is *forum theatre*. The group is asked to tell a story which expresses the human drama of the conditions of the poor. Then a 10-15 minute skit based on the story is improvised, rehearsed and presented. After the presentation, the audience discusses whether the play really expresses the problem and proposes a solution. Members of the audience can then enter into the play as actors and lead the rest of the actors in the direction that seems most accurate to the person making the proposal.

Boal experimented with a number of other approaches to theatre which stress the incompleteness of action in the play and which conceive of drama as a rehearsal for seeking solutions to problems in real life. The form which moves theatre closest to social action is *invisible theatre*. In the factory or other context of unjust treatment, the 'actors' plan a 'play' in which employees actually carry out a work stoppage or other form of protest in a way that dramatises the inhuman or unjust conditions.

Types of People's Theatre in Latin America

Ochsenuis describes four major styles of grassroots theatre that have developed in different Latin American countries:

- 1 Non-commercial groups of theatre students, amateur players or professional actors who tour urban neighbourhoods or rural areas with relatively improvised street theatre that involves local people and introduces an interest in theatre. An example is the Yuyachkani group in Peru which goes out to a rural town, performs humorous, satirical sketches in the street and gradually draws the children and other spectators into a celebration in the central plaza.
- 2 Groups of amateurs, usually monitored by local leaders with some experience in theatre, which create and perform theatre for the local community. For example, a group in Argentina created a play portraying the legendary tragi-comic gaucho hero, Juan Moreira, as a symbol of the Argentinian search for freedom and democracy in the mid-1980s. The group eventually gave more than 500 presentations of the play around Argentina.
- 3 Groups which are part of an organisation which wants to explore a current cultural or political issue among its members and then dramatises this problem to a larger public. In 1982-1983, the Committee for the Return of exiles in Chile wrote a play about the life of the more than one million Chileans in exile and presented this twenty-three times to audiences totalling more than 2,500. This play is credited with influencing public opinion and bringing about a more lenient government policy regarding the return of exiles.
- 4 Theatre for education, community animation and organisation of the poor. In Chile, the programme of education for women

in poorer neighbourhoods and for women employed as domestics developed plays about the problem of male domination and the exploitation of domestic servants.

Responding to Historical Contexts

Ochsenius emphasises that people's theatre, like all good theatre, is at its best when it captures the drama, the socio-political problematic and the range of human emotions in a particular historical moment. The description of the development of people's theatre in Argentina, Uruguay, Peru and other countries shows how people's theatre has been an effective 'ritual of freedom' in the transitions out of dictatorships and into forms of greater democracy during the 1980s. Each socio-political period over the past fifteen years has called for a different kind of people's theatre, different methods of training and organisation in theatre groups and different forms of action research. Ochsenius outlines four different stages in the evolution of people's theatre in Chile since the early 1970s.

Before Pinochet's 1973 Coup

Like most Latin American countries, Chile has a long tradition of student performance in secondary schools and the university, neighbourhood amateur theatre and an amateur theatre that frequently moves on to the professional stage. This blossomed in Chile especially during the 1940s and 1950s, but it was largely an imitation of professional theatre with the presentation of classical and Chilean playwrights. In the 1960s there was a move toward much more political theatre, largely among middle-class people and university students with an occasional presentation to industrial workers.

Theatre in the Dictatorship: 1974-1979

The coup swept away all university and semi-official governmental support for amateur theatre. In the years right after the coup of Pinochet in 1973, there was little organised theatre except for an occasional sketch along with reading of poetry and musical entertainment at public protest meetings, for example, to collect funds for human rights committees.

By the mid-1970s, however, several types of theatre groups began to appear. Informal groups of students revived the tradition of amateur theatre presenting adaptations of classical Chilean plays for neighbourhood or parish groups. This revived interest in theatre and encouraged festivals of artistic theatre groups, but this type of theatre did not attempt to reflect upon the current socio-political situation.

With some loosening of political security in the middle and late 1970s, a second type of theatre, a radical protest against violation of human rights, was attempted by more intellectual, artistically inclined political groups. Although collectively produced, these short plays always presented the same theme of an anguished cry against the dictatorship to the same small group of people with relatively little dramatic imagination.

In the late 1970s a third type of grassroots theatre began to emerge which provided a model for theatre BY the people with great dramatic creativity. After the coup, in the atmosphere of a repressive police state, high unemployment and a cutback in government social services, private agencies such as the Church's Vicariate for Solidarity or small independent centres for social work and popular education began significant work to rebuild morale with an infrastructure of groups among the unemployed, the youth, housewives (who often became breadwinners) and community action councils. These agencies, centres and movements began to introduce new approaches to popular education and artistic cultural expression then circulating in Latin America. Freirian concepts of participatory education and communication were a priority, with the principle that the dictatorship must be confronted by the

solidarity of the poor and an indigenous popular cultural expression.

For example, a play was developed among working women which demonstrated that the rather ordinary heroism of ordinary people could be dramatised as a 'theatre of hope' in a situation that appeared hopeless. The women, to make a little money, met to make little tapestries called *arpillas* out of cast-off clothing. The play, *La Arpillera*, produced for the celebration of folk Catholicism's 'Month of Mary' and dealing with the humorous efforts of simple people to work together, became so popular that a version of it was eventually taken on the professional stage. More important, it demonstrated that it was possible to dramatised the simple, immediate problems of the family, the married couple, the school, work, the sports club and the neighbourhood in a way that was not so directly ideological but indirectly touched upon the real impact of the dictatorship in the everyday lives of the poor. This was a theatre that was simple and entertaining to produce collectively and opened up an immense variety of dramatic human situations. Plays such as *La Arpillera* provided something of a model for the great expansion of people's theatre in Chile in the 1980s.

1980-83: A Theatre Movement

In these years a great variety of independent centres for popular education began to encourage theatre as a dramatic form of conscientisation, community entertainment and neighbourhood organisation following the model described above. It was at this point that some centres of popular art, such as CENECA in Santiago, began to introduce the ideas of Augusto Boal and others experimenting with new forms of people's theatre in Latin America. Local leaders with a special interest in theatre and perhaps some experience in amateur theatre emerged as 'monitors' bringing together young people, community action groups, women's groups, etc. for people's theatre activities. Participation in a theatre group might last only a year or two, but the local 'monitors' might continue on for years, giving consistency to the movement and rooting theatre in the local community. With the increased interest in grassroots theatre, many of the centres for support of popular education and popular communication, often financed by international church-related or private foundations, began to open departments of training, promotion and action research for people's theatre. Institutions such as CENECA, organised for action research on popular arts and staffed by talented people forced out of the universities, began a series of publications on people's theatre which have been quite widely circulated in Chile and throughout Latin America. Out of all of this, there gradually evolved networks of people's theatre groups in various cities and provinces with their annual festivals and congresses.

- 19 Enrique Buenaventura y El Teatro Experimental de Cali' in *Popular Theater for Social Change in Latin America*. Gerardo Luzuriaga (Ed.) Los Angeles: Univ of California in Los Angeles Latin American Center Publications, 1978. pp42-68.
- 20 Eugene R Skinner. 'Education and Theater in Post-Revolutionary Cuba', in *Popular Theater for Social Change in Latin America*. pp77-84
- 21 José Monlon. 'Vision Rapida del Teatro en Puerto Rico y Mexico', in *Popular Theater for Social Change in Latin America*. pp77-84
- 22 Grupo de Teatro Ollantay. 'Cuanto nos Cuesta el Petroleo', in *Popular Theater for Social Change in Latin America*, pp325-337.
- 23 Augusto Boal. 'Aristotle's Coercive System of Tragedy' in *Theatre of the Oppressed*. New York: Urizen Books and London: Pluto Press, 1979. (Trans from *Teatro de Oprimido* by Charles A & Maria-Odilia Leal McBride, 1974).
- 24 Augusto Boal. 'Poetics of the Oppressed' in *Theatre of the Oppressed*. pp119-156.
- 25 Augusto Boal. *200 ejercicios y juegos para el actor y para el no actor con ganas de decir algo a través del teatro*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Crisis, 1975.

Typically, neighbourhood groups chose themes that were much closer to immediate life situations: inhuman conditions in local factories, the moral corruption of employers, problems of drug addiction and juvenile prostitution – always entering into the drama of human dilemmas that these problems pose. Women's groups dramatised problems of *machismo* and male domination before male audiences. Many plays were of a more humorous, satirical comment on the 'mystical trusts' and the 'Chicago Boys' behind Chile's so-called 'economic miracle'. Other plays gave a critique of the consumerist culture which proposed terms of 'redemption by advertising jingles', and parodied the endless American TV programmes then pouring into Chile. There was also emphasis on children's play with puppets and clowns. Some plays were recorded and broadcast over the people's radio stations. Many of the more entertaining plays were presented many times over, and usually the play was followed by public forum discussions among spectators.

This period of people's theatre in Chile, along with other forms of people's communication, contributed to a growing movement of cultural solidarity and cultural confidence among the popular classes. By 1983 this new solidarity and confidence was a factor in the strong public pressure for return to Chilean traditions of democracy.

1984–1987: Moves Toward Democracy

In this more hopeful period, theatre came out of closed groups into

larger halls and into the open air with a general atmosphere of celebration. Typical of this period has been the 'Chingana' – a public gathering with music, singing, dance, dramatic sketches, reading of locally-authored poetry, story telling, jokes and exhibitions of plastic arts. Everybody has an opportunity to participate. Every celebration – community and parish festivals, anniversaries of the founding of a labour union, festivals of working women's organisations, the annual day of the children, etc. – is an occasion for a Chingana-like fair.

During the same period in Uruguay and Argentina, also experiencing a move back to democracy, similar festivals of performance appeared in the form of the *murga*. The *Chingana* and the *murga* are one of the fruits of a longer process of people's theatre in small groups, starting timidly and sometimes clumsily, but increasingly gaining confidence and returning to the people a tradition of popular performance and indigenous cultural expression.

Over the years, much of this theatre has had an overt socio-political theme, but the broader political significance is that it has brought a social integration to the popular classes and given them a sense of being creators of their culture. The active participation in the performative experience has gradually prepared ordinary people to be actors in a wide range of national, political, social and cultural movements. This has been the general result of theatre and other forms of people's communication not only in Chile but in many other Latin American countries.

PERSPECTIVES

What is the Cultural Process of People's Theatre?

The research and publications on people's theatre in different parts of the world show that this is very much an international movement with a great deal of cross-fertilisation of ideas over national and cultural boundaries. People's theatre is generally part of a broader people's communication movement which seeks to give to the poor and those subjected to the political and cultural domination of elites greater control over the definition of their cultural identity. The focus here has been Africa, Asia, India and Latin America although much could be reported about people's theatre in other parts of the world. In Korea, for example, there is a surge of interest in amateur, people's theatre in the wake of the democratic opening in that country. People's theatre seems especially relevant in many parts of Asia, India and Latin America where the dichotomous, hierarchical social structure of advanced agrarian societies has left a legacy of cultural control by a caste-like elite of socio-political decision makers.

In agrarian societies, the cultural autonomy and identity of folk traditions in villages are protected by geographical isolation, the social contract of benevolent patronage and the strategies that villagers have for evading or resisting interventions. Agrarian societies also have a long history of peasant uprisings and cultural movements among lower-caste groups. As these agrarian societies are linked into a world political economy, the mobilisation associated with industrialisation, the drive for rapid economic development, and national political integration, deeply accentuated the socio-political and cultural conflicts. The defences of a folk tradition are swept away and the exercise of power becomes more direct. People's theatre enters as part of the efforts of lower-status

groups to discover new strategies of sustaining cultural self-reliance.

The ethos of people's theatre movements rarely seeks to recover a nostalgic folk past, but there is a search for a space of freedom in which the less powerful can define a new cultural identity in continuity with the past. Modernisation and national integration are taken for granted, and, in this new context, people's theatre is one of the ways that the urbanising popular classes become active participants in the national socio-political and cultural development.

The Significance of Performative Communication

Theatre is a relatively powerful cultural expression because it so actively involves a wide range of the physical, emotional and imaginative capacities of the human personality. Performance also brings together many facets of cultural creativity: socio-political and religious ritual, myth and story telling, dance, music, traditions of satirical mimicry, symbolic role playing and the festive celebration of community. The embodiment in theatre of the liminal experience – that space in the rhythm of human life for more free, ecstatic, anti-structure and utopian exploration of cultural possibilities – make theatre at times an unpredictable cultural opening. It is no wonder that Plato wanted to curb the influence of the poets in his ideal society, and Aristotle had his reasons for wanting to assign theatre a largely cathartic role.

Quite rightly, the people who are involved with people's theatre and find themselves intervening in some way in the cultural process of popular movements are often the first to question what they are doing.

Whose Theatre?

The key idea in people's theatre is that it be theatre BY people who are not ordinarily part of the literate, high culture tradition. In practice, however, most experiences of people's theatre have been initiated by those from the literate tradition or by those promoting greater integration of the folk tradition into a process of national development. There is a folk and more urban popular tradition of performance in religious ritual, community festival and in the drama of spontaneous popular public protest, but the linking of people's theatre with this tradition is more often the exception. At least, current research does not make very clear how people's theatre emerges out of the cultural continuities of lower-status communities.

Clearly, the middle-class educators, development officers and political activists who are introducing people's theatre have an agenda of their own. It is a pity that there is so little systematic reflection on this agenda because it would tell us much about the way people's theatre develops and what kind of a cultural process it is.

In part this deficiency in the analysis and description of people's theatre may be due to the lingering influence of a linear, source-oriented concept of communication, and the emphasis on techniques of modernising intervention whether that intervention aims to introduce fertilizers or raise political consciousness. Communication science has yet to use our extensive understanding of social movements and how people's communication emerges within popular social movements. This might help to clarify the origins of people's communication and the role of more literate allies in this process.

The numerous studies of popular movements show that these, at some point, usually involve allies from an urban, more technically trained background. Modernisation which implies linkages with political-economic empires brings a reaction not only among peasants but among a broad range of actors – the keepers of a literate cultural tradition who see modernisation as the destruction of the indigenous culture, religious leaders, the lower levels of development bureaucracies frustrated with the continuing personalistic domination of traditional elites, etc. All of these actors tend to form a broad front seeking a new national cultural identity which is modern, breaks down social class barriers and is in continuity with indigenous cultural history. As the review of the histories of people's theatre movements in India, Africa and Latin America indicates, the cultural policy of these broad social coalitions for national cultural autonomy generally take some form of the folk or urban popular tradition as the truly indigenous and the normative culture. Less clear, however, is how the popular culture in fact does become normative in efforts such as people's theatre.

How do 'The People' Retain Control?

Under certain socio-political conditions, there are spontaneous movements with local leadership among peasant groups trying to recover land or, more often now, among people in urban settlements seeking better services. These movements already have their political and cultural agenda defined, although this may not be couched in terms of society-wide change. A careful local leadership will require that outside allies with some expertise in communication and media submit to their leadership as a condition for access and coalition. Often, however, there is no strong base movement or socio-political organisation and the 'agenda' is at best a vague sense of desperation. Promoters of people's theatre entering from the outside may not have enough familiarity with the popular culture or may be too preoccupied with an idealistic political agenda to recognise the existing performative traditions in resistive protest, community festivals with their elements of political satire or religious ritual with an implicit liberation theology. Etherton notes that when young Nigerian university students observed the quaint

festival performances which Hausa villagers had invented, the first reaction of these theatre students was that it had little real performative or political meaning even though there was a good deal of criticism of public authorities in it. Even participatory forms of defining themes of people's theatre may pose questions which are remote from existing performative traditions or may presuppose a level of political vision that even consciousness-raising education cannot develop very rapidly. A skillful promoter may stimulate drama with considerable rhetoric of protest while he or she is in the community, but then the people return to their more accustomed rituals of cultural definition. The process of people's theatre in Chile which dramatised ordinary dilemmas close to the real-life drama and in contexts of rather ordinary community entertainment – but with relatively little overt ideological content – did, in fact, have long-term implications for socio-political and cultural solidarity of the popular classes. From the evidence, it would seem that people's theatre is becoming an accepted, continuing part of the life of the local community.

Accompanying the People

Some people's theatre activities in India have been sharply criticised because they are supported by outside, international funding. They make one-night stops in rural areas presenting political theatre to the people rather than going out to live with the people. One response to this problem is to establish centres for rural education in outlying districts and patiently follow the rhythm of socio-political development over a relatively long period of time. A deep familiarity with the culture and problems develops and the technical support is present at the moment when the people suddenly find a need. It is possible to gradually develop local leaders of people's theatre who live within the community. Generally, however, research and publication on people's theatre, even that of Boal, encourages more quick, 'how-to' methods based on relatively short-term experiences. Unfortunately, this encourages the view that with a few quick workshops, theatre is likely to become an integral part of the life of the people.

The analytic approach in the book of Ochsensus which describes the 'natural history' of people's theatre movements in Uruguay, Argentina, Chile and Peru in different socio-political moments over fifteen to twenty years is more likely to encourage a response to the socio-cultural rhythm of the people. This perspective recognises that the indigenous performative tradition may take many different forms and respond to socio-political opportunities in very unpredictable ways. Ochsensus himself also emphasises that theatre is at its best when it is entertaining and fits into ordinary forms of community entertainment.

What Kind of People's Culture is Emerging?

Ochsensus' book analysing the development of theatre in different countries of Latin America takes theatre as a kind of rich text reflecting broader socio-cultural and political changes in those countries. Yet, even in this case, the focus is on the 'text', not the actual changes in the culture. We still have very little understanding of the cultural dialectic of theatre in communities. We need to understand the cultural process which leads up to a relatively spontaneous desire to celebrate, criticise and reflect within the framing experience of theatre and then how this performance feeds back into and influences the subsequent cultural history of a community. We know that people's theatre can be a powerful cultural catalyst, but we do not understand it well as a cultural process. Consequently, people's theatre is expanding with a great deal of enthusiasm, but often those who intend to intervene and strengthen popular cultural identity are fumbling in the dark.

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CARIBBEAN (English-Speaking)

BARBADOS: **Theatre Information Exchange**, c.o. Ms M Crowcroft, Rockley New Rd, Christchurch.

GUYANA: **Francis Farrier**, Director of Drama, National History and Arts Council, Min of Information and Culture, Georgetown.

JAMAICA: **Sistren Theatre Collective**, 50 Kensington Crescent, Kingston 5. **Graduate Theatre Company**, Cultural Training Centre, 1 Arthur Wint Drive, Kingston 5.

LATIN AMERICA

A much more complete list of centres, groups and specialists in people's theatre in Latin America is provided in the book of Carlos Ochsenius, *Práctica teatral y expresión popular en América Latina*, Buenos Aires: Ediciones Paulinas, 1988.

ARGENTINA: **Grupo Diablolmundo**, Hipolito Irigoyen 97799, (1832) Provincia de Buenos Aires.

Red de Teatro Popular y Animación de Base. Contact: **Enrique Ducal**, Vera 260 9 piso dpto 18, 1414 Buenos Aires.

Roberto Vega, Boedo 1070 4 piso, 1239 Buenos Aires.

BOLIVIA: **Centro Popular de Arte y Cultura**, Casilla 5936, La Paz.

BRAZIL: **CENACEN**. Contact: **Tania Pacheco**, Av Rio Branco No 179, Centro, Rio de Janeiro, RJ.

CHILE: **CENECA**. Contact: **Carlos Ochsenius**, Santa Beatriz 106, Santiago. Centro Cultural Villa Alerce. Contact: **Francisco Bravo**, Regimiento 1050, Puerto Montt.

Domingo Colicoy, Grupo 'ad-Mapu', Casilla 387, Temuco.

Confederación Nacional de Teatro Aficionado (CONFENATA). Contact: **Miria Aparecida Vierir**, Presidente, Avenida Presidente Wilson 400.32, Sao Vicente, SP, Cep 11.300.

FREDER. Contact: **Herminia Alvarez**, Casilla 5-0, Osorno.

IMPRODE. Contact: **Eloy Silva**, Carlos Cid, Hernán Pino, tucapel 339, Concepcion.

COLOMBIA: **CEPALC**, Apartado Aéreo 28462, Bogota.

CINEP. (Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular), Carrera 5, No 33A, Bogota.

Dimension Educativa: Red de Teatro Popular (Boletín 'Telón'), Calle 41 No 13-41, Bogota.

CUBA: **Roberto Blanco**, 3ra, 526 entre 6 y 8 Vedado, La Habana.

ECUADOR: **Maria Escudero**, Grupo 'Malhierba', Apartado Aereo 671, Quito.

HONDURAS: **Rafael Murillo Selva**, Calle 8a No 206, Barrio Abajo, Tegucigalpa.

MEXICO: **IMDEC**: (Instituto Mexicano par el Desarrollo Comunitario), Pino 2237, Colonia del Fresno, Guadalajara, Jalisco CC 44900.

NICARAGUA: **Daniel Prego**, Casa Fernando Gordillo, Parque El Carmen, Managua.

PANAMA: **Red de Teatro Popular** (Centroamérica), Apartado 3-114, Zona 3, Panama.

PARAGUAY: **Rudi Torga**, **Elenco Teatro Estudio Libre del Programa de Cultura y Arte de Mision de Amistad**. General Santos 1310, Casilla de Correo 255, Asuncion.

CECTEC (Centro de Educación, Capacitación y Tecnología Educativa), Casilla 1730, Asunción.

PERU: **Grupo Cultural 'Yuyachkani'**, San Martín 274, Magdalena del Mar, Lima 1. (Miguel Rubio, who prepared the report for the book of Carlos Ochsenius is a member of the 'Grupo Yuyachkani', and could provide names and addresses of some 30-50 centres and groups.)

URUGUAY: **Maricruz Diaz**, Montevideo (no street address available).

VENEZUELA: **CESAP** (Centro al Servicio de la Acción Popular), San José del Ávila (al lado de la Abadía), Caracas 1010-A.n y Tecnología Educativa), Casilla 1730, Asunción.

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