

Manuscript version: Author's Accepted Manuscript

The version presented in WRAP is the author's accepted manuscript and may differ from the published version or Version of Record.

Persistent WRAP URL:

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/147331>

How to cite:

Please refer to published version for the most recent bibliographic citation information. If a published version is known of, the repository item page linked to above, will contain details on accessing it.

Copyright and reuse:

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions.

Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Publisher's statement:

Please refer to the repository item page, publisher's statement section, for further information.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: wrap@warwick.ac.uk.

Reflecting on the challenges of applied theatre in Kenya

Maxwel Okuto and Bobby Smith

Abstract

In this article the authors draw on their own experience and research in applied theatre in Kenya in order to reflect on challenges currently facing practitioners working in the country. In order to outline the range of challenges faced by practitioners, issues related to the wider landscapes of government and politics in Kenya are explored, alongside challenges inherent in the international development sector's use of applied theatre and Theatre for Development in Kenya, and the struggle that many theatre practitioners face in terms of the legitimacy of theatre in Kenyan society.

Notes on contributors

Maxwel Okuto

Maxwel Okuto is the executive director of Amani People's Theatre in Nairobi, Kenya, which uses a participatory, multi-arts approach to conflict transformation and peacebuilding. His background is in social sciences, and he has many years of experience in Kenya and internationally. He has been involved in the design and training of Theatre for Development processes and peacebuilding and conflict resolution projects with agencies and institutions of higher learning in Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria The Netherlands, Thailand, Canada and recently United kingdom. www.aptkenya.org

Bobby Smith (corresponding author)

Bobby is an applied theatre practitioner and is currently researching for a PhD exploring theatre and development at the University of Manchester (UK). He has worked with young people, refugees and in the criminal justice system in the UK and internationally, including in Malawi, Uganda, Kenya and Hong Kong. He has also worked as a trainer for a number of charities, supporting staff and volunteers to use drama and arts-based approaches in their

work. His research interests include: arts and culture as development; international partnerships in theatre and development; practitioners' perspectives on the challenges and possibilities of applied theatre. bobby.peter.smith@gmail.com

Introduction

This short article reflects on themes discussed during the early stages of collaboration between the authors. Maxwell Okuto is the director of Amani People's Theatre (APT) - a Kenyan Non Governmental Organisation (NGO) using Theatre for Development/Applied Theatre. Bobby Smith is a British applied theatre practitioner and researcher. We began writing to each in early 2015 other as Bobby was interested in finding out more about APT. As our conversations developed ideas for collaboration began to emerge. In particular, we had both experienced working within criminal justice settings and were interested in building on this further. We started to seek out funding to enable us to work together and were successful in securing a small grant from the British Council and Arts Council England, which has enabled Maxwell to travel to the UK and Bobby to Kenya in 2016. We hope to continue this process of mutual exchange and learning in the future. Our focus on continuing to work collaboratively together between both the UK and Kenya led us to share perspectives on the challenges faced by applied theatre practitioners. Many of these challenges are faced by practitioners regardless of where they work, but in this article we pay particular attention to the Kenyan context given that there is relatively little writing reflecting the experiences of practitioners on the ground in Kenya. We suggest that the challenges of applied theatre in Kenya are related to government, the international development sector, and tensions around the legitimacy of theatre in Kenyan society. Throughout the article we draw on Maxwell's extensive practical experience in Kenya and his perspective as the director of APT since 2013, as well as Bobby's experiences of working in Kenya and undertaking wider research on Theatre for Development (TfD).

Amani People's Theatre in context

Unexpectedly Maxwell let out a loud wail, sending a jolt through the group. An old debt needs to be settled. What begins as a hostile silence between two communities soon erupts into violence. Stones are thrown along with insults. As people take cover a small child

emerges from the crowd and stands between the fighting. The violence stops abruptly, and the two communities stand facing each other with a shared sense of shame.

We built the story collectively, taking Maxwell's initial provocation and stepping into the circle to improvise what happens next. At the end of the exercise we reflect on the nature of the conflict, and on whether we feel it was resolved or not. It is a powerful starting point to explore themes of conflict further through drama.

Figure 1. Theatre games during an expressive arts in therapy training in the Mathare informal settlement, delivered by Amani People's Theatre in partnership with the Japan Centre for Conflict Transformation, 2015. Photo: Amani People's Theatre.

APT draws on the popularity and rich history of storytelling and oral literature in Africa to inform its approach to working with communities. Alongside improvised, collective stories that can help to unpack the nature of conflict through reflection and metaphor - like the exercise described above, which Maxwell ran in July 2016 at a workshop at the British Council in London - APT also draws on Theatre of the Oppressed methodologies. The process integrates education, entertainment and research in exploring conflict and searching for non-violent responses to such conflicts. APT was founded in 1994 by young African artiste-peace builders. The organisation has worked mainly in grassroots community contexts in rural and urban Kenya, but has also conducted workshops and performances across East Africa, Sudan, Europe and North America. APT's five founding principles continue to guide their work:

- Respect and promotion of indigenous African knowledge on the arts, conflict and peace;
- Upholding the sanctity of human life;
- Open to new ideas and willingness to share;
- Non-partisan approach to work;
- Belief in the uniqueness, rights and potential of each person in society.

Despite challenges, the practice of applied theatre has become an integral strategy for promoting social change in Kenya. APT understands its work - and the role of TfD/applied theatre - as being explicitly related to the promotion of development in specific communities.

Maxwel identifies Nogueira's (2002) analysis of TfD being primarily concerned with moving towards dialogical processes that empower communities to solve their own problems as chiming with APT's understanding of working through theatre. In terms of APT's work, this focus on development – and an understanding that TfD is about empowerment – is harnessed to encourage individuals and communities to critically analyse the root causes of conflict and to find non-violent ways of responding to conflict and wider social injustices.

TfD and applied modes of performance in Kenya have a rich heritage, with examples including the work of the Kamĩrĩthũ Community Education and Cultural Centre (KCECC), which was active from 1975 to 1982 and led by playwright Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and educator Ngũgĩ wa Mĩrĩĩ (Bjorkman 1989). The KCECC has become a key reference for those interested in applied theatre internationally. Ngũgĩ and Ngũgĩ sought to draw on Freirean approaches to education and social change, with plays such as *I Will Marry When I Want* - developed by Ngũgĩ and Ngũgĩ with members of the Kamĩrĩthũ community and first performed at the KCECC in 1977 - exploring continuing imperialism in post-colonial Kenya. Ndanyi (2016) states that from 1976 President Jomo Kenyatta actively sought to crackdown on theatre performances like those at the KCECC because of their radical potential. When Daniel Arap Moi became president in 1978 this repression continued - the KCECC was demolished in 1982, and Ngũgĩ and Ngũgĩ were jailed and later exiled for their involvement in the programme (Ngũgĩ 1986). British colonialists actively repressed non-European performance in Kenya (Kerr 1995) and this restrictive approach to theatre has spilled over into the Kenyan government. A report on African theatre undertaken by Article 19 (2003) - an organisation campaigning for freedom of expression - argues that following independence government legislation in Kenya meant that all plays were subject to censorship, and that in many instances this was used to repress artistic expression thought to challenge government. The period following the demolition of the KCECC in 1982 up until the early 1990s is marked out as particularly repressive (Article 19 2003). However, one area where these kinds of censorship could be positively navigated is through the annual school drama festivals. Whilst these began during the colonial era as a way of further spreading British cultural values, Otieno (2011) argues that from the 1970s Kenyan forms of performance began to be showcased. The festivals also became a site for discussing and reflecting on societal issues and ignited the interests and talents of many Kenyan applied theatre practitioners - including the founder members of APT.

In 1991 reforms to promote democracy in Kenya meant that previously banned plays could be performed, and that indigenous performances were less restricted. The creation of groups that aimed to put pressure on government for social change, such as the Kenya Human Rights Commission and Citizens' Coalition for Constitutional Change – founded in 1991 and 1994 respectively – meant theatre began to serve as a tool for awareness raising and advocacy. At present Maxwell is aware of at least 18 NGOs operating from Nairobi that use TfD to promote social change, although informal operations spring up in unpredictable ways, making it difficult to provide accurate figures. Several groups, such as Wasanii Sanaa Youth Organisation for example, exist in the Kibera slum area and use theatre not only to promote social development, but also to provide employment and training opportunities to young people. During the run up to Kenya's new constitution being implemented in 2010 Moving Framez Africa undertook 'Silent No More' – a legislative theatre project in the Kibera area of Nairobi. The project focussed on exploring young people's perspectives on what should be included in the Kenyan constitution.

Whilst a brief overview of the historical context of applied theatre in Kenya shows that the environment has become much more open to practitioners working in the field, Maxwell's experiences of working in Kenya and Bobby's conversations with individuals involved in TfD in the country show that numerous challenges remain. Some of these challenges are no doubt shared by those who work in socially engaged drama no matter where in the world they are located.

Figure 2. An audience member intervenes in a forum theatre performance by community animators trained by APT in the Majengo slum, Nairobi December 2016. The piece explores the story of a young man who has been radicalised by Al Shabaab. Photo: Bobby Smith.

Challenges from government

We have already touched upon some of the challenges to applied theatre and TfD that come from government. Despite democratic reforms, there is ongoing evidence of the government intervening in theatre projects. In 2013 the government banned the Butere Girls High School from performing *Shackles of Doom* – a play exploring power and inequality among different ethnic groups – at a drama festival as they were worried it may endanger national security, although the ban was eventually lifted following a petition by the activist Okiya Om-

tatah (Article 19, 2013). Many of the practitioners interviewed in Bobby's research in Kenya expressed frustration that the Kenyan government very rarely funded applied theatre or TfD work, or any arts work at all. Several interviewees positioned this lack of investment against a wider failure of the government to invest in culture. The new constitution - written in 2010 - states that the government: 'recognises culture as the foundation of the nation and as the cumulative civilization of the Kenyan people and nation' and promises to 'promote all forms of national and cultural expression through literature, the arts, traditional celebrations, science, communication, information, mass media, publications, libraries and other cultural heritage' (KLRC 2016).

However, very few respondents felt the government was actually doing anything to implement these commitments. Despite being active since the early 1990s APT has not received government support, and has had to rely on international donors and partners. Consequently, it is extremely difficult for theatre artists in Kenya to find funds that will enable them to make a living from the arts. On a wider level, access to the newly refurbished National Theatre in Nairobi - funded through the Department of Culture - requires payment from theatre makers per night, and many argued that such fees are prohibitively expensive.

Challenges from the development sector

Kenyan TfD practitioner Lenin Ogolla has criticized the way in which the development sector in Kenya has sought to use theatre as a tool which is simply 'discarded after the damage is repaired' (Ogolla 1997, 20). His argument that NGOs take an overly instrumental, compartmentalized approach to uses of theatre chimes with what many practitioners working in Kenya have expressed. Despite a dissatisfaction with the way in which TfD projects are being run, a lack of government support for artists results in many theatre practitioners being compelled to accept or seek out the funding offered by development organisations in order to supplement their income. Whilst understandable, the relationship between artists and development funding brings with it its own set of challenges. Hugely concerning is the view shared among many of the practitioners that Bobby has spoken to in Kenya, and that Maxwell's experience confirms, that many so-called applied theatre practitioners are opportunistic, taking advantage of funding opportunities provided by development agencies, and not committed to the work they are undertaking. An additional concern arises from Odhiambo's (2006) identification that the majority of Kenyan practitioners lack training in applied

theatre. Furthermore, many researchers have reflected upon how the use of theatre and drama in development contexts can be ideologically problematic. Ahmed (2016) and Plasztow (2014) both warn of the neoliberal interests of development actors in the mainstream global development sector. As Odhiambo (2006) notes, in Kenya applied theatre 'is still defined and determined by donors from the North' (ibid, 191). This can mean that artists who are hoping to work in applied theatre are easily manipulated by NGOs and donors into delivering work that imposes an agenda, rather than creating the space for dialogue and empowerment echoed in much TfD and applied theatre rhetoric. The development sector is also often criticized for ignoring the views of practitioners, the desires of the community, or the findings of projects (Kerr 2009; Nyoni in Odhiambo 2006). From discussions with practitioners in both the UK and Kenya, it also appears that the need to work with the international development has an impact on the artistic integrity of the work created. Due to the lack of funds to support the development of 'art for art's sake' projects in Kenya, many feel unable to play and innovate - instead they become animators of development messages.

APT has also encountered difficulties with how funds are managed. At the time of writing (late 2016), for example, a major donor to the organisation significantly delayed the payment of funds and gave no clear timeline regarding when funding would eventually become available. This had a major impact on the staff of the organisation as salaries were paid late, and risked damaging relationships with the communities APT had arranged to work in, since they may have been unable to maintain commitments to communities and others they had worked hard to get on board as part of outreach activities. Delays in the availability of funds are not unusual, and many practitioners spoken to had experienced similar problems with the way money filters through from international donors to local partners and eventually finds its way to those undertaking theatre work. Sami Gathii - a theatre practitioner who runs the Youth Arts Development and Entrepreneurship Network (YADEN) - reflected that the unreliability of when funds will actually clear, and the stop-start nature of many funding arrangements also impacts negatively on participants, and can mean that progress towards tackling issues is obstructed (Interview with the authors 2016).

Figure 3. A young woman improvises with an actor during the performance at Majengo, warning him of online propaganda produced by violent extremists. Photo: Bobby Smith.

The international development sector also shifts agendas and priorities, which can mean that organisations have to be quick to adapt and respond. In response, APT have taken the active decision not to stray from their founding principles and from the focus on peace-building and conflict resolution. At times this can serve the organisation well, as they have a clear identity and have managed to survive in an environment where very often Tfd operations disband quickly. However, this clarity of focus and refusal to follow trends in development priorities also means that there have been periods where little funding has come into the organisation, or where reliance on just one funder which can cause problems - as shown above.

Challenges of legitimacy

In practice, Maxwell has found that further challenges for practice come from a sense of mistrust towards theatre, and because there is a social stigma towards theatre as a cultural activity that can limit the willingness of organisations to utilise theatre, or for communities to take work seriously, at least initially. Once communities or organisations experience theatre they often become much more positive about its value. In *Towards Behaviour Change* Lenin Ogolla (1997) talks about how, at 17, his desire to work in theatre was met with an angry reaction by his father. Such a reaction might ring true to those of us working through theatre regardless of where in the world we are. The general attitude to theatre as a 'trivial' art, removed from real-life, is somewhat ironic given the power of the KCECC in the 1970s and early 1980s. As Ondiege Matthew - a theatre practitioner and founder of Nairobi-based organisation Dance into Space - identified during a research interview, *mcheso* is a Swahili word for both theatre and play, or game. He identified a prevalent social attitude that dismisses the theatre as just that - a game, not serious work and not worthy of paying for properly. Often performances are seen as simply being a pre-cursor to the 'real' work presented by a suited development 'expert', hindering the potential that theatre and drama-based work in the community might have. The dismissal of theatre is not only prevalent at a societal level, but also pervades development discourse. Many practitioners that Bobby has spoken to - in the UK as well as Kenya - have reflected on the often problematic relationships that form between the theatre and development disciplines. Artists often feel used, disrespected, and that not enough time and money is given to project to enable real impact to occur. The writers tentatively suggest here that there is a link between this lack of legitimacy for theatre in development and Odhiambo's (2006) identification of the trend in Kenya

of applied theatre projects led by those who lack sufficient knowledge and training. Theatre is not seen as serious work, and very often those who have built up considerable skills in applied theatre in Kenya move into other fields that offer better pay and social status. Furthermore, projects may be given to the lowest bidder. Established organisations such as APT, who have invested in training and have extensive experience of working in the field, are therefore at risk of being overlooked over by donors who prefer cheap and quick interventions and will therefore hire inexperienced practitioners.

Figure 4. A group of community animators trained by APT perform a devised piece in Kenya's coastal region in December 2016. The piece is about a man who joins an extremist organisation after being promised money. Photo: Bobby Smith.

Conclusion

In this short article we have attempted to weave the perspectives of those doing applied theatre work on the ground in Kenya with wider research in the field. What is clear is that at all levels of our considerations there are complex webs of international, national and political influence - as well as wider perceptions of what theatre is and what theatre can do - that need to be grappled with. However, to effectively tackle these challenges we can only rely on ourselves to reshape the wider structures in which applied theatre projects take place: whilst challenges exist in terms of government policy, working across disciplines, and questions of legitimacy, we need to find strategies to effectively engage with these different spheres and overcome these challenges in ways that ensure the sustainability of practice.

References

Ahmed, S. J. 2016. 'Applied theatre and climate change in Bangladesh: indigenous theatrics for neoliberal theatricks.' In *Critical Perspectives on Applied Theatre*, edited by J. Hughes and H. Nicholson, 150-171. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Article 19. 2003. *Women's Voices and African Theatre: Case Studies from Kenya, Mali, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Zimbabwe*. Braamfontein: Article 19.

Article 19. 2013. "Kenya: High Court Lifts Ban on Play." Last accessed 1 August 2016. <https://www.article19.org/resources.php/resource/3697/en/kenya:-high-court-lifts-ban-on-play>

Bjorkman, I. 1989. *Mother Sing for Me: People's Theatre in Kenya*. London and New Jersey: Zed Books.

Kenya Law Reform Commission (KLRC). 2016. Last accessed 19 September 2016. <http://www.klrc.go.ke/index.php/constitution-of-kenya/108-chapter-two-the-republic/177-11-culture>

Kerr, D. 1995. *African Popular Theatre: From Pre-colonial Times to the Present Day*. Portsmouth: James Currey.

Kerr, D. 2009. 'You only made the blueprint to fit yourselves: A theatre-based health research project in Lungwena, Malawi.' In *The Applied Theatre Reader*, edited by T. Prentki and S. Preston. 100-107. London and New York: Routledge.

Ndanyi, S. K. 2016. 'Reassessing Jomo Kenyatta's Crackdown on Theatre for Education and Development.' In *Kenya After 50: Reconfiguring Education, Gender and Policy*, edited by M. M. Koster, M. M. Kithinji and J. P. Rotich. 71-88.

Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. 1986. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: James Currey.

Nogueira, M. P. 2002. "Theatre for Development: An Overview." *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 7 (1): 103-108. doi: 10.1080/13569780120113175

Odhiambo, C. J. 2006. "Theatre for Development in Kenya: Interrogating the Ethics of Practice." *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 10 (2): 189-199.

Ogolla, L. 1997. *Towards Behaviour Change: Participatory Theatre in Education and Development*. Nairobi: PETAD International.

Otieno, S. P. 2011. *Modes and Codes: Theatre on HIV/AIDS in Kenya, Uganda and South Africa: Practice of Youth Theatre in East and Southern Africa*. Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing.

Plastow, J. 2014. "Domestication or Transformation? The Ideology of Theatre for Development in Africa." *Applied Theatre Research* 2 (2): 107-118.