Conclusions/provocations: applied theatre and global/ sustainable/development

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ABSTRACT

This short piece concludes this edition of Points and Practices by bringing together the contributions and offering some provocations for how they help to conceptualise the relationship between applied theatre and global sustainable development.

KEYWORDS Global sustainable development; applied theatre

To bring the contributions of this issue of Points and Practices together, I offer some provocations on the terms 'global' and 'sustainable' and how, when used in conjunction with 'development', these might interact with applied theatre. To do so, I locate the themes outlined by the articles against the changing landscape of development. Central to a conceptual shift in development are the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which follow up where the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) left off. The latter shaped development from 2000–2015 and were criticised as imposing agendas from the Global North upon the South (for example, Bond 2006). The SDGs, however, were agreed upon through more consultative processes that involved countries from both the Global North and South in dialogue (Horner 2019). The SDGs outline 17 goals which aim to act against poverty, the climate crisis and hunger, while promoting education, gender equality, and more. Importantly, these goals are framed as global concerns. Indeed, countries across the North and South have signed up to meet them – a key difference from the MDGs which were aims only to be met by those in the South. In development studies, some have argued this signals a blurring of the 'developed' global North and 'under-developed' South, stressing the need for global collaborations and interconnected partnerships to solve global challenges, rather than the problematic framing of the South as 'in need' (Scholte and Söderbaum 2015).

The contributions resonate with this sense of shared challenges, engaging as they have with performance projects relating to the environment, wellbeing, or the exploitation of workers and the impact such issues can have on individuals and communities across the globe. They also chime with the need for interconnected approaches to tackle them. Recognising challenges as shared, and the need to collaborate globally is, I suggest, productive. However, the contributions from Karim, and Friel and Ouma, raise important concerns relating to applied theatre operating on a global scale. Whereas the former demonstrates historical inequalities in the networks and interactions of those from the North and South, the latter navigates such power dynamics in the present, reminding us that intentions to work across borders to create networks and foster solidarity can maintain unintended hierarchies.

From the contributions, 'sustainability' might be understood in several ways: sustained, committed partnerships; fighting for sustainable livelihoods; the complexities of food production; environmental issues; sustaining, and harnessing, diverse cultures. Most imminent is the threat to life posed by the climate crisis. Yet, as the reflection on Rafiki Theatre's work in a context of water shortages and hygiene issues outlines, the continued ways donors dictate the terms of projects, practitioners' desires to create more 'bottom-up' approaches, and the urgency to simply 'get the message out there', can clash. Jordan's article also raises the conflicting ethics of using personal testimonies: sharing such stories can honour participants, provide a human face to seemingly vast problems and establish interconnectedness and solidarity between borders. However, in the process individual experiences can be misunderstood, and ownership eroded. In the context of environmental

catastrophe, we also need to interrogate our own actions – particularly those of us who jet from one destination to the next to 'apply' theatre.

Given such challenges, along with those pertaining to power dynamics in global projects and the risks these pose for the diversity of artforms globally, do we remain committed or give up, admitting defeat?

Postcolonial theorist Chakrabarty (1999) argues for the provincialisation of Europe, or the creation of a horizontal plane where non-European frameworks are specifically named and Eurocentrism challenged. Ukuma's and Jordan's considerations of Kwagh-hir and Pot Gan are refreshing, highlighting specific forms of performance that deviate from dominant models of practice. Working globally then, we are implored to consider what these marginalized forms are specifically? What do they look like? What are they called? Could they, and should they, speak at a global level, not – as Ukuma argues is the case – merely offer 'local' spice, sprinkled over a lukewarm recipe unquestionably served up time and time again?

Applied performance is never just about form, but also about the function that art can play in processes of education and change. Alongside interrogating how models of practice interact in global projects, we must also ask how theatre can support and catalyse wider action for social change, as reflected in Haedicke's consideration of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. Our choices and actions, and the challenges we face, are interconnected. Socially-engaged and applied forms of performance must, therefore, seek to become globally-engaged, though how that can be achieved within the complicated terrain of development, and the agendas to which theatre is applied, is complex. To return to the question of pressing forward or admitting failure, here we might draw on Spivak's (1999) argument that highly reflective, pragmatic strategies that work within, rather than repudiate systems as too broken to fix, are important.

References

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