

Theatre of the Oppressed: active enquiry

An interdisciplinary dialogue

Sunday 21st May 2017

CARN
Collaborative Action Research Network

CUSP
A GROUP OF CRITICAL CONCEPTS
STRAY, WILLIAMS, WOODS & GILL

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This workshop brought together practitioners from research, theatre, community work, critical pedagogy and professional development to enquire into the use of Theatre of the Oppressed in the current socio-political context.



The scene was set by a performance of *The Fairground* by theatre company Active Inquiry. A Forum process allowed us all to experiment with becoming 'spect-actors' to explore the social justice issues addressed in the play.



After lunch, a short film and talk by Andy Stafford and Sally Keys illustrated some of the current work of the Lawnmowers theatre company.



Linking first with others with interest in research, community work, theatre or professional development, we created images of the ideal use of participatory theatre and its opposite.

We then went on to pose questions about Theatre of the Oppressed in four categories: WHO WHAT WHERE WHY. The questions were explored in groups, using various techniques from the repertoire of Theatre of the Oppressed and bearing in mind Boal's idea of *Chinese Crisis* - the tension between threat and opportunity.

CHINESE CRISIS

WHEN WRITTEN IN CHINESE, THE WORD

CRISIS

IS COMPOSED OF TWO CHARACTERS

ONE REPRESENTS

DANGER 危

AND THE OTHER REPRESENTS

OPPORTUNITY 机

Some of the questions we explored in groups and through drama...

How do we foster critical reflection?

If the most important people to involve in the change work of ToTO are most resistant – either end of spectrum of power imbalance – how does that change?

Who is in the room and who should be?

How can we tell who's oppressed or oppressor?

Who holds the power?

Should we be using 'real' actors in Theatre of the Oppressed?

If we only ever change the protagonist in forum theatre, doesn't that make it their responsibility, even their fault?

Whose voice gets used and who uses it?

Who are we not including?

How do you do theatre with shy people?

Who is it for? People who are oppressed or people who are in authority?

How do we engage people who do not want to perform- do we miss ideas and solutions?

WHO?

Can everyone get involved at the same level?



What about empathy?

How do we stop the value driven process being hijacked?

What is the benefit for larger communities?

If we use ToTO for therapy are we just avoiding the structural issues?

Who hears and sees the work and can they make change?

How do we resource this work but stay autonomous?

Who has directly influenced policy making in the UK?

If you don't stand up for something, you'll fall for anything?

WHY?

What is the role of play in ToTO?

Why not?

Is it encouraging the audience to take action or open its mind?



What is our real purpose?

Can we use ToTO as a debate and dialogue technique?

How can we appeal to an intended audience?

What are the ethical problems with this work?

Where should the techniques and ideas develop now- in which direction and with what adaptations and changes?

If the state funds us to do this work can we work against the state with it?

Is direction oppression or education?

Does ToTO lose its power if we use it too much?

WHAT?

What responsibility do we have as practitioners once folk leave the theatre?

How can theatre affect oppressors?

Can a way be found to help spect-actors symbolise systemic change – not just individual response?

Is there a lack of criticism of ToTO and if so why? Constructive criticism could help it stay alive.

How do we invite collective change not just individual?

Do we need to do more of this in the streets?

How to bring forum theatre into primary schools?

Can it transcend language barriers and work with international groups?

WHERE?

How can we connect more effectively with other community workers?

Where are the most effective sites for ToTO?

Where can we get resources for our creative work?

Site specific?

Public spaces... public performances... e.g. politicians on the way to Parliament?

What other art forms can we use - music?

How can we be open but also create a safe environment?

How do we manage the tension between raising individual awareness and focusing on the need to build connections to address structural issues?



How can the spaces for Theatre of the Oppressed be made more democratic and impactful? Do we take the theatre to the places of power or bring the powerful to the theatre spaces?



In the cycle of oppressed and oppressor, how do we balance the need to acknowledge difference, and different claims of oppression, with the need for consensus and co-operation for change?



What next? Who takes responsibility for action after the event? How can we take responsibility for developing the theory and practice of Theatre of the Oppressed?

it was good to get so many folk working on similar stuff in the room together

excellent connections achieved between people.

great opportunity to explore the possibilities of Theatre of the Oppressed

very powerful and moving

a valuable opportunity to pick things apart

a really stimulating and constructive day

Really keen to explore how this work fits into the (health) policymaking agenda

lets make use of the potential from this kind of event by moving to a more active use of media to support personal, community and societal engagement with the ideas and themes raised.

Thanks to everyone who participated, shared their experiences and brought their minds *and* their bodies to exploring the questions together.

How can we take these questions forwards & explore them further?

