

## Theatre for Development in Uganda: The Case of Makerere-Kikoni Theatre Project

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### Introduction

The use of popular theatre as a tool for development in Uganda is a relatively recent phenomenon. However, there have been theatre activities that could be viewed as precursors to today's popular theatre practices in the country. In 1946, the colonial officials in the Department for Social Welfare engaged in using theatre for development purpose; whereby, they toured the rural areas performing educational plays which were basically about agricultural methods and cattle breeding.<sup>1</sup> This did not take long before the project was abandoned in favor of cheaper radio plays.

In the early 1960s, the Makerere Travelling Theatre was founded. Its main aim was to do away with the elitist and urban nature of the theatre at that time, and take theatre to the people. They traveled to perform in places where no conventional theatre buildings existed and did not only perform in English, but also in several local languages. As Michael Etherton observes, "the aim was to shape the content, whatever it was, in such a way that the new mass audiences would understand it."<sup>2</sup> But, as Axel Paul rightly notes:

in practice its educational effectiveness remained restricted because this form of Development Theatre did not get the communication process between actors and spectators going, but represented more the well-meant, one-sided announcement of a message, which was limited for the duration of the play.<sup>3</sup>

After the dissolution of the Makerere Travelling Theatre there have been other lesser attempts at using theatre for development purpose, but, they were all still a far cry from being identified as truly popular theatre for development. They all viewed the audience as object to be bombarded with development messages, as empty containers to be filled, and not as subject in development. They did not, as Paolo Friere would put it, "enter into a dialogue with the people."<sup>4</sup> They did not see "the need for the critical intervention of the people [themselves] in reality"<sup>5</sup> as important agents of development. This kind of theatre (whereby the audience remain passive recipients of messages defined by others) cannot bring about meaningful development because the people are not active participants in the theatre process, and yet it is up to them to play key roles in the Development process.

At best these early theatre activities could be labeled as mere precursors of popular theatre for development in Uganda. To be popular, theatre must express “the desires or aspirations of a people . . . in a particular historical stage of its existence.”<sup>6</sup> It must involve the people, the audience, in the theatre process. As Antonio Gramsci puts it: “What is required is an intellectual and moral content which is the elaborate and complete expression of the most profound aspirations of a determinate public . . . in a certain phase of historical development.”<sup>7</sup> Without this, theatre can never be a meaningful and effective tool for development. It must give the people the potential to actively participate in the process of communicating, together for development, that is, communicating their views and analysis of the development process through the use of a medium they themselves control.

As Iyorwuse Hagher rightly states:

Community Theatre for Development is a theatrical style which stresses “participation,” “dialogue,” “critical consciousness” etc. The practitioners of this kind of theatre are committed to social transformation through cultural action, using theatre. Through its practice they hope to involve the peasants and workers in finding solutions to their common problems through research, dramatization, analysis and follow up action.<sup>8</sup>

This is exactly what CASEDEV is trying to do in Uganda today.

#### **CASEDEV**

CASEDEV (Cultural Agency for Social and Environmental Development) was founded in 1990 by three former students of the Department of Music, Dance and Drama of Makerere University. They were influenced by the theatre activities of Penina Mlama in Tanzania, and encouraged by Professor Rose Mbowe of Makerere University. Realizing they were being exploited by Kampala theatre groups (which were commercial in nature and not development oriented), they wanted a kind of “down to up” approach to development, using theatre to mobilize the people.

The organization has as its full-time members Geoffrey Wadulo (as Director), W. Makika (as Administrator) and S. Isabirye (as Organising Secretary). It also has some support staff and field-workers, who are only co-opted when the need arises during particular theatre projects, as temporary members.

The organization has adopted as its motto: *Culture for Development*. Wadulo explains what they understand by culture and how it can be connected to development. He says:

Culture is a way of life, in which the people themselves are

concerned with their day-to-day issues. It is the most important aspect of development. Unless you understand the people's culture you cannot bring any meaningful development among them. There is no way you can separate culture from development.<sup>9</sup>

CASEDEV cooperates with other non-governmental organizations (NGOS) and government ministries in executing development projects using theatre, in which case funds are made available by such NGOs or government ministries. For example, with the Ministry of Health in its CDD (Control of Diarrhoeal Diseases) program in 1991, with C.I.S (Committee for International Self-Reliance) in conjunction with Kampala City Council in the "Keep Kampala City Clean" project funded by World Bank, and PAPSCA (Programme for the Alleviation of Poverty and Social Cost Adjustment) under the auspices of C.I.S.

This kind of co-operation has a weakness in that the message to be communicated is defined by the donor body and the people are only expected to participate in discussing the performances. This has been the case especially in situations where a few selected actors (wrongly referred to by CASEDEV as facilitators) are trained, paid and made to move around various communities, only adjusting the performances and the message to fit a particular locale.

However, there have been instances where members (or a member) of CASEDEV have gone to communities with no pre-defined message or donor constraints, with no funds but personal commitment to the community theatre project. In these cases the people themselves defined the message/content of the performances, participating fully in dramatizing their problems, needs and aspirations and are the key subjects in discussing and analyzing, their community development. They draw resolutions as a result of the performances and the subsequent forum sessions and decide on the nature of the follow up action to be undertaken. Donors only come in when the people have identified the problems and needs and have decided on what actions to take towards community development.

This has been the case with the Namasagali Village Theatre Project (in Kamuli District) in 1990, Kijambula Village Theatre Project (in Bwaise, Kampala) in 1991, and the Makerere-Kikoni Theatre Project (in the suburb of Kampala) in 1993.

The Makerere-Kikoni Theatre Project was initiated by Geoffrey Wadulo under the umbrella-of CASEDEV. The project was not funded from anywhere, but depended on the commitment of the community members themselves and the initiator.

**Project Initiation**

To initiate the Makerere-Kikoni Theatre Project, Wadulo had first to gain access to the community through the authorities in the area. The chairperson of Makerere 2, Zone A, RC1, <sup>10</sup> was contacted and invited Wadulo to speak to the RC1 executives about the project. Some of the RC1 officials were skeptical but they decided to give the venture a trial. According to the chairperson, Alice Namukasa, they had found it difficult to mobilize the peoples of the area, but if CASEDEV thought it could do it using theatre they had no objection.

On March 7th 1993, Wadulo was called upon to attend the RC1 Village Council meeting<sup>11</sup> and explained to the assembled residents the concept of *theatre for development*. He stated that it was the people who were responsible for the development of their area. The aim of the theatre was to create awareness and make them search for solutions to their social and environmental problems. He explained that CASEDEV believed it was through culture that people can best be sensitized and mobilized; he appealed to them to respond, and stressed the importance of community involvement.

He further explained that, after the performances and the subsequent forum sessions, CASEDEV could contact the relevant authorities and bodies (on behalf of the people) to help settle some of the problems. He gave the example of Kijambula Village in Bwaise whereby a ten-roomed pit-latrine was built for the community by Kampala City Council following the people's resolution during a similar theatre project initiated by CASEDEV.

**The People's Initial Reception of the Theatre Project**

The very idea of *theatre for development* was strange to the people. They only knew of commercial theatre, and some asked how much they would be required to pay to watch the performances and whether those who would volunteer to act would be remunerated. The initiator again had to explain the nature of the community based theatre being initiated.

However, a more serious question came from one member of the community ( who declined to be named). He said:

“Many of the social problems that we face are not created by us, but by others and the government. For example, high tax rates and school fees, low salaries and wages, high rent rates and electricity bills. If you are really interested in finding solution to the social problems, why not address yourself to the root-cause, the government, instead of coming to us helpless people at the grass-root? Why not start from up?”

The response he got was that the people are a crucial factor in their own

development, and should not be ignored; there is need for their involvement (because they know best their situation) instead of everything being imposed upon them from without. Contacting the authority as an individual (just assuming the needs of the people) is not effective enough. But, once the people themselves have discussed and analysed their social and environmental problems and made resolutions on what they want, the authority would be better disposed to listen. The purpose of the project was to use theatre to mobilize the people for community development, to involve them in the development process.

Some members of the community wanted to know how the members of CASEDEV survive, given the fact that the theatre project to be initiated had no funding at all from any donor organization and that the initiators expected no monetary returns from the community. They were assured that members of CASEDEV had their own private means of survival and engage in community theatre as a result of personal commitment to community development, not as a means of survival. CASEDEV is a non-profit making Organisation

Eventually the residents of the area unanimously agreed to set Sunday, March 14, 1993, to begin the rehearsals.

#### **Procedure**

There was no pre-set procedural process for the theatre project. As Wadulo later explained, CASEDEV does not use any clear-cut procedure for every theatre project. "The procedure varies from community to community, depending on the nature of each individual community."<sup>12</sup> In the Makerere-Kikoni Theatre Project, five distinct procedural stages seemed to emerge.

#### **Stage One**

This comprised mainly of games and some physical exercises. When members of the community converged for the first time for the rehearsals, they were taken through a series of games and exercises which were quite exciting and entertaining. The games were used as a means of mobilizing the people, attracting them to the venue of rehearsal and maintaining the interest of those already there while waiting for more to come. Some games (like the naming game, where people gave their names) served the purpose of making people familiar with one another, creating a sense of togetherness. It also enabled the initiator (and two other people working with him) to know the members of the community and familiarize with them, as a means of gaining acceptability.

There were also exercises involving a lot of body movements the aim being to learn how to theatrically express one's self using body language.

#### **Stage Two**

This stage involved the identification of the outstanding social and

environmental problems facing the community, by the members of the community themselves. This was after the games and exercises, when many residents had gathered. There was a general agreement that the following were the major problems:

- i. Stagnant water in the area, leading to diseases.
- ii. Lack of toilets or latrines in some buildings and structures, resulting into a sanitation hazard in the area.
- iii. Dirty homes and filthy surroundings due to careless dumping of refuse and garbage.
- iv. Insecurity in the area with rampant cases of theft and robbery.
- v. Notorious drinking leading to disturbance of other people.
- vi. Over-speeding of vehicles on Nakulabye road (due to the absence of humps) resulting into accidents and loss of innocent lives, especially of children crossing the road.
- vii. Poor attendance of general meetings, and the high level of apathy whereby people were simply not concerned about any mobilization for the development of the area.
- viii. Immorality leading to the spread of AIDS.

### **Stage Three**

Here, members of the community present at the scene of rehearsals were asked to volunteer in small groups of four or six and pick out one of the problems identified the previous weekend and try to formulate a play around it. Each group was to move to a separate corner and try to discuss the performance they were going to put up. This took about twenty minutes and all the groups then converged where other members of the community were waiting. That evening, about four skits were performed.

Such kind of unscripted spontaneous performances later formed the basis for subsequent rehearsals. After each performance the spectators were asked to comment, discuss the performance and suggest improvement. At times the audience felt an actor was not acting a part well enough to depict real life situation and advised accordingly, or one of the spectators would take up the role becoming an actor instantly.

There were some performances which were collectively "written."<sup>13</sup> A performance would stop at a certain point and the spectators would be asked how it should proceed. There were suggestions and in some cases even arguments, before a consensus was reached as to how the performance was to proceed. For example, the performance on housebreaking:

After the robbery had occurred there was a pause and the audience was asked as to whether the robbers should be caught.

There was agreement that at least one of the robbers should be caught. The performance then proceeded and after a robber was caught there was again a pause, and the audience had to suggest what should happen next.

There was a collective involvement in directing and shaping the performance.

#### Stage Four

Stage Four was the final performances before the whole community on Sunday, April 4th, 1993. It took place immediately after the RC1 Village Council meeting in the open area, which was attended by some RC2 executives. After the meeting was declared closed, nobody walked away as the performances immediately took over. In fact, some people had just come to attend the meeting so as to watch the performances. During the performance the distinction between actors and audience was almost non-existent. The audience in part became the actors.

The first performance tackled the problem of sanitation. It featured a family without a toilet, or pit-latrine. Visitors had to be stealthily directed to the neighbor's latrine (if and when it was not locked), and members of the household helped themselves into little polythene bags, which were later thrown into the surrounding areas when no one was watching. It so happened that one of the little bags loaded with human feces landed squarely on a drunk who had fallen into a bushy growth by the roadside. He took up the matter seriously complaining to members of the household and later reported the case to the RC1 Secretary for Security in the area who promptly rushed to the scene of the offence. In the case of the performance, the man playing the role of Secretary for Security addressed himself directly to the audience asking what was to be done in such a circumstance. The audience responded giving suggestions and commenting on the plea of the guilty party. The sanitation problem in the area was also discussed. It was then resolved that each household in the area must have a toilet or at least a pit-latrine within a specified time limit. The RC1 General Secretary was asked there and then to take down the people's resolution.

The next performance highlighted the problem of house-breaking and theft in the area. In the course of the performance (after the robbery had already taken place), one actor directly shot a question at the RC2 vice-chairman (who was present in the audience) asking him what he was doing as a leader to ensure the security of property and life for the people of the area. He was forced to stand up and respond. As the performance proceeded, some of the robbers were apprehended and the audience again had to actively participate in discussing what was to be done to the culprits. Some suggested they should be handed over to the police after some beating and sent to jail. But the next question was, "Would that solve the

problem of insecurity in the area?" At this stage an actor made one of the RC1 executives in the audience join in the performance by addressing him directly, "Omwami Issa, this child here belongs to you. What do you have to say?" Although in actual sense the child acting one of the robbers was not his son, the man had to act as if he was. In earnest, he asked for sympathy and understanding from the gathering. But, when an elderly member of the audience sharply pointed out that as a parent he was responsible for the correct upbringing of his children and was therefore partly responsible for the crime, the RC1 official caused laughter when he, quickly responded, "in fact, this boy is not my own. He belongs to my aunt. Since he is such a bad child, I will get rid of him from this location by sending him back to his mother in the rural area."

There was also a performance featuring the problem of road accidents. Actors zoomed into the arena purportedly driving vehicles at high speed, and one of them knocked a child crossing the road dead. The immediate sound of pain and bitterness that escaped the lips of some of the spectators showed it was no mere play thing. A heated debate on the gravity of the situation then ensued, starting with the actors but eventually engulfing the whole audience. There was no difference between actors and audience at this point; all were seriously involved. The RC1 Secretary for Finance was asked to account for the money he had been collecting from the residents of the area to put up speed humps on the road. This he did and seriously enough. It was no longer mere theatrical performance.

Some people took up the chance the performances offered them to air views they could have not otherwise been given time to do so during RC1 general meetings chaired and controlled by the executives. The gap between the leaders and the people was narrowed during the performances. They all participated at the same level.

When the performance came to an end that night, even those who had initially been skeptical about the theatre project were excited. Many requested for the project to continue saying they would actively participate. One of the RC1 officials from another area asked the initiator to go and initiate a similar project in his area. The RC1 General Secretary of the area, Godfrey Sozi, confessed: "At first I didn't understand what you people were up to. Now that I have seen, I am indeed very grateful. Thank you for bring[ing] this kind of theatre to us."

#### **Stage Five**

This was the follow up stage. The initiator with some of the people who participated in the rehearsals and the eventual performances moved around the area to gauge the impact of the theatrical performances in the community. There were signs the message regarding cleanliness in homes and proper sanitary habits had been well received. In one building, the tenants decided to set up a health committee to see that garbage was not carelessly dumped and that children use the



latrines instead of helping themselves outside. However, in some residences no action had been taken towards improvement, but the inhabitants promised to do something. People continued expressing their appreciation for the project. There was a pledge to keep the theatre project going, even after the departure of the initiator.

However, the long-term follow-up action was to involve the implementation of the people's resolution made during the performances. This was to be a collective effort involving the RC1 officials and the people themselves.

### Conclusion

The Makerere-Kikoni Theatre Project needs to be critically examined, in relation to the upheld concept of *theatre for development* (or popular theatre), if we are to evaluate whether it really exhibited a truly dialogic popular theatrical practice.

As Chambulikazi rightly points out, "popular theatre speaks to the common man in his own language and idiom and deals with the problem of direct relevance to his situation."<sup>14</sup> In the Makerere Kikoni Theatre the language used was Luganda which was the most widely understood language in the community, and the issues tackled were of direct relevance to the people's situation. Chambulikazi further asserts that "popular theatre is the type of theatre production that is initiated by the people in order that it may initiate exchange among themselves."<sup>15</sup> Although the project was not initiated by the people themselves (but by a member of CASEDEV) the theatre definitely initiated exchange among them. They were able to exchange views and opinions, entering into a kind of dialogue with one another about their situation.

The main aim of the theatre project was to use theatre to create awareness among the people, to enable them to analyze their social and environmental problems, and begin a search towards solving them and eventually, initiate community development. There are many definitions of what development really is, but we will adopt Chambulikazi's definition which we feel is more accurate. He states that: "Development . . . refers to a 'positive socioeconomic' change in the quality and level of human existence which is aimed at raising the standards of living and quality of human dignity."<sup>16</sup> There was every sign this was the direction the Makerere-Kikoni theatre project was leading to, although it was still too early to gauge the full developmental impact of the theatre in the community. However, it is worth noting: the scope was limited to social and environmental problems (in accordance with CASEDEV's objectives). Although the people themselves defined the message of the performances, it was within this confine. The project was steered away from tackling any political issue, and no serious economic problem was addressed.

The form of theatrical representation (of the people's situation) used in the course of the theatre project was drama. This was as a result of the prevailing

circumstances in the community at that material time, and drama happened to be the most immediate popular means of communication at the practitioners' disposal. Dances and songs could not be used for the simple reason that drums and traditional musical instruments were not easily available in the community. There were a few songs sang by the children, but these were not critical and immediately relevant to the people's situation; they simply acted as interludes.

Drama as a form of theatrical representation gave a wide latitude for spontaneous expression. Drawing on improvisation and unstructured (or loosely structured) performances, it provided a forum for the people to freely participate in the analysis of their own situation.

One of the main objectives of popular theatre, as Augusto Boal rightly observes, is "to change the people—spectators, passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon—into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action."<sup>17</sup> The Makerere Kikoni Theatre Project was geared towards achieving this objective. There was a deliberate attempt to draw in the spectators as active participants in the theatre process. There were occasions during the performance when the distinction between actor and audience was almost non-existent; all were involved in the theatrical representation of their life situation, in the critical analysis of it and a search for solutions and ultimate development.

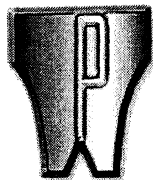
As far as the Makerere-Kikoni Theatre Project was concerned, theatre could rightly be regarded as a tool for people's empowerment in the development process—first, at the mental level. As Hagher correctly notes, "theatre, like science is a mental activity by which content of the world are brought into objective valid cognition."<sup>18</sup> It enabled the people to enter into a dialogue with one another about their own situation, thereby, leading to a critical and analytical realization of the prevailing situation (i.e social and environmental problems). Secondly, it acted as a means of mobilizing the people for action drawing them towards common development goals. It made them aware of their potential as subjects in the development process. As a result of this resolutions were made and follow up actions clearly stated.

However, to regard theatre, any theatre (even community-based theatre), as a tool of people's empowerment and a means to development, it "should take the whole community as its workshop."<sup>19</sup> If only a small percentage of the community is involved, the greater percentage not involved will regard any resolution arrived at and follow up actions suggested as an imposition. This will definitely erode the effectiveness of the theatre project because it would not be able to engulf the whole community in the development process and make the majority subjects and not mere objects. This is a difficult target to achieve. In the case of the Makerere-Kikoni Theatre Project less than twenty-five percent of the whole population of the area were involved. This was even bigger than the number that usually attend the area's RC1 general meetings. Yet, it is worth pointing out,

that this does not diminish the credibility of community-based theatre as a powerful tool for community development.

## Notes

1. Axel T. Paul, *Tugende e Kampala (Notes On the Theatre in Uganda)* (Freiburg: Krause 1990) 17.
2. Micheal Etherton, *The Development of African Drama* (London: Hutchinson, 1982) 326.
3. Paul 19.
4. Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin, 1972) 30.
5. 30.
6. Adolfo S. Vazquez, *Art and Society* (London: Merlin Press 1973) 267.
7. Antonio Gramsci, *Letteratura e vita nazionale* (Roma : Editori riuniti, 1971) 100-1.
8. Iyorwuese H. Hagher "Introduction: Theatre and the Community through the Ages," in Iyorwuese H. Hagher (ed.) *The Practice of Community Theatre in Nigeria* (Lagos: SONTA, 1990) 1.
9. The statement was made during an interview with Geoffrey Wadulo on April 19, 1993.
10. The RC system is an administrative system that was established in Uganda when the National Resistance Movement (NRM) came into power in 1986. At the grass-roots level is the RC1; and the executives of a number of RC1 councils form the RC2 council. At the county level there is the RC3 whose members are drawn from several RC2 councils' executives. At the district level is the RC5 council.
11. RC1 Village Council is composed of all the residents of the area above the age of 17.
12. The statement was made during an interview with Geoffrey Wadulo.
13. Here, "written" is used in the sense that there was a collective composition of the content and plot of the performance; not that pen and paper were used.
14. Eberhard Chambulikazi, "The Msoga Popular Theatre Workshop: A Participatory Research Process," *AALAE*, 2.1 (1987): 21.
15. 21.
16. Eberhard Chambulikazi, "Theatre as Communication Medium in Community Development," *Innotech Journal* 8.1 (1989): 40.
17. Augusto Boal, *Theatre of Oppressed* (London: Pluto Press, 1979) 122.
18. Hagher 3.
19. Chairman Mao se Tung quoted in Herold Entwistle, *Antonio Gramsci: Conservative Schooling for Radical Politics* (London: Routledge and Regan Paul, 1979).



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