

## Blog – QES/CAP I II

### From Page to Stage: Connecting Dots from Community-Based Theatre Projects

In my previous blog, I reflected on the importance of vulnerability in relationship to art and theatre practice. However, I pointed out that, it is important theatre practitioners don't feed on people's fear, exploiting their vulnerability and anxiety. Rather, compassion should meet vulnerability – that's when empathy becomes integral to humanity.

Since my first audio blog that centered on using the power of theatre to engage the community<sup>i</sup>, I have been deliberating on varied social issues that theatre can possibly seek to address in my *new* community; and how I can use theatre to engage with the community. Also, I continually strive to understand clearer and better my role both as a researcher, and a community member who is directly or indirectly involved in such issues. These ongoing inquiry constantly positions me to understand my relationship, stance, distance, and role on such social realities. In the past few months for instance, I have engaged with different communities to deepen my understanding of migration, and refugee advocacy. The overarching goal is to create a platform for dialogue for the community to find hope, understand pre-existing ideas and strategies, and perhaps develop more effective strategies needed to confront certain concerns. I also collaborated in a faith-based setting to discourse linguistic relationship between *refugee* and *refuge*, and the role of the church in refugee advocacy/migration<sup>ii</sup>.

In addition, my inquiry affords me the opportunity to appreciate the complexity that surrounds migration and refugee issues. I am able to co-learn with the community members implications of existing efforts to address the problem; and further engage with different communities to realign community perspectives and strategies for desired change if any. Again, I partnered with various agencies during the University of Victoria's IdeaFest to explore refugee advocacy within the university community<sup>iii</sup>. These experiences among others raised certain questions which are necessary to ensure that my practice as a theatre practitioner, and researcher meets my expectation which is captured in the word '*hope*'. Hope that is bold, informed, truthful, critical and resistant to agencies that perpetuate the atrocities of the post-normal system<sup>iv</sup>. In this reflection, therefore, I try to unpack briefly a common thread that connect these projects captured in this axiom – 'those who are part of the problem are also part of the solution'. Accordingly, all of us are culpable and responsible for uprooting social injustice, not just the oppressed<sup>v</sup>, because human consciousness has the capacity to censor and react to situation depending on perspective, understanding and realities at stake. For instance, the same man that is wicked, bossy and dreadful at work becomes friendly, lovely, and approachable to his kid at home. In fact, through covert or overt display of personal and collective assumptions, biases and prejudices, all people can be both agents (oppressors/perpetrators) and targets (oppressed/victims) of different forms of oppression<sup>vi</sup>.

In essence, there is a dialectical relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor, a connecting principle of relationship interwoven and suggestive of contradictions; a knot of contradictions in personal relationships or an unceasing interplay between contrary or opposing tendencies<sup>vii</sup>. Therefore, a poetics of the oppressor is essential because of the duality of existence and relationship that is inherent in these positions. The oppressed are equally capable of perpetuating oppressive systems of privilege as much as the oppressor<sup>viii</sup> because the movement between oppressor and oppressed is too fluid to allow for a strict binary to be drawn between the complex relationship<sup>ix</sup> and man is central to these positions and these processes involved. Consequently, the common thread is the potential capacity of building a support system, and a genuine sense of community is crucial to these community engagements.

A major role theatre plays is in building relationships, communities, and creating a sense of community through community engagements regardless of the social strata. The ability to build empathy, share lived experiences, relate with other's vulnerabilities and at times share insights that might potentially help the community. For instance, sharing the space with the seniors during a reminiscence theatre project did not only provide us insight into their pasts, it also connected us to their present, and after several meetings with them, we become an intergenerational community. A community of interest, insight, and understanding that are ready to hold the space for one another, and create the needed support for the ensemble. Central to community engagement projects through theatre is the empathy, compassion, and relationship. That is, a peculiar support system that one can always run towards. Our present realities are shaped to some extent by past experiences, and it supports us many times especially when we are able to rightly appropriate such experiences. Also, when such experiences are shared with and by others, or handed down, a new pattern of understanding and wisdom is built which can become useful in the future. In that situation, a community is shaped or re-shaped based on our experiences. In essence, a sense of community is the perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, and the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure"<sup>x</sup>.

Since sense of community is a feeling of belonging by members. It is built based on the understanding that members matter to one another, and there is a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together<sup>xi</sup>. These attributes are analogous to the theatre's. Scholars agree that a community must have the following: membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared of emotional connections<sup>xii</sup>. Theatre, especially applied theatre by default is characterized by these features because it is a theatre by the people, with the people and for the people. Participants or spect-actors<sup>xiii</sup> agree to become members of a new community, knitted together by interest; they are given agency to over the community and vice versa; and create necessary change needed. With these, membership is crimsoned on boundaries, emotional safety, a sense of belonging and identity, personal investment in the community, and a common symbol system (this might be as simple as greetings, clothing, language, rules or mode of operations etc). All these attributes resonate with the community engagements with the theatre.

Furthermore, the nuances of power are tackled because as members of community, power gap is ameliorated. The community is given agency because members in the community share power for a communal purpose. Community-based theatre practice; in this context, a theatre that is people-specific, by the people, for the people and with the people is essentially developed to connect, and commit the people to equity and empathy. Building relationship and sense of community is presented on two levels; the facilitator and the participants'. For instance, as a theatre practitioner, the ability to create a project with a series of communities gives one the opportunity to broaden my network and potentially build new contacts that will enhance my practice in the future. On the other hand, it has open a new door for collaboration for the community. This idea has been reinforced severally in many of my theatre projects.

On a personal level, during a first crack at reminiscence project with some seniors, I was able to build a repertoire of contacts that has opened further projects in that regard and also the project created an opportunity for participants to share their stories. During these interactions, unheard stories were shared and many seniors discovered new things about their mates. Building relationships and a sense of community can't be overemphasized in theatre. Theatre is in the business of bridging gaps; and producing the lubricant of empathy and compassion to keep relationships ever green. This role deepens learning abilities, enhance understanding of relationships, help build value systems, collective spirit and safe space for expression. After devising the theatre from the stories harvested from the seniors, the group returned

to present it to them and we showed accountability, stewardship and respect to them. If that is the change that theatre achieves, then, I think it's worth it.

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<sup>i</sup> Being my first submission, which was a podcast, I reiterated my goal which is to use the tool of theatre for the society. Anchored by Benjamin Lawrence, a fellow Queen Elizabeth Scholar at the CAPI office, the interview unveiled background information about my research interest among others. It served as a means to investigate and trace my inquiry for personal and corporate evaluation in the CAPI's Cross Border Incoming Commonwealth Scholar program.

<sup>ii</sup> This is the subject matter I discussed in my second submission, a report on a project I was involved in at the Emmanuel Baptist Church, Victoria, BC, Canada. I have elaborated on this report and presented a paper on this project at a conference in National University of Ireland, Galway, Ireland during my first year as a Queen Elizabeth Scholar, University of Victoria.

<sup>iii</sup> This is the subject of my Capstone project entitled 'Breaking down the fence: exploring refugee advocacy through applied theatre'. After a performance, I facilitated a workshop that explores the phases of 'Arriving, Becoming, and Belonging' in the resettlement process.

<sup>iv</sup> This is another subject I dealt with in my third blog 'Is Vulnerability an element of this art?' An artists' Inquiry'.

<sup>v</sup> Marc Weinblatt and Cheryl Harrison, "Theatre of the Oppressor: Working with Privilege towards Social Justice." In *Come Closer: Critical Perspectives on Theatre of the Oppressed*, edited by Emert Toby, and Ellie Friedland, New York: Peter Lang, 2011. These two theatre scholars posit 'systematic oppression', a situation where people in positions of privilege may, consciously or unconsciously, become party to oppression through subtle means based on the values of the dominant culture.

<sup>vi</sup> Kenny Chinyowa, "Re-imagining Boal through the theatre of the oppressor." In *Applied Drama/Theatre as Social Intervention in Conflict and Post-Conflict Contexts*, edited by Hazel Barnes and Marie-Helen Coetzee.

<sup>vii</sup> Griffin, Emory. "Chapter 12: Relational Dialectics." *First Look at Communication Theory*. [S.l.]: McGraw Hill Higher Educat, 2011. 153–67

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid*, p. 4

<sup>ix</sup> Michael Dumlao, *Understanding the Oppressor*. In *TCD Literature Review*.

<sup>x</sup> Sarason, S.B *The Psychological sense of community: prospect for a community psychology*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 1974

<sup>xi</sup> McMillan, 1976

<sup>xii</sup> McMillan, D.W., and Chavis, D.M. *Sense of community: a definition and theory*. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 14.1

<sup>xiii</sup> Augusto Boal's term for audience/participants who are involved in the theatre – 'spect' and 'actors'. He emphasized more on this in his classical book 'Theatre of the Oppressed'.