

**Theatre in Praxis: situating Boal, grassroots democracy
and transnational connections**

by

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ABSTRACT

This research documents the adaptation of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed in Vancouver and Ahmedabad to explore the intersection between geography, grassroots democracy and the role of cultural practices in opening up spaces for active citizenship. I begin by reflecting on the complexity of local and transnational collaboration between individuals and organizations dedicated to radical democratic praxis. The complex relationship between theatre activists and *people living the issues* is used as a provocation for academics to simultaneously reflect upon the politics of participatory research, as well as imagine, rehearse and implement more collaborative forms of knowledge production. This research then considers the ability of forum theatre to disrupt existing hierarchies by producing a critical public sphere in which individuals can engage in an intimate dialogue to challenge dominant social scripts and devise concrete political options. As a cultural practice that has travelled transnationally, I contextualize the ways that forum theatre lives intensely in the historical moment and moves through specific relationships and networks that are situated in time and space.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Table of Contents	iii
List of Figures	iv
Acknowledgements	v
1 Introduction	1
2 Border Crossings in Local and Transnational Solidarity	13
2.1 Introduction	13
2.2 Bringing Poverty into Focus in <i>Practicing Democracy</i>	16
2.3 Accusations of 'Poornography'	25
2.4 Disrupting the Rule of Experts in Transnational Collaboration	34
2.5 Conclusion	47
3 Playing for Social Justice in Ahmedabad, India	50
3.1 Introduction	50
3.2 Spaces of Multiplicity	53
3.3 Contentious Spaces	60
3.4 Conclusion	68
4 Embodied Connections and Hybrid Masala	71
4.1 Introduction	71
4.2 Resituating Boal in Ahmedabad	76
4.3 Translating Boal in Vancouver	80
5 Conclusion	88
References	95

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1	'Nan' animating the issues of seniors living in poverty	19
Figure 2.2	Angel and Trade living in a dumpster, <i>Practicing Democracy</i>	27
Figure 3.1	Vidya performing <i>Aasha</i> in Ahmedabad	54
Figure 3.2	Vidya packing up stage	58
Figure 4.1	Karla working the streets in <i>Practicing Democracy</i>	85

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Introduction

For the past fifty years Augusto Boal has put theatre to work in making politics and politics to work to make theatre. Boal first began formulating the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) as an aesthetic language while working as the artistic director at the Arena Theatre in Sao Paulo in the 1950s. It was a time of surging political nationalism in Brazil, and much of Boal's early work focused on supporting the creation and development of an independent Brazilian drama for a Brazilian audience. In 1964 Brazil underwent a military coup and the left-leaning nationalist government of Joao Goulart¹ was overthrown by a military junta, consolidating the political power of the country's military-industrial complex. By this time Boal had established himself as an artistic director of international attention, and emerged as an outspoken critic of the censorship, kidnappings and 'disappearance' of political opponents, and union and student organizers.

Committed to mobilizing theatre as a tool for galvanizing political opposition, Boal's company of actors took to working with factory labourers, unions and slum dwellers to devise strategies of resistance. Of this time Boal (1995: 1) reminisces,

¹ Joao Goulart's administration (1961-64) can be characterized by its attempt to usher in a number of social and political reforms, including establishing state monopolies in key industries. It also attempted to introduce limited social and agrarian reforms, as well as threatened to nationalize foreign-owned corporations. The military coup in 1964 cemented 22 years of authoritarian rule; civil liberties were severely restricted, political parties abolished, censorship introduced, while politically motivated detentions and murders were common throughout the country.

We rebelled about it [class oppression], our blood boiled, we suffered. We wrote and staged plays, spirited, violent pieces, aggressive in their anger against injustice. We were heroic in our writing of them, sublime in our performance: almost always these plays would end with anthems of exhortation, sung in chorus by the actors, with verses which urged: Let us spill our blood for freedom! Let us spill our blood for our land! Let us spill our blood, let us spill our blood!

Boal also started touring propaganda theatre in the countryside, urging peasants to unite and rise up in solidarity to fight Brazil's grossly exploitative latifundio system.² Boal (1979) recounts a pivotal moment in the development of the Theatre of the Oppressed. The company was touring an agitation theatre production in the northeast of Brazil, performing a play that advocated armed uprising.³ The play ended with cast members taking up arms, singing revolutionary songs, and inciting *campanheiros* to violently claim their rights to the land. After the performance Boal recalls being approached by one farmer who, having been deeply moved by the production, invited the company of actors to join the community in an armed insurrection. Boal (2001: 194) declined the invitation, but the encounter led to his realization that "when we, the genuine artists, talked of giving our blood for a cause, in fact we were taking about *their* blood, the peasant farmers'."

² Landownership in Brazil has been and continues to be highly monopolized. In 1993 the United Nations Development Program noted that the country has the second highest concentration of landownership in the world.

³ Boal's company had established contact with radical Catholic priest Francisco Juliao and the Peasant League, one of the early precursors to the Movimento de Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Landless Worker's Movement). With an estimated membership of 400,000 the MST has emerged as perhaps the largest, most influential social movement in Brazilian history. The mandate of the MST includes pressing for aggressive land reforms by occupying idle land and public buildings to establish cooperative settlements.

It was a moment in which Boal realized that the company's propaganda theatre was revolutionary in theory only, and as such, it was no longer tenable to incite spectators to such radical actions. As middle-class theatre artists, Boal and company recognized that they were expounding solutions to conflicts that had very real life and death consequences for audiences. As a result, Boal returned to Sao Paulo intent on devising a new theatrical format, one in which actors would stage conflicts but, rather than prescribe solutions, improvise them with audiences.

For his condemnation of the military regime, Boal was targeted as a political dissident. In 1971 he was arrested, detained and tortured. Three months later Boal was released (due largely to an international letter writing campaign orchestrated by theatre artists in the United States and Europe) with the assurance that if he did not suspend his activities he would be executed. Boal fled into exile with his family to Argentina. Two years later he was invited to participate in a national literacy campaign organized in Peru by the military government of General Velasco Alvarado.⁴ The objective of *Operacion Alfebetizacion* was the eradication of illiteracy within a span of four years, a massive undertaking considering not just Peru's linguistic diversity, but also the very high levels of illiteracy (at the time- it was estimated that a quarter of the country's 14 million people were illiterate or semi-illiterate).

⁴ Sparked by a dispute with Peru's International Petroleum Company over licensing rights to the La Brea y Parinas oil fields in northern Peru, General Alvarado led the armed forces in the overthrow of the country's elected government. Velasco's administration can be broadly characterized by a series of militant reforms, including the expropriation and nationalization of various industries (i.e. fisheries, telecommunications, oil and power production). Velasco also implemented an assertive program of educational and agrarian reforms.

Boal's participation in the program represented an opportunity to further refine the techniques of forum theatre. Rural peasants from across the country were brought to Chaclayo (a town outside of Lima) where Boal began practicing what he termed 'simultaneous playwriting', theatre that draws upon people's lived experiences to stage scenarios and improvise texts. Boal recalls one group in which the company was working to stage the directions of a woman who expressed frustration with Boal's interpretation. To resolve the impasse Boal invited her up into the dramatic action to rehearse and explore her own ideas. It proved to be a valuable moment for Boal, one in which he saw the possibility of opening up the dramatic narrative so that spectators could enter into the theatrical 'fiction' to devise constructive solutions.

These early experiments in popular theatre eventually led to the development of a new theatrical form. Forum theatre creates the spaces in which spectators (reframed as spect-actors) can physically enter the theatrical 'fiction' to devise political options. Boal (1998: 142) argues that the potential of forum theatre resides in its ability to create spaces where it is possible for citizens to "transgress, to break conventions, to enter into the mirror of theatrical fiction, to rehearse forms of struggle and then return to reality with the images of their desires... [providing] an uneasy sense of incompleteness that seeks fulfilment through real action." This encapsulates Boal's desire to transform the nature of spectatorship, and to revolutionize what he perceives to be the cathartic relationship between actor and spectator in conventional drama. In forum theatre, audience members give no power to dramatic characters to think, feel or act on their behalf. Rather, spect-actors come onto the stage and assume the protagonist's role, empowered to enter into

and open up the dramatic action. The main objective of forum theatre is to transform people “from ‘spectators,’ passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon- into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action” (Boal, 1979: 122). Boal (1979: 141) insists that, “It is not the place of the theatre to show the correct path”, but rather to engage citizens in social dialogue and provide a space in which “all paths may be examined.”

Returning to Argentina Boal’s activities fell under the gaze of state authorities in an increasingly repressive and turbulent political climate. Boal began using ‘invisible theatre’ as a means of working covertly to stimulate public debate on pressing social issues. Invisible theatre involved staging theatrical events in public spaces to disrupt everyday life with actors masquerading as citizens, and performing rehearsed scenarios designed to provoke public discussion. Invisible theatre furthered Boal’s desire to challenge established authority structures and liberate dramatic practices from the confines of the conventional stage by relocating theatre in more ‘popular’ venues, such as: schools, streets, community centres and restaurants. Eventually Boal’s work was censored by the state and he retreated (temporarily) from public life in order to publish three books that more fully articulated his theatrical and philosophical pedagogy. In 1976 Argentina underwent its own military coup commanded by General Videla, who led the armed forces in deposing President Peron. In consolidating a monopoly on political power, General Videla unleashed a wave of systemic violence that targeted liberals,

students and political opponents.⁵ Again fearing state persecution, Boal and his family fled to Europe where he was offered a one-year teaching position at the Sorbonne University. In Europe Boal's work received greater international attention, and through the training of a core group (that consisted of theatre professionals, therapists and popular educators) in the techniques of forum theatre, the Parisian Centre for the Theatre of the Oppressed (CTO) was founded in 1979. The CTO has been (and continues to be) a primary point for the dissemination of Boal's techniques throughout Europe (and beyond).

Boal's more recent undertakings have included experimenting with forum theatre to make law. After returning to Brazil, Boal ran as a member of the Worker's Party (PT), and was elected in 1992 as one of 42 city councillors (*Vereador*) in Rio de Janeiro. As city councillor, Boal secured the funding for five full-time and ten part-time theatre practitioners who established nineteen permanent (along with 31 temporary) Theatre of the Oppressed companies around the city of Rio with a variety of community groups. Each group had a 'joker' (what Boal refers to as a "cultural animator") who led the company in forum theatre techniques and facilitated interventions during public performances.

Based on the public interventions that emerged during these community forum collaborations, lawyers working with Boal drafted legislation that articulated community desires. The idea of this legislative forum theatre model was to turn the public's desires

⁵ In what came to be known as the country's 'Dirty War' it has been estimated that 11,000 Argentines 'disappeared' between 1976-1983.

into municipal law, and in doing so, contribute to the greater democratization of the political decision-making process. During his time in office (1992-1996; Boal ran a second time for public office unsuccessfully), Boal carried thirty laws into what he later referred to as the “bloody arena of the Chamber of Deputies” (2001: 334), thirteen of which were passed. These covered a variety of initiatives, including mandating that all municipal hospitals staff doctors specializing in geriatric medicine, banning all treatments for mental illness that produce irreversible effects, establishing legal privileges for the *Casa das Palmeiras* (a mental health facility), legislating that motels in Rio could not discriminate based on sexual orientation, as well as securing a comprehensive witness protection program (the first in Brazil).

Reminiscing about this remarkable process, Boal (2001: 336) suggests, “It was theatre, fiction. Even so, it showed possible paths: by means of theatre, law can be made. Theatre as politics, not just political theatre.” After 1996 the municipal funding for the Centre for the Theatre of the Oppressed was lost, and Boal recreated the Centre as a non-governmental organization, which continues to produce ‘Legislative theatre without the Legislator’. Of the future of the form, Boal (1998: 80) says:

Next time... where? When? Of course, in Brazil where we intensely believe in this method, and intensely work for it to happen. But this should not be a Brazilian experience. It should spread out into other countries. We want democracy, theatre can help in this process- why not? When I started the Theatre

of the Oppressed movement, many people used to say: "Yes, it is very nice for Latin America, but in other countries it will not work."

While Boal continues his theatrical-political work, the Theatre of the Oppressed has taken on a life of its own. Boal's pedagogy has been taken up and adapted around the world as a cultural methodology through which political and social change is sought. The international festival of the Theatre of the Oppressed has been organized since 1981, bringing companies together to share their work through performances, workshops, and lectures. Boal's literary work has been translated into twenty-five languages, and forum techniques have travelled from New York to Delhi, Manila to Mexico City, emerging as a highly potent strand of political theatre. There is now a vast and diverse interpretative spectrum on Boal's political and aesthetic vision (see Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz, 1994; Cohen-Cruz and Schutzman, 2006).

This thesis travels to Vancouver, Ahmedabad and London in documenting the adaptation of Boal's model of forum theatre by two grassroots theatre companies. The research started simply enough, somewhere in-between my work as a graduate student and professional theatre life. In 2004 I was invited to participate in the development of *Practicing Democracy*, a forum theatre play produced in Vancouver by Headlines Theatre for Living.⁶ The project was exceptional in several respects, most notably because as North America's first experiment with Boal's model of legislative forum

⁶ Headlines Theatre for Living is a company based in Vancouver, British Columbia. The organization was founded in 1981, and has extensive experience working with the techniques and principals of Boal's theatrical pedagogy (see www.headlinestheatre.com).

theatre, the production was organized to explore how Vancouver's City Council could respond (on a policy level) to provincial and federal cuts to social spending. It was an effort to put theatre to work to democratize the political decision-making process by mobilizing theatre to formulate community-based law. As a performer with a long history in theatre, the production intrigued me as a tangible space for mounting oppositional politics to the well-documented fallout of neo-liberal economics.⁷ In documenting the *Practicing Democracy* project I participated in an initial one-week development workshop, after which, working with my graduate supervisor (Geraldine Pratt), I attended council meetings, several performances of the play, and conducted a series of interviews with cast members, city councillors, the legislator, and other workshop participants.

Later that same year I had a chance encounter in Vancouver with Manisha Mehta, the artistic director of Vidya, a grassroots theatre company based in Ahmedabad, India.⁸ Funded and trained by The Pan Centre for Intercultural Arts (based in London, England) Vidya has worked with Boal's pedagogy since 1999. Vidya invited me to visit the

⁷ This issue has become increasingly pressing in British Columbia. Since the election of the B.C. Liberal Party in 2001 there have been massive cuts to public services, social assistance programs and public sector jobs. Employment legislation has been re-drawn so that minimum wage rates have been substantially reduced for first-time workers, and the minimum workday has been reduced from four to two hours. Single parents are now deemed employable when their youngest child turns three (instead of seven), and the eligibility for childcare subsidies has been restricted. Funds for social housing projects frozen, and the Ministry for Women's Equality has been eliminated. In 2003 the United Nations condemned the B.C. government for the impact of state policy on women's lives (Pratt and Johnston, 2007).

⁸ Manisha had been invited to present on Vidya's work at Vancouver's Earth Project, an annual symposium that brings together practitioners, educators, policy-makers and activists from the around the world to present and discuss the role of art in social change (see www.judithmarcuseprojects.ca).

company and I decided to expand the geographic scope of the research. In 2004 I spent two months working with Vidya in Gujarat. During this time I gleaned various ethnographic materials: I did interviews with performers, accumulated stacks of fieldnotes, and analyzed company documents (annual reports, press clippings, songs and video). Travelling with Vidya, I attended community performances around the city of Ahmedabad, witnessed their creative and decision-making process firsthand, and became increasingly involved as a supporter, translator and political ally.

I was drawn to both *Practicing Democracy* and Vidya for a variety of reasons. Each provided sites for connecting performativity with very real material struggles. In this I find solidarity with Houston and Pulido's (2002: 402) concern that certain strands of social theory have taken the trope of performativity to new levels of abstraction, and that there is "an urgent need to reconnect performativity to historical materialism and collective political action." As a researcher I also wanted to experience firsthand how the Theatre of the Oppressed functions as a highly innovative means of working with stories, bodies and (what turned out to be) sometimes extremely personal life histories. The possibilities of theatre as a means of doing research responds to Nigel Thrift's (1997) claim that academic research often prioritizes language while ignoring aspects of our embodied experiences that cannot be fully represented in speech or writing (Pratt and Johnston, 2007). This also draws upon and expands the growing attention that geographers have paid to popular theatre and the possibilities that it offers for fostering creative and constructive dialogues (see Nagar, 2000; 2002; Houston and Pulido, 2002; Pratt and Kirby, 2003).

Both *Practicing Democracy* and Vidya also provide valuable sites for thinking more fully about the complexity of what some have called participatory research. Recently there has been a lot of enthusiasm for action research. Duncan Fuller and Rob Kitchin (2004) argue that action research is the most promising methodological development in the history of radical geography (see also hooks, 1994; Chouinard, 1994; Blomley, 1994; Routledge, 1996; Nagar, 2002; Pratt and Johnston, 2007). Much of this debate has concentrated on exploring to what extent academic research can be engaged in producing knowledge effects that extend beyond the halls of the academy, and the social responsibility of intellectuals situated in positions of power, as well as articulating more democratic research practices that find ways of bringing the experiences of others into visibility. Kitchin and Hubbard (1999: 195) suggest that there has been a lack of critical reflection on the merits and limitations of participatory action research, suggesting “many social and cultural geographers are happy to survey... the exclusionary landscape, but rarely do much to change that landscape apart from the occasional token nod to ‘planning and policy recommendations’.” I turn to both the *Practicing Democracy* and Vidya projects as a means through which to distil the complexity of collaborative work.

After these methodological discussions, I consider how the Theatre of the Oppressed is designed to disrupt established authority structures. It does so in one register by producing a critical public sphere in which alternative types of citizenship are possible. Forum theatre is conceived to generate a performative space in which people living the issues interact with a broader public to construct possibilities for political action, while facilitating physical dialogue that *can* cut across social and other class-

based boundaries. Questions of citizenship and radical democracy are of wide interest to geographers, some of whom have drawn attention to the ways that space lies at the heart of the meanings, obligations and responsibilities of citizenship (see Smith, 1995; Kearns, 1992; Painter and Philo, 1995). I assess the capacity of forum theatre to create critical geographies that challenge prevailing political and social norms.

This thesis then expands its geographic scope by turning to the adaptation of the Theatre of the Oppressed as a cultural methodology that has travelled transnationally. In this I look to the international dissemination of Boal's pedagogy to examine how it has been taken up as a vehicle for physical and social dialogue in heterogeneous circumstances. This traces the diffusion of forum theatre as one particular global culture 'flow'. I am interested in the 'flow' of information, the complex social and institutional geographies constructing transnational networks, as well as the ways that cultural traditions and ideas get translated and reconfigured by local geographies. The work of Headlines Theatre and Vidya are deeply rooted in a particular time and place. As such, it will be important to consider how this methodology is embedded in particular geographies, and the ways that forum theatre techniques have been adapted to specific historical conditions and existing cultural practices. This draws on Geraldine Pratt's (1999: 218) assessment that all political actions are "inherently geographical" acts which are situated and impart meaning in relation to specific social spaces. This suggests that the power of forum theatre does not derive from its universal application but rather from its ability to engage with very specific social, political conditions and historical moments. But listen, enough rhetoric. Let the show begin.

2 **Border Crossings in Local and Transnational Solidarity**

2.1 **Introduction**

I begin by considering both the *Practicing Democracy* and Vidya projects to address several methodological questions. Recently, the issues of power, privilege and authority involved in the production of knowledge have received prolonged scrutiny. Geographers (and others) have increasingly concerned themselves with unsettling the status of academic knowledge, and urged the need to devise strategies that are more democratic and participatory. Cindi Katz (1994: 503) has argued for a reconstituted geography that embodies a “politics of engagement” and which moves “between theory and practice.” For bell hooks (1994: 54) there is an urgent need to (re)formulate an “ethics of struggle” to inform the relationship between intellectuals and people “who have not had access to ways of knowing shared in locations of privilege.” Chouinard (1994: 5) argues that the social responsibility of academics means “putting ourselves on the line” in connecting “with the trenches.”

This is but a small sampling of a rich and varied debate. One that has broadly called for the production of knowledge that not only engages with specific political struggles, but also produces tangible effects that resonate beyond the halls of the academy. For many, collaboration across racial, gendered, class-based, institutional and geographic borders has been identified as a means of both facilitating critical dialogues between those interested in progressive politics, and opening spaces for subjects to act as thinking, speaking agents. Ong (1995: 368) suggests that it is necessary to “describe a

political decentering... in Western knowledge as it allows itself to be redefined by discourses from the geopolitical margins”, a process that involves “a deliberate cultivation of a mobile consciousness... disowning places that come with overly determined claims and reowning them according to different (radical democratic) interests [and] critical agency shifting between transnational sites of power” (qtd in Nagar, 2007: 9). This confirms Routledge’s (1996: 406) sense that, given their access to time and resources, academics have a responsibility to engage directly with the objectives and claims of social movements, while opening “legitimate spaces for practical actions, creating networks of ideas, strategies, communications and alliance.” That said, collaborations and border crossings are no easy affairs.

A distinctive aspect of both these projects is the deployment of theatrical space and cross-border collaboration in the pursuit of grassroots democracy. In constructing *Practicing Democracy*, a range of theatrical games and exercises were used to elicit stories that allowed economically, and in some cases psychologically vulnerable individuals to explore and share experiences (Pratt and Johnston, 2007). In lots of ways, this was only possible through a democratic process that enabled subjects to narrate their experiences in a non-invasive way, while affording a great deal of agency to participants to negotiate self-representation. And yet, conflict erupted throughout this collaborative venture, with various ‘actors’ accusing Headlines Theatre of negligence and of capitalizing on individuals’ experiences of poverty. The Vidya project was also organized to embody a radical political agenda based on the ideals of transnational, democratic praxis. It was orchestrated in such a manner that researchers (white, western men from

the global north) consciously disrupt their positions as so-called experts, allowing for different kinds of encounters between themselves and economically and socially vulnerable men and women living in extreme poverty.

While calls for collaborative research work well in the smooth and abstract space of high theory, given the potential for high-levels of conflict in community-based organizing, it remains a challenging task translating this into critical praxis. Further, as state actors off load social responsibility, and NGOs play an increasing role in development programs in the global south, it is imperative to examine the ways with which class and other politics get produced and reproduced amongst individuals and organizations dedicated to grassroots activism. In adapting Boal's pedagogy, both the *Practicing Democracy* and Vidya projects provide researchers the opportunity to more fully reflect on the complexity of participatory research and the difficulties in local and transnational border crossings. While representing many of the goals of participatory research, these two encounters nonetheless raise questions about the labour of constructing what Richa Nagar and Susan Geiger (2007: 9) describe as "*situated solidarities*", and the challenges facing researches working to produce knowledge "across multiple divides... in ways that do not reinscribe interests of the privileged" (2). In exploring the relationship between the interests of the privileged and vulnerable subjects, I look for a nuanced understanding of how these actors, participating in local and transnational solidarity, are situated in broader power relations and the structural inequities to global capitalism, neo-colonial and class relations.

2.2 Bringing Poverty into Focus in *Practicing Democracy*

The first word of the theatrical vocabulary is the human body. ~ Boal (1985: 125)

Fieldnotes: Vancouver.
February 1st, 2004.

We've gathered at the Japanese Hall in the heart of Vancouver's downtown eastside for the first day of rehearsals in the creation of *Practicing Democracy*. The company of 31 is diverse. The director (David Diamond) begins by explaining that the week's work will be focused on using a variety of theatre games and exercises to elicit stories and experiences. The idea is to "till the soil" for the creation of a play that will tour several venues in the city as forum theatre. Our shared labour has been orchestrated to respond to one guiding question: how the cuts to welfare and social service programs are creating danger in our day-to-day lives? We will be asked to draw upon our own intimate knowledge and direct experiences in constructing *Practicing Democracy*.

That same afternoon, David leads us in our first experiment with image theatre. The company divides into small working groups, in which each individual has an opportunity to mould other participants into frozen images that reflect moments of our own lives. In one scenario, I am shaped into a child on its knees. A vulnerable position. Leslie (another workshop participant) stands above me with her fists raised. Ready to strike. Several others are situated around us with their backs turned in silent disregard. David moves around the image, asking each of us to reveal our character's inner monologue in one sentence that begins with "I want". When tapped on the shoulder, having had little time to compose a response, I blurt out, "I want to know why she hates me." Leslie replies, "I just want to provide enough."

Just as Leslie performs this utterance, she bursts out yelling, shouting that all she really wants is for someone to listen; to give her a break. She finally breaks down into tears. I'm startled by this sudden outburst, unprepared for its emotionally intensity. In the room there are several moments of uncomfortable silence while Leslie collects herself. The company then gathers to discuss the dynamics of the image, and how it provides a site for thinking about what David describes as the "oppressed oppressor." Our group then re-assembles the frozen image which is photographed with a Polaroid, named and posted on the wall of the auditorium for future reference. David reminds us that it is these images that will form the backbone of our work, serving to set up the scenarios- moments of conflict between oppressor and oppressed- that will set the stage for forum theatre.

The *Practicing Democracy* project began with a weeklong workshop in February 2004, which brought together 31 individuals who applied to Headlines Theatre for Living

by submitting a letter about how the cuts to provincial social programs had affected them personally.⁹ Participants were selected to represent a “broad spectrum of voices” precisely because, as the project’s director (David Diamond) argued, “the cuts to welfare have their effect on everyone.... We [at Headlines Theatre] went looking for people living on and off welfare, the homeless, advocates, welfare workers, people doing studies, the elderly” (Diamond, 2004: 7). Six workshop participants were selected to construct a twenty-minute play from the concerns and themes that emerged out of this initial creation-development process (these included the lack of affordable housing in Vancouver, the vulnerability of people living in poverty, the scarcity of food, as well as services for seniors). *Practicing Democracy* was performed in Vancouver in three different venues over a three-week period in March 2004 to a total audience of 1296 people.¹⁰ The play was performed in several community halls across the city in order to attract diverse audiences. As forum theatre, at each performance the play was performed twice for the same audience. When re-performed any member of the audience could freeze the dramatic action by yelling ‘stop!’, at which point they were invited up onto the stage to improvise solutions to the staged conflicts. The director remained on stage to facilitate interventions, which were improvised for a few minutes before discussion was opened up to the audience.

The *Practicing Democracy* project provides a compelling example of what some have called participatory action research. Not only was its creative process democratic

⁹ I was hired by Headlines to participate in this workshop.

¹⁰ An additional estimated 5000 viewers saw a televised performance of the production which included call-in participation on Shaw Community TV.

and collaborative, but also the project aimed at producing effects that extended well beyond the play's workshop and public performances. In an effort to adapt Boal's model of legislative forum theatre, the ambition of the project exceeded its public performances. In February 2003 Vancouver City Council voted unanimously to support the project, and to receive a report based on its forum interventions. The decision to focus on the effects of cuts to social programs was made by polling community opinion. In dialogue with several city councillors, Headlines Theatre put together a list of potential topics, and through its relationships with local community centres polled 144 individuals. The impacts of cuts to social programs received the greatest public support.¹¹ A lawyer (Carrie Gallant) was hired by Headlines Theatre to attend each performance of the play, and to draft a legislative report that documented and classified public interventions into a number of policy recommendations.¹²

As the vignette suggests, a range of theatre games and exercises were deployed in constructing *Practicing Democracy*. During the workshop, participants were engaged in a process that did not explicitly depend on language and script. Rather, the techniques of image theatre were used as a means for the company to express attitudes and emotions through physical imagery. Throughout the weeklong workshop participants spent considerable time 'sculpting' each other's bodies into frozen images that were meant to convey moments of individual and group oppression.

¹¹ The other topics included exploring the relationship between youth and the police, seniors and the city, and a ward electoral system

¹² For a full accounting of this legislative process see Pratt and Johnston, forthcoming.

Figure 2.1 'Nan' animating the issues of seniors living in poverty, *Practicing Democracy*.



Credit: photo by David Cooper

These images provided the company the place for the re-enactment and the staging of lived experience in order to better understand moments of conflict. These 'games' and exercises not only proposed the body as a site of embedded cultural knowledge, but also the site for political action.¹³

¹³ Boal (1979: 127) argues that bodies are shaped by different regimes of labour through "muscular alienation", which must be addressed before participants' bodies can be expressive. Boal's theorizing about the body is (at times) somewhat problematic. He (1992: 139) suggests that it is possible for an ideologically encoded body to adopt a neutral position (if only momentarily), and that actors can displace the "rigid, hardened 'structures' of ideas, muscles, movements, etc... [without replacing] them with others". From a post-structural or Foucauldian perspective this is problematic considering the sensibility that the body can never escape ideological inscription, but rather is constituted entirely through discourse (for an extended discussion concerned with Boal's relationship to post-structuralism see Taussig and Schechner, 1994: 17-34).

Providing space to narrate and stage personal histories had important effects for particular participants. Leslie¹⁴ (a cast member) suggested that,

when we made those first images I freaked out and cried... because I totally didn't expect to end up there, you know, being that frustrated single parent... like I could freak out and hit my kid [because] there's no supports... Confronting that, and then meshing that with the frustration I felt as a welfare worker trying to advocate and fight for every fucking penny I could get my clients... And I think about those two experiences and I think about being on one side of the counter and on the other side of the counter, and my whole life meshed into that, and... confronting my own issues, my own relationship with my child, the frustration of being a government employee... all at once (Interview, 7 April 2004).

Leslie (who ended up playing an unemployed public sector worker in the play created from the weeklong workshop) reveals herself as a complex subject. She illustrates how the workshop provided a space for spontaneous expression and moments of self-staging, while enabling an opportunity to critically reflect on her multiple, somewhat contradictory positionality. A basic tenet of the workshop was to encourage participants to critically self-observe in what Boal (1995: 29) describes as a "mirror which we can penetrate to modify our image", and in doing so, carry these images back into the routines of daily life. But, while the process clearly provided an aesthetic space in which

¹⁴ The names of cast members and workshop participants have been replaced with pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

to explore difficult testimony, it (unlike my interview) did not require Leslie to situate or fully reveal the origin of this experience.

In keeping with Boal's non-verbal techniques, during the image work participants were asked to draw upon and disclose (sometimes) personal life experiences without talking about their origins. This did have the effect of producing a kind of confessional atmosphere.¹⁵ The fact the workshop asked participants to explore difficult narratives without demanding a full disclosure is important to researchers, especially for those working with socially and psychologically vulnerable individuals. This is particularly relevant considering the demands that social researchers often make for intimacy without opening genuine spaces for individuals to act as thinking, speaking agents. By engaging a methodological process that was democratic, *Practicing Democracy* offered participants a great deal of agency in selecting and rejecting representations of their own lived experiences. Boal's pedagogy, which was used to bring participants' experiences in images and words, provides fruitful ground for considering how theatre can produce a space for self-staging, critical reflection, and concretizing political issues in ways that do not depend explicitly on language or full disclosure.

The methodological potential of such theatrical games and exercises was due- in part- to what Victor Turner (1983: 233) argues to be the "volatile, sometimes dangerous explosive essence" of improvisation, or what Dorrine Kondo (2000: 63) describes as the

¹⁵ In her work with TO, Bernice Fisher (1994: 192-193) has made similar observations, suggesting, "the lack of pressure to verbalize afforded participants a certain measure of safety to express deep feelings they could not or did not wish to explain."

radical potential of “flights of fancy” possible in the theatre. Carrie Gallant (the lawyer hired by Headlines Theatre to attend public performances and draft the legislative report) made a similar observation,

[In the] Theatre... people are able to get up there and say they're not really playing themselves, but they're able to let a lot out. They are able to work through things in a way that is okay because it's all acting, right? It's all play-acting, don't worry. And we fall back behind the mirage and really at the same time the truth is out there... it's an emotional play... these are their real issues (Interview, 30 April 2004).

Likewise Judith Butler (2004: 28-29) argues that

fantasy is part of the articulations of the possible, it moves us beyond what is merely actual and present into a realm of possibility, the not yet actualized or the not actualisable... Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home... These practices of instituting new modes of reality take place in part through the scene of embodiment, where the body is not understood as a static and accomplished fact, but as an aging process, a mode of becoming that, in becoming otherwise, exceeds the norm, reworks the norm, and makes us see how realities to which we thought we were confined are not written in stone.

For Leslie the workshop represented a place to critically self-reflect and to imagine ways of becoming. Other members of the company also testified to the positive effects of the workshop's 'as-if' space, with several participants speaking about the potential of having a space in which to relate and stage personal narratives. For Elizabeth (cast member) this was especially significant because, "When you're old and you're poor and a woman, you're anonymous so to speak" (Interview, 8 February 2004). Whereas for Maria (workshop participant) the project presented the opportunity to "have a space to talk about my experiences [as a recent immigrant in Canada] because usually you have to hide them... I felt connected [as] I haven't ever before felt [in Vancouver]" (Interview, 12 February 2004). Julia (workshop participant) argued that the workshop represented a place in which to

feel validated and respected... you know, one of the big issues is that people got paid. And it's not just [the] money. It's the dignity, because everybody is always doing another goddamn program, for the people in need. And they're always doing it for us. This, you were part of something else. You were part of the building. You were part of the research in a way that were creating it. So you were actively doing something, it wasn't being done to you (Interview, 8 February 2004).

Julia's feelings of being "validated and respected" raise the proposition that if researchers are serious about devising radical research practices, an important point is to develop

ways that subjects are active agents in shaping the research process and have a vested interest in the outcome of the project.

Not only did the workshop afford a measure of privacy to individuals but also provided agency for subjects to select and reject moments as thinking, creative agents. Based on lived experiences image exercises were used as starting points for social investigation and improvisation. Once constructed, images were then 'animated' in various ways, and participants were asked to interpret and imagine how personal narratives related to broader social issues. The rationale being to illustrate how each individual is simultaneously an object of oppressive mechanisms, as well as an agent of social change.

In lots of ways, the workshop embodied a radical political agenda that focused on bringing the experiences of vulnerable individuals into focus. This process had important effects for various members of the company, and demonstrates the rich potential of forum theatre as a methodological strategy that provides spaces for subjects to negotiate self-representation. And yet, the project's democratic process can only be carried so far as high levels of conflict did emerge throughout the project, with some participants accusing the process as being sensational, undemocratic and exploitive (Pratt and Johnston, 2007).

2.3 Accusations of 'Poornography'

Fieldnotes: Vancouver
February 6th, 2004

It is the last day of the workshop for *Practicing Democracy*. Carlos has not shown up for rehearsals. This has raised considerable concern in the company because not only has he been hired as a cast member who will carry the play in a series of public performances in Vancouver, but also (for those who know him personally) his absence is strangely out of character.

During the break for lunch, the director asks me to go and check on Carlos, who apparently lives several blocks away on Cordova Street, just off Main and Hastings. Arriving, I realize Carlos lives in some sort of government transition-housing complex. The entrance to the large six-story concrete development is barred with fortress-like doors. I buzz a receptionist to explain under the suspicious gaze of several residents. A social worker appears to let me in. I relate the company's concern over Carlos' absence this morning, and she agrees to walk me up to his room. She has no hesitation unlocking Carlos' door after getting no immediate response.

I am relieved to see that Carlos is in fact home, and appears fine as he jumps out of bed at the unexpected arrival. It's obvious that he has been drinking heavily. The smell of stale cigarette smoke permeates. His place is small, sparse and functional. There is little more than an electric cook plate, bed, T.V., sheets of poetry lay scattered throughout. I explain the company's anxiety and ask if he's planning on coming back to our last day. Carlos tenses, and defensively explains that as much as he would like to, he can't as the workshop has been an extremely emotional experience. He promises to contact David [the director]. I leave, making my way back to the Japanese Hall with his regrets for the rest of the group.

Over the past week, Carlos and I have become casual friends. During this time he has shared some of his personal history. He has spoken sparingly about his memories of Guatemala, of his family being killed by government counterinsurgency forces, of fleeing the country and entering Canada as a political refugee, of being a peer educator at Vancouver's Carnegie Centre, of being in and out of prison, of drug addiction.

Carlos would return to the project as a cast member of *Practicing Democracy*, but would again withdrawal from the production. This time he would not respond to a second visit made by a fellow cast member and stage director (in fact he refused to open his door to them). He remained silent to repeated telephone

calls made by the director and inquiries made by the building's social worker. He was explicit that he did not want to discuss his withdrawal from the project.

Conflict first emerged during the workshop concerning the perception that the creative process was sensationalizing particular stories. The tension over representational politics erupted during a group discussion when Jamie (workshop participant) suggested that the workshop was effectively silencing particular members of the company. She argued that by focusing on the more sensational issues of public violence, prostitution and drug addiction, the company had essentially failed to make space for the more 'mundane' experiences of poverty. Jamie suggested that this failed to address how oppression was being experienced differently by different members of the company (she drew particular attention to the experiences of single mothers, residents from *outside* the downtown eastside, those who are physically challenged and public sector workers). Further, she expressed anxiety over who in fact owned the production, and while acknowledging that participants had been hired as employees, she feared that Headlines Theatre were acting as "poverty pimps", capitalizing on the experiences of the poor without opening ownership of the creative process to the true spirit of democratic collaboration. These were strong allegations, accusations that were shared by several other members of the group. Leslie suggested that,

I felt... prostituted for my experience of poverty... Here I'll give you five hundred and fifty bucks a week and you can tell me all about your living hell... we commodified our experiences of poverty... I made jokes about people in the

West End paying to see people in my part of town's poverty experiences on the stage (Interview, 7 April 2004).

Figure 2.2 Angel and Trade living in a dumpster, *Practicing Democracy*, 2004.



Credit: photo by David Cooper

There were several external factors that contributed to producing sensational narratives during the workshop. Julia (workshop participant) argued that

believe it or not those were the safe issues [prostitution, public violence, drug addiction]... From working with teens in schools... the improves you always get are the pimps, the drugs, the alcohol, no matter where the kids come from. So those are the safe issues... but when it [the workshop] got down to the core... it became the real consequences... The issues suddenly became real... real

situations, and real emotional investment with many, many things in it... it's much more exciting to be the crack addict on the corner who can't get his fix... That's the safer issue to deal with... It's emotionally safer to deal with... because it's more like playacting. It's more like T.V. It's more like Tarantino for god sake... It's more like what we get bombarded with... it's not something we're going to do (Interview, 8 February 2004).

Julia raises the proposition that in some ways the more sensational story is somehow the safer one, and that participants chose to narrate their own stories through established scripts or other popular narratives (Pratt and Johnston, 2007). A further factor to consider in the production of sensational narratives is the actual physical location of the workshop. During the course of the week's work the company witnessed two extreme acts of physical violence, one involving the assault of a young woman by two male police officers, the other a fatal stabbing of a man. Perhaps it is not surprising then that because the workshop took place in Vancouver's downtown eastside that the more sensational narratives of poverty made their way into *Practicing Democracy*. For researchers this means that it is vital to consider both where information is collected and where subjects' narrate their experiences, including the physical location.

Yet, conflict over the sensational nature of *Practicing Democracy* persisted. A cast member noted in the media's reception of the play, "Nobody's interested in the middle class [affected by the cuts to social programs]. People wanted the fucking dumpster [the play included a character that lived in a dumpster]... everybody wanted in

on that dumpster. But to me it was important that everybody understand that the middle class is the new class of poor in this country” (Interview, 7 April 2004). It is not my intention to assess the sensational nature of *Practicing Democracy*. Rather, I would ask whether or not researchers can be charged similarly? Are academics guilty of being drawn to the sensational? To stories of deprivation rather than the ‘mundane’? Is there a need in our own writings to challenge particular representational clichés?

I began this section with an ethnographic vignette relating Carlos’ withdrawal from the *Practicing Democracy* project. I did so because it signals important ethical and methodological issues for researchers working with socially vulnerable individuals. Clearly, while the theatrical ‘games’ and exercises deployed in constructing *Practicing Democracy* offered both a measure of privacy and possible therapeutic effects, for others the process itself re-activated old trauma. One participant suggested that

when you do [this] work, it affects people. And to what degree do you have a responsibility to them? You have to deal with that ethically, and I think a lot of unintended consequences come out of doing work like this... I guess it depends upon on your ethics and what you’re trying to achieve. Yes, it was a job and we were paid, but when I look at Carlos and he started having flash backs to the shit that happened to him... he started drinking, getting fucked up, won’t come out of his apartment. I think about him and his participation and all of that, and oh, I hope somebody checks up on him. Well, I think we have more of a responsibility to him than that (Interview, 7 April 2004).

Where does a theatre company's responsibility begin and end?¹⁶ We may very well ask the same of researchers. Where is that slippery line for academics? What are the social and economic responsibilities that researchers take on when engaged in collaborative ventures?

The accusations that Headlines Theatre was somehow negligent are particularly distressing considering the significant resources the company put in place for the project. All workshop participants were paid an honorarium of \$500 per/week, while cast members received \$550 over a seven-week period. During the workshop a full-time support worker was on staff to provide information on available social services and to help with any emotional stress that surfaced during the course of the project. Headlines also provided bus tickets, a childcare subsidy for single parents, along with offering to help cast members open bank accounts, as well as providing catered lunches for 35 people each day of the workshop. Two weeks of safe accommodation was arranged for two individuals who came into the project homeless, and for one cast member over a

¹⁶ This has been a recurrent theme and concern throughout my work as a community-based theatre artist in Vancouver. For example, in 2003 I worked as a mentor in *The National Demonstration Project*, a research project that was part of a three-year study conducted by researchers at McGill University. It focused on assessing the use of theatre in preventative education, working specifically with 'youth at risk' in Vancouver's Strathcona neighbourhood. At the end of the project, several mentors (myself included) experienced significant anxiety over breaking relationships with (in some cases) extremely vulnerable youth. Little or no planning had been made by researchers to deal with the fallout following the program when grant money had been exhausted. Also in 2003, I worked peripherally on *In the Heart of a City*, a play performed by members of the downtown eastside community in conjunction with theatre professionals. During the production strong opposition emerged, with some participants expressing strong concern over the fact that they were not getting paid, nor were properly fed. Interestingly several members of the *Practicing Democracy* workshop also participated in this production.

three-month period.¹⁷ These are significant resources that required a ten-month fundraising initiative to raise a production budget of \$153,000 (Director's Report, 2004). Further, with a long history of working with socially marginalized groups, Headlines Theatre is well aware of the work's potential psychological effects. David Diamond (1994: 36) observes that creating forum theatre requires a

journey that both the joker [director] and the participants should be prepared for. Because that journey investigates oppressions from the participants' lives, it travels to places with negative memories or feelings. However, this journey does not stop there. By investigating the oppression and finding ways to deal with it we can travel through it and arrive at a place of empowerment... the process is not complete until we take our discoveries back into reality and apply them.

While aware of the psycho-dramatic undertones of the Theatre of the Oppressed, David Diamond is equally clear about the social responsibility of Headlines Theatre, arguing that,

Headlines is a theatre company, not a social service agency... as a theatre company we have [a] responsibility to put some structure in place, to a degree, and we do that well. But then there's also a time when you go, and now it's over folks. And they know that in advance, you're just straight about it, because what

¹⁷ Feeding workshop participants and finding suitable accommodation for those who came into the project homeless was central to Headlines' contract with its community sponsors (see Director's Report, 2004).

are we suppose to do? Projects have a beginning, a middle and an end, and you move on to the next thing because there's ninety thousand a year in operating money from three different levels of cultural government, and they give you that money to produce theatre, not to be a social service agency (Interview, 1 June 2004).

Nevertheless, some participants continued to express strong views about the responsibilities that Headlines Theatre had to those in the project, and in particular the trauma experienced by Carlos. Leslie suggested that,

When we ended that play about poverty, about the government and all that shit, and David's asking people to open their heads and hearts and their whatever. When we finished, Theresa still didn't have a fucking place to live, and was going back on the street. And nobody, including myself- in some way that is totally embarrassing to admit to you or anybody else- nobody cared. We're all a bunch of bull-shitters. Do you know what I mean? I got a fucking job for six weeks [as an actor], Caleb, and I can only hope and believe that city hall pays attention to some of that, that the experience gave everyone else something, that Theresa finds somewhere to live and [Carlos] doesn't spend the next six months fucked up at the bottom of a can of beer... I feel obligated in this weird way to say, oh yeah, it makes a difference, does this, that. But I just don't know in my heart of hearts (Interview, 7 April 2004).

In constructing *Practicing Democracy*, theatrical space was deployed to not only bring experiences into visibility, but also facilitate the rehearsal of political options and staging of concrete imaginings. Further, as legislative forum theatre, the ambition of the project exceeded both the workshop and public performances. Various 'actors' expressed a keen sense of optimism for *Practicing Democracy* largely because of the perception that the project would have an impact on Vancouver's political-decision making process. Such expectations were not unfounded, but neither were they immediately realized (Pratt and Johnston, forthcoming). The program for the play included a letter from the Mayor of Vancouver (Larry Campbell) stating that by participating in the project, "City Hall will be able to listen to people who might not otherwise engage in a political process and incorporate their creative ideas into the development of municipal policy."

Practicing Democracy represented a highly innovative and bold attempt to bring together people living in poverty, citizens and policy makers. It did so by folding together theatre and activism by moving individuals' experiences and the effects of cuts to social programs into a broader public debate. Nevertheless, Leslie's sharp criticisms bring into focus how collaborating across differences of class can be fraught and riddled with conflict. During the course of the project, this discord manifested in participants expressing concern over the perception that their experiences were being capitalized on by Headlines Theatre, and commodified so that largely middle-class audiences, the media and policy makers could vicariously participate while remaining relatively untouched by the issues. Given the limited resources available to participants and the tough life circumstances that they faced at the end of the production, Leslie's disillusionment is

hardly surprising. These are difficult issues to resolve. What can be gained from this encounter is a much greater appreciation of the difficulties and challenges involved in working collaboratively across class boundaries to affect social change. Practicing radical democracy can be a messy affair, and requires a commitment and willingness from all to engage these politics in order to imagine, rehearse and implement greater social equity.

2.4 Disrupting the Rule of Experts in Transnational Collaboration

The Vidya project also raises important ethical questions regarding participatory research and the production of knowledge across multiple boundaries. Vidya was orchestrated to disrupt the authority of outside experts. The project was established in 2000 in a transnational collaboration between the Pan Centre for Intercultural Arts¹⁸ and the Darpana Academy, a performing arts school in Ahmedabad, India. Having received a substantial grant (£97,824) from Britain's Lottery Community Fund, and with a long history of working with Darpana, the Pan Centre initiated Vidya as a three-year pilot project in the city of Ahmedabad. Vidya brought together sixteen men and women from Ahmedabad's slums¹⁹ for the purpose of training this group in Augusto Boal's theatrical

¹⁸ The Pan Centre for Intercultural Arts is an NGO based in London, England. Established in 1986, the Pan Centre focuses on the "research and exploration of interculturalism" through a range of artistic practices. The Pan Centre has a long history of working in the United Kingdom, as well as establishing arts-based development projects in Palestine, Kenya, the Netherlands, Belgium, Jamaica and India (see www.pan-arts.net/index.htm).

¹⁹ Slums are defined here as highly compact areas of the city with a concentration of poorly built, improvised tenements, with little access to electricity, sewer infrastructure, and safe drinking water. These areas of the city have little access to electricity, concentrated cases of disease and high levels of illiteracy. Since the 1950s, urban growth has mushroomed in Ahmedabad's periphery areas where so-called 'illegal' occupation of

pedagogy. The Theatre of the Oppressed was chosen precisely because it was deemed to offer a critical praxis through which to engage what were perceived to be “very, very entrenched views in the Ahmedabad slums, [and] to show people on the ground that some people from their own communities would get up there and take a stand” (Interview with John Martin²⁰, 19 January 2005).

The Vidya project was exceptional in that it was designed to transfer the skills and technologies necessary for *people living the issues* to operate independently as community researchers and practitioners of forum theatre. Ralph Yarrow²¹ suggests that,

[The Vidya project] is actually a methodology, or a tool, or a way of delivering... educational skills... it develops an awful lot of different skills. It develops performance skills, it develops presentational skills, it develops, you know, flexibility, the ability to work with other people, the ability... to organize yourself... the ability to negotiate with funders, and with all the agencies, you know, a whole range of social and kind of economics and organizational skills...

A vast range, actually, you know, what are called transferable skills (Interview, 14 January 2005).

public and private lands has been the primary housing option for new migrants and other economically vulnerable groups. According to a recent study conducted by the UN-Habitat (2003) the percentage of Ahmedabad’s housing, categorized as slums, has increased dramatically, with 40 percent of the city’s population (total 5.5 million) now living in slum conditions (figures based on 1991 census data).

²⁰ John Martin is the artistic director of the Pan Centre.

²¹ Ralph Yarrow is a professor at the University of East Anglia, as well as a close collaborator of John Martin and the Pan Centre for Intercultural Arts.

Yarrow points out that a central tenet of the project was to disseminate a range of 'transferable' skills. This is a difficult undertaking because members of the company not only came into the project with no performing experience, but also were largely illiterate or semi-literate with little in the way of formal institutional education. Vidya began with a series of workshops led by John Martin and Mojisola Adebayo (a freelance theatre professional based in London, England) that mentored the company in TO techniques, improvisational skills, vocal training, as well as elements of physical theatre and playwriting. In order that Vidya could perform in various areas of the city, a mini-bus was purchased and converted into a mobile theatre by customizing one side of the vehicle into a folding stage.

An intriguing aspect in the formation of the company was that it not only involved training in Boal's pedagogy, but also in research strategies more familiar to social scientists. In identifying areas of the city in most need of intervention, Vidya undertook an extensive period of quantitative and qualitative research. Over a six month period, the company conducted sample surveys in eight areas of the city that detailed various demographic indicators: approximate population size, gender ratios, literacy rates, nearest school, hospital and police stations, as well as the approximate monthly income of families, primary occupations, and rates of enrolment of young women in school (Vidya Annual Report, 2001).²² The purpose of this research was to establish the company's credibility as community researchers, as well as provide what Manisha Mehta describes

²² In 2004 Vidya expanded its work into twenty additional areas in and around the city of Ahmedabad. A similar research process was undertaken as a precursor to performing forum theatre in these communities.

as a “starting point to the external assessors of the project and its progress” (Interview, 8 December 2004). The gathering of statistical data was both about gaining insight into the socioeconomic landscape, and legitimizing the company’s work for external funding bodies (in the UK) and municipal authorities in Ahmedabad (both which desired to quantify the effects of the project).²³

But drawing a statistical map of various slum areas in the city was only a starting point for Vidya’s work. As this initial research was followed-up and supported by collecting oral testimonies and stories from community members in order to reveal “what kind of issues are of most concern for their area” (Mehta, Interview, 28 December 2004). The gathering of personal experiences was meant to strengthen relationships within the communities, while providing the opportunity for Vidya to glean the specific issues around which to construct issue-based plays that then returned to these same communities as forum theatre.

²³ The difficulty in quantifying the effects of forum theatre was a recurrent theme during my research. In his work with the Theatre of the Oppressed in the United Kingdom, Adrian Jackson (a leading practitioner of Boal’s work in Europe and artistic director of Cardboard Citizens) suggested that, “There’s this big thing about evaluation, and evaluating and assessments, and outputs, and blah, blah, blah... When people talk about the work and the changes it makes in people, actually... we, knowing people over a period of time, are very clear about the changes that happen, because we know the people. They might not be as simple as somebody got a job, somebody did this, somebody stopped taking smack. They might be that, but they might not be. But they would be visible. I want... people to be able to do their own evaluation of themselves... you would be able to see the difference” (Interview, 20 January 2005). In exploring politics in NGO work in north India, the Sangtin Writers and Richa Nagar (2006: 144) echo similar sentiments, asking “how professionalization of organizational structures and processes makes many women’s organizations accountable primarily to their funders, who seek certain kinds of reports and statistics and whose insistence on seeing “evidence of empowerment” often results in standardization and homogenization of grassroots strategies.”

One of the central objectives of the Vidya project has been to not just disseminate skills, but also contribute directly to the economic and material wellbeing of the company's performers. This has been accomplished by providing long-term job security²⁴, helping members of the company open bank accounts, get passport, cover emergency medical procedures, and (in one case) secure a bank loan to start a family business. But the effects for the individuals involved in the project extend well beyond greater economic stability, as the work has also affected their individual social status within their respective communities. Savitaben (Vidya performer) has observed that

When even a small problem would arise [in her community], they will come to me because they know that we're working for the community and for bringing change. So, small problems, people... will come to me and, you know, check with me how to go further... I feel respected... if they want to write a small letter also they'll come to me and get it checked, because they feel that, you know, [since] I'm working within a social institution... I have a better knowledge (Interview, 5 January 2005).

Bhikiben (Vidya performer) notes that her participation in the project has resulted in her community

paying more attention to me, they say they really admire and respect our work, and they say our work has made a difference on how they think... They see that

²⁴ Vidya has employed 16 individuals with full-time work over the past six years. Each member of the company is paid a monthly salary of 4,000 rupees (\$114 Canadian).

I'm working for some social upliftment. They respect me... they also have a confidence in me. And it has helped in changing people around me in the community, the people around me. If there's some injustice going on around, they also know that now they have a right and are capable, you know, to say against it when something wrong goes on... I'm the main [person] in my community right now. And I feel responsible for all of them. If there is any kind of problems they come down to me and I help solve them, from the smallest to big problems... We had a problem where we got a notice from somebody that the government are going to destroy our houses in 15 days. But I went... and I guided my neighbours that no, we are not doing anything wrong, they are our houses and nothing is going to happen to us (Interview, 23 December 2004).

In assessing the effects of her involvement in Vidya, Raniben echoes similar sentiments, observing that

There has been a change in myself not only in the community. My attitude towards life, my way of thinking, my way of sitting and talking to a person has totally changed... My community looks at me in a very different way, you know... I have a totally different position in my society now... They look at me with pride... If I say something on some issues, they try and hear me. I was for so long been abused in a lot of ways. I was, you know, living in a, I've had a very hard life... let me tell you. There have been lots of changes for me. My entire life has changed (Interview, 3 January 2005).

For members of the company, their participation in the Vidya project has had a pronounced material effect in their intimate lives: long-term, humane employment and securer living conditions, as well as shifting their social status and sense of responsibility within their own communities.

In lots of ways, the Vidya project represents a compelling example of grassroots, collaborative development that, though funded by the British government, departs significantly from the singular logic of development based on universal, Eurocentric models that have long sought to mould the world in the liberal image of the West. "The very reason", John Martin argues,

that we did Vidya in the way that we did was because we felt it was no longer tenable to do theatre development as nice, well educated, middle class people going into these areas and saying, 'well, you've got problems and we know how to solve them', you know, which has the sort of arrogance which 90 percent of development work has. And the thinking behind Vidya was to try and get the community itself debating with itself, so we got the Vidya members coming out of those communities going back in and talking and working it out with them. It's not been set up so that John in London, or the intellectual Londoners are really behind it. There are [ethical] questions, but [what's] the alternative if you don't do it? I'm very aware that, you know, coming from essentially a white educated background, and a liberal thinking background... one has to be aware of the, yeah, western arrogance of ethical thinking... One of the reasons I wanted to do it

[the Vidya project] was because it was very clear that girl children in the slums were not achieving their potential. They were more likely not to be born in the first place, and if they were born they were more likely to be undernourished and be illiterate... But, I think, part of defence position here is that, again the research was done by them, by themselves, the work is done by them for them. It's a debate, a dialogue, which has been started within the communities... We are opening up the possibility for them to say what's right or wrong in their lives (Interview, 19 January 2005).

Martin argues that an integral aspect of the Vidya project has been to disrupt his position as an outside expert by transferring the skills and expertise necessary for Vidya to operate independently. While reflexive of his position of privilege, Martin suggests that not only is there a danger in becoming mired in poststructural demands that stress social differentiation, but also that cultural difference does not represent an insurmountable gap. This exemplifies both She's (1994: 665) assessment that there is a danger in "essentializing differences between East and West", as well as Young's (1990) concern over whether or not it is possible to respect difference and remain committed to social justice. Martin navigates these murky waters by contending that there is a much greater peril in not taking action against social injustice, and that the Vidya project embodies a radical political agenda because it consciously disrupts the hierarchical relationship between (post)colonial subject and researcher. And yet, there is a politics here that needs to be unpacked.

Timothy Mitchell (2002) reminds us that a central feature of modern life has been the abstraction of knowledge through its centralization, which has the effect of inscribing the authority of experts. Central to this process has been producing nature (and social life) as an object that can be abstracted from its context, transported across great distance and studied and administrated from afar. This has been possible due to the production and circulation of knowledge through nodes and networks of experts. In organizing Vidya, Ralph Yarrow argued that there was

a very great danger of being regarded as some sort of outside expert. And therefore the whole structure of the project becoming top down, and not really listening to what people actually want, and drawing on their skills and resources. So... as far as possible, the project should always be in the hands of the people who are embedded in the local communities (Interview, 14 January 2005).

Martin and Yarrow clearly echo (post)colonial sentiments that warn of the dangers of misrepresentation and cultural appropriation typical of encounters between researchers situated in positions of privilege and subjects in the global south (see Spivak, 1988; Nagar, 2003; 2007). Their mutual desire to decentralize their authority to those “embedded in the local communities” is especially noteworthy. Nevertheless, both are highly mobile experts who attend international conferences, set up projects around the world, give presentations, produce publications and receive lucrative research grants. Further, central to legitimizing their own work and accountability to funding bodies has been the promise of study, publication and dissemination of research materials. This

raises the proposition that there are specific constraints placed on researchers situated in institutional cultures that must be accounted for in assessing transnational activism.

The politics here exemplify Richa Nagar's (2006: 3) concern that there is an overwhelming tendency amongst researchers and specialists who have access to considerable resources to use the global south as a "source of raw materials", and that knowledge production about the majority world "has become part of a globalized network of institutions and actors who share ideas, collaborate, and make critical decisions" (5). Her concern is that that experts from the global north continue to control the context in which knowledge gets produced and circulated.

I entered this project just as politics involved in producing knowledge across institutional and geographic borders emerged between the Pan Centre and Vidya in India. The multi-year funding provided by the British Community Lottery Fund had ended and Vidya had just discovered (through a mutual colleague in London) that the Pan Centre had received a second grant from the British Research Council to document the Vidya project and to use the company as a model in establishing similar pilot projects in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.²⁵ This research program also includes establishing a regional network that will support sharing expertise and practices amongst arts organizations in

²⁵ The Pan Centre is currently in the process of establishing three new pilot projects. One in Pakistan, a second in Sri Lanka working with a community of Indian Tamils who work as indentured agricultural workers. The Pan Centre is also in the advanced stages of organizing a project in the Punjab with young women labouring in the carpet weaving industry.

India.²⁶ As part of this current research agenda, the Pan Centre is in the process of sending a researcher from the United Kingdom to Ahmedabad in order to translate Vidya's entire theatrical repertoire (songs and scripts) from Gujarati to English.

According to John Martin, the purpose of this research is to

tell people about Vidya, and to- and not really seed other Vidyas, because I think that gets into a new imperialism, or new colonialism- but get the brand out there and sort of, you know, have a Vidya here and Vidya there. Much more, you know, "Look there's you guys over here working in the forests of Bhopal or working up in Charancho in the mountains, or working in the slums in Mumbai. You're doing work and, you know, you're looking to set up exchanges, you're looking for new work opportunities. This is Vidya. This is how it works. What can they teach you? What can you teach them? How can we get a much broader network moving in India, which doesn't need us?" That's the important thing. In the same way that Vidya now doesn't need us. They needed us very much at the beginning, but the empowerment process has been to quite deliberately follow it through to the point where, you know, if Vidya doesn't phone me again, I'm happy (Interview, 19 January 2005).

²⁶ The first stage of this program has been completed during my fieldwork. The Pan Centre had organized a series of conferences in Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, Trivandrum and Calcutta, which brought together 250 individuals from 50 different organizations. Research money was spent on paying participants' travelling, accommodation and food expenses. The groups who participated in these events came from diverse artistic backgrounds, the only parameter being that they use some sort of theatre or performance in their grassroots activism. In 2005, the Pan Centre established two funding opportunities to support the networking between arts organizations in India: the first (£1000) to facilitate exchanges of personnel, the second (£312) to fund workshops.

Ralph Yarrow offered similar insight,

We thought, okay... this might be a very interesting model to present in [an] Indian context, and to share with other groups... and say, "Have you got similar situations that you come across? Can you apply similar methods? And have you got experiences and expertise of your own that could be shared with Vidya, or with other groups in India?" So the research project, we felt the target [was] not just reporting it in British academic journals or international academic journals, but also sharing the outcomes of the project amongst practitioners in India. Because there are lots of people doing work... They don't have the resources to get together to share their knowledge and their expertise (Interview, 14 January 2005).

An intrinsic aspect of the Vidya project has been to break the type of 'dependency culture' that Martin and Yarrow perceive to be rampant in development programs in India (and beyond). The first step in this process has been to disrupt their authority as outside experts. This is manifested in their current program of research because it focuses on facilitating the sharing of information and expertise amongst arts organizations in India. In doing so, the Pan Centre hopes to further the development of a sustainable, independent Indian polity, while extending their own knowledge production beyond "British academic journals". This demonstrates not only the radical potential for researchers to engage directly in the political struggles of less privileged communities, but also reflects Faust and Nagar's (2002: 74) observation that, despite criticisms,

transnational collaboration remains a means to “espouse progressive values, goals and methodologies.”

That said, tension arose between the Pan Centre and Vidya around questions of appropriation and intellectual ownership. During my fieldwork, Vidya expressed anxiety over what happens to the company’s materials and success story once it gets abstracted from the context of Ahmedabad. They also articulated frustration over the lack of transparent dialogue between themselves and the Pan Centre, and their decision to use Vidya as a template in establishing similar projects in India elsewhere. They also questioned the utility of the Pan Centre’s current research agenda, as Vidya has neither the experience nor the resources to support the networking and sharing of expertise amongst arts organizations in India. This was aggravated further because Vidya did not feel that they were in a financial position to assert themselves and clarify the Pan Centre’s intentions for fearing of upsetting the possibility of future patronage. The inability of Vidya to express these concerns directly to Martin and Yarrow demonstrate that actors who are situated in transnational solidarity occupy very different positions of power and privilege. Who garnishes material benefits from local or transnational grassroots activism is not confined to mere academic argument. Rather, these politics have very real consequences for both Vidya’s performers and the communities with which it works in Ahmedabad.²⁷

²⁷ It is perhaps an understatement to note the financial difficulties facing Vidya following the termination of funding by the Pan Centre. Vidya’s annual operating budget is 1,500,000 rupees (\$42,868 Canadian). Sustaining the company’s work from funding sources in India has been and continues to be a great challenge for Vidya.

2.5 Conclusion

The *Practicing Democracy* and Vidya projects clearly embody many of the ideals and goals of collaborative, participatory praxis. In mobilizing Boal's pedagogy, these projects demonstrate the ways that the Theatre of the Oppressed represents a highly innovative means of bringing the experiences of the vulnerable into visibility. The goal is not simply to record and document. Rather, in providing moments for self-staging, critical reflexivity and active citizenship, *Practicing Democracy* and Vidya facilitated spaces in which subjects expressed agency in narrating and staging their own experiences. This was largely possible because both projects deployed theatrical space to provide opportunities for 'non-experts' who are living the issues to devise solutions to their own problems. This confirms Paulo Freire's (1997) assertion that socially and economically vulnerable individuals and communities can act as agents in initiating radical social change by analyzing the political, social and economic frameworks in which they are situated.

In lots of ways, *Practicing Democracy* was very much an effort in "making theatre [with] communities." As David Diamond (1994: 35) suggests, "The richest and most productive way to work with oppressed groups is to help them find their voice, not speak for them." Nonetheless, conflict did erupt throughout the project, with some participants making strong accusations that their experiences had been commodified, and that Headlines Theatre had a much greater responsibility to those brought into the project. Given the finite resources of Headlines Theatre, the tenacity of class relations, the

expectations placed on the company from external funding agencies, along with the assault on social programs carried out by the current liberal government in British Columbia it is hardly surprising that these class politics emerged.

The relationship between Vidya and the Pan Centre for Intercultural Arts provides a context for considering the possibilities of transnational collaborations between well funded NGOs and grassroots actors to produce what Benson and Nagar (2006: 6) describe as “new dialogues and knowledge across socioeconomic, geographical and institutional borders.” While orchestrated to consciously disrupt established hierarchies between researchers in the global north and subaltern subjects, the Vidya project raises questions about the challenges facing researchers engaged in producing knowledge across multiple divides and that is tied to a material politics of change that contributes directly to less privileged communities and places. Given organizational hierarchies, unequal access to resources, along with the tremendous structural inequities inherent to global capitalism and neo-colonial relations it is perhaps hardly surprising that these politics have been personalized between Vidya and researchers at the Pan Centre.

In lots of ways, I simply tagged along and documented what proved to be two compelling examples of participatory, collaborative research. While *Practicing Democracy* and Vidya demonstrate the promise of border crossings, they also illustrate how politics gets produced and reproduced amongst organizations and individuals dedicated to grassroots activism. For researchers who are interested in producing knowledge across multiple divides of power, privilege and location, these case studies

provide fruitful ground. Each project stands as a provocation for researchers to embody the challenges and radical potential of action research into their own practices. We can do so in a variety of ways. At times, this means participating directly in a wider range of experiences that challenge and unsettle the status of academic knowledge and the role that experts play in social and political life. When possible we can devise more participatory forms of knowledge production, while facilitating collaborative ventures in which 'subjects' have a vested interest in the outcome and application of the research. We can work toward disseminating the skills and technologies necessary for individuals and communities to conduct future research. It is in this way that we can further the politics and practice of participatory democracy.

3 Playing for Social Justice in Ahmedabad, India

3.1 Introduction

I'm going to jack you into this chapter with a third world arrival scene. ~Diane Nelson

Fieldnotes: Ahmedabad, India
December 20th, 2004

Driving through Ahmedabad's traffic: auto rickshaws, bicycles, cows, porters (barefoot) pushing laden, wooden carts, dogs, pedestrians. At busy intersections the air is blue with smog. I am travelling with Vidya to the community of Kagwad Padi to watch the company perform its newest Forum Theatre play, *Aasha* (translates as *Hope*). We drive in a mini-bus that has been converted into a mobile theatre. On route, Manisha (Vidya's artistic director) explains that Kagwad Padi is a large slum area with an approximate population of 3,500 families whose primary occupations are daily labourers, garbage collectors, factory workers and 'rag pickers'. She relates that this is a particularly "sensitive" area of the city, where "communal relations" have been a particularly hot issue. The area was a flash point in the riots between Hindu and Muslims that erupted throughout the state of Gujarat in 2002. She explains that this tension remains "close beneath the surface" of daily life.

We arrive in a dusty courtyard just off a major thoroughfare for passing traffic. Vidya disembarks. One side of the bus unfolds into a travelling stage. A sound system is erected to cut through the surrounding din. Costumes and instruments are unpacked. The courtyard is an enclosed space where men attend to a variety of small industries. To one side, a group rope together a teetering mountain of spent burlap sacks used to transport dried chilli peppers from local farms to the city's vegetable and spice markets. The air is full of chilli dust that burns the eyes and throat. Another group of people squat, mixing what appears to be some sort of chemical concoction in large, blue plastic vats. The fumes are toxic. Children perch on surrounding rooftops flying kites, tugging and yanking great spools of coloured thread. Cries of victory erupt when a competitor's kite gets caught in the knot of overhanging power lines.

The PA crackles and *Aasha* begins with a series of songs, drawing the attention of the assembled crowd, and designed to communicate what (I'm told by Kunal- my translator) is the process and purpose of Forum Theatre. Central to a rather loose narrative is the experience of a young bride who works in a nearby

ceramics factory, and who now finds herself in an abusive relationship having been married to an older man. The staged conflicts are raw. Tense. Charged. After it becomes clear that the marriage is barren, these scenarios escalate to a point of crisis, and the play closes with the young woman being beaten and set on fire by her husband and mother-in-law. After the play finishes, it is immediately re-performed. This time the audience is encouraged to freeze the dramatic action at any point, come up on stage and replace any character that is perceived to be the object of oppression. A series of public interventions follows.

The play resumes. During a scene where the bride wards off the sexual advances of her employer, a young woman from the audience raises her hand and yells, STOP! The dramatic action freezes and Suresh (a performer facilitating public interventions) invites her up on stage to explore possible solutions to the conflict. The young woman stands on stage nervous, shy, but unyielding as she demands an explanation as to why women in the community have to experience sexual harassment when working 12 to 14 a day making up to 1000 clay cups for a meagre 70 rupees (roughly the equivalent of \$2 Canadian). There is a general murmur of approval from the audience. Other interventions follow, many of which reveal how power relations are wired into everyday life (home, marriage, religion, caste, patriarchy) and larger systems of exploitation (systemic poverty, capitalism, neo-colonial relations). The performance ends with another round of songs. This time Vidya sings the phone numbers of local organizations people may need to call in an emergency: the rape crisis line, the police, local branches of various NGOs.

I was watching the adaptation of forum theatre by Vidya Educational Trust, a grassroots theatre company working in Ahmedabad, India (see www.vidyaindia.org).

Despite the heat of the noonday sun, several hundred men and women from the surrounding 'slum' community of Kagwad Padi had gathered to watch Vidya perform. *Aasha (Hope)* presented a series of unresolved and escalating conflicts between oppressor and oppressed in a narrative that lasted roughly thirty minutes. The play told the story of a young woman whose family and community had been complacent in concealing extreme acts of violence against local women. *Aasha* had been constructed from testimonies gathered in the community, as well as the lived experiences of Vidya's

performers. In the tradition of forum theatre, the play was performed twice for the assembled audience. Once it was performed, it was immediately re-performed for the same audience with the expectation that any spectator could freeze the dramatic action when they saw an opportunity to make a constructive intervention. One of Vidya's performers remained on stage to facilitate public interventions, inviting members of the audience up into the theatrical 'fiction' to improvise solutions to the staged conflicts.

I begin with narrating this performance in an effort to document Vidya's adaptation of Boal's model of forum theatre. Political theatre has a long and varied history in India, and activists (especially feminists) have increasingly turned to popular theatre in the struggle for economic, political and social justice (see Bharucha, 1983; Kumar, 1993; Subramanyam, 2002; Nagar, 2002; 2004; Bhatia, 2004).²⁸ Vidya puts theatre to work to politicize issues and produce a critical public sphere in which community members (who are situated in different positions of power) can engage in dialogue to challenge and disrupt dominant social scripts and societal roles. As a socio-spatial act, Vidya's theatre transforms the street into a staging ground for political representation, negotiation and contestation. In doing so, Vidya quite literally moves discourse (shaped by caste, class and gender) out into a public sphere so that communities engage in (often contentious) dialogue in order to negotiate partial perspectives, stage political identities and rehearse concrete solutions.

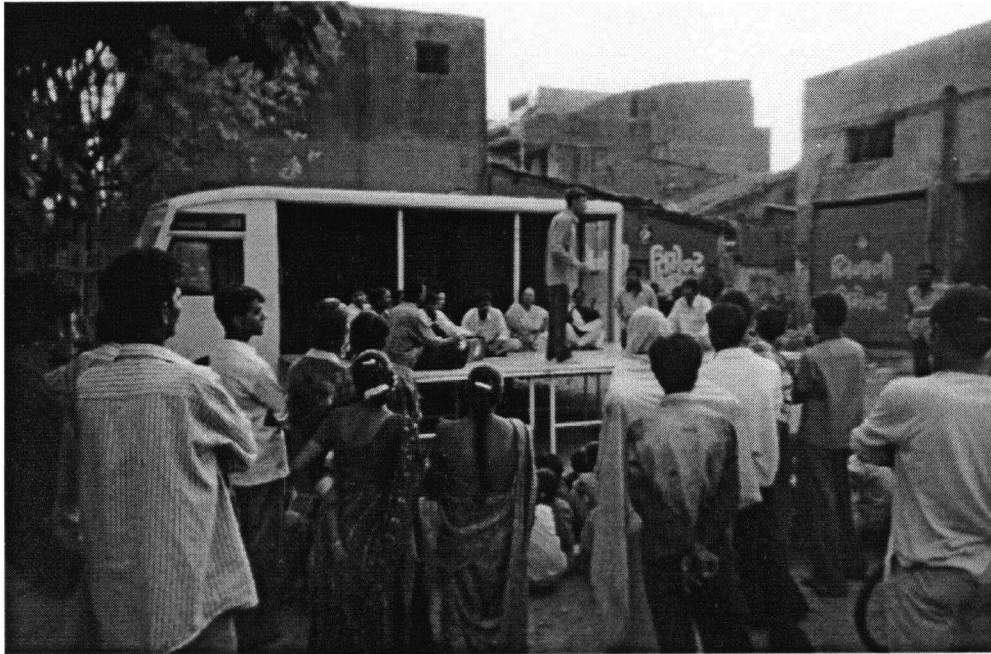
²⁸ The historical geography of modern political theatre in India can trace a beginning to the formation of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), the country's first organized political theatre movement that emerged during the 1940s under the patronage of Bengal's Communist Party (Bharucha, 1983).

Vidya has another story to tell. In producing a critical public sphere, I want to consider how Vidya's forum theatre is deeply rooted in a particular time (history) and place (geography). I am interested in the way that Vidya has adapted and translated Boal's pedagogy to engage with specific socio-political conditions and in relation to existing cultural practices. The potential of forum theatre does not draw from its universal application, but rather from its ability to live in the historical moment.

3.2 Spaces of Multiplicity

Aasha wove together a narrative that staged a series of conflicts between oppressor and oppressed. The episodes were raw, and left unresolved as to encourage members of the community to enter into the dramatic action to improvise solutions. For close to two hours, men and women, young and old, ventured onto the stage to replace various characters viewed as objects of oppression. Interventions were charged and voices often raised in heated discussion. Spectators remained focused on the stage until the play closed and Vidya circulated with audience members to gauge the community's response to the play.

Figure 3.1 Vidya performing *Aasha* in Ahmedabad, 2004.



Credit: photo by author

Forum theatre is interactive, and with multiple people moving through characters the grip of the original script is lost and a world of multiplicity opens up (see Taussig and Schechner, 1994; Pratt and Johnston, 2007). John Martin proposes that forum theatre was selected for the Vidya project because of its ability to open spaces in which community members could engage each other within the relative safety of theatrical space, while providing,

a kind of window through which they could see something different... Why do you use theatre for development²⁹ at all? Well, because in creating a piece of

²⁹ The Pan Centre's focus on theatre as a tool of social change is part of a much larger movement. Emerging out of the political activism of the 1970s and widespread disillusionment in modernist development programs, Theatre for Development has been widely taken up by NGOs and social movements throughout the global south who have

theatre around a development issue, you allow various points of view to be stated, and various lenses on the situation to be used. And so you can start to understand it in a more three-dimensional way than if it's just someone lecturing you... you can empathize or not with whichever character you want to and see how they see it. And I think that's why theatre may be the tool of choice in certain situations to affect change in areas which other development tools can't reach. And, you know, I've seen it, quite literally, in liberal development campaigns, I've watched people coming from NGOs with models of the female reproductive systems, and they're showing this and this, and they're watching but, you know, it's not going in. And I think in theatre things go in a bit deeper. I've seen people go, 'hmmm', they get a surprise and shocked, because you can, you know, theatre is a manipulative form. Obviously, you can play with people's expectations [with] rhythms, story lines, emotions, and you take them on a journey, and then you shock them with a surprise, and you show them possibilities. And... I see people very engaged with that process, that they start to really, in a way, they embody the problem themselves, and that's the situation in forum, to get them to get up and embody part of the problem (Interview, 19 January 2005).

John Martin argues that forums provide space in which it is possible to voice and negotiate dialogue in ways that the issues begin to be understood in a "more three-dimensional way." Having abandoned the "model of well trained middle class performers

turned to sites of cultural production in order to forge political consciousness, set the agenda for social change, and to articulate what Awam Amkpa (2006: 163) describes as "postcolonial desires... [and] the effective participation of marginalized communities in [civil] society."

going into deprived areas” to prescribe solutions, the Vidya project was orchestrated to adapt Boal’s pedagogy to generate a critical public sphere in which alternative types of citizenship are possible (Personal communication with Martin, 20 January 2005). This is especially significant because, as John Martin suggests, “liberal development programs” are often impotent in devising solutions that challenge dominant social narratives.³⁰

Because it is a “manipulative form” theatre is positioned to invoke the power of dramatic effect to persuade and forge an emotional conversion through which problems are partially embodied. One audience member describe being deeply moved by the performance of *Aasha*, observing that,

The problem of dowry and deaths related to that are evident here. [A] few women had tears in their eyes while watching the play. When they were asked to participate during the foruming, many young girls reacted very strongly to the play. There was a great need felt by the young women to come up on stage and express their views. The forums worked very effectively when young girls, who had volunteered, started not only suggesting different actions in the play, but also started questioning the audience (Personal correspondence, 20 December 2004).

³⁰ John’s insight is indicative of a much broader and sustained critique of NGO work in the global south that asks whether or not such organizational structures have increased levels of standardization in grassroots activism to the extent that NGOs are often unable to respond to local concerns. Koni Benson and Richa Nagar (2006) argue that- in many cases- the practices of NGOs must be critiqued and re-defined so that alternative frameworks can be used to rationalize political struggles and social realities from a more local perspective.

But the effects of forum theatre extend well beyond emphatic identification, and illustrate how performativity enters directly into the constitution of self and the broader social world. Ralph Yarrow argues that forum theatre

tends to generate conflict, doesn't it? So there is a problem here, and we need to get as many different perspectives upon that problem which is possible... Okay, what's your point of view? What's your vision? What would you do? So it actually invites a plurality of responses to that particular problem... It opens up the problem, and whether it ever comes to a single [resolution], it's probably not what happens, but it does make one think... to begin to perceive from different angles. Strategies begin to emerge. And I guess, in one way, it's not so much about resolution, as about activation, you know, the ability to focus on that, start to come up with potential solutions... Men have got up and... changed [the] role of the oppressive male... Okay, this is a magical solution... but even allowing those actually has had ultimately quite a good effect. Because the man, who's made that statement, by getting up and acting in this way, has done so in public. It would therefore be very much more difficult for him to go back to his traditional, let's say, you know, patriarchal status... I guess it identifies you in a different way, doesn't it? Because in doing that in public... confirms something about your identity, changes the way in which people perceive you. And that's very important (Interview, 14 January 2005).

Ralph Yarrow reiterates that the power of forum theatre rests in its ability to produce spaces for inter-subjective dialogue that invites a “plurality of responses.” By engaging multiple (often conflicting) responses, Yarrow argues that forums facilitate dialogue through which practical strategies emerge that can be carried back into the practices of everyday life. This is possible- in part- because forums provide moments for self-staging in a public sphere, and while we may very well be sceptical about such “magical solutions” which witness the sudden transformation of oppressive mechanisms, Ralph argues that performance in this public sphere itself has material effects, bringing into being what Jonathan Culler (1997: 97-98) describes as the “world-making use of language.”

Figure 3.2 Vidya packing up stage, 2004.



Credit: photo by author

Manisha Mehta has observed similar phenomena, suggesting that by engaging in this public sphere, it is possible for individuals to re-imagine themselves by

communicating what they really want. Really, it's quite impressive for them because... just by raising their hand, just stop, "I want to come up", this is a big change. It's empowerment for them. [When there is a] thousand people [in the audience], and there is one girl saying, "I want to". Because in the media and the television things are shown differently. But in real life it's impossible. But it's here that you come up and show whatever you want in front of your community. So it is a political act. But very challenging... in Gujarat (Interview, 28 December 2004).

According to Manisha, public performance is a political act in and of itself, and forums not only provide a space for dialogue, but also a public platform from which to forge new, politicized identities. Savitaben echoes similar sentiments, arguing that

There are girls who cannot say things even in their own homes, also, but when they watch forum theatre they have self-confidence in them... because of that they come up on stage and are able to say what they do not get to say at their house. They can say it on stage (Interview, 5 January 2005).

In one register, providing spaces for individuals to express agency is extremely important, and has political implications. The ability of forums to facilitate moments of self-staging is significant, especially considering Chandra Mohanty's (1991) assessment

that the articulation of political consciousness and self-identity are fundamental in the empowerment of so-called 'third world' women.

Vidya's forum theatre serves individuals (especially vulnerable women) a means of asserting their presence as social agents, and in doing so inscribe gendered, caste and class politics onto the social and material landscape. The radical potential of this work does not simply rest in the articulation of political identities, but also in challenging dominant narratives and dislodging existing hierarchies within a public sphere (the very narratives and authority structures that are complacent in legitimizing violence). Ideally, forums provide individuals, families and communities experiencing the types of violence represented in *Aasha* the opportunity to engage in difficult, yet absolutely crucial dialogue in order to imagine and rehearse political options that can be carried back into the habitual routines of everyday life. It is in this "moment of meeting and potential transformation", argues Daniel Banks (2006: 196), that "our collective future waits, the empty space yet to be filled with either another fiction- another coercive image- or with a new story, a new image, a new reality. In this unique moment, perhaps, there is neither oppressed nor oppressor, only possibility."

3.3 Contentious Spaces

In her widely celebrated political project, Donna Haraway (1991: 191) reminds us of the importance of negotiating situated knowledges. The partiality of perspective requires us to make connections, work out of difference and engage in social intercourse

to construct 'truth' and meaning through strategic alliances and reciprocal conversations. This is a familiar geography and requires no substantial retelling. However, while "shared conversations in epistemology" enable us to develop a "solidarity in politics", Haraway conveys a sense of liberal idealism that assumes there exists a culture of dialogue through which difference can be negotiated. Haraway's project may work well in the smooth space of high theory, but when translated into critical praxis, it is often a much more challenging and (at times) dangerous task producing concrete spaces from which to mediate differences across partial perspectives.

Forum theatre provides a tangible space in which communities attempt to negotiate difference. But in considering the ability of forums to provide a critical public sphere, it is vital to note that facilitating dialogue and mediating across points of conflict is often a fraught, contested process. Vidya had to suspend its work in 2002 following the extreme communal violence that erupted between Hindus and Muslims throughout the state of Gujarat. The massacre of Muslims was spurred on by the fiery rhetoric of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a Hindu nationalist political party with strong support in the state of Gujarat. Ahmedabad was a flashpoint in statewide riots. During this period of violence, one of Vidya's Muslim performers was shot (thankfully not killed), while another was forced to flee the city with his entire family. During my fieldwork in India, Manisha related an episode where Vidya was stoned on stage during a performance, and in which she was struck by a knife thrown from the audience:

In one area, this community has tremendous problems with girl-child, the sex scandal. Harassment is there, trafficking is there, the youth are gambling, alcoholism is there, many issues [are] there. [One time] we were performing on sexual harassment, and there was this 'rag-picker' agent who was there, and he didn't like what we performed for the larger audience... He's in [a] gang, so he just discussed with the youth, and told them, "stop them over there". Because... he is going to be exposed. And then the youth... because they are involved in such activities, exploiting girls and [that] kind of thing. And these particular youth just started throwing stones first... It was very crowded, [like] you saw yesterday, more congested. Then we just stopped, no talking, no microphones, everything is stopped... And suddenly [at] that time, that gangster just threw a knife at my face. Yeah, right at my head... it was just bleeding on my head. And I just stopped and said, "Come on, this is your issue... we are not inventing the issues and performing for you. This is about you, because you decide the issues. This is your play (Interview, 28 December 2004).

The episode occurred because Vidya had dismissed threats made by bootleggers to suspend their performance addressing the effects of alcoholism in the local community.³¹ This certainly an extreme case. Nevertheless, it demonstrates the dangers of disrupting caste, class and gender relations, as well as challenging existing social hierarchies within a contentious public sphere.³² Further, while the local is often

³¹ Gujarat is a 'dry' state. As such, there is an extensive market for homemade alcohol.

³² Ralph Yarrow had similar stories. He retold an experience observed during his fieldwork with Jana Sanskriti (a forum theatre company based in Calcutta) in which the

romanticized as a site of resistance, the potential for violence in this intimate public sphere demonstrates how the crossing of socially constructed demarcations and initiating inter-subjective dialogue in communities shot through with issues of power can be a risky, dangerous enterprise.

Manisha argues that in many ways the challenges in facilitating a critical public sphere rests not in isolated incidences of physical violence, but rather in negotiating the patriarchal structures that dominate public life, and limit the company's ability to draw particular individuals into the high visibility of forum theatre.

When you have... sometimes one thousand, two thousand people there, we have to inform police, and we have to inform the particular community leaders, the Municipal Corporation. Because there has to be law and order. Because if something happens it's easy from them to blame Vidya. These are very sensitive areas where we're performing... We have to interact with this sort of power structure. It's a [patriarchal] power structure... Even [when] we are empowering children, they are not the decision makers. So we have to work with the power structure all the time: all men, all fathers, all brothers, all teachers, all men. So we have to, all the time, focusing on power structure (Interview, 28 December 2004).

company was attacked while working in West Bengal with agricultural labourers to confront local politicians concerning state corruption and the monopolization of land ownership. In documenting his involvement in Save the Children in Nepal, Etherton (2004) relates how he was forced to withdraw from a theatre project when the sons of local ruling families threatened low-caste children, and warned them of the consequences of disrupting the status quo.

John Martin and Ralph Yarrow also raise questions about the limitations of forum theatre as a methodological strategy, as well as the inclusiveness of forums to produce a public sphere. "It is important to remember", argues Ralph, "that the play isn't going to solve the problem, the play is and remains imaginary, it takes place in an imaginary space, so you have to transfer that into social action" (Interview, 14 January 2005). While John praises forum theatre as "a nice kind of dialoguing, interactive sort of form", he expresses concern over the ability of this public sphere to reach particular members of the community,

Those who will come up on stage are those who will have already have had their minds changed anyway. [The] people you're trying to get to are those watching, and there's certain problems there... So the idea for me is to start dialoguing the community, and for me, when I see forum now it's much more about those who didn't go up on stage than those who did... It's about getting them communicating and talking to their neighbours, and challenging them to go home and talk to their families about what they've seen. And at the same time, try and get them to start thinking, the ones who aren't the natural extroverts, the ones who aren't the ones who are thinking, yes, of course, that's right and we'll do it this way (Interview, 19 January 2005).

Martin and Yarrow introduce limitations to forum theatre's ability to generate a public sphere by proposing that—in some cases—the extroversion demanded by public performance fails to draw particular individuals into the theatrical event. As such, there is

a need to devise further strategies in order to get people “communicating and talking with their neighbours.”

This is especially problematic because, as Rekhben (Vidya performer) argues, the areas of the city in which Vidya performs are

very closed communities, and having their own societal law systems. People are not very open to express their views. They feel that the issues are relevant, but we cannot express our feelings because the neighbours and others will think we are not clean. People will discuss... behind our backs. We will lose respect in our society.... At the same time when they are in small groups... they are comfortable in sharing their viewpoints. Workshops and role-plays become very interactive, compared to the [forum] play itself (Interview, 21 December 2004).

As Rekhben suggests, Vidya has attempted to deal with the limitations of forum theatre and the types of social stigmas and pressures associated with taking a public stand on the issues. The company has done so by establishing long-term working relationships with 28 communities in and around the city of Ahmedabad. The company performs forum theatre as often as twice a week, and performances are always followed up with subsequent visits in which Vidya gathers feedback.³³ The company often conducts smaller, more informal

³³ In working with the homeless in London (England), Adrian Jackson made similar observations, suggesting that “after the show, the company will try and act as mentors, sit down with people, we will, you know use the engagements that we’ve made, the unique relationship which we we’ve been able to develop, with trust and respect that our people are able to gain with people, we build on that. People sit down... and talk to people, and

workshops and role-playing exercises in order to access specific members of the community who (for a variety of reasons) may be alienated from the high visibility of forums. Vidya also provides counselling services, and has assisted parents in acquiring documents (e.g. birth certificates) from municipal offices and hospitals necessary for the enrolment of children in school.³⁴ Since the termination of funding by the British Lottery Community Fund in 2004, Vidya has sustained its grassroots theatre in a number of ways. In 2005, the company was successful in securing multi-year funding from a large development agency based in Geneva. Vidya has also depended on donations from individuals in Ahmedabad, and often takes contract work and collaborates with local NGOs throughout the state of Gujarat. More recently, Vidya has begun producing a variety of handicrafts (purses, note-book covers, shopping bags) out of recycled plastics, with products begin made in the communities with which it works in Ahmedabad.

Vidya also acts as an intermediary between communities and local NGOs to disseminate information about the types of services available in the city. Manisha relates that,

After the performance [of forum theatre], and then information, because in Ahmedabad, in the slums [there are] many NGOs, somebody is providing food, somebody is providing health facilities, somebody is providing books, but they

arrange to meet people, maybe the next day or a week later, or... have a cup of coffee with people, or go with people to a training place, or to a rehab centre, housing society, or whatever... They're trained to be a sort of bridge between all the facilities and organizations and agencies that there are in London" (Interview, 20 January 2005).

³⁴ Vidya maintains that between 2001-2003 the company helped 185 children to secure admission to primary school in Ahmedabad (Vidya Annual Report, 2004).

don't know how to use the resources. They have offices but they don't interact with the people... So are conducting all the information which is located in the slums, within the slums. You can use the resources you have already. And we invite all these NGOs, friends and people to be there... Like SEWA is spread out all over Ahmedabad... World Vision is there, who is providing books and uniforms. So we can just give the information and also to the NGOs, these are the needy people, you can help these people. Working and networking within the community (Interview, 28 December 2004).

Vidya's ability to act as an intermediary and as a conduit for the sharing of information is especially significant because, as the Sangtin Writers and Richa Nagar (2006: 143) have observed, NGOs are often "staffed and dominated by Hindu and upper-caste grassroots workers, whose critiques of casteism, communalism, and untouchability often remain confined to the material and discursive spaces of offices and organizational meetings." Because its performers are the people living the issues from within the community, Vidya is uniquely situated to bridge local communities and the limitations of NGOs in connecting with individuals on the ground.

Despite being told by a "senior figure in Gujarat" and other "experts on Gujarati theatre that forum theatre will never work in Gujarat, [because] people won't come, they won't intervene, no one will get up, the people are too conservative", the Vidya project has experienced remarkable success. "They're playing to audiences of, say, 1,500 people, and sometimes when they have been invited to go to special places, they've been playing

to audiences of 10,000” (Ralph Yarrow, Interview 14 January 2005). The Pan Centre claims that over the past five years Vidya’s theatre has reached over 600,000 people, resulting in a “marked improvement in the level of girl children’s health, literacy and numeracy, decrease in domestic violence and child labour, as well as an overall attitudinal change concerning the importance of young women within family life” (see www.pan-arts.net/international.htm).

3.4 Conclusion

Since the formation of the company in 2000, Vidya has constructed dozens of forum theatre plays that pursue a politics that address gendered violence (rape, dowry murder, female feticide, sexual harassment), illiteracy and systemic poverty as primary sites of disempowerment. Kumar (1993) describes how over the past thirty years a concerted effort has been made by grassroots movements in India to reveal the ways with which socioeconomic and political inequity are not just wired into broader structural processes (such as neo-liberal economics and neo-colonial relations), but equally embedded in the overlapping systems of caste, class, gender and community. An explicit objective of Vidya’s work has been to claim theatrical space as a site from which to interrogate how systems of authority and violence are reproduced and legitimized within local circuits of power. This is possible because Vidya puts theatre to work to produce a critical public sphere in which alternative types of citizenship are possible by creating spaces for community-wide discussions and critical reflexivity.

In documenting a popular theatre campaign in north India, Richa Nagar (2002: 70) argues that feminist movements often mobilize street theatre to “create a new public domain to produce critical dialogue and reflection” while revealing the “contradictions and oppressions embedded in popular discourses of honour and dishonour, masculinity and femininity, kin and community, crime and justice.” Vidya’s forum theatre represents a means for vulnerable individuals to rearticulate their relationship with public spaces by staging political identities, and to challenge what Cindi Katz (1994: 41) describes as the “socially constructed nature of accepted demarcations such as those between home, body and community.” In working with the testimonies gathered from within the community and the lived experiences of its performers, *Aasha* carried discourse out from the privacy of homes into the high visibility of the stage and street. It is within the performative, discursive geography of forums that community members (situated in different positions of authority) can engage in an inter-subjective dialogue that has the potential to cut across social demarcations.

Nonetheless, disrupting social narratives and dislodging structures of authority is a risky enterprise. In suggesting that forum theatre makes possible spaces for active citizenship modelled in the space of the theatre, it is not my intention to underestimate the tenacity of class, gender or caste politics. It is not that individuals or communities transcend oppressive structures and ideological positions, but rather have agency in resisting and transforming specific configurations of power. It is because of the persistence of such politics that require the production of spaces that communities can enter into sustained and difficult conversation in which the solutions are both complex

and hard to glean. The intensity of these encounters is possible precisely because forums are staged theatrical events (see Kondo, 2000; Mattingly, 2001; Nagar, 2002; Jackson, 2004; Pratt and Johnston, 2007).

4 Embodied Connections and Hybrid Masala

4.1 Introduction

If political theater has a *raison d'être*, it is surely its allegiance to people who have been denied their fundamental human rights... What makes a play political is not its fidelity to the Party or any model prescribed by Brecht or Piscator but its fidelity to a people whose oppression cries out to be enacted on stage. (Bharucha, 1983: xvii)

Over the past forty years, the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) has disseminated far and wide, emerging as a highly potent strand of political theatre. As a transnational cultural practice, Boal's pedagogy has been taken up by NGOs, therapists, theatre professionals and educators dedicated to grassroots politics. Forum theatre is used to produce a contested and intimate public sphere in which dialogue across power hierarchies is possible. Nonetheless the radical potential of Boal's model does not rest in its universality, but rather in its ability to engage with very specific social spaces and political conditions. Further, because it is "convenient and adaptable" forum theatre has the capacity to "soak up whatever cultural forms that are around it" (Interview with Adrian Jackson, 20 January 2005). Just as various actors are eager to take up Boalian techniques to affect social change, these individuals and organizations rework the methodology in important ways. It is precisely because of its adaptability that forum theatre has been mobilized as a vehicle for social and physical dialogue in extraordinarily heterogeneous circumstances.

A common criticism of Boal's pedagogy is the perception that it tends to simplify conflict into a binary opposition between oppressor and oppressed. This is perhaps not

surprising given the fact that Boal first articulated TO as an aesthetic of resistance under Brazil's repressive military regime. Emerging out of South America's turbulent political climate of the 1960s, forum theatre was first and foremost a means of staging popular resistance and devising strategies to disrupt the workings of authoritarian power. That said, within the context of North America and Europe the concept of hegemonic power and oppression has become increasingly problematic. Practitioners have expressed the need to contextualize the form, and extend what is often perceived to be an overly deterministic framework by unsettling fixed categories and resisting binary oppositions. Further, calls have been made to reconfigure TO to account for the more complex psychological dynamics of oppression, as well as the movement of power through various disciplinary mechanisms that normalize oppressive habits and social norms.

Such insight has not gone unnoticed by Boal, whose own work has evolved through time. His own transport to the West in the 1970s brought him into contact with groups and individuals who found it difficult to synthesize and narrate their experiences within a dichotomous framework. Boal (1990: 44) reminisces,

When I started working in Europe in the mid-70s, many people said their oppression was "noncommunication," "loneliness," "emptiness," etc. At first I didn't understand—I was used to social and political oppression: police, the boss, unemployment, and so on. Then I found out that in countries like Sweden and Finland where the main social problems have been solved—like education, social security, minimum wages, housing—the suicide rate is much higher than in

Brazil where people die of starvation or from being murdered by the police. If a person *prefers* to die she must be suffering terribly. The oppression is different but the death is just as final. So I started caring more about internal oppression. I discovered the cops in the head—knowing that the headquarters are outside.

Boal relates that the types of oppression that his work addressed in Europe's 'first-world' liberal society tended to be far more psychological in nature. As a result, in some of his more recent writings, Boal (1995) has proposed a new set of theatrical techniques adapted and designed to work with the kinds of internalized oppressions specific to modern industrial society.

Nevertheless, practitioners in North America and Europe have suggested that Boal's model needs to be reconfigured further. For some, this has meant abandoning Theatre of the Oppressed as a means of describing their forum theatre practice because the terminology carries too much of an overt political agenda and fixes oppression in terms of class struggle. "I talk about power", observes Julie Salverson (a theatre professional based in Toronto), "I talk about systematic abuse of power and of individual power." Elanor Crowder describes working through "chains of oppression" in her use of forum theatre in Ottawa, suggesting that

Maybe in the Central American and South American context it's easier to say, "Here's the power structure we are fighting." As people living off the oppression of third-world people, it's hard to use these words and techniques... What we got

to was instead of having an oppressor and an oppressed we had two protagonists—one male, one female—each of whom at different times was oppressing the other with all their social conditioning. Either one can be replaced. I think the format of oppressor versus oppressed doesn't allow the reality of multiple interchanges, it tends to draw straight lines out of what is a much more contiguous experience not happening within those lines. We don't experience things linearly in our lives very often.³⁵

Crowder reiterates the notion that binary oppositions essentially fails to demonstrate the complexity of oppression. Such insight certainly resonates with particular post-structural sentiments that profess the absence of a centralized power that can be confronted, as well as the awareness that individuals can exist in multiple identities and overlapping geographies.

For others, adapting Boal's pedagogy has produced a distinctive therapeutic turn in the practice of forum theatre. This has involved fusing forum theatre techniques with elements of psychodrama³⁶, and in doing so, utilizing Boal as a tool for revealing individuals' own internalized or hidden oppressive habits. The idea is that it is only by focusing on the individual, and differential experiences of oppression that individuals begin to perceive how their experiences are wired into broader economic and political

³⁵ Both Julie Salverson and Elanor Crowder participated in a Canadian routable that brought together various TO practitioners from across North America. This focus group can be found in Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz, 1994: 198-226.

³⁶ Psychiatrist Jacob Moreno first developed psychodrama in the 1920s, arguing that it was through theatrical improvisation—action and play instead of words—that repressed conflicts and traumatic experiences could be most clearly revealed (see Moreno, 1985).

processes. Boal's "rehearsals for the revolution", observes Mady Schutzman (1994: 139), have often shifted to "rehearsals for healing." "What worries" Rhonda Payne (theatre practitioner in Toronto) "about Theatre of the Oppressed, and about various concepts of facilitators and jokers, is that we're starting to assume the role of fixers. And we're starting to move into the role of therapist" (qtd in Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz, 1994: 217).

The Theatre of the Oppressed is a dynamic cultural methodology, and as various 'actors' take it up, it has been adapted in a variety of ways. In translating and reconfiguring Boal's model both the *Practicing Democracy* and Vidya projects are deeply rooted in a particular time (history) and place (geography). In this concluding chapter, I look at some of the ways that Headlines Theatre and Vidya rework the techniques of forum theatre. This draws on Richa Nagar's (2000: 344) observation that we cannot understand the complexities of local struggles without "situating them in the geographical spaces from *and* within which they derive their resources, meanings, visions and limitations." This suggests that the power of forum theatre does not draw from its universal application, but rather its ability to live in the historical moment.

4.2 Resituating Boal in Ahmedabad

<i>Hurdum kirte jayinge</i>	With every breath we will
<i>Vidya subko dikhayenge</i>	Show everyone the power of knowledge
<i>Vidya kyutu razaahe</i>	Knowledge is the reason for these reminders
<i>Vidya subki yadehe</i>	Knowledge reminds us of everything, our past, old customs
<i>Vidya subki yadehe</i>	Knowledge reminds us of everything, our past, old customs
<i>Rakhi no rakiyaka</i>	Building the relationship between sisters and brothers
<i>Aurat he fukher ki basha</i>	It's a language of appreciation, gratitude, mercy
<i>Hamara naara sunte jao</i>	Listen to what I have to say, proclaim, look at my vision
<i>Vidya ko tum milke banao</i>	Get together and develop the knowledge, learn from each other
<i>Vidya ko tum milke banao</i>	Get together and develop the knowledge, learn from each other
<i>Hurdum kirte jayinge</i>	With every breath we will
<i>Vidya subko dikhayenge</i>	Show everyone the power of knowledge
<i>Vidya kyutu razaahe</i>	Knowledge is the reason for these reminders
<i>Vidya subki yadehe</i>	Knowledge reminds us of everything, our past, old customs
<i>Vidya subki yadehe</i>	Knowledge reminds us of everything, our past, old customs
<i>Jisne naraa dher lagayaa</i>	Whoever delays in proclaiming
<i>Jiven me se tumko baghaya</i>	Driving it away from your life, running away from it
<i>Subko pyar ki raha dekhana</i>	Show everyone the path to love
<i>Vidya ko tum khub burhana?</i>	When are you going to progress in your knowledge?
<i>Vidya ko tum khub burhana?</i>	When are you going to progress in your knowledge?

As explored in the previous chapter, Vidya mobilizes forum theatre to facilitate a critical public sphere in which alternative types of citizenship are enacted. Constructed from the testimonies gathered from within the community, *Aasha* claimed the street to animate experiences of violence in an effort to open tangible spaces in which members of the community could engage in the difficult conversations required to imagine, rehearse and bring into being solutions to their own problems. In this register, Vidya has adapted forum theatre to facilitate action on a number of social issues that are intensely place-specific. But in doing so, the company has reworked Boal's pedagogy in a variety of ways to contextualize the form within the cultural and political context of Ahmedabad. John Marin proposes that he is

a great believer that, you know, you have to kill the gods who made it [the Theatre of the Oppressed]. And say, well, you know, forget Boal, there's a technique here. Yes, it says that in the book, but that's not going to work here. We're going to have [to] introduce music and songs. That's what we're going to give the audience... Now if you are prepared to... play fast and loose with it, and say, "we're going to change the form, we're going to change [the] work of joking, the way interventions come", the actual form and format of the story to get as close to the local vernacular, then, I think, it travels as a concept (Interview, 19 January 2005).

While Vidya draws on Boal's methodology in the construction and performance of forum theatre, Martin draws our attention to the adaptability of Boal's pedagogy and the need to translate the "form and format" into the "local vernacular." In doing precisely this, Vidya has fused forum theatre with elements of Bhavai, Gujarat's folk, story-telling theatre that blends together a mix of dance and music, while incorporating humour, dialogue and speech in verse. Music plays an especially prominent role in Vidya's forum theatre practice, and performances are always accompanied with the singing of songs in Gujarati.

I began this chapter by including a few verses from a song composed by Vidya. It speaks to the power of knowledge, as well as the need to build a culture of compassion and trust. What is equally compelling (if not unexpected) is that in its composition Vidya based its melody on a popular Bollywood tune. Popular and folk melodies are not only appropriated by Vidya in order to more fully bring audience members into the theatrical

event, but also Vidya subverts mainstream cultural productions in order to politicize the issues and communicate important information to the audience. Performances begin with Vidya on stage as a chorus describing and reminding audiences of the process and purpose of forum theatre. Another song is sung at the end of each forum session to communicate the telephone numbers of local organizations (e.g. rape or child abuse centres, police, hospitals) that individuals may need to contact.

John Martin also suggests that there are limitations to using forum theatre in Ahmedabad because of the inherent realism that the form demands, which is

fine when you're working in areas of the world where realism is part of the everyday vernacular. But, you know, North America, South America to a degree, but when you're working in areas like Gujarat, India... that is not a form which is intrinsic to that area... There's a script that's never been done... about Shiva watching from above, and because in one of his forms he's half women, half man, not understanding why there's all this prejudice against women, and coming down. I mean, that to me would be an entrance point into doing Vidya's work in a different style. Would it work as forum? I'm not sure, but who knows (Interview, 19 January 2005).

Martin draws our attention to the limits of realism as a model of representation because it has little cultural resonance in Gujarat. While Vidya continues to animate issues experienced in everyday life with stark, poignant realism, the company has begun to

adapt elements of epic and mythological drama into their forum theatre productions.³⁷

This exemplifies Nandi Bhatia's (2004: 2) assessment that

theatre in colonial and postcolonial India has consistently participated in providing possibilities for resistance to and reassessment of ruling ideologies through multiple methods of engagement ranging from mythology, folk forms, re-enactment of oppressed histories, revival of historical stories and hybrid Anglo-European productions.

Cultural forms are never static. Rather, as the techniques of forum theatre travel through transnational networks they are translated and reconfigured in relation to existing cultural practices and specific social spaces. Vidya deploys forums to produce a critical public sphere by claiming the street to disrupt the spaces and habitual routines of everyday life. In fusing the techniques of forum theatre with Gujarati folklore, language, mythological drama, dance, Bollywood melodies, the company imparts political meaning through the appropriation and subversion of established cultural scripts. This is done to not just translate forum theatre into the vernacular so that spectators are more fully converted and drawn into the theatrical event, but also it is through social narratives that audiences are more likely to narrate their own experiences and engage in the hard

³⁷ Adrian Jackson has expressed a similar desire to expand the repertoire of forum theatre. His company (Cardboard Citizens) has recently finished adapting William Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* (2006) into a forum theatre production for the Royal Shakespeare Company's Complete Works Festival, which was performed in Stratford. The company has also refashioned Shakespeare's *Pericles* (2003) and John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1999) in collaboration with the English National Opera Company. This raises the intriguing proposition of challenging what counts as forum theatre, as well as Jackson's desire to disrupt spectatorship in conventional theatrical spaces in the UK.

conversations that forums demand. Boal's methodology may very well provide the backdrop to Vidya's practice, but "how it becomes Indian", observes John Martin, "is one of the things that's up for grabs at the moment" (Interview, 19 January 2005).

4.3 Translating Boal in Vancouver

Practicing Democracy also adapted and deployed forum theatre to facilitate a critical public sphere within the city of Vancouver. In animating the experiences of poverty gathered from people living the issues, the production politicized the lack of affordable housing, services for seniors, the scarcity of food, police harassment, as well as the vulnerability of particular people (especially women: sex workers, seniors and public sector workers). The play was performed to sold-out houses over a three-week period in March 2004 in three venues situated across the city. As forum theatre, at each performance members of the audience were encouraged to enter into the theatrical 'fiction' in order to imagine, rehearse and devise solutions to the staged conflicts.

One Vancouver city councillor described the experience of forum theatre as a space where people situated in different class-based and other social positions could engage each other within the safety of theatrical space. He drew particular attention to the ability of forums to facilitate a space in which audiences can simultaneously observe and engage the issues from a safe distance, but in such a manner that they feel the issues directly (Pratt and Johnston, forthcoming).

Councillor A: You're never going to look at a homeless person the same after hearing that person's story, or a drug addicted kid or something like that. Because I can remember the previous time I saw [David Diamond present a video production], one of the people who was in it came and gave a talk to the group. A young woman who was heroin addict in her teens. And I'll always remember her, and I guess she'll be somewhere in my thoughts as I'm thinking about these policy issues. But when you turn it into a pile of recommendations on a piece of paper, suddenly it's just another policy report... Because I do talk to my business pals who decide they want to do something in the community, who start to plug in. And they just go, 'oh, I just had no idea these things were going on in my city.' If there were that kind of eye opening, that heart opening, that came out of it, then it would be more tangible. And they [his business pals] have gone on to dump money into things, get involved themselves in organizations that are dealing with these questions. But the council? You're singing to the choir, preaching to the choir.

Geraldine Pratt: So if one was to make recommendations for how to redo the process, maybe the recommendation would be to actually think about prolonging the play, and showing it to different kinds of audiences, to have that kind of impact?

Councillor A: Well, I think the advantage of the play would be, you don't have to get up at four thirty in the morning and have a sort of guided, go down and walk

the back allies of the Downtown Eastside on your own to find out what's going on. It's a sort of safe place to address these issues, but still in a fairly direct way.

GP: It's pretty raw, yeah.

Councillor A: So you still get the impact, but it's packaged in a particular way, to get into your... You can show up without having to, I don't know, pick up dirty needles as you walk into the theatre. I don't know, just a way to get you closer to the issues (Interview, 16 March 2005).

A second city councillor made similar observations, relating how deeply moved she was by the play, and its ability to personalize the issues:

Clearly some of the people there lived, had been homeless or lived very close to it, or knew people. I mean this was stuff they were, like very close to, and obviously engaged with. And I think any time you can use art, or a play like this, somehow you get past the way we protect ourselves, the way we abstract, the way we intellectualize, the way we remove ourselves...[It's] a really powerful thing to cut through, and make it very real. That these are real people, with very real day-to-day lives, and choices they're making and that, like all of us, they make choices the best way anybody can to get through day-by-day. And so I think that's the powerful thing. Like even to describe people as homeless. 'The homeless.' Just makes them remote. Like it's threatening, and it's scary, and it's kind of

difficult. Like what does one do to solve some of the problems? (Councillor B, Interview, 5 July 2004)

Practicing Democracy was orchestrated to personalize the issues within a rich public sphere. Beyond this, following Boal's model, the project focused on producing effects that extended beyond public performances. As North America's first experiment with legislative forum theatre, the project was an attempt to translate a rich public sphere into a number of policy recommendations through which city council could respond to cuts being made to social programs. It was conceived and executed to democratize the political decision-making process by empowering citizens to affect policy change at a municipal level.³⁸

In adapting forum theatre within the context of Vancouver, Headlines Theatre has reworked Boal's model in a number of ways. It has done so in the first instance by expanding the scale of this public sphere beyond the confines of the stage and theatre. The production of *Practicing Democracy* was aired on SHAW Community Television to an estimated audience of 5,000, with viewers being able to call in interventions via the telephone. Actors then animated these on stage. Headlines Theatre's most recent forum theatre project, *Here and Now* (2005), which explored the issue of gang violence within Vancouver's Indo-Canadian community, included a live webcast over the internet with actors staging interventions from as far away as Australia. David Diamond (1994: 52) remembers

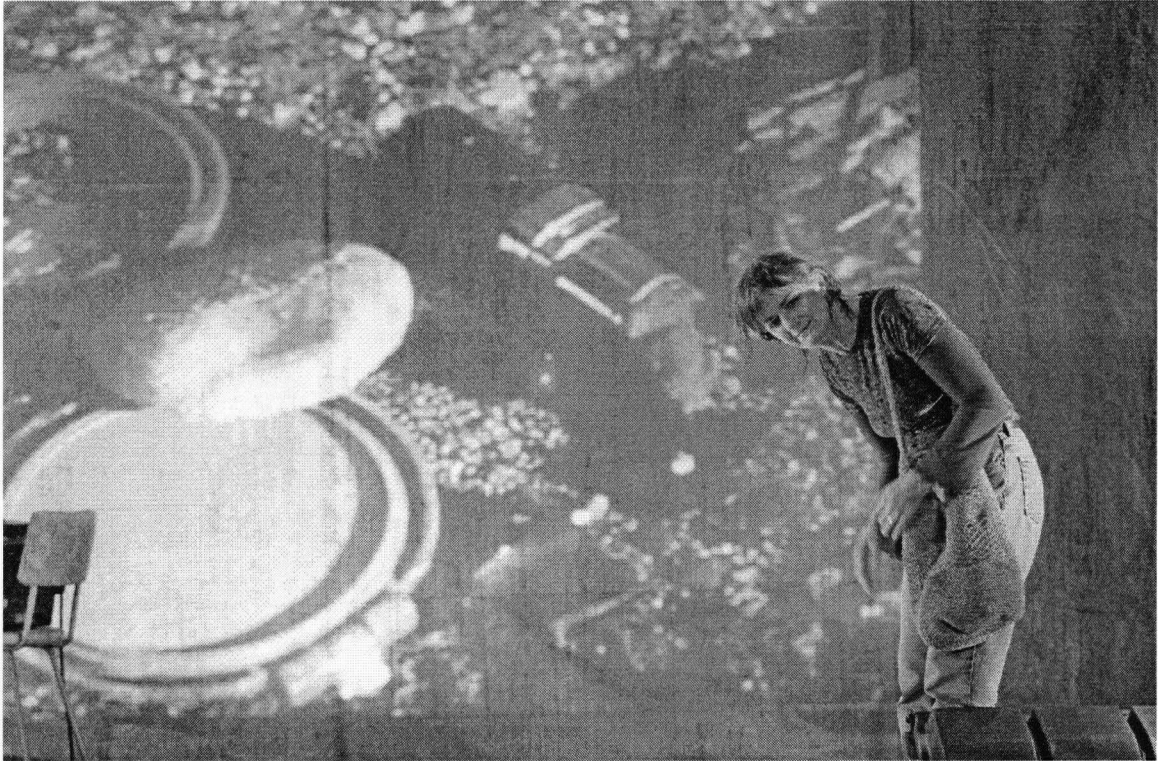
³⁸ For a detailed accounting of how city hall worked with the *Practicing Democracy* report, see Pratt and Johnston, forthcoming.

sitting with Augusto in Sydney, Nova Scotia in 1987, explaining that I wanted to take forums onto live TV. He laughed a very good-natured laugh and said, “You’re such a North American!” Augusto was right—I am North American and the most persuasive medium of communication in my culture is television.

This is an exciting development in the practice of forum theatre, and raises not only the possibilities of using communication technologies to provoke a greater public debate, but also re-imagine the scale in which the practice of democratic politics may be possible.

But much more than this, Headlines Theatre has adapted Boal’s methodology by refusing any simplistic rendering of the dichotomous relationship between oppressor and oppressed. Characters in *Practicing Democracy* were consciously constructed to resist simply reduction, and scenarios were crafted as to offer no clear solutions. In one scene, when Karla (a character who plays a sex worker) is harassed while working the street by a police officer, who takes fifteen dollars that she has just earned and desperately needs, one interpretation is that this is a show of brute, sadistic power. But to the director, “In his own twisted way, that I disagree with, he’s trying to help her. He’s saying to her, “If I make your life miserable enough, you’re going to finally get it, and get off the street. Because I don’t know what to do with you anymore, I’m going to do this” (Interview with David Diamond, 1 June 2004).

Figure 4.1 Karla working the streets in *Practicing Democracy*, 2004.



Credit: photo by David Cooper

In staging complex characters and unresolved conflicts, *Practicing Democracy* sought to exemplify not only the complexity of oppression, but also to demonstrate that individuals are not easily locked into fixed subject positions, and often embody shifting, flexible identities. This is important because, “If we’re serious about breaking cycles of oppression”, argues David Diamond, “how do we go about doing that in the theatre? We don’t go about doing it by putting on stage an evil, violent father or an evil, racist teacher, because some of them are in the audience” (David Diamond, qtd in Daniel Banks, 2006: 196).

The complexity of these scenarios requires audiences to participate in the “hard conversations” needed to unravel the capillary workings of oppressive mechanisms. Addressing the intricacy of power stands as a common concern for practitioners of forum theatre in North America and Europe. “It’s the reason that theatre is so powerful”, argues David Diamond, “and this kind of theatre in particular, because you freeze the moment, and you do, ‘Okay, we’re not in the whole play, we’re in these two seconds now. This two seconds is the world. And you get to have the hard conversations” (Interview, 1 June 2004). It is precisely the insistence that these “hard conversations” take place within a critical public sphere that demonstrates the potential of forum theatre. In adapting the techniques of forum theatre in Vancouver, Headlines Theatre has remained close to Boal’s model. Perhaps much more so than other companies, many of whom have increasingly concerned themselves with deploying Boal’s pedagogy as a tool for individual therapy.

“We are not doing therapy in the community”, observes Diamond (1994: 35-36), “although this work is often therapeutic... There is a difference between doing psychodrama and popular theatre. Psychodrama focuses on the individual; Power Plays [terminology used by Headlines Theatre to describe its forum theatre practice] focus on the community.” David Diamond draws our attention to way with which Headlines Theatre remains deeply committed to adapting Boal’s theatrical model to generate a greater public debate within the broader “living community.” Margy Nelson (a member of Boal’s company in Paris) offers similar insight, arguing that practitioners of Boal’s pedagogy in Europe and North America have become far too focused on individual

struggles, and in doing so, taken the onus away from mobilizing forum theatre to galvanize collective political action. For Headlines Theatre, it is “about a desire to use the language of the theatre to actually accomplish things, to do more than entertain. And I find that this work is a really effective way to do that, both on an individual level, and for me it’s becoming more and more important on that larger... I mean working with the larger consciousness, that is the living community” (Diamond, Interview, 1 June 2004).

5 Conclusion

Boal's model of forum theatre produces a critical public sphere, which gets adapted and remoulded to engage place-specific issues and in relation to existing cultural practices. As a cultural practice, it has travelled through transnational networks in ways that the postmodern leitmotifs of flow and mobility simply do not encapsulate. This transnational transfer of cultural knowledge and methods is embodied in specific social relations and the commitments of particular individuals and organizations to the practice of grassroots politics. I trace some of these connections to argue that the transnational 'flow' of cultural practices moves through very specific nodes and networks. Globalization is not uniform and ubiquitous, but rather happens through fractured and fragmented practices. In lots of ways, the *Practicing Democracy* and Vidya projects disrupt the dichotomous relationship between the global and local. Forum theatre has been transmitted globally but through concrete networks in specific ways in particular places. The transfer of Boal's pedagogy to Vancouver and Ahmedabad has been possible because of its movement through intimate relationships that have developed over time and the unexpected connections that are possible in space.

"I've done a lot of work [with] Darpana over the last, I suppose, 6 or 7 years", observes John Martin,

Before Vidya started, I must have done one production there a year with a performance group. And some of those were on gender issues, and going into

poorer areas... Yeah, because I had been invited there. I had a long connection there (Interview, 19 January 2005).

Martin's "long connection" with Ahmedabad began with a chance encounter in France with Mallika Sarabhai, a classical Indian dancer who had been hired to perform in Peter Brook's epic production of the Mahabharata (1989). As the co-director of the Darpana Academy, Sarabhai had an extensive history working as a writer, choreographer and educator. Martin and Sarabhai discovered that they shared a mutual commitment to using theatre as a means of affecting social change. Shortly after this meeting, Martin began making yearly visits to Ahmedabad in order to participate and collaborate with the Darpana Academy in a variety of theatrical ventures, which enabled him to establish long-term relations with the city's arts community.

This eventually culminated in the orchestration of Vidya, which brought together other individuals who shared a common interest and history with Boal. Mojisola Adebayo, who discovered Boal after abandoning university to train with Boal in London and work with Adrian Jackson's Cardboard Citizens, was hired by the Pan Centre to provide instruction in the techniques of forum theatre. Martin's close friend and collaborator, Ralph Yarrow, was enlisted to help secure funding from the British Council and to document the project. Manisha Mehta, who had forsaken a secure career in accounting to produce community theatre at the Darpana Academy, was enlisted as Vidya's artistic director. The point being, that Vidya emerged out of a dense web of intersecting lives in London and Ahmedabad, and was possible because of relationships

that developed over time between individuals dedicated to reconfiguring Boal's theatrical model.

Practicing Democracy told a similar story. When my graduate supervisor (Geraldine Pratt) and I began documenting the project, we did so with an understanding that David Diamond had a long history of working with forum theatre in Vancouver. Not so apparent were the allies he encountered on city council following the city elections in November 2002:

And so... when the civic election happened and the city council changed dramatically, all of a sudden there were all kinds of old friends on city council. And so I went to council and said, "Here's this idea. Do you want to do this?" We didn't even know what the subject matter would be yet, just a legislative theatre experiment. And council voted unanimously to do that, although I understand now that they had no idea of what they were agreeing to do (Interview with David Diamond, 1 June 2004).

Perhaps more surprising was the level of familiarity that particular city councillors had with Boal's theatrical work. One councillor had come into contact with Boal through "a guy I worked with", who happened to be celebrated Brazil educator Paulo Freire. The councillor had worked with Freire over a period of 8 years, first in Geneva establishing the Institute for Cultural Action, then in Tanzania where he helped develop literacy projects:

All of them started with a code, be it a play, a song, some form of representation that allows the community to take an objective distance and begin to describe what's happening in the situation and how to change the reality. It's very simple. It's just that Boal has used the theatrical form and theatre to make that work (Interview with Councillor C, 16 June 2004).

Another city councillor had become acquainted with Boal through her interest in the types of participatory planning and grassroots governance being implemented in Brazil:

This is a left wing council. So those are the kinds of things that interest us. And people have been very familiar with Brazil and Paulo Freire, and the Worker's Party, and what they've done there. So I mean, it's pretty logical (Interview with Councillor B, 5 July 2004).

This was only logical when situated within her own social relations, which happened to include being married to a community planner who has worked on several occasions in Brazil. A city planner related that,

It has been used a lot. And because I worked with Headlines since a long time ago- David Diamond- and he used to take me along [with him to work] with racism issues in the schools. [There's] a lot of youth violence and issues in the school... So, the last thing for young people they want is an adult coming in and telling them what they should and what they should not do. But by having them

involved, they actually understand the dynamics, understand some of the impacts and actually feel how it feels being discriminated [against]... And they also contribute to the solutions. So I've always believed that was a useful way of engaging people (Interview with Wendy Au, 11 March 2004).

Sketching this geography in *Practicing Democracy* and Vidya is significant because it demonstrate how each project was only possible through the commitments of various 'actors' to grassroots politics, and relationships that have developed over time. As Geraldine Pratt and I (forthcoming) argue, these personal connections are important as they trace a distinct spatiality that is neither entirely open and without barriers, nor closed. It describes a network, but one that is multiple and diffuse rather than unitary and coherent, constructed from specific life histories and the collision of lives in space.

The need to practice democracy has never been more urgent. Don Mitchell (1993) argues that modern democracies are currently witnessing a rapid decline in authentic public life, along with the disappearance of spaces that support public debate and social interaction. This state of affairs is pressing when situated within the persuasive climate of neoliberalism which has orchestrated the systematic dismantling of the welfare state and off loaded the social responsibility of government. Just as individuals, NGOs and other social organizations become increasingly responsible for social welfare in 'first-world' democracies and 'third-world' development strategies, *Practicing Democracy* and Vidya provide a context for thinking more fully about the complexities of local and transnational collaboration. While the conflict that emerged during these two projects

raise questions about the types of politics that are (re)produced amongst individuals and organizations working across multiple divides, it also reveals how these actors are situated within broader power relations, institutional cultures and the structural inequities inherent to global capitalism. The point being that there are constraints that must be accounted for in assessing local and transnational activism.

The *Practicing Democracy* and Vidya projects were possible only because of the commitments of various actors to the practice of grassroots politics. Both took place because of specific life histories, the connections between individuals situated in Vancouver and Brazil, London and Ahmedabad, as well the ability of practitioners to adapt Boal's model to engage particular political conditions and absorb existing cultural practices. Headlines Theatre and Vidya put forum theatre to work to produce spaces for active citizenship by facilitating a critical public sphere in which people—who are situated in different social positions—can engage in physical dialogue within the relative 'safety' of theatrical space. "People want more than just to sit in a darkened room", observes Adrian Jackson,

People are interested in interaction... And people in positions of power and influence are interested in that, you know, they may not make it themselves, but they're interested in it. I mean theatre has returned to its basic function of informing people about stuff which is actually in the public arena. It's like people trust in the theatre now. Whereas they don't trust anywhere else. And so, theatre is the place you go because you trust that you're learning something which is true.

So I'm very optimistic... We don't have to make all those arguments that you used to have to. You used to have to explain what it would do... but actually [now] it's a growth industry. A lot of charities, trusts and foundations will invest in theatre, particularly forum theatre, in fact, because it is so adaptable, because it can be turned into whatever is in the community (Interview, 20 January 2005).

As interactive theatre, forums provide moments for people living the issues to interact with a broader community to imagine, rehearse and devise political options that can be carried back into the habitual routines of everyday life. The objective is to facilitate a public debate so that individuals can act with agency to resist and disrupt existing hierarchies and social norms to initiate radical change. In doing precisely this, *Practicing Democracy* and Vidya offer spaces for multiple politics in a public sphere, and extend our understanding of the role that theatre can play in the articulation of democratic politics and grassroots tactics. The practice of democratic politics is often a messy affair. All the more reason that we need to produce critical geographies in which it is possible to conceive and implement solutions that challenge prevailing political and social norms.

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