

**Article No 2.**

**GETTING THE MESSAGE: MEASURING AUDIENCE RESPONSE TO THEATRE FOR DEVELOPMENT**

**By Ian Gaskell and Robin Taylor (Vanuatu)**

**Abstract**

The effectiveness of Theatre for Development was explored with the Wan Smolbag Theatre Company in a tour of North Efate, an island of the South Pacific nation of Vanuatu, in June 2002. Audience responses to a play dealing with coastal resource preservation were measured in terms of receptiveness to various artistic elements. Our results suggest that the rhetorical devices employed by the Wan Smolbag Theatre Company are successfully employed with these rural community audiences. This study gives support to the notion that the artistic quality of the performance is of fundamental importance to successful Theatre for Development. Implications for both practitioners and funders of Theatre for Development are discussed.

L'efficacité du Théâtre pour le développement fut explorée avec la compagnie de théâtre Wan Smolbag, lors d'une tournée de North Efate, une île des Vanuatu, dans le Pacifique sud, au mois de juin 2002. Les réponses du public à une pièce traitant de la protection des ressources naturelles de la côte furent mesurées en termes de réceptivité à des éléments artistiques divers. Nos résultats suggèrent que les procédés rhétoriques employés par le Théâtre Wan Smolbag sont utilisés de façon réussie avec ces publics d'origine paysanne. Cette étude renforce la notion que la qualité artistique de la performance est d'une importance fondamentale pour permettre au Théâtre pour le Développement d'avoir du succès.

Les implications pour les praticiens ainsi que pour ceux qui le subventionnent sont discutées.

La efectividad del Teatro para el Desarrollo ha sido explorada por la Compañía Teatral Wan Smolbag en el 2002 durante un tour de Efate Norte, una isla de la nación de Vanuatu situada al sur del océano Pacífico. La acogida del publico con relación a una representación teatral sobre la preservación de los recursos costeros fue medida de acuerdo a la receptividad de varios elementos artísticos. Nuestros resultados sugieren que los mecanismos retóricos utilizados por la Compañía Teatral Wan Smolbag son usados exitosamente con el publico de estas comunidades rurales. Este estudio apoya la noción de que la calidad artística de la representación es de importancia fundamental para un Teatro para el Desarrollo. Las implicaciones para los practicantes y para los que apoyan económicamente el Teatro para el Desarrollo son argumentados.

**Keywords:** Theatre for Development, Rhetorical Analysis, Persuasive Discourse, Artistic Intent.

**Authors' biographies**

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Robin Taylor earned his first degree in Zoology from the University of Dundee and then his PhD in Psychology from Edinburgh University. He has lived and worked in the Pacific since January 1994, teaching in the Psychology program at the University of the South Pacific. Currently he is on sabbatical.

## **Introduction**

Various stakeholders, including government ministries, non-government organisations and international aid donors, have generally endorsed the use of theatre to address social problems in developing countries. Theatre for Development, as it has come to be known, is a form of theatre that aims to disseminate knowledge, raise awareness, change attitude and modify behaviour in regard to issues such as the environment, health, AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, domestic violence and a wide variety of other societal problems. Theatre, as opposed to written material or video/television, has been embraced as a medium for promoting development issues because it reaches individuals who cannot read and communities that have no electricity.

Although there are numerous qualitative reports on the positive effects of Theatre for Development, the literature describing empirical studies on its effectiveness is sparse. Just why there should be a mismatch between the qualitative and quantitative evaluation of Theatre for Development is an avenue of research worth pursuing. However, because they are perceived - rightly or wrongly - as being more 'objective', quantitative studies are potentially more persuasive to large, fiscally accountable donor agencies. In the absence of 'hard' evidence, these agencies might decide that aid monies would be better spent in other, more cost-effective, ways.

The tendency in measuring effectiveness qualitatively seems to be primarily oriented toward detailing testimonials (Dalrymple, 1992). Quantitative assessment seems to focus on attitude change (Elliott et al., 1996). In both these approaches, theatre is merely a convenient means to an end (which is to deliver a developmental message or theme). Related to this is the tendency to think of the 'message' as an abstractable element rather than an embedded feature of the artistic exchange.

While it has not been completely ignored, the artistic quality of performance remains almost an afterthought in most theoretical writings on the effectiveness of Theatre for Development (Boal, 1979; Mda, 1993, 1998; Kerr, 1995). In a previous piece of research with the Wan Smolbag Company (Gaskell and Taylor, 2003), the authors undertook a thematic analysis of transcribed semi-structured interviews and focus groups that appeared to give considerable weight to the artistic quality of the theatre performances as an index of successful Theatre for Development. Despite the inherent subjectivity of the exercise, it seemed possible to devise a way of measuring audience response to the artistic elements of a Theatre for Development production, and in so doing establish its communicational efficacy with particular reference to the reception of intended effects.

The theoretical justification for this approach was constructed in a second study that explored Theatre for Development as 'persuasive' communication (Gaskell and Taylor, 2003). For a number of (ideological) reasons, the concept of persuasion is anathema to most writers on Theatre for Development. Many of the assumptions for this form of theatre are based on the educational theory of Paulo Freire (1972) and the theatrical practice of Augusto Boal (1979), both of whom stress participatory dialogue rather than didacticism as a way of inducing learning through 'conscientisation'. From their perspective, persuasion implies a top-down, unidirectional model of communication. Rather than empowering the community, persuasion simply manipulates. Nevertheless, a theatre production is inescapably a rhetorical artefact designed to engender certain effects in its audience. The rhetorical purpose of theatre can be understood, however, not just in terms of 'instrumental' persuasion but also in terms of 'constitutive' self-persuasion. Rather than simply promoting the adoption of a particular attitude by individuals toward an abstracted message, Theatre for Development can be seen as creating community consensus through shared experience. As a non-discursive, symbolic form of communication, this form of theatre imaginatively engages its audience and serves as a means to raise awareness and generate later discussion about its embedded subject. Its persuasive techniques are primarily directed towards holding the attention of the audience, asking them simply to 'look, listen and enjoy', and only secondarily towards the promotion of a particular position on the issue(s) raised.

This theoretical perspective on the persuasive aspects of Theatre for Development suggested a working methodology for analysing its communicational effectiveness. The approach explored in the present study involved the application of rhetorical criticism to a given performance text as a means of establishing its persuasive purpose in general, and to identify those specific artistic strategies employed to achieve that purpose. Insofar as these strategies take the form of rhetorical appeals designed to

generate a particular response in the audience, it seemed possible to devise an audience-sensitive instrument to determine whether or not they had the desired effect. The study only

attempts to measure the communicational efficacy of the art without reference to broader questions of knowledge transmission or attitude change.

The aim of this research was to apply this new methodology 'in the field' with one of the foremost practitioners of Theatre for Development in the Pacific region. Based in Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu, the Wan Smolbag Theatre Company (WSB) has been producing this form of theatre for well over a decade. Two years of research contact with WSB prior to this project allowed us the unique opportunity to travel with the company during a tour of their new play, *Something for Nothing*, which they were presenting to the communities on the northern shore of Efate, the island on which Port Vila is situated. The aim was to attempt to use our new methodology/research instrument to measure the audience response to the play, particularly in reference to the company's artistic intentions.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

The research involved a combined group of Wan Smolbag's senior troupes and the communities of a number of villages along the northern Efate shore. Normally Wan Smolbag has two groups of four to five professional actors who are engaged in Theatre for Development performances. On this occasion, some of the members of one of the groups were unavoidably absent. This meant that one of the groups could not conduct its scheduled performances. It had been decided before we arrived that the remainder of this group would join the other group on its July tour of North Efate. The combined WSB members for this tour were (in alphabetical order): Charlie, Donald, Lucy, Morinda, Noel, Paul, Titus and Yvette. We also had considerable assistance from the company's staff back in Port Vila - notably (but not exclusively) the director and script writer - in helping us to refine our instrument.

### **Materials**

We brought along a variety of research equipment which included the following: a digital video recorder, audio recording equipment, a number of cameras (film and digital), the script from the play *Something for Nothing*, an audience questionnaire, a focus group interview schedule and a 'clap-ometer' (see Figure 1). The latter served as a visual device for an audience to demonstrate their agreement or not on questions posed to them after the play.

### **Procedure**

Prior to the fieldwork, the performance text of *Something for Nothing* was subjected to a rhetorical analysis, through examining the script (in translation) and observing rehearsals. The analysis included an appraisal of components such as plot and character and aspects of staging, acting, costuming and music. A number of audience appeals were identified, including those based on the classical scheme of logical argument (logos), emotion (pathos) and character (ethos), models for imitation or avoidance (exempla), tropological argument (enthymeme) and formal structure. Discussion with the director, principal writer and actors served to confirm the specific artistic intentions of the company. (See the plot summary of *Something for Nothing* below.)

Based on the above, a questionnaire consisting of about 12 key questions was constructed. We had considerable input from members of the Wan Smolbag Theatre as to their suitability. All the questions were reworked by the company in the process of translation into Bislama. In addition, we produced a set of questions along with potential probes to be used in smaller focus groups.

We also built a 'clap-ometer', which is an audience response instrument. The rationale for creating this instrument was based on the realisation that audiences might find the filling out of questionnaires that included numeric rating systems to be an alien, confusing and time-consuming operation. We also wanted to minimise our intrusion into the company's own post-performance procedures.



**Figure 1: Wan Smolbag operates the 'Clap-ometer'. T**

he pointer is manually moved from the red to the green area. The question is read out and the red area is designated with a response (such as 'disagree') and the green area is designated as the opposite response (such as 'agree'). The audience is invited to clap loudest when the pointer is on the colour to which their response is.

Although each village was slightly different, in general the procedure was followed along similar lines. Arriving in the village, one of the group's members would make general inquiries as to where we were to set up the performance. Weather dictated whether the performance had to be presented in a hall or could be staged outdoors. A simple neutral backdrop was hung between two suitable supports.

Sometimes there would be warm-up activities that the group would do with the audience - for example, 'statue work' where the audience would become living 'statues' depicting thematic elements from the play to be performed (e.g. making a living display of the coral reef). The play would then be performed. After the play had finished, the audience was immediately asked to stay behind for some discussions. The clap-ometer would be brought to the front of the audience by some members of the company who would explain how it worked and then perform some practice runs. The audience questionnaire was then read out loud, and the response based on the audience's subjective rate of clapping would be recorded. After these questions were answered, a discussion on the topic related to the play would often follow, conducted by a few members of the group. A small number of either men or women were asked to join us in a small focus group discussion. In this discussion we would conduct our semi-structured interview with the help of one of the Wan Smolbag members to translate when necessary (which was most of the time).

#### *Plot Summary of Something for Nothing*

*Along with regular supplies being delivered by boat to a village is a box of old books for the school. One of these books is a history of the Lapita people, the prehistoric settlers of the islands. Although initially disappointed, Betty the schoolteacher becomes fascinated with the story. As she reads, the book comes to life behind her. When the Lapita people came to the land, the reefs were filled with fish, great turtles and now-extinct land creatures. The story of the Lapita people is told in a series of scenes inserted into the main action. Having exhausted the island's coastal resources, the men - despite the Lapita woman's protests - go from island to island repeating the process until nothing is left.*

*A parallel situation exists in the present-day village. Sam, the owner of the village store, wants to harvest the diminishing stocks of shellfish to sell. He is opposed by Betty's father, the chief, who wants to preserve them. This conflict is made apparent when the children discover a turtle. Sam wants to kill it; the chief puts a taboo, represented by a Namele leaf, on the nest. The situation is made more complicated by the fact that Betty and Sam are romantically involved. Eventually Betty, who has listened to their arguments, sides with her father. The climax of the play occurs when the children rush in saying that the eggs from the turtle nest have been taken. The chief's taboo has been violated. Shortly afterwards,*

*the chief dies - and perhaps with him any hope of preserving the reef.*

## **Results and Discussion**

As we indicated in the project proposal, we were interested in creating an instrument that would establish the presence of significant persuasive communication between the company and its audience. Our particular approach has been to explore the notion that the communication is primarily non-discursive in nature and that it is a function of specific artistic techniques. Using traditional rhetorical theory, we analysed both the script and the performance to uncover these strategies.

As a whole, the play has a clear message: that the over exploitation of natural resources - coastal resources, in this instance - might create problems for the community in the future. The play uses a number of artistic strategies to generate a receptive response to the issue from the audience, including logical argument, character appeals and emotional incidents. In addition to these standard rhetorical appeals, there are other artistic elements which also contribute to the play's persuasive effect: its plot structure; the style of its theatrical presentation, including staging, individual and ensemble performance; and the use of music, costuming, etc., all of which are designed to elicit a specific positive response to the underlying message that exploitation of natural resources must be undertaken responsibly. However, the play presents the issue from multiple perspectives, with characters holding and arguing opposed positions, such as preservation versus development. Significantly, the play does not resolve the dispute at its conclusion, leaving it up to the audience to draw its own conclusions as to the future of the represented village. This lack of closure is designed to prepare the ground for post-performance discussion on the issue by the audience.

## **Formal Structure**

The play uses an interesting interweaving of past (the Lapita people) and present (the village), where the former constitutes 'living' lessons or guidance on the need to preserve the coastal resources. This 'history lesson' is cleverly presented through the device of a 'living book'. As the story is being read from a book, the characters described in it come to life and the story moves from narrative telling to dramatic enactment. What makes this device particularly compelling is its thematic connection to the purposes behind the play as a whole - namely, education. The fact that the story is being told to children serves not just as a convenient way to dramatise the past, but also as a dramatisation of education itself. The excitement of the children, their desire to know what comes next in the story - indeed, their obvious delight in learning - are communicated to the audience as a whole.

The audience is shown parallels between the past and the present, particularly in the form of characters that want to live for the 'present' without regard for the 'future'. Just as there is conflict in the depicted past (the Lapita people) between those who want to exploit (and waste) the resources and those who want to preserve them, the same conflict is depicted in the 'present day' village. These structures of past and present remain parallel: they only converge at one point, where the Lapita woman exhorts the sleeping (dreaming) Betty to safeguard the reef. What happens to the Lapita people and their demise is indirectly linked to the possible future of the present-day village. This approach is a conventional technique of arguing by means of example: the use of 'fable' (in this case, 'history') as a form of persuasion.

Note that the ending of the 'history story' and the ending of the play itself are both unhappy. This is discussed briefly below under 'emotional appeals'. From the standpoint of persuasion by means of formal structure, the conclusion to the play is distinctly unorthodox.

## **Performance Style and Tone**

The play makes effective use of a 'chorus' that sets up events and comments on the action. In particular, the chorus uses music to help convey its message. The major song in the play, presented in the context of the Lapita people, is an effective reworking of several traditional Vanuatu rhythms calculated to elicit a response of 'identification' from local village audiences based on a sense of familiarity. This is necessary if the audience is to perceive these earlier people as connected to them in some way.

Throughout, the performers employ a fairly broad acting style. The purpose here is to vocally and visually reach an audience often situated outdoors in non-acoustic space at some distance from the

performers. When the performance is indoors, the space is usually fairly noisy and distracting with large numbers of children. Audibility and the need to hold the audience's attention demand a vigorous vocal and gestural style.

With the adult actors playing the two children, there is a necessary degree of exaggeration and humour, to which the audience responds with amusement: these performances never, however, degenerate into gratuitous and unrestrained comedy with the actors playing for laughs. The actors playing the Lapita people generally give more exaggerated performances than the 'present-day' village people, the latter having to express more complex motivations than the former.

In general, the performance style is consistent with other Wan Smolbag productions: a style evolved over a decade to meet the practical requirements of performing in non-formal 'venues' and to meet the challenge of presenting potentially unexciting messages in an energised and interesting manner.

### ***Staging***

The staging is simple: a neutral backdrop suspended between trees (and at one point between a house and the company's van) serves a setting for the entire action. This staging principle allows for very fast transitions between scenes. A bench becomes a canoe and then a bench again, just as an actor changes from being a chorus member to the village chief by putting a hat on in front of the audience.

Past and present, beach and village, wharf, house, shop and schoolroom are created instantly with little more than a line reference, a gesture or a slight change in position. This simplified staging is actually quite conceptually sophisticated, rejecting a naïve illusionistic approach in favour of a symbolic representation; however, the audience (as we established through focus groups) is never confused about the time or location of any part of the action.

There are a number of practical and aesthetic reasons that lie behind this kind of staging, which we need not explore here. For the purposes of our study, however, there are two elements that are significant: the first is that minimalism generates the fast transitions that are essential for maintaining audience attention; the second is that inventive and imaginative solutions to presenting the play are not just intrinsically interesting, they also demand an imaginative response from the spectator. If the audience is required to use its imagination, it is invariably engaged with the performance.

### ***Logical Appeals***

The arguments for (and against) reef protection are presented dialectically as an extended interchange between the village chief, who seeks to preserve resources for the future, and Sam, the owner of the village store, who argues eloquently for progress and development. By refusing to make the arguments one-sided, the company introduces complexity into the action, avoiding the simplistic assertion of a right and wrong point of view. Not only does this approach make the conflict more truthful, it also prevents the play from turning into a dramatised lecture.

### ***Character Appeals***

Traditionally, ethos is understood as the 'character' of the speaker. The persuasive appeal is a function of, among other things, reputation - in this case, the reputation of the Wan Smolbag Company as a whole. As a well-established, hard-working theatre group, the company speaks to the community with the collective voice of authority, lending credibility to the occasion of theatre performance.

We can also consider the appeal of ethos in terms of the individual speakers in the fictive world of the play. Here, character (and by extension the individual view of each on the central issue of reef preservation) serves as a model for emulation or rejection. The play is the sum of all the voices in it. Just as the conflicting points of view are presented in a balanced way, so are their proponents. All the characters in the village are presented sympathetically. The chief is a model of good governance, enforcing perhaps unpopular decisions in the best interests of the village. Sam is dynamic and entertaining. Even though his position is antithetical to the 'message' of the play, he also embodies admirable qualities. Again, the refusal by the playwright to present obviously good and bad characters ensures that the audience must examine the individuals carefully.

Placed between her father, the chief, and her potential husband, Sam, Betty serves as a surrogate for the audience. She is a teacher, instructing the children about the past and in the process

learning about it herself. Her process of self-education involves a careful judgment of the two other characters (and the merits of their arguments). Her gradual adoption of her father's point of view serves as an example for the audience to emulate.

There is also an attempt to provide models for younger audience members. The children express a keen interest in learning from books and from actual experience. They become fascinated about the past in the story of the Lapita people. They express an obvious excitement in discovering the turtle and a delight in learning about its life cycle.

### ***Emotional Appeals***

Without some form of emotional appeal, it is difficult to involve the audience in the action of a play. Involvement in the story is a prerequisite for engaging the audience in the concerns expressed through it. The play employs several focuses for emotional appeal: the love story between Betty and Sam, particularly her suspicion that she is being used by Sam to influence the chief; the fate of the Lapita people, in particular the disillusionment of the Lapita woman; the children's reaction to the destruction of the turtle nest; the chief's anger at the violation of his taboo; and the subsequent death of the chief.

All of these moments are important, particularly in their linkage with the play's thematic concerns. The death of the chief, however, is particularly interesting as it occurs at the end of the play, and in fact constitutes the resolution of the action. Rather than a happy ending - one, for example, suggesting a change of heart in Sam and an eventual marriage with Betty - the play avoids a conventional conclusion and with it a nice tidy solution to the problems it raises. In making this choice, the company sacrifices the persuasive impact associated with a cathartic closure. Instead, the conclusion to the play is unexpected and frustrating. Rather than leaving the audience satisfied, the ending generates a sense of disquiet. In particular, there is a suspicion that without the chief's restraining influence, Sam will exploit the reef. On being asked about this, the director and playwright indicated that they hoped the ending would lead to a more purposeful post-performance discussion.

### ***Audience Questionnaire***

The questionnaire was developed from the rhetorical analysis according to the principle of focusing on the art rather than the underlying message. As a result, the questions are based on concrete aspects of the script rather than an abstracted rational notion of the issue. We wanted to see what particular persuasive devices were likely to generate an audience response and whether that response would be what the artists intended.

Travel and the collection of data with Wan Smolbag was done between 3<sup>rd</sup> June and on 9 June in north Efate. Performances were held in the villages of Sanma, Emau, Pauning, Takara, Epule, Matarisu and Ekiye combined, Pang Pang, Siviri, Tanoliu and Epau. In all, there were 10 performances. Of these, we were only able to conduct post performance audience questionnaires in five of the locations. We were able to conduct small focus group discussions in six of the locations. The reason for not always conducting the questionnaire and/or focus group was usually a late start of the performance, resulting in either a potential clash with another performance or, on two occasions, insufficient light.

There were three distinct types of data collected during the project: quantitative audience response data; qualitative audience focus group data; and semi-structured interviews with community stakeholders.

### ***Quantitative Data***

All sampled villages thought that this was a 'realistic' play in the sense that it depicted credible events that could happen or already are happening. All of them agreed that the play had made them think about the issue of conservation and protection of natural resources. The following responses corresponded to the rhetorical strategies that the Company had employed:

- All the samples thought that Betty was a likeable character and a suitable role model.
- All the samples thought that the chief was a good one and thought he was right to place a taboo on turtle fishing and were sad when he died in the play.
- All the samples liked the Lapita woman as a character and thought she was right to make the decisions she did in the play.



- Both sampled villages thought that the Lapita people were not 'brave' in their approach to exploring new lands, and instead thought they were 'stupid' in their total exploitation of the natural resources of these new lands.
- The majority (three-quarters) thought that Sam was not a likeable character. One of the sampled villages was not sure what to make of Sam (which partially did not correspond to the rhetorical strategy).
- Most of them (four-fifths) thought that what Sam was trying to do was make money, reminding them of the Lapita people squandering the natural resources of the reef (which corresponded to the rhetorical strategy), but one of the sampled villages was not sure what to make of him (which again partially did not correspond).

### ***Some Observations on the Clap-ometer***

We noticed the almost total agreement amongst the audience responses in always going for one particular answer. Only on one occasion did we actually hear a difference of opinion - this turned out to be a mis-hearing of the question by the audience member. We also noticed the strong bipolar responses: it was either 'totally agree' or 'totally disagree'. This does make sense since, during the 'group' total audience questionnaire, many times the question would be asked and then there would be a perceivable 'wait' for the consensus to emerge - often this could be initiated by an 'elder' or someone whose opinion obviously counted. In one village (Takara), we actually heard and saw an older man 'loudly whisper' what the audience response should be. So the idea of a strong 'consensus' did not surprise us.

When there was no 'standard' to follow as a consensus decision, we should not be surprised to discover that individuals expressed differences of opinion. We attempted to explore the difference between group consensus and individual response in one of the villages at the end of the tour by distributing response sheets to individuals in an audience. Ironically, we had initially tried to stay away from this form of data collection for fear of having respondents who either did not know how to read or write or how felt awkward doing this. We 'solved' this problem by using the standard procedure: namely, having the questions read out with the clap-ometer providing potential responses. The individuals in the audience had a response sheet that consisted of 10 mini-pictures of the 'clap-ometer'. Respondents only had to mark where they would like the pointer on the 'clap-ometer' to stop on the relevant picture. We managed to collect data from 17 individuals (eight females and nine males). The results of the average responses from all individuals agree with those of the audience responses. However, there was considerably more variability and differences in opinion between the individual audience members.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to conduct formal inferential statistical tests on this data as the statistical power is too low. However, our data appears to show that, when given the opportunity, individuals will make choices that do not necessarily conform to the 'group consensus'. For example, one of the questions asked whether the Lapita people are stupid or brave (or neither) in their tendency to attack, kill and eat any beast that they can, regardless of whether it is dangerous or not. The contingency table mosaic plot (Figure 2) shows that all of the villages asked with the 'clap-ometer' agreed that the Lapita people were stupid. However, the data for the individual responses showed that about half the respondents thought they were brave.



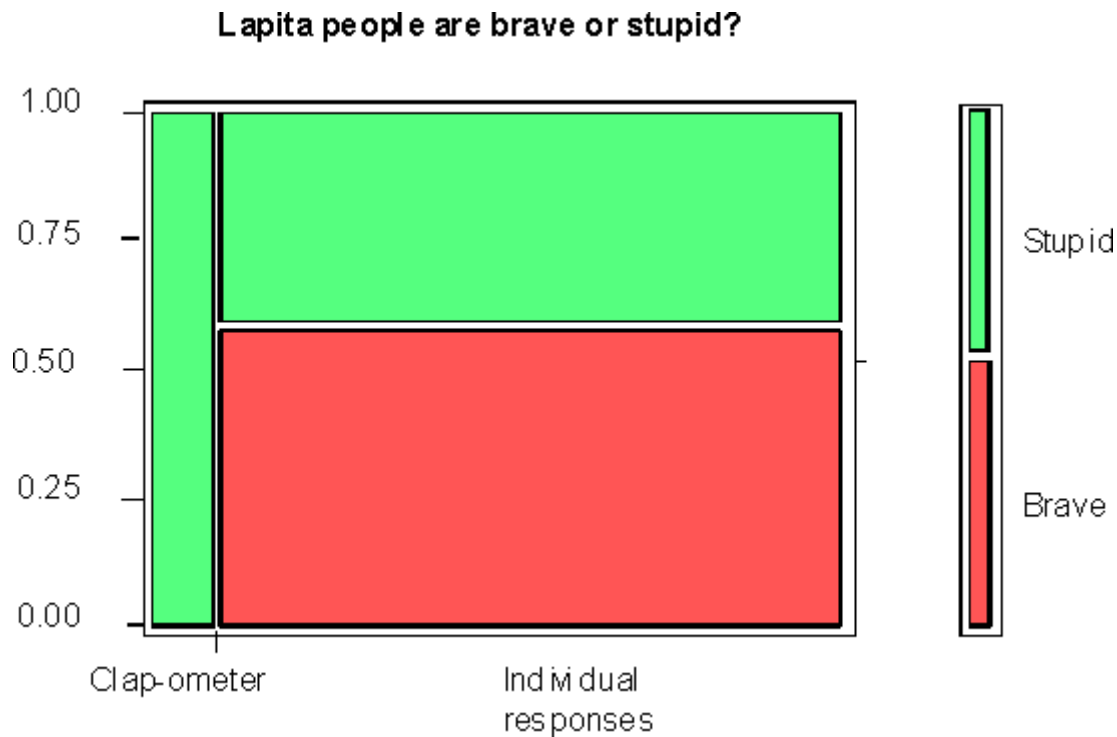


Figure 2: Contingency table mosaic plot of whether respondents thought the Lapita people 'brave' or 'stupid' allowed as an option, as well as significant numbers of 'disagrees'.

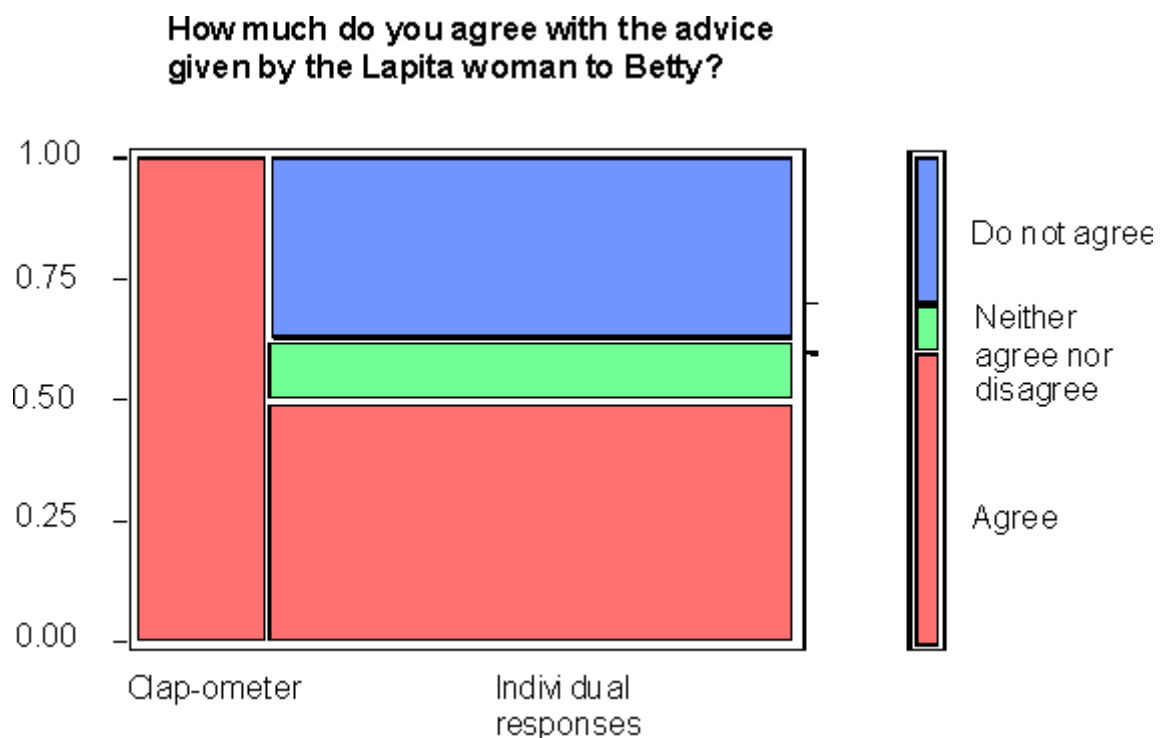


Figure 3: Contingency Table mosaic plot of whether respondents agreed with the advice the Lapita woman gave to Betty in a dream.

And another example is when the audience is asked about the degree to which they see the similarity between what Sam does in the present and what the Lapita people did to the original environment (see Figure 4).

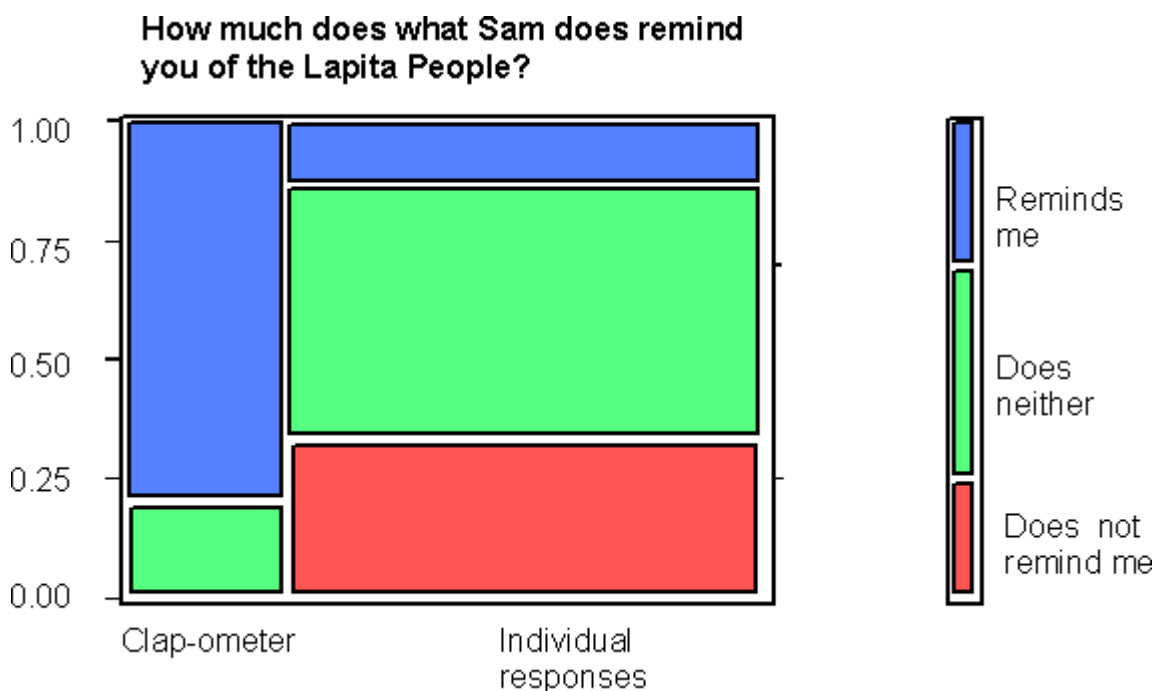


Figure 4: Contingency table mosaic plot of whether respondents were reminded of the excesses of the Lapita people with regard to coastal resources, as compared to actions of Sam today

These results raise another possibility as to why Theatre for Development might in fact be more potentially effective than non-artistic forms of development communication. If, from the perspective of instrumental persuasion, artistic strategies operate as rhetorically intended, then the majority of the audience will respond accordingly - for example, praising a well-intentioned deed or character in the drama and vilifying the negative examples. From the perspective of constitutive rhetoric, however, theatre tends to generate audience consensus. Individuals who are not privately persuaded and sitting on the fence may be swayed towards the consensus position, either immediately in witnessing the collective audience response (clapping, booing, laughing) or later on in post-show discussions (formal and informal) where a community position on the issue emerges. Note that there is nothing *a priori* to state that a well-designed play need always support the 'right' position.

### Focus Groups

The focus group interviews have yet to be transcribed, so a thematic analysis such as that conducted in our first study is not possible at the moment. What follows, however, are some cursory remarks on the focus groups. We managed to conduct six focus group interviews in Samna, Ekipe and Matarise, Takara, Paunagisu, Emau and Pang Pang. We were surprised that most of the participants - many of whom had not seen or even tasted a turtle - still thought of them mainly as a food item. We had expected them to have some sort of emotional attachment towards these creatures, since they are displayed in the play as something precious and something that reminds them (both in reality and in the play) of a 'golden era'.

None or very few of the respondents had heard of the Lapita people. In that sense, the Wan Smolbag performance actually informed and taught the audience something new about the history of Vanuatu.

Despite the fact that the Wan Smolbag actors are well known and have been either seen before in numerous plays, or in videos or even posters placed around, all the respondents saw the actors in performance in terms of their respective character, thus clearly differentiating the actor from his or her role.

About half the respondents understood that at the one point when the parallel stories intersect, the playwright intended them to see it as an allegory of the past speaking to them in the present.

We noticed that, in many performances, the audience would laugh when it was clear that wailing signified the death of the chief. However, all the focus groups stated they felt sad when they realised that the chief was dead. We asked the focus groups why the laughter would occur. All of them stated that this in essence was a 'nervous' release.

All the focus group respondents grinned or laughed out loud when we asked why Sam, the main male character, gave Betty an expensive dress. Their subsequent answers indicated that they were aware that this was a subtle advance on the part of Sam to find favour with the chief's daughter. Opinion was split, though, as to whether this was purely a commercial ploy or whether he was in fact really interested in her. When we asked Noel, the actor who plays this part, to explain what it was that he was trying to portray at this point, he indeed outlined a multiple motivation. In wooing Betty, Sam is actually interested in her. However, once he thought he had won her, he then did not think it inappropriate to use her as business leverage. As the focus groups demonstrate, the rural audience for Wan Smolbag performances responds to the subtleties of theatre like any other 'sophisticated' audience would.

Not all the artistic strategies succeeded in their intended effect. However, this may be in part due to a number of other environmental factors such as fading light, cramped performance conditions or a reduced or untypical audience attending the performance. As with all theatre communication, the transmission between Wan Smolbag and its audience is subject to 'noise' and other interference, a problem that is exacerbated by the non-formal circumstances of performance. This fact, however, strengthens our assertion that it is the strength and artistic quality of performance that is important in reaching an audience.

## **Conclusion**

We have shown that rhetorical analysis can yield important data as to the effectiveness of artistic communication in Theatre for Development. We have data from previous research that suggests that the artistic quality of Theatre for Development is a fundamentally important part of what makes it successful in reaching communities facing modern development issues. The current study suggests that rural communities in Vanuatu (and, given Wan Smolbag's success elsewhere, in the larger Pacific region as

well) are sophisticated consumers of drama in Theatre for Development form. To be successful, Theatre for Development requires a minimum standard of artistic quality, without which it cannot gather an audience and hold its attention.

Our research still has not unequivocally shown what mechanisms operate to make the issues in Theatre for Development most effectively communicated. Some hints on this come from the incidental observation of overt consensus building when audiences were trying to answer questions. Future research efforts might consider the combination between rhetorical theory and psychological processes of communication to explore these mechanisms further.

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