

Article 5

Evaluating the Efficacy of Community Theatre Intervention in/as Performance: A South African case study

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Abstract

The evaluation of African community theatre for development has largely been premised on product rather than process. While evaluation focuses on audience reception, consumption remains the major concern. The primary goal (to transform the lives of the target audience) tends to be ignored, as most critics are still preoccupied with viewing it as a ‘showy spectacle’. This article examines community theatre practice in, as and through the medium of performance. If the efficacy of such theatre is to be found in the process of performance, I also question the ambiguous nature of identities emerging from the live interventions.

Résumé

L'évaluation du théâtre communautaire africain pour le développement a été largement fondée sur le produit plutôt que le processus. Tandis que l'évaluation se concentre sur la réception par l'audience, la consommation reste l'intérêt principal. Le but primordial (de transformer les vies de l'audience ciblée) tend à être ignoré, la plupart des critiques continuant à se préoccuper à regarder ce théâtre comme ‘un spectacle tape-à-l'œil’. Cet article examine les pratiques de théâtre communautaire dans, avec, et à travers le moyen de la représentation. Si l'efficacité d'un tel théâtre se trouve dans le processus de la représentation, je questionne alors la nature ambiguë des identités apparaissant lors des interventions en direct.

Resumen

La evaluación para el desarrollo del teatro de la comunidad africana ha sido básicamente dirigida al producto en vez del proceso. Mientras que la evaluación se concentra en la recepción de la audiencia, el consumo se ha mantenido como su mayor preocupación. El objetivo principal (la transformación de las vidas dirigidas a cierta audiencia) tiene tendencia a ser ignorado, ya que la mayoría de los críticos aún se encuentran preocupados por que da la impresión de ser ‘un espectáculo deslumbrante’. Este artículo examina la práctica del teatro de la comunidad en el sentido de en, como y mediante el medio de la representación. Si la eficacia de tal teatro ha de ser hallada en el proceso de la representación, también cuestiona la naturaleza ambigua de identidades que emergen de las intervenciones en vivo.

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Evaluating the Efficacy of Community Theatre Intervention in/as Performance: A South African Case Study

Introduction

The evaluation of community theatre for development in Africa has largely been premised on *product* rather than *process*. Even if such evaluation focuses on audience reception, consumption remains the major concern (Mda, 1993). The primary goal of such theatre — to transform the lives of its target audience — has been overshadowed by an overriding tendency to treat it as a ‘showy spectacle’ (Breitinger, 1992). Even if the workshop and/or performance process remains the central transformative mechanism, most critics are still preoccupied with viewing community theatre as if it is intended for consumers of a finished product. In this article, I examine community theatre practice *in, as* and *through* the medium of performance. I argue that if such theatre is to be regarded as a potent force for social intervention, then its efficacy should be found within the process of performance itself.

As community theatre strives to create alternative realities for its target audience, questions about its ultimate value remain contested. As Tobin Nellhaus and Susan Haedicke (2004: 14) point out, art is not neutral; its socially committed intentions do not shield the work from possible ambiguities. The immersion of community theatre practice in local relations of power, authority and engagement tends to obscure its positive intentions. What begins as a benefit to the community can be affected, for better or worse, by the politics of location, agency and culture, with far-reaching implications for the identity of participants. Hence the discourses that surround community theatre interventions must be interrogated to understand the ambiguous nature of identities emerging from such work.

Baz Kershaw (1994) asserts that community theatre has the potential to create an immediate and lasting impact on the evolution of wider cultural, social and political realities. Yet Helen Nicholson (2005) contends that such modes of applied theatre can be viewed as both a gift and a poison. Apart from the ambiguous meanings that may be attached to the metaphor of a gift such as dependency, patronage and surveillance, Nicholson (2005) argues that the practice of making theatre in community settings creates spaces that enable participants’ voices to be heard. Theatre practitioners and donor agents put themselves in the position of gift-givers. Their desire to identify with the lives of others (i.e. the target community) through the drama and theatre process constitutes the experience of the gift. But Nicholson goes further to sound a warning on the paradox behind the gift:

Because it can be seen simultaneously as both a present and a poison, it is sometimes worth remembering the unpalatable truth that a present, however well intentioned, may be thought to be poisonous by those who live in a different context, and whose version of a good life differs from our own. (2005: 161–62)

James Thompson (2006) seems to concur with Nicholson when he describes applied theatre as existing in a state of bewilderment. The theatre practitioners and their participants

remain in a transitory state of amazement and fascination mingled with doubt and uncertainty. As communities try to break away from familiar cultural practices or accustomed patterns of behaviour, they are likely to experience bewilderment, ‘a great deal of hurt and damage, [but also] a powerful impetus to people’s struggle to make sense of their lives’ (Thompson, 2006: 24).

This article uses the illustrative paradigm of two performance interventions that were employed by Ikusasa Lakho Theatre, a young people’s theatre group that I founded in one of the high-density suburbs of Pietermaritzburg in South Africa in 2006. The paper begins by giving a brief background to the formation of the youth theatre group and the reasons for the group’s choice of teenage pregnancy as a major concern. It then proceeds to evaluate the performance intervention strategies and the ambiguous nature of identities that emerged from these interventions.

Ikusasa Lakho Theatre

After taking up a postdoctoral research fellowship position in the Department of Drama and Performance Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in August 2006, my host supervisor invited me to a meeting with Tholakele Mkhize, a young Zulu woman from Edendale high-density township in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. The meeting marked the beginning of a community theatre project that, to me, has been a challenge to the academy to engage with local communities in development education. At the meeting, it was agreed that Tholakele would come up with a draft proposal of what exactly she wanted and how the academy could help her community. In the introduction to her draft proposal, Tholakele wrote:

The youth residing in the rural (sic) communities of Edendale are constantly exposed to crime, drugs, HIV/AIDS and povert (sic). The (sic) face a black (sic) future whereby they are unable to avoid the everyday pressures of their friends lading (sic) to them (and) engaging in illegal and immoral activities. (Mkhize, 2006: 1)

In spite of her shaky English, it was clear that Tholakele was calling upon the academy to intervene in the process of empowering the youth to do something about their own lives.

Eventually, I took up the challenge and focused my research on the youth in Edendale township. From close consultations with my host supervisor and Tholakele, her original draft proposal was revisited in order to come up with a revised version. In the revised proposal, the mission statement for Ikusasa Lakho Theatre, the Zulu name for the newly formed community theatre group which means ‘the future is yours’, was:

To empower the youth of Edendale township by engaging in community theatre practice and other activities that will enable them to realise their full potential for integrated development. (Chinyowa, 2006: 1)

Ikusasa Lakho Theatre’s vision was based on the desire to find alternative ways of bettering the lives of the disadvantaged people — particularly the youth — who had been placed on the margins of history by colonialism and apartheid. The name of the group, which came from the youth themselves, reflected the latent driving spirit that none but themselves should prepare for their future. Hence the aims and objectives of the group were geared towards enabling the

youth to rise above the fetters of the past and make their own history. In her draft proposal, Tholakele had indicated that the youth in Edendale township were constantly engaged in illegal and immoral activities such as sexual promiscuity, crime and drugs. Hence the choice of context was largely informed by the potential desire of the local youths to make a difference to their lives and the community. The youth were tasked to collect stories from the community that were eventually workshopped to create an improvised performance on teenage pregnancy entitled *Sbongile*, the name of the female eponymous character.

Teenage Pregnancy

The debate about the pros and cons of teenage pregnancy as a social problem in South Africa remains inconclusive. It has been argued that, since fertility plays a central role in African women's identity, the negative consequences of teenage pregnancy can be mitigated by the birth of children. From their study on teenage pregnancy in KwaZulu-Natal, the province with the highest prevalence rate in South Africa, Preston-Whyte et al. (1995) observed that, in general, mothers and grandmothers tend to condone pregnancy in order to encourage girls to 'prove' their fertility. The girls are told that pregnancy is far preferable than the prospect of infertility caused by taking contraceptive measures. Hence falling pregnant becomes a way of striving for social acceptance. However, limited attention has been given to the adverse consequences of teenage pregnancy beyond matters of fertility and childbearing. Studies have revealed that more than 35 per cent of adolescent girls in South Africa become pregnant before the age of 20 (Preston-Whyte et al., 1995; Cunningham et al., 1996). In fact, the statistics are so alarming that it is inconceivable to ignore the possible ramifications. According to IRIN News (2007), apart from an average of one in three schoolgirls having a baby by the age of 20, there are hotspots in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal provinces where pregnancy rates are higher. For example, a 2006 survey showed as many as 71 per cent of girls at one school in Soweto township falling pregnant (IRIN, 2007). Clearly, the disadvantages of teenage pregnancy far outweigh the advantages. More often than not, adolescent pregnancies are a result of external pressure rather than personal choice, hence they are mostly unplanned and unwanted. The health hazards associated with adolescent pregnancy, coupled with the burdens of early parenthood, leave teenage girls at high risk. School dropouts, illegal abortions, social rejection, economic insecurity, child neglect, drug abuse and aborted relationships are only some of the multiple consequences of teenage pregnancy.

It was out of concern for what was happening to their peers in Edendale township and other parts of KwaZulu-Natal province that the members of Ikusasa Lakho Theatre decided to address the problem of teenage pregnancy. The performance of the play *Sbongile* became a frame of reference for the youth and the community to take action against teenage pregnancy. As performers, the group would act as mediators while the community participated as co-players in the action. The purpose of performing *Sbongile* was therefore to create a platform for action that could influence changes in values, attitudes and behaviour among the youth themselves.

The Performance Text as Intervention

The performance text has been described as an ideological transaction and negotiation between the group of performers and their target audience (Kershaw, 1994: 16). The language of the performance text, its signs or codes of signification, connect with the target audience's cultural frames of reference to forge a dialogue of world-views. In fact, Baz Kershaw (1994) goes so far as to assert that:

The totally passive audience is a figment of the imagination, a practical impossibility; as ... the reactions of audiences influence the nature of a performance; ... the [audience] is engaged fundamentally in the active construction of meaning as a performance event proceeds. (1994: 16)

In other words, performance involves the transaction and negotiation of meaning between performers and audience as they interact either actively or vicariously. In the process, the performance will appeal to its audience to effect, at least in terms of memory and imagination, an alternative social reality.

Through direct observations of, personal engagement with and audience feedback on Ikusasa Lakho Theatre's performance of *Sbongile*, different levels of audience responses were experienced that demonstrated the efficacy of the performance text. From the performances that the group carried out, most of the young audiences tended to identify themselves with the eponymous character's double consciousness, responded rather strangely to the power of patriarchal ideology and displayed differing horizons of expectation in terms of levels of participation. These two forms of audience response will be analysed to reveal the ambiguous nature of identities that were emerging in the process of performance.

Double Consciousness

When her father insists on barring her from home because of what he perceives to be deviant behaviour, *Sbongile* decides to go and live with a close friend. But as soon as she falls pregnant, she finds herself rejected by her world. Her friend, Zinhle, no longer wants to stay with her. Mandla, her 'sugar daddy', and Jabu, her boyfriend, want nothing to do with her. While she hungers to claim her rights as a woman, she cannot escape parental control, male chauvinism and social ostracism. In her soliloquy at the end of the scene, *Sbongile* decides to either terminate her life or return home to seek parental forgiveness. In the end, she opts for the latter and returns home to give birth to a baby girl.

Sbongile's double consciousness causes her to remain trapped between her desire for freedom and the reality of what she perceives to be sexual victimisation. From discussions with audiences and their responses to the question 'What did you learn from this performance?', they revealed an ambivalence similar to *Sbongile's*. Some tended to condemn *Sbongile* for not listening to her parents and falling prey to peer pressure, while others felt she did not have much choice over the circumstances.

Evidently, the performance text had struck a chord with the audience that allowed them to experience these paradoxical feelings. The text as performance 'played' with the fundamental beliefs of the audience to provoke a crisis of identity similar to that of the protagonist. In Helen Nicholson's (2005) view, various forms of applied theatre rely on the convergence of different narratives because participants bring a range of ideas and experiences to the drama. Through the process of identification, each participant 'triangulates' these disparate narratives to provoke an ethical ambiguity arising from the understanding of oneself in relation to others. Thus paradox defines the potential efficacy of the performance when the possibilities it raises resonate with the realities affecting the audience.

Patriarchal Ideology

Patriarchy operates as an ideology that compels women to internalise male domination. *Sbongile's* father expected his daughter to conform to cultural expectations that regard women as

docile, submissive and obedient to men. But while Sbongile rejects such conformity, she goes on to 'imprison' herself by falling into the vicious love triangle consisting of herself, her boyfriend, Jabu, and her 'sugar daddy', Mandla. To an extent, the performance exposes patriarchy as a dominant ideology responsible for Sbongile's problems. Antonio Gramsci (1971) argues that ruling classes maintain their power and control over the social system because the majority accept the ruling group's hegemony as the norm. This was evident from most of the audience's responses to the performance. Male dominance lies at the centre of the cultural construction of gender in most African societies. Relations between men and women are still viewed in terms of a hierarchical tradition that privileges male authority over women. The power of patriarchy is thus enhanced by its tendency to extend Salvatore Cucchiari's (1981: 62) simple gender formula: woman equals 'passive nature' and man equals 'dominant culture'.

Rather than question the power of patriarchy over personal prerogative, one of the young respondents wrote:

I thing (sic) the character who plays Sbongile must go back to her parents and apologise for what she did (extract from audience questionnaire).

Apparently, such responses reflect the young audience's acceptance of patriarchal values that seem to conflict with the postmodern conditions affecting them. As Fredric Jameson (1991) points out, postmodernism is closely related to the emergence of consumerist capitalism, the formal features of which express the logic of that particular socioeconomic system. In Sbongile's case, such consumerist values are portrayed by her preference for the world of materialism, pleasure and prestige offered by her 'sugar daddy', Mandla. James Thompson (2006) has observed that, even if applied theatre carries positive intentions — like suggesting a counter-culture that opposes the negative aspects of patriarchal ideology — the process itself produces a clash of expectations. As the audience engages with the action, the performance impacts in ways that are diverse, situation dependent and perhaps contrary to the issues at hand. The potential efficacy of such theatre may lie in it challenging the audience's complacency over the status quo and question the dominant ideology, or the issue itself may remain irrelevant to the audience.

Horizons of Expectation

Each genre of performance raises expectations in the audience according to how it has been framed. The performance text had emerged from the stories that the group had collected from the community. As David Booth (1994) points out, the story is a basis for organising human experience. What the story reveals is not simply that which is already known, but that which is there but not yet understood. The story thus provides the community with an aesthetic framework for learning about itself, reflecting on its needs and aspirations and interpreting the meaning of its own experiences. It is the multifaceted way in which the make-believe world of narratives affects the audience that gives rise to what Kershaw calls 'horizons of expectation' (1994: 24).

Through the distancing effect of make-believe, the audience members willingly suspend their disbelief and allow themselves to accept the events of the performance as both real and not real. It is by entering into such a metaxic world, what Larry O'Farrell calls 'the liminoid experience' (1996: 129) that they are able to experiment with the norms, values and practices which govern their real lives. The outcome of such activity may not have an immediate consequence for them, yet it is such ambiguous experiences that constitute 'the first condition

needed for performance efficacy' (Kershaw, 1994: 24). In response to the question, 'Do you think performances like this can work as a way of learning?' most of the respondents answered in the affirmative. Some went on to indicate that they had learnt about being responsible, the importance of forgiveness and the need for tolerance and acceptance. But the process of attaining a state of make-believe remains ambiguous, and one wonders at the complexity of identities being constructed through such performance practice.

Forum Theatre as Intervention

Forum Theatre is a function of Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979), the primary objective of which has been described as being:

to encourage autonomous activity, to set a process in motion, to stimulate transformative activity, to change spectators into protagonists. And it is precisely for these reasons that the Theatre of the Oppressed should be the initiator of changes the culmination of which is not the aesthetic phenomenon but real life. (Boal, 1992: 245)

Forum theatre's main focus is on transforming the spectator into a protagonist, or the oppressed subject who undergoes a process of transformation that may eventually be extended to the larger society. To this end, forum theatre creates an 'anti-model' of oppression that lays the basis for a theatre-based dialogue in which the participating audience members, or 'spect-actors', intervene to try and change the outcome of the forum scene on behalf of the protagonist (McCarthy, 2004). The 'anti-model' needs the involvement of antagonists who embody and maintain the oppression through conflicts of interest targeted at the protagonist. The rehearsal of the 'anti-model' acts as an aesthetic space for actors and spect-actors as they engage in forum debate and experiment with alternatives to the oppression. The facilitator, or 'joker', manages the intervention by presenting the actors, engaging with the spect-actors and controlling the whole intervention process.

Apart from using the performance text as an intervention strategy by itself, Ikusasa Lakho Theatre also used the same text as an anti-model of oppression following Boal's forum theatre techniques. Although the forum interventions did not seem to yield as many efficacious results as the performance interventions, they acted as a necessary starting point for community dialogue. For instance, I played the role of joker at one of the community performances in the YMCA Hall near Georgetown library in Edendale township. As a theatre group, we had agreed to end the performance at the point where Sbongile returns home with her pregnancy after being rejected by her boyfriend, Jabu, her 'sugar daddy', Mandla, and close friend, Zinhle. While her mother, Mama Ndlovu, appears sympathetic and willing to welcome her back, Baba Ndlovu remains adamant and threatens to beat her up with his knobkerry (a wooden weapon with a long handle and rounded 'head' at one end) if she does not go away. The characters freeze at this moment and the forum intervention begins. I began by explaining the rules of forum theatre as a game in which the audience is free to intervene in order to change the outcome. After a long period of silence, an adolescent boy from the community volunteered to intervene. I invited him to come to the stage and show the audience. His solution was to get both Sbongile and her mother on their knees begging for forgiveness. Though he played Baba Ndlovu's role to the audience's applause, the solution seemed to reinforce patriarchy's domination over women.

Evidently, the spect-actor did not intervene on behalf of the oppressed protagonist, in this case Sbongile, but of the oppressor, Baba Ndlovu. It was as if the protagonist were confronted by an accumulation of oppressions. But, as Boal (1992) explains, the action of the anti-model may contain its own negation. Sbongile herself had accepted her wrongdoing and sought forgiveness from her parents. Her oppression was therefore compromised by her apparent moral shortcomings. The spect-actor was therefore simply expressing a dilemma by not breaking the oppression, but rather reinforcing the idea that gender oppression was not so easily defeated. At another level, Boal (1992) argues that only spect-actors who are victims of the same oppression as the character can replace, or act on behalf of, the oppressed protagonist to find new forms of liberation. Such spect-actors who are as oppressed as the protagonist will, at the same time, be training themselves to take action in their own lives. In this case, the young male spect-actor was not experiencing the same oppression as Sbongile. Thus, even though forum theatre decrees that the intervention should only be done on behalf of the oppressed, there may be incidents where its rules need to be reversed — for instance by intervening on behalf of the oppressor. Boal (1992) himself admits that if the audience, at a particular moment and for a particular reason, decides to change the rules of the game, it can change them. However, as a social intervention strategy, the only forum theatre rules which cannot be altered are those where spect-actors can become the protagonists of the dramatic action and, by extension, they must prepare themselves to be the protagonists of their own lives.

At another performance that Ikusasa Lakho Theatre carried out in Amanzimtoti after being invited by Africa Cares for Life, a Christian-based non-governmental organisation that deals with teenage pregnancy problems, the intervention posed by one spect-actor sounded more like ‘evangelical theatre’. Perhaps it was because the organisation’s members who made up the majority of the audience were Christians. The theatre group stopped the performance on the same scene where Sbongile asks for forgiveness from her parents and the father remains adamant. A middle-aged white woman volunteered to intervene on behalf of the protagonist. She came on to the stage and put on Mama Ndlovu’s apron and head-dress. As joker, I asked the actors to replay the scene with the spect-actor in role as ‘Mama Ndlovu’. Baba Ndlovu came on to the stage raging with anger at the sight of her daughter and scaringly wielding his knobkerrie. In spite of the violence and intimidation, the spect-actor simply asked him to calm down while shielding her daughter. The audience just burst into laughter. From the subsequent debate on the intervention, many audience members justified the spect-actor’s action, suggesting that Baba Ndlovu would change his patriarchal attitude with time. The evangelical overtones of such a solution cannot be in doubt. However, Boal (1992) seems to privilege the power of debate over the ‘magic’ of the solution. In his own words:

Debate, the conflict of ideas, dialectics, argument and counter-argument — all this stimulates, arouses, enriches and prepares the spectator for action in real life. Thus, when the model is not urgent, that is to say when it is not about having to act in reality immediately on leaving the show, finding a solution is not of prime importance. (Boal, 1992: 231)

The question of gender hierarchy, of male dominance over women, cannot possibly be solved by imminent action. It is a long-standing question that calls for time-tested solutions. Perhaps the evangelical approach suited the specific context of performance and would fall into

the category of Boal's 'model of future action' (1992: 231). Although the model seemed to suit the majority who were present, serving as a stimulus for future action, its evangelical inclinations could remain problematic in practice.

From the forum sessions that were carried out by the theatre group, the audience appeared more concerned with questioning the role of Sbhongile's father than any other characters. There were no attempts to question the more influential roles of Sbhongile's friend, boyfriend and 'sugar daddy'. In fact, it was not an easy task to get the audience to participate in the forum sessions. This may be attributed to the audience's lack of familiarity with forum theatre as an intervention strategy and also the apparent absence of a spirit of creativity and critical frame of mind. However, during the forum interventions the audience continued to call for a closure to the performance. They were not content with an open ending in the last scene. As one audience member from Amanzimtoti commented: 'How can we have men who still wield knobkerries at women in this day and age? It goes against the struggle for women's liberation.' In the end, the group had to improvise an ending in which Baba Ndlovu takes up the advice of a close friend to forgive his daughter. The play closes with a sombre atmosphere in which Baba Ndlovu is holding Sbhongile's newborn baby, Thando, in his arms. The closure ends with song and dance followed by post-performance discussions on teenage pregnancy.

Boal (1992) admitted that forum theatre itself was still experimental. More research and exploration are still required if it is to attain its full potential to transform the spectator into a protagonist of the theatrical action, and ultimately to change society rather than interpret it. More important is the need for catalysts of forum theatre interventions to help their target audience to make connections between the imaginary life of the aesthetic space with real life. Of all the different forms of applied theatre, forum theatre seems appropriately placed on the frontier between fiction and reality, between 'what if' and 'what is', between 'as if' and 'as is', or between the 'not real' and the 'real'. It is by crossing this often-blurred boundary that people's 'dreams' may be made to come true. Yet such a boundary appears to be not so easy to cross considering the experimental nature of forum theatre itself. Its multiple shortcomings, such as the narrow divide between the oppressor and the oppressed, susceptibility to confusion by inexperienced jokers, a tendency towards individualised rather than collective interventions by spect-actors and a rather excessive freedom with the rules of the game, can impact negatively on constructions of identity.

Conclusion

Teenage girls were the primary target audience for Ikusasa Lakho Theatre's performance and forum theatre interventions. From these interventions, the most outstanding problem remained that of silence. The girls were more conspicuous by their reluctance to actively participate in discussions on a matter that had direct relevance to their lives. Judging by their lukewarm involvement in discussions, it is difficult to assess the extent to which the interventions acted as an effective catalyst for change. On further interrogation, it was observed that the young girls were caught between the cultural ambiguities of a society in transition. The majority of the girls still felt protected by the social expectations of an indigenous Zulu womanhood in which they were socialised into obedient and respectful women. However, as a survival mechanism, this protective sensibility was being challenged by the reality of the contradictions in which the girls found themselves. They had become victims of unwanted pregnancy, patriarchal dominance and intractable diseases such as HIV/AIDS. The option was for them to begin to 'speak out' against the dominant ideological system using relatively safe means of cultural resistance such as

community theatre to challenge, if not subvert, the prevailing status quo. It is in the voicing of silences that the young girls could be able to claim their right to make decisions about their sexuality.

Yet this seems not to have been the case with Ikusasa Lakho Theatre's interventions. Why? While community theatre remains in search of social change, it seems to be confronted by ambiguities in terms of the agency, power and representation of its participants. Perhaps it is in the gap between fiction and reality, in playing in-between the self and the other, that the construction of identity resides, or maybe the matter of existence itself. As James Thompson (2006) concludes, if theatre were simply an opportunity to challenge people's antisocial attitudes and change behaviour, it would lose the possibility for the unexpected, surprising and radically disturbing.

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