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AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION, AESTHETIC DISTANCE AND CHANGE: REFLECTIONS ON *FIFTY SQUARE FEET*, A THEATRE- IN-EDUCATION PROGRAMME ON URBAN POVERTY

By Chan Yuk-lan Phoebe (Hong Kong)

Abstract

Drawing on her reflections of a Theatre-in-Education (TIE) programme devised and performed for teenagers in Hong Kong on global citizenship education, the author discusses how her TIE team attempted to use audience participation and aesthetic distance to bring about change in young audiences raised in a mainstream culture that sees development as narrowly defined in terms of economic growth. The article documents the process of devising, implementing and evaluating the TIE work, and critically reflects on the artistic choices made at different stages of the work by constantly referring back to its educational goals. Throughout the process, the author and her team considered and experimented with various kinds of audience participation forms to achieve the optimum balance between engagement and distancing to facilitate learners' understanding of poverty issues, arouse social awareness and empower young people to become informed citizens with agency for change.

Abstract

作者透過一個為青少年而編作，有關世界公民教育的教育劇場（TIE，有譯作「教習劇場」），反思和討論她與創作團隊如何藉由調控觀眾參與的模式、觀眾與作品的距離，以達致為青少年帶來轉變的效果。本文闡述、分析作者與其團隊在編作與實行該作品期間，在不同階段所作的藝術決定，透過不斷檢視這些決定與作品之教育目標之配合，考慮如何在投入與疏離之間取得平衡，從而為「經濟發展就是社會發展唯一標準」的社會氛圍下成長的青少年，帶來對貧窮議題的認識，社會意識的提昇，並使能成為更具識見與能力感的公民

Biography

Chan Yuk-lan Phoebe is Lecturer/Programme Coordinator at the Hong Kong Art School, where she convenes a Master of Drama Education Programme co-organised with Griffith University, Australia. She has an MA (Drama in Education) from the University of Central England, and is currently undertaking PhD study with Griffith University. She has worked extensively with theatre companies, schools, community groups and NGOs in stage performance, applied theatre and Theatre-in-Education, teacher education in the use of drama as pedagogy, and research, as well as editing, translating and authoring publications. She is the co-editor of *Planting Trees of Drama with Global Vision in Local Knowledge: IDEA 2007 Dialogues*.

Biography

陳玉蘭是香港藝術學院的講師/課程統籌，負責策劃與執教該院與澳洲格理菲斯大學合辦的「戲劇教育碩士課程」。她於伯明翰英格蘭中部大學修畢「戲劇教育碩

士」，現於格理菲斯大學攻讀博士學位。陳氏的工作範疇廣泛，與不同表演、社區或教育團體合作，參與舞台創作、應用劇場、教育劇場、教師發展、研究、翻譯、出版等不同項目。她是《IDEA 2007戲劇性對話：認識自己，放眼世界》的聯合編輯。

陳玉蘭

香港藝術學院

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION, AESTHETIC DISTANCE AND CHANGE: REFLECTIONS ON *FIFTY SQUARE FEET*, A THEATRE- IN-EDUCATION PROGRAMME ON URBAN POVERTY

This article draws on my experience of planning, developing and implementing *Fifty Square Feet*, a Theatre-in-Education program on global citizenship education, as the premise to discuss the notion of audience participation and aesthetic distance (Jackson 2007) in using theatre as social intervention to bring about change.

For the purpose of this article, I use the term 'Theatre-in-Education' (TIE) to refer to a form of theatre that is devised, age specific and participatory, and contains not only a production but also pre- and post-performance activities, as described by John O'Toole in his seminal work *Theatre in Education* (1976):

Firstly, the material is usually specifically devised, tailor-made to the needs of the children and the strengths of the team. Secondly, the children are often asked to participate; endowed with roles, they learn skills, make decisions, and solve problems, so the programmes' structures have to be flexible ... to respond to the children's contributions within the context of the drama and still to uphold the roles ... Thirdly, teams are usually aware of the importance of the teaching context, and try to prepare suggestions for follow-up work ... (1976: vii)

Other terms related to TIE include 'Educational Theatre', used by Jackson (1993) – who later preferred 'Interventionist Theatre' (Jackson 2005, 2007), with which he referred to a wider scope of works that may not necessarily happen within schools and formal educational settings. Other authors use 'Applied Theatre' (Prendergast and Saxton 2009; Prentki and Preston 2009; Taylor 2003; Thompson 2003) or 'Applied Drama' (Nicholson 2005) to refer to works of similar nature, with a slightly different focus on the applied nature of theatre (as opposed to theatre that purely serves to entertain). In this article, I have opted for 'Educational Theatre' as a general term to refer to works that happen mainly in school and other educational contexts, and TIE as its sub- set, embodying the devised, age-specific and participatory features mentioned above.

In discussing Educational Theatre, including TIE, Schechner suggests that a more fluid, contemporary notion of theatre needs to be considered – one that sees theatre as 'an interplay among space, time, performers, action and *audience*' (Schechner, cited in Jackson 2007: 139) (my italics). Audience participation, rather than being seen narrowly as a process that denies or compromises the aesthetics of theatre, is an integral element in a theatre event. Jackson also asserts that audiences actively engaged in participatory theatre can engage in ways that retain a degree of aesthetic distance, enabling them to simultaneously believe and not believe, and to be engaged and distanced.

It is in this liminal space of engagement and detachment that the potential for change and transformation becomes paramount. Brecht (1964)m in maintaining that theatre should aim to promote social change, calls for the effect of *Verfremdung* (defamiliarisation) in theatre, distancing the audience to bring about heightened consciousness and reflection in social and political orientations. Boal (1979) sees theatre as necessarily political and emancipative, where 'change is imperative' (1979: Foreword). His Forum Theatre techniques further Brecht's notion of alienation by breaking the conventional separation between 'actors' and 'spectators', turning the theatre into an empowering ground for people to rehearse for changes in real life.

Heathcote also asserts that drama provides a framework for participants to negotiate their change when the 'self-spectator' of a learner is awakened.

It is through the awakening of what Heathcote terms the 'self-spectator', which is the participants being aware of what they are doing while they are doing it, that she aims to bring about knowledge and change (Muir 1996: 25).

Bolton describes 'self-spectatorship' as a 'double valence of being an audience to one's own creation and being an audience to oneself' (1998: 266). He explains that such a concept takes the percipients (a term to denote the combined function of participant/spectator) beyond individual watching to collective and shared feelings. O'Neill (1989) regards this form of spectatorship as a more productive kind of audience

presence, as the dual function of 'actors' and 'audience' facilitates reflective action, collective meaning-making, and thus a change of understanding of human issues.

These notions of change are highly relevant to education in modern society, where learning tends to be reduced to passive processes of receiving prescribed knowledge for examinations. Participatory TIE aims to hand knowledge back to the people, encouraging active participation so that people make changes in their learning, in their lives and eventually in their society.

In collaborating with Oxfam Hong Kong in conceiving and conducting the work *Fifty Square Feet*, our TIE team found that the above notions of change strongly echoed the core value of Global Citizenship Education advocated by Oxfam:

Through an interactive approach, global citizenship education encourages young people to actively participate in the society, and to discover their potential to make a difference. (Oxfam Hong Kong)

Fifty Square Feet

The TIE programme *Fifty Square Feet* was devised and conducted by a team of three drama educators: Liu Pui-fong, Tang Yiu-hing and myself. It addressed the situation of poverty and social exclusion faced by people living below the poverty line in Hong Kong, especially the working poor. The work was targeted at secondary school students (12–18-year-olds), with the aim of arousing empathic understanding of the poor and critical reflection on issues around urban poverty. It also problematised the mainstream notion of development adopted by many in Hong Kong as well as other developed countries – one that had been 'too narrowly seen in terms of economic and social progress' (wa Thiong'o 2009: 149).

In Hong Kong, the divide between rich and poor is widening despite the SAR's economic improvement as a whole. The Gini coefficient – a widely used measure of income disparity – increased from 0.476 in 1991 to a record high level of 0.533 in 2006. According to the United Nations' *State of the World's Cities 2008/2009: Harmonious Cities*, Hong Kong has become one of the most inequitable societies in Asia. Oxfam and the Alliance Concerning CSSA (2008)¹ state that amongst the three million people in the Hong Kong labour force, 14.6 per cent are low-income workers earning less than HK\$5,050 a month. Around 181,000 people in the labour force are unemployed while 90,200 are under-employed (Hong Kong SAR Census and Statistics Department 2009).

As devisers and actor-teachers of the TIE work, the foremost questions our team considered were:

- 1 What kinds of changes do we want to offer the young audience who are brought up in such a socio-economic context?
- 2 What kinds of changes can be achieved in a three-hour, one-off TIE experience?

Hong Kong students are not unfamiliar with the subject of poverty, as it is a prevalent topic in their curriculum, included variously in the subjects of Integrated Humanities, Liberal Studies, Life Education, and Moral and Civic Education. However, existing civic or social education practices favour acquisition of knowledge over feelings, and critical thinking is understood as merely conceptual rather than an affective, experiential process. Neither of these really leads to students' connectedness to what they learn, so such approaches are unhelpful in bringing about attitudinal or behavioural changes.

Our main goal was therefore to restore young people's connectedness to the subject-matter. We believed a useful way of doing this was to invite the young people to actively participate in the theatrical event and get in touch with the immediacy of feelings and actions of the drama. By involving audience participation, we aimed at using theatre as social intervention to bring about a number of changes.

Change in Knowledge and Understanding of Poverty

Participating in TIE brings about a different form of understanding – an empathic one that not only entails cognitive knowledge of facts or figures but calls for feelings and experiences. By letting the students embody the characters in the drama through audience participation, we aimed at 'cracking students' previous understanding into new awareness and insights' (Johnson and O'Neill 1984: 122).

Change in Social Awareness

By engaging the students actively in the TIE work, we aimed at bringing them into interactive dialogues

that problematise and critically examine norms and values that easily go unquestioned yet have an enormous impact on marginalising the poor. We saw our work as sowing the seeds of many 'small p' political initiatives that may help develop more critical and informed citizens. As Jackson (2007) puts it:

We cannot change social processes overnight, but by understanding that our attitudes, prejudices and behaviour are to a considerable degree 'constructed' by the cultural values and systems around us, that they are not natural, universal or timeless, we may at least see the point of questioning our assumptions and re-thinking our own attitudes and actions as a result. (2007: 172)

Change in the Process of Learning

Boal asserts that 'change in theatre will extrapolate into the spect-actors' real life' (1995: 44). Cockett, however, argues against such a proposal and asserts that students' changes in the real context outside drama is beyond our knowledge, but 'from the evidence of the quality of the drama ... What's real for them is rooted in the quality of the drama they create.' (1998: 42) If we agree that what is real in drama only lies within the actuality of the learning process, then one real observable change that participatory theatre can bring is an empowerment of the learners in the process of learning. Students who participate in TIE works no longer sit back to observe and listen, but rather make a step forward to change the circumstances in the learning setting. The construct of audience participation devolves power to the hands of the learners, giving them the right to change not only the elements of the story but power relations in the theatre-cum- classroom setting.

Devising, Implementing and Evaluating the Work

Fifty Square Feet is based on a newspaper interview featuring a teenager from a poor family. On first reading it, our team was intrigued by a photo of an 11-year-old girl sitting on a bunk bed in a tiny cubicle apartment – one that houses a family of four, with no individual toilet or kitchen of their own – filled with second-hand belongings (see Figure 1).

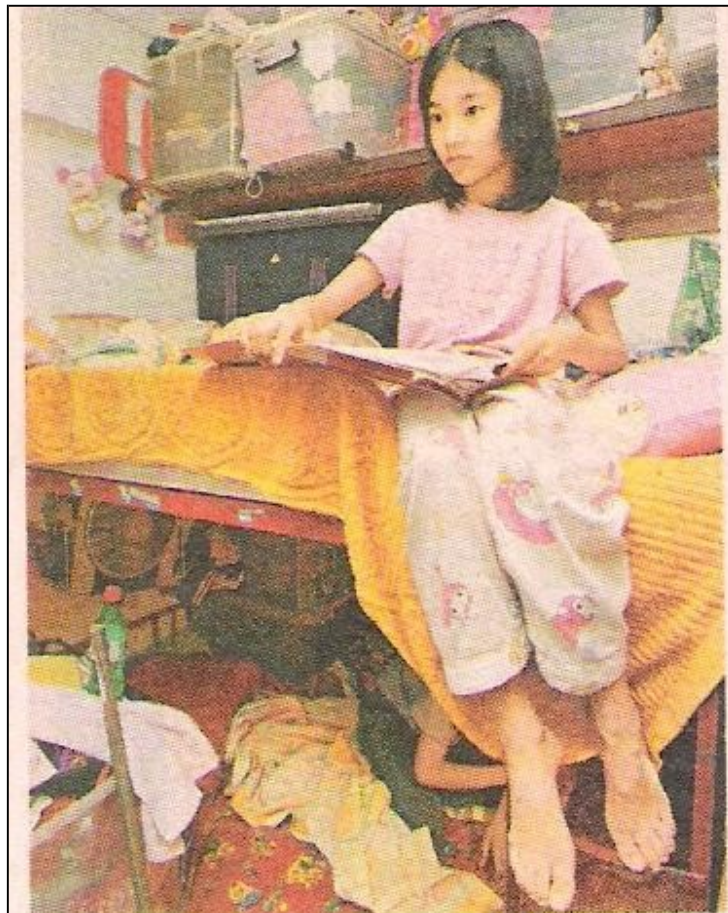


Figure 1: Image of the girl in the cubicle apartment (*Apple Daily*, 27 December 2004)

The pre-text quickly conjured up images and sparked the imaginations of the devising team. We gave the teenage girl the name Ah Yee, and devised a story about her and her parents, both low-income workers, living in a 50-square-foot cubicle apartment filled with stuff from second-hand markets or scrap-picking.

The development of the TIE work involved the three of us, as devisers and actor-teachers, working closely with Oxfam's staff in:

- 1 formulating the educational goals of the work
- 2 researching the topic (including interviews with some teenage poor to get first-hand information and the 'flesh and blood' contact with real people in poverty)
- 3 turning hard facts, information and opinions on poverty into human stories – which is what drama should be about
- 4 piloting the work-in-progress at schools to understand teenagers' views and possible response to the work and poverty issues
- 5 running a trial session of the final work at Oxfam's Interactive Education Centre, the actual performance venue, with a group of adults affiliated with Oxfam and the acting team, to test out audience response and the audience participation activities.

From 2006 to 2010, more than 80 performances of *Fifty Square Feet* have been conducted and the work will continue to run in the 2010–11 school year. During the course of the work, our team continually reflected on and evaluated the work based on our personal experiences – in interacting with the students, observing their responses and examining post-workshop questionnaires from students and teachers, as well as having dialogues with other critical friends who came to observe our work. We engaged on a journey of reflective practice in which understandings, as O'Mara (1999) asserts, were developed through actual experiences, and were constantly changing and developing as we continued with our practice. Our ongoing reflections and re-examinations of the work regarding its form, content and purpose, and the mistakes we made along the way, led to a number of revisions of the work, particularly in the audience participation form that is the focus of this paper. The following account documents our developing understanding of the subject and how the understanding emerged as we engaged in practice and maintained dialogues with theoretical notions of audience participation.

First Version of the Work

Working with an audience size of 30–40 (the usual size of one class in secondary schools), we were able to consider a high audience participation level that would preserve the intimacy of the experience. We went for what O'Toole termed 'integral participation' (1976: 88), where the audience takes roles within the drama, and contributes to the drama in ways that would alter the dramatic action. We also decided to opt for a mode that was wholly participatory, where the audience would be in one role within the drama throughout the play. The decision was partly to do with a belief that our audience needed a role frame to motivate them for a seemingly boring topic, but also largely based upon a personal desire – we wanted to make a difference as we were dissatisfied with the lack of understanding of Educational Theatre exemplified in the works of many local theatre companies, which were still adopting superficial modes of audience involvement in their works. (Yes, the 'Look out, behind you!' type of shallow participation that O'Toole criticised in some TIE works in the 1970s unfortunately still exists in Hong Kong.) Such a stance was eventually found to be unhelpful, as it led us to make the choice of form for the sake of making it, without carefully considering its appropriateness.

After devising the three major scenes in Ah Yee's story (details of which will be introduced later in this article), we were still unable to find a point of view that would give the audience a useful role as 'integral participants'. About a week or so before the trial run, we finally came up with an idea of framing the audience in role as trainee guardian angels for Ah Yee's family. Undergoing a test to be certified as real guardian angels, they were presented with problems faced by the family, and asked to suggest solutions. The frame of 'guardian angel' was adopted to provide the will to help and the power to make changes, while the frame of 'trainee' was adopted to slow down the action, avoiding the invocation of angels to use their magic power to provide a quick fix for the problems.

We implemented the work with this role frame in the trial session, and soon found it redundant, too limiting and even at odds with our educational goals. First, with only three hours for the program, it proved to be too time consuming to enrol the participants and help them work out the complicated logic of their role. Worse still, even after considerable time had been spent on this, they didn't seem particularly engaged. They pointed out to us afterwards that the idea of playing a guardian angel was far too remote and hard to believe. Some also said that the story of Ah Yee was very engaging itself, but the role of guardian angel got in the way so they quickly decided to ignore it.

To make things worse, we also found that the role of guardian angel, had it really worked, went against the meaning we wanted to put across. An angel is essentially of higher status than Ah Yee's family, and such a role risks giving the participants a point of view that could appear patronising. Moreover, the hidden message that comes with the role is also problematic: to solve the problem of the poor, one has to rely on the angels – the supernatural – to rescue them! This severely contradicted what we wanted the participants to understand – that many problems of poverty are socially constructed, and everybody in the society has a role to play in dealing with those problems.

We learned a good lesson from this experience. We made a big mistake by only adding the role frame on to the play at the very last stage. An integral, holistic role will only work when it is considered with the dramatic actions as a whole. Also, meticulous considerations must be given to the implications of the role in relation to the educational purpose of the work.

Second Version of the Work

We dropped the idea of using holistic audience participation after the trial session, and opted for tailor-making a different mode of participation for each of the three scenes. This second version of the work was what we implemented with our real target audience, secondary students, and it was carried out for one school year. The following paragraphs explain the kinds of participation entailed and our reflections on the choices.

Scene 1

The programme starts with two short pre-performance activities:

- 1 *Each student writes a personal wish on a small piece of paper, and clips it onto a piece of installation (which will appear in the set at the end of the play).*
- 2 *The audience considers the size of 50 square feet, marks it out on the floor, and discusses where it can be and who may live there.*

Scene 1 starts, giving an overview of the family's background and living conditions. It highlights the vulnerability of the father's work life – a freelance construction site worker whose income was highly susceptible to the economic downturns in the late 1990s. He worked hard to make ends meet but unfortunately died in an accident at his workplace. His family did not receive any compensation since he was not formally registered for the job that day.

The first scene ends here, and resolves into a small-group discussion. Participants are invited to share their views about something in the story about which they feel most strongly. A discussion following those points is conducted to help the students understand the social forces that led to the misfortune of the family. This part wraps up with a newspaper caption-writing activity for the participants to consolidate their views on the play up to this point. The captions are then read aloud to the whole class by the actor- teachers.

In this first part of the program, audience participation was kept at an 'extrinsic' level (O'Toole 1976). The students did not take any roles, and were only asked to respond to the play outside the drama. The level of exposure was minimal, with the audience members mostly remaining in their seats. Meanwhile, we began to plant the seeds for the more active participation modes later – getting the students used to interacting with us by requiring everyone to take part in the discussion. To make the task easier, we started with something that anyone could readily talk about – something in the play they felt most strongly about.

The rationale for designing the activities this way was that a certain degree of 'protection' was deemed necessary before the students felt ready to engage more actively in drama. In discussing the notion of 'self-spectatorship', Heathcote (1994) asserts that although a pedagogical goal of drama is to 'alert the self-spectator so the child begins to monitor the quality of its work' and gradually become autonomous learners' (cited in Shillingford 1994: 20), the development of such ability needs to be carried out in a progressive manner. She strongly holds that before students get involved with the issues in a drama, they should be '[sheltered] from the embarrassment of being stared at' (Wagner 1999: 20). Referring to this as a kind of 'negative self-spectatorship', she argues that the self-consciousness could bring about shallow and clichéd behaviours. She suggests that teachers should monitor the degree of self-spectatorship by paying attention to the progress of the students and the drama in order to protect (reduce the negative effects of self-spectatorship) or challenge (promote the positive effects of self-spectatorship) the students at different times (Shillingford 1994: Chapter 3).

While Heathcote discusses self-spectatorship in terms of the participants' behaviours in role in Process Drama, we regard her idea as valid for this TIE work when students have not yet stepped into role, but are preparing to do so.

Scene 2

Ah Yee wanted to participate in a birthday party her classmates were planning to throw for a teacher, but she could not afford the money. In a plea to her mother for an advance payment of her travel money (she planned to save up for the party by walking to school), she found it hard to make her mother understand that she needed to take part in social activities at school to get acquainted with her friends.

The scene flashes back to the day when Ah Yee's friends invited her to the party. Ah Yee failed to convince her friends to scale down the party, as their concepts of spending money and what makes a decent party were very different. While she was still worrying about the money, her friends decided to go shopping together. Ah Yee made up a lie to excuse herself, but the lie was exposed. Her best friend got angry with her.

The scene is followed by Forum Theatre in which the students are asked to think of ways of helping Ah Yee deal with the situation.

After the Forum Theatre, the students do a piece of in-role writing as Ah Yee.

This part of the work adopted Boal's Forum Theatre techniques by inviting the audience to go on stage to suggest and enact solutions to a problem, thus turning passive 'spectators' into active 'spect-actors'. Unlike classic Forum Theatre, where the primary aim is to empower the oppressed to test out alternative ways of dealing with social injustice, our Forum Theatre aimed at something different. In Theatre of the Oppressed, those in the audience are members of the oppressed groups and are trying to deal with their own problems through theatre. However, the students who participated in our work were not necessarily people in poverty. Thus we opted for a focus that would help them get deeper understanding of the situation by physically and emotionally engaging with the feelings and actions of Ah Yee and her classmates. As I pointed out earlier, there is a gap between what students cognitively understand about poverty and what they feel/experience about the issues involved. The Forum Theatre allowed us to bring the audience into the immediacy of feelings and actions, the 'here and now' of the situation, in order to gain knowledge and insights.

Boal (1995) explains how change in knowledge occurs when a complex process of self-observation takes place in theatre:

The extraordinary gnoseological (knowledge-enhancing) power of theatre is due to these three essential properties: (1) plasticity, which allows and induces the unfettered exercise of memory and imagination, the free play of past and future; (2) the division or doubling of self which occurs in the subject who comes on stage, the fruit of the dichotomic and 'dichotomizing' character of the 'platform', which allows – and enables – self-observation; (3) finally, that telemicroscopic property which magnifies everything and makes everything present, allowing us to see things which, without it, in smaller or more distance form, would escape our gaze. (1995: 28)

Putting the above ideas in the context of our work, we understood the process of student participation in

this Forum Theatre as one in which the following occurs:

- 1 Each spect-actor takes advantage of the 'plasticity' of the theatre to create meaning by juxtaposing what they know about poverty in the past with Ah Yee's story. With their physical and affective faculties fully engaged in a creative process that liberates memory and imagination, the knowledge created would not be just an abstract idea but a concrete and real experience.
- 2 The 'telemicroscopic' nature of the theatre allows them to take a closer look at Ah Yee's situation, enabling them both individually and as a whole audience to examine it and understand something that they might not have noticed, or might not be able to examine so closely in real life.
- 3 The 'dichotomic' nature of the theatre would allow them to see not only what is happening to themselves, but see themselves seeing it – as they would act upon a problem they would see themselves acting. They would also be able to see the world as seen by Ah Yee, and see themselves as seen by other classmates in the audience. This 'dichotomic' nature of theatre is important in bringing about opportunities for reflections.

An understanding of these ideas – particularly the last one – was highly useful for us as facilitators of the Forum Theatre. For example, after spect-actors had acted as Ah Yee or her classmates, we would invite them to stay behind and share how they saw the matter as the character, comparing it with how they saw it when they were part of the audience. We also invited the audience to share their observations on the different actions and consequences of the actions. By encouraging these dialogues between the role and the self, as well as between actors and the audience, we were often able to bring about deeper reflections on the situation, the characters' way of thinking and their dilemmas.

Scene 3

After Ah Yee's father died, her mother became the breadwinner. She did different laborious and low-paid jobs, and ended up being a cleaner in a public housing estate. Faced with all kinds of unfair employment terms, she burst out in anger one time and shouted to the Foreman, 'I'll quit!' She soon regretted it as she realised she could not afford to lose the job, and decided to beg the Foreman to let her stay.

In a poetic epilogue to the play, the audience sees Ah Yee, Mom and the deceased Dad making humble wishes but finding them extremely hard to fulfil, despite their hard work. The common saying of 'work hard and you will get a better life' never seemed to work for them.

Post-performance activities:

1. *The audience hot-seats the mother to understand the problems faced by the working poor. They also hot-seat the Foreman to understand why the cleaning companies are making conditions so harsh for their workers.*
2. *The students form small groups to look at the wishes their classmates made at the beginning of the program, and compare them to those of Ah Yee's family.*
3. *The program ends with an out-of-role discussion on the participants' feelings of the experience, and their reflections on poverty issues.*

The audience participation mode in the hot-seating was more 'peripheral' (O'Toole 1976: 88) in its nature, where 'the quality of the experience was ... primarily theatrical' when the students conversed with the characters but their response 'took no part in the development of the drama' (1976: 104).

In the implementation of the work, we found that the students' response in hot-seating was greatly affected by the way we presented Scene 3. The naturalistic style of performance successfully called for deep sympathy for the mother – to such an extent that they put the blame solely on the Foreman, an individual, rather than the social system, despite that fact that we had embedded many social elements in the script (e.g. problems with outsourcing, lack of minimum wage guarantee policies). What originally aimed to be a conversation to understand the employment structure and its impact on the poor turned into

a moralistic lecture aimed at the Foreman.

Jackson (2007) asserts that in considering audience participation in educational theatre, the 'aesthetic distance' needs to be scrutinised carefully (2007, p. 144). When a drama is 'over-distanced', catharsis may be less likely to occur. When it is 'under-distanced', the reawakening of the audience may be correspondingly harder to achieve. Although he warns that a 'satisfactory balance' – should it ever exist – may be difficult to achieve, his ideas helped us to further refine the work.

The insights we gained from this experience were related to what Szondi (cited in Lehmann 2006) terms a 'crisis of drama', where he sees that the 'epic' social themes called for by modern theatre can no longer be contained by the traditional Aristotelian dramatic form with its interpersonal emphasis, which is characterised by 'the dominance of dialogue and interpersonal communication; the exclusion of anything external to the dramatic world (including the dramatist and the spectators, who are condemned to silent observation); the unfolding of time as a linear sequence in the present; and the adherence to the three unities of time, place and action' (2006: 3).

We learned that, in order to fulfil our pedagogical goals, we needed to look for a different artistic presentation of Scene 3 to realign the degree of empathy and detachment of the audience.

Third Version of the Play: Revised Scene 3

This new version of the TIE work emerged after one year of implementing Version 2, when we were able to re-devise the work during the semester break. We made minor adjustments to Scenes 1 and 2, but a major change in Scene 3. The content was still focused on the mother's employment conditions, but rather than adopting an Aristotelian theatre model, we once again broke the Fourth Wall by inviting the audience to interact with us in three job interview scenes. The scene we formed was tested and modified throughout the second year of implementation to come up with the version described here.

The students form groups to prepare for three characters, all working poor, who would compete with the mother in the job interviews. One representative from each group takes up the acting task, while the rest become that person's 'brains trust' as he or she goes through the interview. Such an arrangement was made to ensure that the audience members also had a certain kind of involvement in the scene rather than purely watching.

In interacting with the interviewers (played by the actor-teachers), the spect-actors encounter different constraints from those faced by the poor. The program ends with a small- group discussion about these constraints, and how some values and norms in the society have helped to shape those constraints.

We found this version more suited to our goals. As revealed in the student discussions after the scene, the audience was much more ready to point out the social problems involved in the labour market. By diversifying the jobs from one to three, it became possible for us to bring the students to the understanding that oppression does not occur only due to the wickedness of one 'Big Bad Boss'. It also allowed us to include more diverse types of constraints faced by poor people (related to gender, age and family circumstances).

Although our initial reason for changing Scene 3 was to achieve greater 'distance' for the audience, this was not the outcome. Rather, we found that the aesthetic distance experienced by the students was no longer a clear-cut 'distanced/engaged' or 'Aristotelian/epic' differentiation. On the one hand, the students were more distanced from the fiction with the Fourth Wall demolished, but at the same time the first-person participation as the interviewees and their 'brains trust' gave them a stake in the drama and emotional investment. The highly sentimental scene in the last version of the work was gone, but the interview scenes that replaced it were still mostly naturalistic and 'Aristotelian', apart from the breaking of the Fourth Wall. We found that, as we were playing the balancing act of aesthetic distance, we were coming to be more aware of the complexity of this notion. As Jackson (2007) puts it:

Aesthetic distance cannot be reduced to a formula which can be applied in a number of permutations to achieve specific effects with specific audiences. It is a problematic notion and requires enormous imagination, understanding of the audience and grasp of artistic forms on the part of the theatre makers, especially in the context of participatory theatre, if it is to be handled well. (2007: 157)

Looking Ahead: Reflective Practitioners Keep Learning

The third version of the work has been implemented for two years now, with minor revisions made during that time. Oxfam and our team are very aware of the need for continual reflection on the work with reference to the changing society and the audience.

In the 'Five Year Strategic Review' conducted at Oxfam Hong Kong's Interactive Education Centre (IEC) in 2010,² it was pointed out that there is a pressing need to revise the IEC programmes, *Fifty Square Feet* being one of them, to address the rapid changes of young people's needs over the past two years. These changes involve more sophisticated knowledge about and attitudes towards poverty as a result of the introduction of Liberal Studies as a new compulsory school subject, and as a result of the increased youth participation in large-scale anti-government campaigns and the social atmosphere generated by this. Furthermore, a widening socio-economical disparity of the students attending IEC programs is also observed, and ascertaining how the IEC programs could address such diverse needs within one event is a challenge that lies ahead.

It is not my intention in this article to discuss how these needs will be addressed, for this is something for our team to work out and learn through vigorous reflections, experimentation and actual experiences. We are very fortunate to have this opportunity to undertake a project that allows us to undergo a very long process of reviewing, revising and refining, without the pressure of having to prove our success to funding bodies in order to survive. It allows us to adopt evaluation processes that are flexible, grounded in experiences and built on critical reflection and dialogical praxis – evaluation mechanisms that applied theatre practitioners regard as pertinent to improving practice (Etherton and Prentki 2006; Jennings and Baldwin 2010; Taylor 2003). In sharing our reflective narratives in this article, we also hope others may find in them useful ideas as they engage in similar participatory TIE works.

Notes

- 1 CSSA stands for 'Comprehensive Social Security Assistance', which is a scheme provided by the Hong Kong Government for those who cannot support themselves financially.
- 2 This is an internal review involving all staff members of Oxfam's education team – senior management as well as freelance facilitators who work at the Interactive Education Centre, including the author and the other two actor-teachers of *Fifty Square Feet*.

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