

Article 2**PERFORMING ORPHANAGE EXPERIENCE: APPLIED THEATRE PRACTICE IN A REFUGEE CAMP IN JORDAN****By Fadi Fayad Skeiker (Syria)****Abstract**

This paper focuses on the role of applied theatre in empowering Palestinian youths who live in one of the biggest refugee camps in the Middle East. An applied theatre workshop, using personal stories of the participants, is analysed to examine the achievements and challenges that face the facilitator while leading the workshop. The facilitator's journey in organising, leading and reflecting on his practice serves as a microcosm for the case of applied theatre in the Middle East, a part of the world where applied theatre culture has not yet spread and/or is not yet fully recognised as a tool for addressing personal growth and the resulting social change.

Keywords

Applied theatre; personal stories; youth; refugee camp

Author's biography

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Applied Theatre in Jordan

Applied theatre in Jordan has mostly been practised by Western trained theatre artists; they are either Jordanians or Westerners who volunteer in the refugee camps and social centres that are growing on the outskirts of Amman or in some of the poverty pockets that exist outside Amman. Most of the work of such volunteers exists under the umbrella of non-government organizations (NGOs). Some NGOs have clear agendas about the role of the arts in contributing to personal and social development, but few of them articulate theatre as a main method of intervention in their work. These organisations and the individuals within them have been doing outstanding work in an increasingly challenging environment. However, most efforts to use the arts – especially theatre – in these settings are sporadic and have not constituted a trend in Jordanian communities.

Applied theatre practitioners in the Middle East have made little headway towards applying their practices, as most organisations (local and international) are directly or indirectly resistant to drama and applied theatre as tools for intervention in the lives of oppressed citizens, and specifically refugees. Therefore, most applied theatre practitioners who reside in the Middle East or who plan on going there to do applied theatre work must be prepared to approach community organisations, write convincing cover letters and be interviewed, vetted and approved by officials of the organisation before they can offer their services.

I reside in Amman, and in 2010 I started the Amman Theatre Lab, offering applied theatre and performing arts workshops under its umbrella. During one performing arts workshop, I got to know a puppeteer/activist who turned out to be on the board of an orphan centre in the Baqaa refugee camp. After learning about the centre and its efforts to bring hope to young people, I asked for his help in organising an applied theatre workshop at the centre. Excited by the idea, he helped me to obtain permission to start the workshop and offered to be my assistant.

Goal of the Workshop

I used the following terminology to obtain approval to lead the workshop: 'I intend to lead drama activities for Palestinian youths in an orphan centre in the Baqaa refugee camp.' It was important to generalise my goal in order to gain official approval, and it spared me detailing my specific agenda, which focused on giving the participants a platform from which to voice stories of their daily lives in the camps. It was highly likely that by unveiling my goals for the workshop, the process of actually getting started might be slowed down and I would be questioned about my motives, who I was working for, my organisational affiliation, my funding, and so on. My tactic worked and I received approval.

Applied theatre scholar Tim Prentki (2009) adopts Henry Giroux's concept of border crossing and uses it to describe applied theatre as a tool that allows its participants to make a transition. A transition can happen on many levels: personal, social or professional. I adopted this analogy and kept it in mind when I was formulating my goals for the workshop. I wanted my work to enable the participants' transition to a place where they could voice themselves, express their thoughts, form friendships and make allies, and establish an environment counter to the street culture of the refugee camp in which they live.

Context

The Baqaa camp is a community that faces the challenges of poverty, unemployment and a falling education level. It is occupied by about 150,000 inhabitants, most of whom are Palestinians who fled the Israeli occupation in 1967. A refugee camp constitutes a troubled context for its inhabitants. The suffering is evident in the faces of the camp residents as well as in the challenging environment where there are few amenities such as parks or playgrounds for children. The youth orphans centre is one of the few community centres offering essential services for orphans in the camp. The youth orphans centre defines an orphan as a child who has lost one or both parents.

Participants

The young people who participated in my workshop hold Jordanian citizenship. However, being a citizen

is a contested notion among participants of the workshop, all of whom are of Palestinian origin. Jordan as a country has a high percentage of Palestinian refugees who have the same civil rights as Jordanians. Nevertheless, most of them still identify as Palestinians, seeing their living in Jordan as temporary while they yearn and dream every single day of returning to their historical land. Palestine is their home – physically for the older generation who were forced to leave it by Israel's occupation in 1948 and 1967, and imaginatively for the younger generation who were born in exile but have been raised with the notion of Palestine as their lost home ingrained in their upbringing. All my workshop participants were born and raised in Jordan and have lived all their lives there. The public narrative of Palestine as a nation-state is shaped by the personal stories of refugees and their children, and by a sense of solidarity with their fellow Palestinians who are still living under Israel's occupation. Thus the idea of the formation of a Palestinian state remains an imaginative one that is sustained by memories of their families' histories.

Workshop

I ran a ten-day applied theatre workshop from 10–20 January 2010. I had seventeen participants – seven females and ten males, with an age range between 12 and 16. We met daily for two hours. During the workshop, I worked on exploring issues related to the participants' troubled context by offering theatre exercises that served as a platform from which they could voice their stories as orphans living in a refugee camp.

Each meeting began by inviting the participants to sit in a circle. This format created a stir among participants since they typically perceived a workshop as educational, and thus they expected to sit on chairs and receive information from the 'instructor'. However, sitting in a circle made them aware that this workshop was not a 'normal' training workshop. The circle format also served to remind them of communal gatherings where they met with elder family members sitting on the floor and listening to stories. Sitting in a circle allowed the participants to see one another and created a sense of equality, not just amongst the participants but also between the participants and the facilitator (Diamond 1993). It also helped develop a sense of equality among those who chose to present their stories and perform them and those who decided not to do that but were willing to reflect on them.

The workshop took place in a large room with only a carpet in the middle and no chairs. I started each day by asking the participants to walk around the room, notice objects and colours, and observe their fellow participants. The outcome of this seemingly simple exercise was astonishing. These young people are trained to focus only on what matters for living – essentially, how to get by. In their daily lives, they need to work in order to be able to afford their food. Under such difficult living conditions, paying attention and being aware of their surroundings has become a luxury they cannot afford. A defining moment was revealed in this exercise by one of the participants, who said that 'even though I have known my friend for two years, I had not noticed that her eyes were dark green'.

The main focus of the workshop was on telling stories – the participants' personal stories. As the facilitator, I tried to understand how they saw their world and how they existed in it. I hoped that using their personal stories would help the workshop participants to form a social bond, and would eventually facilitate the creation of a social capital they could use even when the workshop ended. Social capital – a concept developed in sociology – is an umbrella term that covers the study of informal communication, trust, culture, social support, social networks and so on (Adler and Kwon 2002). It assumes that building connections among social networks and individuals contributes to the well-being of the society (Putnam 2000).

During the workshop, I gave them one rule to follow when telling their stories: the story had to be from their daily lives. I was eager to hear stories that told about the personal/social/political elements that formed who they were. Instead, I was surprised to witness them improvising stories derived from their cultural/historical heritage. Two major themes – religion and history – shaped the stories they told. These themes were the only ones that they talked about in the public forum; talking about what was personal to them was something they were not accustomed to doing.

After listening to their stories, I reminded them that I had set up clear guidelines regarding what they should talk about, and with respect to their story choices I would again have to ask them to improvise different stories. Before I gave them another chance, I explained the importance of stories in our lives, and how we spend our lives trying to tell/be part of stories. I further explained that one of the techniques they would learn in the workshop was how to be convincing storytellers. The participants looked at me in disbelief. To prove my point, I brought up an analogy to which they could relate. The dissent between

Israel and Palestine is one of the longstanding conflicts of our times; each side has a story and whoever tells their story in an effective way will get international support and gain local political benefits. After bringing up this analogy, I could see that I had touched a sensitive place in their lives – after all, the workshop participants were the product of such a conflict, and the story of the conflict had shaped their lives. The young people in the camp were taking action and adapting certain behaviours based on a story they were living: the story of their camp.

After my speech about the importance of stories, I divided them into smaller groups and asked them to come up with different stories. The results were once again not what I had hoped for. One story was about a birthday party where they had 'lots of fun'; another one was about attending a wedding. As the facilitator, I faced an ethical moment where I had to decide to either work with them on the stories of their choice or push them to dig harder to come up with stories that matched the goals I had set for the workshop. *I wanted to hear stories about bullying in school and in the street, about the lack of good schools, stories about sleeping hungry because of a lack of money.* My choice to push towards the unspoken story was not derived from the fact that I wanted their stories to be miserable; rather, it was because

- (1) I felt the participants had chosen their stories intentionally to test me as their 'instructor' by violating the rule I had given them;
- (2) they were intentionally resisting opening up because they still perceived me as an outsider who did not really understand where they were coming from; and (3) they perhaps wanted to impress me and were trying to 'rise up' to my living standard by telling me stories to which I could relate, such as birthday and fun stories.

To push them harder, I changed their groups and asked my assistant, who had been born and raised in the same refugee camp, to be active in the discussions amongst each group. Participants engaged in actively telling stories that focused on the theme of street fighting and neighbourhood gangs. It was an amazing moment when all the participants were collectively engaged in a conversation on a topic that related to their local environment in a way that crystallised what performance studies scholar Marvin Carlson (2003) discusses about the relationship between building a collective cultural memory and its relationship to a physical space, district, neighbourhood and street.

The theme of violence was now present in their discussions. Violence presents a very real concern for youth in Baqaa camp. Apart from their challenging environment and the kind of pressure that will lead them to witness or even engage in acts of violence in their community, most of the participants had lost their parents in violent acts during confrontations with Israeli soldiers. Thus, for them, violence is a reality that they witness and experience – one that has long-lasting effects on them and requires a huge expenditure of social energy (Roach 1996).

When presenting their stories, I worked with that aesthetic and encouraged them to capture what they felt, to build their awareness of the story as it unfolded, to consider how they perceived the story in the past and how they were experiencing it now while telling it from a distance, to let the audience know how this story was affecting their attitudes and views of the world. The workshop ended with an informal presentation of their stories, where we invited the orphan centre administrators and some of the participants' friends to listen.

The final presentation of the workshop took the following format. The participants walked around the room while a folk song was playing, and at specific parts of the song they formed shapes that represented the following words or concepts: tree, sun, city, Amman, Baqaa, home, friendship and solidarity. The formation of these shapes had been well rehearsed during workshops. After the song ended, all participants sat on the floor. One of them then went to the middle of the circle, sat on a chair and started telling their story.

One of the stories I got permission to share was about a child who was playing in the street and got into a fight with some street bullies who broke his arm. He did not know what to do since his sister was at work, so he stayed in the street crying but not getting help from anyone. He then went to the home of one of his friends, where he got immediate help from his friend's parents who drove him to the hospital and paid for his medication. His arm still carries a scar from the unfortunate accident. Some of the participants opted not to tell their stories in front of an audience because the stories were extremely personal and they did not want to share them publicly. We ended up listening to five stories. The final presentation ended with the whole group standing, facing the audience and singing a song they had all agreed upon, a song that calls for hope for a better future and fostering social belonging.

Challenges

Youth at Baqaa were described to me by the administrators as a group of kids who had no problems defining who they were, who they belonged to and what they wanted. As an applied theatre facilitator, I felt that I would face no problems in asking them to open up and tell their stories, but participants were neither willing to open up nor prepared to share stories that would then be open to discussion.

They did not start telling their stories until I pushed them hard, and until I instructed my assistant who knew them to be part of their story-building process. Having an assistant who himself was a member of the community helped the work to progress, since he acted as a bridge between the facilitator who was not part of the community and participants. He also ensured that the participants felt safer about expressing their thoughts in the presence of a trusted community member.

Part of the reason for facing this particular challenge was due to my personal qualities as a facilitator. The linear chronology of my personal life was in direct contrast to that of their lives. I am a middle-class Arab from Syria who has lighter skin and longer hair, a person who could not help inserting some foreign words while speaking in Arabic. The participants, on the other hand, lived below the poverty line, had darker skin and spoke Arabic with an accent that was sometimes difficult even for me to understand. Another reason for facing this challenge was the fact that I was inclined to move fast. It is sometimes the facilitator's natural tendency, when directed by powerful agendas, to push harder and faster to the 'good bits'.

However, it takes time to make participants feel comfortable in such a new context.

Another challenge I encountered was that using some activities which encouraged the participants to use their bodies proved to be a failure, since the participants were resistant to moving their bodies freely. An example was when I asked them to walk in the room and focus on a single part of their bodies, such as their head or knees. I then asked them to consider this body part as the centre of their bodies and lead their walk by it. Participants were not willing to exaggerate their movements, and were unable to focus on their bodies; instead, they were always looking at other participants despite my instruction to focus just on the self. I overcame this challenge by playing games that were more competitive in nature. Such games found approval among the participants because the games mirrored their struggles to exist and gain respect in their hard conditions in the camp. An example of a competitive game that they loved and wanted to play again and again was the wink/murder game. I asked the participants to sit in a circle and close their eyes. I then touched one of them on the shoulder, and that would be that person's sign to be assigned as a murderer. I then asked them to move around the room while the murderer tried to wink at the other participants. If they were winked at, it would eliminate them from the game.

The last challenge I faced was cultural. What is taken for granted in the realm of applied theatre within a Western context became contested in the Baqaa refugee camp. For example, I often use a game in which I ask the participant to group themselves according to similar colours of their pants, or to similarities in their hairstyles. However, in the context of this group of participants, I had to be careful because some of the girls were wearing hijab. Another problem arose when a male participant said he did not want to be in a group with female participants.

When faced with such a problem, I simply asked the rest of the group if anyone was willing to replace him, and thus it was rectified.

Evaluation

Evaluation in this workshop was a constant act that involved both facilitator and participants. Theatre educator Philip Taylor (2003) values and emphasises reflection in applied theatre practice. Evaluation for him is not merely a 'recursive process', but rather an integral part of the work. While working with participants in the workshop, I always saved five minutes at the end of each exercise to ask the participants about what we had just done and encouraged them to find tactics in order to play the game more effectively next time. Reflection during the workshop revealed, for example, that participants favoured some games over others. This was valuable feedback. I could then focus more on games they liked and deepen each element of the game every time it was played. In addition, I always pushed the participants to link the skills gained from each game to their lives, creating a connection between their personal lives and the games played. This connection enabled them to understand human behaviour on both the individual and social levels. Sharing these connections and reflections publicly with other participants helps in building, extending and enhancing a collective vision. I also had valuable moments of

reflection about the workshop and the role of arts in communities with my assistant after each session. Finally, I asked the students to write a reflective paper on the last day of the workshop; their words taught me that I was critiquing myself harshly while I was working. The participants were thrilled by the activities we undertook, and their writings showed deep understanding of the way such work affected them. One of the participants wrote:

The workshop taught me to be confident and be daring. I learned how to think on my feet; in addition, the workshop makes me aware that I am part of a group and I can lean on my friends in times of stress.

Such a reflection is stunning, since this participant is now able to link her personal growth to being a member in a group. In addition, she is able to appreciate the importance of having allies. Another participant was more interested in the artistic skills she had gained from the workshop:

I learned how to concentrate when I am in a public space; also the workshop taught me how to play with my voice when I act so that I can express different emotions.

Another participant paid attention to the personality of the facilitator, noting that 'he is not afraid to speak his mind, and his energy is contagious'. Tim Prentki (2009) refers to applied theatre as a safe place to speak, imagine and gain new understandings and new relationships. When returning to the participants' reflection on the workshop, I felt assured that Prentki's statements had been accomplished.

Reflection

While writing about his work on applied drama projects in developing countries, Michael Etherton (2009) suggests that applied drama presents youth with a platform to (1) express injustice in their lives; and (2) initiate for change. However, in order to move from the stage of expression to the stage of change, a facilitator must be aware of and attuned to the dynamics of the workshop participants. A major factor would be the willingness of the target group to open up to the facilitator. In my workshop, I encountered a group where playing simple theatre games or telling a story was a challenge, not to mention constructing a scene. I felt that my work with them had failed. After voicing my feelings to my assistant – who is a theatre artist himself and has been working with orphans for many years – he said that what I had done with them was a miracle. These kids were working for the first time on revealing their stories and sharing them publicly. It was success enough that they were willing to do it. The workshop not only offered them a platform for sharing their stories; it offered them storytelling skills, presentation skills, voice and articulation skills, and public presentation experience.

At the end of my experience, I was left with many questions. Was applied theatre effective in helping the lives of youth in this particular community? What performance strategies were effective in enabling the participants to become more aware of the power of the story to help give shape to their lives and promote a greater sense of efficacy? If my goal was to allow them to give voice to their own experience, why did I shut off the participants who wanted to bring up a story from religion? Was I being oppressive in forcing different modes of thinking, moving, behaving and voicing? Would it have been different if I had given the process more time or been less driven by my agenda? Did I do the right thing? Could I have done it better?

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