

# Development theatre and the process of re-empowerment: the Gibeon story

*Alex Mavrocordatos*

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## Empowerment, the ultimate goal

Without empowerment there can be no development. Ownership of knowledge and action by a community must underpin any project undertaken in partnership with them. The case for empowerment has been argued frequently and eloquently elsewhere. The question is where to begin in the process, identifying the point of entry or initial engagement between partners, and the guiding principle or methodology that may be involved.

In the context of the sometimes systematic disenfranchisement of communities by government or colonising powers, it may be preferable to address the notion of 're-empowerment'. Thierry Verhelst has argued that it is those 'internalised features' of a community's indigenous cultural roots in religion, morals, and myths that underpin the traditional way of life and earlier (em)power(ment) of its people. When this cultural base is disturbed, Verhelst fears that 'there is then a 'withering away', an atrophying of consciousness itself and, unless the latter can recover, the process may well become irreversible'. He goes on to stress that '[w]hen a people is stripped of its identity, it is no longer capable of self-determination. ... Such is the nature of under-development' (Verhelst, 1990).

Carl Gaspar, working among his own people in the Philippines, considers that 'the whole concept of community theatre is not complete if there is no corresponding conscious effort at organising the people around issues that affect their lives, thereby developing communal action tailored to their needs' (Gaspar, 1991).

The Gibeon story charts one path from ‘withered away’ to re-empowered. It describes a culture already suffering from the malaise described by Verhelst, stripped as it is by 200 years of foreign presence. It shows how a small community group explored its own ‘self-oppression’ before going on to organise itself around specific issues, taking action towards its own re-empowerment.

## RISE and the Community Listening Theatre (CLT)

The Rural-People’s Institute for Social Empowerment (RISE) is a Namibian non-government organisation (NGO) working with the mostly Nama communities who live between the Rehoboth plains and the mountains of the Karas region which give way to the Orange river and the border with South Africa, some 700 kilometres to the south. The best land is still privately owned by ‘commercial’ farmers, while the rest is designated as ‘communal’ land available to the landless farmers, who must try to raise a living from the desert soil. In the distant past, large herds grazed and ‘rivers of cattle’ flowed to the Cape colony, having been bought by the traders in exchange for trinkets, household goods, guns, and some money. Now there is too little grass for too many goats, it is difficult to sustain the caracul sheep farming for which these parts were renowned, and there are no more cattle.

As its title suggests, RISE’s overall aim is the empowerment of communal farmers and their families. Its field-staff work with community members on a variety of project activities, based on savings and loans schemes and ranging from pig-farming groups to village bakery and sewing cooperatives. Programmes also cover sanitation and the digging of pit latrines, with workshops and seminars at local and regional levels.

With empowerment as the ultimate goal, RISE is committed to facilitating a process whereby communities can define and address the constraints that impede their development. The aim is to avoid being project-driven, and its work is underpinned by establishing unifying Community Based Organisations (CBOs) such as the South Namibian Farmers’ Union (SNAFU), the Good Hope Women’s Development Forum, and, more recently, the Youth Enterprise Support Scheme (YES), which brings together unemployed youths whose families are suffering the vagaries of drought — since farming has come almost to a standstill — and whose sole source of income may be their grandparents’ pensions.

The Community Listening Theatre (CLT) programme, with support from Oxfam (UK/I), was to introduce Theatre for Development (TFD),

concentrating on staff training. I was with RISE for some 18 months, spread across three years (1992-5). We held monthly TFD training workshops for staff, and I worked on a one-to-one basis with the field-workers in one pilot community each: together we would set up and run a CLT programme, with existing or new RISE partner groups, along with their project activities. The field-workers learned to absorb theatre facilitation skills into their work, establishing community groups who now include performances alongside and within their other activities. CLT/TFD helps to bind these groups, while addressing social constraints directly and at an early stage.

## The Gibeon Youth Programme

Gibeon is a town of some 4,000 people. It has a densely populated shanty-town area, served by communal water stand-pipes whose source is a dam over 30km away. Toilets are of the old, unpopular, 'bucket-in-a-tin-shed' type: the bucket is collected in the small hours of the morning by council workers in an old truck which often drips its unsavoury contents along the dusty streets. Unemployment is the norm, alcohol is over-used, pregnancy comes early, and there is little energy for change.

RISE had been active in Gibeon for some years. The centre-point was the well-established community bakery; there were also sewing and brick-making projects, and a Ventilation Improved Pit-latrine (VIP) programme that became the focus of discrimination and clan conflicts which will be described below.

Just as the CLT started early in 1992, RISE was establishing the Gibeon Youth Programme (GYP). Members of the GYP were receptive to the idea of a drama activity, so it was in Gibeon that I began with my colleague and trainee Johannes Jansen a programme of fortnightly theatre workshops. After a six-month period, Jansen would be fully trained as a CLT/TFD facilitator, repeating the process with other communities, while the Gibeon group would be continuing with their own project activities — able to explore their own social reality through improvised plays and scenarios.

At first, the youth members saw the drama work as a potential money-earner, hoping to put up a series of *Konsert-aande*. These are concert evenings consisting mostly of choral singing of familiar Christian and secular songs, some of which would be accompanied by the traditional Namastap dance. They have a prodigious talent for song, and in a typical *Konsert-aande* the audience may 'buy' a repeat performance of an item they have particularly enjoyed, over and above any entrance fee they had paid.

It was not difficult to add short scenarios to such a programme, and this could have presented a way for the TFD initiative to be built upon a local cultural tradition that even offered the potential of interaction with the audience. However, while the multiplicity of programme items, and thus themes, in this review-like format was a constraint that could perhaps have been turned to good advantage, the focus on money proved to be a more serious limitation. An early and perhaps impetuous attempt by the group to perform one of these shows in the local big town of Mariental was great fun and did contain brief scenarios on the obvious themes of AIDS, drunkenness, and teenage pregnancy; but the brevity of these insertions into a longer programme militated against their depth or efficacy. The group realised that they were not ready for the 'big-town big time', and that anyway they were not likely to earn money enough to split usefully among up to 20 performers.

Meanwhile, some engaging local issues had emerged from the workshops, and most members were keen to follow through these explorations of their own community life and its development. It was the group itself that determined to concentrate on such matters in the subsequent drama workshops.

## Bringing in Boal

If Nama cultural tradition had ever included any indigenous form of performance, this has long been overshadowed by the influence of the Church, so powerful in this highly Christianised country. Preconceptions of drama centred on Sunday-school plays and Easter pageants. Unable to build on older cultural foundations, we were obliged to work from the Western model that the community had already accepted.

In this context, the work of Augusto Boal became appropriate, based as it is upon Freirian ideals of dialogical education and conscientisation. In Boal's Forum Theatre, the protagonist of a prepared scenario would be a victim of human circumstances, seen to make an error of judgement and behaviour that implicitly endorsed an oppressive status quo, and led to suffering and the protagonist's demise. The audience, in this interactive theatrical form, would then be invited to step into the action and replay key moments where the character might have been able to act differently and so reverse the oppressive conditions. The audience would then concur — or not — about whether this was a viable representation of reality — a rehearsal for change that has to come. We never sought to import (or impose) the strict formula of Forum theatre, but did embark on

explorations around it and the more general notion of an interactive theatre that by its nature would foster the expression not only of the views of a performing group but also those of its audience, and give air to the ensuing debate. Initial work, however, was within the workshops of the activity group. Public performances would come later.

Their dramatic explorations in the workshops were pointing towards the reality of discrimination within their community. Although Namibia was by that time technically free from the chains of south Africa's illegal occupation, it still suffered from the apartheid system, and improvisations on the theme of oppression produced scenes about the general iniquities of racist oppression. Further exploration — closer to home — led us to a scenario that dealt with local clan conflicts inside Gibeon. This was the Sewing-Play, in which the group portrayed a (so-called) co-operative sewing project with alleged irregularities and differentials in payments, as well as nepotistic restrictions on the use of the machines, which had been provided by foreign donors for the use of the whole community. The project in question was managed by members of Gibeon's ruling family.

## A tale of empowerment

Gibeon is no exception to the social rifts that so impede local development initiatives. Usually these are ancient quarrels that run deep, perhaps exacerbated by recent political history, and marked by distinctions relating to families and clans. Many people still insist that they could never join forces in a co-operative effort.

Although the Sewing-Play was created in the privacy of our own workshop, it was still a bold statement in the context of the 'culture of silence' and obedience to the whims of the traditional leader, or *Kaptein*. In Gibeon this was Pastor Witbooi, then Minister of Labour and Manpower and very highly placed in the party hierarchy of the SWAPO government. His refusal to countenance the RISE pit-latrine programme in the shanty-town quarter of Gibeon is described below.

During one workshop, we found the group to be divided on whether they could start up a market garden without donated resources. The sides of the argument were then represented in two separate scenarios, and a final synthesis was evolved with the whole group. In this play, the characters decide to use a set of garden tools which had previously been donated and left with the town council for the use of community members. They need seeds and are debating whether they can be acquired through donation, or whether they are going to have to provide for themselves.

Meanwhile, they determine to get on with preparing the seedbeds, and send a delegate over to the relevant authorities to request the use of the tools. They are disappointed to be refused access, even though the tools were supposed to be at the disposal of the community. Angrily, one member insists that they should all go down to demand the tools, but another retorts: 'Nobody hears our voice — there's no point. They do not see us, we are invisible.' Others add, 'In Gibeon it's *who* you are that counts. They don't count us.' 'They' referred to the town authorities from the Witbooi camp. Again Verhelst spotted the danger of this syndrome when he described 'the real tragedy of "underdevelopment" [as] the resulting disintegration or destructuration of society [which] may go so far as an internalised negation of one's self and thus of one's real vitality' (Verhelst, 1990).

During subsequent workshops, the play was refined and re-focused to express and explore these feelings of invisibility or inferiority that remained implicit and merely alluded to in the original version. The issue of self-oppression became the overt subject, and the Self-Oppression Play which developed out of it was later given in public performance at the South Namibian Youth Seminar in Berseba. The seminar brought together youth from all over the south of the country and was aimed at establishing the Youth Enterprise Support Scheme (YES). There was a vociferous response from the assembly, whose audience interventions tried out both resistance and reason against the obdurate council official in the play who had refused access to the tools. They discussed in depth the 'self-oppression' implicit in the suggestion that there is no point in doing anything, since nobody hears your voice. The session agreed that if you see yourself as inferior you will remain so, and remain undeveloped. Like empowerment, it is a question of attitude — and attitudes can be changed.

Theatre, as a social process, is ideally suited to lubricating such change — by addressing the very social issues that so often constrain the acceptance of the often unfamiliar activities that we call development.

## Tackling issues of concern

A few weeks later, a Farm Labourers Play was developed for performance at a meeting of the Farmers' Union (SNAFU) which was to be held in Gibeon. Some of the actors and many of the farmers had first-hand knowledge of the plight of such labourers, many of whom still live an enslaved existence on Namibia's wealthy commercial farms. There was a lively discussion about how their exploitation could be alleviated. The

audience's vociferous and active interventions which amplified the gravity of the situation and explored ways of finding strength to withstand the oppression had to be forcibly terminated by the catering staff, who needed the chairs for the evening's programme. Not even the smells of barbecued goat that had wafted in from outside, nor the growing festive sounds, had been enough to halt the discourse. RISE has projects in the pipe-line which relate to the farm labourers' issue.

At that time, RISE had access to a Food for Work (FFW) programme, about which the staff were circumspect, but which had allowed our group to work together while they cleared Gibeon of all the broken bottles, beer cans, and general rubbish that gets thrown out into the wind-blown streets and empty lots. Once the clean-up was over, the group turned to the overdue pit latrines, digging pits both for their own homes and those of elderly or incapacitated neighbours. In the context of Gibeon, this was an act of defiance.

Some two years previously, RISE staff had already been turned out of Gibeon for implementing a pit-latrine programme against the wishes of the ruling Witbooi town council. Pastor Witbooi still maintained that these long-drop toilets would pollute the ground-water, despite the fact that almost all of Gibeon is built on a hill, and its water is pumped from a dam more than 30km away. A recent study shows the latrine programme to be the best way forward. Although they are reluctant to come out in public for fear of offending those in power, many in the community have privately expressed interest in the pit latrines. Few people can afford the water bills (from which they are currently exempt) and price of porcelain fittings that would attend the installation of Witbooi's preferred flush-toilet system. Besides, there were fears that many of their shacks would have to be torn down to allow relatively straight pipelines to be laid where none currently existed. The Ministry of Local Government and Housing had later requested that the programme continue, and there was European money earmarked for the project. But in 1994 it was still firmly blocked by *Kaptein* or Pastor Witbooi.

So when the group, through their 'Clean Up Gibeon' campaign, now turned to the digging of latrine pits for the many community members who wanted to get away from the foul and insanitary bucket latrines, it carried a distinctly political message — defiant and empowered. Unfortunately their pick-axes soon hit rocky ground, and their labours were halted; they needed a jack-hammer to make the holes deep enough. As luck would have it, the Minister of Local Government came to Gibeon for a public meeting on another issue, on the invitation of a women's

group. Again displaying their new-found pluck, the members of GYP — male and female — availed themselves of the opportunity and attended the meeting, ready for the moment when she might ask, and she did, about the delays in the pit-latrine programme that her Ministry had recommended. Members of the Youth group were quick to reply, explaining their digging difficulties. Then and there she commanded that a jack-hammer be brought to Gibeon from the government works department, in order to complete the holes. This of course raised the profile of the campaign, and the group were further emboldened by their courage in raising the issue.

## Speaking out in public meetings

To announce the arrival of the jack-hammer in Gibeon and its availability for all the community, RISE and the GYP prepared a two-day celebration, which was called The Plunge. There was to be a march through the town with songs and banners calling for the right to good health, and a play in two parts, *Potte en Pitte* ('Buckets and Pits'), to be performed over the two consecutive days around the town. The group prepared the play, and we came to Gibeon the day before to rehearse it, and to help coordinate the big event.

'Buckets' portrays the insanitary bucket toilets; the play is scatological in reference and hilarious in parts, but the laughter stops when the play ends with the death from diarrhoea of the child whom we have seen going to the toilet with her mother, lump of bread in hand.

The lively audience discussion looked forward to the performance of 'Pits' the next day, which takes up from the mother's distress as she searches for a way to avoid the same fate for her other children. She considers flush toilets and is finally advised that she could make use of the jack-hammer to dig a pit for a VIP latrine. She sets her elder son to work preparing the hole and calls for the Youth Group to bring the jack-hammer.

However ... at this point the youth group, as actors, were to enter the scene, with the jack-hammer, to dig the woman's pit. But we had received bad news. Some of the Witbooi leaders had seen the enthusiastic crowd marching and singing through the town the previous day and had made a private visit to Minister Amadhila herself, persuading her to withdraw the jack-hammer immediately. She had done so, and the scenario was altered accordingly.

Instead of the youth group and RISE coming to the woman at her toilet site, she is visited by the (actual) woman from the town clerk's office, who



gives her (as she had given us) the news that the jack-hammer is not to be available to the people of Gibeon. Shocked silence gave way to heated discussion, which led to a petition with 100 names, drawn up on the spot for presentation to the Minister. The youth members still continue to dig holes where they can, while awaiting response from the authorities. At the time of writing, there have been some signs of conciliation — but not before the GYP's next move.

## The Youth Project annexes Vrystaat farm

The progress made by the Gibeon group demonstrated a new strength among its members: empowered — by themselves, as they had been oppressed by themselves — they had been able to take on the formidable powers that controlled Gibeon. That confidence was endorsed by their next move, which was made possible through the resources and facilitation of RISE.

The youth group, all of them unemployed or dispossessed farmers, had often spoken about starting a chicken farm. Now they determined to annexe, or squat, a small piece of land some five kilometres outside Gibeon known, ironically, as *Vrystaat* ('Free State'). Although it stands on the mostly dry banks of the Fish river, it is barren but for a leaking concrete reservoir and wind-pump. Here Sentimub, the leader of the group, had grown up.

Uninhabited for some years, Sentimub's house had lost its doors and walls to thieves and vandals; corrugated iron from the roof now formed the walls and roof of Sentimub's current home in the Gibeon shanty-town. Other houses of the old settlement were evidenced only by the concrete slabs that were once their floors, the tin walls long since relocated. Using the pretext of Sentimub's return to his family homestead, some of the GYP began to move into the area with him, intending to start a co-operative chicken farm and eventually a goat-farming co-operative. They constructed shanty dwellings out of flattened tin drums and corrugated iron. Simple chicken runs were built with the support of RISE, who also provided loans for buying chickens. There were also some rabbits, and the project was looking increasingly solid.

The move was met with official silence by Witboois and his camp, although private displeasure had been clearly indicated. A year later, in 1995, the inauguration of YES was held at *Vrystaat*. It was attended by some 50 youth members from both Hardap and Karas Regions, as well as by various local government dignitaries, and reporters from the press and national television. One of the Witbooi leaders appeared some hours

before the ceremony was due to begin and, before the press and the public arrived, delivered a conciliatory and even supportive speech to the assembled YES delegates. Perhaps this marks a turning point in relations between the GYP and their hereditary leaders.

## Meanwhile the plays continue

The Gibeon group by now had an identity of their own and a confidence that allowed them to create and perform plays elsewhere, in the service of the development goals of the RISE partner communities. On one occasion, they were invited by the National Youth Council to create a play for performance at a Regional Youth Seminar on Unemployment, which was to show how to move from inertia to action in building up a project activity. RISE was then on Christmas recess and the play was done without any staff involvement.

Around the same time, RISE was to hold a Health and Sanitation seminar in Hoachanas, where there had not yet been any TFD activity. An afternoon spent with the GYP yielded a new Sanitation Play: the original 'Buckets' was played out by then and wholly inappropriate, since Hoachanas had a quite different set of constraints. They had made repeated attempts at VIP latrine programmes which would start up with great gusto and very soon run out of steam, leaving people back where they started. We devised a play with a seemingly circular structure.

The play opens with two families at home. Their toilet is the dry riverbank on the edge of their settlement. An elderly man goes out into the bush to relieve himself. He is hindered by thorns, worried about the driving wind that kicks dust into his face, and the lack of leaves or paper to clean himself. His neighbour, an old woman, disturbs him, and he cleans himself hastily with a stone. She in turn is interrupted by the taunts of peeping children. Forced to chase the kids, she throws stones at them, steps in her own dirt, and finally arrives at home where the family is eating. She immediately sits down to eat, defying the complaints of the others that her clothes and perhaps her hands are soiled.

Later, after she falls ill, the two families get together and determine to join the RISE sanitation programme and build themselves a pit latrine. While they are digging the hole, someone points out that RISE will be paying for the materials but not for their labour. They fall to arguing and finally abandon their efforts.

Then follow more scenes of scatological interest during which one girl, with the urgency of diarrhoea, defaecates right next to the house, under

cover of night, while another is bitten by a scorpion. The families decide to resume work on the pit latrine, but general laziness and inability to co-operate with one another again cause the project to be abandoned.

The play ends with the old man trudging off once more towards the riverbed. The audience were quick to take part in the play, indicating their own reasons for discomfort with the distant riverbank toilet system, as well as illustrating their own misunderstanding of the original arrangements with RISE for support and subsidy in the subsequent building of the toilet hut. This grievance was unlocked and aired by the performance, making it easier to share the problems and discuss action. Although the characters moved along a circular narrative path, the audience made a spiral journey, no longer fetching up at square one, as they had done in the original events as depicted by the actors. Participation in the theatre event had opened up the issue, and the conflicts depicted had moved towards resolution.

Thus, the Gibeon group and their TFD skills began to serve as a utility for RISE beyond the immediate development of the Gibeon community itself. While it would be preferable, and is indeed intended, to establish theatre activity within each and every partner group, reality recommends having key performance-skilled groups that can be called upon to create problem-posing forum plays for outside seminars and workshops. Both forms are functions of cultural action, and the touring performances also prompted some communities to request RISE to initiate performance work with them. Of course the ideal situation would be if the community sought this help from the Gibeon (or any of the other CLT active partner groups), or even embarked upon it unaided. This dependency has not yet been dispelled.

## A YES troupe is formed

Prompted by an invitation from the National Youth Council to enter our 'drama group' for a national drama competition, the Gibeon group later joined forces with members of the activity groups from other communities to form a single performing company representing the newly formed YES. First prizes for best play, actor, and actress went to the group, amid great cheers of excitement and song. Using a rotating membership from the community groups, the YES troupe went on to perform in various regional and national seminars and forums, such as the National People's Land Conference, a nationwide event organised by the association of Namibian NGOs (NANGOF) to investigate the still unresolved question of post-independence land redistribution.

Needless to say, this turn of events had a knock-on empowering effect on the nascent YES organisation (as yet almost without public profile), the YES troupe itself, the contributing community activity groups and, of course, the individual performers. The group became adept at shaping plays and (re)writing lyrics for traditional songs within the context of their plays. Performances often included the Namastap dance, as well as the forum interventions of the audiences that form the second part of any of their performances. Their reputation as a cultural troupe grew; they won further prizes in regional and national competitions, and performed one of their plays at a 1995 international community theatre festival in Zimbabwe.<sup>1</sup>

## The process

Cultural action for re-empowerment, or field-workers' tool? As Paulo Freire (1974) remarks:

[a]ll these aspects ... (peasants' knowledge of erosion, reforestation, farming, religion, death, etc.) ... are contained within a cultural totality. As a structure this cultural totality reacts as a whole. If one of its parts is affected, an automatic reflex occurs on the others.

The theatre work of these young Namibian farmers, with the understanding of issues stemming from their dramatic explorations of current topics, has brought conventional development work and conscientisation into the cultural arena. A simple arts-based community theatre programme, within an arts-based institution or a youth centre, may do the same: it may have as its aim the (re)activation and propagation of cultural activities, with social content, so as to enrich and develop the life of the community. In both processes, community performers and, by implication, the broader community, gain a voice and some measure of empowerment for having spoken out. If it succeeds, a sustainable channel for expression will have been opened.

However, the arts-based institution may not have resources to respond directly to these expressions; the development organisations, be they NGOs or community-based organisations may be better placed, having the material resources of their actual project activities or the networks to act as go-between with more appropriate agencies. 'Theatre work needs to be keyed into organisations which are concerned with raising consciousness and strengthening people's culture ...' (Etherton, 1982). That link with a development agency — and it could be any agency concerned with a people-centred development process — turns the

community's creative expressions into dialogue, by responding. It is this capacity for dialogical communication which separates Theatre for Development from Community Theatre.

At first, the RISE staff had expected TFD to be a simple communications tool in their field-work, to be evaluated in terms of its supposed impact on the implementation of project activities. Emphasis on the cultural component of TFD was thus reduced. As already stated, preconceptions of 'drama' have long been influenced by church nativity and passion plays within these deeply religious Christian communities, and it was not considered out of place to introduce these (also foreign) ideas of interactive improvised performance. Staff and communities took to it.

Elsewhere it has not been so simple. Where local cultural activity still retains its traditional identity, field-workers may gain respect from community leaders for having respected the culture of the community. It is important that the performers work from their own traditions and forms, evolving new forms of theatre or performance appropriate to their own culture. Unless the activity has been created by the community, people may take part readily while the project is present, but sustainability may be jeopardised.

In the past, TFD was usually perceived as a tool for the field-worker. It would involve simple role-plays in meetings, or didactic playlets presented by community performers, or even outside groups contracted to research and present these plays in a variety of locations. Either makes many fewer demands of the field-worker, who often has little time to spend planning and running drama sessions. There are signs of change, however, and TFD planners are facing the choice between placing more emphasis on the complex cultural component of development activity, or retaining TFD as a simple teaching tool. As Ross Kidd and Martin Bryam were already saying in 1981: 'the prominence of Theatre for Development as non-formal education must be de-emphasised, and more attention paid to a sustained programme of group organisation' (Kydd and Bryam, 1981).

The CLT programme was never restricted to role-plays in meetings. Most importantly, we retained the emphasis on training community activity groups in TFD skills. Drama exercises focused on the group, turning its attention on itself, so that the scenarios and plays evolved by the volunteers explored their own blocks against motivation and activity. These issues may have been known to field-workers, but were difficult to address during the normal course of meetings and technical workshops.

During the course of the RISE programme, we worked through many of the ideas and activities at both ends of the continuum between

commitment to the cultural component, and the promotion of TFD as a tool with immediate and palpable applications. While the staff were primarily concerned that CLT should explore specific issues, we hoped to retain significant acknowledgement of the cultural aspect of the performance work. Indeed, this was well represented by the gradual integration of song and dance into the later performances.

## A local methodology evolves

Over its substantial incubation period, a RISE CLT formula gradually emerged. Typically a field-worker would take a new activity group through a sequence of exercises aimed at introducing the idea of the ‘tableau’ or group sculpture. These ‘snapshots’ or ‘images’ were popularised by Augusto Boal, who would use them to depict a given thematic circumstance — typically some oppressive condition. Reformulation of the images by the rest of the group constitutes further exploration of the issue and may indicate the path towards change. Such image work is also used in the field of drama therapy.

In the CLT, image work marked the beginning of exploration through abstract concepts — such as greed, oppression, power, clan conflict, education — leading into improvised scenarios and plays. These concepts would not be proposed by the facilitator unless they had emerged from other images and scenarios or in direct conversation. During this period, the community group would be learning to look in on their own social reality, exploring and expressing the constraints within themselves which may have prevented them from taking an active role in development projects and community life.

The CLT groups were soon able to create *instant plays*, where a quick workshop prepares a play for presentation at a forthcoming meeting as a participatory way of opening debate. In addition, several other formats evolved, such as the *circular play* described above, which worked well in inter-active performance: the structure remains the same, but the content can be adjusted by the audience to portray, explore, and resolve the problem that persistently pushed people back down the ladder to square one. There was also the *five-minute play*, suitable for performance several times within the same afternoon. This could be particularly useful among sprawling communities, reaching people who do not, or cannot, come to meetings, or rallying attendance at a seminar or workshop.

All of the performances are improvised and interactive: that is to say they involve the audience in discussion, at the very least, and often actual

participation in a repeat of the critical scenes, replacing the protagonist so as to present strategies of their own devising which would solve the problem portrayed in the initial presentation.

These formats would be unlikely to evolve so clearly in a shorter project period, where one works on the principle of handing over the skills and allowing the trainees to make of them what they will. We had the luxury of allowing these variations to develop out of the basic approach, once that was in place: both the circular and the five-minute plays appeared in the last months of the project. If the CLT continues to be applied in direct response to varying circumstances, then new formats will continue to evolve. That is the fluid nature of sustainability.

Furthermore, if we are looking for a readily replicable TFD formula, we should be careful. I have embarked on every project confident that the previous work had provided a formula which would be applicable in this new and as yet unfamiliar context. And I always get a rude shock.

In West Africa, I had had some success in using story games as a way in to scene-creation. The first workshop with a group of Bobo youths, however, fell flat when it turned out that for them a story exists, it is a fixed entity handed down through generations and adapted only by the storytellers. Recently, in Johannesburg, our rather cerebral (CLT) issue-and-analysis formula, described above, proved inappropriate to the group of young trainees. It seems they were aspirant actors and actresses — some from the newly-emerging middle classes — and were not from a single community with burning issues all of their own. Image Theatre was not the best way in, for it relies either on actual involvement with the issues or a commitment to community theatre work which sets out, as CLT does, to ‘uncover the covered’, as RISE’s Director Pintile Davids puts it. What did spark the group were open improvisation exercises similar to those which had worked so well with the non-literate Bobo farmers.

## The guiding principle: co-intentionality

According to David Pammenter:

Co-intentionality depends upon agreement, on the congruence of our ambition. It is an agreement to co-annunciate those ambitions. If the agreement takes the form of a desire to ‘name’ or change the world, then it is, in practice, concerned with the business of development. It is constitutive of community and therefore also exclusive. It depends upon dialogue in the form of a will to know. This dialogue, once articulated in practice, reveals and develops more about the reality

and human-ness of that community than any monological task-based agenda however that agenda is constructed. A co-intentional, practical pedagogy is necessarily self-reflexive and must remain so if it is not to be turned into its opposite (Pammenter, 1996).

There is no formula, no universally applicable methodology. There are only starting points. If anything, my assumption that the RISE formula, or the Bambara stories, could work elsewhere was *disempowering*. But it is not the offering of a game or exercise that disempowers, it is the assumption that an outside formula can work. And indeed, as Zakes Mda has argued, it is the 'Anomaly of Community Participation' that it tends to be 'imposed in a benevolent style from outside the community'.

This means that Theatre for Development ... is incompatible with the ideas of Freire, since the educator, according to him, must be a co-worker and not an applier of formulas. Theatre workers are now seeking to join the rural communities as co-workers in the process of creating a theatre that will be more relevant. (Mda, 1993).

Until I shared what I had, it could not work, and empowerment would be off everyone's agenda except my own. Only when I let go of my own vision — or is it preconception? — of what form the theatre would take could we evolve a process together. Only then could the partner group own the process; only then could there be a path towards empowerment. From that point, any action that the group is to make — be it the introspective explorations that led in Gibeon to conscientisation through their explorations of self-oppression, or to the subsequent and defiant digging of the pit latrines, or to the performance of plays about them — is their own. That ownership in itself is part of the empowerment process. And it is the (participatory) process itself that is empowering, it is both means and end, opening doors for further new beginnings.

Carl Gaspar is correct when he asserts that all empowering theatre needs to be structured around living issues, but he is describing work in his own cultural context. It may be far more difficult as an intervening outsider to arrive at the point of trust and sharing where sensitive issues can be shared publicly. The Gibeon group addressed general topics to begin with, later moving on to more or less daring allusions to local problems whose deeper subject matter was their own self-exploration and engagement with the question of empowerment. Once that process was in motion, the partners began to look at and express the broader issues that constrain. They found that empowerment came from within: it meant a change of attitude, both individual and collective, from a



declared helplessness to empowerment. Spontaneous theatrical exploration may ideally be suited to that end. But there are no formulas, only starting points and the guiding principles of co-intentional, people-centred, shared exploration and analysis.

## Note

1 The story of the YES group is treated in greater detail in Mavrocordatos (1997). Oxfam/World Neighbors, Mali (project report for Oxfam).

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■ **Alex Mavrocordatos** is based at King Alfred's University College, Winchester, where he is Senior Lecturer on the MA/Postgraduate Diploma in Theatre for Development. He has extensive experience in West and Southern Africa and is currently researching the area where PRA and TFD meet. This article was first published in *Development in Practice*, Volume 8, number 1, in 1998.