

PSC Paper No. 16

THEATRE AND DEVELOPMENT

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For an International Workshop on
"Communication for Social Development"
held at the University of Zambia, Lusaka
29th April - 10th May, 1974

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Although as far as I know the theatre has not been extensively used in development support work, I believe that the theatre has an important role to play. It is one of the cheapest media available, it does not rely on literacy, it can be more flexible and topical than other media, and above all the audience can participate in the play making the theatre a genuine two-way medium for communicating information.

The theatre can be one of the cheapest means of communicating information since it does not require the outlay of vast sums of money on tape recorders, cine cameras, screens, projectors and all the expensive gear connected with other communication media. Think of a well produced publicity poster on say a nutrition campaign with good pictures. You will agree that it costs a lot of money. The printers want to make a profit on you, the typists, the artists and all the people contributing to the production of the poster.

Now think of a play. There is no need to spend all that money on paper, ink, stencils, typists, artists and photographs. The major expense for a play will be the production of the scripts. Thereafter, you will concentrate on drilling your actors into the characters and situations you want them to portray according to the nature of the campaign. Moreover, short one act plays do not require so much expense on time (rehearsal) and material resources. (I have personally produced such plays inside three days with raw casts during my theatre workshops in Zambia's rural areas.) Of course, I am not thinking of the Western Traditional Theatre which will need an elaborate theatre building and complicated lighting equipment, for this would be even more expensive than the communication media we have cited above. No, you will not need a building or any structures in which to stage the plays. I am thinking of a village meeting place, a market place, or even the back of a travelling lorry on the street will do. The idea is that you take theatre to the people instead of expecting people to come to the theatre.

Plays can help the audience understand the other man's point of view, which is essential for social development. For example, in the film "REACHING RURAL FAMILIES", we see that a family planning worker plays the role of an ignorant mother, while the mother takes on the role of the family planning worker. The mother in her new role has to think like the family planning worker, while the latter does the opposite. In this way the two people will understand each other's point of view, and this is essential in communication campaigns for social development where attitude change is vital. The same effect can be gained from a play, especially if we use audience participation.

I envisage plays where the audience is allowed to participate in the action by going up onto the acting area. It may be tactical to plant some players among the audience to break the group shyness before the audience at large can freely take part in the drama. And you should expect this since you are engaged in street or market theatre. People on the streets or market places should not be expected to be well behaved theatrically, i.e. applauding just when they have to mostly out of courtesy and not because they have enjoyed the joke or the poetry in the line.

Probably the most important advantage theatre has as a communication media in development projects is the fact that it does not rely upon literacy. Let us go back to the poster campaign. Even after all these expenses, you are not certain that your poster will be read by as many people as you would like. The number of readers, of course, will depend upon the degree of literacy in the target community, as well as the effectiveness of your poster display. How does theatre overcome all these problems?

Think of a little sick child who doesn't want to take his pill unless you coat it with a little sugar. The sweetened pill has the same effect, i.e. restoration of maximum health to the child. Theatre for development can be thought of in the same way. People get the message laughing as they see themselves and life satirised on the acting area. For this reason the play must be based upon the experiences of the target audience. Then provided you make sure that the message has reached home in a very enjoyable manner, the theatre can overcome all the problems of cost and literacy associated with other media.

One can use traditional folk lore in plays, but one must be careful. It is generally believed that folk lore tends to consolidate and stabilise the traditional beliefs that may in turn inhibit attitude change. This need not be so if the play shows how traditional beliefs may inhibit attitude change, and carefully attacks those traditional elements that people would like to do away with. An example of a traditional belief which inhibits change for the better is the belief that if pregnant women ate eggs they would bear children without hair. And often, among the Bemba for example, eggs are food for the father, and not the children and the mother. A story could be written and dramatised using folk lore to undermine this belief for a nutrition campaign. But plays do not have to be only about traditional beliefs.

A play can satirise a topical issue or problem current within the community, e.g. the news by radio of a possible cholera outbreak, and the danger zones within the city; i.e. places without proper sanitation. And supposing one or two people, or even children, have recently died in the Butungwa Compound of our little play "DISTORTION". Then a well written play depicting the dangers of lack of toilet facilities and general cleanliness would open up the eyes of the residents of Buntungwa compound, and they will only be too willing to do something about the terrible disease of cholera.

If you cannot write an original play based on the community, a good transposition of a Western play like Bertold Brecht's "THE GOOD PERSON OF SCHWE-CHUAN" will do. But even here you must not think transposition is any easier. You have to understand the theatre culture of Brecht and his play, and translate this into the suitable theatre culture of your target audience. This means that you transpose the idiom as used by Brecht into the local idiom as used by your target audience. You can, therefore, see that you need to be an expert at transpositions or else you easily lose the original flavour of the play and your message may not come out as clearly as you want it to. I can assure you it is much easier to write an original play than to attempt a transposition.

The most important thing is that the message of the play must be clear. This means that you should not couch your play in such a language and style that it will need a lot of intellectualisation before your audience starts understanding what you are trying to say. The symbolic play and the intellectualised play have no place here. The play must communicate easily. There is no room for theatre of illusion where the audience is made to believe it is only a play meant merely for their

entertainment and that it should have nothing to do with their lives later on. This is the kind of play normally seen in various Western Play Houses. I am advocating here a theatre of commitment. And this "COMMITMENT" is "SOCIAL CHANGE". In the theatre of commitment, you want to involve the people you are aiming to change. You want them to dislike certain things and to like certain other things that you think will change their lives for the better. Their emotional involvement in the play is essential.

At the beginning of this Workshop we performed a play, "DISTORTION", which I wrote to dramatise the potential communication problems in an urban upgrading project. When we take "DISTORTION" to one of the Lusaka shanty compounds, we should not fail to get a sharp reaction to the play from the audience who are being or may be shifted to another area by the Lusaka City Council without their consent or without even being sufficiently informed.

This is what the theatre of commitment for social change is all about, for there is nothing like the theatre for enabling the audience to see with its own eyes and hear with its own ears the things that are designed to change their lives for the better.



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Expanded Number **CF-RAI-USAA-PD-GEN-2007-000191**

External ID

Title

"Theatre and Development" by Kabwe Kasoma. Distributed during Part III (Media in PSC Campaigns) of the UNICEF/PSC Workshop on Communication for Social Development, held at the University of Zambia, Lusaka, 29 April to 10 May 1974

Date Created / From Date

4/1/1974

Date Registered

6/20/2007 at 12:14 PM

Date Closed / To Date

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F13: Record Copy? **No**

Record Type **A01 PD-GEN ITEM**

Contained Records

Container **CF/RA/BX/PD/RP/LB/1987/T005: Africa: Social welfare, Nutrition, Sa**

Fd3: Doc Type - Format

Da1: Date First Published

Priority

6/22/2007 at 12:05 PM

Document Details **Record has no document attached.**

Notes

Kabwe Kasoma was a Playwright, and Dean of Students at the University of Zambia. PSC paper No 16, discussed during Part III of the workshop, "Media in PSC campaigns". Discusses the author's experience in using play as medium of communications in rural Zambia.

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