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Setting the Stage for Change

By Vani Sreekanta

In an industry where production budgets are skyrocketing, venues rent space at a premium, tickets sales is the buzzword, and conversations revolve around Havel and Pinter, a new movement is afoot and marching to the tunes of Augustus Boal and heading out to give a voice to the voiceless. We take a look at Forum Theatre, where art becomes more.



I love the theatre. The journey on stage, from the depths of Pinter's despair to the heart of Elliot's spiritual quest, fighting frustration with Maggie the cat, fearing Virginia Woolf, celebrating happy unions on the twelfth night, all of it is powerful.

Suspended in bright lights, the story, the action on stage, the drama between characters, all of it forces us to think beyond ourselves, demands our empathy.

Theatre is truly transformative. But devoid of the glitz, stripped of costume and make-up, what is it? Well, apparently it becomes even more. Case in

point - Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, especially Forum Theatre.

From Boal's address in Rio De Janeiro, "Theatre of the Oppressed was born in 1971, in Brazil, under the very young form of Newspaper theatre, with the specific goal of dealing with local problems, and soon, spread all over the country. Forum Theatre came into being in Peru, in 1973, as part of a Literacy Program; it is now practiced in more than 70 countries.

Growing up, TO developed Invisible Theatre in Argentina, as political activity, and Image Theatre to establish dialogue among Indigenous Nations and Spanish descendants, in Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico... Now these forms are being used in all kinds of dialogues.

TO was used by peasants and workers; later, by teachers and students; now, also by artists, social workers, psychotherapists, NGOs... At first, in small, almost clandestine places. Now in the streets, schools, churches, trade-unions, regular theatres, prisons... Above all, we believe that the Theatre of the Oppressed is of, about, by and for the Oppressed."

Imagine watching a play that stops mid-performance and you then being asked what should happen next. Imagine now that you as a member of the audience have the power to stop the performance at any given point and give direction. As a spectator you are asked to and expected to step forward

and participate in the play. Now take that a step forward and blur the lines between the actors and spectators completely and you begin to understand what Forum Theatre is about. More than art, it is a tool to engage oppressed communities and give them a voice, a means to evoke the inherent wisdom of ordinary people to address, understand and solve their own problems.

Sounds farfetched? Increasingly, theatre groups across India are starting to experiment with forum theatre as a means to empower marginalised communities. **Rafiki**, a theatre group in Bangalore stages Rafiki's Reptiles, a play that revolves around a young boy/girl who has run away from home and hides out in a forest where he/she meets a reptilian community ruled by the crocodile king. As time progresses, the king and his people throw away all the other groups of reptiles out of the village. As time proceeds, life in the village become untenable given that the balance brought in by various inhabitants is skewed. The crocodile community then convinces the king that he ought to invite the original inhabitants back. The play quietly underlines communal oppression.

At this point the play, performed at schools, invites kids to walk in and take on the character of different reptiles, negotiate, and decide the fate of the village. A facilitator cajoles, challenges, and draws in the audience into the performance. This is why there are no spectators in Forum Theatre but 'Spect-actors'.

Most importantly, forum theatre negates the top down approach most forms of interventions usually take on.

Dr. Sanjoy Ganguly, activist and founder, **Jana Sanskriti**, who met Boal in 1991 in Paris, has been using Forum Theatre ever since. It is his opinion that Forum Theatre democratizes thought. Dr. David Selvaraj, Founder, **Visthar**, an organisation that uses Forum Theatre regularly when working with disempowered, displaced communities, says "Forum theatre enables those in the margins to not only develop a critical consciousness but to step out of their cultural of silence and take tiny steps of defiance and questioning of authority."

Anish Victor, who runs Rafiki, talks of a time when a version of Reptiles was performed at a remand home in Bangalore. Victor says that by the end of the play many of the boys who were performing as the reptiles voiced interest in returning home. They even negotiated a peace treaty wherein the king was asked to relinquish his title and his hereditary rights were replaced with a member of a different reptilian family serving as king for a year's duration.

Forum theatre, Dr. Ganguly explains, analyses a local problem and then locates it in a larger intellectual context. He points to the fact that if the education of the girl child is a problem, then it is rooted in patriarchy. **The trick is to let the community realise the problem themselves.** Villages where Janasanskriti works in now show a 100% enrolment of girl children in schools. From no women in the audiences when they started in 1985 to every woman in the village choosing to perform, they have come a long way, he says.

Forum Theatre's growing popularity is evident. The Asia Europe Foundation (ASEF) recently funded and organised a healthcare initiative titled Health on Stage, which used forum theatre to promote better hygiene and sanitation among three communities in India – the slums of Bangalore, the industrial suburbs of Chennai, and two tribal villages close to Mysore. Volunteers gathered in Bangalore and after preparing for a week, split into three groups, and headed into the field.

After acquainting themselves with the locals, based on what they saw, heard, and learnt, the group chose their focus depending on the most pressing concern. Some chose water contamination, while others chose housing or hygiene. Though it is still early days to talk about the efficacy of the project, an ongoing evaluation of the pilot is showing positive results.

Perhaps the true mark of popularity of something is in how many borrow it and change it to suit their purpose. TOTO, the cutesy name by which Theatre of The Oppressed is being called, and Forum Theatre, are now used even in corporate training. So Mr. Simon and Mr. Garfunkle, here is the answer to your question – Yes, analysis is really worthwhile and no, the theatre is not really dead.