



Resisting Neo-colonialism in Participatory Theatre

Devika Ranjan
Albany Park Theater Project

Bio

Devika Ranjan is a theatre-maker, ethnographer, and educator who tells stories about migration through performance, research, and advocacy. She is Resident Director of Albany Park Theater Project in Chicago, USA. Previously, Devika was an Inaugural Fellow at the Laboratory for Global Performance and Politics from 2017-2019. Her work with displaced people has been commended by HRH Meghan Markle for its importance for vulnerable people and political crises at large. Devika attended Georgetown's School of Foreign Service and received Master's distinctions from the University of Cambridge and the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, where she was a Marshall Scholar.



As a theatre-maker who tells stories about migration, I use participatory theatre tools to work with communities of asylum-seekers, forced migrants, and others who have been displaced from their homes. Yet in my work volunteering with organisations across the Global North, I have observed a number of artistic interventions that replicate systems of oppression within their community-based work. In this article, I reflect on a workshop series in which an organization's neo-colonial framework obscured the aim to empower newly arrived refugee women.

In 2019, during my Masters in Applied Theatre, I undertook a volunteer placement with a small arts organisation. The organisation aimed to use drama as a means for empowering migrant women worldwide and developing their leadership skills. In reality, most of the work focused on teaching English to the participants. I worked on the organisation's London project that offered a three-month workshop series for newly arrived refugee women.

The organisation used tools from Theatre of the Oppressed as a foundation for its work. Created by revolutionary theatre-maker Augusto Boal in Brazil in the 1970s, Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) is a collection of games, exercises, and performance-building methodology that intends to empower people facing systematic or structural oppression (Boal, 2000). Through a pedagogy based on play, it aims to help a community examine the oppressions that they face, spark an action or build solidarity, and imagine a better future (Boal, 2002). Through this reflection, I chart the misuse of TO in the London workshops. Though this example is specific to theatre-based practices, similar practices occur across social justice organisations and there is an



urgent need for all institutions involved in community-based work to consider the ethics of their practice.

The organisation that I was volunteering with was founded by a white woman whose online bio lists her as a ‘serial social entrepreneur’ and CEO. In 2018, she initiated the program in London with a group of Syrian women. She trained three of the women who had completed the program to be co-facilitators for the next workshop series, so that they could lead the group of new participants in improving their English and engaging in drama-based games. The co-facilitators had all been professional Arabic teachers in Syria; and they adapted their language teaching abilities to help other Arabic speakers learn English. But while they were confident language instructors, they were less comfortable leading the theatre activities. My volunteer role was to help the co-facilitators plan and execute three months of workshops. With my background in Theatre of the Oppressed and Arabic language skills, I was an intermediary between the CEO, who lived in Paris, and the co-facilitators.

The three co-facilitators and I spoke to the CEO on weekly WhatsApp calls, when the CEO suggested activities for the co-facilitators to do in workshop that week. Often, the internet connection was weak between the five of us and the call was interrupted or disconnected. While the co-facilitators spoke varying degrees of English, the CEO did not speak Arabic. With choppy audio and my rough English-to-Arabic-to-English translation, we all were often on different pages regarding the weekly plan. I felt uncomfortable relaying the CEO’s instructions, considering the co-facilitators were supposed to be the ones running the workshop. And while it



made sense to have someone who was well-versed in TO in support of the co-facilitators, I was conscious of the fact that I was inserted in a process that had begun several months earlier at the initial workshops. I wished that I had been there in partnership with the co-facilitators from the beginning.

The idea of training and paying people from the target participant community to lead workshops is good, but the co-facilitators did not have control in designing the three-month process. They were given leadership positions, but their titles meant little when they were denied the agency or power to deviate from a prescribed curriculum and determine what was best for their community. Instead, the co-facilitators should have been able to design the workshops based on their knowledge of the community's needs. Since they had participated in the CEO's version of the workshop the previous year, they could have offered improvements, tailored the workshops to their own skills, and worked with me to find the drama games that fit their weekly curriculum.

Even with the curricular confusion, the co-facilitators made it work. In the first few weeks, they played one of the CEO's suggested theatre-based games as a warm-up and then followed it with language-learning exercises that they created. I assisted them with the theatre games, occasionally leading one when they invited me to. Mostly, I sat with the women who were newest to English and helped them keep up with the pace of the others, explaining words that they did not understand or giving them support as they played a game. This system worked well and we built a regular group of participants. The women who attended the workshops were



enthusiastic and very funny. They enjoyed the break that the workshop space and games provided in their lives, which were often stressful outside of the room.

As the workshops continued, the CEO urged us towards creating a Forum play, as was part of her organisation's methodology. Forum is TO's main technique, in which community members—most of the time non-actors—create a play about a real interpersonal conflict that their society faces (Boal, 2002). They pause the performance at the height of the conflict, when the protagonist is in most peril. Forum is an interactive theatre method. The Joker—TO's term for a performance facilitator—asks the audience if anyone can think of a way for the protagonist to change the situation of oppression. The Joker invites an audience member to step into the role of the protagonist to test out a solution by enacting it onstage, while the rest of the cast responds in character. Boal calls Forum theatre a “rehearsal for a revolution,” helping individuals identify the issues in their community collectively (Boal, 2000). The aim is for participants and audience members to fully understand the oppression and its structural roots, as well as come together to offer solutions and empowerment to the oppressed. Though the co-facilitators had had experience performing in Forum plays as participants in the previous year, they were understandably unclear on the process of creating a Forum play. And when the new participants were told about the performance component of the workshops, they were very sceptical.

The workshops were advertised for the participants to “Learn English through Drama.” The women who attended were interested in sharpening their grammar and vocabulary in order to survive in the UK and engaging in social activities. They wanted to maintain a light space in



which they could enjoy time with their new friends rather than focus on their problems through Forum theatre.

Through the neocolonial frame of the organization, the CEO felt that she knew what was best for the participants—to the extent that she misled them to join the workshop thinking that they would be meeting people and learning English. Neither the participants nor the co-facilitators were consulted in deciding the workshop’s outcomes. As a result, the workshop space re-created colonial structures of power through the guise of development work. While the white woman who was CEO was invisible, speaking only through What’s App, the extent of her control over the organization and over the activities of the brown participants was extremely present. This neocolonial action dissolves the trust between the facilitator and the participants, as well as indicates the lack of respect the practitioner has for the community’s agency. But, in considering these workshops “serial social entrepreneurship” instead of community-building work, the CEO pushed the co-facilitators towards creating the Forum theatre that would fulfil the organisation’s international mission and pull in new donors without regarding the participants’ desires.

After a few weeks of convincing, the participants agreed to make a performance, though most of them refused to act in it. The women enjoyed constructing a fantastical story about their fictional protagonist, Zainab. In Forum, the protagonist is usually a fictional amalgamation of the participants. Zainab is a single mother whose husband died of a heart attack in Syria while



waiting to join the family in the UK. Zainab has to address numerous issues with her inadequate council flat, her son's difficult school transition, and culture shock in the UK.

In a Forum performance, the play typically ends at the point of greatest conflict—where the protagonist faces the most oppression. Understandably, the participants had enough of the negativity in Zainab's life as it hit too close to home. They came up with a romantic ending in which Zainab meets a handsome man who was her childhood sweetheart in Homs; they fall in love all over again. The son does better in school and he accepts the new man into their family.

This impulse makes sense to me; some participants had arrived in the UK as recently as 7 weeks prior and many were currently experiencing the problems in Zainab's life. They yearned for a sense of hope that they wanted to share for the future. Although the CEO insisted that they end the Forum play with the conflict, as originally intended, they decided to keep the joyful resolution for a woman who they identified with—therefore moving away from her prescription of a Forum play.

The idea of performance began to clash with the original intention of the English skills. Memorising a script was difficult, if not impossible—and it was not an effective way for the participants to learn English. We re-started by improvising a script, so that each person said their lines in their own words. Then, I suggested that they make the performance a radio play, so that they could have the newly improvised scripts in their hand and focus on telling Zainab's story rather than memorising their lines. I encouraged them to do as much of the performance as they wanted in Arabic. Being able to rely on their native language for performance made them feel



more comfortable, and it was more accurate to the way that Zainab would talk to her family and loved ones anyway.

Then, we learned that the majority of the audience would not be the participants' Arabic-speaking families and friends, but Quakers from the neighbourhood. The local Quaker meeting house had offered space for our workshops for the three months. While they had been gracious hosts, their all-white audience presence made me uncomfortable. I felt that the performance then became a demonstration of the impact that the Quakers' resources had had on the participants, as if the organisation was parading them to be evaluated or pitied. And because the participants did not feel confident speaking in English, they were forced into a vulnerable position of performance—that they were reluctant to do anyway. The Quaker audience also posed a problem in the context of interactive Forum theatre, because the Joker typically invites the audience to offer solutions to the community problems. To have wealthy, white, British people offering solutions to a Syrian woman's problems reinforces their neo-colonial superiority, especially as many of the workshop participants sought refuge in the UK from violence that, in part, stems from British imperialism.

The institution of neo-colonialism is never far from my work. While I was able to relate to the workshop participants as we were all Arabic-speakers, women of colour, and outsiders in London, I carry much more privilege in, among other things, my American passport and accent, my funding to be in the UK, and my training and upbringing in theatre. I noticed that while serving as a 'translator' between the CEO and the co-facilitators, I was continually caught in an



awkward middle position. This was not a new position for me: I rode the Tube across affluent central London to do workshops with refugee women, then attended class at my prestigious and overwhelmingly white drama conservatory that interrogated the ethical dilemmas of community-based theatre, then returned to my apartment that I shared with my Pakistani flat-mate, paid for by a scholarship from the British government that divided our subcontinent. My life in London was full of contradictions and the ties to coloniality are not lost on me. But in the London workshops, as in my work more broadly, I could use my privilege to undermine and subvert neo-colonialism by speaking directly to the avenues of power I have access to, as well as supporting those who are working for justice and telling their own stories, the way they want to tell them.

The week of the performance, all of the participants discussed what they wanted to do. Eventually, they settled on having a few of the participants lead their favourite theatre games with the audience. This idea demonstrated the participants' power and confidence, and redirected the focus of the evening to a sharing of the games and exercises that they had enjoyed in the workshop. They also wanted to perform their radio play, but with the happy ending that they had created for Zainab.

I offered to be the Joker for the performance, continuing my role as the translator—this time, between the (Syrian, female) workshop participants and (mostly white, British, Quaker) audience members. I was considered safe, educated, and accessible to both of these groups—and I could use that privilege to help push forward the co-facilitators' vision of the sharing. I did not ask the audience to solve Zainab's issues, as traditional Forum theatre would have required.



Instead, I invited them to offer one-word responses to Zainab’s struggles and point out the systematic issues that they saw her endure. Then, each of the women shared their vision of Zainab’s future and described what her life would be like, in Arabic or in English. Instead of a performance that paraded the women or patronised their English, the evening focused on the joy they found in their community, their power to lead the audience in group exercises, the struggles that they had to overcome in the UK, and their dreams for the future. The participants felt successful at the end of the sharing, celebrating each other and their courage to perform in English. After a break for Ramadan, the program continued without me. The co-facilitators continued to convene the group with occasional phone calls from the CEO.

The London workshops are one example in which an organisation’s well-intentioned methodology can give way to neo-colonial actions. For those of us situated in the Global North, working with or for people at the margins, we have to constantly hold ourselves accountable to the communities we work with. Institutions and individual practitioners must be extremely mindful of recreating colonial relationships: whether that is telling participants what is best for them, inviting outsiders to solve the problems of a community they are not part of, or denying individuals the agency to create their own solutions. Instead, we must be attentive to the participants’ desires, offer the skills or resources that we have to fill those needs, set them up for success in their new environments, and honour their expertise to create and fulfil their own community’s needs.



Beyond theatre, I encourage all practitioners involved in social justice work to consider that participatory methods are not the same as power-neutral methods; they are inflicted with all kinds of power dynamics. Anti-colonial actions are an active choice, a continual process, and a requirement for ethical social work—especially in the Global North, and even for methods that are participatory.



References

Boal, A., 2000. *Theater of the Oppressed*. Pluto press.

Boal, A., 2002. *Games for actors and non-actors*. Psychology Press.

