

**A Community-based theatre practitioner
working on a research-based theatre project:**

Reflections on Praxis

By Yasmine Kandil

This paper is a reflection on my experience as a community-based theatre practitioner working on a research-based theatre project. The project was a joint investigation by the Centre on Aging at the University of Victoria and the university's Theatre Department. The project was designed to investigate opinions on older adult driver safety through interview focus groups with older adults and stakeholder groups. The data was then used to stage a performance that depicted the challenges and opinions expressed by the different focus groups. The purpose of the play was to examine if the audience's views on older adult driver issues changed after seeing the performance.

As a community-based theatre practitioner I am used to working directly with communities to create performances that are enacted by community members to depict their challenges and concerns on a given topic. My role in the project was to accomplish two tasks: a) to read the interviews with the different focus groups as they were transcribed, and to assign them to categories according to the research computer program NVIVO; b) to act as the assistant director during the creation and staging of the theatre performance. The nature of this project was new to me as I had no experience with using data collected from interviews to create a play staged by professional actors. However, I understood that my role—as the theatre practitioner who was involved in the analysis and processing of the data—would be to bridge the world of the focus groups with the world of the theatre performance.

My practice is based on a method called Theatre for Development. I came upon this term during my graduate studies at the University of Victoria after I had been practicing it for some years in my native home of Cairo, Egypt. Theatre for Development (TfD) is the term given to the practice of theatre with marginalized or disempowered communities with the aim of raising the community's awareness, and/or engaging in dialogue or analysis on a particular topic at hand. The objective of such a practice is for

these communities to find a voice to express their opinions and to be heard. The community's participation varies but from inception to outcome, their concerns, problems, worries and interests remain central to the work.

Most research that has been published about Tfd locates it in developing countries (Mda, 1993; Munier & Etherton, 2006; Nogueira, 2002; Prentki, 2003), although in actuality the practice is more widespread and projects with immigrant communities have been documented as Tfd practice (Kandil, 2010). Mlama (2002) writes "the most commonly cited strengths [of Tfd] include the facilitation of the active participation of the community in identifying and analyzing their own development problems prior to the decision on action to solve them" (p.46). Although the following definition is used for Popular Theatre, I believe it encompasses the essence of the practice of Tfd:

[Popular Theatre] sets out to be part of a movement towards greater empowerment on the part of participants. It tries to be part of social and political change as well as individual change. It tries to enable those who are marginalized in some way to examine collectively their issues from their perspective, to analyze causes of these issues, to explore avenues of potential action about the issue in question, and to create an opportunity to take such action. (Prentki & Selman, 2003, p.9)

Over the past four decades the method of Tfd grew from the type of process where the community was talked at by theatre practitioners, in which performances were used as a means for propaganda and passing messages from 'above', to a process that involves the community as actors in the creation of theatre pieces about their lives. The shift came when practitioners realized that communities needed to feel fully involved in the process of creation in order to be invested in the issues at hand. It was also observed that community members are the experts about their own issues, so they would be most

capable of expressing and investigating these issues in the performance process. One of the factors that constitute the success of a Tfd project is respect of the community's autonomy over the process. This means that they have a sense of ownership of the work, which is achieved when a community's opinions and agenda are taken into consideration in the planning and execution stages of the project.

As a Tfd practitioner I work with marginalized or disempowered groups in order to create social change. I create social change by creating an arena where people's concerns and fears are voiced and hopefully heard by the intended audience. Even in projects where I have opted to eliminate the performance aspect in order to hold true to the community's agenda, the process remained powerful because the community found a place to be heard and to feel supported within the group. The process is not just to educate; it is also to provide a safe space for people to explore and express their fears with the hope of finding some relief or even feel some power and liberation through self-expression.

There are two issues that arise in this reflection paper: a) the challenge of theatre practitioners working with research data; b) the issue of not involving the stakeholder groups during or after the play-building process to authenticate and validate the play's content. Part of the challenge of working on the research data was that the actors who were part of the play-building process and performances did not participate in the interview process nor did they have the opportunity to read the transcribed interviews by the various focus groups, hence their participation in the creation of the play seemed to me to be missing something vital to preserving the authenticity of the content in the interviews

During the first phase of the project on older adult driver safety, my role as a research assistant was to

attend several meetings with the principal investigator and the rest of the research team. The team was made up of researchers from different disciplines at the university who met once a week to assess the process and to create a plan for the upcoming stages. The focus group interviews that took place in the city of Victoria and other cities on Vancouver Island with older adults and various other stakeholder groups were fascinating to read through. I was surprised by the varied experiences of the stakeholders, particularly of the older adult groups. They each had their own challenges that were unique to their own experiences, yet they all shared feeling so vulnerable. I read through those interviews, and I wanted to reach out and help those people in some way. The TfD practitioner in me wanted to create a workshop to give them a sense of power and some relief from a reality that hovers over them: that they may not be able to drive as long as they want to, and there is fear and loss attached to that reality.

The second phase comprised of working with professional and semi-professional actors to create a play that would address all the topics expressed by the interviewees in the focus groups. I was eager to see how this process would culminate in a performance that would hold the richness of some of the more moving stories in the interviews. Due to budget limitations we were only able to work with three main actors whom we cast in order to represent the main stakeholders that were represented in the data: an older adult male, a middle-aged woman who would play his daughter, and a young adult male who was the older adult's grandson, and who would represent the younger generation.

Phase I:

When I first read the interviews I was often moved by an older adult's story or reflection on the issues surrounding older adult driver safety, and imagined different ways that this story could be staged in a

performance. One of the stories I remember was of a gentleman who could not imagine not being able to drive. For him, the drive he took every evening across the highway was the only thing remaining that reminded him of an activity he used to do with his wife when she was alive. He continued with the tradition of taking that highway drive every day in order to keep her in his heart. Another story was of an elderly woman who did not feel safe driving on the roads, so she made up her own way of driving that gave her a sense of safety. That special way was she never took a left-hand-turn on a road. She always turned right, even if it meant that she would go around an entire block once around in order to arrive at her intended street.

I also remember reading a story about a woman who said that for her to continue to drive meant that she could drive around her friends who were no longer able to drive. She was able to drive them to their doctor's appointments and to the grocery store. To share the costs, and to thank their friend, each person would contribute to the cost of gas. I was also moved by a story shared by a woman who was stopped by a police officer and given a speeding ticket. It turns out she was driving to her husband's funeral, and was feeling so sad and emotionally overwhelmed that she didn't give this information to the officer. In this story I felt the endurance of this older woman, and her oppression by a system that is concerned with rules and regulations and not with understanding that there are vulnerable people who are affected by these laws.

These stories and others represented the heart of what driving meant to elderly people. It was not just about pride in driving and feeling independent in their lives, it was also about coping and surviving in a fast-paced world that is moving faster than they are able to. Driving for them was their way of trying to catch up, and trying to hold the pieces of their lives together.

Once all the interviews were collected and transcribed the research team, another research assistant and I contributed to the sorting and categorizing of the different themes explored in the interviews. I was assigned several transcripts of interviews which I read through and sorted each line into a coding category depending on to what I thought it best related. An expert on the program NVIVO then inserted each of these lines into the program, and the program sorted them out in terms of themes. The result was a summary of all the interviews, sorted in categories based on the themes explored by the different individuals. We could examine the data by looking up a theme, then looking up its sub-theme, and reading the quote that was said about that topic.

Phase II:

The rehearsal process in the second stage involved explorations with the actors by the director, Trudy Pauluth-Penner, myself as assistant director, and one of the principal investigators of the project, Dr. Warwick Dobson. The actors were guided into improvised situations in which they explored their characters' reactions to various situations. There was a very skilled and studious stage manager, graduate student Lauren Jerke, who typed the improvised scenes as they were acted out. Dr. Dobson, University Chair of Applied Theatre at the University of Victoria, used all the improvised scenarios to write the play. Ms. Pauluth-Penner and Dr. Dobson ensured that the major topics on the list of themes were explored in the improvisations, and were touched upon in the final play text.

The older adult male actor, John Krich, was an established actor in the community, and he brought with him depth to any topic that was explored. He even brought to rehearsals a model car that was the car

he learned to drive in, as well as photographs of himself in his early adulthood next to his new car, and a box where he stored letters and photographs. These objects became a major component of the performance, and the rest of the acting team incorporated these objects, and the stories related to them, in their performance. The younger male actor, Reid Sparling, was key to creating a scene about a Global Positioning System (GPS). This GPS becomes a nuisance when the family goes out on a drive to test the skills of the grandfather on the road only to find that his driving knowledge is outdated. The female actress, Anne Cirillo, was key to the exploration of a busy single mother who is trying to manage her life, while coping with her aging father and her worry about his deteriorating driving abilities.

Applied Theatre Models of Interaction

There are two models of applied theatre, discussed by Prendergast and Saxton (2009), which relate to this project: the “Curriculum model”, and the “Interview model” (p. 22). The curriculum model is described as: “a skilled group selects or is contracted to engage with a topical issue and generates a theatre piece for performance in the community, primarily for the purposes of education” (p. 22). The interview model is described as: “interviews become the basis for an applied theatre piece that is subsequently performed for the interviewees and their community by a group of skilled actors” (p. 23).

Although the project was a combination of the above two models, I see it best fitting the “Curriculum model” (p. 22), where the actors were contracted to investigate a particular topic with the intent of performing it to the community as a means of education. The question that I kept asking myself was: what do I make of these interviews? Do the interviews and the stories of these older adult stakeholders

become a steppingstone for more explorations and more sharing of stories by actors who are not stakeholders? For me, as a member of the creative team, this project became about exploring the issue of older adult driver safety, and creating a play that was based on the explorations of the actors who were working on it. The interviews served their purpose of giving the research team material upon which to base their findings. The findings worked to inspire the theatre team, and acted as a guide to the improvisations and explorations made for the play-building process.

In Prendergast and Saxton's definition of the interview model it is outlined that the model "ideally involves inviting interviewees into the rehearsal process to evaluate the authenticity of the transcribed interviews" (p.23). It was never the intention of the research team to involve the stakeholder groups in the play-building process, trusting that the sorted and thematically categorized content of the interviews would be addressed in the performance. However, the outcome became focused on the exploration of the actors, and not on the enactment of the stories shared by the stakeholder groups. The project's limited budget dictated how many hours the actors could put into rehearsals, which meant that the creative team's efforts would have to focus on the play-building portion, and not so much on reading the material from the focus group interviews.

Challenges with the Methodology

On the one hand, the NVIVO program that organized and sorted the data was impressive in its accuracy and its ability to combine all these related topics and sub-topics into one readable document. On the other hand, I couldn't help but feel dissatisfied with how the richness of these interviews was lost amidst all the sorting and categorizing. There used to be a flow to the interviews where I could follow

through what one person was saying, hear his or her story, and read how others had responded. To me the richness of the materials lay within these stories, and not within the categories they were assigned.

I respected that the NVIVO program and the research team were able to draw out and analyze the various topics at hand, which constituted the core of the challenges around older adult driver safety. But I knew that when the theatre team—comprised of the playwright (co-investigator), director and actors who were to stage this performance—examined the interviews in their “sorted” form they would not get a sense of the essence of these stories, and that this would be detrimental to the accuracy of this process. As the process of creating the performance progressed I kept pondering my knowledge of community-based theatre, and in particular of TfD, which advocates for a respect of the agenda of the community, and of ensuring their investment in the process in order to reach the project’s intended goals of dialogue and hopefully social change.

The result of the actors’ improvisations was a very rich and moving exploration of the topic of older adult driver safety, as created by the theatre team. This richness, although inspired by the topics discussed in the focus groups, was primarily due to the contribution of the actors, and not the interviewees. The richness of the stories shared in the interviews remained in the binder they arrived in, and unfortunately remained only a memory to those of us in the research team who attended these particular focus groups, or who took the time to read the transcripts in their entirety.

As a TfD practitioner I couldn’t help but feel a responsibility towards the stakeholder groups, and the stories they shared in the interviews. Talking about this topic was a first step for the stakeholders to

feel a sense of relief perhaps, or even a sense of community for sharing and witnessing the experiences of other stakeholders. My practice with marginalized communities has taught me to use theatre to bring to light these unsolved problems, and to create community dialogue through performances of these topics.

Recommendations for Future Practice

In order to integrate into this research project some of the ethical considerations employed in the method of TfD, a few procedures have to be factored into the process: a) the community would be involved in the interviews as active participants; b) the interviews would be shaped as theatre explorations using tableaux and other simple scene creation techniques; c) if actors are to be involved in the process, they are to be part of the theatre-based interview workshops; d) if a professional theatre team is to create the play, the stakeholders would visit the rehearsals to validate the authenticity of the content; e) the stakeholders would be present during the post-performance discussion to further clarify or give voice to some of the play's content.

The above model is what Prendergast and Saxton (2009) title the "Transfer model" (p.23). This model would hold true the experiences of the stakeholder groups, as well as achieve the goal of providing some relief to their concerns and a space to explore their challenges. The objective of the applied theatre process here would be: a) to explore the issues at hand; b) to provide some relief to the stakeholder groups for the issues that are immediate in their lives; c) to educate the community about these issues; d) to create community dialogue between various stakeholder groups.

This experience has taught me many lessons as a community-based theatre practitioner working on a research-based theatre project. I learned that theatre practitioners enjoy the practice because it replicates life, and it makes people think about their actions and choices. Theatre practitioners are fascinated by stories and people's experiences, and they want to re-enact them through performances. The interviews of this research project were full of rich stories that I believe would have made incredibly rich performance material. In order to achieve that goal, the action plan for this project would have had to incorporate practicing applied theatre with the interviewees, and possibly involving them in the performance.

References

- Kandil, Y. (2010). Here I stand: A case study of a Theatre for Development project with immigrant and refugee youth living in Victoria. [Unpublished chapter in dissertation]. University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.
- Mda, Z. (1990). *When people play people: Development communication through theatre.* _
Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Mlama, P. (2002). Popular theatre and development-Challenges for the future: The Tanzanian experience. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 12(1&2), 45-58.
- Munier, A. and Etherton, M. (2006). Child rights theatre for development in rural Bangladesh: A case study. *Research in Drama Education*, 11(2), 175-183.
- Nogueira, M.P. (2002). Theatre for development: An overview. *Research in Drama Education*, 7(1), 103-108.
- Prendergast, M. & Saxton, J. (Eds.). (2009). *Applied theatre. International case studies and challenges for practice.* Bristol/Chicago: Intellect.
- Prentki, T. (2003) Save the children? Change the world. *Research in Drama Education*, 8(1), 39-53.
- Prentki, T. & Selman, J. (2003). *Popular theatre in political culture: Britain and Canada in focus.* Bristol/Portland: Intellect.