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## The trials and tribulations of community theatre

As actress or director I have been responsible for various community theatre projects. These have included using theatre as a way of teaching English to French schoolchildren; creating a short show with a Finnish class; working with multi-cultural groups of young European actors and musicians to create ambitious musical and classical theatre productions. Currently I am working with two groups based in the Paris suburbs. I'd like to talk about these two groups as they represent my most challenging project yet and are revelatory of key difficulties but also of key benefits of socially engaged theatre as I have experienced it.

First of all, I'd like to give a brief introduction to the context. I was asked to work with both groups by the theatre where I am performing a solo show in May 2007. The theatre is heavily involved in its local community, running a number of partnerships with local charities, groups and educational establishments. There are many factors motivating the theatre's community commitment. There is a real conviction that the purpose of theatrical art is to "speak to the people" by involving and addressing the daily lives of the community in which it is based. In addition, by exchanging with the local community the theatre seeks to educate and develop an audience, bringing through its doors people who would otherwise reject theatre as inaccessible and not for them. On the other hand, there is perhaps a pragmatic motivation. By running such projects, the theatre is able to apply for a wider variety of grants, on both local and European levels, thus ensuring its own financial survival.

The participants of both groups are immigrants living in some of Paris' more impoverished suburbs. The level of fluency in French is variable as is the level of literacy. Some are legal residents, others are not, and the degree of stability is very varied as the participants' employment and family situation can change constantly. There are a large number of female participants, many of whom come from the Maghreb. As women living in a North African cultural environment, they face certain challenges and difficulties: in particular that of stepping beyond the circuit of home and family.

One group is made up of participants enrolled in a French language and citizenship class, organised by a local charity. The other group, entirely female, consists of women who live in the same housing block who get together to take part in various activities (gym, cookery, shopping outings, childcare). It is an essential support network for the women concerned, and while they seem to have achieved a certain level of autonomy, the group is nevertheless supervised and organised by a social worker. Both drama projects are focused on issues of citizenship and the right to vote of foreign residents.

I'm now going to describe some of the difficulties encountered and the challenges of working with this type of group.

For both projects, it has been very hard to bring together a regular and committed group. The theatre has imposed the aim of creating a final performance. This requires commitment and regular attendance, but each session there are new participants and others who are absent or no longer attend. This is linked to many factors: a new job, family commitments (children to be looked after, collected from school, taken to the doctors etc) as well as a lack of understanding that regular attendance is necessary in order to create a group dynamic and to rehearse a show. For similar reasons, rehearsal sessions are often inefficient and time is wasted because participants arrive late or leave early. Whilst participants enjoy the sessions, many pull back from engaging further and committing to the challenge of a final performance in the theatre because they know they will not be able to get away from family commitments in the evening.

Participants are not used to the discipline (learning lines, repeating moves, redoing again and again the same scene etc) of this kind of activity and look on the session as a chance to relax or catch up with friends. They are not used to using their bodies to express emotions.

Neither are they used to listening to each other or to watching each other perform. Some of them do not speak the language they are being asked to perform in and few of them can read. Theatrical culture and convention is a foreign language to them. Many lack self-confidence, are ashamed of their lack of cultural background and take refuge in embarrassment or reticence (For example, one woman, whose ideas and suggestions were pertinent and enthusiastic, left the project because she was embarrassed by the fact that she cannot read.)

However, many of these difficulties, once overcome, are directly counterbalanced by the positive benefits of this kind of project. When a group dynamic has been created, participants experience a new energy of shared solidarity and participation. By committing to the group and valorising their own contribution to the project, they gain a new sense of self-respect. Indirectly, they learn to shake off some of the cultural constraints they face, implicitly saying to their family members – this is important to me, I merit the time it takes and I have the right to involve in something beyond the family circle. They gain a sense of achievement and new self-assurance as they overcome barriers of language and shyness linked to a lack of cultural confidence. Little by little they gain confidence in their own creativity and imagination.

Perhaps most importantly, they gain a new means of expression and a chance to articulate thoughts and feelings that they cannot express in other contexts. Many of the improvisations they have done during the sessions have involved re-enacting their daily lives. This gives them the chance to play the role of someone else: their friends, their husbands, representatives of authority, the institutions... This develops their capacity to imagine and understand the view point of others, but also allows them to point out and provoke discussion about the behaviour and attitudes with which they are confronted daily. The exceptional context of the drama workshop enables them to go beyond certain cultural taboos.

Overall, despite various frustrations, the work with these two groups is rewarding and eye-opening. I'd like to describe briefly some of the lessons I have learned, as well as mistakes I've made that can be avoided.

- Make sure there is a reliable group leader who can be relied upon to motivate, organise and help carry the group, (by reminding participants of session times, making sure they practise and learn lines between ses-

sions, finding on the spot solutions to practical problems like organising last minute baby sitters so that mums can attend the performance...)

- Be aware of the different motivations of the structures involved, as they can conflict with the real human needs of the participants. A theatre financing a social project may insist on a final show to which it can invite representatives from the funding body, even though the participants are not ready to make the step to public performance. A local charity providing language lessons to immigrants may insist on the importance of writing a script which participants will have to learn in order to demonstrate their linguistic progress, even if they cannot actually read. An enthusiastic social worker may suggest a theme for the drama project that he or she feels the participants ought to be thinking about this issue, when in reality it is not an urgent or important subject for the participants.
- To avoid the above difficulties, try to meet the group first. Talk to them, find out about their lives, listen to their voices, try to assess what aspect of their lives it is important for them to explore and express. Gauge a sense of their understanding or experience of theatrical or written culture. Devise the project's artistic direction from this background.
- Calculate the number of hours scheduled working with the group: the time available to rehearse will be half that total. Tailor the project aims accordingly. It is generally important to programme a performance of some kind, as this sets a very clear objective to work to and will increase the sense of group achievement. Where possible make the scale of the performance fit the schedule as well as the group identity.
- Start with improvisations. Stay concrete. Explore situations that the participants know and recognise. To begin with, ask them to act their friends, their family, their daily lives. Acting the role of someone very different from themselves is initially too big an imaginative leap. This takes time. Until you have to rehearse a show, don't repeat the same situation too often, as boredom quickly sets in. Instead, for example, explore the same emotional state in different situations.
- Build the script/show from participants' improvisations. Learning a written text can be too alienating. Make sure the participants understand the situation being acted, so that they can improvise with their own words. Be sensitive to the group's identity. They may be happy to explore certain difficulties or problems in the context of a private workshop, but not want to re-enact them in public.

- Make them move and work together (physical warm-up, games, and exercises), but always explain the purpose of an activity. The purpose of drama games may be obvious to experienced actors, but an amateur novice may think he or she is being patronised if asked to take part in games perceived as “childish”. Don’t spend too long on one thing. Even if it “doesn’t work”, come back to it the next session and build up achievement over time, rather than try to make it work straight away.

- Don’t count on one person, as a key actor may suddenly stop attending workshops or not be available on the performance day. A potential solution to this problem is to concentrate on group scenes or chorus work in which actors are interchangeable. In addition, this type of work helps overcome shyness as participants perform as a group.

And finally, be patient and don’t expect miracles. This kind of project takes years to build and establish successfully.