

Can Theatre be a Project of Liberation Theology?: Explorations in the Case of a Collaboration in Tanzania¹

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In the summer of 2011, a contingent of graduate students and faculty sourced from Yale University's Divinity School, School of Drama, and Institute of Sacred Music partnered with the Parapanda Theatre Arts Lab in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Building on the work of Augusto Boal, Parapanda has pioneered using participatory theatre as a means for social change. Their process creates provocative, non-traditional drama that attempts to give voice to instances of social injustice. Yale students joined Parapanda artists for an unprecedented international exchange exploring this unique possibility of theatre-making. An essential component of the Yale/Parapanda experiment tried to bring theatre for social change into conversation with liberation theology. Traditional coursework in Christian and Islamic liberation theologies intermingled with rehearsals and performances, but neither the final performances nor inter-company conversation extensively engaged religious questions. The failure to launch productive religious discourse as a part of the Yale/Parapanda experiment seems to name any theoretical connection "merely cosmetic."

In this paper, I will argue that the resonance between a theology of the oppressed and a theatre of the oppressed go deeper than surface-level similarities. Indeed, the Yale/Parapanda experiment reveals a symbiotic relationship between these disciplines even though *discussing* religious topics remained elusive and its final performances did not integrate religious content. I will show how participatory theatre reflects the methodology of liberation theology *in action* and that liberation theology provides a guide for theatre that seeks to combat oppression. In the spirit of liberation theology's attention to contextual analysis, I will begin with Parapanda's theatrical process and examples from the Yale/Parapanda experiment. I will then develop a brief theological account for what I believe to be one of the key principles for the success of theatre for social change—the creation of "spaces of freedom." On these grounds, I will suggest a way to see how participatory theatre for social change, in its historical and dramatic activity, *does* liberation theology.

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CROSSING BORDERS: PARAPANDA'S PROCESS AND THE YALE/PARPANDA EXCHANGE

Parapanda performs Tanzanian storytelling with music, traditional and non-traditional drama by East African playwrights, and collaborative reinterpretations of the Western canon (e.g., a recent production of *Antigone* in conjunction with a Swedish theatre company). At the core of Parapanda's mission, however, is theatre for social change. Each performance is based on all original material developed by the performing ensemble. Parapanda's theatre for social change requires a different type of rehearsal process. Parapanda artists live and conduct interviews in a given community and create a theatre piece based on that community's responses. Paying close attention to the concerns of the people, actors string these stories together into a unified play. Parapanda performs the completed drama as part of a lively and popular community event. At the height of the story's conflict, the drama freezes. An actor playing the role of a "Joker"² asks audience members to identify the issues raised during the play and leads a discussion inspired by the performance. Often, key community leaders are invited to be a part of the audience. The technique creates a "safe space" to raise confrontational and difficult subjects. In the past, Parapanda has successfully created community theatre pieces surrounding issues of HIV/AIDS, domestic abuse, gender, government and police inefficiency, neighborhood violence, and economic exploitation.

Usually, Parapanda sends a delegate of performers into Tanzania's rural villages to create such theatre for social change. In the summer of 2011, Parapanda and Yale embarked on their collaboration which, for the first time, prepared this type of theatre for Parapanda's own back yard in Dar es Salaam. The multi-lingual Yale/Parapanda collaboration researched, created, and performed a theatre piece that addressed issues in education and waste management. The entire process took place within the Mabibo and Mburahati neighborhoods of Dar es Salaam. The team followed Parapanda's painstaking research process by entering those communities to conduct interviews. Theatre-makers asked questions aimed to provoke the telling of stories and sharing feelings and experiences. Artists then spent time analyzing the findings, creating small scenes based on individual stories, and asking dramatic questions in search of performing a scene demonstrating the issue's "root cause." Inspired by the community's own experiences, the ensemble created a performance that dramatizes their stories with fictionalized characters. The performances are not "sociological reporting"; they try to be provocative dramatic art.

For the performance, actors *returned* to the very same communities from which the stories were gathered. Against the backdrop of everyday life, the group performed the two plays developed from their research. Yet this theatre explicitly does *not* offer pre-determined staging for a given issue's "solution." The action stops midway, at the height of the drama's conflict, to create a space for conversa-

² Parapanda's use of the term "Joker" alludes to the inspiration for this process in the work of the groundbreaking Peruvian theatre-maker, Augusto Boal. See Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Charles A. & Maria-Odilia Leal McBride, trans. (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985).

tion. The work of seeking a resolution falls to the *audience*. A member of the company becomes Boal's "Joker," a bridge between the audience and the performance and mediator for conversation. The Joker asks the crowd to identify those responsible for the situation portrayed. She might ask those gathered to offer alternative solutions or to dig deeply into uncovering the unspoken root causes for the dilemma. There are myriad ways the Joker might include the audience. Boal suggests a game of improvisational substitution, where an audience member can "stand-in" for an actor and play the scene differently.³ Another method, called hot seat, brings a character back onto the stage to be questioned by the audience. In discussing potential resolutions for the play's plot, the Joker simultaneously guides conversation to solutions for the play's *issues*. Though the characters are fictional, the situations and contexts for the drama were gathered from real stories within that community. By discussing systematic problems faced by a character, audience members begin to discuss themselves.

Here is an example from the Yale/Parapanda performance. The "waste management" play "Mama Ibra" showed a woman who makes her living selling *kitumbua*⁴ outside her home near an intersection of two unpaved roads. In the neighborhoods of Dar es Salaam, trash and human waste collection only occurs if a given city block pays a direct fee to the trash collector. In speaking to members of these communities, we learned that these *taka taka* (trash) collectors often "forget" they have already been paid. An actor from Parapanda played one such character. Should the *taka taka* collectors not come, families pile their trash into makeshift landfills near the intersection, right next to where Mama Ibra makes and sells her *kitumbua*. The short drama explored what might happen if Mama Ibra's infant child played in one of those trash piles and contracted a fatal disease. While we never met a real-life "Mama Ibra," we did learn the actual events from which the company compiled the theatre piece.

As Mama Ibra's child became sick, the Joker froze the action to invite conversation. A woman in the crowd, who makes her livelihood selling *kitumbua*, shared that if she and her child wished to eat, she needed to let her child play while she cooked and served the food. "If trash was around, so be it! The city never does anything about it." Her passionate comments sparked others in the crowd to blame Mama Ibra and the *taka taka* collectors for their neglect. Both characters answered audience questions during "hot seat."⁵ By answering the audience's objection, the conversation could be turned to a perceived "root cause" of the issue: government and personal apathy. A local political leader in charge of trash collection happened to be in attendance at the play. During the facilitated conversation,

3 "The participants who choose to intervene must continue the physical actions of the replaced actors; they are not allowed to come on stage and talk, talk, talk; they must carry out the same type of work or activities performed by the actors who were in their place" (Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 139.) Though Parapanda has used this technique in the past, it was not a part of the Joker segment of the Yale/Parapanda performances.

4 A fried rice cake and a favorite Tanzanian street food.

5 It is important to note that the actors portraying the characters remained "in-character." This is not an interrogation of the actor but the *character*.

he commented on his own need to make waste management a greater priority for city officials. The conversation allowed members of the community to confront a systemic issue without alienating a potential ally in that city official. By contextualizing their comments through a fictional character, community members raised their concerns without jeopardizing their personal wellbeing.

WHAT'S GOING ON: THEATRE CREATING OF "SPACES OF FREEDOM"

Parapanda's work to create theatre for social change falls under the broad rubric of "applied drama." This theatre tries to *do* something for the community in which it is performed beyond the expectations normally associated with drama and entertainment. The Yale/Parapanda experiment tried to make change by raising awareness and encouraging cooperation. The two dramas made an attempt at galvanizing the audience to play a more active role in confronting issues in education and waste management. Theatre can certainly raise important questions, but why aim for conversation? On the whole, dehumanizing conditions can become normalized; this theatre attempts to reveal the sin that trains a community to expect and accept misery and the problem of an apathetic posture towards human suffering. A detailed theoretical account for *why* this theatre makes change often eludes inquiry. By placing participatory theatre in conversation with liberation theology, I will sketch a theoretical and theological framework for making sense of how this theatrical project enables positive social change through the creation of what I will call "spaces of freedom" through dramatic performance. By space I do not necessarily mean a physical location. This type of theatre, particularly in its application by Parapanda, must be located in the community. Because Tanzania lacks an abundance of public performance space, the play tends to happen in the open and in the midst of everyday living. Here, "spaces of freedom" might indeed be by physical locations—a field, a local center, a home, a street corner—but it also means a disposition, an environment, and a communal experience.

A theological account might say that participatory theatre thus hopes to create a kind of "church," a place of material substance and divine presence manifest in and through its people animated by the Holy Spirit. Christians who talk about their church do not simply mean buildings. The term invokes people, activity, and the spirit of fellowship brought about by communion in Christ. These theatrical "spaces of freedom" should not cease to exist once the performance has ended. As such, the term does not exclusively mean the "playing space" or stage. Instead, such a process hopes to ignite conversations that build the Kingdom of God; it seeks to grow, expand, and eventually conquer systems of oppression.

Intellectually Free Space

Oppressive systems depend on the control of language and discourse to eradicate the possibility for imagining different models of human relationship. Concepts crystallized in language help to create our understanding of reality; by controlling the story and restricting the imagination, hegemonic systems of oppression can influence one's perception of reality. James H. Cone, in *God of the*

Oppressed,⁶ writes a compelling indictment of white-American slave owners' false use of Christianity. Slave owners argued their system operated with the rubber stamp of God. Atrocities (such as the promulgation of the myth of Ham) perpetuated because those in power attempted to hold sway even over ways of thinking. Slavers reinforced their claim to supremacy by stifling any means to imagine an alternative economic system. For Cone, such positions depended upon readings of the scriptural text that⁶ ignored the central hermeneutic of God's liberating action on behalf of the poor. Oppression steels itself against objection by proclaiming "this is just the way it is."

Participatory theatre presents an opportunity to name and explore solutions that might be unimaginable in day-to-day life. A community which cannot complain, join together, or organize will never constitute a threat to the establishment. Such conversations fail in a culture of silence where they might be stifled by economic fears or imposed through military force. By contrast, theatre conditions the flourishing of the imagination. Theatre-making inherently rejects calcified perceptions of reality. Theatrical art depends upon the audience's "suspension of disbelief." In order for the play to work, we must allow ourselves to believe (at least within the world of the play) that the actors are who they say they are. The audience must believe that Peter Pan really can fly, that Romeo really loves Juliet, or that the Oklahoma territory has burst out into song. The audience plays the game and believes that a new, secondary reality has been created on stage. Theatre creates an alternative space where daily life's "unspoken rules" become malleable. Anything is possible in the world of the play. This point remains true even if the theatrical world mimetically represents the real one.

Theatre for social change thus defies the systemic control of conceptualization through the imaginative logic of dramatic art. On stage, *any* solution to the problem is possible. To be most effective, the Joker will guide the conversation towards feasible solutions, but the rubric for "feasibility" has been expanded beyond those provided by the seats of power. The drama presents an accurate image of everyday life, but it also creates space to engage solutions previously unthinkable. In the Joker's conversation about the drama, an audience member's language can slip free from the terrifying responsibility of "I" to safety in referencing "the character." Such intellectual freedom might be fleeting, but it permits oppression to be safely named and confronted.

Emotionally Free Space

Revelations brought about by an intellectual project, though good in and of themselves, do not make change. The conclusions of an intellectual awareness often lead only into the complacency brought by feelings of fear and helplessness. Unlike education campaigns, military interventions, and pamphlet drops, theatre also addresses an emotional dimension to liberation. Harnessing the passions lies at the heart of any project of liberation. Fear must be transcended; anger must be

channeled into productive resistance; joy must be affirmed. This theatre forces its audience to feel and feel powerfully. But it puts those feelings under interrogation; it asks, "Why are we angry? What do we do next?"

Emotions can be coerced into serving the will of an unjust social order. All feelings which object to systems of oppression are outlawed. In *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Boal offers a detailed critique of the emotional coercion of Greek drama. Aristotle claimed the theatre sought the sole end of producing catharsis in its audience: an intense purging of the passions of pity and fear. Boal suggests that such catharsis supported the aims of the Athenian state. By siphoning a people's emotional experience, the tragedies conditioned the masses for servitude. Indeed, Boal paints the picture of the theatre as a cure for the malady of emotion; it drains away parasitic passion from an infected mind. Downgrading emotional responses to sin seems antithetical to the image we find in Matthew of a truly human Jesus Christ. Upon entering the temple, Jesus "overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves" (Mk 11:15); actions far from medically or cathartically induced serenity. Boal and liberation theologians recognize and argue for the central place of emotional liberation. This theatre, then, does not seek to eliminate emotions but to provoke, to stir, and to ignite them. Audiences must walk away troubled, angered, and inspired; simultaneously comforted and shaken. Here is a process evocative of the experience of the gospel, something which seeks not catharsis but genesis.

Physically Free Space

In some ways, theatre seems contradictory to a program of empowerment. The very act of establishing "actor" and "audience," designating a "stage" and an "auditorium," preaching from the political safety of a character's "monologue" rather than the personal accountability of a "soap box," seems to alienate the very community one hopes to affect with change. It confines activity and dynamism to the realm of the powerful (the performers), and relegates those without such status to passive reception (the audience). For these reasons, theatre for social change requires the creation of a "physically free space." Gathering a community for the sake of a performance, in and of itself, constitutes an act of defiance against an oppressive system. "Showing up" *en masse* demonstrates the possibility to change the status quo. Purposeful gathering transforms a space of commerce (e.g., a street corner, park, or truck yard) to a space of performance, conversation, and engagement. Yet this theatre goes further than a rally or even a political drama with a talk-back.

Participatory theatre offers the opportunity for spectators to step in and play the role of a character. It rejects monological presentation (actor/speaker to audience) to create a dialogical event (audience-actor to audience of potential spectator-actors, what Boal called "spectactors"). This theatre subverts an expectation for passive receiving by arriving at moments of engaged conversation. By involving the audience in an improvised scene, the spectator-cum-actor embraces the poetic freedom available to the theatre artists. Borrowing terminology popularized by the performance theorist Richard Schechner, here the entertain-

⁶ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, Revised edition, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).

ment begins to have its efficacy. We saw this when Yale/Parapanda invited the audience to improvise a conversation with Mama Ibra or the *taka taka* collector. Here we find a space free enough to imagine life or circumstances in a new way, to feel the emotive experience of such liberation, and to *embody* it. The audience member who interacts with the character begins to *play* the scene him or herself. Dramatic possibility, previously a tool of distraction for entertainment, now serves a purpose in systemic change. The spectators of a staged theatre play become actors in the improvised drama of embodied life. The dramatic moment might present a new view of personhood to the individual as he or she expresses intellectual, emotional, and physical autonomy by joining the conversation. Theatre confirms the weakness of hegemony: an artistic project proposes an opportunity to encounter life outside its supposedly “understood” expectation and un-consensual social contracts.

Participatory theatre does not try to teach the “right” way to be. The conversation remains open and unplanned. Drama creates the condition for social change, but it cannot force feed answers determined before the conversation began. This drama is *not* propaganda. For this theatre to work, it cannot “prescribe” solutions to a community in the mode of the hospital. Prescriptions (in the case of this analogy, “prescribed medications”) necessarily ignore the subjectivity of the patient; they seek to confront and combat problems with the beneficial “side effect” of healing. Many will object saying that a didactic theatre aimed to articulate a clear plan of action seems more efficient. Why waste so much time creating an art piece that, ultimately, only leads to a difficult conversation? Liberation theology provides the answer. Christians are called to love the poor as brothers and sisters. This requires a theatre with problems, with holes, with opportunities for conversation. It must create room where an oppressed community is forced to tell its own story rather than receive one dictated to them. This theatre seeks to explore the messiness of life as it is lived. It seeks to present the real world rather than serve the dramaturgical ideal of what is “most interesting.” This theatre must reject a pathological approach to poverty, as an illness in need of prescribed medical solutions. Poverty is not a condition to be cured; indeed, the gospel reminds it cannot be: “For you always will have the poor with you” (Mt 26:11). This is not to be read as an excuse for Christians to turn a blind eye to poverty because a cherry-picked biblical quotation seems to support their apathy. Participatory theatre for social change corrects an instinct that liberation only requires us to fix the broken parts of the current system. Any system which dehumanizes is inherently toxic. The medical analogy for “curing” oppression breaks because it pretends current social structures are value neutral. This logic seems to say, “If I have my Epipen at the ready, I can continue to eat the peanuts which could kill me.” A more holistic treatment plan takes away toxins rather than merely flooding the body with antidotes. This theatre works to give those who have been marginalized room to embrace God’s gift of freedom which some have tried to take away. Such participatory theatre does not seek to give the oppressed anything they lack; instead, it attempts to pry away the social structures which prevent, constrict, and control their flourishing.

CONCERNS

I must pause to acknowledge some of the ethical pitfalls of the Yale/Parapanda experiment. Christian liberation theology’s account of the *imago dei* and human dignity interrogate the colonial implications in using the experience of the “oppressed” as proving grounds for experimental theatre. Such theatre necessarily commodifies human experience for the sake of a dramatic point. The power of a play based on real experience but artistically constructed also requires that human suffering be distilled away from the human person. A person has become a story, a data-point to be played with in a rehearsal. Aestheticizing oppression does not heal wounds in and of itself; it may, in fact, further distance us from Christ’s commandment to *love*. Furthermore, the Yale/Parapanda project sent people of extreme privilege to *use* the experiences of the poor in Tanzania for their own intellectual benefit. While participatory theatre offers a grand opportunity, its practitioners must always be wary and consistently check their intentions. Creating participatory theatre with goals ascertained through liberationist theological reflection might be a way to keep such theatre oriented toward its mission. I offer these concerns not to reject the possibility of a just theatre for social change, but to note the consistently dangerous temptation to believe the “efficacy” of this theatre somehow resides in the virtuosity of the actor to actualize the “transformative power of drama.”

DRAMATIZING LIBERATION

But participatory theatre for social change, with its generation of three spaces of freedom, can be called a *theological* endeavor in and of itself. Though a recent development, theatre and theological discourse are established dialogue partners. Theo-drama, coined by the 20th century Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar to mean “Theological Dramatic Theory,” attempts to utilize the language and imagery of the theatre to offer an analogical understanding of God’s presence in history. Balthasar suggests that the revelation of God’s *goodness* happens *dramatically*. The incarnation, for example, constitutes a dramatic demonstration of God’s love: Jesus Christ enters onto the world stage visibly embodied and historically tangible.

A participatory theatre informed by liberation theology, then, dramatizes the liberationist argument. It presents the *conclusion* of a liberation theological project *historically* and *in the world*. Liberation theology must grow from and must remain accountable to the lived experience of the oppressed.⁷ Liberation theology

7 Cone writes, “In order to do theology from that standpoint, [theologians] must ask the right questions...[which] are always related to the basic question: What has the gospel to do with the oppressed of this land and their struggle for liberation? Any theologian who fails to place that question at the center of [her/his] work has ignored the essence of the gospel” (Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 9.) Theology, as human speech about God, inherently speaks from and about its context, but a truly Christian theology committed to interpreting the revelation of the God who liberates needs to do more

puts the voice of the marginalized in conversation with those with power; liberation theology hears the “cry of the poor” as a viable and essential contribution. Participatory theatre endeavors to present the very same thing: the lived experience of oppressed communities *dramatized within* those very communities. It becomes a dramatic mirror and an invitation for reflection. Herein lies a dramatic vision of the Kingdom of God. It exemplifies the core of the project of liberation theological method: to transfer reflection on God from a monologue in the halls of privilege to a dialogue on the streets of the poor. But, at its core, liberation theology preaches the gospel which calls the faithful to action and to build the Kingdom of God on earth.

By seeking social change in an artistic endeavor, participatory theatre stumbles into Gustavo Gutiérrez’s notion of the connection between creation and liberation. In reading the Exodus narrative, Gutiérrez sees a world where God’s creative and liberating inclinations come hand-in-hand: “Yahweh will be remembered throughout the history of Israel by this act which inaugurates its history, a history which is a re-creation. The God who makes the cosmos from chaos is the same God who leads Israel from alienation to liberation.”⁸ Gutiérrez believes the incarnation gives humanity the opportunity to be part of that creating/liberating action by following the example of Jesus’ life and ministry as a mandate for historical and political action. Human participation in liberating praxis helps to build the Kingdom of God.⁹ This is not to say that any “creative” activity simultaneously liberates. On the contrary, Gutiérrez writes, “The human work, the transformation of nature, continues creation only if it is a human act, that is to say, if it is not alienated by unjust socio-economic structures.”¹⁰ Making theatre to combat injustice that is tied intimately to real and lived experience constitutes a “human act” *par excellence*.

In creating “spaces of freedom,” participatory theatre enacts God’s will for liberation. The piece may say nothing about God, Jesus, eschatology, pneumatology, or soteriology. But it does, in its creation of spaces of freedom, perform a testimony to the love of God which frees the voice of the oppressed and asserts human dignity. These theatrical projects transition theo-drama from a useful analogy for systematic theological reflection to a description of the form by which we practice liberation theology. Here, theology asks its question in dramatic action rather than intellectual contemplation. The liberating power of God’s love becomes *incarnate*

than pay postmodern lip service to the role of context in shaping the biases of an argument. Cone asserts God-talk by the marginalized speaks greater truth than God-talk on behalf of marginalization.

8 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 15th Anniversary edition, Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, trans. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 89.

9 Gutiérrez writes, “The growth of the Kingdom is a process which occurs historically *in* liberation, insofar as liberation means greater human fulfillment.” He argues that acts of charity, rebellion against unjust social structures, and removing systematic alienation participate in the building of the Kingdom of God. As Gutiérrez reminds, “we can say that the historical political liberating event *is* the growth of the Kingdom and is a salvific event; but it is not *the* coming of the Kingdom, not *all* of salvation.” (Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 104).

10 Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 101.

in the communal performance of the actors, the embodied freedom of spectators challenged to take up the means of dramatic production, and the confrontation to systemic sin revealed in conversation.

CONCLUSION

The Yale/Parapanda experiment revealed how liberation theology might find itself spoken in languages alien to traditional academic theology. Most profoundly, liberation theology illuminates the teleological aim for theatre of the oppressed. It provides the metaphysical rubric for understanding such theatre’s efficacy. Simultaneously, a liberation theological framework protects against the second-order objectification of marginalized people by keeping such theatre “honest” to its mission. But theatre for social change also *does* the work of liberation theology in its practice: it reveals the liberating activity of God by *creating* spaces of freedom for human flourishing. This theatre destabilizes hegemonic intellectual, emotional, and physical oppression with the very same goals as liberation theology.

The need for a liberation theology has not gone away. The economic systems of our world still run on an engine of human servitude and income inequality. Dehumanization happens daily in familiar forms like racism, classism, ableism, and sexism which run as rampant in the so-called “developed” world as they do in countries which struggle to produce a full day’s worth of electricity. For many, justice has yet to roll down. But in order to have a future, liberation theologians must be flexible in seeking innovative ways to take seriously the charge to be part of God’s liberating action on behalf of the poor and oppressed. Liberation theology must move towards becoming more methodology than genre.

The Yale/Parapanda experiment in participatory theatre proves the myriad ways the ideas of liberationist theologians can become incarnate in the service of justice. I am hesitant to claim that the Yale/Parapanda project, in and of itself, enacted substantial change for the residents of Dar es Salaam. Truly, it seems the theatre-making participants gained more from the project than the communities they tried to serve. Instead, this paper has used the Yale/Parapanda experiment as a test-case for a new structure by which to enact the mission of liberation theology. Participatory theatre can transition theology from a form which *articulates* the meaning of God’s revelation into a form which *expresses* the meaning of the gospel in the service of justice. In participatory theatre, faith can seek understanding in dramatic action against oppression.