

Life as a Somali in Finland Forum Theatre courses 2001 and 2002

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Aims

There were two separate courses of forum theatre held at Humanities Polytechnic (Humak) in Kauniainen, Finland. The first course took place in May 2001 and the second in April 2002. During the courses the students studied the position of Somali immigrants with respect to the Finnish population. The courses also aimed at decreasing racism and intolerance. Topics studied during the courses included the following: cultural differences, the possibilities minorities have to keep their own culture alive, the integration of immigrants, the difficulties and possibilities encountered in every day life. The students also discussed the hopes and dreams of immigrants.

In addition the courses aimed at acquainting the students with forum theatre. This specific form of Theatre of the Oppressed was studied in theory and practice during the courses. In addition emphasis was laid on the possibilities offered by this art form to treat and discuss cultural and social problems and awake discussion on topics which affect the community.

Content:

The Beginning

The structure of each course was alike. The course started with a three-day seminar concentrating on Finnish society's attitude towards immigrants from a theoretical point of view. During the first day the topics studied included the ethnic minorities which have moved to Finland and their relation to Finns. In addition the students learnt key terminology and studied Finnish immigration policy. On the second day the subject was approached from the grassroot level. Representatives of different minorities present in Finland explained their experiences, hopes and the difficulties they had encountered in Finland. In addition the lecturers talked about their own culture.

On the third day a panel discussion was held on the position of minority cultures in Finland. Over thirty people attended the discussion. Different minority groups and people who work with minorities were heard. The latter included social and cultural workers, police officers and administrative staff. On the third day the students also approached Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed and forum theatre. A short demonstration of forum theatre was developed, based on the students' experiences.

After this theoretical study the course continued with two simultaneous topics. The students became acquainted with Somalis and Finns who work with Somalis. At the same time the students began rehearsing their own forum theatre performance.

The students had invited a group of Somalis who live in the centre of Espoo to dine at the polytechnic and at the same time discuss their lives as a minority in Finland. Somali women had prepared a Somalian meal, which they brought with them. The Finnish students demonstrated Finnish food culture by frying pancakes. In this informal “garden party” the students had their first contact with the possibilities and practice of forum theatre by acting out a previously rehearsed scene using forum theatre methods. In addition they developed a second scene based on the comments and suggestions of the public. The audience participated actively, by making comments and by questioning the approach. This proved that forum theatre was applicable to our needs.

During the same week Humak students, in smaller groups, met different people who work with Somalis. These included school staff, social work representatives, project and field workers and the staff of the Multicultural Centre Caisa. During the following week students visited a job search centre aimed at immigrants in Espoo and a residents’ premise for immigrants. In the latter the students had a discussion with Somalis and people who work with them. Later on the students also visited the Multicultural Centre Caisa and the multicultural house Fenix.

The students also continued informal meetings with Somalis. Some of them were even invited to the homes of some Somali families. The students also visited Finnish for foreigners language lessons and an immigrant girls’ group in a youth work centre.

Rehearsal period

In the first stage the aim was to get to know one’s body. There is a great number of exercises designed with the objective of making each person aware of their own body, their bodily possibilities, and of the deformations suffered because of the type of work performed. That is, it is necessary for each one to feel the “muscular alienation” imposed on the body by work. (Boal 2000, 126-127)

The students learnt new ways to move. In one exercise they had to carry a small object using different parts of the body. In another each person had to follow their partner’s hand. When someone else controls your rhythm and lines of movement you can find profoundly new ways of moving.

The exercises of this first stage are designed to “undo” the muscular structure of the participants. That is, to take them apart, to study and analyze them. Not to weaken or destroy, but to raise them to the level of consciousness... If one is able, in this way, to disjoint one’s own muscular structures, one will surely be able to assemble structures characteristic of other professions and social classes; that is, one will be able to physically “interpret” characters different from oneself. (Boal 2000, 128)

The participant is asked to express his opinion, but without speaking, using only the bodies of the other participants and sculpting with them a group of statues, in such a way that his opinions and feelings become evident. The participant is to use the bodies of the others as if he were a sculptor and the others were made of clay: he must determine the position of each body down to the most minute details of their facial expressions. He is not allowed to speak under any circumstances. The most that is permitted to him is to show with his own facial expressions what he wants the statue-spectator to do. After organizing this group of statues he is allowed to enter into a discussion with the other participants in order to determine if all agree with his “sculpted” opinion. (Boal 2000,135)

From image theatre we moved to forum theatre. The students took the stories they had learnt during the meetings with the Somalis containing a political or social problem

which was difficult to resolve. During the following few weeks short scenes (five to ten minutes) were rehearsed. The scenes portrayed the problems and intended solutions. These were rehearsed and later they were represented during the forum theatre event.

The Event

There were three scenes, with very different themes, that were chosen for the forum theatre event itself. The chosen topics included a child's curiosity towards a coloured person in the metro, a Somali woman being insulted by Finnish teenagers. One of the chosen scenes portrayed a Finnish girl telling her family that she was dating a Somali.

In forum theatre the joker plays an important role. The joker is seen as a host who introduces the scenes, gives background information and is in constant dialogue with the audience. After a scene was performed, the spect-actors (audience) was told that the same scene would be re-performed, exactly as it was the first time. The second time any person in the audience was allowed to stop the scene and ask for the actors' motives. This engendered a lot of discussion between the public and the actors. The scene which dealt with the Finnish girl telling her family that she was seeing a Somali was one which raised the most questions and discussion. After discussions any member of the audience had the right to replace any actor and lead the action in the most appropriate direction. The other actors thus had to adapt to the new situation and respond instantly to the possibilities that it may present. During rehearsals different possibilities and solutions were also acted out. But several new approaches and solutions were engendered by the public performance.

After the theatre performance a discussion was held concentrating on the problems and solutions raised by forum theatre. This type of discussion is important because it expands the scenes and topics of the play further outside theatre. In these discussions the audience is able to reflect upon the possible solutions and action models that could be used in reality. The aim is to improve reality. One of the main aims of forum theatre is to influence reality, that is why the topics chosen concentrate on social problems. The aim being to create a community spirit to fight against these problems.

Methods

The aim of the courses was not to make artistically high quality theatre performances, but to use theatre as a tool. We wanted to enhance cultural awareness through theatre production as well as through theatre performance. The rehearsal period was regarded as important as the performance itself. For the participants of the courses, learning acting skills was regarded as secondary to understanding similarities and differences between cultures.

The methods used during the course were adapted from Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed and especially from forum theatre. According to Boal "all theatre is necessarily political, because all activities of man are political and theatre is one of them" (Boal 2000, Foreword). Later he declares: "I, Augusto Boal, want the Spectator to take the role of Actor and invade the Character and the stage. I want him to occupy his own Space and offer solutions.

By taking possessions of the stage, the Spect-Actor is consciously performing a responsible act. The stage is a representation of the reality, a fiction. But the Spect-Actor is not fictional. He exists in the scene and outside of it, in a dual reality. By taking possessions of the stage in the fiction of the theater he acts: not just in the fiction, but also in his social reality. By transforming fiction, he is transformed into himself." (Boal 2000, Preface.)

“This is the theatre I believe in: the place where we can stand and see ourselves. Not see what others tell us we are, or should be – but see our deepest selves!” (Boal 2001, Preface.) Through theatre production an attempt was made to enhance not only the audience’s cultural awareness, but also that of the actors, of the participants themselves.

The aim of Theatre of the Oppressed is to create a change, a political change in a person’s real life situation, a psychological change in a person’s way of seeing his possibilities towards his own life. Through Forum theatre one is stimulated to transform his society and to engage in revolutionary action. Because of this, Forum theatre must differ from the traditional form of Aristotelian theatre, which, according to Boal (2000, 47) “is designed to bridle the individual, to adjust him to what pre-exists.”

The ultimate aim of tragedy, of Aristotelian theatre in general, is catharsis, quite a controversial concept of correction and purification. “Through purification, catharsis, through purgation of the extraneous, undesirable element which prevents the character from achieving his ends. This extraneous element is contrary to the law; it is a social fault, a political deficiency.” (Boal 2000, 32.)

“Empathy is the emotional relationship which is established between the character and spectator and which provokes, fundamentally, a delegation of power on the part of the spectator, who becomes an object in relation to the character: whatever happens to the latter, happens vicariously to the spectator.” (Boal 2000, 102.) In Aristotelian theatre the spectator sits still and watches imaginary events taking place in front of him. The spectator sees how dangerous it is to break the rules, not to obey the laws and orders of society. Aristotelian theatre is a warning of a catastrophe that rebellion will meet. Theatre like that aims to maintain status quo.

In Image theatre the participants make images or statues by using bodies, their own bodies or those of others in the group. This form was born to avoid problems of language i.e. different words mean different things to different persons. (see Boal 2002, 174-175, Boal 2001, 310-311.) “Dealing with images we should not try to ‘understand’ the meaning of each image, to apprehend its precise meaning, but to feel those images, to let our memories and imaginations wander: the meaning of an image is the image itself. Image is a language.” (Boal 2002, 175.) In one version of Image theatre the participants are asked to make one image of the real situation where they feel oppressed and one of their desire. After that they are asked to make another image of how they can move from the real to the ideal. (Boal 2001, 310.)

In one game of Image theatre the group was divided into pairs. Silently, one of each pair made a statue out of his/her own body. Then the other one went into the statue and made it a statue of two bodies. After feeling the new image the first one moved to a different position and that way changed the image. Again after feeling the new image the second one moved and so on. After the game each pair discussed their feelings and images. There were both similar and different reactions, which helped the participants to realize different aspects of the images they had produced. Image theatre was used during the rehearsal period, but not in the event itself. The event was built around three scenes that were made using the method of Forum theatre.

Forum theatre as well as the other forms of Theater of the Oppressed makes the spectators the active protagonist of theatre. They start acting, it can be invisible theatre, image theatre or forum theatre. The gap between the audience and the stage no longer exists. Theatre is not a spectacle that a person sees on the stage but rather events that they take part in. The performance is something new, something that

nobody was able to foresee. The spectators are invited to carry the events to the direction they see is necessary /inevitable. The story will be the one the spect-actors invent.

“In Theatre of the Oppressed, reality is shown not only as it is, but also, more importantly, as it could be. This vital element is entrusted to the creativity of the audience: the spectators come on stage, substituting themselves for the protagonist, and trying to find viable solutions for real problems.” (Boal 2002, 6.) Different solutions for the problems were acted out during the rehearsal period, but still in the main event there were some new solutions carried out.

With the help of the Joker system a spectator is invited to play different characters. “The participants who choose to intervene must continue the physical actions of the replaced actors; they are not allowed to come on the 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. The theatrical activity must go on in the same way, on the stage. Anyone may propose any solution, but it must be done on the stage, working, acting, doing things, and not from the comfort of his seat. Often a person is very revolutionary when in a public forum he envisages and advocates revolutionary and heroic acts; on the other hand, he often realizes that things are not so easy when he himself has to practice what he suggests.” (Boal 2000, 139.)

The Joker is a person between the action on the stage and the spect-actors in the audience. The Joker does not personally decide anything, but “is constantly relaying doubts back to the audience so that it is they who make the decisions” (Boal 2002, 261). “Jokers must avoid all actions which could manipulate or influence the audience. They must not draw conclusions which are not self-evident. They must always open the possible conclusions to debate, stating them in an interrogative rather than an affirmative form, in such a way that the audience can answer ‘Yes’ or ‘No’, ‘We said this and not that’, instead of being confronted with the Joker’s own personal interpretation of events.” (Boal 2002, 261.)

The Joker can ask questions or show doubts in order to help the spect-actors gather their thoughts or prepare their actions. Although the Joker is constantly aware of possible unrealistic solutions given by spect-actors, the Joker is not the one who decides which solution is magic. Once again the Joker’s task is only to doubt and let the spect-actors make the final judgement. The Joker’s situation between the stage and the audience should also be seen concretely; the Joker does not sit with other spect-actors in the audience but rather stays (or sits) on the stage, or at least nearby it. And being on stage the Joker must be aware of his/her physical stance, since every image produced on stage is automatically significant. (Boal 2002, 261-262.)

As mentioned before, the aim of Forum theatre is a change. In Boal’s own words (2000, 141) Forum theatre is “a rehearsal of revolution”. There is no catharsis in Forum theatre, on the contrary, it evokes a desire to practice in reality the act-spectator has rehearsed in theatre (Boal 2000, 142). And according to the feedback we received, enhancing cultural awareness through a Forum theatre event was a rehearsal for a peaceful co-operation between people from different cultural backgrounds.

Best practices:

One of the best practices we had was the garden party where Somalian and Finnish food was cooked and served. In an informal meeting over a meal it is easy to become familiar with each other. The possibility to “taste” another culture creates an immediate reaction towards it.

At the beginning of the theatre performance the audience was asked to join the actors on stage. Everyone was asked to, random, take hold of two other persons' hands. Then the knot had to be undone, without letting go of hands and a circle was formed. This exercise sounds very simple, yet it effectively breaks the boundary between the stage and the audience. In addition it breaks the audience's physical impunity. This way the audience and actors are also made to work together in order to attain a common goal. Once the audience is made to hold a stranger's hand, receive and give advice, they will feel more at ease to actively participate in the performance itself.

Feedback:

According to student feedback the method was regarded as suitable for Finland. It gave the participants the opportunity to ask for motives and ask questions, which are normally impossible:

"Theatre of the oppressed was a completely new experience for me. I see it as an extremely suitable and efficient method to awaken discussion, increase understanding and it is adaptable to real life situations. This method should be used more to solve social problems and bring different social groups together. Theatre of the oppressed is cooperation and solution-making. It is impressive to see real situations re-performed. As right answers are not given, people are activated to think for themselves."

"I think that Forum theatre is a good way to solve problems. It offers people the possibility to look at problems from different angles. In normal situations people are so vexed that it is impossible to find a common solution."

"I really can't offer any solid model of solution. The co-operation between Finns, Somalis and the media is the key. Forum theatre seems to be quite an effective tool."

The fact that Somalis did not participate in the course was a grave disappointment to many:

"I wish the Somalis were more involved in our project. In the beginning I was afraid that we were going to tell them about their problems."

"It would have been important to have Somalis among us, that would have given more depth to our performance."

The participants also pointed out that they confronted their own opinions about themselves and their culture:

"I learned a lot about myself and my own culture, which can be very dominant. I found out that I am quite shy and cautious and surprisingly prejudiced in confronting different cultures."

"During the five weeks period one had time to study one's own feelings and prejudices."

"The course awoke more questions than it gave answers. My own attitude towards Somalis was completely altered."

Evaluation:

Forum theatre is a method that can be well used in Finland. The participants found it an extremely suitable and efficient method to awaken discussion, increase understanding and it is adaptable to real life situations. In the forum theatre event it was possible to ask questions which in normal life are impossible. Forum theatre was also praised for giving the possibility to understand different motives behind opposite actions.

If the barrier between the actors and the audience is actively broken at the beginning of the event, it is much easier for the audience to participate, to become a real spect-actor.

The most important problem we faced, was that the minorities did not participate in the rehearsal process. One possible reason for this was our own failure to market the course. On the other hand forum theatre is not at all well known in Finland, so the possibility it offers to solve social problems is not widely understood either.

In the future it would be important to use this method with an audience familiar with the method and willing to use the method to improve their living conditions. This would improve the experiences gained by community members, the audience and the course participants.

Services:

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