

## **Pumpkin Fruit / Pumpkin Root: Participatory Theatre in a Ugandan Prison**

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This theatre is not much to look at. It is a single, rectangular room with no seats except the few wooden chairs that were taken from the administration offices to accommodate the six guests, American friends of the co-director (and author of this paper), none of whom will understand a single spoken word of the performance. The rest of the audience, consisting of about two hundred Ugandan prisoners, is squeezed tightly together on the concrete floor. They are thin and muscular. Most are barefoot. Almost all belong to the Acholi tribe, a Nilotic group whose population extends into Southern Sudan. The once-white concrete walls of the “theatre” are streaked now with stubborn black mold and the red dirt that is pervasive here in the north. Iron bars fill the frames of the pane-less windows that line each side of the room. I walk through the crowd with Peter<sup>1</sup>, an inmate and former schoolteacher who has served as translator and co-director throughout the three-week theatre project. We explain to the audience that three different performance forms will be presented over the course of the afternoon. Two forms, the traditional tribal dances and the contemporary dances, have been created and rehearsed by the inmates alone. The third form was created over the course of our workshop: short, original plays based on Acholi folktales.

Finally, the performance begins with the words used to begin all Acholi folktales. The storyteller indicates that a tale is about to be told. The audience members signal their readiness to begin (Ocitti 74):

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<sup>1</sup> All names, including that of the prison, have been changed.

Storyteller: “Ododo-na moni en-yo!”

Audience: “Eyo...”

### **Te Okono obur Bong’ Luputu**

There is a well-known proverb used amongst the Acholi: *Te Okono obur bong’ luputu* – “the pumpkin in the old homestead must not be uprooted” (P’Bitek 41). The phrase refers to the pumpkins that once grew wild in the northern districts that comprise the tribe’s traditional territory. In his introduction to Okot P’Bitek’s epic poem, “Song of Lawino,” G.A. Heron explains, “[p]umpkins are a luxury food. [...] To uproot pumpkins, even when moving to a new homestead, is simple wanton destruction” (P’Bitek 7). P’Bitek, the renowned Acholi author, uses the proverb as a unifying metaphor in his poem, and provides an added layer of meaning to the refrain. Through his protagonist, Lawino, P’Bitek uses the repetition of the proverb to plead with and admonish his people not to destroy their cultural identity by turning away from their past and from their traditional values.

*Te Okono obur bong’ luputu* has taken on particular resonance for the northern Ugandans in the years since independence. Four decades of dictatorship and civil war coupled with the modernizing effects of post-colonial globalization have acted to loosen the once-powerful ties to traditional culture. Over the course of three-week prison theatre collaboration between the author, an American theatre practitioner, and about 100 Ugandan prison inmates, the idea of the pumpkin and its roots became a powerful metaphoric frame. In this paper, I extend the metaphor to outline the ways in which the values inherent to inclusive education and participatory theatre shaped my work in Uganda; to describe a process in which participatory theatre techniques were used to build an inclusive and trusting environment; and to describe the process of creating

collaborative theatre within the constraints of a prison environment. For the purposes of the analysis I'll divide the metaphor into three parts: the root, the fruit, and the seed, wherein each part corresponds to a stage in the process of the collaboration.

### **Root/Structure**

Politics itself is not the exercise of power or struggle for power. Politics is first of all the configuration of a space as political, the framing of a specific sphere of experience, the setting of objects posed as "common" and of subjects to whom the capacity is recognized to designate these objects and discuss about them. Politics first is the conflict about the very existence of that sphere of experience, the reality of those common objects and the capacity of those subjects. (Ranciere no pagination)

Perhaps it goes without saying that facilitating theatre at the intersection of prison and war within postcolonial Africa is a political act. To operate within any one of these arenas is to position oneself ideologically. To operate simultaneously in all three is to enter a complex terrain of competing stances in regard to, among other things, power; personal and cultural identity; punishment and rehabilitation; individual agency; 'otherness'; and human roles within institutional and societal structures that continue to preserve hierarchic aspects of colonial rule.

Ranciere's statement suggests that the political can be seen as the discourse surrounding the right to identify and interpret reality. Theatre is one medium through which an interpreted reality can be performed. But who are the subjects who get to decide what "common objects" to discuss? Whose reality gets performed? How are the conflicts of perception, interpretation, and capacity negotiated? And if there are such things as "best methods," what are they in the context of facilitating drama with populations that are vulnerable on multiple levels? In this section, I will explore the ways various theatre praxes inform my own attempt to confront these issues within a prison context.

There are many pedagogical and theatrical traditions that have influenced the potentially humanizing work of prison theatre. These traditions, which privilege the experiences of individuals and communities, and in which top-down methodologies are eschewed in favor of bottom-up and co-creative approaches, are like trees in a forest. Their shared and entangled roots draw from the same soil, overlapping and intertwining, making the naming and dividing of such practices a matter more of convenience than of accuracy.

My work in prisons is grounded in the values of community-based, educational, and applied theatre. All are interested, through their various forms and to varying degrees, in co-creative and collaborative methods that engage individuals in a process of inquiry concerning a particular issue. Community-based and applied theatre, situated as they are within non-traditional theatre spaces and community settings, and commonly working with disempowered and vulnerable populations, tend to be more explicitly political than educational theatre in that they engage groups of people with shared identity with the intention of discussing and challenging issues of personal and community concern (Cohen-Cruz 1-2). There is a desire to foster criticality amongst participants, empower individuals, and improve people's lives (Taylor, *Applied Theatre* 3-9; Nicholson 2-8). A sense of partnership and shared responsibility prevails between facilitator and participants, just as it does between teacher and students in progressive models of education, which emphasized experiential, child-centered learning (Taylor, *Drama Classroom* 118).

Influenced in particular by the work of John Dewey, a number of educators including Winifred Ward, Caldwell Cook, and Peter Slade began to incorporate and

advocate for the use of classroom drama as an educative tool. The interplay between drama, classroom, and community continued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, notably in the work of Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, who developed a participatory approach to teaching literacy that challenged the traditional relationship between teacher and student (Nicholson 9). His book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), inspired his compatriot, Augusto Boal, to create the techniques known as “theatre of the oppressed,” which constitute perhaps the most well-known and implemented form of participatory theatre in the world today.

Under the umbrella of participatory theatre, community members themselves are acknowledged as subjects capable of identifying and discussing the common objects of concern within a specific realm of experience. This privileging of the individual as the discerning subject is found in much of the Theatre for Development (TFD) work that exists throughout sub-Saharan Africa today.

TFD began in the early 1950s when government-sponsored troupes of actors traveled to rural areas of Africa to perform propaganda plays promoting the colonial agenda on such topics as hygiene, birth control, agriculture, and effective methods for producing cash crops (Nogueira 103-8). Much has been written about TFD,<sup>2</sup> and it is beyond the scope of this paper to outline its history. What seems clear is that it has evolved into a more participatory, dialogical form of theatre that can be used as a powerful tool to raise consciousness and engender criticality around important, local issues. Examples can still be found of top-down approaches to TFD (see Odhiambo, 189-99) but, taken as a whole, the literature reflects a predominantly positive view of the

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<sup>2</sup> For recent commentary of TFD, see Abah 1996; Chinyowa 2007; Nogueira 2002; Odhiambo 2005; Wa'ndeda 1998.

field. Chinyowa and Abah present it as a liberatory, inclusive practice that has the power to confront the “cultural bomb” of colonialism (Thiong’o, qtd. in Abah 250), from which the fallout continues to destabilize, invalidate and destroy indigenous cultures and values (Abah 245; Chinyowa 134). Abah compares TFD’s political function with what he calls the subversive politics of Drama in Education (DIE) in a way that has resonance within a prison setting. While both forms seek to raise awareness through dialogue and shared enquiry, DIE operates to reveal hidden oppressions and amplify silenced voices within a school site whose function is to reproduce the *status quo* through “socialization into the cultural, political and economic systems” (Abah 257). DIE is subversively political in that it undermines the primary function of the institution.

Theatre with prisoners similarly undermines an institution, one whose primary functions are to contain and punish. Gaining entry is no simple task. An artist must “walk a tightrope between incorporation into and resistance to the criminal justice system it seeks to exist in” (Balfour 3). While it’s not uncommon to find individual administrators who believe in the importance of educative and creative outlets for their wards, “the humanizing process [...] exists in contradiction to the administrative task of the institution” (Balfour 2). Prison theatre often exists under the heading of “rehabilitation,” a term that can hold vastly different meanings for warden and artist.

There is no need for an artist to try and disabuse “the system” of its notion of rehabilitation, which, in current criminological discourses, focuses on the individual responsibility of the so-called “wilful offender” (Balfour 4-7; Heritage 32; Hughes 44) who must be re-socialized in preparation for his eventual release from prison. For the artist grounded in the theoretical and practical frameworks of participatory theatre, it is

possible to acknowledge the philosophical perspective of the institution, while expanding the meaning of rehabilitation to include an approach that “values the human individual and is committed to their potential for growth” (Hughes 61). Thus, artists wishing to “walk the tightrope” often play a linguistic game: accepting the *signifier* while silently quietly operating from their own understanding of the *signified*.

### **Inspiration/Seed**

The idea of *signifier* and *signified* has relevance when working in cultural contexts that are not one’s own, especially when the primary communicative signifier, the word, is not of a shared language. Throughout my three weeks in Uganda, I communicated verbally through an interpreter, and often found myself flipping through my mental rolodex for alternate ways to express meaning when my first (or second or third) attempt failed to resonate within the inmates’ frameworks of understanding. Physical gesture and facial expression were often effective tools, but at other times missed the mark. My task throughout was to find ways to lessen the linguistic and semiotic distances between us. In this section I will describe my work with the Ugandan inmates, and the various approaches I employed in the process of creating theatre.

Under the initial terms of my agreement with prison officials, I was to work with the participants from 9 am until noon, Monday through Friday, for three weeks, after which the men were to perform for the rest of the population. However, due to a scheduling snafu I was told to complete the workshop on the Tuesday of the third week, and have the men perform the next day. What was to have been a three-week process became a two-week process, considering that the days immediately preceding the performance would inevitably be focused more on “product” than on process. I had

wanted to spend the first week engaged in exercises and games that would foster a sense of community and build trust between the inmates and myself. I hoped that this work would reveal issues of concern within the group that could then be developed over the course of the remaining two weeks. But the shortened schedule, combined with the fact that over 100 men asked to participate in the workshop, forced me to altar my plans. Instead of using theatre exercises to generate ideas collectively, I decided, in the interest of time, to put forward a proposal of how best to use our time – an idea to be discussed and voted on. I was concerned that I was already moving away from the ideal of collective decision-making toward a more expedient, democratic form. When working in institutional settings there is often a tension between the commitment to process and the pressure to produce a culminating product. It can affect positionality in relation to decision-making, forcing choices to be made that attempt to balance one's commitment to inclusion with the needs of the institution and those of the participants.

I wasn't sure of my direction but I knew I wanted to ground our exploration in Acholi culture. During my time in Uganda, I had seen many examples of traditional dance and song, but I hadn't seen spoken performance, though I knew that oral storytelling was one of the dominant forms of entertainment and cultural transmission amongst the Acholi (Ocitti 73-9). Their popular folktales highlight human faults, foibles, and weaknesses through the adventures of animal protagonists. The stories are didactic and moralistic, reflecting the values of the tribe. Proverbs, too, are commonly used amongst the Acholi to express cultural beliefs and values (Ocitti 70-3). Initially, I wasn't sure how we might play with the folktales and proverbs but, having discovered them – as



well as the proverb from “Song of Lawino,” – I thought I had found a way to create word-driven theatre with the inmates through the use of culturally familiar material.

### **Seed/Sowing**

The heat, chaos, and excitement of play places the physical body in a super-alive relation to the environment and transforms the relations between that person and their world ... [They] move outwards, or forwards from the body and do not stay within its physical limits... Play fills the body with an adrenalin that incites it to look to others: to engage more vividly. (Thompson, 54-5)

In the humid confines of the cramped barracks the men are laughing and slapping hands. Sweat drips from my face as I watch the men speaking excitedly to one another in Lwo, their native language. It’s the end of the first week of the workshop and the men have just completed a variation of Boal’s game called, “One person we fear, one person is our protector” (Boal 141). We call it, “The Elephant and the Lion.” The men loved it, each one running around the room laughing and trying to keep the “elephant” between themselves and the “lion.” For the first few days, we simply played for almost half of each three-hour session. Each game finished with laughter and chatter, and served to create an atmosphere of joy and trust. Prison is a space completely devoid of play, and I could see that the sheer silliness of the games relaxed the men. In the singular presence required, in the utter absence of self-consciousness that comes with true laughter, there is a feeling of freedom. The joyful atmosphere allowed the work to move forward.

Now at the end of the week, the games are what we look forward to after our mornings of work. We start the day now with a ‘check-in,’ during which the men take a moment to be ‘alone.’ The men mill about the room, keeping to themselves, and I ask them to notice that even in the midst of many men, it is possible to find some solitude.

When I began on Monday the men giggled throughout, but now they are silent and focused. I ask them next to make eye contact with one another. They do, and they can't control the wide smiles that spread across their faces. Now I call out a word and ask them to create physical images with their bodies of the word as I count down from five. "Joy!" A hundred bodies twist themselves into images of joy. "Anger!" "Love!" They embody anger and, through peals of laughter, love. They play the image game as fully as they play the silly games. After each, the men shout and clap.

Image work becomes our bedrock. The men enjoy using and moving their bodies. I know that most of them are illiterate and that the Acholi were a non-literate society before the colonial period. I imagine that this is why I never have to implore them, as I do with American students, to "get out of your head!" I feel as if the men truly live in their bodies, that emotion and thought is expressed physically. The image work is comfortable for them and it is a language we can all use to communicate easily. I find myself using fewer words and more of my body as the weeks go on.

To begin the second week, I divide the men into twenty groups of five. Peter whispers a well-known proverb to each group. I ask the groups to create tableaux that get at the meaning of the proverbs. They're to keep the proverbs secret so that, later, we can try to guess the proverb based on the image. The men huddle for a moment and then, almost instantaneously, they are on their feet, twisting and moving into various positions. They are still absorbed in the work as I am escorted out. I'm never allowed to stay past noon, but the men are allowed to continue working into the evening.

When I return after the weekend, they are eager to show me their work. One by one the groups display their images. To help the others guess, and to generate dialogue, I

ask the viewers to describe what they see and what they think is happening in each tableau. The men deconstruct the images piece by piece and eventually try to guess the proverb. I sense that this kind of discussion is boring to many of the men. Quite a few are having side conversations, or walking into the yard. A core group of about thirty men stay and get very engrossed in the conversation, but I am concerned that I'm losing so many. I worry that I'll only be able to move forward if I keep things "fun." But I decide that it's as important to honor those who are enjoying the analysis of the proverbs as much I honor those who have lost a bit of interest as the work becomes more cerebral. One of the proverbs that generates heated discussion is *Te Okono obur bong' luputu*. The men talk about the relevance of the phrase and how the "pumpkins" of their culture have, in their opinion, already been uprooted. The one white-haired man in the group brings up "Song of Lawino" and explains to the younger men the connection of that phrase to the end of colonial rule. I am fascinated by the discussion and, remembering the folktales, I ask the men if they would be interested in extending our exploration of cultural meaning by delving into some of the local folktales. I explain that I think we could try to create contemporary, human dramas from the stories. They readily agree. I question myself again as to whether I am 'driving' the agenda, but I feel that I'm simply harnessing something that emerged naturally, and using it to move forward. But the men seem intrigued by the idea. They say they've never thought about transforming the tales into human drama. One man suggests that anyone who knows a folktale tell it to the rest of the group so that they can decide which ones to focus on. Peter suggests to the men that they choose two or three folktales to concentrate on, and asks them to strive to retain the

lesson of the original. One by one, the men come to the center of the room and begin to tell stories:

“Ododo-na moni en-yo!”

“Eyo!”

I didn't know it then but my work was more or less complete. Very naturally, Peter took over. I continued leading warm-ups each morning, but the conversations about which folktales to choose and the process of work-shopping them was easier for everyone without having to have each conversation translated. I was content to sit and watch Peter work with the men. He would occasionally ask me for advice, or have me look at a scene, but for the most part the men made the work their own, which in my mind, made the workshop more successful than I could have hoped.

### **Fruit/Display**

The day of the performance is a celebration. The men have been eager to perform and are particularly excited that I was able to bring my wife and a few friends to see their work. As in New York, the chance to interact with, let alone perform for, “civilians” is special; the men relish the opportunity. The entire performance lasts over three hours and consists of dancing, music, poems, as well as both the telling of three traditional folktales and the enacted skits the men have created. Throughout, I think about language and symbols. The Americans have been so excited to come to the prison. I sense, as I do with many newcomers to prison, that they are romanticizing the experience. The danger, the crossing into this hidden world, is exciting. The men are excited, too, but for them it is the brief glimpse of the outside world, something different, which excites. To them there is nothing romantic or interesting about prison. During the performance the reactions differ,

too. What has the Americans clapping and shouting – the traditional music and dancing – is commonplace to the Ugandans. They sit passively throughout, and don't applaud at the end. Why would they? Culturally, the dances are enacted during ritual and celebration; they are not performances. On the other hand, the skits based on the folktales have the prisoners literally screaming and doubled over with laughter. Each skit produces loud cheering and several minutes of conversation as the men recount the events in the play. The Americans, despite being given written translations, don't engage with the tales, but why would they? There is no cultural connection for them, no shared understanding or point of reference.

The performance runs long so instead of having a joint conversation with participants and audience, we are forced to move the debrief to the following day, which, unfortunately, only the workshop participants are permitted to attend.

What strikes during the final conversation is the depth of feeling and gratitude from the men: "Never could I have imagined that it was possible to make a play like this. I know the direction forward now;" "You have shown us a way to use our own stories to create the drama." The white-haired man stands and solemnly thanks me for coming to Uganda and for reintroducing these folktales to the community: "The conflict has interrupted the cultural traditions. This really reminded us so much of all of it. None of us expected the dramas to be so wonderful." A young man who had taken a leading role in one of the folktales stands and tells the group that they have a "responsibility to the younger generations to teach them the customs of the people." He promises that when he is released he will work with the youth and teach them these and other dramas based on the Acholi stories.

The comments extend to the three-week process as a whole. “Through the process that you brought to us, I feel that when I go [out of prison] I can live in any situation. I also didn’t know that the folktales could be [transformed] like this. Now I will use your method to transform the rest of them.” One man said that the prison was more lively in the past three weeks and that he had “felt as though in freedom [sic]. I was able to relax and review my entire case from the very beginning and I was relieved of my bondage.” At the conclusion of the sharing, I thank the men: *Afoyo matek!* – “Thanks a lot!” I circle the room and shake hands with each man. The workshop is complete.

### **Fruit/Harvest**

When people talk about prisoners “reentering the community” they often forget that prisoners are, in fact, a community unto themselves as well as a subset of larger communities in the outside world. Prisoners are hungry to feel like valuable members of the communities to which they belong, both inside and outside the prison walls. The process in northern Uganda was empowering for the participants and inspiring and entertaining to the rest of the population. The actor-inmates were encouraged by a sense of direction for their future work, both in regard to theatre in prison, and their projected contributions to the free world.

As a practitioner, I have mixed feelings. On the one hand, I am delighted that in the short time we had, we were able to work in a way that left the men feeling empowered by the process and affirmed by the responses of their peers. I am excited that we were able to find a way of making theatre that employed my knowledge as a theatre practitioner and the cultural knowledge of the Acholi men. On the other hand, I am disappointed that I wasn’t able to take more time to generate our workshop theme

collectively. The idea to use the folktales and proverbs was mine and, to that extent, was “top-down.” On the other hand, while I came in with the idea of creating spoken theatre, I don’t feel I forced the issue. It was after discussing *Te Okono obur bong’ luputu* that I proposed exploring and transforming the folktales. Had the idea not been met enthusiastically, I would certainly not have forced it upon them. But I was confronted by a problem of time and logistics that forced me to slide down the scale from a hoped-for collective approach to a democratic one. It is easy to see how a practitioner under similar constraints, even one with the best of intentions, could consolidate decision-making power in a desire for efficiency and in an effort to make the “best” product. What I learned is the importance of having a wide understanding of various participatory theatre theories and practices, as well as a sincere desire to learn from the population with whom one is working. A built foundation of trust and respect between myself and the Ugandan men, coupled with my own knowledge of the various approaches to inclusive and dialogic theatre, allowed us to create meaningful, culturally grounded theatre within the constraints of a prison environment.

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