



LOOKING FOR AMINA

An experience of Forum Theatre

Jordi de Miguel



This article explores through a case study how participatory approaches derived from Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed techniques can spark debates and action around migrant human rights and development in the European context.

Ever since the analysis of the Peruvian “telenovela” *Simplemente María* (1969) -a Cinderella story where a household domestic employee becomes rich and famous through her proficiency with a “Singer” sewing machine- showed that the serial drama triggered some remarkable unintended effects (such as increases in “Singer” sales and enrolling in adult literacy classes), interest in the power of entertainment as an element of educative initiatives linked to development policies has grown. Dozens of soap operas, comics, cartoons and even musical hits around the world have been designed to influence individual and collective positive behavior around specific issues (e.g. HIV-AIDS, family planning, gender inequality), giving birth to Entertainment-Education (from now onwards, E-E). Taking into account the flexible nature of its elements, Tufte (2005) defines it as “the use of entertainment as a communicative practice crafted to strategically communicate about development issues in a manner and with a purpose that can range from the more narrowly defined social marketing of individual behaviors to liberating and citizen-driven articulation of social change agendas”.

Most E-E interventions share two characteristics: they use mass media, and they are designed, owned and operated by a team of technicians unconnected to the audience. In this sense, Augusto Boal's “Theatre of the Oppressed” techniques break the one-way 'expert' monologue, transforming E-E into a two-way dialogue between spectators and actors. This turn in the communicative model has its correspondence in the conception of development, as problem-posing and ways of implementing solutions are shared and discussed, taking into account the perceptions and needs of the community where projects are to be advanced.

With my case study I aimed at shedding light on the ways in which participatory communication in E-E initiatives could contribute to the

ISSUE 14
May 2010

theory and practice of communication for development, especially in European countries and regions where dilemmas set by the major presence of immigrants demand a structural redefinition of models of development. In the case of Catalonia in particular, globalization processes are perceived by part of its population and political parties as a threat to the maintenance of their cultural identities.

Amina is looking for a job, the play I chose to carry out my investigation, is one of the results of the tensions generated in this context. In it, a Moroccan family (Amina El Hilali and her two sons, Ayoub and Hamza), with the help of Forn de Teatre Pa'Tothom, a Catalan organization that uses Theatre of the Oppressed techniques to promote local development through the empowerment of vulnerable sectors, tells about Amina's "real-life problems" to find a decent job in Catalonia as an old immigrant woman discriminated by public institutions and mistreated by her temporary bosses. The play, that has been performed around twenty times since 2007 (six of them in prisons), uses the Forum Theatre technique, a format that promotes the active participation of the audience in the discussion of solutions to a particular form of oppression.

LOOKING FOR THE COMMUNICATION FOR DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

Since Augusto Boal created and developed the Theatre of the Oppressed in the 1970s, his techniques have been widely studied as an artistic expression for social change within different fields: development, post-colonialism, racism, feminism and social movements, among others (Kalomgera, 2005; Epskamp, 2006; Cohen-Cruz and Schutzman, 2006; Babbage, 2004).

However, in-depth analyses of Boal's work from a communication for development perspective are virtually non-existent, despite the fact that Paulo Freire's work (a mainstay of Boal's thesis) is one of the main sources of its theories, especially of those related to participatory approaches. Tufte (2005) and Singhal (2004) have referred to the need to pay attention to the Theatre of the Oppressed as an expression of new trends in E-E, but their conclusions point mainly to the obvious innovation it introduces (the participatory approach), leaving questions regarding effects and the coherence between development theories and participatory theatre in a secondary place. My interest with my study was to bring those questions to the debate.

METHODOLOGY AND TECHNIQUES

The techniques used for the research were aimed at shedding light on the case from different angles. The study sought to explain the relevance of the experience through the triangulation of data gathered from three different levels: 1) the production of the play; 2) its content and 3) the reception process.

On the production level I carried out three in-depth semi-structured interviews: one with Montse Forcadas, co-director of Forn de Teatre Pa'Tothom; another with Jordi Forcadas, co-founder of the NGO and director of *Amina is looking for a job*; and the other with El Hilali's family. Since *Amina is looking for a job* was not being performed during my field work, I used a DVD of one of the performances recorded to gather information about: 1) the “moments of oppression” suffered by Amina; 2) Amina's responses to that oppression; 3) the participation sparked among the audience (dialogues, action on stage, etc.); and 4) the debates generated on immigration and oppression at work.

Given the impossibility of meeting the audience of the play, I carried out a focus group with three students of the Theatre of the Oppressed techniques at Forn de Teatre Pa'Tothom that had seen the play and participated in the subsequent debate. With their help I could broaden the contextual information, gathering valuable data and enriching discourses and points of view related to effects research and the contribution of the play to social change.

CONTEXT OF THE PLAY: MINORITIES, GLOBALIZATION AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Amina is looking for a job is staged in Catalonia, a “nation” within Spain (as declared in its autonomous constitution), where the intensity of debates around human rights, identity and the management of immigration has increased for the last ten years. The argued difficulty to manage public resources for the new population, the fear of losing a cultural identity (mainly based on Catalan language) persecuted by a forty year-long dictatorship, and the need to protect human rights, are issues at stake.

As I write these lines, the local government of Vic, one of the Catalan cities with the highest percentage of migrant inhabitants (20%), is being questioned by regional and state authorities for planning a restriction to the registration in the local census for those immigrants who do not have work or residence permits that would leave them without access to education and health services and ready to be deported.

Most immigrants in Catalonia come from the Maghrib. After a brief period of mobility during the industrial development promoted by Franco's dictatorship in the 60s, Moroccans began to settle in Spain, especially from 1975 to 1986, as borders in traditional European countries of destination (France, Germany and Netherlands) were gradually closed. However, the construction of a negative image of Moroccans and Muslims has been dominant in Spain from the sixteenth century and onwards (Martín Corrales, 2002). Some surveys have underlined, for example, that the image of Muslims in Catalonia is associated to qualities such as cruelty, low disposition to work, lack of honesty or the idea that they are untrustworthy (Colectivo IOÉ, 1994). The “SOS Racisme 2008 Yearbook” is clear: racism in Spain is being normalized at both institutional and social levels. The law is supporting inequalities and promoting the violation of the human rights of those people who try to get into the country or actually live in it. And circumstances propitious to racist demonstrations and discriminations are increasing, as a consequence of opportunist political discourses and the mass media's treatment of the problem.

According to the study "Catalan Society 2008", Catalans feel perplexed, confused and disoriented by social, political and economical changes experienced in 2007. The research stresses three axes that feed such disorientation: 1) the assumption that Catalonia is not the leading motor of the Spanish economy and modernity anymore; 2) the coming of a new migrant wave; and 3) the moral and ethical dilemmas raised by scientific innovations and new ways of life. The yearbook compares the challenges introduced by this new wave with that of the 60s. At that time, the immigrants came from other Spanish regions as workforce, settling in poor shacks without water or light. *The other Catalans*, as they were named, opened up the debate on national identity, immigration and human rights. Keeping in mind the distance between both phenomena, they all personify the central problem of globalization for many nation-states. Following Appadurai (2007), they are necessary and at the same time annoying, because of their identities and anomalous royalties.

AMINA MEETS THEATRE

Amina's story probably does not differ much from other stories about immigrants. She lost her job in the dress-making and tailoring sector and had to look for another one. Amina's difficulties to find a decent job and to get support from the Catalanian administration increased, since she did not speak Catalan and had difficulties speaking Spanish. Furthermore, the jobs she could take, as a cleaner, were always underpaid and temporal.

Her two sons were learning theatre at Forn de Teatre Pa'Tothom, and Amina convinced her older son, Ayoub, to create a play where they could expose the abuses she was suffering in every stage of the process. With lots of humor, the play dramatizes the obstacles found in her search for a job, but also the discrimination suffered at work, mainly from her bosses. Amina, always wearing her veil, always holding her handbag, does not make many gestures, but gets nervous and raises her voice when she feels she is suffering an injustice. Nevertheless, she has no chance other than accepting the rules or going back home without money.

When the play is over, it is time for the audience to say their word. A debate is sparked among the audience to propose and share alternatives to overcome the oppression suffered by Amina. Then, the scenes where people think the story could have changed are performed again, with the direct intervention of the spectators on stage.

This kind of mechanism puts the play right into an entertainment-education frame of analysis, since its very essence is to change people's attitudes and behaviors in light of a social problem.

MR. FREIRE IS BACK...

“All educative action entails a communicative process” (Kaplún, 1998): this sentence became commonplace for many Latin American communicators from the 1970s and onwards, mainly thanks to Paulo Freire's work. This conception is rooted in the idea that every message, whether it is conveyed through the mass media or not, seeks a goal: from the maintenance of the status quo to the struggle for liberation. Models of education and communication, thus, are interrelated.

Quoting Juan Díaz Bordenave, the Uruguayan pedagogue Mario Kaplún (1998) refers to three models of education: the first puts the emphasis on *contents* and their vertical transmission; the second on the intended *effects*; and the third on the *process*. This model gives priority to the endogenous process of transformation led by individuals and communities, the dialectic interaction between people and their reality, and the development of their intellectual capacities and their social conscience, raised through a process of action-reflection-action. This dialogical model owes its main guidelines to Paulo Freire's liberating pedagogy, based on the active participation of the subject in the educational process.

Although according to Tufte (2005) Freire himself “had no deep

understanding of, or interest in, the mass media”, his influence on the evolution of the field of communication for development has been crucial. Freire's dialogical pedagogy is, along with UNESCO's debates in the 1970s, one of the main approaches that feed participatory communication, understood as “a dynamic, interactional, and transformative process of dialogue between people, groups and institutions that enables people, both individually and collectively, to realize their full potential and be engaged in their own welfare” (Singhal, 2004). Endogenous and participatory development that points to the empowerment of the oppressed is at the heart of this approach.

New trends in development and communication are revisiting Paulo Freire's figure, whether to highlight ideas of empowerment and dialogue in E-E interventions or to stress his legacy on the practice of participatory development, as in the case of participatory theatre.

DEFINING THEATRE FOR DEVELOPMENT

In the same way as E-E interventions imply a model of education, communication and development, different expressions of theatre related to social change (popular theatre, theatre in education, community theatre, etc.), sometimes subsumed within the general term of 'theatre for development', emphasize different conceptions of what the function of theatre should be.

Epskamp (2006) uses the term 'participatory theatre' as a common denominator. In all these forms: “1) performances or workshops aim at the exchange of ideas between actors/facilitators and the audience; 2) the content of the performances is directly related to the living environment of the targeted audience; 3) the themes interwoven in the storyline of the performances are problem-oriented and of directed relevance to the community; 4) the audience is motivated to interact in a direct manner during or after the performance with the actors/facilitators”.

Epskamp recommends differentiating between Theatre for Development understood as a product and as a process-oriented tool. In the first case, the parallelism with the diffusion model of development communication and education dominant in the 50s-60s is clear: the main goal of this type of message-oriented theatre is to inform people about some development related issues and to persuade them to change their behavior. This does not mean there is no participation. Two-way communication is enabled through discussion and learning, but, as in Kaplun's second type of education, always oriented to the stimulation of intended effects.

In the second case, Theatre for Development is seen as “a range of theatrical practices and participatory methods to engage marginalized members of communities in a dialogical process aimed at enhancing awareness of political and social issues, building up social cohesion and stimulating the participation, awareness and organizational strength of groups and communities” (Epskamp, 2006). Here the contribution of Augusto Boal's theatre of the oppressed is essential.

THE AUDIENCE, DOUBTING ONTO STAGE!

Since the 1970s, Boal's techniques have been implemented and reinvented worldwide in many contexts: therapy, activism, legislation, health, ethics, cultural studies, performance art, and feminism. In fact, according to Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz, Theatre of the Oppressed “is, at its core, already a synthesis of what has become divided, packaged, and consumed, mostly in the academy, as separate and discrete bodies of disciplinary knowledge” (Schutzman and Cohen- Cruz, 2006). Its techniques are inspired on Freirean principles of dialogue, interaction, problem-posing, reflection and “conscientization” and point to the activation of the spectators to take control of situations, rather than passively allowing things to happen to them. Theatre becomes “a form of rehearsal theatre designed for people who want to learn ways of fighting against oppression in their daily lives. The theatrical act by itself is a conscious intervention, a rehearsal for social action based on a collective analysis of shared problems of oppression” (Singhal, 2004). Freire broke the hierarchical divide between the teacher and the student, and Boal did so between the performers and the audience, raising the figure of the “spect-actor”. Freire asserted that there is no apolitical education, and Boal outlined that all theatrical systems are necessarily political. Any kind of theatre aims to provoke a certain impact on the audience. Boal's discussions on the nature of poetics and its relation to the audience have lots of points in common with debates on Entertainment-Education. According to Martin (2006), Theatre of the Oppressed poetics should most properly be seen as precisely a “theory of the audience, of what a public in attendance can do to 'decolonize the mind’”.

Understood as a set of techniques, Theatre of the Oppressed covers four main figures: Image Theatre, Invisible Theatre, Legislative Theatre and Forum Theatre. Forum Theatre (*Amina's looking for a job* being an example) is probably the most practiced. Although it is understood as a revolutionary rehearsal for real solutions, for Boal, a Forum Theatre performance must always introduce a doubt, not a certainty: provoking a good debate is more important than reaching a good solution to overcome a particular oppression.

PROBLEMS TO FIX EFFICACY

Some of Boal's considerations could be regarded as discouraging by those who seek an answer about the efficacy of his techniques. For example, comparing Theatre of the Oppressed to a key, he argues: "The key does not open the door. It is he or she who, with the help of the key, opens the door" (Babbage, 2004). The Theatre of the Oppressed does not claim to provide answers or solve problems, but it is understood as a rehearsal for revolution. The Forum method stimulates energy for change, an energy that those oppressed should be able to put into action in their real lives. Since, according to Babbage (2004), we do not have any certainty that the empowerment experienced on stage will be applied beyond a theatrical context, we need tools to gather information that brings us closer to an answer. How can the results of a Forum Theatre play be assessed? Taking into account the number of people who had the opportunity to witness the play? The percentage of people that came onto stage? The number of people who said their word during the discussion? Perhaps counting the people who changed their behavior afterwards? According to her, this kind of approach would be beset with problems of quantification, and even if it could be adopted, it would not reveal whether the Forum itself 'works', but only to which extent it made an impact with those people, at that time, in that place.

THE POWER OF AMINA'S TESTIMONY

The transformation of what had previously been considered private, non-public, and non-political matters of public concern, issues of justice and sites of power is seminal to the Theatre of the Oppressed (Cohen-Cruz, 2001). That is why Forum Theatre stories are always unresolved: because it is expected that *spect-actors* will intervene with possible solutions, as they find others suffering from the same oppression. As testimony produces social discourse, political action and personal therapy are intertwined.

The transition from a personal space to a public and political one was intensively lived by Amina during the different performances of the play. According to Jordi Forcadas, the play's director, Amina experienced it all as a very intimate process, but without noticing the social projection her case had from the beginning. For him, the play worked as Amina herself changed, realizing she was becoming a spokeswoman for invisible sectors. Conditions at work also improved: in one occasion, a lawyer among the audience accompanied her to visit her "real" employers. They gave her the severance pay they were withholding.

Amina's empowerment also facilitated the subversion of stereotypes of Arab women that depict them as passive, submissive and illiterate subjects. As one of the Theatre of the Oppressed students pointed out, even the veil, often categorized in the Spanish press as the symbol over which a polarization between a democratic, progressive and modern Occident where equity between the sexes prevails and a dictatorial, underdeveloped and traditional Orient based on women's oppression, is built (Reigada, 2004), could be turned into a symbol of struggle and liberation.

WHAT ABOUT THE COLLECTIVE?

The research threw some light on the difficulties faced by small organizations such as Forn de Teatre Pa'Tothom to assess their experience and use it as a catalyst for change at a collective level. On the one hand, members of the staff argued they had no time or economical resources to implement follow-up mechanisms and an evaluation plan; on the other, doubts around how to evaluate and the value of evaluation were also detected, which contrasts with the clarity with which E-E promoters have developed methodologies of evaluation from the 70s and onwards.

However, through my fieldwork I could gather enough information to list some clues that could frame the answers to the research questions. The play questioned the Forum Theatre formula, since, according to its director, people left with a feeling of desolation and impotence as they saw the problem that they were facing as structural and complex. However, it could spark deep debates on human rights and identity in Catalonia, even when spectators, due to their heterogeneity, did not identify closely with the main character. This was for example the case in discussions among first and second generation immigrants in Catalonia. It is not a secondary question, since a great deal of the future of Catalan development depends on how the issue of civic rights, tolerance and coexistence is approached. In their analyses and dialogues, the audience could go further beyond Amina's particular experience to identify the oppression as a matter of human rights, independent of nationalities. Some opinions may have not appealed to part of the audience, but there was always the chance to discuss them through arguments. Furthermore, oppression at work was not understood as a social problem that only required the opinions of technicians and experts. The same people who suffered the oppression, personally or indirectly, analyzed and identified the key problems, formulated alternatives and made decisions.

CODA

Obviously, a Forum Theatre play cannot create a conversational democracy per se (Montañés, 2004), i.e. a democracy based on the principles of dialogue and endogenous development. But I am sure that it can promote the culture of tolerance, participation and compromise necessary to achieve it. In this sense, participation in E-E may resolve some of the ethical dilemmas found on the way to social change. While in dominant E-E paradigms from the 70s and 80s the answers to questions such as “who decide for whom what is pro-social and what is not” came from technicians and decision makers who analyzed needs and prescribed solutions from the outside, in participatory based E-E projects the contents, messages, diagnoses and proposals are negotiated within the members of a community involved in their development.

It is my impression that while other areas of communication for development have gradually incorporated participation as a necessary element to promote sustainable development, Entertainment-Education has not reflected enough about how its dominant methods, based on behavioral engineering, and designed underestimating needs, wills, capabilities and proposals from communities, have delayed an in-depth debate on ethics, sustainability and efficacy. As stated by Kaplún (1998), “only participating, being involved, investigating, making questions and searching answers, questioning things and questioning themselves, people reach knowledge. You really learn from what you live, what you recreate and what you reinvent, and not just what you simply read and listen”. Is it possible to incorporate these values in E-E practices? Cases like Amina is looking for a job show that is not only possible, but also necessary, to use participatory formats coherent with models of development that, in order to protect and vindicate human rights and inclusion, will have to take into account people's needs and people's proposals.

This article is based on the author's Master thesis in Communication for Development, Malmö University, Sweden.

Jordi de Miguel is a journalist and community manager at [Fundación Chandra](#), an organization whose main goal is to promote participation and interaction among NGOs, communicators, public administration, enterprises and citizens. He has postgraduates studies in communication and local development, and in citizen participation. He is a member of the [Spanish Communication, Education and Citizenship Forum](#). jordidemiguel@gmail.com

geografía de la furia. Barcelona: Tusquets Editores.
Babbage, Frances (2004). Augusto Boal. New York: Routledge.
Brown, William J. And Singhal, Arvind (1990). "Ethical dilemmas of Prosocial Television". Communication Quarterly, Vol.38. No.3 3. 268-280.
Cohen-Cruz, Jan and Schutzman, Mady (ed.) (2006). A Boal Companion. Dialogues on theatre and cultural politics. New York and London: Routledge.

Colectivo IOÉ (1994). Marroquins a Catalunya. Enciclopèdia Catalana: Barcelona.
Epskamp, Kees (2006). Theatre for development. An introduction to Context, Applications & Training. London and New York: Zed Books.
Kamlongera, Christopher (2005). "Theatre for Development in Africa". In Hemer, Oscar and Tufte, Thomas (eds.). Media and Glocal Change. Rethinking Communication for Development. Goteborg/Buenos Aires: Clacso Books/Nordicom.
Kaplún, Mario (1998). Una Pedagogía de la Comunicación. Madrid: Ediciones de la Torre.
Martin, Randy (2006). "Boal and the horizons of theatrical commitment". In Cohen-Cruz, Jan and Schutzman, Mady (ed.). A Boal Companion. Dialogues on theatre and cultural politics. New York and London: Routledge.
Martín Corrales, Eloy (2002). La imagen del magrebí en España. Una perspectiva histórica. Barcelona: Edicions Bellaterra.
Montañés, Manuel (2004). "De la democracia delegada distributiva a las democracias conversacionales" in Fernández, Manuela; Rosa, Montse and Encina, Javier (coord.). "Reparto. Presupuestos participativos y autogestión de la vida cotidiana en Las Cabezas de San Juan". Sevilla: Atrapasueños.
Reigada, Alicia (2004). "Barreras culturales y barreras de género: la construcción de la Otredad a través de la prensa". Barcelona: Fòrum Universal de les Cultures, 24-27th May.
http://www.portalcomunicacion.com/dialeg/paper/pdf/113_reigada.pdf Retrieved on 23th, November, 2008.
Singhal, Arvind and Rogers, Everett M. (1999). Entertainment-Education. A Communication Strategy for Social Change. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
Singhal, Arvind and Rogers, Everett M. (2004). "The Statuts of Entertainment-Education Worldwide". In Singhal, A.; Cody, M.J.; Rogers, E.; and Sabido, M. (Editors). Entertainment-Education and Social Change. History, Research, and Practice. New Jersey: LEA.
SOS Racismo (2008). Informe anual SOS Racismo 2008: sobre el racismo en el Estado Español. Barcelona: Icaria Editorial.
Tufte, Thomas (2004). "Soap Operas and Sense-Making: Mediations and Audience Ethnography". In Singhal, A.; Cody, M.J.; Rogers, E.; and Sabido, M. (Editors). Entertainment-Education and Social Change. History, Research, and Practice. New Jersey: LEA.
Tufte, Thomas (2001). "Entertainment-education and participation. Assessing the communication strategy of Soul City". Journal of International Communication, 7, 25-21.
Tufte, Thomas (2005). "Entertainment-education in development communication. Between marketing behaviours and empowering people". In Hemer, Oscar and Tufte, Thomas (eds.). Media and Glocal Change. Rethinking Communication for Development. Goteborg/Buenos Aires: Clacso Books/Nordicom.

SUBMITTED BY: FLORENCIA ENGHEL

2010-04-26

