

POPULAR THEATRE AND IT'S ROLE IN PARTICIPATION IN SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT.

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INTRODUCTION:

What is popular theatre?

It can simply be defined as peoples' theatre, speaking to the common man in his language and idiom and dealing with problems of direct relevance to his situation. A peoples' theater should concentrate on awakening the latent capacity of the people to take part, and to make their own decisions, to organize themselves for common action. Then they will be ready to play a real part in everything affecting their existence. It is a question of changing society, of encouraging the solidarity of the people, through the shared experiences and interchanges provided by realistic, critical and free popular theatre.

It is popular because it attempts to involve the whole community, not just a small elite group determined by class or education. Being comprehensible both for the people as a whole and for the individual. It enriches and expands the forms of Popular expression by:

- Adopting and strengthening the point of the most progressive section of the people.
- Rooting itself in tradition and developing in a positive manner.
- Popular theatre needs to be realistic, critical and free.

By **realistic** it is meant:

- Demonstrating the real social causes of the problems facing the community and the people.
- Fearlessly achieving an awareness of suffering and exploitation.
- Dynamically presenting existing realities, projecting positive values.

By **critical** it is meant

- Trying through dialogue to perceive the causes of Society's problems and pose alternative solutions.
- Trying to create a critical consciousness in the people which will result in a critical attitude to the reality which oppress them .

By **free** it is meant:

- That the structure of the theatre and its method of functioning should be free and a part of the people.
- That a theatre that is not free or critical loses its reason for existence, since it cannot act as a critical and free agent for change

- That the theatre must be open to continual changes, and to the integration of new elements and forms.

Briefly we can say that popular theatre is a theatre that is with and of the community, rather than simply in the community; a theatre that is truly creative and authentic, and not a tool for the divisive social system in which we live; a theatre which projects the necessary values for the creation of the era of justice that the human race should build.

Popular theatre can be an effective tool in development programmes:

1. As an **entertainment**: Can attract and hold the interest of large numbers of people.
2. As an oral medium **in local languages**: Can involve the poorest groups and classes who are often left out of development activities because of their illiteracy or lack of understanding of other languages.
3. As a **dramatic representation** of local problems: provides a codification of reality which can be used by the participants in analysing their situation.
4. As a **collective expression** and communal activity: Creates the context for cooperation rather than individual thinking and action. It creates the possibility for horizontal communication or peer learning rather than top-down one-way communication.

CATEGORIES OF PEOPLE THEATRE.

The popular base of the theatre must spring from its attempts to ensure that the material and spiritual riches of this earth reach those who should receive them. With this in mind, we can divide popular theatre into three categories.

Theatre produced by a theatrical group but oriented toward the people.

This involves a group of actors, directors and dramatists producing for the community a play which inspires social change. Their objective may be didactic, that is to say they are trying to bring to the people some educational message that encourage the audience to tackle the problems that their community faces.

Theater organized by and for the people, with spectators.

A group of people drawn from trade unions cooperatives and other popular organizations without professional expertise and without departing from its daily tasks, sets up workshops for the peoples theatre. Their social drama and theatrical presentations contain elements drawn from the community and use people from the community.

The workshop is an integrated group which forms a unit for discussions on community themes. It should analyze the local and national problems, trying to obtain as much information as possible and to provide interpretations of actual events. At the same time, it carries out basic activating exercises that lead to greater flexibility in the way the group projects itself, without becoming too technical.

The central conflict of the work which is to be performed is fixed by means of discussions and improvisations. The group attempts to stage the play so that its themes and words express important events in the life of the people. The work may or may not be written, according to the interests and needs of those concerned. Music, humor, songs and dialogue are used to stimulate the emotive and critical reactions of the spectators.

The workshop comprises not only those who are actually going to act, but others with various tasks assigned to them. It is not independent of the popular organizations, but is an extension of them. The performance should be an organic, daily and permanent part of the life of the community and its organizations. Contrary to the usual conception of the theatre, the main point of the performances come not before, or during it, but afterwards. The presentation is a public platform and the work performed acts as the catalyst in a cultural cycle. For these reason the work should be short and motivating, lively and provocative.

This category of popular theatre has an advantage over the first category in that it develops directly out of the people. The first category on the other hand, involves the use of professional theatrical groups, whose knowledge of theatrical techniques and resources may weaken the impact of the drama.

Theatre organized by and for the people without spectators.

This is a 'theatre informant' in which the participation of the public creates the work performed, and in which the action gets through to the spectator and stimulates him/her into becoming an actor and dramatist.

This can be done by the members of the community being asked to recount a real sequence of events for which the solution is difficult. A group improvises a presentation of that narrative. Those taking part are asked whether they agree with the version that the group has performed. The performance is repeated, and those who consider that there should be changes in the interpretation must not only say so but must replace that person who is playing the part. The community formulates the script, "writes" it, modifies it and performs it. The dynamic impulse centers around them dealing with problems that actually exist. The process is the collective participation in the demonstration of the realities.

Another instance is the theatre which projects images. In this case, members of the public tell the story of the problem not with the spoken word but by shaping and presenting it with the movements of the bodies.

Using the Zanzibar experience gained in the programme for “Zanzibar without poverty, “Theatre for Social Development’s approach” may be summed thus:

- (a) Consultation with programme staff, discussion rather than simple acceptance of issues raised by the researchers. The idea is to acquaint the theatre practitioner with the programme needs.
- (b) Out of consultation and discussion with the programme staffs the script was written and pilot tested in two different villages. The purpose of these visits was first of all to establish the theatre for social development idea and to extend discussion of the problems of poverty (to get the villager’s point of view).
- (c) Scenario preparation using findings gained during the discussion with the programme staffs and the first visits in the villages, followed by rehearsals.
- (d) Presentation of play to the targetted audience. At this stage our targeted audience were shehias and district leaders. The Presentation style here was emphasized on an open-ended approach to allow for discussion as the performance was going on. As result of this there was a frank participation between the mobilization team, the audience, and theatre people during the discussions that arose after the performance.

RESULTS:

The main aim of the workshop was to raise awareness amongst the Shehias and district leaders. The participants were motivated by “Theater for Social Development” performances and the workshops were very active. The participants forgot their status and raised all issues that hinder their development. They identified the main sources of poverty in their areas and also committed themselves to spreading the knowledge they gained to others; they were ready to participate in spearheading the programme of poverty reduction programme to a successful conclusion.

CONCLUSION:

The people’s theatre and development

The development of our country will revolve around the participation of our people. Theatre and other forms of popular communication are efficient and effective methods of achieving this participation.

The creation of popular theatre groups from amongst the people, both in the towns and the countryside, is not an utopian dream. Using my short experience

of introducing four groups on Zanzibar (two in Unguja and two in Pemba) I have proved that there are elements among the people that can provide the means, the interest and the individuals for the tasks of self-expression and social change that are involved.

A people's theatre does not mean an art of lower standards, but an art deriving from the people because it is concerned with them. It is not an exotic art or one speaking for minorities. It speaks to the basic human being who struggles to gain his/her daily needs and whose life or death is decided by that struggle. It is that struggle which challenges him/her to picture the realities of his/her situation and to reflect on how to change them.

The theatre is thus a medium, a method, a technique, an art and, above all, a new language in which imagination, discussions, dialogues, lamentations, laughter, Union, dancing and music are elements which shape the creation of the new voice - the voice of the people. Without this, there can be no people's theatre. And without popular theatre for social development our country will be late to reach development.

My belief is that the best short cut for our country to win the war against poverty is to facilitate our experts in social policy analysis and use theatre for social development approaches in our training and in running our programmes.

Bibliography:-

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