

‘ONE HAN CYAN CLAP’: EXPLORING THE PARALLELS BETWEEN SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL ACTION THEATRE IN JAMAICA

SHAWNA-KAE BURNS

Abstract

This article discusses the use of social action theatre for social change through the lens of a social work educator and practitioner who is also a part of the Jamaican theatre community. Based on the author’s positionality, the article explores the possibilities of performance and drama as an effective tool for social change and, ultimately, social work interventions. The author explores the union of social work and social action theatre by aligning the social work engagement process with Kathryn Grushka’s Arts- Education concept of tangential visibility. The use of theatre techniques in social work practice as a teachable intervention tool is explored. The author conceptualises performance and drama as an expression of cultural and ancestral memory, and invites Caribbean social work practitioners and educators to consider the range of intervention possibilities it presents.

Keywords: social action theatre, tangential visibility, Caribbean social work education, social work practitioner, Jamaican theatre

‘One Han Cyan Clap’: Exploring the parallels between Social Work and Social Action Theatre in Jamaica

To decode the images and ideas contained in tales... is to release the power contained in the images and to create a basis for political action. (Ford-Smith, 2005, p. xvi)

Jamaican theatre scholar, Honor Ford-Smith, captures the essence of what has always intrigued me about the connection between social action theatre and the work of social change. Social Action Theatre, unlike other forms of theatre, is ultimately about facilitating social change from within. It goes beyond the staging of a story that may or may not provide social commentary on the day and time it referenced, and acts as a catalyst for internal change processes for both the practitioner and the audience members. I confess that my partiality to such a union aligns with personal experiences which have veered on a path that has seen both theatre and social justice operate in the service of societal change and national development. From Jamaica’s early stages of nationhood, a distinctive and creative ethos emerged as a means of communication and survival. Throughout our nation’s development, our creative ethos has become more evident as we sought outlets for our frustrations due to increasing

social ills. Our engagement with the arts is the foundation on which many of our social, cultural, and educational processes are set. As a social worker and theatre practitioner, I have found both practices to not only be useful in the development of my professional competence, but also function as a gateway into a deeper understanding of self and culture. The natural affinity of Jamaicans for storytelling and embodiment, has set the stage for the use of drama and theatre as a “go-to” interventive tool and cultural approach (Baker & Maxwell, 2012, p.386). It has reaffirmed for me that, like the inability to create a rousing applause with one hand, maximum effect is best created with both hands working together, understanding social action theatre as one hand and social change as the other.

This research article is conceptual in nature and has three distinctive purposes. Firstly, it seeks to examine parallels between the processes that social workers use to engage clients, and the processes that social theatre practitioners use to engage their audiences. Secondly, it sets out to explore how Kathryn Grushka’s (2008a, 2008b), arts education concept of tangential visibility has been applied to the work of social action theatre and reflexive practice processes for training social work practitioners. Finally, this paper highlights the work of four social justice organizations in Jamaica whose work serves as examples of tangential visibility in action, as they facilitate successful behaviour change through culturally situated and personally transformative experiences.

While this is essentially a conceptual paper, I draw on empirical data from a series of informal interviews conducted with key actors in the development of social action theatre in Jamaica. I begin with a description of my personal experience of how both theatre and social work has manifested in my practice and proceed to offer a brief discussion of the influence of theatre techniques on social change. Tangential visibility is a critical and discursive practice of self-analysis by way of observation of others. I discuss how it can be used as an educational concept, and if utilised in social work education and training, how it can facilitate social change and provide an additional layer of professional efficacy and competence in regional social work. The article concludes with an exploration of how tangential visibility has been operationalised in the work of four Jamaican social action performance groups and culminates in examining the implications of its use for future social work research and practice in this area.

Creating Theatre for Social Work: A Personal Reflection

As a social work educator and theatre practitioner I have often fused my practices to meet social work project goals. Ritual Theatre, for example, treats with personal and social healing by way of invoking ancestral memory (Schrader, 2012). I have used Ritual Theatre to enable me to have a deeper understanding of my social work students and my clients through an embodiment of the cultural and historical parameters with which the clients process their experience. To illustrate how I have done this work, I recall two occasions where I was asked to create dramatic pieces as edutainment items for social work ceremonies as a member of faculty at The University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona.

At the launch of the tenth volume of the *Caribbean Journal of Social Work* in 2013, I selected an article from the journal volume produced that year entitled “Re-writing the Script: The Drama of HERstory and the Women of Sistren” (McClean Cooke & Groome, 2013). The

work resonated deeply with me both as a female theatre practitioner and as a young social work educator. The cast included four current social work students of the bachelor's programme, and during rehearsals with the students, their general surprise that the lives of these characterised women resonated with "real women" was notable. The question I asked them was, "Why do you believe that these were not the stories of real women?" For the students, it seemed that theatre was conceived as a staged phenomenon, aligned with light-hearted antics and anecdotal remedies rather than truth and real life. The work of *Sistren* is theatre built on lives and stories of real women in Jamaican communities, and it was in the experience of creating theatre from their own lives that healing and self-empowerment occurred.

On another occasion, for the opening ceremony of the Association of Caribbean Social Work Education (ACSWE) conference held at UWI, Mona in Kingston, Jamaica in 2017, I opted to create a piece of theatre from the Jamaican Association of Social Workers (2008) *Code of Ethics Handbook*. In this piece, the cast combined current students of the BSc Social Work programme at the university, students that hailed from different faculties at the UWI, and theatre students from the Edna Manley College of Visual and Performing Arts in Jamaica. Though not intentional, it was beneficial to the process that the non-social work and Edna Manley College of Visual and Performing Arts students were not familiar with social work ethics and principles. The students were therefore required to dive within themselves to understand and embody the ethical dilemmas as stated in the script. It was once again noteworthy that the social work students found it more challenging to relate to the presentation of real-life issues in a format such as theatre as compared to their non-social work counterparts. One student asked, "Will we make it a joke?" For these social work students, theatre was equated with caricature, a means of diluting the importance or value of the content for the audience. This struck me as problematic as it made evident that these students did not understand the power of alternative methods of interventions like social action theatre to empower vulnerable populations. As soon to be qualified social workers, likely to work in community and school settings, their unawareness of the rich history of organisations that use theatre for social change, social action and community intervention was troubling. It is here that the first seeds of formally integrating theatre as a means of enabling social change and the teaching of theatre techniques to facilitate the social work process, took root for me. It was an endorsement of Mclean Cooke and Groomes (2013) challenge to social work educators to infuse the social work curriculum "with the formal introduction of expressive art therapies" (p.119). I see my work and this article as a contribution to the development of such.

The Influence of Theatre Techniques on Social Action and Social Change

For many social work students and practitioners, theatre for social change, may be somewhat of a peripheral concept and therefore its engagement limited. An understanding of some of these concepts can provide the basis for social workers understanding and usage of these techniques for intervention work. Applied Theatre, typified as, theatre for social change, seeks to move beyond traditional forms of theatre that rely on the separation of actor and audience. It enables the audience to become more involved in performances and in some

cases have direct access to the players on stage, with the ability to “intervene directly in the dramatic action and act” (Boal, 2008, p.102). This is illustrated in Augusto Boal’s Forum Theatre, where the traditional theatre’s fourth wall in the theatre space is interrupted during the performance. Applied Theatre is an umbrella term that includes several types of interactive and participatory techniques that moves away from traditional forms of theatre, seeking instead to engage the audience in the process of drama and drama creation. In these types of process drama “we can manipulate images to conjure worlds which are beyond our immediate experiences and by doing this we open the door to all imaginative thought” (Bowell & Heap, 2013, p. 2).

Various drama techniques are used to engage the internal processes of the audience, and in so doing access key emotional responses that influence the behavioural reactions of audience members. It is for this reason that Applied Theatre and the work of social change is a perfect marriage. Applied theatre forms are varied and include:

- **theatre of the oppressed:** a widely practiced form of drama for social intervention arising out of Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. It is described as “a set of techniques that helps people overcome oppression through acting, both in the sense of being an actor and being active” (Boal, 2002).
- **theatre for social change:** described as “theatre in the service of social change” (Prentki & Preston, 2007, as cited in Thornton, 2012, p. 3);
- **playback theatre:** considered an “act of service” by creators Jonathon Fox and Jo Salas (Rogers, 2006)
- **protest performance:** which is described as a process of “facilitating performances of memory and mourning that can generate dialogue between communities facing violence in different contexts and leads to shared insights and new forms of solidarity” (Ford-Smith, 2011, p. 11).

Applied Theatre forms use techniques that have been acknowledged as key components of social change and drama intervention. The magic of these techniques lies in the execution and involvement of the participants and the audience. This allows for people to be active in their experience of oppression, view experiences from different perspectives, and access different solutions to their problems (Alshughry, 2019). The far-reaching influence of artistic expression, arts education, and drama intervention has been articulated in scholarly literature, building an understanding that “arts-based creations offer a guide for our inner journey toward more authentic ways of seeing and being in the world” (Black, 2012, p.12). There is a “growing acknowledgement of the therapeutic value of creative arts, including dance, the traditional practices of indigenous societies, where art, music, dance, and storytelling are integral to health and healing, are recognised and professionalised” (Dunphy et al., 2015, p. 2). Black (2012) captures the essence of the power of arts-based creations as a gateway into the internal processes of human life:

At an individual level, creating art-forms such as self-portraits help us communicate what is tacit or not easily sayable, and offer ways to represent and understand the

dimensionalities of our life and work situations. When we make and view these, we realise the power of art-forms for communicating inner worlds and messages about the lives we are living. (p. 12)

Arts-based interventions operationalised through social action theatre, are undoubtedly fitting and an accessible medium for social change and social work intervention.

Tangential Visibility for Social Work and Social Action Theatre Practitioners

As a theatre practitioner I have always been asked to not only understand and interpret, but to perform with truest emotion, the actions, reactions, and subsequent behaviours of any character given to me. For there to be complete believability from the audience, the actor must deny themselves—if even for the duration of the piece—for the emotions of the character to come to the fore. In essence, the actor must become the character. The actor must be able to put aside their own instinctual emotions and reactions to realistically bring forth this character with an authenticity that will submerge the audience into experiencing what they observe on stage. Tangential visibility is defined and reconstructed as pedagogy by educator and artist, Kathryn Grushka (2008a), in her seminal work, “Tangential Visibility: Becoming Self through Creating Socio-Cultural Portraits.” It is “the capacity or skill to observe the shaping of others discursively and critically, to reflect on how events and social representations impact on individuals, and the ability to find new creative possibilities that inform self” (Grushka, 2008a, p. 298). Grushka posits that we learn about ourselves through the indirect or tangential observation of others who we relocate in a broader social context, which allows us to safely interrogate and gain a better understanding of self (Black, 2012; Grushka et al., 2014; Hadjiyanni, 2014).

Grushka’s work, originating from an arts education frame, is readily applicable to the work of theatre practitioners. I offer that tangential visibility can also be an effective concept for social workers to use in exploring the liminal space between the client and themselves. Grushka (2008b) states that it is in “the process of communicative significance when one acknowledges that identity is a liminal experience, performed through acts of communication and behaviour, that an individual is always positioned at the boundary between self and becoming other” (p. 4). I invite you to apply this process to social work, to take on to our understanding that social workers undertake the process of tangential visibility when conceptualizing and implementing individual, family, and community interventions. I am positing here, that the exploration of this liminal space becomes tantamount to unlocking a deeper sense of self for the social worker/social change agent. It is in the baptismal quality of this process of tangential visibility that effective change for the client can occur. For social workers to successfully engage the planned change process, we allow ourselves a freedom to look at the client’s lives through their lens of lived experience. On deconstructing the processes of tangential visibility, Hadjiyanni (2014) stated that, “comprehending the various angles from which a problem can be approached to be solved... [and] embarking on a process of self-discovery... often helps...[us] to uncover more about ourselves and how we perceive the world in which we live” (p. 36). For both the client and the social worker, reliance on this process is key.

Theatre in service of social change can be seen as paralleled to the social work process - the players (understood as the social workers and social change agents) and the audience (understood as the clients) must together go on a journey of self-discovery. Social action theatre, as stated here, creates art from reality and presents it in a digestible format. The actors on stage undergo the trauma of an event for the audience and allow emotional safety, as they process and possibly relive any experience that may have been triggered during the performances. The key component here is that the observer may experience a justified resolve or themselves be involved in processing with the characters, an alternate ending to the experience presented, from an objective and emotionally safe distance (Rogers, 2006). Tangential visibility here “is experienced and performed through creative acts of communication, behaviour and storied lives that position individuals at the boundaries between self and becoming other” (Grushka, 2008a, p.299).

The planned changed social work process and the social action theatre process both operate in a boundaried, or liminal space marked by a powerful intersection of “insider/ outsider” dynamics. It is experienced by the client/audience as they interrogate their own lives; where it is possible for the client/ audience to come to experience new insights about themselves, allowing healing to begin. A catharsis of sorts is experienced in the client/worker – theatre practitioner/audience dynamic, and in that process of engagement, new understandings of self-emerge, creating a paradigm shift that serves as a catalyst for behaviour change.

Tangential Visibility in Social Work Education

During my work as a social work educator, I have often found that the utilisation of drama and theatre techniques in the classroom aids in curating an energetic and fluid space that allows for both the students and the teacher to be engaged in an active experience of theory application. As an educator, I have been tasked with guiding level 1 and level 2 students through client worker engagement, in aptly structured courses that lean into experimental learning. Human and practice skills laboratories enable the unmasking of students prejudices and pre-conceived notions. Classroom activities include group theatre, intimacy and mindfulness training, privilege walks, and healing circles. These activities access a higher level of understanding when framed within tangential visibility. As students work through these activities, their capacity for empathy is being developed and their ability to engage in reflexive practice sharpened. They not only learn how to treat clients with empathy, but to understand clients' behavioural reactions, while at the same time, objectively interrogate their own internal responses. Ultimately, the classroom experience triggers an emerging practice that can be used by students “to orientate themselves from multiple positions beyond themselves [and] often these positions can be opposing and confronting” (Grushka, 2008b, p.5). Since tangential visibility encourages a denial of self in order to locate commonality with others, it serves as a gateway into the suspension of judgement. It challenges burgeoning social workers to interrogate lives different from their own, enabling internal shifts. Being equipped with the knowledge of tangential visibility therefore becomes integral for social workers whether as an educator engaging with their students in the learning process or practitioners in the field.

We must, in essence, be able to occupy that liminal space between the client and themselves. We should aspire towards practicing competently in the environment and culture of the client if we are to truly be of service to them. Engagement in social action theatre or being emerged in the process of tangential visibility, as it is interpreted here, also allows social workers to understand and operate at their highest level of professional competence. The idea that we as workers get to explore the nuances of human behaviour and observe its resulting actions and adjust them accordingly for the most effective change, becomes the reason why theatre for social change and the understanding of tangential visibility, can be seen as an important concept for social action.

Tangential Visibility in Action: Social Action Theatre Companies in Jamaica

There are numerous ensembles which have utilise theatre in their social action work in Jamaica; in this section, I highlight four groups that have used theatre as a means of educating and elevating social consciousness. It is critical to note here that the groups highlighted, do not recognise themselves as engaging in tangential visibility as a process; rather Grushka's 'Tangential Visibility' as pedagogy is used as an analytic frame.

This section will start with an examination of the work of the Sistren Theatre Collective, followed by the Groundwork Theatre Company, moving through WMW Ja (Formerly Women's Media Watch Jamaica) and onwards to The Ashe Company. It must also be noted that detailing the techniques used by these groups is beyond the scope of this paper; however, a brief description of how their work plays into Grushka's concept is given. The subsequent discussion, with the exception of the segment related to the Sistren Theatre Collective, is based on information garnered through informal and personal conversations with members and affiliates of these groups. As such, this discussion presented is conceptual and not based on empirical data.

As a starting point for this section, it is important to note that many of our current theatre practitioners who became involved in social welfare work in Jamaica were students at the Jamaica School of Drama at the then Cultural Training Centre (now known as the Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts). This affiliation served as a stabilising force for many of these groups, especially in the early years of their development. This association may have contributed to them being seen as legitimate recipients of government investment, private sector and international funding. The training at the Cultural Training Centre included two key courses that set the foundation of social action for these graduates and affiliates in motion, those being, Community Drama 1 (Problem, Cause and Solution) and Community Drama 2 (Drama as a Development Tool). In these courses, Drama was touted as a means of "discussing, exploring and playing back to the community, their own issues and for helping them to create the solutions" (O. Ellis, personal communication, March 5, 2020).

Sistren Theatre Collective

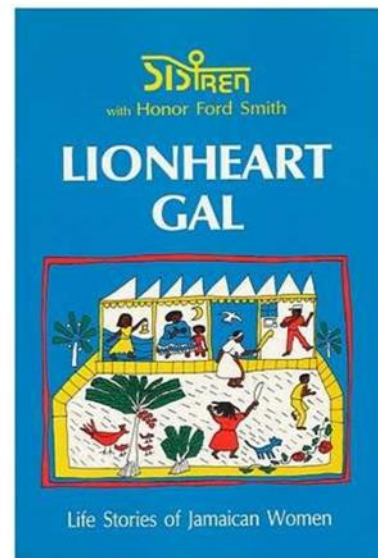
The Sistren Theatre Collective is arguably the most noted social action theatre group produced in Jamaica in the last 50 years. There the ethos of women's empowerment emerging out of political and cultural work has been referenced, locally, regionally and internationally by



Sistren: Back row – Cerene Stephenson, Jennifer Williams, Beverley Hanson, Joan French; Middle row – Lana Finikin, Pauline Crawford, Lillian Foster, Honor Ford-Smith, May Thompson; Foreground – Rebecca Knowles
Missing – Jasmin Smith and Vivette Lewis
Photo: Maria La Yacona

scholars studying both literacy and feminist disciplines. Founded in 1977, The Sistren Collective emerged out of the consciousness of a group of working-class women “drawn from the emergency employment programme... of the democratic socialist government of 1972-1980 led by Michael Manley” (Ford-Smith & Sistren, 2005). Their working mandate was analysing and commenting “on the role of women in Jamaica society through theatre” (Ford-Smith & Sistren, 2005, p. xxii). The Sistren Collective became the epitome of theatre for social change, utilising

aspects of both Narrative and Forum Theatre techniques to “demystify the process” and collectively involve...the whole community’ so that they can understand what is going on” (Ford-Smith & Sistren, 2005, p. xxiv). The productions of the Sistren Collective and their community style of theatre allowed for women in that era to gain a better understanding of self, productions such as *Bellywoman Bangarang* and the other stories told in *Lion Heart Gal* were of real women whose stories were staged by the group and has since served as safe space for other women to understand and process their own realities. Applying Grushka’s (2008b) understanding of tangential visibility as “acknowledging the complex interdependencies ...[of] the subject being observed and experienced” (p. 4) we see that the methodology that was employed by the Sistren Theatre Collective served not only as a mere “taking of drama to working class communities” (Ford-Smith & Sistren, 2005). The work of this social action group highlights the discursive nature and the re-representation of “the other” that allows for the tangential understanding of self.



Groundwork Theatre Company

The Groundwork Theatre Company, founded in 1981, was characterized as “a theatre company with a difference” (O. Ellis, personal communication, March 5, 2020). Originally conceived as an outreach arm of the Jamaica School of Drama, its methodology of Drama in Community Intervention was used as a means of nation development through youth empowerment and community engagement. Founded by a group of graduates of the School of Drama which included Owen Ellis, Winston Bell, Sheila Chambers and Eugene Williams; these young people took with them the techniques learnt from the Community Drama 1 and 2 class “an affinity to the oppressed” and saw themselves as “one with the masses” (O. Ellis, personal communication, March 5, 2020). Their work carried them into Jamaican communities under the

auspices of the Jamaica Cultural Development Commission, the Caribbean Conference of Churches, and the Ministry of Youth, Jamaica to inform and empower the youths of Jamaica.

GROUNDWORK'S PRODUCTIONS

- 1982 **The Black Jacobins**
By C.L.R. James. Directed by Eugene Williams
- 1983 **Accidental Death of an Anarchist**
By Dario Fo. Directed by Dennis Scott
- 1983 **Sufferers' Song**
By Victor Quesnel. Directed by Earl Warner
- 1984 **Dog**
By Dennis Scott. Directed by Rawie Gibbons
- 1985 **Bopal Ky-aleo**
A Musical Revue. Directed by Bobby Ghisays



▲ Yuh Safe

▼ Accidental Death of an Anarchist



- 1987 **Whiplash**
By Ginger Knight. Directed by Henry Muttoo
- 1988 **Fallen Angel & The Devil Concubine**
By collective creation (GTC) & scripted by Pat Camper. Directed by Eugene Williams & Her-tencer Lindsay
- 1988 **Yuh Safe**
By collective creation (GTC). Directed by Her-tencer Lindsay & Carol Lawes
- 1990 **Pump Up the Fun**
By collective creation (GTC). Scripted and Directed by Owen Ellis
- 1992 **Krossroads - de Culcha Clash**
Scripted by Fred Hickling and Owen Ellis. Directed by Eugene Williams. Produced jointly by GTC and Musical Associates Ltd.



▲ Fallen Angel & The Devil Concubine

GROUNDWORK THEATRE COMPANY
3 OXFORD TERRACE
KINGSTON 5, JAMAICA
TELEPHONE: (809) 929-4564/0891

GROUNDWORK is a theatre company with a difference. The Company has an enviable reputation locally and overseas, not only for doing what theatre companies normally do such as putting on plays, but also for its pioneering work with youth in schools and communities all over the Caribbean region.

The Company was originally conceived as an outreach arm of the Jamaica School of Drama and was the dream of the then Director, Dennis Scott, who envisioned a popular theatre movement focusing on the development of rural communities thereby promoting some of the aims of the School of Drama.

The Company's work has now expanded to encompass many other facets. Its main focus is youth and the GTC works deliberately towards discouraging relationships of dependency. It tries to lay the groundwork for further development at all levels.

GROUNDWORK enjoys fraternal linkages with major local and regional institutions of education, culture and development and is an active member of the Association of Development Agencies (ADA).

GROUNDWORK THEATRE COMPANY



The Groundwork Theatre Company, worked as teachers and facilitators of the Area Youth Foundation which was formed in 1997. This work, detailed by Anne Hickling-Hudson (2013) in her article, "Theatre-Arts Pedagogy for Social Justice: Case Study of the Area Youth Foundation in Jamaica"; has influenced numerous youths in Jamaica's inner-city who have been exposed to aspects of Boal's theatre of the oppressed and have become change agents themselves within their wider community. The dynamic of facilitator/ participant role within both Groundwork and Area Youth Foundation "supports an understanding of self as actively formed within a social context and that the expressive and critical communicative act of artmaking can inform the self as citizen" (Grushka, 2008b, p. 13-14).

WMW Ja (Formerly Women's Media Watch Jamaica)



Emerging in an era of female empowerment in 1970s and 1980s the Women's Media Watch, Jamaica group was formed in 1987. A group of young artists, dancers, teachers, and professionals came together at a research group formed by Sistren Theatre Collective to discuss the lives of Jamaican women in the 1980s. This group of women included such noted names as Judith Wedderburn, Hilary Nicholson, Samere Tansley, Patricia Donald and Fae Ellington. They quickly realized that they shared a similar consciousness of female empowerment and love for the arts that would become the

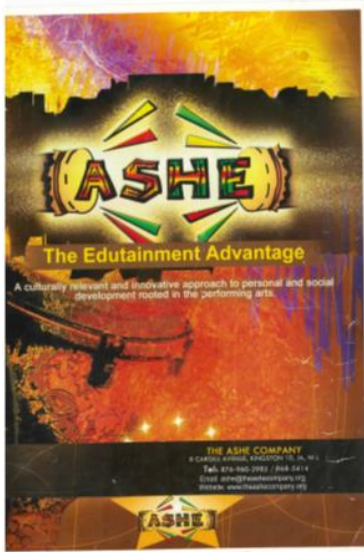
founding ethos for their desire to advocate and promote positive female representation within the Jamaican society. The group developed the mandate of "being an agent of change, promoting peaceful, equitable gender relations" (H. Nicholson, personal communication, March

24, 2020). They began using participatory training with community members and developed a multi-faceted approach to research and advocacy that included public education, training workshops using popular theatre and community drama. Founding member Hilary Nicholson, stated that “this drama intervention technique came out of credited theories of intervention such as the experiential learning theory and theatre of the oppressed by Augusto Boal and allows us an insight into the lives of Jamaican women” (H. Nicholson, personal communication, March 24, 2020). It was in this forum theatre style discussion that “many opportunities to construct, reflect and experiment with the possibilities of emerging self within society, outside of the intensity of personal expressive exploration” (Grushka, 2008b, p.13) occurred.



The Ashe Company

The Ashe Company, founded in 1993 by Joseph Robinson, Paulette Bellamy, and a small group of past players of the Little People Performance Club is widely known locally and internationally for their entertaining and high energy performances. What many people may not know is their massive contribution to civil society and nation development through their unique blend of entertainment and education grounded in theatre and performance. Serving as the current co-directors, Conroy Wilson and Michael Holgate (personal communication, May 22, 2020) describe the group as “a civil society organisation that works on various social issues. They are a performing arts organisation and a social development enterprise that uses theatre and edutainment for social development.” Their unique mandate, “to inspire and foster empowerment of all people, exclusive of none, to live a life of integrity and fulfillment, doing what they love and loving what they do” (The Ashe Company, n.d.) guides their unique methodology of **Excitement + Involvement + Commitment (EIC)**.



This **EIC** model drives their unique combination of arts-based training and education techniques guided by cultural and ancestral leanings. The members of Ashe themselves are deeply entrenched in spiritual and empowered ways of being, allowing them “a deep spiritual connection that resonates with the audience and workshop participants” (M. Holgate, personal communication, May 22, 2020). It moves through their performances to empower observers and self. The key to this type of theatre, is an unconscious involvement on the part of their audience and workshop participants in the process of education and self-healing, which exemplifies the pedagogy of tangential visibility.

Conclusion

The work of the social action theatre groups discussed evidenced many shared social work principles. Their work identified practical ways in which theatre was used to empower, advocate and elevate the social consciousness of our people. These groups all share common principles of theatre for development of self and society. The ability of the actors and the audience to go on a journey together in unmasking the “real-life characters” represented on stage must be recognised as “re-representation of self” (Grushka, 2008). This re-representation is what provides the catalyst for a new emergence of self. This is seen from the bold and expressive nature of the Sistren Theatre Collective and Women’s Media Watch Ja’s determination to tackle the nation’s issue of representation of gender. It can be seen in the Groundwork Theatre Company’s far-reaching impact on the lives of youth and youth empowerment. It is evident in the Ashe Company’s unwavering commitment to issues of national development. All the groups highlighted, provided examples of how engaging in the analysis of self through othering, sets the stage for the “creation of a safe space to develop potentialities within individuals and the collective that enhances a sense of self-efficacy” (Sliep & Meyer -Weitz, 2003, p. 54). Tangential visibility is seen through art making which “presented as an expressive [and] critical space [where] self is embodied and [the personal] can be explored” (Grushka, as cited in Bolstad, 2010).

When applied to social work processes, tangential visibility can be seen as a developing concept to the exploration of self among social work practitioners, social work students, social change agents, and theatre practitioners alike. Reflecting on my own position as both theatre practitioner and social worker, the implication of this work and its contents for the social work profession is immense. The importance of social action theatre and its potential for social work education becomes one that can be relocated as “best practice” amongst Caribbean social workers, as its potential for behavioural change and nation development is undeniable. It is understood that the exploration of self can be done in a discursive way which will allow emotional safety for the client involved in the process.

Tangential visibility, while emerging from arts education, can be applied to social work practice as a conceptual aid for enabling social change, within the planned change process. With further development and research, it can be used as a teachable tool in social work education. The establishing and legitimising of drama intervention as an effective intervention tool for social work practitioners and educators cannot be overstated. The unearthing of Grushka’s Tangential Visibility, for social work researchers, educators, and practitioners, becomes even more important as we seek to etch out the growing body of Caribbean social work theory that is indigenous to us but stand secure as a globally relevant pedagogy for our region.

Shawna-Kae Burns, MSW

Instructor

Department of Sociology, Psychology and Social Work

The University of the West Indies, Mona

shawnakae.burns02@uwimona.edu.jm

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