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BOOK REVIEWS

WENN DIE BURKA PLÖTZLICH FLIEGT. EINBLICKE IN DIE ARBEIT MIT DEM THEATER DER UNTERDRÜCKTEN IN AFGHANISTAN. [WHEN THE BURQA IS SUDDENLY BARED: INSIGHTS FROM WORKING WITH THE THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED IN AFGHANISTAN] BY HJALMAR JORGE JOFFRE-EICHHORN (2013)

Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag, Berliner Schriften zum Theater der Unterdrückten, Vol. 5, 220 pp.
ISBN: 9 7838 3820 4727.

Reviewed by Sruti Bala, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Joffre-Eichhorn's book on his experiences as a practitioner of the Theatre of the Oppressed in the context of development and peace-building in Afghanistan strikes a refreshingly different note from most existing literature on the field of Theatre for Development and theatre in conflict zones.

To start with, it is written in a very personal and conversational manner, in the form of a diary or weblog of the author's own experiences in the country as an international developmental worker and theatre activist of sorts. It is full of anecdotes and personal memories, incorporating photographs and drawings from workshop processes that seem to intentionally convey a raw, unedited impression of theatre work in one of the most complex and protracted conflicts of the world. The pathos-laden title already gives an indication of the narrative style – at times flowery and sentimental, but nevertheless genuinely unassuming in its tone. To that extent, it can be classified more as a primary source text containing material on participatory theatre in Afghanistan rather than as a work of theatre scholarship.

At the same time, the book touches upon critical issues, asking tough questions and reflecting on the dilemmas of theatre-based intervention under extraordinarily grim circumstances without claiming to have ready truths or offering a finished, sophisticated analysis. It can thus be read as a form of

militant research, an intermittent chronicle of reflections that calls for further action and activist intervention. Joffre-Eichhorn's intense personal commitment to participatory theatre, and to the people with whom he has forged longer term associations in Afghanistan, is thus more than evident.

As a German-Bolivian with a background in international development and education management, Joffre-Eichhorn has served as freelance theatre practitioner using the Theatre of the Oppressed and Playback Theatre methodologies in different parts of the world. The book presents the complexities of his own position as privileged *Charidji*, or foreign development aid worker, as a male facilitator from the West working with marginalized groups and as an expat who is critical towards the politics of international development aid, always treading a thin line between using and opposing the system. In this regard, the book offers a passionate, though unsystematic, critique of all that goes wrong in the name of developmental cooperation and humanitarian assistance: where the internationals live in their own segregated world in Afghanistan, with no connection to the local population and no real political will to effect change from the grassroots; where the Afghans continue to be viewed as backward and uncivilized; and where resources are misused and disproportionately distributed.

Joffre-Eichhorn's book presents several examples of how theatre in such a setting is implicated in the neo-colonial politics of aid and military or civilian intervention in conflict. These suggest the need for a more in-depth study, as well as a broader theorization of theatre in conflict zones with reference to emergent modes of neo-liberal governance around the world.

The book is part of a German-language series that introduces recent applications of the Theatre of the Oppressed in diverse contexts. It is an interesting resource for scholars of the Theatre of the Oppressed for two reasons. First, it provides insights into the application of well-known Boalian exercises in a workshop setting: how cultural codes of communication are navigated when it comes to exercises involving physical or eye contact; how a group of war widows engage with image theatre; how children with hearing impairments respond to cooperation games; in which situations exercises involving rhythmic co-ordination fail and where exactly storytelling exercises are welcomed with enthusiasm. Joffre-Eichhorn unpacks the interpretive potentials of these exercises, but unfortunately also partly spoils that by repeatedly focusing on the question of evaluation and impact, an occupational symptom possibly internalized from working within the logic of INGOs and donor agencies. There is far more to say about a theatre workshop in a remote war-torn village than whether or not the participants found it useful. The dynamics of de-mechanizing bodies that are stultified through war and violent conflict for decades, the intricacies of language, translation, the embodiment of ethnic differences, the temporary transformation of spaces such as a mosque through an effort of collective imagination: these are profound and difficult issues upon which the book touches, yet they are left unresolved, as if the question of the political relevance of theatre can be answered more easily through participant affirmations of its use. The second aspect of interest to theatre scholars is the combination of the Theatre of the Oppressed with other methodologies such as Playback Theatre in Joffre-Eichhorn's experiments in Afghanistan, as well as the discussion of how the methodology relates to models of transitional justice. Here the question of how truth-telling corresponds to justice in the framework and aesthetic conceptions of the theatre is crucial, and also offers scope for further investigation and reflection.

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