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### Theatre for Women's Participation in Sustainable Development

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Theatre for Women's Participation in Sustainable Development

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## 1. Micro effects and affects of applied theatre

A group of young, rural Guatemalan girls are enrolled in a mentoring programme offered by an NGO to be able to complete their schooling and receive supplementary training to be groomed into a generation of self-confident and skilled leaders. During a theatre workshop conducted by Beth Osnes, author of the practice-led study under review, the girls are asked to prepare a scene depicting an encounter between one of them and the first lady of Guatemala on the importance of education for girls. The exercise elicits relentless attacks of giggles, which severely affect the completion of the exercise. Osnes pays close attention to this moment, searching for its significance: was it simple amusement? Was it an uncontrollable reaction to the very thought of having to even imagine such a situation? Was it a kind of stage fright that pertains not only to the theatrical stage, but also to a possible future moment where its rehearsal might become a real encounter? Was it a collective recognition of the absurdity of the scene, given the obstacles to education in their present lives, a way of preserving the status quo by inducing shame on others, or a way to cover up one's own fear at being giggled at? As facilitator, Osner navigates these reactions by introducing a set of breathing exercises to calm down the giggles and urge the girls to support the protagonist in her appointed task. She reflects on the giggles as being both an obstacle to the exercise as well as an opportunity to elicit a collective, embodied reflection.

The example illustrates what the study does best, namely demonstrate the application and impact of participatory theatre methods at a micro level: seemingly minute changes in the mood of a group, subtle transformations of a rural woman's level of self-confidence in terms of the strength of her voice, the openness of her laughter, the way her arms stretch out and dare to take up more space. When a young girl physically experiences the de-mechanisation of her body movements through games and exercises, when her peers listen attentively to her and she discovers that self-exploration is not frivolous but an existential pursuit, it can lead to a paradigm shift in her attitudes towards authority or towards societal norms regulating her behaviour. Applied theatre is thus assessed in terms of both *effect* as well as *affect*, a distinction discussed eloquently by James Thompson, whose work Osnes unfortunately does not refer to. In *Performance Affects: The Ends of Applied Theatre* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), Thompson pleads for an understanding of applied theatre practices in terms of affect, rather than only emphasising their social or developmental impact. By affect, Thompson refers to a concern for emotions, feelings and embodied responses as different from and assessed not only in terms of their social or other larger consequences or behavioral changes resulting from them, but on a different register. In Osnes' study, affect seems to be relevant in terms of its effects. The distinction is not fully taken into account, at least not as one that requires a different methodological frame. The wealth of examples offered in her thick descriptions of workshop exercises provide several opportunities to analyse the affective aspects of women's participation, some but not all of which can be measured in terms of their impact in sustainable development. Put differently, theatre is a tool for social transformation, and simultaneously a site for the exploration of the individual and collective psyche. It offers a means to approach the volatility and irrationality of the psyche, its resistance to developmental agendas and economic logics, its unlegislated desires. Registering this affective component of theatre in relation to the lives of women affected by poverty, is core to understanding the politics of participation in art and social reality.

## 2. Women, development and applied theatre

The book examines the role of applied theatre in promoting women's participation in sustainable development in Guatemala, India and Ethiopia. It is guided by the author's own practice-led research and personal commitment to various developmental initiatives around women, public health, motherhood and sustainable or clean energy. The applied theatre forms include a combination of voice training, participatory methods from the Theatre of the Oppressed, inspired by radical educational reformer Paolo Freire, as well as Education Entertainment, a method of behaviour change communication through the arts and popular media, including the so-called Sabido methodology, created by Miguel Sabido from the Mexican media network Televisa. The overall argument of the book is that

(a) the more genuine and autonomous the participation of women, the more sustainable or long-lasting the desired societal change will be, and (b) that applied theatre can nurture such a kind of self-empowered, rather than tokenistic participation.

There are two things that distinguish this book from the vast existing literature on theatre for development, applied theatre and gender. First, the author is well informed about developmental discourses and challenges through her own long-term involvement in clean energy programmes. She has presented her work not only or not even primarily to theatre scholars, but also at conferences on development and technology and sustainable energy, where she established contacts with some of the organisations she visited, offered workshops to and spent time studying. This knowledge of the problems and debates around energy, women's health, or mother-child-care programmes based on her experiences in three continents, lends the study a certain rigour in the presentation of the issues. Second, the book does not limit its scope to theatre alone, but also discusses the use of radio programming, as well as video and television together with applied theatre. This is refreshing and done in a down-to-earth manner, without turning it into an abstract discussion on intermediality or becoming anxious about the threatened status of theatre in the face of growing technologies and social media. Another interesting feature in terms of the range of applied theatre methods covered, is the discussion of education entertainment (EE) and the Sabido methodology, a social learning concept based on positive, negative and transitional characters, with which audiences are triggered to identify and change their own behaviour. Osnes outlines the critique of EE as not being rooted in a paradigm shift or addressing the structural dimensions of a problem, but merely offering different modes of behaviour. Yet the Ethiopian example of using EE in the form of a radio play on female genital mutilation is assessed by Osnes as an instance of the method's effectiveness and suitability for that particular context, notwithstanding the problems it carries.

All case study chapters are structured in a similar fashion: a brief presentation of the national development and gender context, an introduction of the NGO where the study is conducted, their stance on gender and developmental aims, their funding structures, a description of the authors' involvement and contribution or intervention, a description of the site, a detailed thick description of the applied theatre workshop conducted by the author herself or run by the organisation, a presentation of the outcomes, a section on impact assessment, monitoring and evaluation, overall lessons learned and recommendations. A very brief comparative analysis of the different countries is offered in the concluding chapter, yet this does not go beyond ascertaining that there are common commitments to gender equity in all three settings or that young women are mainly targeted as participants in their theatre programming (181-2). There is no broad discussion of the differences between Guatemala, India and Ethiopia, for instance how and why the same voice exercise may have had an entirely different quality in another location and to what extent the attitudes towards gender equity were to be attributed to the international human rights and developmental discourses.

### 3. Feminist applied theatre?

The three main cases presented in the book are: an educational project for girls in Guatemala called *Starfish One by One*, already introduced at the beginning of the review; the applied theatre training of trainers programme of the *Appropriate Rural Technology Institute* in Maharashtra, India, specially geared to raising awareness about clean energy access in India; and the *Population Media Center* in Addis Abeba, Ethiopia, with its focus on family planning and reproductive health. Further examples from Osnes' involvement in a sustainable energy project with indigenous Navajo women in the USA and from South Africa and India are referenced as well, though in less detail. Though all organisations are pursuing some form of developmental goals, not all are specifically women's organisations. Based on the observations in the field and with reference to literature on gender and development, Osnes argues that women's participation is essential to pursuing any developmental goals. This does not mean that ensuring women's participation is not a meaningful end in itself, nor that the onus for social development should be on women alone. The book reinforces the belief that a change in attitude or behaviour at an individual level, facilitated by applied theatre, can effect societal change at large. A critique of the NGO-isation of civil society in countries of the Global South and of the lop-sidedness often found in gender discourses in development is thus entirely absent. To give one example, in the educational video film made by the Indian rural technology initiative ARTI to raise awareness on clean energy cooking systems, there is a scene where a husband is angry with his wife because his food is not prepared on time, not realising that the open cooking stove does not light properly (119). The wife then learns about the new energy saving and easy-to-use cooking stove, the acquisition of which eventually leads to matrimonial harmony, since she can now prepare her husband's dinner on time and not have to suffer using a polluting and inefficient stove. Osnes assesses the film in terms of it being received very well by rural audiences and resulting in actual behavioural change with women becoming willing to adopt clean energy stoves. Yet Osnes does not directly question the reinforcement of gender stereotypes in the film; that it presents the clean energy stove as the answer to the disturbance of the patriarchal order, without having to question the husband's unjustified anger at the wife in the first place or indeed make him do the cooking. Women's participation in adopting appropriate technological changes marks one part of the challenge of sustainable development, but if the paradigm of development is seen as unrelated to patriarchy, then women's participation, however genuine or committed, becomes instrumentalised to suit the status quo ante or at best make it more bearable. Osnes thus reveals that theatre for women's participation in sustainable development need not

necessarily be a feminist theatre. However, the study makes a strong case for applied theatre as a tool that is sensitive to the embodied articulations of the lives and perceptions of women, particularly women in poverty.

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