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**TOWARDS A PRAXIS OF RESISTANCE: POPULAR THEATRE AND/AS  
EMPOWERMENT**

By

Sharon L. Green

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

1999

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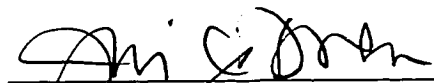
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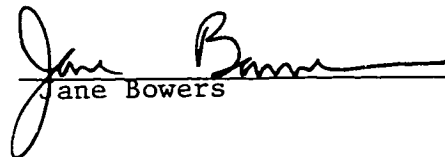
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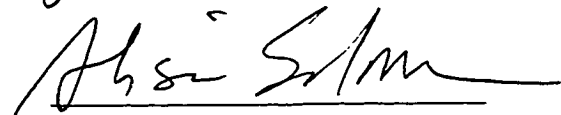


Jill Dolan, Executive Officer  
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May 7, 1999



Jane Bowers



Alisa Solomon

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I have written this part of my dissertation over and over in my head for what feels like eons. Yet, now as I actually sit down to write it I feel uncharacteristically at a loss for words. This has been a very long process, not just the writing of the dissertation, but graduate school as a whole; as a matter of fact it was a process I never imagined I would complete. Throughout the time I have been working on this project there have been so many people who have provided emotional, intellectual and other varied types of support. To thank them all here barely seems to begin to do justice to what I owe them all and I fear that in the frenzy that can become graduate school I didn't take enough time out during the process to thank them all. I hope to begin making amends here.

I want to thank those people who made up the intellectual community that has fostered and supported my own developing intellect and critical abilities. First, there are the professors in whose classes I learned both about theatre and teaching. In particular I am grateful to the members of my dissertation committee; Jill Dolan, Alisa Solomon and Jane Bowers. Their supportive readings and encouragement throughout this process kept me on track during even the weariest moments. Teas and classes with Marvin Carlson taught me much about theatre, teaching and scholarship. I thank the members of "The Reading Group" – Beth, Erin, Jay, Jill, Jim, Maurya – which has provided some of the most intellectually stimulating moments of graduate school. Knowing how smart and perceptive all of you are pushed my own thinking to a new level.

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## INTRODUCTION

“Theatre is the first human invention and also the invention which paves the way for all other inventions and discoveries.”

– Augusto Boal<sup>1</sup>

In his book, The Politics of Performance, Baz Kershaw notes the predicament that faces radical theatre: “to aim to be both oppositional and popular places performance on a knife edge between resistance to, and incorporation into, the status quo.”<sup>2</sup> It is precisely the way in which political theatre negotiates this balancing act that I will explore in this dissertation. This dissertation will look at the way political theatre negotiates and maintains its existence in opposition to the mainstream. I will suggest that making performance political is a *process*, rather than a static descriptor, which continuously exists in a dialectical relationship with other processes of history and culture. Those relationships and the nature of their intersections and interactions in turn will affect the politics of any theatrical performance. As the contexts in which performance practices

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<sup>1</sup> Rainbow of Desire, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Baz Kershaw, The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention, (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 153.

exist shift either historically, geographically or otherwise, their politics too will change. This dissertation will be an attempt to understand how theatre negotiates its relationship to these processes in an effort to be a site for radical political and cultural resistance. Integral to an understanding of how theatre can be made political is an understanding of when and how politically resistant meaning is and is not generated. In other words I will look at both the successes and failures of the theatrical practices I have chosen to examine.

In particular, this dissertation will be concerned with an examination of theatrical practices that purport to empower either their participants, their spectators, or both. The emergence of the theatre practices I will be discussing in this dissertation roughly coincides with the independence of many African, Latin American and Caribbean countries from European colonizers in the 1960s and 1970s and whose development is tied to post-colonial struggles against oppression and imperialism. This post-colonial moment infused many of the working class or oppressed peoples in these nations with the hope and fervor for bettering their conditions. In Jamaica, for example, singer Bob Marley's words – "Get up, stand up, stand up for your rights" – became symbolic of the emancipatory determination of working class attitudes in that nation. In other nations, independence prompted a resurgence of indigenous cultural traditions that had been suppressed during colonial times and which became the source for politicized performances.

These theatrical practices, which developed in response to post-colonial forces of liberation, imperialism and oppression, comprised what I will argue was a popular theatre

*movement*. This dissertation will explore the dynamics of popular theatre and interrogate its purported ability to be a radical political practice, in an effort to understand when and how political theatre can be most efficacious. In what context does popular theatre represent a practice of resistance? What historical and social forces converge to result in the containment of its politics? What are some of the strategies that have been successful in recuperating these practices as sites for radical resistance? To what extent are the meanings generated by popular theatre performances – and hence the role they play in cultural struggles – contingent on the context in which they exist? What implications does this have for the politics of popular theatre when it is relocated to a different geographical context, such as Latin American theatre activist Augusto Boal’s move from Brazil to Europe and North America, and the Jamaican women’s theatre collective Sistren’s performances in the US and Canada? What are the political implications of other contextual shifts such as Sistren’s move from performances within working class ghettos to those for middle-class audiences? What can a study of popular theatre’s reception reveal about the long-term viability of resistant practices? What can contextual studies of these practices teach us about the resilience and relevance of popular theatre today?

While many theatres and theatrical practices throughout history have been referred to as “popular,” my discussion will be limited to a very particular definition of popular theatre, one which has its roots in the theories and practices that emerged from these post-colonial nations. The explosion of popular theatre practices in “third world” nations in the 1960s and 1970s, constituting what I will refer to as a popular theatre

movement, owes a great debt ideologically to the theories of adult educator, Paulo Freire, and the ways in which these were then translated into a theatrical practice by the Brazilian playwright and director, Augusto Boal. Scholar Diana Taylor concisely defines the theatre of this movement by focusing on its goals: popular theatre “supports the interests of the oppressed and marginalized groups within a society . . . popular theatre attempts to liberate both its audience and itself.”<sup>3</sup> It is precisely this idea of liberation that connects Freire’s pedagogical theories and Boal’s practice to the popular theatre movement.

Freire rejected what he termed the “banking” style of education – where the teacher has all of the knowledge and makes periodic deposits into the students’ “banks” – and believed instead that each individual must actively participate in her own education and liberation. Working as part of a literacy program in Latin America, Freire cited pedagogy’s goal not as the accumulation of empirical knowledge but rather as the development of the ability to think critically. The term “conscientization,” which has been used to describe the goal of popular theatre and refers to the raising of a critical consciousness, grows out of his work. In his article, “Theatre as Praxis: Discursive Strategies in African Popular Theatre,” Guarav Desai notes this influence on popular theatre practices in Africa: “Many of the theoretical premises of the popular theatre workers in Africa originated in the seminal work of the Brazilian adult educator Paulo Freire.”<sup>4</sup> Desai’s description of the cultural function of popular theatre notes its

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<sup>3</sup> *Theatre of Crisis: Drama and Politics in Latin America*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 42.

<sup>4</sup> “Theatre as Praxis: Discursive Strategies in African Popular Theatre,” *African Studies Review*, 33(1), (1990):68.

connections to both pedagogy and politics: “African popular theatre has continually articulated itself as an educational medium and thus as a primary arena for social struggle.”<sup>5</sup> Popular theatre and participatory education in Africa and the Caribbean – which grew out of similar impulses to not only communicate information but also to empower oppressed peoples to assume greater control over their lives – continue to share many goals and working methodologies. Because both are invested in, and components of, a larger project of struggling for liberation, much reference and scholarly material on one engages with the theories and practice of the other.<sup>6</sup>

In many places in the world, including many African countries, the development of participatory popular theatre was a direct rebellion against the government-sponsored theatre projects that preceded it, which consisted of didactic skits designed to teach remote villagers things that the government deemed important. For example, a large population control campaign in Africa, in the 1950s, was conducted in this way. Penina Mluma, a professor and popular theatre practitioner in Tanzania, describes the development of popular theatre in Tanzania as a reaction to the other, more propaganda-based oral art practices that can be found in that country. In contrast to these, which serve to preserve and disseminate dominant ideologies, popular theatre “involves the participation of the community not only in action for development but also in communicating its own ideas, views and analyses of issues . . . in the Popular Theatre process oral art is used very effectively by people to analyze for themselves their socio-

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

economic conditions.”<sup>7</sup> While popular theatre strives for a greater dialogic structure it, too, as Desai notes, is “a functional discourse which can legitimate or subvert the existing power structures of a society.”<sup>8</sup> Because the potential to do either is inherent in the form, my interest lies in studying the variant ingredients that contribute to a particular practice’s politic. How do successful practices subvert the power structures of the status quo? What social conditions and spectatorial behaviors contribute to this outcome? How can a performance which in one context, has meanings which subvert the status quo, in a different context acquire meanings which accomplish the opposite goal?

As the above quote by Boal which starts this writing suggests, popular theatre recognizes that theatre as a medium paves the way for discoveries of self, community and each’s roles within larger structures. Rather than remaining a static entity, popular theatre “incessantly questions and rigorously analyzes its own position and ideology.”<sup>9</sup> This dissertation seeks to understand the ways in which popular theatre has been, and can be, used as an efficacious site for interventions which disrupt hegemonic cultural and political structures.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES**

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<sup>6</sup> I draw this conclusion from my own research with various primary source materials, i.e. organizational pamphlets, reports from popular theatre conferences, theatre company newsletters.

<sup>7</sup> “Oral Art and Contemporary Cultural Nationalism,” in *Power, Marginality and African Oral Literature*, Graham Furniss and Liz Gunner, eds, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 32-34.

<sup>8</sup> Desai, 65.

<sup>9</sup> Taylor, 43.

Cultural studies offers a theoretical terrain on which to think through questions that explore popular theatre's participation in the larger processes of cultural struggle. Lawrence Grossberg has described this approach: "Cultural studies is concerned with describing and intervening in the ways 'texts' and 'discourses' (i.e. cultural practices) are produced within, inserted into, and operate in the everyday life of human beings and social formations, so as to reproduce, struggle against and perhaps transform the existing structures of power."<sup>10</sup> Because of my interest in looking at popular theatre as it developed in third world nations during the 1970s and 1980s within the context of contemporaneous political and social movements, cultural studies offers a method for articulating the ways in which these events and theatrical practices are connected, related and contingent on and with one another. Grossberg further states that cultural studies "tends to look at culture itself as the site of the production and struggle over power."<sup>11</sup> Cultural struggle is an ongoing process made up of moments of resistance, containment, incorporation and recuperation. A contextual examination of popular theatre practices in various locations will allow for a closer examination of the machinations of that struggle. Theatre provides a microcosmic view into, for example, the ongoing linguistic struggle in Jamaica between standard English and patois. This linguistic battle is itself a struggle over and for power, or as Bourdieu might say, for "cultural capital."<sup>12</sup> Sistren's

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<sup>10</sup> "The Circulation of Cultural Studies," in Bringing It All Back Home: Essays on Cultural Studies, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 237.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste, trans. R. Nice, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

performances in patois – and *for* speakers of patois – at a commercial theatre in Kingston participates in this struggle.

Stuart Hall has usefully delineated the various elements of this struggle for power: “Cultural struggle, of course takes many forms: incorporation, distortion, resistance, negotiation, recuperation.”<sup>13</sup> My project will be to study these various processes of cultural struggle as they are played out in the form of popular theatre. That performance can be a particularly useful site for investigations into the dynamic process of cultural dominance is noted by Elin Diamond in the introduction to her anthology, Performance and Cultural Politics: “To study performance is not to focus on completed forms, but to become aware of performance as itself a contested space, where meanings and desires are generated, occluded, and of course multiply interpreted.”<sup>14</sup> Cultural studies, as it has thus far developed, though, Diamond notes, has neglected performance as a site of inquiry. Recent cultural studies anthologies (During, Grossberg et. al.) do not include discussions of performance. I would add that Diamond’s anthology itself tends to privilege performance over theatre; few of the essays in the collection discuss theatrical practices, playwrights, theatre companies or theatrical production.<sup>15</sup>

Cultural studies provides the tools for understanding cultural practices in general and popular theatre in particular as a space of contestation, a site of struggle and

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<sup>13</sup> “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Popular,’” in People’s History and Socialist Theory, Raphael Samuel ed., (London and Boston: Routledge and Keegan Paul Ltd, 1981), 236.

<sup>14</sup> Performance and Cultural Politics, Elin Diamond ed., (New York: Routledge, 1996), 4.

<sup>15</sup> However note that several essays which specifically employ cultural studies models in their discussions of theatrical practice are included in the collection, Critical Theory and Performance, Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach, eds., (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992).

transformation, both ideologically and materially. Because as Stuart Hall has noted, “cultural domination has real effects,” I believe it is as important to note and interrogate those “real” or material effects as well as the ideological ones, noting the complicated ways in which they are interrelated.<sup>16</sup> While *Sistren* is struggling to assert a legitimacy for working-class culture, they are also trying to improve their daily living conditions. Their most frequently cited success involved a community of women sugar workers who, because of a broken pump, did not have water in their community and had to travel far to get it. The popular theatre strategies of *Sistren* helped them to determine what action could be taken to remedy the situation and the water supply was restored shortly thereafter. Joseph Roach has noted that “cultural studies resists the view of art and life as autonomous experiences and insists, instead, that they are inextricably entangled in history and that they are both products of and productive of dynamic cultural processes.”<sup>17</sup> For example, the repressive military regime in which Boal was trying to make theatre necessitated the development of his Theatre of the Oppressed strategies. The challenge to the power structures of the status quo that his theatre practice represented had very material consequences; as Boal’s work became too openly critical of the Brazilian government and its policies in the late 1970s, questioning their authority and ideological dominance, he was imprisoned, tortured and exiled. Two other members of his troupe were executed for their activities.

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<sup>16</sup> “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Popular,’” 233.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Roach, Introduction to section entitled “Cultural Studies,” *Critical Theory and Performance*, Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach, eds, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 10.

Because these practices of popular theatre hope to give voice to the experiences of oppressed people and agitate for social change, they represent a challenge to the power base of the status quo which will inevitably be met with some form of containment. Hall elaborates on this process of domination and suppression of the subordinate classes: “I think there is a continuous and necessarily uneven and unequal struggle, by the dominant culture, constantly to disorganize and reorganize popular culture; to enclose and confine its definitions and forms within a more inclusive range of dominant forms. There are points of resistance; there are also moments of supersession. This is the dialectic of cultural struggle.”<sup>18</sup> It is this dialectic of cultural struggle that my project will trace using popular theatre, its forms, development and reception as a site of investigation. I want to identify those “points of resistance,” as Hall refers to them, and examine why they are successful; what does a useful practice of resistance look like and what conditions allow it to exist?

In addition to moments of resistance, however, Hall also notes that there are also moments of supersession. This process of supersession, or repression, can occur on a material level, as discussed above in the example of Boal. But an equally powerful means of repression can occur on an ideological level, where challenges to dominant ideology must be dealt with in such a way as to make them unthreatening to the power structures of the status quo. John Fiske describes this process of incorporation and its outcome: “The process of adopting the signs of resistance incorporates them into the

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<sup>18</sup> “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Popular,’” 233.

dominant system and thus attempts to rob them of any oppositional meanings.”<sup>19</sup> But Fiske also notes that “under some conditions incorporation may be comparatively effective but under others it is much less so.”<sup>20</sup> To what extent does the current use of patois in other artistic forms, for example, rob Sistren’s use of this language of its oppositional meaning? Under which conditions and in which contexts then is this process of incorporation successful? When and how do the signs of resistance used in popular theatre lose and also maintain their oppositional meanings?

Simon During has noted that culture can be thought of as “an apparatus within a large system of domination,” and that “cultural studies offers critiques of culture’s hegemonic effects.”<sup>21</sup> The tools of cultural studies provide a method for interrogating the practices and material consequences of popular theatre, and for examining the role it plays in the larger system of ideological domination and resistance. By looking at what happens to a practice of resistance, such as popular theatre, as it moves through time and changes locations, I believe much can be learned about the many forms of cultural struggle to which Hall refers. If we consider these practices, as Kershaw suggests we do, as cultural constructs, part of cultural production, what can we then learn about cultural politics of the moment? What role have these various practices played in the larger arena of the politics of identity – national, gender and ethnic?

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<sup>19</sup> Understanding Popular Culture, (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 15-18.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>21</sup> “Introduction,” The Cultural Studies Reader, Simon During, ed., (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 5.

Integral to this methodology is a study of spectatorship, audiences and the political, social and cultural context in which the work is done. Kershaw's study attempts to assess the efficacy of radical performance in post-war Britain, while simultaneously noting the difficulty of such a project. He notes that "in order to assess their impact it becomes essential to study their context. If we wish to understand their potential meanings in that context we need to investigate how specific audiences might 'read' their performances."<sup>22</sup> Theatre, as all cultural products, is imbedded within the ideological system in which it is produced. Meaning is created within that context through the exchange between the performance and the spectators. Political, social and cultural context will all impact the way in which a "specific audience might read the performance" and make meaning out of it. I am interested in studying the link between reception and the creation and maintenance of oppositional meanings. I believe that a study of audiences provides a rich site from which to analyze the possibilities and pitfalls of resistant practices as well as to understand the ways in which changing contexts can change the meanings made of a performance. For example, to what extent is a practice's efficacy dependent on a specific audience for resistant meanings?

This approach also includes a comparative study of *changing* audiences. When the political and/or geographical context of the performance changes, either as a result of political/social change within a culture – as will be the case with Sistren's performances within Jamaica – or as a result of international travel – such as Sistren's performances outside of Jamaica, or Boal's practice as adapted by North Americans and Europeans –

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<sup>22</sup> Kershaw, 143.

the meanings made of the performance will inevitably change as well. What happens to the politics of a resistant practice when taken out of its original social, political and cultural context? What effects do changes in targeted (and/or actual) audiences have on the politically resistant nature of the work? In her book, Theatre Audiences, Susan Bennett notes, “if the nature of the audience changed, then so did the cultural status of the theatrical event.”<sup>23</sup> I am interested in looking at the changing “cultural status” these theatre practices have as they change location and as the “nature” of their audiences changes. My research for this part of the dissertation will be ethnographic in nature, based in large part on field research and interviews.

A study of popular theatre, unlike much other theatre research, must also confront the methodological difficulties resulting from the scarcity of traditional artifacts on which theatre historians rely – scripts, reviews, programs, company records, production notebooks. As Maria DiCenzo notes in her book, The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain 1968-1990: The Case of 7:84 (Scotland), this is one of the greatest challenges facing scholars of alternative theatre.<sup>24</sup> DiCenzo notes that because alternative theatre work frequently occurs in the margins of society, it does not get documented in traditional ways and hence gets written out of history. For my project, this difficulty is compounded by the fact that popular theatre exists at the crossroads of different professions; many popular theatre workers have been literacy and outreach workers,

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<sup>23</sup> Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception, (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 4.

<sup>24</sup> The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain 1968-1990: The Case of 7:84 (Scotland), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

rather than theatre professionals, and so any written documentation of their work has been skewed to provide a record of the work within that discipline rather than including theatrical documentation. For example, one of the first scholarly essays on the Botswana *Laedza Batanani* experiment, which I discuss in chapter one, was published in a journal of adult education and focuses on the projects' success as a literacy project.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the most comprehensive archive of primary research material on popular theatre that I used for this project was housed at the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) in Toronto.<sup>26</sup> Other archives that were useful to me were the resource centers maintained by Sistren and the Association for Development Agencies (ADA) in Jamaica. Clearly, I needed to look outside traditional disciplinary boundaries to find research materials.

Much popular theatre, including Sistren Theatre Collective, has been funded by international development agencies. The research implications of this are two-fold. First, much of the available written material on popular theatre projects has been prepared as evaluations for these agencies. Gaurav Desai has noted, "Most of the earlier writing on theatre for development in Africa has been of a documentary nature. This tendency reflects the fact that the 'theatre for development' campaigns have often been financed by international funding agencies in cooperation with the African states; workshop reports have been a normal bureaucratic requirement in this context."<sup>27</sup> Because of the audience and purpose for which they were being written, Desai notes, "These reports have

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<sup>25</sup> See Ross Kidd and Martin Byram, "Laedza Batanani: Popular Theatre for Development," *Convergence* 10 (1980):20-31.

<sup>26</sup> ICAE sponsored several networking events for popular theatre workers during the period this dissertation covers. See Chapter One for more details.

generally failed to offer any sustained theoretical discussions of the enterprise.”<sup>28</sup>

Because negative critique of such projects had far-reaching consequences for their survival, Diczenco notes the difficulty for historians relying on such writings:

I am concerned less with offending individuals and more with the implications of critical studies/histories for existing theatre companies. On one hand, they can have positive implications by raising the profile of a company, even lending the company’s work authority or credibility (in the academic sphere). There is no doubt that once such histories are produced or published, they affect the status of companies and contribute (no matter how unwillingly) to canon formation. *It is not unusual for companies to use positive assessments in their publicity and grant applications.* On the other hand, negative accounts can be damaging to companies struggling to survive.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, because the work I am looking at either took place in developing countries or in informal workshop settings, much of the research material that would be of use to me was either never published, or not widely distributed. Scholars who have studied in these regions had much of their work published by government agencies rather than commercial or academic presses, doubly marginalizing the material. While there may be holes in the history I write of these theatrical practices, I have followed Diczenco’s advice in remembering that even in its elliptical nature this work helps to write those histories back into theatre history.

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<sup>27</sup> “Introduction: Theatre for Development in Africa,” *Research in African Literatures*, 22(3), (Fall 1991):8.

Another methodological challenge has been the scarcity of recorded scripts/texts for popular theatre work. David Kerr notes in the preface to his book, African Popular Theatre, “The bulk of African popular theatre does not exist in script form – it has to be reconstructed by analysing oral or written descriptions.”<sup>30</sup> Such descriptions may be more or less readily available in different instances. For example, during my field work in Jamaica I was able to view videos of several performances, which gave me a sense of the aesthetic quality of Sistren’s work. However, most of the scripts of those productions do not exist in a finished form. Several copies of scripts I read included handwritten edits, with lines added and deleted. In addition, during my interviews, several members told me that lines were constantly being changed, sometimes up to the day of performance.

Boal has always juxtaposed his Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) with other bourgeois theatre by noting that the bourgeois theatre is a finished theatre. “The bourgeoisie already knows what the world is like, their world, and is able to present images of this complete finished world . . . on the other hand, the proletariat and the oppressed classes do not know yet what their world will be like; consequently their theatre will be the rehearsal, not the finished spectacle.”<sup>31</sup> His comment suggests that the scholar of such theatre should, as this dissertation tries to do, focus on the processes of creation rather than solely the “finished” products. Much of Boal’s Theatre of the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>29</sup> Dicenzo, 9. Italics mine.

<sup>30</sup> David Kerr, African Popular Theatre, (London: James Curry, 1995), x.

<sup>31</sup> Theatre of the Oppressed, 142.

Oppressed – as practiced both by Boal and others – is based on stories told in the moment by spectators whose active participation in the creation of the theatrical event transforms them into “spect-actors.” The stories are not recorded, nor are they meant to be. Integral to TO practice is the active participation of the storyteller. Certainly some TO practitioners use “rehearsed” stories or scenarios, but they usually lie in the performers’ or company’s memory rather than on paper. For example, TO practitioner David Diamond describes the process of creating a “Power Play,” a form influenced by Boal’s TO work: “In actual fact a pen was never put to paper – we just started improvising based on the characters and situations we wanted to portray.”<sup>32</sup> Diamond’s comment points to the difficulty involved both in doing research on popular theatre and in keeping records of this work. Moreover, even when a scenario is scripted, it is usually used simply as a starting point for an exploration that occurs in performance. But even these “scripted” performances are rarely recorded. Because performance itself is ephemeral – in the moment that it exists it also disappears – the lack of textual remains makes popular theatre particularly vulnerable to historical erasure.<sup>33</sup>

A study of texts, however, is antithetical to my current project, a reality necessitated by the lack of such research material and by the focal point of the genre itself. My study, rather, is more interested in the creative process and its interactions with other cultural and political forces. As Baz Kershaw notes, I want to consider this practice “as a cultural construct and as a means of cultural production.” As such, what can

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<sup>32</sup> Playing Boal, 43.

popular theatre practices reveal about the larger cultural and political conditions out of which they emerge?

Popular theatre has a very specific use-value and the role it plays in daily struggles for cultural and economic survival, I will argue, is where attention must be paid. My interest in popular theatre as a praxis of resistance is engaged less with the actual dramatic structures developed than with the theatrical practices' interaction with their audiences and creators.

Much of my research for this dissertation has been ethnographic; I did field research in Jamaica with Sistren for chapters two and three and have interviewed numerous people throughout North America about their work with Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed techniques for chapter four. In some cases, I was able to observe an individual's work, in others I use examples of projects in which I was involved in some capacity. My research for chapter five included observations of rehearsals, performances, informal talks and interviews. Doing the work of an ethnographer has added particular complications and richness to this project.<sup>34</sup> Diczko notes, "A researcher may also find, by interviewing and observing the working process, discrepancies between the way the company purports to operate and how it *actually* operates."<sup>35</sup> I found this to be true both in my work with Sistren and in the observation of several Theatre of the Oppressed

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<sup>33</sup> For a longer discussion on the ephemerality of performance see Peggy Phelan, Unmarked: The Politics of Performance. (London, New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>34</sup> For some of the complexities involved in conducting ethnographic research, see, for example, James Clifford and George Marcus, eds., Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986); Larry Whitehead and Mary Ellen Conaway, eds, Self, Sex and Gender in Cross Cultural Fieldwork, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

activities which purported to operate under structures of democracy but oftentimes actually did not.

What this points out is the necessity of fieldwork, but also the limitations of fieldwork, for the researcher can never hope to observe all of the processes about which she hopes to write. Sistren has existed for twenty years; my fieldwork was only for a tiny fraction of that time. I could never observe all of their operations. This means that while some of the history I have written is based on observation and ethnography, some is not. Some is based on archival research. Thousands of people throughout North America have been influenced by Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed work; I could not speak with and observe the work of all of them. From the observations I have done, and from my own experience of Boal's techniques, I have extrapolated and generalized and drawn conclusions. Those conclusions may be more and less true for other Boal practitioners. Because of this, while certainly part of my project has been to write the history of Sistren Theatre Collective, the focus of the dissertation as a whole is less on specific histories and more on the dynamics of popular theatre as a practice of political and cultural resistance. In the chapters of this dissertation I try to note the ways in which my own position as a researcher affected my evaluation of the work; however, one of the inherent problems with ethnography is that there are a multitude of ways in which my subjectivity has affected the very organization of the research and writing of this project of which I remain unaware.

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<sup>35</sup> Dicenzo, 9

The questions that have fueled this inquiry have been ones which circulate around understanding how popular theatre can be used as a tool for cultural intervention, critical pedagogy and activism. How can lessons learned in one geographic region be extrapolated for use in other regions? Empowerment is the articulated goal of much popular theatre; are all cultural interventions empowering? Is political theatre inherently empowering, and vice versa, is empowering theatre inherently political, and what does it mean if it is? What does it mean if it isn't?

In chapter one, "Critical Convergence: Theatre, Social Action and Pedagogy," I look at the emergence of popular theatre as a practice and interrogate its operative principles of participation and empowerment. In this chapter I will posit that post-coloniality created a similar set of social, political and cultural conditions in various regions of the third world which resulted in similar theatrical responses. Popular theatre with goals of conscientization gained the momentum of a movement which included conferences and information sharing among practitioners. Drawing on examples from the various developing regions of the world – Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean – I look at the development of popular theatre as a pedagogical, political and theatrical tool that was an integral part of struggles against oppression.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Similar and parallel popular theatre practices were developing in other parts of the third world as well. I have chosen to limit the scope of my study in large part because of the availability of research materials. One of the more well-documented examples is the Philippine Educational Theatre Association (PETA). For more information see, Eugene van Erven, Stages of People Power: The Philippines' Educational Theatre Association, (The Hague: Center for the Study of Developing Countries, 1989). Also see the same author's, The Playful Revolution: Theatre and Liberation in Asia (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

Chapters two and three provide an in-depth examination of Sistren Theatre Collective. Chapter two, “Practicing Resistance: The History of Sistren Theatre Collective,” starts by examining the founding of Sistren and the political, social and economic conditions out of which it emerged. The third chapter, “Rethinking Resistance, Relocating Popular Theatre,” charts some of the changes the company has faced as the political landscape within and outside of Jamaica has shifted. My cultural/social history of the organization exists in a dialectic relationship with the various changing contexts that provide their theatrical practice with meaning; changing audiences, the changing material conditions of the audiences, and changing places of performance. This discussion will connect to the discussion of the changing contexts of Boal’s practice by interrogating the ways in which popular theatre struggles to remain “popular,” in a society that has grown indifferent to grassroots initiatives. Can popular theatre, which strives to articulate the conditions of oppressed peoples and agitate for change, still truly exist in such a context?

Chapter four, “Beyond Boal: Theatre of the Oppressed in North America,” is an exploration of some of the ways in which Boal’s practice has been adapted in the U.S. and Canada by different practitioners and the implications of these contextual and geographical shifts of his practice. The chapter focuses on structural and contextual challenges faced by TO practitioners in their work and what implications these reveal for the role TO can play in cultural struggles in these new contexts.

The final chapter, “Grassroots Theatre in a Era of Cultural Globalization,” looks forward to a world in which local cultures are being swallowed by global and corporate

ones and asks, what are the implications of such a force for local, community-based theatre practices whose focus is activism and education? In the context of this era what is to be made of what I will call the “fetishization of the folk” or the intense interest in folk cultures? The chapter begins with a theoretical interrogation of the relationship between globalization and popular theatre. Can popular theatre, which depends on locality for its meanings continue to be effective in an era of globalization? The dissertation, as a whole, tries to take lessons that can be learned from various places in an effort to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which popular theatre can be used in our time and location as an efficacious site for cultural and political interventions.

**CHAPTER ONE**  
**CRITICAL CONVERGENCE: Theatre, Pedagogy and Social Action**

“Political and economic liberation are the essential conditions for cultural liberation, for the future release of a people’s creative spirit and imagination. It is when people are involved in the active work of destroying an inhibitive social structure and building a new one that they begin to see themselves.”<sup>1</sup>

–Ngugi wa Thiong’o

“I do believe that the theatre, utilized in the highest and most difficult sense possible, has the power to influence the aspect and formation of things.”<sup>2</sup>

–Antonin Artaud

“One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding. The starting point for organizing the program content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people.”<sup>3</sup>

–Paulo Freire

I begin this discussion of popular theatre by noting its location at the confluence of several disciplines: theatre, pedagogy, politics and social action. The above quotes pinpoint fundamental theoretical and formal concerns from each discipline in order to

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<sup>1</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong’o “Towards a National Culture,” in Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics (New York: L. Hill, 1973), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Antonin Artaud, The Theatre and Its Double, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1958), 79.

<sup>3</sup> Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1987), 76.

begin to suggest the ways in which this practice's location in the interstices of divergent disciplines complicates both my discussion and my research methodology. I want to examine the inter-relations between discourses of pedagogy, political theatre and post-coloniality and the complex ways in which they enter a discussion of the aims, goals and defining characteristics of popular theatre. In this chapter I will posit that the post-colonial moment created a similar set of social, political and cultural conditions in various regions of the third world that resulted in similar theatrical responses. The mutually influential nature of this work, in which theatre became a social practice and a *praxis* of resistance, constituted a popular theatre movement.

In 1993 I attended a conference on African Theatre and Film at the University of Toronto. At that conference two papers piqued my interest based on their titles because of what I thought would be their relationship to my current research project, which was to trace the influence of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed practice in Africa. The titles of both papers indicated that they would deal with "popular theatre in Tanzania." The difference in the types of performances addressed in each paper encapsulate the difficulties that this chapter will seek to sort through. The first paper was much what I expected it to be; it discussed several projects in which popular theatre had been used to facilitate critical thinking and social action in several rural areas. The second paper, however, discussed popular theatre in Dar es Salaam and focused on performances that had nothing to do with politics per se, or social change, but rather were well attended. While it is the former phenomenon that interests me here, too, I will interrogate the various deployments of the descriptor, "popular."

My discussion is not meant to be a comprehensive retelling of the history of third world popular theatre; that is a project beyond the scope of this dissertation.<sup>4</sup> Rather, I want in this chapter to explore the emergence and dynamics of popular theatre, and in the process trace key concepts in its development and practice in an effort to problematize some of the central terms of the genre, such as “popular,” “participatory” and “empowerment.” I have chosen particular examples from a variety of geographical areas as a means to illustrate the various points I want to make. In later chapters I will take on the task of presenting fully contextualized case studies of popular theatre practices. Here my focus instead is on the emergence and development of practices of popular theatre and the discourse that provides the context for a critical analysis of its potential as a site for political resistance.

Janelle Reinelt has described the theatre of a radically democratic society as one that “involves intervening in the imaginative life of the society by producing mediations on its current balance of equality with liberty, staging contradictions between democratic principles and the material conditions they purport to describe, or creating images of possible alternative configurations, other worlds.”<sup>5</sup> To what extent does popular theatre provide a site for such a practice? This is the driving question of this dissertation. While popular theatre, per se, has a long history in the developing world, its use as an integral

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<sup>4</sup> For a fairly thorough history of the genre in Africa see Kerr, and *Research in African Literatures*, 1991, special issue on theatre. Kees Epskamp, *Theatre in Search of Social Change* (The Hague: CESO, 1989) is somewhat of a survey of third world popular theatre projects. There is also a very early collection of essays on Latin American popular theatre, but no comprehensive history of later developments. There is no comprehensive study of the genre in the Caribbean.

part of post-colonial struggles against political and cultural oppression represent a particular theatrical practice, at a specific moment in history, that determined its social function. To suggest that these practices constituted a third world popular theatre movement is not to suggest that theatre which supports and advances the interests of the oppressed hasn't existed before. Rather, I mean to suggest that this particular movement was connected to specific historical and social global forces that resulted in their emergence across various cultures and geographies at a specific moment in history. While the practices I will discuss may have been substantially different in content, there were also certain unifying elements. Primary among them was, the theatre's purpose or social function in that society. The goal of my study is not to prove the unique quality of the popular theatre movement in its advocacy for the oppressed classes. Rather, I want to look at the *ways* in which it has been able to do this as a means of examining the role of culture, generally, and theatre, specifically, in a people's struggle for self-determination, equality and freedom, through a close examination of one specific social, cultural practice.

## **BEGINNING A MOVEMENT**

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<sup>5</sup>"Notes for a Radical Democratic Theater: Productive Crises and The Challenge of Indeterminacy," in Staging Resistance: Essays on Political Theatre, ed. Jeanne Colleran and Jenny S. Spencer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 283.

In the third world, much popular theatre has emerged either out of or as a part of economic/community development work. Many popular theatre workers – also often referred to as popular theatre *animateurs* – such as Kidd, Byram, Crow and Mluma, have also been development and/or adult education workers. The primary objective of most development or extension workers was to provide information for rural villages, many of whose inhabitants were illiterate and/or poorly educated. Because of this, most evaluations of popular theatre have examined the medium's efficacy as a tool of development or communication, contrasting earlier theatre projects sponsored by the government with later projects that have had less didactic goals.<sup>6</sup> The most important contrast that has engaged scholars and practitioners is the fact that government sponsored projects always supported, moreover propagated, dominant ideologies. For example, population control projects might teach about birth control without regard to the community's desire for such knowledge and without addressing other problems relevant to population issues (i.e., why overpopulation was even an issue). Despite the fact that such programs were educational in nature, conscientization was not their goal. Popular theatre practitioner and scholar Ross Kidd, notes, "After independence many of the new governments organized a national programme of government-sponsored theatre to promote their own ideas and programmes."<sup>7</sup> For example, he notes that in Ghana and Uganda development teams toured rural areas with plays on cash crop production,

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<sup>6</sup> This is true of virtually all the sources cited from the 1970s and early 1980s. Part of the reason for this, as noted in the introduction, was the fact that projects were being funded by international development agencies which dictated the focus of evaluative reports.

immunization, the importance of self-help, literacy, sanitation, and local government tax.<sup>8</sup> Later theatre-for-development projects in Africa, influenced by the ideas of Paulo Freire, stemmed from a different ideological position and therefore had different goals. Kidd and scholar Kees Epskamp agree that theatre-for-development with goals of liberation, rather than propagandistic ones of information dispensing, came to the fore in the 1970s.<sup>9</sup> Ross Kidd summarized the differing objectives of this popular theatre: “Its object is not to legitimize the existing social structure and exert social control, but to encourage the people to question and challenge the structures . . . it encourages the growth of people’s own analysis, self-confidence and fighting spirit.”<sup>10</sup> Tanzanian popular theatre worker and scholar Penina Mlamba notes, “Popular theatre then, is an attempt to go beyond the mere provision of information and to involve people in a critical analysis of their situation.”<sup>11</sup>

Central to popular theatre’s goal of involving oppressed peoples in a critical analysis of their oppression is the dynamic principle of *dialogue*, as Paulo Freire imagined it. Freire, who believed each individual must actively participate in her own

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<sup>7</sup> “Folk Media, Popular Theatre, and Conflicting Strategies for Social Change in the Third World,” in Kidd and Colletta, editors, Tradition for Development: Indigenous Structures and Folk Media in Non-Formal Education (Bonn: German Foundation for International Development, 1982), 283.

<sup>8</sup> “Popular Theatre for Reconstruction in Zimbabwe,” in The Empowerment of Culture: Development Communication and popular Media, Ad Boeren and Kees Epskamp, editors (The Hague: Centre for Education in Developing Countries, 1992), 127. For other examples see also Zakes Mda When People Play People: Development Communication Through Theatre, (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press and London: Zed Books, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> See Eugene Van Erven, “Revolution, Freedom, and Theatre of Liberation,” Research in African Literatures, 22(3) (Fall 1991), 11-27.

<sup>10</sup>Ross Kidd “Folk Media, Popular Theatre, and Conflicting Strategies for Social Change in the Third World,” Kidd and Colletta, 300.

education and liberation, has been a seminal figure for politically engaged pedagogical practices throughout the developing world. Working as part of a literacy program in Latin America, Freire cited pedagogy's goal not as the accumulation of empirical knowledge but rather as the development of the ability to think critically. The term "conscientization," which has been used to describe the goal of popular theatre, grows out of his work. Conscientization "refers to learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality."<sup>12</sup> Freire's theoretical approach encourages students not only to learn to read words, but to read the world and in this process to question their own position in it. The connection that Lawrence Grossberg makes between a politically engaged pedagogy, cultural practices and the material conditions of everyday life further illuminates the attraction that Freire's theories had for third world development workers:

If political struggles are won and lost in the space between people's everyday lives and the material production and distribution of values and power, in the space where people and groups are articulated, both ideologically and affectively, to social identities, cultural practices, and political projects, then it is here that pedagogy must operate. The task of a politically engaged pedagogy is, after all, never to convince a predefined subject . . . to adopt a new position. Rather the task is to win an already

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<sup>11</sup> Penina Mlana, Culture and Development: The Popular Theatre Approach in Africa (Uppsala: Nordika Afrikainstitut, 1991), 207.

<sup>12</sup> Translators note in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 17.

positioned, already invested individual or group to a different set of places, a difference organization of the space of possibilities.<sup>13</sup>

A richer understanding of how the process of conscientization occurs will be vital to my discussion of popular theatre and to an understanding of how, why and when this process is realized and how, why and when it is not. While I do not want to simplify this influence, I do want to focus on a few particular points; a comprehensive analysis of Freire's work is both beyond the scope of this dissertation and has already been recounted elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> Regarding the dynamic process of consciousness-raising, Freire notes, "Not even the best intentioned leadership can bestow independence as a gift. The liberation of the oppressed is a liberation of women and men, not things. Accordingly, while no one liberates himself by his own efforts alone, neither is he liberated by others . . . The correct method lies in dialogue. The conviction of the oppressed that they must fight for their liberation is not a gift bestowed by the revolutionary leadership, but the result of their own conscientizacao."<sup>15</sup>

Popular theatre encourages an engaged pedagogical structure which emphasizes the productive dialogue necessary to involve people in their own education and liberation. Freire's notion of dialogue is itself a radical one. Dialogue, he suggests, is a generative and creative process: "It is an act of creation; it must not serve as a crafty instrument for the domination of one person by another. The domination implicit in dialogue is that of

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<sup>13</sup> Bringing it All Back Home: Essays on Cultural Studies (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 388.

<sup>14</sup> For example, see, Peter McLaren and Peter Leonard, eds., Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> Freire, 48-49.

the world by the dialoguers; it is conquest of the world for the liberation of humankind . . . it . . . cannot exist in a relation of domination.”<sup>16</sup> More than just dialogue, though, Freire recognized the need to pair intellectual interrogation with activism. Such a pairing, he theorized, was the most effective means to conscientization: “It is not only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organized struggle for their liberation that they begin to believe in themselves. This discovery cannot be purely intellectual but must also involve action; nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must include serious reflection: *only then will it be a praxis.*”<sup>17</sup> It is this theoretical principle that many development workers took as a starting point in their efforts to realize Freire’s ideal of a “praxis” through popular theatre. To what extent then is the social practice of popular theatre a “praxis of resistance” to political and cultural domination? What factors, internal and external, tend to thwart its ability to remain/become such a resistant praxis? What other factors contribute to this determination? What is it within the dynamics of particular practices that make them such?

For development and extension workers, whose primary goal was the communication of information, Freire’s theories suggested politicized ways to rethink their methods. African popular theatre worker Dickson Mwansa also notes the popular theatre movements’ roots in UNESCO’s (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) encouragement to integrate folk media into development

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 47. *Italics mine.*

communication work.<sup>18</sup> Scholar and theatre practitioner, Zakes Mda, suggests that this was so because theatre was thought a particularly effective tool for communication and therefore appealed to development workers and adult educators:

One of the major questions in development communication studies today concerns how communication can be organised so as to increase participation, achieve self-reliance, promote equity, and close communication gaps . . . There is . . . a need to democratise the structures of communication systems, because in their current authoritarian form they are non-conducive to and dysfunctional for development.

Communication technologies need to be decentralised and located among the rural people, who form the majority of the populations in African countries. This will give the rural population access not only to the messages produced by others, but to the means to produce and distribute their own messages . . . Theatre has been identified as one medium the use of which could lead towards the realization of these objectives.<sup>19</sup>

The reasons he gives for theatre's communicative efficacy include the active role that the participants take in the process: "Audiences may play an active role in medium-programming, and therefore in producing and distributing messages . . . [it] is capable of integrating indigenous and popular systems of communication that already exist in the

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<sup>18</sup> See Dickson Mwansa, "Popular Theatre: Globalization of a Social Movement: An Analysis of Meetings and People That Have Influenced the Direction of Popular Theatre in Contemporary Times," A paper prepared for presentation at the ICAE/AALAE International Popular Theatre Workshop in Namibia, August 1991, 1-2.

rural areas.”<sup>20</sup> Epskamp agrees, adding that in popular theatre, “They use the language and symbols of the population itself, which can only make the message easier to be understood . . . these media reach those groups of the population which cannot be reached by the mass media, such as the rural populations and the illiterates . . . they invite the audience to participate and open the way for immediate feedback.”<sup>21</sup> African theatre scholar Hansel Ndumbe Eyoh concurs with theatre’s efficacy as a tool for communication with marginalized communities: “The theatre in particular is being used in community education to conscientize and mobilize marginalized groups of society – those who have been denied access to the more conventional forms of media.”<sup>22</sup> Eyoh further suggests why popular theatre is such an effective communicative medium: “Popular theatre builds on the skills the people already have, the actors provide the songs, choreography, the dances, create the scenarios and are responsible for the themes to be developed.”<sup>23</sup>

The title of Penina Mlana’s article, “Women’s Participation in Communication for Development: The Popular Theatre Alternative in Africa,” and her definition of popular theatre, support Mda and Epskamp’s contention:

Sometimes referred to as ‘theatre for development,’ popular theatre involves the members of a community in the use of their own traditional

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<sup>19</sup> Zakes Mda, 1-2.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Epskamp, 162.

<sup>22</sup> “Theatre and Community Education: The African Experience” by Ahnsel Ndumbe Eyoh, published article clipped and found in ICAE archive popular culture in Africa, place of publication unmarked, date indicated 1987.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 15.

media – dance, music, story-telling, poetry etc – to research, discuss, and analyze socio-economic problems with a view to finding solutions for them. *The essence of popular theatre resides in the use of dramatic media to ‘communicate for development’ by involving the members of the community at every stage of the process.* The members of the community do research into development problems that they define for themselves. Then they analyze their data, identify the root causes of the problems, and propose possible solutions. The people themselves concretize these problems and causes by transforming them into a dramatic performance that draws upon the community’s own theatrical conventions.<sup>24</sup>

Mlama, however, also gives a decidedly more political interpretation for the use of popular theatre in Africa by placing the practice within the context of newly independent nations’ struggle to recover from the historical and cultural repercussions of colonialism: “The Popular Theatre movement in Africa is a response to a history that has undermined people’s genuine participation in the development process . . . the popular theatre movement in Africa . . . has been a conscious attempt not only to bring to the fore the voice of the dominated classes but also to involve them in the process of bettering their way of life.”<sup>25</sup> Alwin Bully, theatre director and cultural advisor for the Caribbean for UNESCO suggests a similar causal relationship between the experiences of colonialism and independence, and popular theatre in the Caribbean: “As far as the

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<sup>24</sup> *Research in African Literatures*, 22(3) (Fall 1991), 43. Italics mine.

<sup>25</sup> Mlama, *Culture and Development*, 5, 20.

reasons for popular theatre, I think it was mainly a post-independence phenomenon . . . people were excited about independence and here was a chance for change . . . so I see the popular theatre movement coming out of the late 70s.”<sup>26</sup> The articles that appeared in the first issue of the Third World Popular Theatre Newsletter also reflect popular theatre’s connection to post-colonial struggles for independence. For example, a report from Tanzania said, “Popular theatre in Tanzania has had a long history, rooted in the traditional role of the arts and more recently in the struggle for independence. During the latter period skits, songs and dances were created to draw out people’s grievances against the colonial masters, to deepen their political awareness, and to mobilize people to struggle.”<sup>27</sup> These comments also point out the dynamic relationship between popular theatre and concurrent historical forces.

Popular theatre, then, strives to be a praxis which radically re-imagines the distribution of power and valuation of knowledges within a society. This, of course, is inherently threatening to the sustenance of hegemony and the borders between/of a class society. Moreover, many of the practices of popular theatre deploy elements of local folk cultures which are steeped in the particularities of a people’s way of life – songs, dances, stories, mythical characters – to express this resistance. While popular theatre strives to be an empowering, democratic and radical political practice, it too, as Desai notes, is “a functional discourse which can legitimate or subvert the existing power structures of a

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<sup>26</sup> Personal interview. Bully is also a theatre practitioner and told me that he tries to return to his native Dominica once a year to direct a play there.

<sup>27</sup> Third World Popular Theatre Newsletter, January 1982, 1(1), 41.

society.”<sup>28</sup> Because the potential to do either is inherent in the form, my interest lies in studying the variant ingredients that contribute to a particular practice’s politic. How do successful practices subvert the power structures of the status quo? What social conditions and spectatorial behaviors contribute to this outcome? How can a performance which in one context has meanings that subvert the status quo, in a different context acquire meanings that accomplish the opposite goal? How, and what, can future resistant practices learn from this? These are the questions that guide both the inquiry of this chapter and this dissertation.

## **THEATRE AS DEVELOPMENT WORK: THE EXAMPLE OF LAEDZA BATANANI**

Scholar Kees Epskamp has noted the importance of placing any definition of popular theatre within its historical context: “A period-related definition of popular theatre can only be distilled from historical case-studies which render the diachronic shifts of its connotations.”<sup>29</sup> He continues, “Popular theatre is circumscribed as theatre that is generally associated with the resistance against bourgeois theatre, or against all ‘classic’ theatre that represents the standard, the rule, and the existing order.”<sup>30</sup> While this definition certainly pertains to what I define as popular theatre, it doesn’t provide any

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<sup>28</sup> “Theatre as Praxis: Discursive Strategies in African Popular Theatre,” *African Studies Review*, 33(1), 1990, 65.

<sup>29</sup> *Learning by Performing Arts: From Indigenous to Endogenous Cultural Development* (The Hague: CESO, 1992), 242.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

information regarding methodology; how is this resistance against the bourgeois theatre and the existing order expressed? Certainly relevant then to a historically and socially specific definition of popular theatre are the political, social and economic systems which represent the existing order and the ways in which that order and its culture are used to repress others. While, for example, 19<sup>th</sup> century American and British melodrama has been discussed as a form of popular theatre, its defining characteristics – i.e. what makes it a popular theatre – differ tremendously from the popular theatre that is connected with the post-independence movements in Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa.<sup>31</sup>

Following Espkamp's suggestion of defining popular theatre within specific contexts I will look at "popular" theatre projects that emerged during this post-colonial period as I work towards a definition of popular theatre. What were the goals and methodologies of these projects? A useful starting point for this discussion is a project started by Ross Kidd and Martin Byram, two extension workers/adult educators in Botswana. While traditional development and extension work basically involved the dispensation of information to rural villagers, Kidd and Byram's work on what they called the Laedza Batanani project – one of the most well-documented popular theatre projects – injected this work with a dose of Freirian pedagogy. The project is cited by many popular theatre workers as influential on subsequent projects. In addition, Kidd and Byram have critiqued various aspects of their work, providing useful insights into the

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<sup>31</sup> For a useful discussion of American melodrama see Bruce McConachie, Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre In Society, 1820-1870 (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992).

methodology's relative successes and failures. Kidd has also written about and worked extensively on popular theatre, both in the third world and in Canada.

Laedza Batanani – which means, “the sun is already up; it’s time to come and work together” – was an annual program of performances and discussions organized by community leaders and Kidd and Byram in the northern Bokalaka region of Botswana from 1974-1977. The Bokalaka is a region which, Kidd and Byram note, has no concentrated village settlements as in much of the rest of this landlocked Southern African nation. Because of frequent droughts, farming is neither stable nor sustainable and the country does not grow enough food to meet its consumption needs. Many workers sought employment across the border in South Africa and the nation of Botswana – which gained its independence from Britain in 1966 – remained economically dependent on its neighbors, particularly South Africa, whose apartheid policies it opposed. Others work in Botswana’s mines – diamonds and various precious minerals – or in the cattle industry. Historian Richard Dale cites these three factors – landlocked location, lack of water, dependence on and proximity to South Africa – as the major contributors to Botswana’s internal problems.<sup>32</sup> Kidd and Byram note that these various factors also contributed to a sense of apathy towards community action in this region and their hope was to use popular theatre to revive interest and participation in community discussions, decisions and action. In particular, Kidd and Byram hoped to use popular theatre to promote self-reliance, rather than dependency on government services.

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<sup>32</sup> Richard Dale, Botswana's Search for Autonomy in Southern Africa, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995).

“The purpose of Laedza Batanani is to stimulate community participation, discussion and action. The performances deal with local problems chosen by the community and by the extension departments. After the performances people in the audience discuss the problems and decide on what needs to be done.”<sup>33</sup>

In preparation for the annual performances – done in the context of a festival – community leaders and extension workers in the region would meet to decide which issues would be addressed that year. Issues taken on by the festival have included cattle theft, health problems, unemployment, nutrition, agricultural production and the exploitation of women.<sup>34</sup> After issues have been selected for the festival, Kidd notes: “A smaller group was selected to prepare a performance of drama, puppetry, dances, and songs and to take this on tour through the five major villages in this area.”<sup>35</sup> At these actors’ workshops, which included members of the community and extension workers, the performers would study the problems to be addressed before deciding how to present them. “The problems must be presented in the performance in the way local people see them and showing the most important aspects of each problem. By studying the problems beforehand and beginning to understand them better, the actors can present these problems effectively in their performances.”<sup>36</sup> Problems were presented through a variety of dance, drama, song and puppetry. The characters in the drama skits were stock

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<sup>33</sup> Ross Kidd and Martin Byram, Laedza Batanani: Organizing Popular Theatre: The Laedza Batanani Experience, 1974-1977 (Botswana: 1978), 8.

<sup>34</sup> Ross Kidd, “Liberation or Domestication: Popular Theatre and non-formal education in Africa” Educational Broadcasting International, (March, 1979) 6.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

ones, such as village drunkard or cattle thief. “In soap opera fashion most of these characters appear each year and people build up a strong identification with them.”<sup>37</sup>

After the performances, “the actors and other local extension workers divide the audience into groups and organize discussions of the problems presented.”<sup>38</sup>

The Laedza Batanani facilitators explain their reasons for using popular theatre as part of their development work:

These performances are called ‘popular’ because they are aimed at the whole community, not just those who are educated. They are open to everyone. They are performed in local languages and deal with local problems so everyone can understand them and find them useful. . .

Popular theatre can be used for extension work and adult education. As entertainment it can catch and hold the interest of large numbers of people.

As a dramatic way of presenting local problems, it makes people in the audience see these problems in a fresh way. Through discussion (which follows every performance) people can talk about these problems with others and see what can be done about them. Often this leads to action.<sup>39</sup>

Laedza Batanani aimed not only to dispense information, but to inject development work with a dose of Freirian pedagogy which “leads not only to decisive

<sup>36</sup> Ross Kidd and Martin Byram, Laedza Batanani: Organizing Popular Theatre: The Laedza Batanani Experience, 1974-1977 (Botswana: 1978), 16.

<sup>37</sup> Ross Kidd and Martin Byram, “A Botswana Case Study: Popular Theatre and Development” Convergence 10, (1977), 24.

<sup>38</sup> Kidd, “Liberation or Domestication,” 6.

action but also to a deepening sense of self-respect and this to a sense of being able to gain greater control over one's life."<sup>40</sup> The project facilitators tried to create a participatory structure that emphasized dialogue, despite the fact their later self-critique pointed out their failure to do so. They note: "The desire was to substitute self-reliance, participation and cooperative action for over-dependence on government and excessive individualism . . . The approach and techniques of extension workers were not suitable since they tended to be more concerned with providing services and information than motivating people for participation; their messages were based on external prescription and activities or messages were seldom coordinated."<sup>41</sup> The project's goals – as well as successive theatre-for-development projects – reflect an awareness that, as political theatre scholar Eugene van Erven notes, "Cultural awakening is a crucial stage in the development of a people."<sup>42</sup> Kidd and Epskamp agree that Laedza Batanani reflected a theatrical advancement in this direction from earlier theatre for development projects which were based largely on government propaganda agendas. Popular theatre with goals of conscientization, the two agree, emerged in Africa in the 1970s.<sup>43</sup>

African theatre scholar David Kerr has referred to the Laedza Batanani project as a "seminal experiment" which influenced, in both form and aims, theatre for development

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>41</sup> Kidd and Byram, "A Botswana Case Study," 21-22.

<sup>42</sup> "Revolution, Freedom, and Theatre of Liberation," *Research in African Literatures*, 33(1), 1990, 11.

<sup>43</sup> Kidd has written extensively on this, see bibliography. For Epskamp see in particular *Theatre in Search of Social Change*.

work in many other countries, particularly, Kerr notes, in Southern and Eastern Africa.<sup>44</sup> Dickson Mwansa notes, “After 1978 the Botswana experience was replicated elsewhere and the two adult educators created linkages between popular theatre activists in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America and the search for where to use theatre as a tool for communication began to grow in leaps and bounds. Notwithstanding what had happened before, the Botswana experiment began to snowball and also to stir the Southern African region and later the world into a global social movement” of popular theatre.<sup>45</sup>

At the same time, however, there were numerous shortcomings with Laedza Batanani. Reflecting on their work after the fact Kidd and Byram were able to identify several factors that, despite their efforts, thwarted the project’s realization of their Freirian goals. These include leaving the villagers out of key stages of the process of creation; the limited amount of time spent on the work; failing to connect the theatre work with structures that support follow-up action; and the development workers’ own stereotyped thinking which made reductive conclusions about complex problems.<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, Laedza Batanani served as the catalyst for numerous similar-minded projects in other African countries, many of which benefited from or built on the critique of Laedza Batanani.

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<sup>44</sup> David Kerr, African Popular Theatre (London: James Curry, 1995), 149, and 156. While it is outside the scope of my project to trace all such influences, Kerr notes many of them and virtually all scholars writing about popular theatre in Africa make mention of the Laedza Batanani campaign.

<sup>45</sup> Mwansa, 3.

<sup>46</sup> See Ross Kidd, From Peoples Theatre for Revolution to Popular Theatre for Reconstruction: Diary of a Zimbabwean Workshop (CESO: The Hague, 1984).

In addition to the influence of the Laedza Batanani project, several international workshops and networking meetings in the 1970s and 80s helped to spread the ideas, methods and practices of popular theatre. For example, Dickson Mwansa notes the importance of a 1979 workshop at the teacher training college of Chalimbana, located 28 kilometers east of Lusaka, the capital of Zambia, for strengthening regional links amongst African popular theatre practitioners. He notes that, "After the workshop there was increased exchange of resource persons between Southern African countries and a start of follow-up national workshops in Zambia, Tanzania and later Zimbabwe but with reduced international participants."<sup>47</sup> David Kerr agrees: "Good communications between popular theatre workers in different parts of Africa meant that experiences were shared and a critical attitude developed, which helped the amateurs create improved Theatre for Development practices . . . Within Zambia a whole network of smaller popular theatre organizations sprang up, each setting up their own modest workshops."<sup>48</sup> Each successive project seemed to reflect an awareness of the shortcomings of the previous ones, and whether or not successfully, tried to address these through methodological modifications.

A collection of essays from a 1980 international seminar in Berlin, edited by Kidd and Nat Colletta reflects the movement's growing momentum across diverse geographic areas; it includes discussions of projects in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean and

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<sup>47</sup> Mwansa, 4.

<sup>48</sup> Kerr, (1995) 161 and 155.

Asia.<sup>49</sup> In that anthology Brian Crow and Michael Etherton note the influence that the work of Freire and Boal have had on African popular theatre, citing yet another strand of influence.<sup>50</sup> In 1982, the Third World Popular Theatre Newsletter was begun as an international networking tool for practitioners in various parts of the world with Ross Kidd and Dickson Mwansa editing the first issue. Although the newsletter was short-lived, its first issue included reports on work being done in Africa, Latin America and Asia. The third issue of the newsletter, published in 1983, was billed as the “Caribbean edition,” and focused on work in that region.<sup>51</sup> Other networking activities – such as international meetings which exposed popular theatre workers to individuals doing similar work – stirred interest in popular theatre as a genre and also led to the establishment of various regional organizations such as the Eastern Caribbean Popular Theatre Organization (ECPTO), which serves as an umbrella organization for groups in that geographic region, and the International Popular Theatre Alliance (IPTA).<sup>52</sup> IPTA was formed after an international workshop held in 1983 in Bangladesh which attracted

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<sup>49</sup> Tradition for Development: Indigenous Structures and Folk Media in Non-Traditional Education, Nat Colletta and Ross Kidd, eds., (Bonn: German Foundation for International Development: International Council for Adult Education, 1982).

<sup>50</sup> See, Brian Crow and Micheal Etherton, “Popular Drama and Popular Analysis in Africa”, in Kidd and Colletta, 570-594.

<sup>51</sup> During my archival research I found copies of the first and third issues of the Newsletter at the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) in Toronto. I was never able to locate a copy of the second issue of the newsletter, nor have I come across any references to it. I found no evidence of subsequent issues but hesitate to conclude that further issues weren’t printed; one of the historiographical difficulties involved in researching this topic as discussed in the introduction.

<sup>52</sup> My archival research yielded evidence of numerous regional and international meetings during the early and mid 1980s in the form of unpublished reports. While international meetings are an indication of communication across continents such meetings were difficult to organize regularly due to the costs involved. Regional meetings represent more local networking efforts.

58 participants from 19 countries.<sup>53</sup> The main goals of the organization were to facilitate international exchanges, start and maintain dialogue between workers in different regions and develop a forum for exchange of ideas.<sup>54</sup> Participants reported the motivation for such an organization: “Sharing a common history of colonial oppression and a common current reality of economic and cultural crisis and growing repression, the Third Worlders felt they had a great deal to learn from each other and a great need to support each other.”<sup>55</sup> The organization’s goals and agenda are explained:

IPTA is a non-governmental voluntary partnership of people, groups and organizations working together to develop theatre as a support for popular expression, education and action at the grassroots, it is a working network of national and regional associations and committees in some 40 countries. IPTA’s activities attempt to reinforce initiatives at the grassroots for education, communication, cultural revival, community-building, and social action. Its priority is to strengthen popular culture and popular capacities at the grassroots so that people can act to transform their situation in an empowering way . . . IPTA’s ultimate goal is to assist the poor and oppressed to realize this capacity.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> “Popular Theatre Dialogue: A Statement,” Adult Education and Development 23 (September 1984), published in English by the German Adult Education Association.

<sup>54</sup> From unpublished report on the alliance’s origins, no date indicated, “International Popular Theatre Alliance: Aims Origins and Activities.” Report found in ICAE resource center, popular theatre archive file.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

Working in Tanzania, Penina Mlama notes her group's awareness of previous work and their own attempts to improve upon it: "They were aware of the Popular Theatre undertakings in Africa and other parts of the world. They were also aware of the shortcomings of the previous Popular Theatre attempts in Africa. They therefore, drew upon these experiences to come up with an approach which not only sought to improve on previous efforts but one suited to the specific needs of the Tanzanian situation."<sup>57</sup> Her comments are interesting on two different levels. First, they reflect evidence of global communication amongst popular theatre workers, facilitated in large part by conference gatherings. Second, they point out that the general methods of popular theatre provided a framework within which workers could focus and adapt the methods to the specific circumstances in which they were working.

Kidd's own work developed from the many lessons he learned from Laedza Batanani. In 1983 he organized a popular theatre workshop in Zimbabwe which had the dual purpose of training development workers in theatre-for-development techniques and starting such a program in a specific community. Greater emphasis was purposefully placed on collaborating with villagers on the creation of dramatic pieces, rather than having them simply observe and discuss the ready-made work. Kidd's description of the project's goals purposefully echoes Freire's ideas of conscientization:

The ultimate aim was conscientization which we defined as 'a learning and organizing process in which people develop the critical understanding, self-confidence and organizational strength to realize their potential for

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<sup>57</sup> Penina Mlama, Culture and Development.

development and transformation.’ This process starts with the community’s own experience and assessment of their experience, develops analysis in relation to the goal of transforming their situation and ideally culminates in organized action by the community. The process would not only conscientize the villagers; it would also conscientize ourselves, challenging some of our own stereotyped thinking and deepening our own understanding. Our collaborative analysis with the villagers would trigger new awareness of the contradictions facing them.<sup>58</sup>

In words that echo those of Augusto Boal, Kidd suggests that “putting the means of artistic production and analysis within the hands of peasant groups meant that the peasants were taking control of their own transformation process, rather than remaining passive recipients of ideas and analysis from outside.”<sup>59</sup>

## **PROBLEMITIZING PARTICIPATION**

Implicit in most practitioners’ definition of popular theatre is the participation of the audience at various stages in the process and performance. What is unclear is the level, extent and dynamics of this participation and its relationship to the projects’ goals.

Penina Mlamba notes that popular theatre

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<sup>58</sup> Kidd, From People’s Theatre for Revolution to Popular Theatre for Reconstruction: Diary of A Zimbabwean Workshop (The Hague: CESO, 1984) , 18-19.

<sup>59</sup>Ross Kidd, “Popular Theatre for Reconstruction in Zimbabwe,” in The Empowerment of Culture: Development Communication and Popular Media, Ad Boeren and Kees Epskamp ed. (The Hague: Centre for Education in Developing Countries, 1992), 129.

refers to a process that involves the participation of the community not only in action for development but also in communicating its own ideas, views and analyses of issues. The process involves several stages. First, members of the community together with 'animateurs' research into what the community believes are its problems. Then the community analyzes these problems with a view to pinpointing the root causes and possible solutions. The ideas are then concretised in artistic forms familiar to the community. These are often songs poetry etc.<sup>60</sup>

Zakes Mda's description of the Laedza Batanani project also stresses the importance of participation: "This project used popular theatre as a medium of encouraging participation, raising community issues, fostering discussion, and promoting collective action . . . Its basic goal was to find a way of motivating people to participate in development efforts in the area."<sup>61</sup>

The increasing interest in greater degrees of participation reflects both a desire to build on what was learned from previous projects, and a recognition of the connection that Freire has made between participation as a generative act and conscientization. Kidd notes,

For Freire the theatre performance is merely the initial catalyst for on-going critical reflection, organization and action. The meaning of the

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<sup>60</sup>Penina Mloma, "Oral Art and Contemporary cultural nationalism," in Power, Marginality and African Oral Literature ed. Graham Furniss and Liz Gunner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 32.

<sup>61</sup> Mda, 13.

performance is produced by active dialogue among spectators and actors at the end of the performance . . . The audience are challenged through the performance and dialogue not only to identify the problem and its root causes but also to do something about it. So discussion leads to organization and collective action. *In this way theatre is used not only to mirror and interpret reality, but also to transform it.*<sup>62</sup>

The practical realization of such participation is perhaps more difficult and has evolved from the lessons of preceding projects. Kidd's critique of his work with Laedza Batanani points out the facilitators' failure to include community members in all levels of the process as a major flaw: "The villagers were not involved in the process of analysing the information, scripting the drama and performing the plays. Then extension workers collect the villagers' information and then retreat to analyse the data and work out a performance on their own. This lack of participation severely reduces the commitment of the villagers by disengaging them from the crucial aspects of the process."<sup>63</sup> Kidd and Byram's further comments qualify the nature of the participation necessary to truly make popular theatre a praxis of resistance:

Who controls the process? Popular theatre may be participatory in the sense that local people are involved in producing it, in acting out the dramas and singing the songs but unless they control the selection of content and the whole educational process they may become unwilling

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<sup>62</sup> Ross Kidd, "Popular Theatre and Political Action in Canada," *Theaterwork*, 1981, 1(6), 11. Italics mine.

<sup>63</sup> Quoted in Mlama, *Culture and Development*, 76.

accomplices in their own domestication. Participation as mere performance is no guarantee of progressive change; unless rural villagers control the popular theatre process they may be used as mere mouthpieces for ideas produced by others which mystify their reality, and condition them to accept a passive, dependent, uncritical role in an inequitable social structure.<sup>64</sup>

Their comments have provided future popular theatre practitioners with words of caution regarding the diverse ways of understanding “participation.” Only participation which includes control over the entire process can be the sort of praxis Freire imagined.

Integral to these practitioners’ discussions of participation is the assumption that it paves the road to conscientization. Greater amounts of participation are seen as marks of a more successful, more genuinely “popular” project. But a discourse of “participation” can also lead to a false illusion of democracy. For example, popular theatre facilitators may believe that by including villagers in the research and creation of popular theatre work, they have established a “truer” means of revealing the community’s problems. However, whatever power structures exist in a given community will persist in the creation and research of popular theatre. For example, in his work in Zimbabwe, Ross Kidd noted, “Another problem was that even though the women outnumbered the men ten to one, the agenda and debate tended to be dominated by the men.”<sup>65</sup> A similar

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<sup>64</sup> Ross Kidd and Martin Byram, “Popular Theatre and Nonformal Education in Botswana: A Critique of Pseudo-Participatory Popular Education,” Participatory Research Group, Working Paper no.5: Toronto 1982.

<sup>65</sup> “Popular Theatre for Reconstruction in Zimbabwe,” in Boeren and Epskamp, 141.

problem had emerged in his earlier work in Botswana. One year, the identified “community problem” for discussion was cattle theft. It was later discovered that this was truly only a problem experienced by the wealthy community leaders – the only ones able to own cattle in the first place. Because these men had been identified as community leaders, they were sanctioned to speak for the community, and the development workers looked to them when doing research for the popular theatre presentation. Later projects facilitated by Kidd and Mlana have made a concerted effort to encourage participation by a broader spectrum of the community, particularly that of women.

Kidd’s critique of participation in the Zimbabwe workshop (1983) also points to the wide ranging interpretations of the concept.

While villagers took an active part in the discussions and in the performing, their participation could not be described as control – *the more authentic sense of participation*. The outside team had most of the control – we shaped the process, leading it and suggesting through our questions the direction it should go, choosing the priorities and deciding which issues should be raised each day. The villagers were left out of the overall planning and day-to-day evaluation. We didn’t spend enough time explaining what we were trying to do and getting their input on the process so that they could participate in a more equal footing. We did the planning and the animation and they, literally, danced to our tune. Calling our work

‘animation’ or ‘facilitation’ simply masked the issue of control. In fact we played a dominant and interventionist role.<sup>66</sup>

Kidd’s honesty and self-reflexive critique is impressive and informative. Rhetorical references to “participation” within popular theatre techniques does not necessarily translate into control, or I would argue, into empowerment. Indeed, I have been at many workshops and observed the work of several practitioners who do “participatory” popular theatre which loses its empowering potential because of the facilitator’s absolute control over the process, a control which is all the more insidious because it is masked by the “participatory process.”<sup>67</sup> Participation and empowerment are not synonymous, nor are participation and democracy. Theatre which includes people’s participation at various levels does not inherently advocate for their rights. Although the rhetoric of “participation” has discursive echoes of democracy, it does not inherently translate into either empowerment or a radical politics.

Penina Mloma makes a more radical critique of “control.” In her study of African popular theatre, she notes that most of those involved in its development were European expatriates – and I would add, men.<sup>68</sup> She suggests that their own cultural identification may have interfered with the popular theatre process. As an example, she notes the emphasis these projects placed on drama – much of the work consisted of skits – at the

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<sup>66</sup> Ross Kidd, *From People’s Theatre for Revolution to Popular Theatre for Reconstruction: Diary of A Zimbabwean Workshop* (The Hague: CESO), 72. Italics mine. This report and the previous citation discuss the same project.

<sup>67</sup> I am intentionally not naming names here. For a further discussion of this issue see chapter four, “Beyond Boal.”

expense of other theatrical forms, such as dance. While she does not suggest that this was intentional, she notes that most of these popular theatre workers came to the theatre from backgrounds in adult education and a desire to develop the theories of Freire into practice. “Their limited theatrical knowledge prevented them from realizing that role playing is not limited to drama but can also be achieved through dance or any other theatre form.”<sup>69</sup>

While there certainly is a great deal of validity in Mlama’s comments, not all popular theatre in Africa (and elsewhere) was practiced by European and/or Canadian expatriates. But there is an important lesson to be gleaned from her critique. There are infinite invisible ways in which the facilitators of popular theatre determine their projects’ efficacy. The facilitator’s own ideology and understandings of participation and empowerment will implicitly be deeply embedded in the structures of her work. Mlama notes the connection between the efficacy of participation and the facilitator:

“Participation in popular theatre is not only a question of having theatre skills. It is a commitment to a process through which a people can be animated to better its conditions. It is crucial for those who participate as organizers and principal participants to be aware that they are involved in a consciousness-raising process. Their own consciousness

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<sup>68</sup> She specifically cites Ross Kidd, Martin Byram, Michael Etherton, Brian Crow and David Kerr; all of whom are cited throughout this chapter.

<sup>69</sup> Mlama, *Culture and Development*, 86. For a similar comment also see Gaurav Desai, “Introduction,” in *Research in African Literatures*, 22(3), 1991.

therefore, needs to be of a level that will facilitate raising the awareness of other people.”<sup>70</sup>

Carlos and Graciela Nunez’s description of popular theatre suggests that the ultimate goal of theatrical participation is to encourage greater participation in social and political action:

That people from the community itself should be encouraged to assume the function of catalysts is, to our way of thinking, a basic requirement for effective popular theatre. Without this development, popular theatre in the full sense can never be achieved. It is surely part of the whole social function of this type of theatre that it seeks to socialize the means of theatrical production so that it becomes generally available as a method of self-education for the community. By doing so the ultimate aim must be to transform the spectators into actors, not just dramatic actors but *social actors* with the ideological resources to play an active part in shaping their own historical narrative.<sup>71</sup>

The Nunezs’ emphasis on transforming theatrical actors into social actors makes the connection between the drama of popular theatre and the drama of everyday life that popular theatre hopes to effect. Their words echo Augusto Boal’s now-famous statement, “Theatre is a rehearsal for the revolution.” Penina Mlama also notes the importance of

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<sup>70</sup> Mlama, *Culture and Development*, 90.

<sup>71</sup> Carlos and Graciela Nunez, “Popular Theatre, Popular Education, and Urban Community Organizing in Mexico,” in Kidd and Colletta, 592-3. Italics mine.

taking the steps from anger at situations and conditions to critical thinking, and then to actual action: “The challenge of Popular Theatre lies in the ability to channel the emotions and the anger into concrete and objective action to change the situation for the betterment of the people’s way of life.”<sup>72</sup>

### **EXAMPLES FROM THE CARIBBEAN**

The island nations of the Caribbean are mostly former colonies of England, Spain, France and the Netherlands. Many of these nations’ cultures were – and some continue to be – dominated by colonial influences, although politically the majority gained their independence in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>73</sup> In the next two chapters I will explore in further detail the ways in which colonialism and imperialism have influenced Jamaican economics, politics and culture. Here, I want to note that numerous other Caribbean nations had similar experiences of political, economic and cultural oppression. Popular theatre became a tool for many of them to reclaim and celebrate indigenous cultural traditions, express political dissent, and organize for change. Kathy McAfee, an Oxfam worker and expert on the repercussions of economic structural adjustment policies in the Caribbean, notes the sort of social function played by popular theatre in this region:

Popular theatre is a particularly powerful tool in consciousness-raising and community organizing. Groups . . . adapt theatre exercises and

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<sup>72</sup> Mlama *Culture and Development*, 205.

<sup>73</sup> The chief exceptions are Haiti and the Dominican Republic which have been independent nations since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Many other islands remain territories of France, the Netherlands, Britain and the U.S.

traditional songs and games to help groups of workers, villagers or co-op members analyse problems and clarify goals. When a rural group, for example, identifies a problem such as the lack of safe water or access to land, theatre is used as a way to investigate the problem's causes and get the community involved in a plan for collective action to solve it . . . In this kind of theatre, a finished script is an end product, not the starting point. To write the play, village theatre group members must gather information from neighbors and officials. Community members especially leaders, are invited to criticize and contribute to the play as it evolves. In the final stages, village troupes may tour neighboring communities facing similar problems. Networks such as the Eastern Caribbean Popular Theatre Organization (ECPTO) sponsor island to island and international exchanges.<sup>74</sup>

McAfee's comments point to popular theatre as a methodology practiced throughout the Caribbean. Its use-value in this region is similar to that described by Kidd and Mlama in Africa; it is a social practice which helps people both identify problems within their communities and think critically towards solutions.

ECPTO, founded in 1983 as an umbrella organization for several popular theatre groups in the eastern Caribbean, was instrumental in creating links between various

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<sup>74</sup> McAfee, Storm Signals: Structural Adjustment and Development Alternatives in the Caribbean (London: Zed Books, 1991), 203. For more information on Structural Adjustment Policies, see chapters two and three.

popular theatre workers in the region.<sup>75</sup> Its goals include networking with regional groups, advocating for the use of popular theatre and “presenting cultural work as a means of stimulating consciousness and awareness of community issues and for problem solving approaches, as well as in its use for the eventual transformation of our societies, to more just and equitable societies.”<sup>76</sup> Popular theatre’s function in this context is “to relate the arts and culture to development issues/goals, to realise a greater effort of free expression. Self-worth, more effective grass-root communication and learning, utilising a cultural mode.”<sup>77</sup> In its newsletter, ECPTO posits its own definition of popular theatre, which reflects similar concerns and goals as the African practitioners discussed above: “Popular theatre for us then relates to the use of a cultural mode to stimulate processes of learning, problem solving, confidence building, group formation and development and action at the community level. It is a response to the challenges brought about by underdevelopment, the lack of local initiatives, a void in leadership both at the community and national level, a dearth of cultural activities and for empowering grass-roots people.”<sup>78</sup> The first Caribbean Popular Theatre Exchange (CPTE), a parallel effort, was held in Jamaica in

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<sup>75</sup> There is conflicting historical information regarding the founding date of ECPTO. In some places its founding date is listed as 1982 in others 1983. Those sources that list the date as 1983 include ECPTO’s own newsletter and therefore 1983 seemed to me the more reliable date. During my field research in Jamaica, however, I contacted the organization to inquire about their future projects and research opportunities. The response I received indicated that the organization was inactive and that its future remained uncertain. In a personal letter to me, dated April 19, 1996, Josephine Dublin, Coordinator of ECPTO wrote, “ECPTO is now at a stage of redefining its role as a regional network due to the drastic changes forced upon it by financial constraint . . . Presently ECPTO does not have any ongoing project or programme to which you can be invited.”

<sup>76</sup> ECPTO Newsletter, 1, (January-April 1990):2.

<sup>77</sup> Sobers Esprit, “ECPTO Training Workshop Held,” in ACTA News: The Newsletter of the Association of Caribbean Theatre Artists, Vol II, No.1, p.1.

<sup>78</sup> ECPTO Newsletter, 1, (January-April 1990): 6.

1985, co-facilitated by Sistren and The Graduate Theatre Company.<sup>79</sup> Popular theatre workers from nine Caribbean countries attended the event and drew up a “declaration” which stated their commitment to using popular theatre “as a vehicle for the cultural expressions of the people and the communication of their concerns.”<sup>80</sup>

In a booklet published by ECPTO, popular theatre is described as having an important role to play in larger social struggles: “Popular Theatre will play a fundamental role in the ideological struggle since it is a medium for unmasking the dominant ideology to portray the situations of exploitation, to create a people’s class consciousness . . . popular theatre carries a message which is politically committed in the struggle for the construction of a new society when it incorporates and makes known the elements of the dominant ideology and of the popular or classist ideology . . . Popular theatre must be an analytical tool critical of the society and its message must contribute to the political project of the popular class.”<sup>81</sup> The booklet lists some of the qualities of popular theatre: it “defends and sharpens the interests of the exploited class . . . reveals and unveils the

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<sup>79</sup> The Graduate Theatre Company changed its name to Groundwork Theatre Company. For more information on Groundwork see chapter three, “Jamaican Popular Theatre in Perspective.” Members of the company also published a brochure chronicling one of its projects which provides a useful detailed description of each step in the process. Drama for Survival: The Jericho Experience: Using Drama as a Tool of Empowerment, by Winston Bell, Honor Ford-Smith, and Carol Lawes.

<sup>80</sup> “Declaration and Call of the First Caribbean Popular Theatre Exchange,” document found in ICAE archive, “Popular Theatre/Caribbean.” The document appears to have been published, but there was no indication of where or when. Although this exchange was billed as the “first,” I have found no evidence of future collaborations of this magnitude. The fate of both ECPTO and CPTE is reflective of what I argue in chapter three is a dissipating interest in grassroots struggles, generally, and popular theatre specifically, in the Caribbean.

<sup>81</sup> Booklet titled “People’s Theatre,” by Miriam Augusto, published by ECPTO, Dominica, 1994, 13. Found in the documentation center at the Association of Development Agencies in Kingston Jamaica.

true reasons for the differences of the social classes . . . presents collective problems and collective solutions . . . it is done to raise consciousness.”<sup>82</sup>

One of the constituent groups of the ECPTO is the Antigua Popular Theatre Organization.<sup>83</sup> The group’s inception was the direct result of a series of workshops sponsored by ECPTO and the Harambee Open Air Theatre. The aims and objectives of the group are “to preserve indigenous art forms and culture . . . to utilize popular education to achieve empowerment of the marginalized . . . to forge links with other local and regional NGO’s with corresponding aims and objectives.”<sup>84</sup> Moreover, the group explicitly sees their work as connected to the larger goals of conscientization: “APTO therefore seeks to promote what the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire recommends as a political necessity for underdeveloped nations: conscientization or the process of action for change through popular education.”<sup>85</sup> Because the organization’s target audiences include women, the uninformed/illiterate, the sick, the elderly, youth and children, they have established relationships with health clinics.<sup>86</sup> Such an alliance – between community based service organizations and theatre workers – is necessary for the long term goals of popular theatre.<sup>87</sup> As Ross Kidd has noted, “Theatre on its own can bring

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>83</sup> The other constituent members are: the New Artists Movement (NAM) of St. Vincent and the Grenadines; The Movement for Cultural Awareness in Dominica; The Folk Research Center of St. Lucia; The Department of Culture in Grenada.

<sup>84</sup> *CAFRA News*, 5(4), (September-December 1991):36. Written by Joan Underwood Dennis, treasurer of APTO.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>87</sup> For another example of popular theatre allying itself with community service workers, see my discussion of Pregones Theatre’s AIDS education work in Chapter Four.

people together and create a forum for awareness-raising and discussion, but it cannot create the conditions for organised action. Without links to local organizations or to a process for organizing the people around the issues, the experience normally ends with the end of the theatre activity.”<sup>88</sup> Perhaps this explains popular theatre’s emergence at the crossroads of several different disciplines; community development, critical pedagogy and theatre for social action. His comments also emphasize the fact that popular theatre is a social practice with a particular use-value that is deeply imbricated in its locality.

The participants in a popular theatre workshop in Trinidad and Tobago in 1990 came up with the following definition of popular theatre: “It is a process of mobilizing people through drama, as a tool of communication which will educate people in dealing with reality and finding solutions. Two of the main characteristics of popular theatre were identified to be (i) providing a dramatic situation in which local problems are highlighted as they exist in reality; and (ii) fostering cooperative thinking, rather than individual thinking. Its aim then is to assist in solving problems that effect people’s lives.”<sup>89</sup>

## **THE KAMIRIITHU COMMUNITY EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL CENTER**

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<sup>88</sup> Participatory Research Newsletter, Spring 1987, vol 4, no.2, 4.

<sup>89</sup> CAFRA News, vol 4, no.3, Sept-November 1990, 20-21, article by Paula Thomas based on workshop held July 20-22, 1990.

The dynamics of a successful practice of popular theatre – and the repercussions of such a practice – can be learned through an examination of the fate of Kenya’s Kamiriithu Community Educational and Cultural Center (KCECC). While the Laedza Batanani project is cited most often as influential for other popular theatre in Africa, the history/story of the Kamiriithu Community Educational and Cultural Center (KCECC) is cited often as the most successful attempt at a genuinely popular theatre. Kamiriithu is a “rural slum” outside Nairobi, Kenya, with a history that has made it, literally and figuratively, an epicenter for struggles of liberation. The history of the KCECC reveals both the strength and threat of popular theatre and illustrates the various forms of cultural struggle that Stuart Hall has delineated: “incorporation, distortion, resistance, negotiation, recuperation.”<sup>90</sup> For my purposes it is interesting to look at how KCECC was able to negotiate its opposition to the power structures of the status quo, and how, when and why the status quo contained its opposition.

Like many other newly independent, former colonies, economically Kenya remained under foreign control, even after gaining independence in 1963.<sup>91</sup> Culturally too, the country remained dominated, after independence, by colonial institutions, such as the Kenya National Theatre which was established and dominated by British directors. As a Kenyan historian notes, “The postcolonial state in Kenya has largely inherited the former colonial economic infrastructure and policies. Kenya’s economy is also still

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<sup>90</sup> Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Popular,’” in *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge, 1981), p227-240.

<sup>91</sup> For a more thorough examination of the ways in which former colonial economies have been controlled and manipulated by foreign powers, see my discussion of the Jamaican economy in chapters two and three.

dominated by multinational corporations and foreign capital. While the former ruling European bourgeoisie departed at independence, their positions were largely inherited by an indigenous bourgeoisie, who are ruling in collaboration with international finance . . . Kenya continues to remain a land of a few rich people and millions of poor folk.”<sup>92</sup> The KCECC grows directly from these consequences. Kidd’s article, “Popular Theatre and Popular Struggle in Kenya: The Story of the KCECC,” provides a useful summary of the center’s work and experiences of repression. The KCECC was a peasant- and worker-controlled organization in rural Kenya.<sup>93</sup> The center, opened in 1976, first took up literacy classes, led by Ngugi wa Mirii who undertook a Freirian literacy approach.<sup>94</sup> The success of the literacy program led to the commissioning of a script that would be about the community’s experiences, co-written by Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Mirii, two intellectuals who worked with the KCECC over an extended period of time. The script then underwent a revision process in which the community members made changes, until Kidd notes, “in effect it became the community’s play.”<sup>95</sup> The play, I Will Marry When I Want, “talks about the people of Kamiriithu – their lives, history, struggles, songs, experiences, hopes, and concerns.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> William R. Ochieng’ “The Kenyatta Era: Structural and Political Changes,” in B.A. Ogot and W.R. Ochieng’, editors, Decolonization and Independence in Kenya 1940-1993 (London: James Curry; Athens: Ohio University Press, 1995), 91.

<sup>93</sup> Ross Kidd, “Popular Theater and Popular Struggle in Kenya: The Story of the KCECC,” Cultures in Contention, ed. Douglas Kahn and Diane Neumaier, (Seattle: The Real Comet Press, 1985), p.50-61.

<sup>94</sup> See Ngugi wa Mirii, “Literacy for and by the People: Kenya’s Kamirithu Project” Convergence 13 (1980):55-61.

<sup>95</sup> Cultures in Contention, 55.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 55

Kidd and Kerr both note the effort made by the community to be self-sufficient; they refused to take money from either wealthy outsiders or charitable organizations. Instead the community worked together to build the theatre/center and do all other necessary work on their own. But such peasant initiative and sovereignty was inevitably threatening to the ruling class and, perhaps, foretold the Center's eventual demise. Kidd summarizes the fate of the KCECC: "In 1977 the performance of its first drama, a community production in which over two hundred villagers participated, was stopped and one of the organizers, Ngugi wa Thiong'o imprisoned. Early in 1982 its second drama was stopped, its license as a community organization withdrawn, and the community-built two thousand-seat theatre smashed to the ground."<sup>97</sup> Kidd captures the essence of what made their work both extremely powerful and extremely threatening: "It represents a reappropriation of culture by the people; they have taken back what the ruling class has denigrated as 'traditional' or converted into a tourist commodity, a means of glorifying the political leadership, or a toll of partisan politics."<sup>98</sup>

Ingrid Bjorkman's research on audience response to the 1982 production by the KCECC, Mother, Sing for Me, reveals its appeal and popularity. She quotes one participant's observation of the audience:

The play used to start at 6:30 and word got around so fast on the first day that as early as three in the afternoon you had house full. If you left your office at 4:30 you would not get a seat even on the staircase. There were

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 57.

people who had hired a bus from Mombasa, from Nakuru, from all over. Working people who had taken off a day from the factory and come to see the play, sitting there from 3 up to 10 – that’s when we used to finish the play. And even at 10, with all that stuffiness in the theatre, with all that heat, with all that waiting, they still did not want to go away. They wanted you to do the play again. And they would come back the next day the same time, bringing their brothers, their mothers.<sup>99</sup>

Kidd cites the KCECC project as a “truly popular theatre,” contrasting it to previous attempts at popular theatre such as university traveling theatres and English language political theatre which is aimed at the educated and privileged class. Kidd’s reasons for classifying the project as such give insight into his definition of popular theatre.

The Kamiriithu villagers are not just actors or a cheap source of labor for a community project shaped by others; they *control* the process and shape it through their participation and ideas . . . they continue to make all the decisions, control the finances and determine its direction . . . *it . . . advances the consciousness and organization of the peasants and workers . . . it encourages the growth of their own analysis, self-confidence, and fighting spirit . . . it makes people question the political-economic*

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<sup>99</sup> Bjorkman, Ingrid. *Mother, Sing For Me: People’s Theatre in Kenya*, (London: Zed Books Ltd, 1989), 59-60.

*structures which shape their oppression and develop the will to transform these structures.*<sup>100</sup>

Desai Gaurav concurs with Kidd's determination in his summary of their accomplishment: "If theatre as discourse has always been a social practice, at Kamiriithu it was fully realized as a social praxis, committed to the dialogic process of social change."<sup>101</sup> Both of their comments and evaluations of the work reflect the continuing emphasis in popular theatre on Freirian pedagogical methods and values; Kidd's summary of the KCECC's accomplishments virtually mirrors Freire's own definition of the process of conscientization.

What perhaps made KCECC so successful and simultaneously so threatening, was its implicit blurring of the lines between culture of the popular classes and that of the elite classes, between popular culture and national culture. Their work made the maintenance of those terms as separate and discrete categories more and more difficult. The KCECC, like Sistren Theatre Collective, who I will discuss in a later chapter, did not want to simply perform in village squares. For their second production, Mother, Sing for Me, they sought a permit to perform at the National Theatre in Nairobi, as Kidd notes, "partly as a challenge to its neocolonial practices."<sup>102</sup> The Kenya National Theatre was established by the former colonial government, and as Ngugi explains, even after independence continued to be dominated by the expatriate community with West End

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<sup>100</sup> Cultures in Contention, 57. Italics mine.

<sup>101</sup> Gaurav Desai, "Theatre as Praxis: Discursive Strategies in African Popular Theatre," African Studies Review 33 (1990), 86.

<sup>102</sup> Cultures in Contention, 57.

musicals dominating the stage. KCECC's work attempted to retrieve pre-colonial cultural traditions: "Kamiriithu then was not an aberration but an attempt at reconnection with the broken roots of African civilization and its traditions of theatre. In its very location in a village within the kind of social classes described above [peasantry], Kamiriithu was the answer to the question of the real substance of a national theatre. Theatre is not a building. People make theatre. Their life is the very stuff of drama. Indeed Kamiriithu reconnected itself to the national tradition of . . . language, of content and of form."<sup>103</sup> The idea of literally replacing the colonial culture found at the National Theatre with theatre created by a peasant community group represents a direct challenge to the cultural authority of the status quo. In an effort to silence the group their request to perform there was never answered and when they arrived at the theatre for final rehearsals, the doors were locked; on the scheduled opening night, "The police kept patrolling the grounds of the Kenya National Theatre."<sup>104</sup> The group retreated to the University where it held "open" rehearsals which attracted thousands of "spectators"; a week later the University received a call from the government instructing them to deny entry to the theatre group. In effect, the government's strategies eventually contained the culture of the peasant classes, preventing it from leaking into and onto larger national institutions.

Kidd's comments on the significance of the work being done illuminates its threat to the status quo:

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<sup>103</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, (London: James Curry, 1986), 42.

<sup>104</sup> Ngugi, in appendix of Bjorkman, 99.

Kamiriithu has provided an alternative vision for developing national culture in Kenya, one which incorporates the notion of popular centers in every village rather than elitist and neocolonial cultural institutions in the capital. The Kamiriithu community theatre has a significance far beyond its own village; it is a concrete example of what a people's national theatre should be: accessible to and controlled by the masses, performed in their languages, adopting their forms of cultural expression, and addressing their issues. In this sense it is *a direct attack* on and a clear alternative to Kenya's existing institutions of national culture which are inaccessible to the masses, controlled by foreigners, in foreign languages, and a reflection of foreign interests and themes.<sup>105</sup>

Popular theatre at its most successful then is an attack on the existing institutions of national culture which even in many post-colonial nations are still dominated by colonial influences; no wonder it is so dangerous and subject to repression. Popular theatre tries to imagine and reconfigure structures of power in such a way as to give the oppressed classes a sense of self-determination and power to create their own destinies. Moreover, in its attempts to replace those remaining vestiges of colonial culture, it suggests where the true power of the nation – culturally, spiritually, imaginatively – should lie. Popular theatre, through its struggles to propose alternatives to national culture whose source lies in the traditions of the peasants and their lived reality, provides the means to re-imagine the nation through culture; popular theatre becomes politically

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<sup>105</sup> Culture in Contention, 59. Italics mine.

dangerous through its radical transformation of the national imaginary. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o concluded, the peasants proved that "out of their own internal resources and the passions born of their unique experience of history, they can outshine the best that can be produced by parroting foreigners, and by following submissively the downtrodden paths of foreign education, foreign theatres, foreign cultures, foreign initiative, foreign languages."<sup>106</sup> Moreover, this production can happen outside of the conventional structures of cultural production. Ingrid Bjorkman noted, "Mother, Sing for Me . . . revived a domestic cultural form and showed that this was more than adequate for contemporary theatre. It demonstrated the success of communication through national languages and traditional modes of expression; contemporary theatre need not adopt Western art forms."<sup>107</sup> Ngugi notes that the play itself "suggested a whole new basis for Kenyan theatre . . . The play which heavily drew from the songs and dances of different Kenyan nationalities showed practical possibilities for the integration of Kenyan cultures."<sup>108</sup>

Integral to this and to the re-imagining of the nation is the use of local languages in performance. Language has long been a tool of cultural dominance both during colonial and post-colonial times and Ngugi has written extensively about the ways in which language has been used to secure cultural hegemony.<sup>109</sup> It is not surprising then, that much popular theatre has been performed in indigenous and local languages; in

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<sup>106</sup> Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary (London: Heinemann, 1981).

<sup>107</sup> Bjorkman, 93.

<sup>108</sup> Statement made to press, March 10, 1982, printed in appendix in Bjorkman.

chapter three I will explore in depth Sistren's use of the local patois in performance. Such performances, on national stages, prove disruptive to the understandings and maintenance of borders between elite culture and popular culture.<sup>110</sup> Such blurrings provide a space for a radical re-imagining of the nation, wherein the appearance of popular cultural forms and local languages in places usually reserved for elite or "high" culture, threaten to disrupt borders elsewhere between "high" and "low." How can such a process provide a site for cultural intervention that could seriously question the dominant culture and its power? Perhaps the Kenyan government realized that "theatre and performance, seen as an institution whose chief function is the production of the social imaginary, can play a potentially vital role in shaping social change."<sup>111</sup> Eroding cultural borders threaten parallel disruptions. Denigration – or total suppression – of popular theatre becomes vital to sustaining power structures of the status quo. How can popular theatre occupy and then expand and exploit the fissures created by these moments of resistance? Can gains be made by popular theatre during these opportunistic moments that change the material and cultural realities of subaltern/oppressed classes? These questions will be addressed in more depth in the subsequent chapters of this dissertation.

## **TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF POPULAR THEATRE: THE POLITICS OF THE**

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<sup>109</sup>See Ngugi *Decolonizing the Mind*. Also see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, for a general discussion of the ways colonial nations used language to secure their cultural and political power.

<sup>110</sup>There are many other examples in which languages of performance have caused tremendous cultural anxiety. See, for example Erin Hurley's discussion of performances in *joual* in Quebec in her forthcoming dissertation, "Styling Nation: Theatre and Belonging in Quebec." See my discussion of Sistren's performances in patois in chapter three for more citations.

## POPULAR

Before continuing this exploration of the politics of the popular, a word of caution is noted by cultural critic Stuart Hall: “I want to tell you some of the difficulties I have with the term ‘popular.’ I have almost as many problems with ‘popular’ as I have with ‘culture.’ When you put the two terms together, the difficulties can be pretty horrendous.”<sup>112</sup> The fact that Raymond Williams calls culture “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language,” indicates the further complexity of this task.<sup>113</sup> William’s and Hall’s comments reflect the complexities that have resulted from the diverse deployments of these terms. While my project is not to define popular culture – others have devoted volumes to that task – I do want to suggest that a definition of popular theatre must grapple with this discourse and its politics because it is at least nominally embedded in it; definitions of popular culture leak into and onto those of popular theatre.<sup>114</sup> Hall’s point suggests some of the complexities and myriad consequences that can result from a project that struggles to define “popular theatre.” What I like to imagine as the consequence of my effort is an understanding of popular theatre as a social practice which has the potential to be a site of radical cultural and political intervention, one which has the ability to disrupt, or at least point to fissures in, the power structures of the status quo. Surely, too, my definition will have consequences

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<sup>111</sup> Reinelt, 289.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>113</sup> Raymond Williams, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

<sup>114</sup> For a summary of the discourse on popular culture see John Storey, Cultural Theory and Popular Culture.

which I cannot foresee and which critics who come after me will hopefully reveal. Moreover, just as popular culture itself changes over time and space, so too must the definition of what constitutes popular culture and popular theatre be subject to such contextual shifts.

In cultural critic Tony Bennett's discussion, "The Politics of the Popular and Popular Culture," he notes,

I shall be less concerned to define popular culture and the related concepts of 'the popular' and 'the people' than to explore some of the political issues which hinge on their definition. Indeed, I shall argue that the meaning of these terms and our understanding of the relations between them are not matters that can be resolved by definitional fiat. The most that one can do is to point to a range of meanings, a range of different constructions of the relations between popular culture, 'the popular,' and 'the people,' which have different consequences for the way in which popular culture is conceived and constituted as a site for cultural intervention.<sup>115</sup>

I have begun my exploration of popular theatre by looking at how others have chosen to define it within a particular set of temporal and geographic contexts. In so doing, I do not intend to resolve the problematics of meaning Bennett refers to through "definitional fiat." Rather, I want to provide a discursive starting point for explorations of a very

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<sup>115</sup> Bennett, in Popular Culture and Social Relations, ed. Tony Bennett, Colin Mercer and Janet Woollacott (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), 8.

particular social practice, and in the process reveal and explore its dynamics. While, I, too, am concerned with the political issues that hinge on defining popular theatre, part of how I have charted those implications is by looking at how popular theatre practitioners have defined their own work. Of course my own political and ideological position skews the study; I want to understand how popular theatre can most effectively be a “site for cultural intervention” which has the potential to disrupt hegemonic political and social structures.

A useful starting point for this discussion is a delineation of the various current deployments of “popular” as used to describe culture. Nestor Garcia Canclini, in a discussion that pertains primarily to Latin America but which I believe proves insightful and clarifying for my discussion, cites three constructions of the popular, noting the potential for overlap and hybridity between them.<sup>116</sup> The first is based in folklore and the traditional cultural practices of indigenous peoples. With this deployment of popular, value is placed on that which is perceived as authentically belonging to traditional practices of the people. The second construction of the popular Canclini discusses differentiates itself from the first primarily by the fact that this culture is given to the people from an outside source. The people play the role of consumer rather than creator; this has also been termed mass culture. The last construction of the popular he discusses and the most useful for my discussion here, is that of popular culture as “conscientization,” or consciousness raising. It is important to remember that Canclini

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<sup>116</sup> Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995). John Storey (1998) also provides a useful survey of cultural theory’s engagement with

discusses each of these phenomena not as naturally occurring but rather as constructions. He remains suspicious of the motives that underlie their deployment. Hybridity of forms is also common; for example, much popular theatre with goals of conscientization uses cultural forms based in traditional or folk practices as a tool for achieving their goals.

Similarly, there are many discursive entanglements among people's theatre, populist theatre and popular theatre, which parallel those that Canclini has described.<sup>117</sup> The forms are not easily defined, discrete phenomena; they too are subject to hybridity. The three important components to consider in sorting through the overlaps are: who creates and performs the work; for whom is it created; and what constitutes its content and form. All three of these components contribute to the relationship between the performers and the audience and the social and political function – or use-value – of the performance event in a given community/society. For example in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the US, the workers theatre movement tried to bring “high culture,” such as Ibsen and Shakespeare, to the masses or the working classes.<sup>118</sup> While it has been argued that the goals here were to make theatre more “popular,” such discourse relied on a deployment of the term that relates to Canclini's second definition – mass culture – and which I will term “populist theatre.” Later worker's theatre was interested in creating

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popular culture; he divides the discursive deployments of popular culture into six segments, each of which fall into one of the three categories Canclini discusses.

<sup>117</sup> Eugene Van Erven's book, Radical People's Theatre deals with some of these overlaps, but also allows for discursive slippage from people's theatre to popular theatre.

<sup>118</sup> See Theatre For Working Class Audiences in the United States, 1830-1980 eds., Friedman and McConachie (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1985). Also, I do not want to imply that Shakespeare inherently is “high culture,” however at that particular moment in American cultural history it was. For an explanation of how this came to be, see Lawrence Levine, Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

theatre out of the issues and stories of the working class, performed by the working class in an effort to create a working class culture.<sup>119</sup> Scholar Diana Taylor has designated such “by the people, for the people” theatre as “people’s theatre” noting that such theatre does not necessarily take on a political analysis or critique. Popular theatre as I will discuss it differentiates itself from these two by its connection to the third deployment of the popular that Canclini notes; its goal is conscientization. What sets popular theatre apart, as I will define it and as many practitioners have defined it, is its articulated *purpose* of conscientization.

Popular theatre, then, is most usefully understood in terms of its goals of advocacy for the subordinate or oppressed classes in a society. Diana Taylor notes what these goals are:

Popular theatre . . . takes into account that theatre plays an instrumental part in shaping ideology, whether it is an agitational, integrative or demystifying kind of theatre . . . it advances and supports the interests of the oppressed and marginalized groups within a society. Popular theatre, as Boal and other practitioners recognize, need not necessarily be written by members of the oppressed classes or even address a popular audience as long as it furthers the position of the disadvantaged within the system . . . Popular theatre then, refers less to specific spectacles, audiences, and

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<sup>119</sup> According to Daniel Friedman, those who became involved in the workers theatre movement of the 30's, “did so with the deliberate intent of helping to create a distinct working class culture.” “A Brief Description of the Worker’s Theatre Movement of the Thirties” Daniel Friedman, 111-120 in McConachie and Friedman.

methods of production than to the aims this theatre serves. By means of intense examination and self-examination, popular theatre attempts to liberate both its audience and itself from the constraints and blinders imposed (however imperceptibly) by the hegemonic cultural discourse.<sup>120</sup>

Boal has himself noted that the “essence of popular theatre is the idea of social change . . . the popular theatre perspective is one of transformation, change, and improvement of the social classes.”<sup>121</sup> While Taylor’s explication of popular theatre’s goals reflects the aims of popular theatre practitioners I discuss, these practitioners accomplish these goals through the use of specific cultural and theatrical forms. So while popular theatre differentiates itself from populist and people’s theatre by its goals, the “specific spectacles, audiences, and methods of production” are not as peripheral to the attainment of this goal as Taylor’s statement implies.

Following Bennett’s assertion – one with which most cultural critics, including myself, would agree – that constructions of the popular have political consequences, I am interested in seeing if I can construct an understanding of popular theatre that can expand our understanding of its possibilities as a site for cultural intervention. How could discursive re-constructions of the “popular” affect the ways in which we imagine popular theatre as a tool for cultural intervention? If, for example, popular culture is defined to make it all that elite and canonized culture is not, this carries a particular value and

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<sup>120</sup> Theatre of Crisis: Drama and Politics in Latin America (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 42.

<sup>121</sup> “Theatre for a World In Transition: Excerpts from an Interview with Augusto Boal,” Theaterwork, July/August 1983, 14, translated by Edgar Quiles and Georg Schuttler.

political valence. In the context of a post-colonial nation, this definitional binary takes on more particular political meanings. The “popular” classes, or “the people,” in this context are usually understood to be those who are oppressed by the minority ruling class, whose culture tends to reflect colonial influences. In this case, the culture of the colonizer is positioned at the “high” end of a “high culture/low culture” binary in which all other cultural forms and production occupy the latter position. The maintenance of a high/low binary within theatre is exacerbated by the fact that much popular theatre does not stem from a literary tradition but rather from an oral one.<sup>122</sup>

As Dwight Conquergood has noted, “The borderlines between texts and performances, literacy and orality, are highly charged and determined within concrete, historical configurations of power . . . Instead of a horizontal, metonymic relationship, the terms are locked in a hierarchical, paradigmatic configuration in which text towers over and subsumes performance.”<sup>123</sup> I would also argue that popular theatre has been marginalized within western scholarship for much the same reason. The KCECC’s attempt to bring performances created by a peasant community to the National Theatre was also an attempt to intervene in the perpetuation of a high culture/low culture binary which sustained the marginalization of Kenya’s landless peasants and their culture. By asserting that this “popular” theatre belonged on a national stage, and hence could itself become “high” or national culture, the KCECC’s performances suggested ways for

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<sup>122</sup> For a further discussion of orality see my discussion of *Sistren’s* performances in patois in chapters two and three.

<sup>123</sup> “Beyond the Text: Toward a Performative Cultural Politics,” paper presented at the “Future of the Field,” Performance Studies Conference, New York, March 25, 1995, 2.

radically re-imagining the nation through a reconstitution of popular culture. That reconstitution then has implications for the practice of popular theatre.

If we could pry the terms – particularly “national culture” and “popular culture” – loose from the high/low binary or as Conquergood says, the “hierarchical, paradigmatic configuration” then, I believe we could also imagine new possibilities for the practice of popular theatre. To begin to pry them loose we would need to think of popular culture not as something quaint or deserving of preservation, not just as cultural practices with a connection to a romaniticised past that need rescuing, but rather as articulations of current social practices which reveal what is most urgent for the survival of a people and most salient to their daily living conditions. I think it becomes clear to see the different consequences this understanding could yield “for the way in which popular culture is conceived and constituted as a site for cultural intervention.”<sup>124</sup> This then yields implications and suggestions for the ways in which popular theatre too, whose form and content borrows from popular culture, can be constituted as a site for cultural and political intervention. If we can imagine popular theatre as a social practice which is both reflective of, and a participant in, a people’s struggle for self-determination, equality and freedom, then surely, too, we can imagine it to be generative of a new, more genuinely *national* culture. As Reinelt has noted, “Theatre and performance, seen as an institution

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<sup>124</sup> Interestingly, in an article in the New York Times describing recent recipients of folk art grants, the rationale for giving them these monies is to “preserve” their craft. For a fuller discussion of ways in which folk culture has been fetishized see my discussion in chapter five.

whose chief function is the production of the social imaginary, can play a potentially vital role in shaping social change.”<sup>125</sup>

Bennett advocates a definition of popular culture that is rooted in that culture’s social relations with both dominant and subordinate classes:

[Popular culture] consists of those cultural forms and practices – varying in content from one historical period to another – which constitute the terrain on which dominant, subordinate and oppositional cultural values and ideologies meet and intermingle, in different mixes and permutations, vying with one another in their attempts to secure the spaces within which they can become influential in framing and organizing popular experience and consciousness . . . it . . . is located in the points of confluence between these opposing tendencies whose contradictory orientations shape the very organization of the cultural forms in which they meet and interpenetrate one another.<sup>126</sup>

Bennett’s definition of popular culture in terms of its social relations, mirrors my own struggle to define popular theatre. The theatre that I will term “popular” I do so because of how it is positioned in relation to the various classes of people, and the locations of power, in a given society. Stuart Hall – along with other cultural studies theorists – also describes popular culture as a *process*, rather than a static set of practices

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<sup>125</sup> Reinelt, 289.

<sup>126</sup> Bennett, 19.

or traditions.<sup>127</sup> Popular culture “looks at the relations which constantly structure this field into dominant and subordinate formations. It looks at the process by which these relations of dominance and subordination are articulated.”<sup>128</sup>

Echoing Hall, Guarav Desai explains popular theatre as a process, and as such, one which must be understood to emerge from and in relation to particular social and political forces.

Popular theatre, then, cannot be defined in any one way. It is best thought of as a normative discursive practice that engages in dialogues with other theatrical practices of the society. The social utterance that we conceptualize as popular theatre arises from and constantly interacts with other modes of social discourse. It is never in an exclusively privileged position and thus constantly negotiates and renegotiates its own articulations in the larger societal context . . . This relationship makes the theatre an active interpretive and socially volatile *process*.<sup>129</sup>

The idea of popular theatre as a fluid process, rather than a bounded entity, suggests that it too is engaged in a constant negotiation with other cultural forces. It also suggests a contextual examination of this practice which is embedded within social, political and historical forces in order to fully understand its meanings and social function.

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<sup>127</sup> See also, for example, John Fiske’s discussion of the processes of incorporation and resistance in Understanding Popular Culture.

<sup>128</sup> “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Popular,’” in People’s History and Socialist Theory, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge, 1981), 235.

<sup>129</sup> African Studies Review, 68. Italics mine.

While popular theatre, as I have chosen to define it, emerged in very different and distinct regions of the world, Ross Kidd notes some of the common threads that tie these contemporaneous phenomena together into a popular theatre *movement*: “The common denominator is a history of a) colonialism and imperialism and struggles against foreign political, economic and cultural domination, and b) attempts by the dominant indigenous classes to consolidate their economic, social and political power are met with resistance by movements of the oppressed classes.”<sup>130</sup> While each of these practices has emerged from specific historical and social conditions and must be studied from within those contexts, they are also political practices embedded within the history of larger political processes, namely those of colonialism and globalization. There is much to be gained from examining their dynamics side by side.

Moreover, many of the forces that result in oppression in each of these varying locales have their sources, not at the local community level, but at the macro-political level, making an exclusive emphasis on locality counterproductive. Mlama summarizes this dilemma: “Another problem which popular theatre will have to struggle with for a long time is how to confront problems whose causes and solutions are at a macro level. How does a village mobilise to solve a problem caused by say flaws in national or international structures? Popular theatre could mobilize a community to expand agricultural production but how can it empower the people to influence the price of their products considering that these are determined at the international market? . . . popular

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<sup>130</sup> “Folk Media, Popular Theatre, and Conflicting Strategies for Social Change in the Third World,” in Kidd and Colletta, 282.

theatre ought to be part of a broader organization which could empower the people to confront their problems both at the micro and macro level.”<sup>131</sup> My hope is that this dissertation will allow for further thinking towards such organization. Political theatre scholar Eugene van Erven’s point provides another important reason for a study of third world popular theatre: “Because ‘theatre for development’ has the capacity to foster the emergence of creative individuals within self-reliant communities, it might well be the third world’s most significant contribution to world theatre.”<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Miama, Culture and Development, 209.

<sup>132</sup> Eugene van Erven, “Revolution, Freedom, and Theatre of Liberation,” Research in African Literatures, 22(3), 26.

**CHAPTER TWO**  
**PRACTICING RESISTANCE: THE HISTORY OF SISTREN THEATRE**  
**COLLECTIVE**

I first learned of Sistren's work while doing research on popular theatre, with an emphasis on tracing the influence of Boal's work. As coincidence would have it, a few months later, members of Sistren came to the University of Toronto, where I was pursuing a Masters degree, to give a series of workshops. I immediately signed up. I remember at the time not being very impressed with the workshops, which had been billed as "empowerment workshops for women" and sponsored by the Women's Studies department, not the theatre or drama programs. The last workshop they offered was on using autobiography as an empowering tool. I attended that workshop with a friend who is a playwright and who had been, at the time, particularly interested in women writers' journals as a form of autobiography; she was using the journal as inspiration for plays that explored these women's lives and relationships to contemporary society. We both walked away feeling disappointed, rather than empowered, but I attributed most of this to the fact that the workshops were being conducted outside of Sistren's context; perhaps they had lost something in the translation or abbreviation. I thought that perhaps similar activities done in Jamaica would have been empowering. I decided to pursue the matter further and contacted them to see if I could arrange some sort of stay with the company in Jamaica. After prolonged communication that reflected what I later learned was a period

of administrative upheaval, I was finally able to conduct the research on which the next two chapters will be based.<sup>1</sup>

I arrived in Jamaica in January 1996 and stayed until June 1996. During that period I was in residence with Sistren. I attended work each day at their offices and participated in many artistic events. I observed all meetings of Sistren's artistic team that took place during that time. I also followed the rehearsal process of their latest effort, the Adolescent Motivation Program. The Program had started just as I arrived so I was able to watch the development of the first set of skits which they intended to bring to local schools. Because this work was very similar to my own previous work I was invited by the director to be a contributing member of the resource team. I also traveled with the company to various other parts of Jamaica when they were performing or conducting workshops, and attended meetings with other Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). I was also fortunate enough to have located several other people who had been involved with Sistren in various capacities throughout the company's twenty year history and conducted numerous interviews. Sistren has also kept a documentation center dedicated to collecting information about popular theatre and issues relating to women and development. Several other NGO's had similar archives all of which proved invaluable to me and provided all of the primary sources included in these two chapters.

What became clearer to me the more research I did was the extent to which Sistren was in decline; what had once been a formidable political theatre company was languishing in apathy. My research goal became to try to figure out why and how this had happened. The first of these two chapters will be a historical examination of

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<sup>1</sup> I was able to conduct this research thanks in large part to a grant from the Inter-American foundation.

Sistren's work and how it created oppositional political meanings through its theatrical practice. The second chapter will look at some of the difficult transitions the company has had to make and will work towards an understanding of the changed nature of the company's relation to the society in which it currently exists.

Because Sistren was begun as a community-based endeavor, I want to begin my discussion by marking my own status as "outsider" to the community with which I worked and about which I am writing. While many theatre practitioners who do community-based work have discussed the problems associated with a facilitator's location outside the community at hand, my position in Jamaica and in my work with Sistren is one which was and is complicated by factors of race, class, nationality, language, experience, and education.<sup>2</sup> In addition to this, my purpose for being in Jamaica was double; I was a graduate student doing research for my dissertation and also a theatre practitioner who was invited to Jamaica to facilitate a series of workshops. Throughout my stay I found my "outsider-ness" seemed to constantly double and redouble over itself. I was both observer and participant simultaneously. I was temporarily a part of this group and yet obviously was never really a member of this community of women, many of whom had been working together for almost twenty years. As Mary Karen Dahl notes in her work on black British theatre, here I am always the outsider, and yet my work – regardless of my own intentions, always participates in

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<sup>2</sup> The panel, "Ethics in Community-Based Theatre," at the 1998 ATHE conference in San Antonio, provided a comprehensive exploration of these issues. Many of the essays in *Playing Boal* discuss these issues. See also, Clive Barker in Patrice Pavis ed. *Intercultural Performance Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1996), and Julie Salverson, "Performing Emergency: Witnessing, Popular Theatre and the Lie of the Literal" *Theatre Topics* 6(2) (September 1996): 181-191.

the “politics of racism,” and, I would add, in the economy of colonialism.<sup>3</sup> Nothing I can do as a researcher can erase hundreds of years of history and my relative privilege as a white middle-class American woman with many years of university education, so I want to make sure that my history does not go “unmarked” here. I also want to acknowledge the extent to which my work is constantly struggling against its inherent involvement in the politics of imperialism. Moreover, I think my position and all of its complications had a strong impact on my overall experience of being in Jamaica and of working with Sistren.

There is something particular about the work of Sistren which makes considerations of cultural difference important. Sistren’s work has always articulated itself as work which strives to empower women. Power structures within any society are complex and contingent on many historical phenomena, most of which in this case remain outside my own experiential knowledge. Might my status as an outsider also mean that Sistren and I would understand the concepts of power and empowerment in divergent ways? Might my perceptions and/or evaluations of the empowering nature of Sistren’s work in the end be affected by this? How does my own understanding of power and empowerment affect the way in which I view the work of Sistren and evaluate its empowering potential? While I want to be aware of the limitations of my own experience and relationship with this community, I also do not want these to lead to some sort of investigative paralysis.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>“Postcolonial British Theatre: Black Voices at the Center,” in Imperialism and Theatre: Essays on World Theatre, Drama and Performance, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 40.

<sup>4</sup> I owe this thought to Rita Parikh, who works for InterPares, one of Sistren’s long time financial supporters. We met while I was in Jamaica and have kept in intermittent touch. When she told me of InterPares’ decision to discontinue its funding relationship with Sistren, she cited their failure to achieve

In her research on Black British theatre, Dahl notes the importance of her differential understanding of several key terms important to that genre. Because of her own history, “immigrant” and “settler,” terms which have a particular valence in Black British theatre, have different meanings for her as the researcher. Dahl acknowledges her own history and potentially discrepant understanding of these terms as a way to “open up these terms, making them vulnerable to interrogation.”<sup>5</sup> I have a similar project in mind as I tell my own history and ground my own difference as a means to open up the terms essential to the genre of popular theatre, “empowerment” and “resistance,” to interrogation.

### **FOUNDING SISTREN THEATRE COLLECTIVE**

The lyrics of Bob Marley’s song – get up, stand up, stand up for your rights – capture the spirit of post-independence Jamaica, when hope for change and empowerment permeated working class and ghetto communities. The 1972 electoral victory of the People’s National Party (PNP), and the 1974 declaration by its leader, Michael Manley, that the country “had been converted to socialism,” augmented this atmosphere of hope and national pride.<sup>6</sup> Manley declared his commitment to what he chose to call “democratic socialism” and stated that, “Socialism begins with the belief in equality. Socialists believe that human beings are moral and capable of acting together to achieve common purposes and believe that the world must be consciously organized to provide

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their stated goals. I told her that of course I had noticed this during my stay but that I hated to evaluate their success by my own American values. She replied that while it is important to be sensitive to the differences of what can be accomplished in different areas and cultures, it also led to a kind of paralysis to dismiss their accountability to their stated mission entirely.

<sup>5</sup> Dahl, 40.

equality of opportunity and social justice for all.”<sup>7</sup> With the government ideologically on their side, “people from the laboring poor were analyzing, making demands and being openly critical of the forces holding them back.”<sup>8</sup> As political scientist Anthony Payne has noted: “During the 1970s many black Jamaicans did come to feel for the first time that they were full members of a national community, entitled to be treated as citizens on an equal basis with others of a lighter skin.”<sup>9</sup>

Although Jamaica had been an independent nation since 1962, it had still remained economically dependent on foreign investments, primarily from the US. Anthony Payne notes that by the time of Manley’s election in 1972, Jamaica’s economy was so dependent on the US that “it would not be too much to suggest that within a decade of independence Jamaica had been effectively transferred from British colonial control into the less overt but still highly effective domain of US hemispheric power.”<sup>10</sup> Manley tried to foster a greater self-reliance for the nation through the policies of democratic socialism, a position that – combined with his support of Fidel Castro and a tax levied on the exportation of bauxite, a natural mineral which is the source of aluminum – made him unpopular to the US government, which used its economic leverage to bolster support for the opposition, the Jamaica Labor Party (JLP).<sup>11</sup> Despite

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<sup>6</sup> Anthony Payne, *Politics in Jamaica* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 1994), 34.

<sup>7</sup> Excerpt from speech to 36<sup>th</sup> annual conference of the PNP, September 1974. For complete speech see, *The Search for Solutions: Excerpts From the Speeches and Writings of Manley*, ed. John Hearne, (Canada: Maple House Publishing), 1976, 42.

<sup>8</sup> Honor Ford-Smith, “Sistren: Jamaican Women’s Theatre,” in *Cultures in Contention*, Douglas Kahn and Diane Neumaier, editors (Seattle: The Real Comet Press, 1985): 87-88.

<sup>9</sup> Payne, 6.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>11</sup> Jamaica has been a rich source of bauxite and there is a long history of American exploitation of Jamaica’s natural resources; virtually all of the profit from bauxite mining went to the American companies which exported it to the US. Manley’s levy tried to dramatically increase the exportation tax on bauxite. For more information see Payne and Fernandez.

his dedication to a more egalitarian society in which certain rights – i.e. education and health care – were enjoyed by all, he was unable to keep the nation from coming under the economic influence of the North and the West. By 1978 Manley had come to a necessary agreement with the IMF for a loan that came with “one of the most savage packages ever imposed on any client government by the IMF.”<sup>12</sup> The structural adjustment policies that were the required conditions of the loan drastically worsened the living conditions of most Jamaicans, because they “prescribe tight monetary and fiscal policies, the removal of budget deficits, tight control over wages, reduced consumption levels among the working class, large cuts in public spending, social expenditure and public sector employment as well as reduced levels of social services and lower incidence of taxation on the rich to finance capital accumulation while increasing tax burdens on the poor.”<sup>13</sup> By 1980 unemployment had risen from 24 percent in 1974 at the beginning of his democratic socialist era, to 31 percent, the cost of living had increased by 320 percent and there was a severe shortage of basic goods.<sup>14</sup>

The beginning of the era of democratic socialism in 1974 also coincided with the beginning of what Eugene Williams, currently head of the drama division of the Jamaica School of Drama, has termed the “go-go” period of Jamaican culture, when it was “bursting with confidence.”<sup>15</sup> Democratic socialism as a political paradigm tried to bring cultural production within its purview, as reflected in its “attempts to establish diplomatic

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<sup>12</sup> Manley quoted in Payne.

<sup>13</sup> Carl Stone, Class, State and Democracy in Jamaica (New York, Westport, London: Praeger Publishers 1986), 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with author, March 1996, Jamaica School of Drama Kingston, Jamaica. Williams has also worked directly with Sistren; in 1986 he directed their major production, *Muffet inna all a Wi*.

ties with African states and embrace African cultural forms.”<sup>16</sup> The “rediscovery” and celebration of working class cultural forms was seen by many as an integral part of creating an independent national identity and was evident everywhere as artists embraced and reclaimed folk traditions. Born in this climate, in 1977, Sistren Theatre Collective’s “method of work was endorsed by policies directed towards legitimizing popular expression.”<sup>17</sup>

In a strikingly similar way to the establishment of the Federal Theatre Project in the US in the 1930s, Sistren Theatre Collective grew out of a government-sponsored employment program. The Impact Programme was one of several social – some might say socialist – programs implemented by Manley’s government in an effort to alleviate the growing problem of unemployment. Because an overwhelming number of urban households were headed by women, the Impact Programme was aimed at creating employment for them and hired them as streetsweepers.<sup>18</sup> Some of these workers were later selected to participate in a training program for teacher aides. It was as Impact workers that the women who would become Sistren were invited to participate in a workers’-week concert. In preparation for their performance at this event they met with Honor Ford-Smith, an “apparently white,” middle class woman who was then a tutor at the Jamaica School of Drama. Ford-Smith – who soon became Sistren’s artistic director – describes her first encounter with the thirteen women:

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<sup>16</sup> Payne, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Ring Ding in a Tight Corner: A Case Study of Funding and Organizational Democracy in Sistren, 1977-1988 (Toronto: Women’s Program, ICAE, 1989), 23.

<sup>18</sup> The Impact Programme, along with other like-minded ones, was eliminated by the Jamaica Labor Party (JLP) shortly after it came to power in 1980.

I first met Sistren in 1977, in an old broken down schoolhouse in Swallowfield where we came together to discuss ideas for a play for Workers Week. I asked them: ‘What do you want to do a play about?’ They said: ‘We want to do plays about how we suffer as women. We want to do plays about how men treat us bad.’ ‘How do you suffer as woman?’ I asked, and we began the long process of exchange of personal history out of which our first piece of work evolved.<sup>19</sup>

This first performance was the skit Downpression Get a Blow which described women’s attempts to organize a union in a garment factory.

The women of Sistren stayed together after this initial performance because as Afolashade, one of the founding members, stated, “They liked what we did and we liked what we did and the idea of staying together as a group was enthusiastically favoured by all of us.”<sup>20</sup> Lillian Marshall, another founding member of Sistren, concurred with this, saying that somehow, the women sensed the importance of the work they were doing and recognized that it fulfilled an important need at the time.<sup>21</sup> Honor Ford-Smith agreed to continue working with the women and the Jamaica School of Drama (JSD) provided institutional support by considering this part of Ford-Smith’s outreach work, letting them rehearse at the school and later providing them with their first grant.<sup>22</sup> Many of Ford-

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<sup>19</sup> Honor Ford-Smith, “Sistren: Exploring Women’s Problems Through Drama,” unpublished manuscript, Sistren Documentation Center, Kingston, Jamaica, 1. Ford-Smith describes herself in Ring Ding as “apparently white.”

<sup>20</sup> Report prepared by Afolashade, one of the founding members of Sistren, for a non-degree course. She loaned me the report to read in January 1996. The report does not have page numbers. Also note that Afolashade changed her name from Pauline Crawford in the 1990s, she is referred to by her previous name in much archival material but I will always refer to her by her new name.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with author, Kingston, Jamaica, April 1996.

<sup>22</sup> See Ring Ding.

Smith's colleagues at the JSD later participated in various ways in Sistren's activities and provided invaluable resource assistance.<sup>23</sup>

During the earliest phase of Sistren's the work, the group agreed to work part-time on a voluntary basis and no formal structures for the future of the organization were put in place. It is important to understand that these women continued to work at their full-time jobs and could rehearse as a group only after work hours, quite an undertaking for women who also had extensive family responsibilities. They also had to deal with many practical considerations of working such late hours; as one of the founding members of Sistren recounts, Ford-Smith would drive each of the women home at the end of each rehearsal because buses did not run that late and she was the only one with a vehicle. Many of the men in these women's lives were vehemently and violently opposed to such "women's work" and the late hours they would keep together. Several members of Sistren have recounted the story of one man who threatened to "mash up" the set of their first major production – Bellywoman – if "his woman" insisted on performing. The police were called in for security on opening night, but he never attempted to carry out his threat, at least not in public. Other women tell stories of their family's disapproval because as the troupe began to travel and perform more and more, children had to be left in the care of others. But as Bev Hanson, a founding member, has stated, the women sensed that the issues they were dealing with were important: "At the end of the month each individual used to get paid some bus fare subsistence . . . we didn't really worry

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<sup>23</sup> For example, Eugene Williams, Owen Ellis and Orville Simmonds, all of whom I will discuss further. Ford-Smith remained artistic director until the late 1980s and has written and spoken extensively on the work and goals of Sistren. Her history of the organization has been one of the most valuable documentations of their work and has served to introduce an international community to Sistren's efforts.

about the money you just were concerned about the kinds of things you wanted to get done, reaching out to someone else in terms of the themes and issues that we were looking at and I was satisfied with a \$5 a month bus fare subsistence.”<sup>24</sup>

Eventually the group outlined its objectives and goals, which changed and grew as the organization itself did:

Sistren will exist to analyze the situation of women in Jamaica; to promote and publicize the contribution of working class women to the development of Jamaican society in different areas of social life; to increase the awareness of gender issues among women and men and social change agencies; and to encourage cultural expression of the Jamaican people through popular theatre techniques and participatory methods.<sup>25</sup>

Sistren Theatre engages in popular theatre techniques to develop scripts and performances based on personal testimonies and research into the struggles of women in their communities. They also conduct workshops in popular theatre and drama in education techniques and in their use to highlight issues around society and women in particular . . . Sistren Theatre relies on Jamaican and Caribbean cultural terms and expressions as the vehicle for their message. Through personal testimonies and

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with author, April 1996. She does go on to talk about the fact that this changed and the whole issue of money changed as time went by.

<sup>25</sup> “Project Proposal: Sistren Theatre Collective: Three-Year Funding Proposal 1995-1997,” unpublished manuscript, Sistren Documentation Center, Kingston Jamaica, 11.

improvisations they develop presentations to reach their target audiences.<sup>26</sup>

## WORKING METHODOLOGY

Sister come row  
 come mek wi say afloat  
 We are all sailing  
 In the same boat  
 –Sistren song<sup>27</sup>

When Sistren began working in 1977, the People's National Party (PNP) led by Michael Manley had been in power for five years. The government's articulated goals of democratic socialism included:

The deepening of the democratic process so that the collective wisdom and experience of the Jamaican working people can become the decisive factor in the decision making process at all levels . . . An important consequence of this advance will be raising the level of involvement and participation

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<sup>26</sup> "Sistren Theatre Collective 1987-1992 Evaluation Report," prepared by Cheryl Ryman, 68-9. Sistren requested this evaluation from the Association of Development Agencies (ADA), an umbrella organization for agencies doing development work in Jamaica. It was meant to provide a useful summary of their previous five years' work and make suggestions for Sistren's future. Hereafter this report will be referred to as the Ryman Report. Sistren's objectives have been described slightly differently in different places, these excerpts are seemed the most typical and include all of the key points.

<sup>27</sup> The original date of this song is unclear. These lyrics were used in several Sistren performances which I saw on videotape. A cassette of Sistren songs available from Sistren's office in Kingston includes this one.

of the vast majority – the working class and small farmer – in national life, in production as well as in cultural and political life.<sup>28</sup>

The discourse around Sistren's own working methodology and goals echoes these principles. Rejecting the hierarchical structure of most other male-dominated artistic organizations, and hoping to achieve many of the same goals that Manley articulated, Sistren strove for greater democracy. Although they tried various other administrative structures, Ford-Smith notes that in 1980, after a company retreat, they began setting up the collective structure which was firmly in place by 1982.<sup>29</sup> She explains the ways in which this collective organization reflected in form, the content and goals of the group's work:

The structure was based on the idea that our personal practice within the organization was as important as our active work toward change in the society as a whole. If we were to be a genuine collective, we could not reproduce in our internal structure, the inequitable power relations found in the society as a whole. Instead, we had to develop a broadly democratic structure which emphasized equality among all the members and which gave everyone a chance to participate and influence policy and action. We did not want to reproduce a structure which equated skill with authority or which divided brain from hand. In a sense, the structure which we built aimed to prefigure the kind of ideal society which we wanted to create.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Darrell E. Levi, Michael Manley: The Making of A Leader, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 276.

<sup>29</sup> Ring Ding, 70-71.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

This collective structure was meant to help recalibrate the inequities that these women of varying races and classes experienced in Jamaican society. Anita Waters notes, “Jamaica’s class structure today reflects its history as a colonial plantation society and its beginnings of industrial development. Its is mainly characterized by a high rate of inequality and a great deal of poverty.”<sup>31</sup> A later evaluation report noted retrospectively the importance of this structure during Sistren’s formative years: “It built self-confidence and self-esteem among the working-class women and offered them an opportunity to share the power and resources in a way not available in the larger society. It was a democratic solution to the problems of race and class and that of unequal education and skills.”<sup>32</sup>

While they strove for democracy, Sistren was also aware of how difficult such a process would be – so difficult in fact that its model, the PNP’s democratic socialist government, lost power in 1980 and many of its policies and programs were dismantled. In “The Contradictions of Collectivity,” Ford-Smith discusses in detail these difficulties, many of which are endemic to any organization that strives for equality among all of its members when inherent power differentials are divisive but also unavoidable.<sup>33</sup> So while in theory the collective structure “gave every woman a stake in the policies of the group and offered a chance for everyone to speak out on all matters concerning the group,” the reality as experienced by its members was not exactly reflective of the theory.<sup>34</sup> In reality those with more education, those of light or white skin, those with marketable skills, all

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<sup>31</sup> Anita Waters, Race Class and Political Symbols: Rastafari and Reggae in Jamaican Politics, (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1985), 26.

<sup>32</sup> Ryman Report, 53.

<sup>33</sup> In Ring Ding.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 73.

had greater power outside the collective, in the society at large and hence had more informal power within the “collective.”<sup>35</sup> Still, democracy was the company’s official policy and the goal for which it strove during this early phase in its work. And this was a policy which was – shortly after its institution – in conflict with the new ruling party’s politics.

Organizational decisions were to be made collectively. This resulted in long general meetings where decisions were come to either by consensus or by a voting majority.<sup>36</sup> As one member has written, “Decision-making in the collective was not easy and it still isn’t. It was time consuming and painstaking. The scheduled activities were often disrupted because the meetings went way overtime.”<sup>37</sup> In her study of the organization and the challenges it faced in its first decade of existence, Ford-Smith commented on some of the organizational difficulties and the impact they had on the creative work of the company:

A very serious problem in Sistren lies in its organizational structure. The internal decision making structure is cumbersome . . . The collective’s administrative support is woefully inadequate to deal with the myriad activities in which it is involved . . . The weight of the organization’s structural and administrative problems has meant that Sistren has been unable to fully develop its approach to women’s theatre and education.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> This problem with collectivity is not unique to Sistren; many collectives experience similar difficulties. For a longer discussion on the challenges of collective management of theatre companies see, Mark Weinberg, Challenging the Hierarchy: Collective Theatre in the US, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992).

<sup>36</sup> Afolashade.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ring Ding , 34-35.

Collectivity has also been integral to Sistren's creative process. Ford-Smith's description of the rationale for creating collectively echoes Manley's statements on behalf of the government's socialist policies: "The group has committed itself to the collective process of artistic production. This is not to deny the special skills of individuals or their needs at times to work alone. *Rather it aims to place that individual within a community which will lay bare the contribution of social processes to his or her way of thinking and to his or her final product.*"<sup>39</sup> The methodology of collaboration was to reflect the content of the theatrical work which would focus not only on the particularities of individual experience but also on the ways in which those experiences connect to others' experiences and in turn are connected with political processes within their community.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, she notes that collective creation was part of a larger project to challenge conventional creative methodologies and put as much emphasis on the process of creation as on the final product: "Collective creation implies that the process of creating theatre is as important as the end product. In so doing it tries to undermine the subordination of the creative process to market forces . . . Collective creation aims to break with rigid and hierarchical divisions of labor as they have come down to us in the Western theatre tradition. It aims to break with theatre discipline that enshrines the thinking process behind the creation of theatre in the body of the director and writer."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Sistren, with Honor Ford-Smith. *Lionheart Gal: Life Stories of Jamaican Women*, (Toronto: Sister Vision, 1987), 12. Italics mine.

<sup>40</sup> Boal also speaks of the importance, in his *Theatre of the Oppressed* work of not remaining concerned with the individual's story of oppression, although that is the starting point. The idea is to use the particular story and individual to expand outward and examine the social and political processes which have informed that experience and to which, many others can relate.

<sup>41</sup> "Notes Toward a New Aesthetic," *MELUS*, 16(3), (Fall 1989-1990): 29-30.

In her study of feminist theatre of the 1970s and 80s in the US, Charlotte Canning notes very similar motivations for those groups' choice to create collectively: "Feminist theatres saw their tasks very clearly; in order to work towards an end of the oppression of women they had to create organizations that would empower women both in the process of creation and the product of performance . . . Collective organization within the theatre groups tried closely to imitate the egalitarian community ideals of the feminist movement."<sup>42</sup> Ford-Smith notes the importance of such a creative process within the context of Jamaica: "The production process itself needed to validate certain kinds of hidden experience in black working class culture and among working class women. It needed to do this by making visible through theatre hidden knowledge and submerged cultural codes and by making the theatre a forum for the concerns of the playwrights themselves."<sup>43</sup> The collective creation of productions allowed Sistren to engage with the stories and experiences of working class women which had traditionally remained unspoken.

Despite the organizational and creative collectivity, there was clear artistic leadership of the group. Honor Ford-Smith served as artistic director until the late 1980s.<sup>44</sup> Even when a production was created from improvisations and stories from the company, Ford-Smith – or another guest artist – would shape this into a cohesive narrative. Although Ford-Smith was later criticized by some for her authorial role in the creative and administrative processes of Sistren, all of the members whom I interviewed

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<sup>42</sup> Charlotte Canning, *Feminist Theatres in the U.S.A.: Staging Women's Experience*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 63-64.

<sup>43</sup> "Notes Toward a New Aesthetic," 29-30.

<sup>44</sup> She did go on leave for one year during that period from 1981-1982, when Hertencer Lindsay took over, producing/directing *QPH*.

expressed a deep respect and gratitude for the generosity of her work. She, too, in all of her writings, is aware of the contradictions and complexities of being the “spokesperson” for a primarily black working-class theatre company when she is neither. She did, however, use her privilege of race and class to secure funding for the company during various trips abroad. She also brought to the collective her expertise as a theatre director. On various occasions, other outside directors and writers were brought in to work with the company. For example, Eugene Williams directed the 1986 production of Muffet Inna Alla Wi, Jean Small directed the 1980 production of Nana Yah and Hertencer Lindsay directed the 1981 production of OPH. In the next chapter I will discuss the impact Ford-Smith’s departure – as well as that of several other educated women who came to serve as resource personnel for the company, such as Joan French and Hilary Nicholson – had on the company and their creative output.

## **SISTREN’S WORK**

Sistren’s work began with the exchange of personal stories. Under the artistic leadership of Ford-Smith, the women of Sistren built a cultural organization that uses storytelling as a tool to educate and empower women by making connections between individual oppressions and larger social conditions. Sistren’s theatrical activities include popular theatre workshops and major productions, while the work done in each informs that done in the other. The work of Sistren also expanded over the years to include a textile project and a documentation and research center. All of these components were to work in concert with one another. The documentation center would provide the research and information needed to begin creating a new production, house research materials and

produce various publications, such as Sistren Magazine, which includes articles on regional women's issues and Sistren's work. The magazine has been instrumental in keeping international audiences aware of their progress. The textile project would produce t-shirts, cards, wall hangings and other fabrics with images from various productions that could be sold to the general public.<sup>45</sup> But popular theatre work was and continued to be Sistren's central activity. To date Sistren has created eleven major productions and countless workshops.<sup>46</sup>

The members of Sistren started by telling their own stories and developing productions and workshops based on autobiographical material and branched out to include the stories of other women from history and legend. The exchange of personal history or testimony has consistently been integral to their popular theatre methodology and goals of communal and individual empowerment. Sistren strives to use theatre to expose experiences which had been perceived as private and individual – domestic violence, teen pregnancy, poverty – as connected to the historical, social and political conditions facing Jamaican women. Making connections between these individual experiences is seen as the first step in recognizing and ultimately changing the social forces that shape them. As Honor Ford-Smith has noted, “The stories chart the terms of resistance in women's daily lives and illustrate ways in which women can move from the apparent powerlessness of exploitation to the creative power of rebel consciousness.

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<sup>45</sup> The textile project was started for two reasons. One of the founding members was a trained textile designer. Also, Ford-Smith discusses – in Ring Ding – the pressure from funders to produce something that could earn a profit. The hope, although never realized, was that the textile project could do this.

<sup>46</sup> While I was writing I heard that another production was in the works.

They reveal the humour and courage released in this process and project fragments of the future it envisions.”<sup>47</sup>

Personal history – alternatively referred to as autobiography or testimony – as a strategy of empowerment has been used at all levels of Sistren’s work, internally, with community groups in workshops and in the creative process and final product of a major production. Ford-Smith notes the historical significance of this method in her introduction to *Lionheart Gal*, a collection of autobiographical stories by members of Sistren: “The tale-telling tradition contains what is most poetically true about our struggles. The tales are one of the places where the most subversive elements of our history can be safely lodged . . . These tales encode what is overtly threatening to the powerful into covert images of resistance so that they can live on in times when overt struggles are impossible or build courage in moments when it is.”<sup>48</sup> She continues, noting the role that stories play in connecting individual experiences to larger social processes: “To create such tales is a collective process accomplished within a community bound by a particular historical purpose. The tales and the process of making them suggest the possibility of a unity between the aesthetic imagination and the social and political process.”<sup>49</sup>

The use and importance of this process to Sistren’s methodology must have been determined to some extent by Ford-Smith’s own personal interest in this method. As she has noted, “My involvement with Sistren came about because I had a particular interest in feminist theatre having been involved in experimental drama work for women in the

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<sup>47</sup> *Lionheart Gal: Life Stories of Jamaican Women*, 1.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

United States and Jamaica. Of equal importance was the fact that I had spent two years researching Jamaican ritual and oral tradition with a view to seeing what lessons these offered for Jamaican theatre. From this work I had evolved an interest in testimony and ritual image.”<sup>50</sup> In addition to her evident interest in oral history, her interest in ritual has suffused the imagery and structure of most of their major productions. She notes, “We do not aim to use popular art forms in a representational way, however, but rather to find within them implications for theatrical form and structure.”<sup>51</sup>

It was through the process of testimony and naming of experience that Sistren’s first major production, Bellywoman Bangarang (1978), was developed. After the sharing of personal stories, or testimony, the women’s stories were then shaped into a theatrical presentation by Ford-Smith. The play tells the stories of four women who become pregnant as teenagers. During the developmental process that culminated in this production, the women of Sistren discovered many common threads in their childhood experiences, including familiarity with the same ring games and the folk songs which came to structure the production. This structure uses imagery, song and ritual to tell the four women’s stories and explore related experiences of rape and domestic violence. As Rhonda Cobham has noted, the circular nature of the ring game which serves as the production’s central image, functions as a commentary on the social structures that have and continue to support conditions in which women remain oppressed.<sup>52</sup> Ford-Smith was able to weave together the traditions of narrative theatre with the popular performance

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>50</sup> Ring Ding, 23.

<sup>51</sup> Cultures in Contention, 89.

traditions of dance and song. Elaine Fido has noted that the production “managed to combine form and content to unite modern theatrical improvisation techniques with oral traditions . . . [it] integrates dance, ritual and powerful emotive symbols with verbal elements.”<sup>53</sup> A further elaboration of the creative process is provided in a production program:

Bellywoman was developed in 1978 in workshop through improvisation, by Sistren with Honor Ford-Smith. The play emerged from the collective experience of members of Sistren. In the beginning each member of the group went into the centre of a circle and sang a folk song from her childhood until the song evoked an incident in her memory. Then she would tell the story or act it out. If anyone else in the group felt that the experience being described aroused a memory of a similar incident in her own life, she would join in, linking her experience through story-telling or improvised action. From these simple exercises the theme of teenage pregnancy and the rites of passage from girlhood to adulthood emerged.<sup>54</sup>

Ford-Smith discusses how the material revealed during this process was then structured into a performance:

The entire narrative structure of Bellywoman Bangarang finally rested on the structure of the games and on the resolution of the conflict in the game

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<sup>52</sup> For a further examination of the ritual frameworks at play in this production see Rhonda Cobham, “‘A What Kind a Pen Dis?’: The Function of Ritual Frameworks in Sistren’s Bellywoman Bangarang,” Theatre Research International 15(3)(Autumn 1990): 233-249.

<sup>53</sup> “Radical Woman: Women and Theatre in the Anglophone Caribbean,” Critical Issues in West Indian Literature, 1984, 36.

<sup>54</sup> Program prepared for European tour, August -October 1983. For this remount of Sistren’s first major production, Rawle Gibbons was the director.

structure. Most games have a metaphorical content and often suggest a line of narrative action based on the game's objective. An example of this is the game "Bull in the Pen." Here the main player stands in the center of a circle of people whose arms are linked. She asks, by touching each arm, what the pen is made of. She then has to try and break out of it.

Dramatically, this game can be used in several ways. In Bellywoman, it functioned as a means of commenting on a scene that had gone before.

The pen became the situation itself and the arms of the players symbolized the problems of the situation. The players then had to improvise a means of breaking out of the pen.<sup>55</sup>

One of the things that made Bellywoman so unusual was the extent and explicitness with which it discussed the events of women's lives, such as birth, menstruation, and sexual violence. Instead of celebrating their womanhood, as much American feminist theatre of the same time period did, Bellywoman contained, for example, images of women's ambivalence towards pregnancy.<sup>56</sup> In her analysis of this production, Rhonda Cobham has noted that the "riddles" which structurally introduce the scenes in which each girl discovers her pregnancy, contain disturbing images: "Pregnancy is represented as dryness (the absence of blood), disease (nausea, coldsweat, blackouts, fatigue), the presence of a burdensome heavy fruit, and, in perhaps the most sinister image of all, as an exploding cupcake."<sup>57</sup> But as Cobham notes, the play is not just about teen pregnancy: "Through its ritual frames, it raises questions about ways in which the

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<sup>55</sup> Cultures in Contention, 89.

<sup>56</sup> For a more comprehensive history of the American feminist theatre movement see Charlotte Canning.

process of mothering, be it social, biological or institutional, may be undermined or put at risk by the economic realities of Caribbean society.”<sup>58</sup>

Bellywoman was first presented at the Barn Theatre, a commercial theatre in Kingston, which was made available to Sistren at a reduced rate. In her essay, “Freeing Up: Politics, Gender, and Theatrical Form in the Anglophone Caribbean,” Elaine Savory Fido discusses the importance of this. She notes, “Plays put on in theatre buildings have often shown a strong colonial character even up to now.”<sup>59</sup> Even the annual Jamaican pantomime, which uses patois and other elements of Jamaican popular culture, was originally a British theatrical form, and structurally retains much of its heritage. The colonial legacy is apparent in other ways as well; Shakespeare has “at times assumed the role of the national playwright [when] . . . the British Council, in association with the Little Theatre Movement and other groups, sponsored the first drama festival for Secondary schools in 1950, the presentations, all thirty-one of them, were chosen from the Shakespearean canon.”<sup>60</sup> The performance of working-class women’s personal stories on a commercial stage in Kingston subverts this standard and asserts a cultural legitimacy for these women’s experiences. This was a purposeful choice, as Honor Ford-Smith notes, “It seemed important to us that working-class women should have access to the

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<sup>57</sup> “Ritual Frameworks,” 245.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>59</sup> “Freeing Up: Politics, Gender, and Theatrical Form in the Anglophone Caribbean,” in, Gender in Performance: The Presentation of Difference in The Performing Arts, Lawrence Senelick, ed., (Hanover NH: University Press of New England, 1992), 284.

<sup>60</sup> Wycliffe Bennett, “The Jamaican Theatre,” Jamaica Journal, 8, no.2&3, (Summer 1974):7. Bennett’s comment should also be taken in historical context; in 1950 Jamaica had yet to become an independent nation. Too, the festival he mentions was sponsored by the British Council. Nonetheless, the comment points to the distance that cultural production needed to travel to truly reflect indigenous traditions.

most authoritative cultural institutions in the country, that this would make their claims visible and bring their voices to the public.”<sup>61</sup>

Many of Sistren’s major productions were created – as Bellywoman was – out of improvisations on particular themes which were then shaped into a final product by Honor Ford-Smith. This process, which could be quite time consuming, allowed for a deep exploration of the ways in which working class women’s lives have been shaped by various social and political processes, such as poverty and violence. For some later productions, scriptwriters were brought in to observe the improvisation work and write a play based on this. Other productions were directed by guest directors who employed the same methods. Song and dance were integral elements of every production and often provided the structural backbone as described above in Bellywoman. Lines were constantly being changed and as Lillian Marshall notes, sometimes even up to the day of the performance the actresses would be asked to make line changes.<sup>62</sup>

This work was exploratory in nature and in many ways occurred at a moment in history when the artistic and political environments converged – albeit briefly – to allow these women the space to explore the creation of a Jamaican women’s aesthetic in the theatre. Eugene Williams has compared the laboratory nature of their work to that of the Group Theatre and Grotowski in that they were being allowed the time and space for

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<sup>61</sup> “Women’s Theatre, Conscientization and Popular Struggle in Jamaica,” in Tradition for Development: Indigenous Structures and Folk Media in Non-Traditional Education, Nat Colletta and Ross Kidd eds., (Bonn: German Foundation for International Development, 1982). Note though, that while Ford-Smith refers to the Barn Theatre as one of the most authoritative cultural institutions, it was primarily used for smaller productions. Barbara Gloudon makes these comments about the space: “Audiences flocked to The Barn in those latter years of the sixties, fascinated by its cozy size, energized by the vibrancy of the performances onstage. The Barn became a laboratory for the development of some of Rhone’s [Trevor] writing and offered to many aspiring playwrights and producers the vision of what could be done on a

similar aesthetic explorations. Sistren was “a laboratory that was investigating a Caribbean aesthetic, a Jamaican aesthetic, using traditional performances of ritual and so on. They were not professional, they were a non-profit theatre company, so they could afford to continue that investigation . . . their work was unique. In a sense, Sistren was a kind of laboratory that Grotowski was . . . the laboratory was being allowed to churn out, to make mistakes.”<sup>63</sup>

In their work on post-colonial theatre, Helen Gilbert and Joanne Thompkins note, “Dramatising women as history’s central figures can be particularly subversive in cultures which have always reserved for male elders both the power and prerogative of public action.”<sup>64</sup> Many of Sistren’s productions do exactly this; women from Jamaican history and legend, as well as everyday women from the ghetto have provided the main characters for their major productions. For example, their production of Nana Yah (1980), guest directed by Jean Small, is based on the legendary figure of Nanny. It is said that Nanny, leader of the Maroons, performed superhuman feats – including bouncing bullets off her backside – as she fought off British soldiers and secured a land patent from the British in 1739.<sup>65</sup>

QPH (1981), guest directed by Hertencer Lindsay, tells the stories of three women – Queenie, Pearlie and Hopie – who died in 1980, in a fire at the Kingston Alms House

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small scale. By the mid-seventies . . . The Barn began to fade from the prominence it once had.” “Twenty Years of Theatre,” Jamaica Journal, (46), (1982): 65.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with author, April 1996.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with author, March 1996.

<sup>64</sup> Helen Gilbert and Joanne Thompkins, Post-Colonial: Theory, Practice, Politics, (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 120-121.

<sup>65</sup> The maroons were a group of black Africans, imported for slavery, who refused to be enslaved and escaped into the mountain and over time have developed their own separate society within Jamaica. Maroon communities still exist in Jamaica and are hard to access because of their locations. For more

that killed 167 destitute women.<sup>66</sup> QPH is structured around an *Etu* ritual, a celebration of the dead with African origins, currently practiced in certain areas of western Jamaica. The ritual framework is “used as a connecting thread, linking individual with individual and past with present,” noted a contemporary reviewer.<sup>67</sup> This ritual framework functions on two levels; it creates something familiar for the audience and also makes connections between particular women’s stories and more general forces that oppress women. In QPH the death ritual is used, not to mourn their deaths, but to celebrate the women’s lives – and the lives of all the other women killed in the fire – and their struggles for independence and survival. The production is haunted by the question, How had society allowed three such different women to end up in the Alms House?

Muffet Inna Alla Wi (1986) is a reggae musical which weaves together the stories of several different women called Muffet who struggle to survive in Kingston’s ghettos. For the production, guest director Eugene Williams melded popular culture images of reggae disco DJ’s with the more traditional trickster figure, Anansi, to create the character of the narrator/commentator, played by Bev Hanson. In the play, “Each of the three women called Muffet must win the right to participate in a competition by singing her survival strategy in a way that outwits the DJ, or master of ceremonies . . . taken together the stories of the three Muffets represent the struggle of Everywoman, who must stand up for her rights despite the harsh realities of urban poverty in modern day Jamaica.”<sup>68</sup>

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information see Mavis C. Campbell, The Maroons Of Jamaica 1655-1796: A History of Resistance, Collaboration and Betrayal, (Granby, Massachusetts: Bergin and Garvey Publishers Inc, 1988).

<sup>66</sup> Queenie was played by Beverley Elliot, Pearlie was played by Cerene Stephenson, and Hopie was played by Bev Hanson. Only Bev Hanson was still with the company during my field research.

<sup>67</sup> Lisa Steele, “Sistren’s QPH: Building a Collective History, This is Theatre Which Engages Through Ritual and Humour,” Fuse, volume V, nos. 8, 9 (November/December 1981): 251.

<sup>68</sup> Program notes, written by Rhonda Cobham.

Despite the many oppressions they must battle, the production ends as a celebration of women's strength and resilience. "The problems of the ghetto, the political violence of the rude boys, the sexual harassment, and the spectre of an economy being slowly strangled by the economic policies of the International Monetary Fund, all are temporary pushed aside as Muffet stands up to the bosses and refuses to take less pay for more work. The play ends with a vigorous celebration of women's energy and dignity."<sup>69</sup> The performance ends as all Muffets come onstage together and sing the song quoted at the top of this section:

Sisters come row

Come make wi stay afloat

You know we are sailing in the same boat.

## **WORKSHOPS**

In addition to major productions, Sistren also conducts popular education workshops. The workshops use many of the techniques involved in the creation of a major production – games, songs – to address topical issues. The workshops always involve the audience in an active way, both in the theatre work and in discussion of the issues. Sometimes a skit will be presented which dramatizes – perhaps symbolically – an issue and then the audience will be broken down into smaller groups, each of which is led in discussion by a Sistren member. Games may be played which have allegorical significance to the issue at hand. For example, during a workshop on the effect of the IMF's structural adjustment policies, a game of musical chairs was played in which more

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

than a dozen women vied for one chair. The members of Sistren used the game to point out the disparity of resources and the resulting behavior. Other workshops utilize the humor of ridiculously oversized props, for example, a very large red, white and blue Uncle Sam hat worn by an actor who symbolizes the United States. Because all Sistren members are women, all male parts are played by women. Audiences find much humor in these performances, most of which I believe is attributable to the skill of the actresses whose physical gender transformations are accomplished mostly through movement, and perhaps a single prop or costume choice such as a pair of sunglasses.<sup>70</sup>

Popular theatre workshops are in a sense the heart of Sistren's work. Much of the information generated from such workshops has provided the source material – or at least the seeds – for major productions. During workshops they are able to gather information about women's lives and explore the effects that various elements of society – such as structural adjustment policies or working conditions – have had on Jamaican women. Sistren's research and documentation center was developed to be an integral part of this process. Issues raised in a workshop might be further explored through historical research and the information gathered and stored in the center.<sup>71</sup> In the earlier years workshops reflected Sistren's commitment to a local community of working-class women and were done with various ghetto communities, or poor women in rural communities. In many ways the changes that have taken place within the organization over the past twenty

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<sup>70</sup> I believe that these performances less resemble an attempt at passing and rather are closer to a Brechtian acting style where the audience is always aware of the actor standing beside the character, never conflating the two.

<sup>71</sup> I am personally indebted to the research center and its manager, Lillian Marshall, for their help during my field research. The center houses much unpublished – as well as published – material relating to third world women and development as well as popular theatre.

years are reflected in the nature of the groups with which they conduct workshops, a subject that I will explore in the next chapter.

### **CASE STUDY: THE CASE OF IRIS ARMSTRONG**

Workshops done with a particular community can also develop into a major production, which happened with The Case of Iris Armstrong (1982), which Sistren developed from work with a group of women who worked in the sugar cane fields in New Sugar Town, Clarendon, Jamaica. Sistren had been doing on-going workshops and research in the area of women's work and their goal with this project was to make connections between the problems they faced as women living in an urban environment and those faced by rural women, sensing that many of them stemmed from the same social structures.<sup>72</sup> Members of Sistren traveled to the sugar cane fields, spent days out in the fields working with the women and conducted interviews in which the women revealed various stories about their lives and their work. After the research phase of their work, Sistren returned to Kingston to discuss the situation and conditions they had found and eventually a scenario emerged. The Case of Iris Armstrong is the dramatization of a story that was told to them by a woman who had taken ill and could no longer do field work. She was given a position as a supervisor, but as the only female in this position she was paid only half of what her male counterparts were paid. Iris's efforts to secure equal pay for equal work are dramatized and the audience is then asked to discuss the efficacy of her efforts and suggest other lines of action. The performance is used to

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<sup>72</sup> This project also resulted in the video, *Sweet Sugar Rage*, which both chronicles Sistren's project and the plight of the women sugar workers.

incite conversation and discussion on the issues raised. After the performance, the members of Sistren facilitate such discussions with the audience.

To bring the work full circle, a performance for the women sugar workers of The Case of Iris Armstrong encouraged them to tackle a current problem in their community: their water supply had been cut off because of a broken pump. The women used Sistren's popular theatre methods to decide what action could be taken to resolve the matter. They were ultimately successful in restoring the water supply to their community. This project epitomizes Sistren's goals: to empower individuals and communities to take action to improve their lives. Most of the time, however, the results of their work are difficult to see and assess. Popular theatre's goal may be conscientization, but how does one measure a "raised consciousness"? In words that echo those of Augusto Boal, Honor Ford-Smith has said that while much of Sistren's work strives to be connected to the political, it cannot itself stand in for political action, rather it is a rehearsal for that action.<sup>73</sup> In her discussion of this project she admonishes against quantifying the results of political theatre projects: "We used forum theatre models to train women to confront local government officials to marshal the arguments and group's cohesiveness needed for the process. In the final analysis, however, it was the actual meeting with the councillor that won an improvement in the community water supply. And there exists no way of measuring whether another form of training would have been as effective or more effective in building consciousness. *To measure the work by reducing it to its concrete*

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<sup>73</sup> For Boal's ideas on theatre as a rehearsal for the revolution see, Augusto Boal, Theatre of the Oppressed, trans. Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985).

*political and educational function is to misunderstand its purpose.*"<sup>74</sup> Her comments are similar to those of the popular theatre practitioners discussed in chapter one. The goal of popular theatre, to paraphrase Freire's goals of conscientization, is to change the way its participants read the world and their place in it.

Yet this project in many ways stands as a singular testimony to the efficacy of Sistren's methods and to the need for the work they were doing in Jamaica at this time. When asked what their greatest success has been at an exhibit on popular theatre at the Jamaica School of Drama in April 1996, Jerline Todd, a founding member of Sistren, referred to this project.<sup>75</sup> Perhaps part of the reason that this particular case is frequently cited is because its results were so visible and tangible.<sup>76</sup> During my research many others also cited this project as an example of what they hoped to accomplish. The process of creating this production and excerpts from the production have been documented in the film, produced by Sistren, *Sweet Sugar Rage* (1982). The film allows a unique view into the creation of popular theatre, a process that rarely gets documented.<sup>77</sup>

## PRACTICES OF RESISTANCE

Baz Kershaw notes in his book *The Politics of Performance* that "performance can be most usefully described as an ideological transaction between a company of

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<sup>74</sup> "Notes Toward a New Aesthetic," *MELUS*, 16(3), (Fall 1989-1990): 29.

<sup>75</sup> Owen Ellis, instructor for this course on Community Drama, allowed me to sit in on several of his classes. The students were given the assignment to create an exhibition-style event that would tell the history of popular theatre in the Caribbean. Members of Sistren – the most accessible popular theatre company with offices a short distance from the School – were invited as guest speakers. I attended the event with them.

<sup>76</sup> This project is also explored in depth in "Sistren: Exploring Women's Problems Through Drama."

performers and a community of their audience.” Ideology, he continues, “is the source of the collective ability of performers and audience to make more or less common sense of the signs used in performance.”<sup>78</sup> While my project entails a historical examination of Sistren’s work, I also want to think about how the political and economic context in which this work was created affected the ideological transaction between performer and audience and made Sistren’s theatrical work a practice of resistance. Understanding resistant practices as contingent on this relationship will also help to explain Sistren’s later ineffectuality and reduced productivity.

Sistren was founded during a time of growing interest and belief in the efficacy of grassroots efforts and empowerment of the working class, both amongst the working class peoples themselves and in the government. As Honor Ford-Smith has noted, “We worked in a very supportive environment. Our government made the nation interested in the statements its working class people were making about their own lives. There was also an articulate women’s movement.”<sup>79</sup> During the first few years of its life, Sistren was working in a nation enamored with its own independence and struggling to define itself as a nation. This national project was reflected culturally in a growing interest in indigenous folk forms and the culture of the working class. Rex Nettleford, founder and artistic director of the National Jamaican Dance Theatre and a prominent spokesperson on

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<sup>77</sup> Maria DiCenzo discusses some of the problems and difficulties that have resulted from the lack of documentation of this sort of popular/political theatre work. See, The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain 1968-1990: The Case of 7:84 (Scotland), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>78</sup> Baz Kershaw, The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention, (Routledge: London, 1992), 16.

<sup>79</sup> “Women Playwrights as Social and Political Critics,” in International Women Playwrights: Voices of Identity and Transformation - Proceedings of the First International Women Playwrights Conference, October 18-23, 1988, ed. Anna Kay France and P.J. Corso, (Metuchen NJ and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc, 1993), 192.

cultural issues, notes the important role that culture plays in the process of decolonization:

No one has seriously denied to that process [decolonization] the imperative of a cultural dimension – in other words the need for that dynamic which moves us creatively to discover the wide range of autochthonous expressions which authenticate our distinct identity not only as beings of the Caribbean but as fully accredited members of the human race . . . many of us who are now engaged in cultural action recognize that *the cultural dynamics of change must go hand in hand with the political and economic thrust in a tripartite assault on the enemies of freedom, independence and sovereignty.*<sup>80</sup>

By using Jamaican folk forms to create a Caribbean women's dramaturgy, Sistren's work was participating in the cultural decolonization process of which Nettleford speaks. By performing in "legitimate" theatres their work was in effect reclaiming those spaces, and a place within cultural production, for working-class Jamaican artistic expression.

Nettleford also notes the ways in which the use of folk forms contribute to a larger project of national social imagining:

The Jamaica ring-games and story-telling for play and recreation, the rituals and dances for worship and expiation, the poems and proverbs and action-music which have recorded the memories and collective wit and wisdom of generations, the masquerades which have masked reality by the

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<sup>80</sup> Nettleford, Rex. *Caribbean Cultural Identity: The Case of Jamaica*, (Center for African American Studies, UCLA Latin American Center Publications: University of California, 1978), 182. Italics mine.

use of irony to transmit poignant coded messages of deep social significance – all such expressions emanating from social interaction now serve as the living archives of our patrimony as well as *the testament of a valid collective experience signifying the germ of a definitive civilization. It is not by accident then that the performing arts which depend on dialogue and social interaction for their dynamic, are the artistic cultural expression which tend to carry greatest conviction among Caribbean people.*<sup>81</sup>

Nettleford's comments point out the unique formal potency of the performing arts in the Caribbean. Part of this potency is derived from people's familiarity with the forms, i.e. games they played as children, songs they sing in church. In a country with a high level of illiteracy, part of this potency, too, results from their ability to appeal to both the literate and non-literate, the educated and the uneducated, on equal terrain. Kathy McAfee notes, "Music and drama has been a powerful force in shaping popular consciousness and in mobilizing movements for change in the Caribbean."<sup>82</sup>

Nettleford's articulation of the importance of culture in the process of democratic socialism echoes Manley's words which presume equality amongst all Jamaicans. Sistren's articulated goals, performance methodology and collective organization attempted to accomplish, in a microcosm, the empowerment of the working-class and social equality that Manley imagined for the entire nation. Manley was unable to sustain his vision, because he was part of a larger global imagining which couldn't "fit"

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 183. Italics mine.

democratic socialism into its “global marketplace.” Sistren’s destiny would of course be affected by these forces as well, but at a different rate and in different ways. In the next chapter I will examine the effect these forces had on Sistren’s work. First, though I would like to look further at the ways in which Sistren’s theatrical practice was part of a larger project of cultural de-colonization.

Sistren told the stories of working class women – storytelling being one of the most powerful working-class cultural forms as Ford-Smith and Nettleford noted above – and did so in their own language, patois. As Eugene Williams noted regarding Sistren’s work, “These plays were being made by improvisation, it was their language, it was also the feelings and expressions from the urban ghetto and from their own rural orientation.” Williams goes on to explain the important relationship between Sistren’s performances and their audiences, suggesting what the ideological relationship between the two may have been:

You had a sympathetic audience because this audience was cued into the indigenous culture so that the statement was important to the audience , the feelings were important to the audience these characters . . . If this new form didn’t seem to be complete, people didn’t bother. The fact that *it was ours*, that it was dynamic, that it was causing you to think about your own life and it was legitimizing your own search for your own empowerment was great . . . It was new and innovative in terms of performance style, use of traditional performances, traditional ritual. New

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<sup>82</sup> Kathy McAfee, Storm Signals: Structural Adjustment and Development Alternatives in the Caribbean (London: Zed Books, 1991), 202.

in terms of performers . . . *for the first time you were looking at grassroots people doing theatre professionally and with some technique and control.*<sup>83</sup>

While Williams certainly makes some generalizations in his determinations regarding the audience's experience watching *Sistren*, I think they still have a certain validity that needs to be explored. I draw this conclusion from many more informal interviews and conversations I had which reiterated a similar sentiment regarding the early performances of *Sistren*. I would like to further explore the importance of *Sistren*'s use of patois as an example of the ways in which the use of cultural forms traditionally belonging to the working-class can provide sites for the practice of resistance. In the next chapter I will explore the ways in which such sites, because they are contingent on political and social movements/moments, can be coopted and thereby cease to carry the same political valence.

The linguistic struggle between local patois and standard English is one deeply rooted in Jamaica's colonial history and represents the struggle for colonial cultural hegemony. Rawle Gibbons notes, "Perhaps the most enduring tyranny of colonialism is that of language – the divisions it has erected within the region [the Caribbean], its seeming absoluteness for accepted notions of progress and development."<sup>84</sup> Additionally, theatre was dominated by colonial forms or British imports until the 1950s, when Jamaicans began adapting these to make them their own.<sup>85</sup> The Jamaican pantomime, for

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<sup>83</sup> Interview with author, italics mine

<sup>84</sup> "Theatre and Caribbean Self-Definition," *Modern Drama*, Spring 1995, 58.

<sup>85</sup> For a history of the production of British plays, with an emphasis on Shakespeare, in Jamaica, see Wycliffe Bennett, "Theatre and the English we Speak," *Jamaica Journal*, 22:3, (1989): 22-29. For a history

example, was an adaptation of the British pantomime. Started in 1941, the pantomime, produced each year by the Little Theatre Movement, gradually began to reflect Jamaican culture by, for example, incorporating figures from Jamaican folklore such as the trickster, Anansi and by employing a greater number of black actors.<sup>86</sup>

This linguistic struggle within Jamaica between standard English and patois is literally and metaphorically mapped out in the geography of its capital city, Kingston. Kingston is a harbor city which lies in the shadows of the foothills of the Blue Mountains, the highest mountain range in Jamaica. Kingston's ghettos lie in the flat land closest to the water; the further away from the ghetto you travel the higher you go – literally. Many of the wealthier “suburbs” of Kingston are nestled into the mountainside. From the bottom of the hills – in the ghettos – one can look upwards and see sprawling mansions precariously built on the jutting cliffs. As you travel uphill away from the ghetto, you will hear less and less patois, or at least thinner and thinner patois, until you travel back into the mountains and the rural communities beyond the suburbs.

In its use of patois, *Sistren* does what Ngugi wa Thiong'o encourages African artists to do in his essays in *Decolonizing the Mind*. Because language has been a major tool of imperialism artists must, he argues, struggle against this imperialism by returning to their indigenous tongues rather than the colonial languages of English, French and Portuguese. “The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a

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of the Jamaican pantomime see Rex Nettleford, “Fifty Years of the Jamaica Pantomime 1941-1991,” *Jamaica Journal* 24:3, (1991) 2-9. Both articles provide an overview of the colonial influences.

<sup>86</sup> For more information on the development of the Jamaican pantomime and the Little Theatre Movement see, Wycliffe Bennett “The Jamaican Theatre,” *Jamaica Journal*, 8, no.2&3, (1974): 3-9; Barbra Gloudon, “Twenty Years of Theatre,” *Jamaica Journal*, 46, (1982): 63-69.

people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural universe."<sup>87</sup> The most dangerous aspect of imperialism, wa Thiong'o states is the "cultural bomb" it drops in order to "annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages in their environment in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves."<sup>88</sup> This cultural bomb, he continues, effectively accomplishes the goal of cultural hegemony by instilling in people the desire to identify with and value cultures and languages that are far removed from their own. In a similar vein, Helen Gilbert and Joanne Thompkins note in Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics, that Sistren's use of patois is "a reclamation of sorts, a political strategy designed to give back to Jamaican women in particular the 'voice' that slavery denied them."<sup>89</sup> But I believe that it is more than a reclamation of a loss that harkens back to slavery, it is a continuing resistance to a current struggle that has made working-class women's experiences and lives invisible through their absence in cultural production. Even within post-colonial Jamaica, the dominance of English continues to play a large part in maintaining the cultural hegemony of the former colonizer. The struggle to make patois an official language rather than merely a dialect, which automatically relegates it to a position of second-classness, is also a struggle for legitimation of the experiences and lives of the speakers of patois – both on the stage and in the audience.

Certainly, Sistren was not the first organization to create a cultural product in patois. As Alwin Bully, UNESCO Advisor for Culture in the Caribbean noted, Sistren's

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<sup>87</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature, (London: James Curry, 1986), 4.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>89</sup> Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics, (London and New York: Routledge), 1996, 186.

use of patois in performance was “following a tradition which had been developing from the 50s onwards.”<sup>90</sup> A precedent for Sistren’s politicized use of patois can be found, for example, in the work of Jamaican performance poet Louise Bennett. Bennett both wrote and performed her poems in patois. Elaine Fido notes the importance of Bennett as a cultural figure: “Her very presence as a major figure in Caribbean theatre has centralized a positive image of woman [sic] as well as privileged her love of the speech of the ordinary person in Jamaican society . . . [her] commitment to her art and her immense achievement in establishing dialect poetry as successful performance are de-colonizing developments in themselves.”<sup>91</sup> Bully notes however, that Sistren was probably the first to “emphasize the use of patois as a teaching tool . . . Sistren’s breakthrough was using patois in an educational way for carrying serious messages.”<sup>92</sup> The other theatre forms that had incorporated patois – such as the Jamaica pantomime which was an adaptation of the English pantomime, the plays of Trevor Rhone and the comedy duo Bim and Bam – were geared towards entertainment rather than education and empowerment.<sup>93</sup> By performing the stories of working class women in their local language on a mainstream stage in Kingston, Sistren was effectively asserting the legitimacy of these women’s experiences and moreover claiming a space for articulation and exploration of them within cultural and artistic production. As Williams is quoted above as saying, audiences recognized this as *their* language and “the fact that *it was ours*, that it was dynamic, that it was causing you to think about your own life and it was legitimizing your own search for

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<sup>90</sup> Interview with author, April 1996.

<sup>91</sup> “Freeing Up: Politics, Gender, and Theatrical Form in the Anglophone Caribbean,” 287.

<sup>92</sup> Interview with author, April 1996.

<sup>93</sup> Trevor Rhone is a successful Jamaican playwright.

your own empowerment.”<sup>94</sup> In discussing the use of patois more generally, Ford-Smith notes its revolutionary potential: “Language is central to all power relations. It expresses the soul of a people. In our experience the development of Patwah expresses the refusal of a people to imitate a colonizer, their insistence on creation, their movement from obedience towards revolution.”<sup>95</sup>

Sistren’s performances in patois also pose a challenge to the hegemony of colonial culture by positing an oral culture/tradition as equal in authority to a written one. Referring to patois as a “dialect” has historically relegated it to secondary status as a language, fit and found only in oral culture.<sup>96</sup> By using this tongue and these forms in institutions usually preserved for written languages, the oral culture of the working class replaces the dominant written culture. In his book, The Practice of Everyday Life, Michel De Certeau theorizes about the complex relationship of scriptural and oral languages. In the production of a scriptural economy, de Certeau notes, “Progress is scriptural in type. In very diverse ways, orality is defined by (or as) that from which a ‘legitimate’ practice . . . must differentiate itself. The ‘oral’ is that which does not contribute to progress: reciprocally, the scriptural is that which separates itself from the magical world of voices and tradition.”<sup>97</sup> Certainly in Jamaica standard English is the language associated with progress and the language you will hear the “higher” you go. Sistren’s performances are then, a practice of resistance in which the oral replaces the scriptural, asserting its own legitimacy and capacity for contributions to progress.

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<sup>94</sup> Interview with author.

<sup>95</sup> Lionheart Gal, 17.

<sup>96</sup> Many still refer to Louise Bennett as a “dialect” poet.

<sup>97</sup> The Practice of Everyday Life, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 134.

Elaine Savory has noted that, in the Caribbean, language has always been – and continues to be – a site at which to play out the struggle against colonialism and imperialism.<sup>98</sup> More generally, Dwight Conquergood’s comments on the relationship between orality and text indicate the richness of such a site for hegemonic struggles over cultural production: “The borderlines between texts and performances, literacy and orality, are highly charged and determined within concrete, historical configurations of power.”<sup>99</sup> He continues, “Instead of a horizontal, metonymic relationship, the terms are locked in a hierarchical, paradigmatic configuration in which text towers over and subsumes performance.”<sup>100</sup> Suggesting that an oral culture has as much legitimacy, power and authority as written culture, and belongs in the same places – both literally as in the physical theatre space and figuratively as in the nation’s imagined identity – threatens to erode these concrete “configurations of power.”

In her essay “Writing Oral History: Sistren Theatre Collective’s Lionheart Gal,” Carolyn Cooper attempts to recuperate and legitimate patois by publishing half of this scholarly essay, which is a critique of Sistren’s autobiographical short story anthology, in patois.<sup>101</sup> The publication of a scholarly book which includes such material, she assumes, will assist the language in accruing some authority, or as Bourdieu would have it “cultural capital,” by asserting its scriptural quality. However, Cooper undermines her own project by noting that she did not actually write the essay in patois herself, rather she

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<sup>98</sup> See, “Strategies for Survival: Anti-Imperialist Forms in the Anglophone Caribbean,” in Imperialism and Theatre, ed. J. Ellen Gainor, (New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>99</sup> “Beyond the Text: Toward a Performative Cultural Politics,” paper presented at the “Future of the Field,” Performance Studies Conference, New York University, March 25, 1995, 2.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Cooper, Carolyn. Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender and the “Vulgar” Body of Jamaican Popular Culture, (London & Basingstoke: Macmillan Education Limited, 1993).

wrote it in standard English and had it translated into patois; so apparently patois is not really a language for the formation of scholarly ideas, rather it must be *translated into* this language. Moreover, Cooper's translation and the stories in *Lionheart Gal* – most of which also appear in patois – do not utilize the same orthography. Instead of accruing authority, Cooper's project undoes itself by proving again that patois is not a scriptural, but rather an oral language.

But this tension between patois and English is not simply a linguistic struggle, it is also a cultural one in which the history of class oppression and imaginings of national identity play large roles. Perhaps this is what was most radical and threatening about their work. Telling the stories of working class women and including them in cultural production suggested that these members of Jamaican society have a legitimate place in the history and imagination of the nation and its identity. Moreover, Sistren's presentation of popular cultural forms, such as patois, folk songs and games, in a space usually reserved for "legitimate" theatre, threatens to blur the lines between popular or working class culture and colonial, or "high" culture. Popular culture's appearance in a place of "authority" or legitimacy, looked at in the context of this struggle for colonial cultural hegemony, presents a potentially threatening challenge to the borders between high and low culture and hence to a class system that is deeply entrenched in Jamaican society. Manley has described this class system as an extension of colonialism: "They controlled political power. They controlled economic power, but most of all, they exerted control upon the minds of the people, and by the time you come to the history of modern Jamaica, they had developed in this country a class system that was as sharply defined as any you could find anywhere in the world. And, not only had a class system been

established, but they had been able to establish in the minds of the masses of the people the conviction of their own inferiority.”<sup>102</sup> Sistren’s performances, and their efforts to legitimate the language and culture of “the masses of the people,” threatens to disrupt the hierarchy and hegemony of this deeply ingrained class system.

In his important study of the formations of nationalism, Benedict Anderson describes the link between language and the formation of imagined communities: “Much the most important thing about language is its capacity for generating imagined communities, building in effect particular solidarities. After all, imperial languages are still vernaculars and thus particular vernaculars among many.”<sup>103</sup> Sistren’s performances create such solidarities and offer the largest – and hence in political terms, most potentially powerful – disenfranchised population an alternate “imagined community.” Doing so would surely prove threatening to the middle and upper classes and the project of capitalism, for in order to become absorbed within the global capitalist economy it is virtually essential to ignore the suffering created by poverty. Tourist advertisements for Jamaica confirm the nation’s desired imagined self; smiling tanned bodies leisurely beckoning, “come back to Jamaica and feel alright.”

Sistren’s work continues to be affected by the reification of value distinctions between high and low art made even by western scholars. For example, in Lizbeth Goodman’s book Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own, she makes the following comment about Sistren’s work: “The theatre work produced is not in any sense

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<sup>102</sup>Hearne, 45. The excerpt that appears in this book is from a speech given at Denbigh agricultural show, August 5, 1974.

<sup>103</sup> Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, (London and New York: Verso, 1983), 133-134.

‘high art’ or ‘drama,’ but is rather a theatre of the people.’<sup>104</sup> Goodman’s comments reify the notion that theatre by “the people” cannot be thought of in the same vein as, say, Shakespeare. She cites Sistren’s origins in political action as evidence of this.

Interestingly she uses Western standards of evaluation, where art and politics can often occupy different spheres, to dismiss the artistry of working-class women. Too, she ignores the fact that Honor Ford-Smith was a trained theatre professional. On a personal note, I find it hard to believe that she would stand by such a comment if she had seen Sistren perform; the skill of the actresses and the multi-medial blend of dancing, drumming, singing and scenic imagery strike me as quite professional.

In the next chapter I will look at the challenges Sistren began to face as the political and social context in which they performed began to change. I will look at the changing face of Jamaican politics and economics and how these directly affected the living conditions and everyday lives of Kingston’s working-class. I will also look at the repercussions of Sistren’s travels abroad, for as they became more and more successful, opportunities to perform outside of Jamaica increased. The next chapter will explore the implications of these geographical relocations for local audiences, the company itself and the audiences abroad.

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<sup>104</sup> Contemporary Feminist Theatres : To Each Her Own, (London, New York: Routledge, 1993), 163.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RETHINKING RESISTANCE, RELOCATING POPULAR THEATRE

In Mario Vargas Llosa's novel The Real Life Of Alejandro Mayta, the protagonist is trying to write a biography of the revolutionary figure, Mayta, by connecting the puzzle pieces of information he has collected from interviews with neighbors, friends, colleagues. The biographer begins to realize that each person he meets paints a starkly different portrait of Mayta and that the cohesive narrative he is seeking doesn't actually exist and so it will have to be his own invention – one which may be more or less than the truth. While I was doing the research for this project and as I write about my work with Sistren I feel a bit like this character; the picture I will paint here is my own rendering of the puzzle pieces my research unearthed, my own invention which is much influenced by my own experiences and which may be more or less than the truth. As James Clifford has said, "The historical predicament of ethnography, [is] the fact that it is always caught up in the invention, not the representation, of cultures."<sup>1</sup> And that invention will have just as much to do with who I am, in this case, as who Sistren is. I think about this particularly in the context of my concerns regarding the ways in which Sistren has and has not been able to negotiate a space of resistance with its theatrical practice as it moved over a changing political, economic and social terrain.

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<sup>1</sup>Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography, James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 2.

My own evaluation of these activities in terms of their potential for empowering audiences depends in large part on what I understand empowerment to be and how theatre can be used as a tool to accomplish this goal. My own experience with theatre as a tool for personal empowerment and social change is relevant to my “invention” of the history of Sistren Theatre Collective. My ideas of popular theatre and theatre for empowerment are very much influenced by Augusto Boal’s ideas and theories of active spectatorship and “rehearsals for revolution.” At the time that I learned of Sistren’s work I was working on a community-based theatre project in Toronto that used many of Boal’s ideas and techniques in its work. Along with this theatre company I also participated in many popular theatre workshops on topical social issues for various communities. The following year I used the popular theatre techniques I learned from these experiences in my own work as the head of a peer leadership program.

All that I read about Sistren before arriving in Jamaica in 1996 was positive in terms of its portrayal of the company’s ability to achieve its goals. Ford-Smith’s book *Ring Ding in a Tight Corner: A Case Study of Funding and Organizational Democracy in Sistren 1977-1988*, which she suggested I read before going to Jamaica, is critical of the funding and internal structure of the organization, but doesn’t discuss its changing ability to achieve its goals of personal and community empowerment in the context of changing politics. While it has been an extremely valuable source of information for this dissertation project, it did not prepare me for what I discovered during my field research. When I arrived in Jamaica in January 1996 it became clear to me quickly that Sistren was not the vibrant, radical and powerful theatre company I had read about in articles and

interviews, although several members were struggling, it seemed, to bring the company's goals back into focus. On my very first day at Sistren's office, the artistic team had put together a performance for me; it included admonishing skits of the various ways I might be hustled or harassed as a foreigner. The skits were clever and energetic and showed off the acting talents of the members. I remember being particularly impressed and touched because it was clear that the performance had been prepared specifically for my arrival (it included a character named Sharon who was a white woman visiting from abroad). Early in my stay I was asked to assist in the writing of their year-end report which would evaluate the year's activities in light of the goals the company had set for itself. As part of this process I was able to go through the various requests they had had for performances and workshops over the past year. What became apparent and will be important for my later discussion was the extent to which international performances – or performances for international audiences – outnumbered community-based ones.

## **CHANGING TIMES**

Eugene Williams, head of the Jamaica School of Drama, summarized the different political and economic environment within Jamaica in the 70s and the 90s when he said that “in the 1970s there were people with stories to *tell* and in the 1990s there are people with stories to *sell*.”<sup>2</sup> Williams captures the extent to which the country has turned towards and/or been overrun by capitalism and the global marketplace. Both he and Alwin Bully, cultural advisor to the UN for the Caribbean, talk about disillusionment

with the promises of independence that began to settle into this era. Bully noted that “all of the expectations that were expected to come out of independence have failed us, have failed the Caribbean people . . . people realized that ‘OK, well, independence didn’t really give us what we wanted . . . we were depressed in the 80s by that . . . this [disillusionment] has sort of killed a roots movement on several levels, especially popular culture . . . you aren’t really a big reggae star until you have made it in the United States.”<sup>3</sup> Eugene Williams noted that “generally there is a growing lack of confidence in the country itself, in nationalism, in things Jamaican, what has been built by socialism.”<sup>4</sup> His comments note the complete turnaround from the spirit of hope that imbued the nation during the 70s.

In order to understand this change, how it came about and how reflective it is of a larger societal shift from socialism to capitalism, I would like to look at the changing face of Jamaican politics, the government’s relationship with the US and the IMF and the extent to which these relationships have impacted domestic affairs, both economically and culturally. It is only within this sort of context that the changes taking place within Sistren can be fully understood.

The atmosphere of hope and grassroots empowerment of Manley’s era of democratic socialism began to dissipate in the late 70s as the country found itself in an economic crisis precipitated by the oil shortage and the socialist policies which strove for

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with author, March 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with author, April 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with author.

regional economic self-sufficiency.<sup>5</sup> The election of 1980 was one filled with violence – the memory of which would continue to affect tourism for years to come – as the nation became polarized into factions either for the JLP or for the PNP. Anita Waters describes the atmosphere: “Seven hundred and fifty people, including one candidate, were killed between the February announcement that the election would be held and the election itself . . . on election day, the streets of Kingston were nearly deserted. A few ballot boxes were burned, six polling stations never opened and there is some evidence of overvoting by both parties.”<sup>6</sup> The JLP and its leader, Edward Seaga, emerged victorious, winning by what Waters characterizes as “a landslide.”

Seaga’s views on government and which economic position would benefit the nation radically diverged from Manley’s ideas of democratic socialism; within a year he radically reoriented the government towards Western capitalism. Anthony Payne has summarized the accomplishments of Seaga’s first year in power:

The various dimensions of Seaga’s policy undoubtedly added up to a coherent and integrated approach to Jamaica’s problems; they collectively represented the unabashed pursuit of a policy of peripheral capitalist development, unconcerned by, and indeed committed to, the proliferation and intensification of ties of dependence on the dominant centres of the

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<sup>5</sup> While the economic crisis and its causes are too complex to discuss here, they were precipitated by the oil crisis which put Jamaica in debt because it needed to import oil and had no way of generating the excess money for its cost. See: Jennifer Jones, et. al. Structural Adjustment and the Public Sector in Central America and the Caribbean, (Managua, Nicaragua: CRIES, 1995); Ronald Fernandez, Cruising the Caribbean: US Influence and Intervention in the Twentieth Century. (Maine: Common Courage Press, 1994); Anthony Payne, Politics in Jamaica. (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 1994).

international economy. As such, Jamaica saw in 12 months the complete reversal of the Manley government's efforts to win for the territory a greater degree of independence in its relationship with the world economic system.<sup>7</sup>

Payne's discussion makes it clear that it was the US in particular that Seaga made an effort to court. Seaga's first order of business was stabilizing the economy, and that required resuming relations with the IMF, which Manley had abandoned in 1979. Agreeing to commence talks with the IMF as soon as possible indicated to the international economic system that "Seaga's economic policy was to consist of close alliance with the Western economic system."<sup>8</sup>

Just as important was Seaga's anticommunist rhetoric. The JLP had consistently accused the Manley government of "being communist" and allying itself too closely with Cuba and Castro. Seaga on the other hand, immediately upon assuming office, asked the Cuban government to withdraw its ambassador in Kingston. In its election platform, the JLP expressed its intention to "halt the expansionist movement of Communist imperialism in the Caribbean."<sup>9</sup> While Manley had expressly rejected both capitalism and communism during his political career, the JLP and the US government chose instead

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<sup>6</sup> Anita Waters, *Race Class and Political Symbols: Rastafari and Reggae in Jamaican Politics*, (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1985), 199.

<sup>7</sup> Payne, 85.

<sup>8</sup> Payne, 81.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Payne, 84.

to focus on actions such as Manley's friendly relationship with Castro as proof of where his loyalty lay.<sup>10</sup>

Seaga's anticommunist ideology, with which he rhetorically put himself in opposition to Manley – and which of course appealed to US foreign policy and interests in the region – and his pro-capitalist policies, allowed him to negotiate much more favorable terms with the IMF than Manley was capable of doing. “Alignment with the West and a corresponding hostility to Soviet and Cuban influence became the touchstones of Jamaican foreign policy” under JLP leadership, and was symbolized when Seaga became the first foreign head of state invited to the White House after Reagan took office. As Payne notes: “All Seaga's actions in his first year of office were built upon the American Connection. It underpinned the IMF negotiations, the provision of financial support generally, the openings offered to foreign capital and the planned revitalization of the tourist industry.”<sup>11</sup>

The history of Jamaican politics and economics during this time is mostly a history of its relationship with the IMF and the impact of that organization's structural adjustment policies. In the mid-1980s Manley wrote a scathing critique of the IMF as an institution and in particular noted the extent to which its ideology is in direct conflict with the workings and needs of developing nations, such as Jamaica. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz launched a similar critique of the IMF's recent dealings with Indonesia, noting the ways in which the IMF's methods and assumptions ignore indigenous cultural

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<sup>10</sup> In 1973 Manley flew on Castro's private plane to a summit meeting in Algiers. This marked the beginning of a friendly relationship between the PNP government and the Cuban regime.

traditions.<sup>12</sup> In Up the Down Escalator, Manley looks at the ways in which the IMF's structural adjustment policies, because they were not devised to work within an economy that had an underdeveloped industrial sector, doomed Jamaica from the start. He explains the logic behind such structural adjustment policies:

The first item in the prescription for recovery is, therefore, devaluation of the currency so as to make imports more expensive and exports more competitive. The second item is a contraction of the internal money supply by reducing government budget expenditure, controlling credit, and restricting wage increases. The purpose of this exercise is to reduce the level of demand in the economy, thereby reducing the pressure on imports while lowering demand for locally produced goods. As local producers find themselves faced with falling demand for their products, they are forced to export to survive . . . Essentially it is a methodology designed for countries with highly developed productive capability who are in temporary difficulty because of a malfunction in the system . . . On the other hand, the Third World dilemma does not consist of underutilized capability but of underdevelopment.<sup>13</sup>

Jamaica's largest exports have been bananas, sugar – both crops – and bauxite, which can be refined to make aluminum. The nation's economic health in the context of world capitalism, then, depends very heavily on the world market for these products and on the

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<sup>11</sup> Payne, 84.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Shenon, "Of the Turmoil in Indonesia and Its Roots," New York Times, May 9, 1998, B9.

season's crops. Its other large industry, tourism, is dependent in large part, on the image of the nation projected abroad (particularly in the US), which was much improved as Seaga made "friends" with the US.

The IMF's structural adjustment policies tend to be felt most heavily by the poor, exacerbating the gulf which already exists between the classes.<sup>14</sup> As Manley noted, "The combined effects of devaluation, budget, credit and wage restrictions create a sudden and tremendous social burden. This is felt particularly heavily by the poor and fixed-income members of the society."<sup>15</sup> Carl Stone's description of the policies provides a further explanation as to why this is the case: "Structural adjustment policies prescribe tight monetary and fiscal policies, the removal of budget deficits, tight control over wages, reduced consumption levels among the working class, large cuts in public spending, social expenditure and public sector employment as well as reduced levels of social services and lower incidence of taxation on the rich to finance capital accumulation while increasing tax burdens on the poor."<sup>16</sup> The convergence of all these factors made daily existence a struggle and contributed to the dramatic decline in the standard of living, particularly for those living in Kingston's ghettos.

In her analysis of the impact of structural adjustment, Jennifer Jones notes that "it has been workers at the bottom of the salary scale . . . whose wages have been most

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<sup>13</sup> Up the Down Escalator: Development and the International Economy. A Jamaican Case Study, (Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1987), 172-173.

<sup>14</sup> Jamaica's relationship with the IMF continues to impact domestic politics and economics.

<sup>15</sup> Up the Down Escalator, 173.

<sup>16</sup> Carl Stone, Class, State and Democracy in Jamaica, (New York, Westport, London: Praeger Publishers 1986), 4.

compressed in real terms.”<sup>17</sup> This was a result of limits placed on wage increases, the devaluation of the Jamaican dollar at a rate higher than those wage increases and increasing prices for staple goods. For example, according to Jones’ statistics, in 1980, the last year of Manley’s democratic socialist government, the rate of inflation was 29% and the official exchange rate was J1.78 to US\$1. Although the first few years of Seaga’s rule saw a lower rate of inflation, by 1984 the rate was back up to 31%, mainly a result of the plunging value of the Jamaican dollar; J4.95 to US\$1.<sup>18</sup> For the working class these statistics translated into impossible living conditions; they would have to survive on a fraction of the income they had the previous year.

In addition, social welfare programs were cut, including, in 1981, the program that employed the members of Sistren. Structural adjustment also encouraged the privatization of business – to bring the economy within the control of the global capitalist market – shifting social thinking further away from collective or community-based action and towards that which will serve the individual good as reinforced by a market economy. This represents not only a material, but also an ideological shift from Manley’s philosophy which had declared a “Re-affirmation of our faith that cooperation

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<sup>17</sup> Jennifer Jones, 123.

<sup>18</sup> The Jamaican dollar has experienced periods of rapid devaluation over the past 15 or so years. For example in 1990 the official exchange rate was J\$8 to US\$1 and the following year had dropped to J\$20 to US\$1. By 1993 the rate was J\$26 to US\$1. During my fieldwork in 1996 the rate was J\$37 to US\$1, at which it currently remains. Many people told me that those businesses that rely on imports from abroad – including supermarkets – tend to anticipate devaluations and hence price their products higher than they actually need to be out of fear of losing money should the Jamaican dollar dramatically decline.

is the basic method by which a society should be organized and that it is our duty to seek to replace the system of human exploitation with a system of human cooperation.”<sup>19</sup>

Because women in working-class families have traditionally played important roles as economic providers, they were particularly hard hit by structural adjustment policies.<sup>20</sup> Peggy Antrobus, who has been active in the Caribbean women’s movement notes, “Poor women, especially those with families, have to bear the major brunt of the regional economic crisis and the structural adjustment policies instituted in the Caribbean.”<sup>21</sup> The reasons for this are multiple. Women suffer most because the highest levels of unemployment – and the lowest paying jobs – are in the social sectors where women predominate and yet women also head 42 percent of the households in Jamaica.<sup>22</sup> In addition, women heads of household experience unemployment at twice the rate of male-heads of households, making women-headed households particularly vulnerable to poverty and hunger. Rural women suffer because many are involved in the production and distribution of food; structural adjustment policies which emphasize export crops and competition from the importation of foods, impinge on their ability to make a living. Many women have been pushed into the “informal economy,” where they seek jobs as higglers – street vendors – or domestics. But even in this informal economy, women’s labor is valued less than men’s; a man working as a gardener can earn four times as much

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<sup>19</sup> The Search for Solutions: Excerpts From the Speeches and Writings of Manley, ed. John Hearne, (Canada: Maple House Publishing, 1976), 157.

<sup>20</sup> See, A.. Lynn Bolles, “Kitchens Hit by Priorities: Employed Working-Class Jamaican Women Confront the IMF,” in June Nash and Maria-Patricia Fernandez-Kelly, eds., Women, Men and the International Division of Labor, Albany: SUNY Press, 1983.

<sup>21</sup> In the Shadows of the Sun, 51-52.

per day as a woman working as a domestic. Moreover, as Faye Harrison notes in her study of the informal economy in Kingston's ghettos, "The relative feminization of unemployment and poverty is manifested in the informal economy wherein females participate in survival and subsistence activities in comparatively larger numbers and proportions."<sup>23</sup> Within that informal sector, women are more vulnerable to exploitation, as dramatized in Sistren's performance, *Domesticks* (1981), where a woman must choose between giving up the only job she has been able to find, or acquiescing to satisfying "all" of her employer's needs. Many rural women seek employment as domestics in cities such as Kingston where they earn approximately US\$40 for a six day work week; they have one day per week to spend at home with their families.<sup>24</sup>

Institutionalized exploitation of female labor also exists in the so called "Free Trade Zones." These zones are areas where "foreign manufacturers are allowed to import piece-goods tax free to be finished by armies of cheap female labor and then returned to the North American market."<sup>25</sup> Unions are illegal in these free trade zones, and while most of the workers are female, most of the managers and bosses are male. Factories within these zones are not subject to the same regulations and tariffs as those outside it. Ironically such zones are "the type of unregulated trade, investment and employment

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<sup>22</sup> "National Report on the Status of Women in Jamaica," Prepared for the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, September 1995. Prepared by the Jamaica National Preparatory Commission, April 1994.

<sup>23</sup> Faye Harrison, "Women in Jamaica's Urban Informal Economy: Insights from a Kingston Slum," in Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres, eds, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 173-196.

<sup>24</sup> One of the uncomfortable moments of my research experience was when a group of white middle class Jamaicans told me that Jamaica was such a great place to live because you could get and have anything you wanted, including someone to cook all your meals and clean your house for only \$40 a week. They were proud of the bargain that made life "so easy."

policies endorsed by the sponsors of structural adjustment.”<sup>26</sup> Kathy McAfee, an OXFAM worker, describes the way in which such zones specifically exploit women: “A 1988 survey of workers in the Kingston, Jamaica FTZ [Free Trade Zone] found that 80 percent of the workers, who are almost all female, earn less than US\$15 a week. In contrast to the myth that women take jobs outside the home in order to supplement their husbands’ wages, the survey found that four out of five of the female FTZ workers have full responsibility for supporting their children. Almost 70 percent of the workers said that their basic pay was so low that they have no choice but to work overtime.”<sup>27</sup> All of these factors converged to make poor, working-class Jamaican women bear the greatest weight of structural adjustment policies.

Carl Stone describes the changing political atmosphere of the 1980s and its impact on the nation’s psyche: “After a period of high political mobilization and political agitation in the 1970s, the end of the decade saw a pattern of demobilization, political apathy, and withdrawal into cynicism and hopelessness as many lost faith in political causes and lowered their expectations for benefits from the system, and expected less from political leaders.”<sup>28</sup> Such cynicism and hopelessness also had a cultural impact on the nation as it lost confidence in things Jamaican. This combined with the fact that once Jamaica opened itself up to a global market it inevitably also opened itself up to global cultural influences, in particular those from the US which flood the nation via television,

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<sup>25</sup> Rhonda Cobham-Sander, Program notes for Muffet inna all a wi.

<sup>26</sup> McAfee, 82.

<sup>27</sup> McAfee, 86. The exploitation that takes place in the factories of such free trade zones has recently received international attention through media coverage of the Mexican “maquiladores.”

<sup>28</sup> Stone, xiii.

movies, and tourism.<sup>29</sup> Of course the effects of Jamaica's entrance into the global economy had different effects on different classes of people. As Andrew Ross notes, it was primarily the wealthy that benefited: "The effects of the rapid penetration of the market economy in the 1980s – including class polarization, social Darwinism and unalloyed materialism helped to create a freewheeling culture that appeared to promise mobility and wealth, but that delivered its promise only to those already privileged and propertied."<sup>30</sup>

I introduce this historical backdrop as a way of understanding the material living conditions of both the women in *Sistren* and their audiences, and the palette against which they were trying to create artistic work that sought to explore the unique plight of Jamaican women. The political and economic situation of Jamaica, the role of the US and the IMF all contribute to the nature of the ideological transaction between the performers of *Sistren* and their audiences of working-class women.

In this chapter I am interested in investigating the ways in which *Sistren*, as a cultural organization, coped with this changing environment. Integral to this chapter is also an investigation of the changing ways that their work was received and the changing places of their performances. What happens to the politics of *Sistren*'s performances – over both time and space – when the political and social context in which they exist begins to shift? What happens to the meanings made of their performances when the

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<sup>29</sup> For an interesting discussion of the complexities of technology's cultural impact on supposedly "third world" countries see, Armand Mattelart, et.al, "International Image Markets," in, *The Cultural Studies Reader*, Simon During ed., (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Ross, *Real Love: In Pursuit of Cultural Justice*, (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998), 48.

nature of their audiences begins to change? How do these changes affect the “ideological transaction” between performer and audience and hence the meanings made of the performance which in turn determine its social and political function? I want to look at the ways in which Sistren’s history provides an example of the machinations of cultural struggle, looking for moments that represent its different forms. Because, as Stuart Hall has noted, “Cultural domination has real effects,” I want to note and interrogate those “real” or material effects as well as the ideological ones, noting the complicated ways in which they are interrelated.

While Sistren was struggling to assert a legitimacy for working-class culture, as was discussed in the previous chapter, they were also struggling to live their daily lives under conditions that resulted from the nation’s domination by the IMF and its ideological reorientation towards capitalism. Clearly, in this case, ideological domination has had material effects. What then are the material consequences for a company like Sistren, whose ideological goals remain focused on grassroots empowerment, communal action and Jamaican folk culture, when the cultural and political landscape of the nation turns more and more towards capitalism and more and more acquiesces to the cultural hegemony of the North? Much can be learned, I believe, about the struggle for political and cultural power in Jamaica generally, through an investigation of Sistren Theatre Collective.

## **THE END OF DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM: SISTREN POST-1980**

After performing in an environment ideologically and materially supportive of their work, the violent election of 1980 ushered in a new challenge for Sistren. Both the content, form and working methodology of Sistren now stood in opposition to the status quo and those in power (Seaga, the IMF, the US). In this era, Sistren no longer participated in a national project of decolonization; rather, they now stood in opposition to the national agenda of capitalist expansion. Sistren's work, in form and content implicitly although not explicitly supported the ideology of Manley's democratic socialism, although the collective itself never officially affiliated itself with any party.<sup>31</sup> Ideologically the collective's existence stood in direct opposition to the JLP; it was a successful cooperative project, it interrogated the ways in which women – “third world women” – were exploited by market forces and celebrated Jamaican folk culture. Perhaps, too, the fact that Manley explicitly supported Sistren's work by attending their performances, made their continued existence under Seaga's government even more of a threat.<sup>32</sup>

Ford-Smith describes the treatment of the collective after the JLP's victory:

There was overt harassment of the collective and a covert sense of moving against the grain of the time. Sistren was declared subversive and banned from radio and television. The new functionary in charge of the state

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<sup>31</sup> Ford-Smith does note that several of the members and resource personnel of Sistren were members of particular political parties. By 1986, of the six resource personnel, she notes that three were members of the Marxist-Leninist Workers' Party of Jamaica (WPI) and most of the working class members of the collective supported the PNP.

<sup>32</sup> Bev Hanson told me that Manley attended their early performances and was personally very supportive of their work. In Levi's biography of Manley, he is quoted as referring to Sistren as the greatest success of the Impact Programme.

media house demanded a copy of one of our scripts which he claimed was subversive. Apparently two lines from a poem by Jean Small, a guest director in 1980, had offended. The lines were: '*Give the younger generation/the strength and the courage/Fi fight fi dem rights.*' . . . Our program of work in the women's prisons was discontinued. In 1981 we were asked to move out of the Cultural Training Centre. It became clear that the group's existence was at risk, if not because of direct intimidation, then because of the removal of forms of support.<sup>33</sup>

Jean Small, who directed the production of *Nana Yah (1980)* which was based on the legendary figure of Nanny, described her own fear of doing Sistren work in this era:

Under Manley there was a freedom to express yourself, I could do that play, and suddenly with Seaga it changed around . . . as a matter of fact we went on television just as he [Seaga] came into power and the play was considered subversive and they wanted to find the director, they wanted the script . . . and the only thing subversive, it sort of empowered black people to be strong and to do things . . . my family became very worried . . . it is a political act when you are doing that kind of theatre and there are a lot of things involved, not just theatre . . . when you take people out of the

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<sup>33</sup> *Ring Ding*, 24-25, italics in original. Jean Small directed the 1980 production of *Nana Yah*. The Cultural Training Center is the home of the Jamaica School of Drama.

ghetto and make them speak about the conditions under which they live and work, it is a political act.<sup>34</sup>

Small's comments point out how threatening Sistren's goals of empowerment for the working class became in the post-democratic socialism era. Because ideologically, Seaga stood in opposition to Manley and democratic socialism it became important to neutralize such opposing ideological forces, and Sistren, because of its goals and methodology, had become such a force.

Stuart Hall's explication of hegemony helps to explain why the forces supporting the new ideology of the nation reacted to Sistren's work as they did:

'Definitions of reality' favorable to the dominant class factions and institutionalized in the spheres of civil life and the state, come to constitute the primary 'lived reality' as such for the subordinated classes. In this way ideology provides the 'cement' in a social formation, 'preserving the ideological unity of the entire social bloc.' This operates not because the dominant classes can prescribe and proscribe, in detail, the mental content of the lives of subordinate classes . . . but because they strive and to a degree succeed in *framing all competing definitions within their range, bringing all alternatives within the horizon of their thought.*<sup>35</sup>

For capitalism to succeed, all opposing forces – i.e. all forces supporting Manley's ideas of empowerment for the working class and cooperation – had to be contained and

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with author, May 1996.

“brought within the horizon” of the market economy. Moreover, the idea of uplifting the working class, and Jamaican self-reliance, could not support Seaga’s economic policies, which sought to incorporate Jamaica into a global, capitalist economy.

Importantly, Ford-Smith also notes the ways in which the nature of their audiences was changing in this era:

By 1982, we were facing hostile audiences in the same theatres where our work had been acclaimed and often with the same plays . . . at times we had to fly out of the theatre in fear of our lives. One Gang leader, who threatened to blow us off the stage at a theatre in Montego Bay in early 83 said to us: ‘You think I want to see somebody carrying water on stage? I see that every day in my community. I want to see a boss chasing a secretary. That’s theatre’ . . . By the end of 1982 our theatre audiences in Jamaica seemed to be comprised of the same 200 people who have always supported political theatre, and we realized that we were preaching to the converted. No matter how good or bad it was, it was time to change track if we didn’t wish to become marginalized and completely silent. We then adopted a different process of work, an attempt to challenge the concept of theatre as a product passively consumed by silent, well-behaved audiences in darkened room, who don’t see each other’s faces and never share each other’s thought. We took theatre out of the theatre buildings into sheds,

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<sup>35</sup>“ Culture, the Media and the ‘Ideological Effect’” in *Mass Communication and Society*.” James Curran, et.al. eds., (Beverly Hills, London:Sage Publications, 1979), 333.

churches and onto street corners all around the country. We began a series of workshops to reach rural market-women, sugar workers, domestic servants and the unemployed.<sup>36</sup>

The project with the sugar workers in Clarendon discussed in the previous chapter is an example of this effort.

The changing political environment also had additional and immediate material consequences for the members of Sistren and their audiences. One of the founding members of Sistren, Afolashade, noted that after 1980 “political violence pervaded our communities and made it unsafe for us to leave our homes . . . The political upheaval interrupted our work tremendously. Most of the time we couldn’t leave our homes because of the violence. Many homes were burnt, vandalized and looted.”<sup>37</sup> Simply traveling to rehearsal became a dangerous activity for Sistren members.

Yet it was also in this era that they were able to secure funding from abroad, come together formally as an organization and deeply explore, define, and expand their artistic goals in a series of award winning productions. Their major production, *QPH* (1981), was awarded best play of the year and was given the National Theatre Critics Award, an acknowledgment of the production’s artistic merit. They also began traveling abroad; in 1981 they toured the Caribbean and Canada for the first time, and in 1983, ’86 and ’90

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<sup>36</sup> “Women Playwrights as Social and Political Critics,” in International Women Playwrights: Voices of Identity and Transformation - Proceedings of the First International Women Playwrights Conference, October 18-23, 1988, ed. Anna Kay France and P.J. Corso, (Metuchen NJ and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc, 1993), 192.

<sup>37</sup> Afolashade’s report.

they toured Europe, in 1987 they toured the US and Canada again.<sup>38</sup> Afolashade noted the connection between these travels and their ability to secure international sources of funding, “We toured Europe, the USA and Caribbean and Canada. Our international success helped us to form networking links with other regional and international groups. Our funding sources increased, which made it possible for us to earn higher income.”<sup>39</sup> Her comments point to the fact that international travel and tours are integrally tied up with economics; the more international exposure they gained the more grant money they were able to attract. Paradoxically, it was by performing outside of their local community, doing work that is outside of their objective and mission that Sistren was able to accrue the cultural capital that brought them substantive funding. It is by performing abroad that they were able to gain enough credibility – is it because this serves as proof of the universality of their appeal? – to capture the attention of international organizations.<sup>40</sup> But performing abroad also meant performing for audiences disconnected from the political and social conditions that the company was founded to interrogate, resulting in complications I will explore below.

## CONNECTIONS ABROAD

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<sup>38</sup> Sistren publicity pamphlet.

<sup>39</sup> Afolashade.

<sup>40</sup> Such a denigration of local community-based work is not unique to Sistren. For example, the American company, Roadside Theatre, formed in 1974, is “a folk theatre that draws on the rich heritage of the remote Cumberland Mountains in southern Appalachia.” This company, though its work is also dedicated to empowering the people within its local community, had to travel outside of this region in order for funding agencies to take them “seriously.” See Sharon Hatfield, “Tales of Appalachia: Roadside Theatre,” *TDR*, 27(2), Summer 1983.

Sistren's relationships with capitalist, "developed" countries have always been fraught with contradictions and frustrations. In many ways Sistren has two different relationships with their constituency abroad, although each impacts the other. These two relationships include that with their audiences and workshop participants and that with various funding agencies that support both their work in Jamaica and abroad. I would first like to discuss the predicament of funding and then delve deeper into an exploration of the impact international audiences have had on Sistren's work and attainment of their goals.

The precarious nature of local funding forced Sistren to seek support outside of Jamaica early in its history, if the company were to survive. As Ford-Smith has noted, "Had we continued to depend on local funding we would either have faded out altogether as many groups did at the time, or our program, limited as it then was, would have been seriously affected. Our working-class members were seriously constrained in the amount of time they could offer voluntarily . . . As the cost of living rose rapidly even they began to curtail their activities and volunteer work threatened to become a thing of the past. . . In effect then, there was little choice before us. We had to seek international funding if we wanted to continue to work."<sup>41</sup> Bev Hanson has noted that Ford-Smith was able to use her connections abroad to secure funding for the organization – funding which eventually allowed them to work full-time as Sistren, rather than part-time after long days working at other jobs.

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<sup>41</sup> Ring Ding, 57.

The problem of declining volunteerism was not unique to Sistren; it riddled the entire Jamaican women's movement in the decade 1985-1995, and probably even earlier as well. The Association of Women's Organizations in Jamaica published a report on the status of the women's movement in 1995 called "Moving Forward: The Work, Realities and Visions of Women's Organizations in Jamaica 1985-1995," in which it noted that "women's groups have not been able to count on very much voluntary support as women have had to put more time and effort into meeting personal and survival needs."<sup>42</sup> Of course this situation is one which was exacerbated, if not created, by the economic conditions resulting from structural adjustment policies. These policies, which resulted in increasing levels of poverty, required women to work longer hours in order to earn enough money to meet basic needs. The policies also resulted in cutbacks to public expenditures which meant fewer social services for the poor, particularly for women and children. A report on The National Status of Women, prepared for the World Conference on Women in Beijing noted that, "When services in certain areas are reduced, women are expected to fill the gap."<sup>43</sup>

Sistren, however, benefited from a convergence of interest amongst international funding agencies in women's issues and third world development. Sistren fit both of these criteria and was serving a constituency that few others were; poor urban women in an underdeveloped country. As Ford Smith notes, "By 1984 Sistren's funding situation had shifted. The group had become quite well known. Instead of having to plead

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<sup>42</sup> Prepared for the Association of Women's Organizations in Jamaica (AWOJA) by Carol Narcisse, in association with Maureen Rowe and Sonia Bennett, 6.

for funds we now had agencies falling over themselves to aid us because we were seen as an example of a successful ‘women’s project.’ Donor agencies which had been quite rude to us in the early days when we were so desperately in need of money now openly courted us.”<sup>44</sup> At the same time however, the paradox of such support began to surface. Agencies required that Sistren work towards such self-sufficiency. “But the whole region is dependent . . . How do you expect a small group like us to be self-reliant?” asked Sistren.<sup>45</sup> The need to satisfy funders with a project that was “productive” and potentially income generating – note the all-too common dismissal of theatre, and education as “unproductive” work – led Sistren to found its textile project, which ironically has ended up being supported by its theatre activities.

Because of the complexities of negotiations with funding agencies – i.e. providing accounts of monies spent, writing proposals and evaluation reports – a high level of skill was needed by the organization. And yet they still were to be “grassroots women” and a grassroots projects; of course, the inherent contradiction in this, as Ford-Smith points out, is that most grassroots women’s organization are never able to secure funding. “Indeed to be able to expand and to function efficiently the organization needed to attract members with a certain level of skills and consciousness and to provide its grassroots members with the means to acquire such training formally. However, were they to acquire such skills it would mean that they were no longer eligible for ‘grassroots’ funding. This catch

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<sup>43</sup> “National Report on the Status of Women in Jamaica,” Prepared for the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, September 1995, 32.

<sup>44</sup> *Ring Ding*, 66-67.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

locked them into a structure of eternal dependency.”<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the skills they were acquiring within the collective were not recognized by society at large and were not valued in the way more formal training and education were; Ford-Smith has noted that even after years of work as theatre practitioners, Sistren members were still referred to as “streetsweepers.”<sup>47</sup> This of course created tension between those working-class women whose livelihood and identity were more greatly invested in the organization – those who started out as streetsweepers – and the middle-class members who would be able to find employment outside of the collective. Sistren’s situation is complicated by the fact that they were being trained and gaining experience in theatre and performance skills, skills that even in capitalist, developed nations have unreliable and limited monetary value. Several working-class members who emigrated to the US over the past ten years left behind careers as actors, performers and educators to join the ranks of US and Canadian immigrant labor, working, for example, as domestic helpers.

Starting in the early 1980s Sistren began touring internationally both within the region and elsewhere.<sup>48</sup> As they gained international recognition they were able to do more and more. International tours and international funding had a symbiotic relationship; each allowed for the other. Ultimately it was funding from abroad that permitted them to stay alive and grow and continue to work into the 90s.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>47</sup> In fact, many more educated people outside of Sistren who I spoke with, attributed Sistren’s current disorganization and their reduced artistic production to the fact that none of the working class members have formal artistic training, despite their many years of experience.

## RELOCATING POPULAR POLITICAL THEATRE

In her book, Theatre Audiences, Susan Bennett notes, “If the nature of the audience changed, then so did the cultural status of the theatrical event.”<sup>49</sup> I would like to use and build on Bennett’s standard as a way of understanding the change that has taken place within Sistren. Given the same content, political, temporal and cultural context affect the relationship between the performers and the audience and hence affect the generative space in which the audience makes meanings out of the performance. To quote the title character in Anne Bogart’s docu-drama based on the life of director Robert Wilson, “The audience creates the meaning” in theatre. Of course the meanings they create have much to do with themselves not just the performance which, Wilson implies, has no inherent meanings.<sup>50</sup> Any changes in the nature of the audience will change the meanings made of the performance and hence alter its social and political function. A study of audiences is then integral to understanding when and how Sistren’s performances represent a practice of resistance and when – perhaps even why – they fail to be such.

While Sistren’s performances for their original target audiences represent a practice of resistance, as I argued in the previous chapter, performances for other audiences may not. Baz Kershaw notes that “performance can be most usefully described as an ideological transaction between a company of performers and a community of their

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<sup>48</sup> International Tours: Canada, 1981, 1987; Europe, 1983, 1986, 1990; US, 1987. Regional Tours, 1982, 1984, 1985, 1987, 1989-1990. Information from Sistren’s publicity pamphlet.

<sup>49</sup> Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception, (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 4.

<sup>50</sup> BOB was performed at the New York Theatre Workshop, 1998.

audience.” Ideology, he continues, “is the source of the collective ability of performers and audience to make more or less common sense of the signs used in performance.”<sup>51</sup>

The nature of this ideological transaction then is contingent on the audience’s relationship to the performer and the cultural knowledge which will impinge on the meanings they create. Changing any of these elements will alter the nature of the transaction and the social and political function of the theatrical event. If ideology itself is embedded within cultural experiences, doesn’t the nature of the “ideological transaction” between performer and audience change when the nature of the audience changes? For audiences that do not make the same sense of these “signs used in performance,” won’t a very different ideological transaction take place? What impact will this have on the meanings generated and hence on the practice of resistance? What happens to resistant practices – both over time and space – as the world they encounter and function in begins to change as they remain stagnant? In this section I want to explore the impact of relocating Sistren’s politically resistant performances to different cultural contexts. I will then turn back and use the same theoretical framework to look at the impact of changing audiences within Jamaica and the impact this has had on Sistren’s theatrical practice and its ability to work towards its goals.

Sistren’s use of patois in performance, which I explored in the previous chapter, provides a useful site at which to begin this investigation. As I argued in the previous chapter, Sistren’s use of the Jamaican language is a practice of resistance which asserts a place in cultural production for working class women, their experiences and lives. The

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<sup>51</sup> The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention, (London: Routledge, 1992), 16.

struggle between English and patois is also a struggle between an oral cultural and a scriptural culture, between high culture and popular culture and between colonial dominance and working class self-determination and independence. Can this complicated linguistic struggle, which is also a cultural struggle for a post-independence national identity and the survival of a people, be efficaciously communicated anywhere besides Jamaica, or outside of its linguistic context?<sup>52</sup> How does separating this performance from the material conditions it reflects – and performing for an audience that does experientially know these conditions – change its political function?

Every audience arrives in the theatre with the history of their cultural experiences. As Susan Bennett says, “The spectator comes to the theatre as a member of an already-constituted interpretive community.”<sup>53</sup> For speakers of patois, “an already-constituted interpretive community,” the theatrical event presented by *Sistren* serves as a legitimator of cultural experience; is it such for other audiences? If not, how does this affect their ability to “make sense of the signs used in performance” and hence the ideological transaction between performer and audience? How do these changes in turn change the function of the theatrical event? Is the performance of patois for an audience which enters the theatre without the experiential history of this linguistic struggle still a practice of resistance, and if so what is being challenged? Or are such performances an example

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<sup>52</sup> There are large communities of Jamaican immigrants in the US (particularly Brooklyn, NY) and Canada (particularly Toronto, Ontario). I mean to suggest that performing for such a community may have more similarities with performances in Jamaica because of the cultural connections, than other performances for audiences abroad. I do not know to what extent *Sistren* has performed exclusively for such communities. For further thoughts on this see Chapter Five.

<sup>53</sup> *Theatre Audiences*, 149.

of cultural tourism, in which the audience can witness examples of another culture without becoming involved in its politics?

In 1987, Sistren toured abroad with their production of *Muffet inna All a Wi*. A Canadian critic's review of the production points out exactly what is missed by an audience that does not belong to the original linguistic community. The reviewer notes that "despite the difficulty of understanding the patois dialect, the packed audience at the University College of Cape Breton got the message that 'Muffet is in all of us' . . . The music, strong visuals and the vibrant energy of the performers combined to communicate beyond dialogue."<sup>54</sup> While the reviewer's comments indicate that there certainly is pleasure to be gained by this audience, and even meanings to be created, these all happen *beyond* the dialogue, *in spite* of the dialogue, rather than *because* of the dialogue.

This is not to say that this audience isn't capable of creating meanings from the songs, music and visuals that are political, but it does mean that the meanings are different and have a different political valence than those created by audiences for whom the language is *exactly* the point and for whom the history has been experienced. Given such different meanings I would argue that these performances entail a very different ideological transaction, and therefore serve a very different social and political function than when they are performed in Jamaica. The critic's comments point to the fact that the message gleaned from the performance is a universal one – Muffet is in *all* of us, regardless of race, class or nationality – rather than one connected to specific political and

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<sup>54</sup> Amanda Hale, "Popular Theatre Festival: Standin' the Gaff," *Broadside: A Feminist Review*, 8(9), (July 1987): 11.

social conditions. The meanings then created by the audience are similarly disconnected from the political and social conditions from which the performance stems. Moreover, this audience may observe the social and political conditions depicted but do not experientially participate in them. Surely then, for such audiences the function of these performances, and their role in cultural struggles, has changed.

The local specificity of the signs used in performance, is indicated in the program notes for Muffet: “The ritual and movement are framed and given meaning by an astute analysis of contemporary political and economic forces.” More specifically, Muffet is billed as a reggae musical which uses this Jamaican popular culture form – said to have been born in Kingston’s ghettos – as the mode through which to communicate with the audience.<sup>55</sup> The main character – a sort of narrator and trickster figure rolled into one – is a combination of Anansi, a figure from Caribbean and West African folklore, and a dancehall DJ.<sup>56</sup> Honor- Ford Smith notes, “We try to develop forms which come from our popular culture . . . We do not aim to use popular art forms in a representational way, however, but rather to find within them implications for theatrical form and structure.”<sup>57</sup> Use of these popular forms is part of Sistren’s larger project of exploring Caribbean women’s cultural identity but also, I would argue, part of what makes it signify differently locally than abroad. Ford-Smith notes, “The cultural forms through which we

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<sup>55</sup> The connections between reggae and Jamaican politics are complex. It has been used to express resistance, but also to call for peace. At one of his concerts Bob Marley had Seaga and Manley onstage join hands as a sign of a truce between the warring parties (year unclear). For more information see Anita Waters. For a history of the connections between reggae and rastafarianism, see Dennis Constant, “Reggae and the Jamaican Society,” Jamaica Journal 24:2, (March 1992): 40-43. But reggae has also become quite commercialized in the West. Alwin Bully is quoted above noting, “You aren’t really a big reggae star until you have made it in the United States.” I will discuss the implications of this later in this chapter.

<sup>56</sup> For an examination of the role of the dancehall DJ in Jamaican culture, see Andrew Ross, Real Love.

choose to express our beliefs and ideas are constantly changing and are in no way unchanging or universal. Cultural work done in one context very often loses resonance in another, although this is not always the case. The lyrics of reggae and the philosophy of rastfari is very often meaningless to those who consume the musical products. *The specific imagery behind Sistren Collective's play Muffet inna Alla We, for example, cannot be decoded without a knowledge of Caribbean history.*<sup>58</sup> Ford-Smith does not say that the production has no meaning outside of Jamaica, but her comment – which echoes Kershaw's contention quoted in the previous chapter – does suggest that the meanings created by audiences that cannot decode the imagery will be different than those created by an audience for whom the imagery is exactly what communicates most. At what point then does this work cease to function as a *praxis of resistance* and instead become something else?

In her discussion of the imagery in Muffet, Rhonda Cobham notes, “The rituals are drawn from the performances of the DJ impresarios who coordinate reggae discos and are interwoven with the spider imagery associated with Anansi stories and nursery rhymes like ‘Little Miss Muffet.’ In each case the plays succeed in alerting their audience to the ways in which certain patterns of oppression are contested or reinforced in the public rituals of Jamaican society.”<sup>59</sup> The local specificity that gives strength to popular theatre projects also makes the work harder to export; it is theatre that has been designed to address specific social and political problems within a particular environment. Popular

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<sup>57</sup> Cultures in Contention, 89.

<sup>58</sup> “Notes Toward a New Aesthetic,” MELUS, 16(3), (Fall 1989-1990): 28.

theatre is concerned with the struggles of people oppressed by particular social and economic conditions to liberate and empower themselves. The language, imagery and content of Sistren's performances are connected to the traditions of their intended audiences – working class Jamaican women. "We women of Sistren speak as women from the ghetto; we speak to women like ourselves who struggle for survival and the well-being of our children."<sup>60</sup> When these performances are presented to different audiences, their function also changes.

In his discussion of interculturalism, Clive Barker is critical of what is lost when a performance is relocated to a starkly different cultural and political context. He describes a particular performance: "The chance to travel to Papua New Guinea to see the work of Raun-Raun will probably never occur for me but to sit in a cold church hall in Edinburgh, amid an elderly Scottish audience, at an afternoon performance, watching their Nugini-Nugini, designed to be played in the clearings of jungle villages, was to experience a sense of numbed culture shock which deadened any understanding that might have been possible. In this as in other cases, there was no shared context which would allow any meeting or meaningful exchange."<sup>61</sup> The importance he places on a "shared context" as a way to create a "meaningful exchange" echoes Kershaw's emphasis on the ideological transaction that takes place between audience and spectator. The reviews from Sistren's

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<sup>59</sup> Rhonda Cobham, "'A What Kind a Pen Dis?': The Function of Ritual Frameworks in Sistren's Bellywoman Bangarang," *Theatre Research International* 15(3), (Autumn 1990): 247.

<sup>60</sup> Program from European Tour, October 1983.

<sup>61</sup> Clive Barker, "The Possibilities and Politics of Intercultural Penetration and Exchange," in Patrice Pavis, ed., *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, (London And New York: Routledge, 1996), 249-250.

Canadian tour indicate that there is some shared context between the performers and the audience, but *what* is shared is different in Canada than in Jamaica.

The responses to the workshops Sistren did as part of this 1987 Canadian tour suggest what the audience and performers shared in this relocated context. In her review of the company's visit to Saskatchewan, one critic noted some of the lessons learned from Sistren's visit: "The process, not the end product, is what counts . . . going through the process of discovering a solution to a problem and then defeating the problem uncovers reserves of confidence and creativity many women have left neglected or unused. And this discovery is just as valuable in Saskatchewan as in Jamaica."<sup>62</sup> While this "discovery" may be equally valuable for these different women, I would argue that what the problems are and moreover which structures of power need to be challenged or confronted in order to discover a solution, may vary tremendously. In this article, the author interviewed several of the workshop participants who indicated that they plan on using the techniques they had learned in their work. Most were doing various types of social service work with an educational component and felt that Sistren's popular theatre techniques would be very helpful.<sup>63</sup> In addition the author has quoted the Sistren workshop facilitator, Afolashade as saying, "I'd say they're similar in a way [the problems facing women in Canada and Jamaica], in terms of women isolated . . .

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<sup>62</sup> Adrian Pavo, "Lionhearted Gals: Theatre and Women's Politics," *Briarpatch* October/November 1987, 10-12.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

Cutbacks are a problem in Jamaica too. When they cut us back, its mostly social welfare that's cut, and its mostly women who suffer."<sup>64</sup>

A valid argument could be made – and it seems that both the critic above and the workshop leader are making this argument – that the shared experience of oppression of women provides a “shared context” which allows for a “meaningful exchange.” But to accept such an argument without interrogation would also be to ignore several other contexts, not the least of which is the past fifteen years of feminist theory. I do not want to suggest that the popular theatre techniques of *Sistren* are necessarily irrelevant and useless to these Canadian women – and others – because they were developed in a starkly different context, but I do think that because they are integrally part of the techniques, political and social contextual differences need to be spoken about and problematized. To ignore the experiential differences of Canadian and Jamaican women would be to practice the kind of intellectual colonialism that has made non-Western women, generally, skeptical of “feminism,” which they view as a white western woman’s philosophy with little to offer them. Indeed as Linda Nicholson notes, “From the late 1960s to the mid-1980s, feminist theory exhibited a recurrent pattern . . . its analyses tended to reflect the viewpoints of white, middle-class women of North America and Western Europe.”<sup>65</sup> Marnia Lazreg has noted that feminist discourse of this period failed to interrogate its connections to the philosophical and theoretical heritage it questioned: “Knowledge is produced not only within a socioeconomic and political framework, but

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 12. Ellipses in original.

<sup>65</sup> “Introduction,” *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Linda J. Nicholson, ed., (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 1.

also within an intellectual tradition with stated and unstated assumptions. Although it questions traditional assumptions, academic feminism has often neglected to investigate its own premises.”<sup>66</sup> In her analysis of Algerian women Lazreg notes the different conditions of non-Western women and the differing underlying systemic causes for these conditions: “At the heart of the feminist project, East and West, is a desire to dismantle the existing order of things and reconstruct it to fit one’s own needs . . . however feminists . . . differ in the grasp they have on this ‘sorry scheme of things’ and the tools they use to ‘shatter it to bits’.”<sup>67</sup> Because structures of power are culturally specific, Lazreg notes that the *tools* to confront and resist these structures in one culture may not be relevant in another.

Many of the women of Sistren were wary of the term “feminist” and didn’t consider themselves as such, despite the fact that to me, a white American woman, their goals – to empower working class Jamaican women – seemed to be feminist ones. This philosophic discrepancy also cropped up in my own effort to understand what was meant by “empowerment” in this context. It was clear to me that what I thought of as empowering – and for that matter disempowering – was not necessarily what the other women around me, both in Sistren and elsewhere in Jamaica, experienced as such. Here is a concrete material example from my stay: I experienced many things that I would define as “sexual harassment,” and which would commonly be considered such in the US. When I mentioned a particular incident to a few members of Sistren, they chuckled at the idea that I thought of such behavior as “harassment.” What then emerged from my

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<sup>66</sup> Conflicts in Feminism, 327.

experience is the fact that in this cultural context men and women communicate with one another in different ways, ways that because they were unfamiliar to me, led me to read certain behaviors out of context. I also realized that the sources of power for women vary in different cultures. And so I wonder what it would be like to do a workshop, for example on sexual harassment, with women from different cultures; would the “shared context” of the oppression of women provide enough common ground for a “meaningful exchange”? Doesn’t reliance on such commonality ignore the material lived conditions of these women who have dealt with vastly different forms of power both politically and socially?

Interrogation of this goal of empowerment gets dropped out of the above discussion of the workshops by the critic and the workshop facilitator. How is the attainment of this goal affected by the techniques’ relocation to a different political and cultural context? In the case of the Saskatchewan workshops, the author has identified the concept of “uncovering or discovering reserves of confidence and creativity” as an empowering activity; is this a universally empowering activity? The same critic noted that “although developed in a Caribbean context, [the techniques] are applicable to any society where women still need to organize to live in security and fulfillment.”<sup>68</sup> While “empowerment” is a difficult concept to define, and even harder to assess, it is inherently connected to the structures of power – both formal, as in the laws of a nation, and informal, as in gender relations in a particular culture – that exist in that context. Because power itself has cultural and historical specificity, doesn’t empowerment also have such a

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

specificity? Certainly what is required for women to “organize and live in security and fulfillment” will vary tremendously from one context to another. And those obstacles that must be negotiated to do so will be very different in kind and size.

I want once again to refer back to the way in which I began my discussion of Sistren, drawing attention to my own subjectivity and the ways in which my own understanding of empowerment may influence my evaluation of Sistren’s activities. Perhaps part of the reason my friend and I were disappointed in the workshops in which we participated in Toronto in 1993 is that we were already familiar with popular theatre and at the time I had been working for over a year with a popular theatre company in Toronto, so its strategies were not novel for me. In addition we had collaborated on several theatre projects which specifically were about women’s lives, constructed from autobiographical and other material. To talk about and creatively explore our own lives as women was not new; we already had much artistic space in our lives in which to do exactly this. For us, these techniques did not work towards goals of “liv[ing] in security and fulfillment.” I must point out, however, that there were many women who seemed very interested and excited by many aspects of the workshops.

The workshop techniques themselves are used for different purposes in different contexts. Much like the change that Boal made in his own work when moving from a third to a first world context, in a Western context, the techniques address social problems, rather than fundamental political and societal ones. Jean Small is quoted above as stating, “When you take people out of the ghetto and make them speak about the

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<sup>68</sup> Pavo, 11.

conditions under which they live and work, it is a political act.”<sup>69</sup> But for me to talk about my own life in a Sistren workshop in Toronto does not constitute the same sort of political act. For the women of Sistren to talk about their own lives, in their own language on a Kingston stage at a moment in Jamaican history when working class women’s experiences weren’t a part of cultural production, was a radical political act. Perhaps then, the fundamental difference between the two constituencies is the *use* we make of the work. Many of the women who participated in the Sistren workshops in Toronto found them to be fun and unusual (most people with little theatre experience find theatre games to be so), but did the techniques empower the women to take action in their lives? Could they *use* them as tools for enacting radical political change? My point is that the workshops themselves are neither inherently empowering nor inherently irrelevant when relocated to a new context. What I want to suggest is that such relocations represent potential cracks in their dynamics that must be dealt with.

Barker presents an interesting point of comparison because he too does various types of theatre workshops in various places in the world. Of this work he notes, “The largest limitation in my own work is that there has to be an area of the context which is common to both of us for the meeting and exchange to take place . . . I function much more easily and directly in universities, teacher training colleges, drama schools and theatre companies than I do in South African townships, Bangladeshi villages or the barrios of Bogota . . . there are boundaries I cannot cross easily and for very good reasons, the principal one being that I share very little of these people’s lives and living.

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<sup>69</sup> Interview with author, May 1996.

Their existence is in my context but I am not in theirs.”<sup>70</sup> He continues to do this sort of intercultural work however and suggests ways of making such boundaries more “permeable.” Barker’s comments – and the publication in recent years of much criticism on intercultural theatre – point to the complexities involved in unraveling such interactions and how deeply embedded they are in larger political systems of colonialism and imperialism.<sup>71</sup> As Julie Stone Peters has noted in her examination of intercultural performance practices, it is essential to place the particular cultural exchange within its historical context; we must remember the history of “exchange” that has taken and continues to take place between these cultures.<sup>72</sup>

I would like to look at a moment during my stay with Sistren, when my own understanding of empowerment was interrogated by the members of Sistren and a group with which they were working. I had originally been invited to Jamaica by Sistren to do a series of teaching workshops on Augusto Boal’s Cop-in-the-Head and Rainbow of Desire techniques. These techniques, which Boal developed when he found himself in Europe, working with a population that harbored many more internal oppressions than external ones, tackle these inner forces. I had used Boal’s techniques in various contexts for several years and had always found them extremely powerful in terms of their ability

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<sup>70</sup> Barker, 255.

<sup>71</sup> For various discussions on interculturalism see; Patrice Pavis, The Intercultural Performance Reader, the criticism generated around Peter Brook’s production of the Mahabharata, ie, David Williams, ed., Peter Brook and the Mhabharata: Critical Perspectives, (London: Routledge, 1991). For an exploration of the intersection of imperialism and theatre see J. Ellen Gainor, ed., Imperialism and Theatre. I must point out that while the interculturalism debate provides insight into the politics of Sistren’s travels, the debate focuses on more on interculturalism in the *creation* of theatrical work -- i.e. borrowing forms from other cultures for incorporation into a different culture’s production -- which is not the issue I am grappling with in regards to Sistren’s work.

to expose and interrogate structures of power and oppression; in other words, I experienced them as empowering. And while I was well aware of the power position of the workshop facilitator and have interrogated the techniques based on this, perhaps I wasn't prepared for the ways in which my position of power was doubled and redoubled by my whiteness, my education and my nationality, and how it would also be completely negated by my lack of experiential knowledge of the power structures I endeavored to reveal. But perhaps the reason the workshops fell flat in this context has something more to do with our different understandings and experiences of our own dis-empowerment and oppressions. While I encouraged the workshop participants to locate internal oppressions, they continually came back with examples of external oppression. For example, in a workshop on health and sexuality, several participants produced images, or staged incidents of their experiences on the crowded Kingston buses, replete with the smells and crushing crowds they had to endure. They continually located their oppressions outside of themselves, although in conversations outside of the theatre workshop it was clear that many of the same internal forces that I experience as oppressive were in operation here as well. Perhaps part of the problem comes back again to use-value; identification of internal oppressions didn't seem to be a useful tool for radical political change.

## **BACK HOME**

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<sup>72</sup> See "Intercultural Performance, Theatre, Anthropology, and the Imperialist Critique," in *Imperialism and Theatre*, 199-213.

Sistren's success abroad – reflected in the stream of requests they received for performances – interfered with their ability to remain locally committed to the ghetto communities to which they had originally dedicated themselves. In an internal evaluation report in 1992, various groups of people were surveyed to find out what they thought of Sistren. Women in the ghettos either didn't recognize the name or said, "Sistren? Chuh! Dem travel too much!"<sup>73</sup> The same report referred to the work they had done in the previous five years within ghetto communities as "too little too late."<sup>74</sup> The evaluator concluded that "the neglect and continued (since 1984) abandonment of Sistren's community group building activities in light of their overseas activities, has left a negative impact on the local grassroots community."<sup>75</sup> The report also noted that "links with their overseas constituency has been maintained better than those with their local constituency."<sup>76</sup> This was managed in part, through the distribution of *Sistren Magazine*, however, "the magazine is pitched for a predominantly literate middle class audience. Some local organizations have begun to use the magazine to complement their work. However literacy and functional literacy particularly among their target grassroots constituency is low and accounts for the limited response locally."<sup>77</sup>

Economics play a complicated role in determining these changes. Afolashade points out why international work began to take precedence over local work:

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<sup>73</sup> "Sistren Theatre Collective 1987-1992 Evaluation Report," prepared by Cheryl Ryman, unpublished evaluation report, Sistren Research Center, Kingston Jamaica, 25.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 27.

A tour that was not scheduled would come up and the local work would stop to cater for the tour. Local work brings in very little income in comparison to the income that is generated at the international level. After a while the local work suffered to make room to cater to our international audience. Less time was spent working in the communities. Often times we would travel all the way from Kingston to the rural community and when we got there the participants would either be late or just didn't show up because the work in the community was not planned for on a long term basis.<sup>78</sup>

Her comments point once again to the complex and paradoxical nature of international funding; international performances took precedence because of their potential for raising funds and yet this led to the deterioration of the local community-based work that they were “really” being funded to do. In other words, while they existed discursively for a local community, their attentions had in actuality been refocused elsewhere. Ironically, many of the women I interviewed expressed a desire to do more community-based work; this was where they felt Sistren's heart lay. But the bureaucracy within Sistren, perpetuated by funding paradoxes and a lack of leadership, continue to stand in the way of this goal.

A woman who performed in Sistren's most recent major production, Kulchafushan (1992), and later joined the company full-time, said she hadn't heard of Sistren before she auditioned for the role in which she was eventually cast. I found this

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<sup>78</sup> Afolashade.

particularly remarkable because she had been taking classes at the Jamaica School of Drama. But she explained, “Although Sistren is Jamaica-based more people internationally know about Sistren than people here in Jamaica. When I go on the road and people ask me where you work now? And I say Sistren, they say where that, what they do? Cause nobody really knows about them. Or you’ll find the rural people know more about Sistren than the urban people and that’s kinda ironic, eh, since Sistren is urban-based . . . my mother knew that Sistren started in 1977, but she did not know that it was still alive, until 1992 when I went there.”<sup>79</sup>

In addition to their international tours, Sistren is frequently requested to perform domestically for large international organizations such as UNICEF or for various delegations visiting Jamaica from abroad.<sup>80</sup> In addition they are invited to do performances at various “women-themed” events. For example, during my stay, Sistren participated in an evening of dramatized readings to celebrate Women’s Day at the University of the West Indies. While I was helping to prepare Sistren’s 1995 annual report, I noticed that they received many more requests for these sorts of performances than community-based work.

Part of the declining interest in Sistren’s work may be a result of the ways in which organizational difficulties affected their creative work. One member addressed the strategies they used to cope with members’ experiences of burn-out and exhaustion:

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<sup>79</sup> Interview with author, interviewee remains anonymous

<sup>80</sup> Sistren has had a long funding relationship with UNICEF.

Our decision to serve groups which were already organized relieved us of the burden of mobilizing the participants and dealing with follow-up and the general problems of building and maintaining the groups. Our work deteriorated somewhat, on account of this decision. Our work at the base with working class women collapsed and on the other hand we were sometimes incapable of delivering what was expected of us from the organized groups. The monotonous way in which we worked became boring to some participants who attended our workshops regularly. A series of workshops that were targeted for members of the NGOs that was successful in its initial phase, lost momentum. STC was not doing much to attract new participants to our work.<sup>81</sup>

This may account, in part, for the poor turnout at the Sistren events I attended during my stay. Most of those who showed up for these events came because they remembered Sistren's work from years past.

Part of the problem too, is that interest in and enthusiasm for popular theatre as a methodology for addressing grassroots problems began to wane in the mid to late 1980's in Jamaica and elsewhere in the region.<sup>82</sup> As Alwin Bully noted, this coincided with the Caribbean's disillusionment with promises of independence; the social refocus away from grassroots empowerment and towards materialism, which was epitomized by the

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<sup>81</sup> Afolashade.

<sup>82</sup> Various; Eugene Williams, interview with author, March 1996; Alwin Bully, interview with author, April 1996; history of Groundwork Theatre Company. In 1985 several popular theatre companies in the Caribbean collaborated on the production the Caribbean Popular Theatre Exchange (CPTe); such a festival was never again produced, and many of those companies are no longer operational.

government itself, and the infusion of American culture and values. Susan Ferner notes that as early as 1985, interest in popular theatre was waning: “The social climate is no longer conducive to popular theatre in Jamaica . . . attendance [at performances] has declined over the past few years.”<sup>83</sup> Williams noted that by the late 1980s, “Sistren as a theatre company in Jamaica was no longer popular. They’d do a play with a couple of audiences . . . feminists who had identified with them earlier would still be there . . . not all of them . . . some would just go to give support to the group. And there was a radical change in the aesthetic by now, because these things about using traditional stuff and so on is no longer popular.”<sup>84</sup> I saw evidence of this waning interest and audience attendance during my field research. In one case, Sistren traveled to a town on the North Coast to do a performance which dramatized several stories from Lionheart Gal.<sup>85</sup> Oracabessa was a town with which they had established links and to which we traveled again later in my stay for a series of workshops. The event, titled Oracabessa Labrish – a labrish is a community speak-out – was meant to attract the whole town. The performance space was set up for an audience of several hundred but only a handful were there when we arrived. The woman from Oracabessa who had arranged for Sistren’s visit, was clearly angry and disappointed and went to recruit more audience members, but when the performance began, there were still fewer than fifteen people in the audience.

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<sup>83</sup> Susan M. Ferner, Master’s thesis, Norman Patterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario. April 1986.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with author.

<sup>85</sup> During my stay, Sistren did several performances which were billed as dramatized readings of stories from Lionheart Gal. The dramatizations interspersed folk songs and some dancing with the telling of the stories.

Despite waning domestic interest in their work, it seems that international audiences are still enthusiastic about Sistren, as they continue to receive invitations for performances abroad. One of the performers in *Kulchafushan* (1992) told me that audiences in Germany, where the show toured, were much more enthusiastic than domestic audiences had been.<sup>86</sup> A review of the 1987 Canadian tour noted that “Sistren has played to standing-room audiences at the University College of Cape Breton.”<sup>87</sup>

While I do not believe that relocated community-based work like Sistren’s can serve the functions of community-building and empowerment that they strive to achieve at home, these performances do have something to offer. They provide a glimpse into a foreign culture and in the case of Sistren also provide an example of what can be accomplished by a community-based theatre company that has dedicated such a large amount of time to the development of their methodology and theatrical style. Additionally, many of the women of Sistren are extraordinarily talented performers. Bev Hanson, Dawnette Hinds, Bess Thompson and Afolashade – all of whom I saw perform during my stay – are all versatile actresses with sharp improvisation skills, who take on a variety of roles in Sistren performances.

### **SISTREN IN THE 1990s: CHANGING TIMES AGAIN, CHANGING POLITICS**

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<sup>86</sup> German interest in Jamaican culture is deserving of some investigation. Germans also make up one of the largest contingents of tourists to Jamaica.

<sup>87</sup> Canadian Press, “Theatre Collective Illuminates Plight of Jamaican Women,” *Globe and Mail*, May 28, 1987, D4. Interestingly in the many different accounts of Sistren’s performance at this festival that appeared in Canadian publications, each one had a error either in the spelling of the play’s title, a member’s name, or of Sistren itself.

At the beginning of the 1990s, with many resource persons gone, interest in popular theatre on the decline and low audience turn-out for performances, Sistren realized the need to evaluate their work, goals and direction. They turned to the Association of Development Agencies (ADA), an umbrella organization for NGOs doing development-related work in Jamaica, and requested a comprehensive outside evaluation. The evaluation report prepared by Cheryl Ryman reviewed Sistren's work, in the context of the company's goals, for the period 1987-1992. The report also made suggestions for Sistren's future, directions to go in and issues that needed to be resolved. A year earlier, Sistren made a video, *Moving On*, which was meant to serve as a promotional device and in its title implies Sistren's awareness of the need to move in new directions.<sup>88</sup>

Many of Sistren's problems have roots in personnel difficulties. The 1990s began with a leadership vacuum left by the departure of several key resource persons, including Honor Ford-Smith.<sup>89</sup> One Sistren member said,

The biggest blow came about when the Artistic Director and the Workshop director officially resigned. Both resignations had a deleterious effect on the artistic and political content, concept and quality of the work output. Their roles and functions were never replaced which created a vacuum and the skills to fill the vacuum were neither to be found in STC or externally.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> This video was directed by Cynthia Wilmot and is available in Sistren's documentation center.

<sup>89</sup> Other resource persons include Joan French, who did much research for the company and Hilary Nicholson.

<sup>90</sup> Afolashade.

In addition, the changing political environment affected the individual members within Sistren. They were all getting older, volunteer work wasn't a viable option anymore, and many wanted to have a more stable economic base. As Williams noted, "The change in socio-economics was causing everybody now to think money. Material things became important, because capitalism was seeping back in with a vengeance . . . of course these people are getting older, want to move on . . . getting older means you have to think about a house, a car."<sup>91</sup> Afolashade comments,

Founding members earned salaries which placed us amongst the top one third of the country's earning categories, but nevertheless, some members felt that they had nothing to show for all their years working. For some, as soon as their passports were stamped with a Multiple Indefinite Visa for the US they migrated with the intention that their earning potential would help them realize their long term needs such as buying a house, setting up a business or paying for their children's higher education.<sup>92</sup>

Lana Finikin made the following comparison between the work ethic of the 70s and that of the 90s: "I remember I would leave my house from five in the evening til two or three or four o'clock in the morning for rehearsal without pay [in the early years]. And I don't think anyone in this era would do something like that if they are not getting some stipend. That is the difference I am talking about."<sup>93</sup> Indeed during my stay there was a prolonged and heated discussion over whether or not to work with a particular ghetto

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<sup>91</sup> Interview with author, March 1996.

<sup>92</sup> Afolashade.

community group that had requested Sistren's assistance. Many of the people in that community do not return home from work until after five, so the theatre work would have to take place in the evening. Sistren reached an impasse trying to reconcile how the members designated to that project would be compensated for such work and so the work never happened. Sistren told the community that they would be unable to collaborate with them.<sup>94</sup> Mired in bureaucracy, Sistren seems to only exist discursively for the "working class"; in reality they have drifted away from their original mission statement.

One member addressed the current status of community-based work:

Right now the only community we are working with is a rural community in St. Mary called LYNX. We had started to do some interaction off Spanish Town Road . . . and the reason for this being stopped . . . a lot of internal problems is affecting the kind of work that we are supposed to be doing outside because if we are to be working with [that community from Spanish Town Road] it would mean working after 5. If someone goes out in the communities to work, they are not doing it in their free time or just to socialize but they are doing it because of the aims and philosophies of Sistren. One of Sistren's main philosophy is empowering women. How can we empower if we are in the office nine to five and nobody is going to do after 5 work because they are not going to be recompensed for their

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<sup>93</sup> Interview with author, February 1996.

<sup>94</sup> Interesting, in DiCenzo's examination of 7:84 she notes a parallel phenomenon. The company was spending so much of their budget maintaining the infrastructure of the company that they had very little left with which to actually produce shows.

work? In Jamaica right now, nobody can afford to do volunteer work everyday.<sup>95</sup>

Another member said, “We have shifted from the mission. Sistren theatre collective as an institution, we are not at the same place we were several years ago.” It seems that both the economic and political conditions within the country that have made volunteer work more costly, combined with organizational bureaucracy, have overwhelmed Sistren to such an extent that they are having a difficult time fulfilling their mission.<sup>96</sup>

A parallel phenomenon has been the deterioration of the collective functioning of the company. The 1992 evaluation report prepared by Cheryl Ryman noted that “there can be no doubt that collectivity once served a very viable and useful function within STC,” but it currently “exists more as a myth than a reality – part of the nostalgic view of the ‘good old days’ of true sisterhood.”<sup>97</sup> In her final words on the subject, Ryman notes that collectivity is “definitely no longer operational or a reality . . . Internally (inside and close to home) the model is tarnished. Growing tensions and resentments are affecting the body even though externally it is not generally known.”<sup>98</sup> Additionally, a 1997 funding

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<sup>95</sup> LYNX is the group based in Oracabessa that is mentioned elsewhere in this chapter. Interestingly, Sistren’s work with this group is actually limited to working with the young people who themselves have been hired to do community development work. They had developed an interest in drama a tool for doing their educational work and sought Sistren out to provide some training and feedback.

<sup>96</sup> This was the reason given to me by a representative from one of their former financial supporters for severing their funding relationship with Sistren in 1997.

<sup>97</sup> Ryman Report, 52.

<sup>98</sup> Ryman Report, p.3 of Appendix V.

proposal noted that the collective structure had “allowed all members to avoid formal responsibility,” a difficulty whose repercussions are still being felt by the organization.<sup>99</sup>

The underlying principle of collectivism is the equal value placed on each person’s labor. It was precisely this presumption that Ryman cites as one of the underlying difficulties in maintaining such a structure:

The Sistren people were not simply different but vastly different and unequal in almost every respect - race, colour, class, nationality, education skills, qualifications, political affiliations, exposure and status. The middle class and the working class resided at two extreme poles. Collectivity and sisterhood bridged much of that gap but created self-destructing elements. The artificial weighting ie the making equal of all contributions disturbed the natural relationship between effort and reward and created a false reality.<sup>100</sup>

While members of Sistren were equally compensated early on, as some members developed various skills there seems to have been the expectation that they should receive greater compensation. Moreover, over time Sistren hired outside persons to perform various functions for the collective – for example, an accountant – and these people who had more formal education also had higher salary expectations. As the 1992 evaluation report notes,

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<sup>99</sup> “Project Proposal: Sistren Theatre Collective: Three-Year Funding Proposal 1995-1997,” unpublished report located in Sistren Documentation Center, 6.

<sup>100</sup> Ryman Report, 53.

For those working class Sistren who were elected or chose to fill the leadership/management vacuum after 1988 frontal challenges to the collective system was high on their agenda. A challenge was openly thrown out in relation to the notion of equal value being placed on responsibility, work load and efforts as well as on the contribution of skills in relation to equal remuneration, ie the collective salary. The three point arm of collectivity was shaken at its very foundation . . . significant changes, which blew the collective system apart were effected. First a recognition of a different value to be placed on different kinds of work skills like the Coordinator, Assistant Coordinator, Team Leaders and Financial Administrator were now able to attract higher salaries. This heralded the end of the 'collective salary' and the notion of equal value for all skills and contributions.<sup>101</sup>

The evaluator's conclusions were met with mixed responses; some within the organization felt that while a precise collectivism no longer existed, its spirit still pervaded the organization. In a report from the 1995 annual retreat, members of Sistren responded to the report: "The Ryman report was of the view that collectivism in the STC existed more in theory than in practice. Participants did not fully endorse this view. Changes in systems and structures recommended in the Ryman report, were intended to ensure that STC met the objectives for which the organization was established. The expectation was that the interim period (1992-1994) would have enabled the organization to improve on

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<sup>101</sup> Ryman Report, 52.

the practices but not necessarily abandon the principle of collectivism.”<sup>102</sup> The failure of collectivism, or struggles with it, mirror the larger society’s abandonment of socialist principles and a gradual shift to a more individualistic society, influenced strongly by the involuntary importation of American values.

In addition to the organizational difficulties the collective faced, the 1990s also brought artistic challenges. In 1990 Rhonda Cobham noted, “Several of the artists associated with the collective see its work . . . as having reached its furthest stage of development.”<sup>103</sup> Lana Finikin, currently coordinator of Sistren and also a founding member, noted in an interview that while popular theatre was effective to address women’s issues and achieve Sistren’s goals in the 1970s, maybe it was not the way for the 1990s.<sup>104</sup> Although she thought Sistren’s goals were still relevant, she noted, “What I see needs to change [is that] we need to find different strategies to implement those goals. Just for us to find different ways of getting them done. To find a way of getting out the messages to the women and organizing them . . . Sistren has to find new methods and new ways to do the work that they have to do.” Interestingly, in *Moving On*, she said that Sistren could never “happen” in the 90s, if it had not been started in the 70s. She elaborates, “The global scenario right now is not for groups coming together, it is for individual enterprise coming and blooming, capitalism etc. Even if Sistren would have started now it would not be on the base that Sistren in 1977 started out, it would be on a

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<sup>102</sup> “Report of STC Retreat: February 1995,” prepared by Yvonne McCalla Sobers, submitted to Sistren Theatre Collective March 20, 1995, unpublished, Sistren Research and Documentation Center, 4.

<sup>103</sup> “A What Kind a Pen Dis?: The Function of Ritual Frameworks in Sistren’s Bellywoman Bangarang,” *Theatre Research International*, Autumn 1990, 15(3): 248-9.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with author, March 1996.

different footing. In the 70s it was women's issues, in the 90s it is environment etc.”

Interestingly, her comment also points out their dependency on funders who make specific choices regarding the “issues” they are going to fund. For example, I saw evidence during my field research of international funding agencies' interest in projects focused on youth. Grassroots organizations which are dependent on such funding for their survival often must make programming choices based on such agencies' agendas.

In addition, Sistren's method of creating a major production is so time consuming it no longer seems possible in this era. Collective creation of a production based on research and improvisation places a great deal of emphasis on the process, rather than the final product. While in the 1970s such a laboratory process was supported, in the 1990s, in a market economy focused on finished products, it is impossible. As Williams noted, “This is not the time when you can spend five months doing a play. Just not economical.” Such a change has been felt elsewhere as well. Williams notes the School of Drama itself “is less of a laboratory . . . the school has become very structured . . . it is now pretty much like any school in America.”<sup>105</sup> Other community-based and popular theatres in other parts of the world experienced similar difficulties during the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>106</sup>

As the political, economic and social conditions within the nation changed, the nature of Sistren's audiences and potential audiences changed, so the meanings made of their performances and their social function have changed. While the folk forms they

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<sup>105</sup> Interview with author.

originally used in the 70's such as patois, ring games and folk songs may have been practices of resistance then, these forms themselves no longer bear the same politics. There is nothing inherently political or resistant about popular forms. They accrue their meaning and their challenge to the status quo within a particular context. When that context changes their role in the practice of resistance changes as well. In an interview with Owen Ellis, who worked with Sistren over the years as a writer and director and currently teaches a community drama course at the Jamaica School of Drama, he noted that these forms are no longer relevant to the young people in Jamaica primarily because they just don't recognize them: "Traditional games are fine, but there are also modern forms. Sistren still use folk songs and most young person in Jamaica who is 18 and under don't know these folk songs. But gonna make them sing it cause some women who are older than them are singing it. How bout using a Beanie Man song, use a Lady Saw song rather than, 'Woman time a come, come, come'. They grew up in a different time. They want to be a DJ, use that."<sup>107</sup>

Ellis thinks that community drama is still relevant in contemporary Jamaican society, but he said the methods that community drama used in the 70s and 80s are no longer as useful as they once were and need to be rethought. Now, he notes, "Everyone has TV, dish and cable. You are asking them to leave that and come and watch people who are badly costumed, voices not very well trained, because its 'only' community

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<sup>106</sup> See Maria DiCenzo's discussion of Scotland's 7:84 and Charlotte Canning's discussion of various women's theatre collectives in the US.

<sup>107</sup> Interview with author. Beanie Man and Lady Saw are both popular singers in Jamaica. "Woman time a come," is a song used in many Sistren performances and workshops. For a fascinating history of dancehall DJ popularity see Andrew Ross, *Real Love*.

drama. I think that's part of the problem, refusing to add quality to the work and today's modern world etc., have to lift the quality of the work . . . to get people interested in it again . . . Think of what the youth are into." Because they have no personally historic referent, the youth don't see the connection between singing these folk songs and political action or empowerment. As Ellis notes, their ears are inundated with the sounds of the dancehall, and the words of American television and film stars.<sup>108</sup> Kathy McAfee notes that popular theatre and music "face tough competition for the hearts and minds of Jamaicans from satellite TV's Dallas and Dynasty, evangelical fanaticism and the CNN News."<sup>109</sup>

In his discussion of British popular theatre, David Edgar referred to the use of forgotten popular forms as "social archeology," noting that their use no longer entails a practice of resistance to the status quo.<sup>110</sup> Ellis points to a threat that always haunts political/popular theatre. Folk forms are not inherent sites for resistance, and their use does not inevitably subvert the status quo. The changing political, social and cultural terrain into which these temporal relocations have thrust both popular theatre and popular culture, means that they may no longer retain their original function as political resistance. Moreover, the processes of ideological appropriation and incorporation always threaten to reconstitute the forms' role in cultural struggles.

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<sup>108</sup> Moreover as Paul Gilroy notes, "Jamaica's DJs steered the dance-hall side of roots culture away from political and historical themes and towards 'slackness': crude and often insulting wordplay pronouncing on sexuality and sexual antagonism." See, 'There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack': The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987),188.

<sup>109</sup> McAfee, 134.

<sup>110</sup> The Second Time As Farce: Reflections on the Drama of Mean Times, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988), 233.

An example of how incorporation and/or appropriation can empty out the political function of a particular form can be seen in the recent cultural appearances of patois. In recent years patois can most readily be found on the Jamaican stage in “roots plays,” a genre which is disconnected from social or political commentary. In a review of a roots play, a critic said that this particular play epitomized “roots” theatre because it made no political commentary whatsoever.<sup>111</sup> Plays of this genre are notable for their portrayal of life in the ghetto. Other characteristics include vaudeville-esque humor whose primary source is the characters’ sexual escapades. The plots are predictable and repeated, basically entailing a lot of sexual activity amongst the greatest number of pairs of people (same-sex couples excluded).<sup>112</sup> Does Sistren’s use of patois then, still represent a practice of resistance, or has it become, to use Edgar’s term too “extensively corrupted” to be the basis of community solidarity and empowerment? While I do not believe that the use of patois in such roots plays nullifies the politics of performances in patois, it certainly dilutes them.

Similarly, reggae music, which has been a site for the expression of political resistance, not just for Sistren, has also been subject to incorporation into the capitalist mainstream. In their study of postcolonial drama, Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins note, “Reggae frequently addresses the latest local and political events. It is a form of music rooted in the experience of the underprivileged and hence often used as a vehicle of

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<sup>111</sup> I read this in a publicity article posted in the theatre in which I saw a roots play. Many people told me the same thing as well.

<sup>112</sup> The roots play I saw during my stay, “The Wickedest Slam,” got its title from a Jamaican saying that “ghetto girls give the wickedest slam,” slam of course being a slang term for sex. I could understand very little of the dialogue which was in thick patois.

third world protests against imperialism.”<sup>113</sup> They go on to cite Sistren’s use of reggae in their production of Muffet Inna All a Wi as a strategy to confront exploitation. But Williams noted that now a reggae singer isn’t considered a star until he makes lots of money in the US: “Reggae is now a big commercial thing, its not just Bob Marley.”<sup>114</sup> Paul Gilroy also notes, “The role and content of reggae changed markedly after 1980. This shift related to the consolidation of Seaga’s regime and the consequent militarization of ghetto life,” and eventually, “slackness achieved ascendancy.”<sup>115</sup> Gilroy’s examination of the ways in which reggae morphed and was marketed within Britain is an example of the ways in which popular culture’s signification can change over both time and space. In Britain, Jamaican reggae became a profitable product, rather than an expression of political dissent. The commercial popularity and de-politicization of reggae and Jamaican popular culture is encapsulated in Marley’s legacy. A Bob Marley song has been used as the Jamaican Tourist Board’s theme song; detached from politics, it encourages visitors to “come to Jamaica and feel alright.” Andrew Ross notes the larger cultural impact of this appropriation:

Ultimately, of course, the Marley sound would become the winter siren song of the Jamaica Tourist Board, calling the baby boomers, black as well as white, in the northern strongholds of Babylon to their spiritual home in the south: “One world, one love / lets get together and feel

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<sup>113</sup> Helen Gilbert and Joanne Thompkins, Post-Colonial: Theory, Practice, Politics, (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 198.

<sup>114</sup> Interview with author.

<sup>115</sup> Gilroy, 188. Slackness refers to a focus on rudeness and crudeness, with an emphasis on sexuality. It is in direct contrast to music with political and social content and themes.

alright.” A light tonic hallelujah to the good life is conveyed by this anemic, posthumous version of a Marley ska classic, stripped of its resonance with the unity ethic in the Rasta liturgy of ‘I & I,’ or even in Marcus Garvey’s Pan African UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association) motto for all black diasporic peoples, ‘One God One Aim One Destiny’.<sup>116</sup>

Even Marley, whose career, lyrics, and person played such an important role in the post-colonial struggle for an independent national identity, has been separated from his politics and put at the service of the global economy.<sup>117</sup> Bob Marley’s other legacy, his son Ziggy Marley, can be seen and heard on American TV singing a watered down reggae version of Revlon’s “Cover Girl” theme song in a commercial featuring supermodel Tyra Banks at the beach. The entire commercial alludes to a romanticized, de-politicized, “feel alright” version of “the islands.” A popular form, in this case reggae, that had been used to express political resistance or dissent now is used to *sell* – rather than tell – the story of Jamaica to tourists, and to market cosmetics.<sup>118</sup> The offspring of the radical 70s have been seduced by American capitalism. The goals and methods of traditional culture, of empowerment and independence, must now compete with the seductive allure of

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<sup>116</sup> Andrew Ross, Real Love: The Pursuit of Cultural Justice (New York University Press: New York, 1998), 45.

<sup>117</sup> For a more thorough discussion of how this happened in Britain, see Gilroy.

<sup>118</sup> The exploitation of reggae is not new. For a discussion of the ways in which both political parties used reggae song lyrics in their political campaigns, see Anita Waters. Also, for a discussion of the commercialization of Marley and reggae in Britain see Paul Gilroy, “Diaspora, Utopia and the Critique of Capitalism,” in There Aint No Black in the Union Jack.

America, both the idea of its cultural capital and profit and its geographical reality.<sup>119</sup>

Reggae may still be able to express political dissent, but as a form it is no longer inherently radical.

### **LAYING GROUNDWORK FOR THE FUTURE**

One of the ways that Sistren hopes to revitalize itself is through the Adolescent Motivation Programme (AMP) which is targeted at youth. This program was just beginning rehearsals for its first set of skits when I arrived in Jamaica, and so I was able to observe the creative process from the beginning. Problems began with the recruitment of teenagers; they originally planned to hire four teens as popular theatre animators, but by the time rehearsals got underway, only two were attending with regularity.<sup>120</sup> Both of these younger “Sistren,” one male and one female, were to be incorporated into all of Sistren’s performance work, and in addition to the skits they were preparing to take into schools, they both performed in dramatized readings at various locales during my stay.<sup>121</sup> But several concerns arose as I watched the rehearsals. First, the skits were being directed by a male director whom Sistren hired specifically for this purpose, although he had done some work previously with them. There seemed to be very little artistic input on the part of Sistren, or any members of Sistren. This is not to suggest that the director they hired was not competent, but rather to note the lack of a cohesive artistic vision.

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<sup>119</sup> For two perspectives on the Americanization of Jamaican music and culture by two Jamaican dub-poets, see, Imani Tafari Ama, “Muta and Yasus Defend the Culture,” in *Sistren Magazine*, 16 (1, 2), 1994, 7.

<sup>120</sup> Having worked previously with teens, this seems to be par for the course rather than any reflection on Sistren.

The last day of my fieldwork, a dress rehearsal of the series of skits on teenage pregnancy was performed for an audience made up of a group of girls from a local school – all about 11-13 years old – and members of Sistren’s board of Directors for feedback. Sistren had done some work previously with the girls’ school, but unfortunately, for whatever reason, the group arrived late and the performance was about half over by the time they got there. Because the girls represented the target audience for these skits – Sistren was planning on taking them into schools – they wanted to get some feedback regarding their efficacy in communicating various ideas. In theory this seemed to me to be a very useful step; however, in reality the adults present dominated the feedback session and in essence silenced the young girls. I was troubled by how much the adult (and mostly, male) voices dominated a discussion that should have been about young girls.

This seems to be indicative of a larger problem within Sistren. While they maintain a mandate to address the concerns of women and girls they themselves lack directing skills and so end up hiring other directors whose artistic visions dominate, and those directors happen to be primarily men. This is not to suggest that all Sistren work directed by men is suspect, rather to point out the contradiction between their mandate and their working methodology. An example of this from my fieldwork includes many things I saw during the Adolescent Motivation Programme rehearsals which, in terms of gender politics, really needed to be interrogated but weren’t because they emanated from the director himself and no one else – i.e. someone invested in a gender critique – was

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<sup>121</sup> While there have been numerous men involved in Sistren activities in various capacities over the years,

watching the rehearsal.<sup>122</sup> The recent deferral to male artistic vision represents a real hole in their goals. This is not to say that they can't work at all with men, but rather that if the guiding principle of their work is a focus on women and gender issues, they certainly cannot give up artistic control of their work to men, unless, of course, these men are similarly invested in revealing the oppressions of women in Jamaican society. Part of the reason for hiring so many male directors – I have been told by many including those not involved in *Sistren* – is that there just aren't many qualified female directors.<sup>123</sup> While this may be true, the consequences for *Sistren* still remain problematic and counterproductive.

### **POPULAR THEATRE IN PERSPECTIVE IN JAMAICA**

Unlike the highly charged elections of 1980 which have left concrete walls in downtown Kingston stained with warnings like “JLP enter only,” or “PNP enter at your own risk,” a 1994 poll showed “no less than 45% of respondents uncommitted to either [political] party.”<sup>124</sup> Such a political environment provides a much changed context for popular theatre work generally not just for *Sistren*'s work specifically. Started in 1981, the Graduate Theatre Company, later to be called Groundwork Theatre Company, was a popular theatre company that was founded as an outreach arm of the School of Drama.

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this was the first man to become a performing member of *Sistren*.

<sup>122</sup> I did feel that this once again was an example of how my own ideas of harassment, exploitation etc., were not in sync with what would be considered such in Jamaican society. Because I did not want to interfere artistically, I did not point out the things that seemed to me egregious in terms of an utter lack of gender critique.

<sup>123</sup> For an interesting retort for this sort of argument see Ellen Donkin, “Black Text, White Director: Issues of Race and Gender in Directing African-American Drama” in *Upstaging Big Daddy: Directing Theatre as if Gender and Race Matter*, Ellen Donkin and Susan Clement, eds., (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 79-87.

The company's visionary, Dennis Scott, then director of the School of Drama, "envisioned a Popular Theatre movement which would focus on the development of rural communities thereby promoting some of the aims of the Jamaican School of Drama. Its [Groundwork Theatre Company] main focus is the empowerment of youth . . . Through the use of community drama methodology GTC facilitates the identification, exploration and discussion of community concerns initiated by community members."<sup>125</sup> Many of the individuals who had been involved with Sistren in a resource capacity also worked with Groundwork, including Honor Ford-Smith, Owen Ellis and Eugene Williams. But the GTC ceased to exist in the early 1990s because funding was no longer available.

Other indications that interest in the strategies and ideology of popular theatre are on the decline include the demise of both the Caribbean Popular Theatre Exchange (CPTE) and the Jamaica School of Drama's degree program in community drama. In 1985, Sistren and many other Caribbean popular theatre companies gathered for a conference to share ideas and collaboratively create theatre. Although the CPTE was hailed as a huge success and Ford Smith noted that it was "a particularly significant event in our development," the conference was never re-created. During my research I attempted to contact several of these regional popular theatre companies; most of them never responded to my queries and those that did indicated that they were effectively defunct.<sup>126</sup> The School of Drama used to offer a full degree program (three years) in

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<sup>124</sup> Payne, 144.

<sup>125</sup> Groundwork Theatre Company pamphlet, located in the archives of the Association for Development Agencies, Kingston, Jamaica.

<sup>126</sup> I have since met several people from St. Lucia, who have been involved with popular theatre at the Folk Research Center there. However, as a popular theatre organization there is little remaining in the region.

community drama; now that program has been reduced to one course. I had a conversation with Eugene Williams, head of the Drama Division, about this course and the changes that he sees taking place within community-based drama in Jamaica:

SG: From what you have said to me so far, you seem to believe that the idea of community based drama is something that has died out. Do you think that is true? Do you think there is still a place for community-based theatre?

EW: I think that there is a place and that's why it's [the course in community drama] there. You have to fight for that place though.

SG: Where is that place? What kind of community based drama do you think there is room for?

EW: The school created a company, a school graduate theatre company, which later became Groundwork Theatre Company, with a similar kind of source as Sistren, but was staffed by graduates. That company no longer exists. It ran into the same problems. Funding, getting work done and so on, that company went into communities and did community drama, it was an extension of the school's program. What we were being taught was being practiced out there. Whereas in the early years students went into the communities all afire and passion for using the arts, there came a time when they just wanted to act and didn't care anymore about poor people, people in the community and the kind of intellectual stress, the stress of initiating . . . just gave up after a while. One, because the passion was not

as great, not as young. Two because the money was reduced. Three of course, because people in the communities themselves were becoming, that sense of community was being eroded again by the cultural intervention from outside. So even the things that they had that you're going to say is valuable and so on they were losing that sense of value and wanting something to come from outside.

SG: So what you are saying is that the problem with community drama is that there's no sense of community anymore?

EW: That's what I am saying. I'm saying that with a sort of intellectual distance, because I had not been included for years. I am holding onto the course in the school because I know of its value from the past and also because . . . you have people working in communities, financing, corporate people who are working in development in the community that would finance the program that are recognizing that one way the company would sell more goods is if they work with families and if put some money helping children, families develop better parenting skills . . . and drama can be sold to them as a good device.

SG: So it's drama as propaganda? Or as part of consumerism and capitalism.

EW: Exactly. So, here I am sitting as director of the school saying, "That's a way for the school to make some money!" So that's where we're at. I still feel that there's value in the community drama program and keeping

it. Just haven't quite figured how to use it in this new era. I am the person to change it from three years to just a semester because the students are not interested, it's just not viable for what they're going out to do and because the programs have developed to the extent that they have many more courses than they used to and the whole thing is structured much more like an American university. America is the current empire."<sup>127</sup>

Williams' comments point to the struggle between sustaining a theatrical practice in a social and political environment that is not conducive or receptive, on a large scale, to that work. He also admits his own necessary reorientation towards profit; the community drama program is useful in that funders are attracted to such programs and such programs might bring needed dollars into the school. Williams "works" the system. Interestingly, Afolashade, in my interview with her, suggested that Sistren take advantage, in a similar way, of capitalism. She suggested doing workshops for businesses and then using those profits to create community-based projects in the ghettos.

Despite the demise of many other popular theatre companies in the region, Sistren has survived, regardless of how its status or function as a political theatre company has changed. Lana Finikin attributed Sistren's survival to its unique commitment to women's issues: "The issues that Sistren was dealing with was a particular issue, it was women's issues, and the rest of popular theatre was dealing with issues that were common issues. Sistren Theatre Collective were dealing with issues that were gender issues that were

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<sup>127</sup> Interview with author, March 1996.

women's issues and because of that we were able to stay around 18 years."<sup>128</sup> Perhaps part of that sustainability is also attributable to the developed world's continued interest in women's issues; we continue to be willing to fund projects with women-focused goals and are interested in inviting a theatre company that addresses these issues to conferences and other events.

## TOWARDS A CONCLUSION

Overall, it seems that the Jamaican government has made the choice – perhaps not a self-determined one, but one geared towards survival – to ally itself, economically and ideologically with America. Even when the PNP was victorious in 1989 and Michael Manley came back into power, this alliance was sustained.<sup>129</sup> As Anthony Payne has noted, the “new” Manley “appeared to have eschewed the language of socialism for that of moderation and the market.”<sup>130</sup> Certainly, as Payne continues, it is difficult to know with certainty whether or not, or the extent to which, Manley's ideological beliefs changed. “The ‘new Manley’ focused Jamaican foreign policy on Washington.”<sup>131</sup> The implications of this policy have far-reaching consequences, beyond simple political alliances. Jamaica, Payne says, has made the choice,

to align itself firmly with all that is going on economically and politically  
in the Americas. This road of development inevitably has far-reaching

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<sup>128</sup> Interview with author, March 1996.

<sup>129</sup> Michael Manley continued to lead the PNP party until 1992 when he resigned and P.J. Patterson replaced him as Prime Minister.

<sup>130</sup> Payne, 120.

implications for the economy, society and polity of Jamaica . . . It is important, though, to note that *the choice that has been made also has a cultural consequence*. Jamaican's unique national identity will be threatened, certainly changed, by all the attendant consequences of deepening Americanization. This does not have to mean that cricket will be replaced in the affections of Jamaicans by baseball, but it cannot but call into question the distinctiveness of things Jamaican which has been such an appealing feature of the development of this island society over the last 30 years.<sup>132</sup>

Perhaps the fate of the Marleys and reggae music exemplifies what is to become of Jamaican popular culture. Maybe not. Stuart Hall has noted, "Even under hegemonic conditions there can be no total incorporation or absorption of the subordinate classes."<sup>133</sup> While American commercialism seems to absorb Jamaican self-definition as exemplified by the Marleys, such a process always contains cracks or leaks. It is in this potential space created by ideological leakage that resistant practices can achieve potency. Right now it seems to be a matter of whether or not popular theatre generally, and Sistren specifically, can find a way to inhabit these spaces.

## EPILOGUE

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<sup>131</sup> Payne, 203.

<sup>132</sup> Payne, 213. Italics mine.

<sup>133</sup> Hall, 333.

About a year after my field work in Jamaica, I heard that one their main funders, a Canadian organization called InterPares, had chosen to sever its funding relationship with Sistren. While they wanted to retain some sort of relationship with Sistren, they felt that despite many years' worth of patience, Sistren continued to be unable to successfully reach the goals it set for itself and could give no reason for these failures at meetings with a representative from the funding agency. The company, of course had to restructure itself in order to accommodate the smaller budget. I do not know exactly how this was done, but I do know that they dismissed many people; I received a letter from Bev Hanson, one of the founding members of Sistren telling me that she had recently emigrated to the US. Her daughters had been living in Brooklyn for many years so she finally joined them, because she had been told by Sistren that her services would no longer be needed. Despite this, she remains in contact with Sistren and recently told me that they were working on a new major production. I do not know if the AMP program survived; there is a good deal of opportunity currently to secure money for projects aimed at youth in developing countries. As a matter of fact, while I was in Jamaica I attended a meeting with two representatives from a wealthy American philanthropy that "needed " to find a project to support. The project had to be one which served young adolescents and children. The meeting was attended by Sistren and another development organization representative. I do not know if they were able to secure fund for the project from this organization, but the meeting illustrated to me the ways in which an organization must truly market itself based on the "needs" of international funders, and frequently, how little the funder's "needs" may coincide with the community's genuine

needs. How such circumstances bode for the survival of popular theatre remains to be seen.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### BEYOND BOAL: THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED IN NORTH AMERICA

In 1991, by chance, I participated in a series of workshops with Augusto Boal in New York City at the Brecht Forum. His ideas, and his understanding and use of theatre seemed to me at the time to be the missing puzzle piece in my own pursuits. Up to that point I had been pursuing seemingly separate interests in political theatre – particularly feminist theatre – and educational/therapeutic theatre. I was immediately entranced by Boal’s work and words and knew that this workshop – advertised as “theatre for empowerment” – was a singularly important event in my life. From that moment on, Boal’s thinking about theatre and the realization of his theories have provided the common thread for my subsequent academic and practical theatre pursuits.

I share this personal information not only to place myself within this discussion of his work, but also because my own sentiments and reactions are ones that have been articulated to me numerous times by others who have taken his workshops; many describe Boal’s workshops as stunning realizations. Since that initial workshop in 1991 I have heard Boal speak numerous times about his work; I have worked with a community arts theatre company on a Boal-based theatre project; created and performed in numerous forum theatre events; directed a Boal-based teen performance troupe; and participated in one of the Theatre of the Oppressed festivals. In the process of this research I have also

had the opportunity to speak with many people about their own work with Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) techniques. Of those I spoke with, some are very experienced with TO techniques and have been using them for many years, others have only recently encountered them and are slowly integrating them in small ways into their work. Some of those I spoke with are theatre professionals, others are primarily educators. Some currently use the techniques of TO, others have done so in the past and now have either moved on, or continue to use some of the techniques but do not see TO as their primary work. Some of those I interviewed wanted to remain anonymous on certain issues, others did not.

In the introduction to Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy, Activism, editors Mady Schutzman and Jan Cohen-Cruz note, “As TO traverses continents and collides with different cultural values, political systems, and personal ideals, we as TO practitioners must negotiate the consequences.”<sup>1</sup> It is precisely this negotiation and these consequences with which this chapter will grapple. In addition to looking at the strategies and adaptations developed by TO practitioners I also want to interrogate the ways in which these necessarily change the politics of the work and its role in cultural struggles. My research is not meant to be solely a series of case studies, although I will rely on examples from various cases to support my points.<sup>2</sup> In keeping with many of the questions I have posed in earlier chapters of this dissertation, I am interested in

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<sup>1</sup> 14.

<sup>2</sup> Case studies of Boal-based projects can be found in Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy, Activism, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), and the special issue of Contemporary Theatre Review, Frances Babbage ed., 1995.

investigating the ways in which Boal's style of popular theatre has been adopted and adapted as a tool for political and cultural intervention in North America. How do the different structures of power in this new context inflect and change the theatrical practice, the meanings it generates and its ability to be a site for expressions of cultural and political resistance? The dynamics of TO's relocation differs from the case of Sistren Theatre Collective discussed in the previous chapter. While Sistren's goals and methods remained much the same as it was relocated, Boal's techniques have been adapted – both by Boal himself and by others – in each new context. However, such changes raise a new set of questions for relocated popular theatre techniques. How have these adaptations shaped the use-value and political function of TO? What can such an investigation reveal about the relevance and efficacy of theatre, generally, and popular theatre, specifically, as a tool for cultural intervention at this historical moment?

This chapter will investigate TO's encounters with North America and North American practitioners in an effort to explore the ways in which the politics and social function of TO shifts as it is practiced in different contexts. Do the dynamics of empowerment change for different audiences? How successful have adaptations of Boal's work been in bridging these contextual gaps and differences? What are the greatest challenges practitioners have encountered in their efforts to bridge these gaps? The overarching question that haunts all of these investigations is, What has it meant for Boal's practice to be relocated to a context with very different power structures and divergent understandings of community, oppression and empowerment?

In order to begin addressing these questions I will provide illustrations of the major issues relevant to TO's adaptation in North America, from my own experiences and from experiences others have shared with me during my research. This research could not be comprehensive; there have been far too many permutations of TO work to include the repercussions and consequences of them all here. Rather, I will explore the major concerns that have emerged as TO has traveled to and through North America and suggest some of the directions that future investigations – by both scholars and practitioners – can go. While I will rely on retellings of the various contexts in which the work has been used, my goal is to stretch beyond this, using illustrative examples to flesh out and explore more general theoretical questions.

What I want to refrain from doing throughout this exploration is establishing an evaluation binary which would suggest that the ultimate question being asked is whether or not TO is a useful pedagogical, theatrical and political process in North America. The mere fact that so many people are using the techniques is evidence enough that it is. Rather, I am interested in exploring translation challenges and adaptive strategies to see what can be learned about its role in various cultural struggles. In chapter one, I noted my interest in defining popular theatre as a “site for cultural intervention which has the potential to disrupt hegemonic political and social structures.” To what extent is the practice of TO in North America such a practice?

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF BOAL'S THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED**

Boal's most influential theoretical work, Theatre of the Oppressed (1974 in Spanish, 1979 translated into English) pays titular homage to Freire's seminal text, Pedagogy of The Oppressed (1970). The popular theatre techniques developed by Augusto Boal through his work in Latin America in the 1960s and early 70s and the theoretical principles on which they are based have influenced theatre artists and educators around the world.<sup>3</sup> Boal's "arsenal" of the Theatre of the Oppressed as he terms it, aims to "dynamize" the traditional theatre audience in an effort to transform spectators into "spect-actors," who become active subjects in the theatre rather than passive observers, and thereby rehearse action to effect change in their lives and communities. Boal's theory follows that if the spect-actors rehearse active resistance to oppression in the theatre they will become empowered to take this action in their lives; the theatre is a rehearsal for the revolution. This idea of active participation in securing one's own liberation provides a theatrical parallel to Freire's pedagogical theories.

Boal's techniques were originally developed while he was living and working under a military regime in Brazil that was growing ever more repressive. The techniques were further developed during his stays in Peru and Argentina. The techniques, which were designed to combat the oppression citizens were experiencing, were based on a presumption of collective oppression. He notes that in Latin America he tended to work with groups from similar communities on problems confronting them as members of that community. The audiences were generally homogeneous, says Boal, "always being the

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<sup>3</sup> Evidence of this can be seen both by diverse representation at the many Theatre of the Oppressed festivals and in the writings by popular theatre workers across the globe who note the influence of Boal's

workers from one factory, the residents of a particular neighborhood, the congregation of a church, the students of a university, etc.”<sup>4</sup> One of the most enduring inventions from this period has been forum theatre. In forum theatre a scenario is presented which “must contain at the very least one political or social error, which will be analysed during the forum session.”<sup>5</sup> The scene is presented once in its entirety for the spect-actors at which point they are asked if they agree with the solution put forth by the protagonist. The scene is presented again, except this time, any spect-actor may stop the action, replace the protagonist and then try to combat the forces of oppression and secure a different outcome. However, all of the other actors in the scene continue to play their original roles as agents of oppression. As Boal says, the “game is spect-actors – trying to find a new solution, trying to change the world – against actors – trying to hold them back, to force them to accept the world as it is.”<sup>6</sup> This struggle makes forum theatre a pedagogical exercise in which the spect-actors learn about the nature of oppression and the difficulty of changing the world but also of the “possible tactics and strategies of the oppressed.”<sup>7</sup>

When he left Latin America in the mid 1970s to move to Europe, Boal thought he was also going to leave Theatre of the Oppressed behind him; what would he need it for, after all, in a democratic world that knew nothing of military oppression? But when he discovered how high suicide and depression rates were in this new location, he knew that

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work and writings. Virtually all of the popular theatre workers discussed in chapter one have noted Boal's influence on their work.

<sup>4</sup> *Games For Actor and Non-Actors*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 18.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-19. Also see this book for further more detailed instructions on forum theatre.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

these people, too, must be suffering from oppression. “If a person prefers to die she must be suffering terribly. The oppression is different but the death is just as final. So I started caring more about internal oppression.”<sup>8</sup> To deal with the oppression of these new spectators he developed his “cop-in-the-head” technique, which focuses on revealing and analyzing internalized oppressions. This technique aims to confront not the cop on the street with the machine gun, but the one that exists inside an individual’s head and controls her behavior and happiness. As Boal says: “The cops are in their heads but the headquarters of these cops are in external reality. It is necessary to locate both the cops and the headquarters.”<sup>9</sup> “The Rainbow of Desire” has come to be the name for all those techniques that focus on internalized oppressions and explore the conflicting forces which impinge on both our desires and decisions. Adrian Jackson, translator of Boal’s recent writings has noted,

Boal’s transplantation to the West brought him into contact, particularly in his workshops, with people who found it less easy than peasant and worker groups he had worked with in Brazil and other Latin American countries to synthesize their experience of the world into the sort of Manichaeian equation suggested by the terms ‘oppressor’ and ‘oppressed’; this confrontation – and the resulting proposition by groups of ‘emptiness,’ ‘fear’ and the like as fit ‘oppressions’ to treat with this work –

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<sup>8</sup> As quoted by Jan Cohen-Cruz in, “Boal at NYU: A Workshop and its Aftermath,” *The Drama Review*, 34(3) Fall, 1990, 44.

<sup>9</sup> “The Cop-in-the Head: Three Hypotheses,” *The Drama Review*, 34(3), Fall, 1990, 35.

led directly to the invention or discovery of the Cop in the head/Rainbow of Desire techniques.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover in this North American context many practitioners have articulated their use of TO as a way to expose the machinations of power – rather than using the terms oppressor and oppressed – aware that in our culture it can circulate in forms we do not refer to as oppression. If this is the case, are the techniques of TO adequate to explore and expose such a web of power and influence, rather than the one-way oppressed/oppressor structure in which it was originally designed to work? Canadian TO practitioner Lib Spry raises similar concerns: “The traditional TO structure allows power-over to dominate all the relationships we present . . . Are there ways of adapting this structure so that people who have mutual needs, but are defined as mutual antagonists, can understand each other and become allies of one kind or another?”<sup>11</sup> Spry has no answers here, but rather notes that this is the direction in which she wishes to take her work.

Boal himself has changed and adapted his own theatrical practice with each of his contextual shifts, although each successive development in TO has built on previous techniques. Adrian Jackson notes, “This rewriting of techniques is a cumulative process, an aggregation not a canceling out; Boal still respects and uses all of the earlier techniques.”<sup>12</sup> His most recent experiment, Legislative Theatre, has perhaps melded theatre and politics more explicitly than any of his previous work. In his most recent book, Boal describes how he was elected *vereador* (member of parliament) for Rio de Janeiro’s

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<sup>10</sup> *Rainbow of Desire*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), xviii.

<sup>11</sup> *Playing Boal*, 183.

equivalent of a city council in 1992. This new experiment gave him – and the members of his TO troupe whom he hired as advisors – the opportunity to “make theatre as politics, instead of simply making political theatre” as before.<sup>13</sup> Legislative Theatre uses the tools of TO, particularly forum theatre, to allow citizens to suggest laws they would like to see enacted. During his tenure, 50 laws were proposed through this process and 13 approved.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, Boal and his troupe established several satellite groups – he has calls them Theatre of the Oppressed nuclei – throughout the city of Rio, that incorporate TO techniques into their work. Although Boal was not re-elected in the next (1996) election, he continues doing similar work which he calls “legislative theatre without the legislator.”<sup>15</sup>

Because Boal has been giving workshops in the use of TO techniques for more than a decade, its use among educators, theatre practitioners, mental health workers and community workers throughout the world has proliferated. He has also founded centers for his work in Paris and Rio.<sup>16</sup> In addition, several other Theatre of the Oppressed centers, founded and run by practitioners who have worked with Boal, currently exist in cities across the globe.<sup>17</sup> Along with TO’s proliferation, however, has come a critique of the practice. Issues that concern practitioners and academics include the cultural

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<sup>12</sup> *Rainbow of Desire*, xix.

<sup>13</sup> *Legislative Theatre*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 15.

<sup>14</sup> A list of these appears *Legislative Theatre*.

<sup>15</sup> *Legislative Theatre*, 113.

<sup>16</sup> Many North American TO practitioners traveled to Paris to study with Boal at his center there in the early 80s.

<sup>17</sup> In the US, there is a Center for Theatre of the Oppressed in Omaha, and a Theatre of the Oppressed Laboratory in New York City run out of the Brecht Forum. Many other companies do TO work, even primarily, but simply don’t call themselves TO centers.

specificity of the work, its emphasis on the universality of individual experiences, its implicit presumption of similar experience which tends to elide differences amongst participants, its use of the body as the site of created meaning, and the power position of the workshop facilitator. The essays that appear in the anthology, Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy, Activism (1994), and the special issue of Contemporary Theatre Review (1995), “Working Without Boal: Digressions and Developments in the Theatre of the Oppressed,” engage with several of these issues as they pertain to the writers’ own work and experiences with Theatre of the Oppressed.

Of particular interest for my project are the issues raised by Mady Schutzman in her article, “Brechtian Shaman: The Political Therapy of Augusto Boal.”<sup>18</sup> Schutzman begins a discussion of the difficulties involved in “transpos[ing] a ‘third-world’ aesthetic of resistance to a ‘first world’ aesthetic of self-help.”<sup>19</sup> She points to the essential discrepancies in Boal’s practice in Latin America and its adoption and adaptation in the US: “Not only are we dealing here with a significant time lapse (1960s to 1990s) but with the asymmetric power politics that marks the change in context from Latin America to North America and Europe.”<sup>20</sup> I am interested in continuing and extending this discussion by looking at the ways in which contemporary North American TO practitioners have attempted to bridge these contextual gaps.

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<sup>18</sup> In Playing Boal.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

Despite the critique that has been generated, Boal's techniques and ideas continue to influence theatre practitioners, community activists and others.<sup>21</sup> Many current TO practitioners have found solutions to the techniques' various problems in adaptations that suit their own needs and constituencies. The recent Festival of the Theatre of the Oppressed, *The Ripple Effect*, held in Toronto in June 1997, evidenced the widespread influence of Boal's work internationally. The festival included the work of theatre companies from more than a dozen countries all over the world.<sup>22</sup> Most of these have adapted Boal's forum theatre style as a means for confronting and resolving conflicts within their communities. The festival also reflected the ways in which these practitioners view Boal's influence; many spoke of TO as a philosophy rather than a rule book, suggesting one need not heed all of Boal's techniques to be within the spirit of TO. Rather than viewing TO as a totalizing system, they see it as a tool box filled with versatile materials for activists; they chose to use only those which will be helpful to their project. Boal himself encourages this idea and sees the inherent need for specific contextual adaptations: "In each country, people have to adapt the method to their own culture, their own language, their own desires and needs. TO is not a Bible, nor a recipe book: it is a method to be used by people, and the people are more important than the

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<sup>21</sup> Very little critique of Boal's work has been negative. Most of it – such as the essays in *Playing Boal* – has pointed to various problematic elements that need to be negotiated. One of the few exceptions is Eleanor Crowder's article, "Manitoulin Island: Lessons From the Rainbow Circle," *Canadian Theatre Review*, 74, Spring 1993.

<sup>22</sup> Most of the festival delegates were from North America, Europe and Brazil. Because of the cost of attending such a festival, there was little representation from poorer areas of the world. There was, however, a small contingent from the Caribbean, representing St. Lucia and Barbados. Sistren did not attend, although I did see Honor Ford-Smith, who now lives in Toronto, in attendance.

method.”<sup>23</sup> Certainly Boal makes an important point here, however, I think such comments also veil the techniques in a false sense of infinite mutability which precludes critics from suggesting that, on the contrary, TO has certain basic structures that may be more applicable for some contexts than others.

### **PROBLEMITIZING THE ROLE OF THE JOKER/FACILITATOR<sup>24</sup>**

As the TO techniques developed by Boal detach themselves from the man himself and are taken up by others, one of the foremost issues for consideration is the role of the joker or facilitator. As the editors of Playing Boal note in the introduction, the proliferating use of TO techniques places future debate and discussion of TO not in Boal's hands but the hands of its practitioners: “The techniques are growing beyond the man, the power politics beyond the techniques. While Boal continues to inspire public audiences and workshop participants in some thirty countries worldwide, much of the ongoing debate and resolution of these tensions now lie in new hands.”<sup>25</sup> Virtually everyone I spoke with during my research remarked on Boal's charisma, kindness, gentleness; are these necessary traits for a successful TO practitioner? To what extent has Boal's own persona been attached to the techniques' success? Moreover, because of their attachment to the man himself, the position of the facilitator within TO has gone

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<sup>23</sup> Legislative Theatre, 120.

<sup>24</sup> While some practitioners use the term “joker,” others prefer “facilitator” to connote the person orchestrating the TO workshop or event. I prefer the latter term and will henceforth use that descriptor; anytime I use the term “joker” I do so because the person whose work I am speaking of has used that term.

<sup>25</sup> Playing Boal, 5.

relatively undertheorized in critical work about the techniques – much scholarship has remained either project summaries, or interrogations of ones' own work.<sup>26</sup>

What has become clear to me in both my academic and practical research is that TO work – its efficacy and ideological integrity – is inherently and unavoidably linked to the project's facilitator, whether or not that facilitator is Boal himself. This fact of course gives a tremendous amount of power within TO work to the facilitator. Because TO, like all popular theatre, strives to be a radical, democratizing process, the facilitator's negotiations of that power will influence the work in fundamental structural ways. Moreover, because TO is ultimately a technique for interrogating power and its dynamics, the way in which the power positions within the workshop are handled will have sweeping consequences for the workshop as a whole. How, for example, is a workshop on racism affected if none of the facilitators are persons of color? In addition, Simon Malbogot, Artistic Director of Mixed Company in Toronto, has noted that whatever oppressions and power structures exist outside of a TO workshop will inevitably exist within it, to believe otherwise is to create a false sense of equality and democracy.<sup>27</sup> However, at times, in working with TO, it is difficult to determine whether some problematic power relationships emanate from the techniques or the participants.

In the introduction to Boal's book, Rainbow of Desire, translator Jackson notes, "The joker is (in Boal-speak) a 'difficultator,' undermining easy judgments, reinforcing

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<sup>26</sup> Mady Schutzman's article in Playing Boal is a notable exception, and has been a catalyst for much of my own thinking on all of these issues. My goal was to make my work in this chapter the next step in the kind of thinking she suggests.

<sup>27</sup> Malbogot made these comments during the Ripple Effect festival.

our grasp of the complexity of a situation, but not letting that complexity get in the way of action or frighten us into submission or inactivity.”<sup>28</sup> Jackson also notes that part of the joker’s job in TO is to help spect-actors move from understanding the phenomenon that individual stories describe to the societal “law” that explains all similar phenomena; a process Boal calls *ascesis*.<sup>29</sup> “This process of ascesis is one of the tasks of the Joker in a Forum Theatre session,” making the joker an interpreter of sorts and imbuing him with an incontrovertible amount of power.

Similar issues of power – who wields it, how it is wielded and how this affects the creative process and subsequent performances – haunt much late 20<sup>th</sup> century theatre.<sup>30</sup> Twentieth century western theatre has often been called a “director’s theatre,” contrasting the greatest source of power within the creative process with previous theatrical eras.<sup>31</sup> Certainly parallels can be made between a TO facilitator and a theatre director in terms of such structural power. How, then, is TO work, and TO workers – many of whom have worked, and/or continue to work, as theatre directors – affected by such structures? In her discussion of the complex implications and negotiations of a white director directing

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<sup>28</sup> xix-xx.

<sup>29</sup> See *Rainbow of Desire*, 26.

<sup>30</sup> Much avant-garde and feminist theatre of the 1960s and 1970s developed as reactions to the traditional director-centered structure. Many companies experimented with collective creation and actor-centered work. See for example, Mark Weinberg, *Challenging the Hierarchy: Collective Theatre in the US*, (New York: Greenwood Press 1992); Charlotte Canning, *Feminist Theatres in the USA: Staging Women’s Experience*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>31</sup> For a discussion on the development of the contemporary theatre director see *Directors on Directing*, Toby Cole and Helen Crich Chinoy, eds. (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc, 1976); *In Contact With the Gods?: Directors Talk Theatre*, Maria Delgado and Paul Heritage, eds. (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996). For various discussions on the ways in which directors infuse a production with their own ideology see the essays in *Upstaging Bid Daddy: Directing as If Race and Gender Matter* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).

a text by an African-American author, Ellen Donkin has made the following related comments:

To begin with the model of director as ‘interpreter’ of the text is full of the kinds of bogus neutralities and veiled authority that feminists have been exposing in literature and literary criticism for the past twenty years. In the instance of a white director working on an African-American play text the real functions of the position of director become even more blatantly exposed as a form of colonialism. I call it the Stanley/Livingston syndrome: the true job of the director is to come into the dark continent of the text and bring civilization . . . If, as white director, I understand the play as a landscape and enter it as pliant territory to be shaped, I will have bracketed the indigenous voices, replaced those voices with my own.<sup>32</sup>

As Donkin has noted, the director’s negotiation of her own power has enormous repercussions on the ideological underpinnings of the performance. I would suggest that a similar dynamic exists in any TO work. The facilitator’s own attitude towards her authority and the community with which she is working impact the work in multiple ways. The model of TO facilitator as just that, a facilitator – or a “difficultator” – similarly masks her interpretive power and authority within the process of TO. Her negotiation of her own power and authority have specific outcomes which impact both the creative process and the participants’ relationship to that process. In chapter one, I

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<sup>32</sup> Upstaging Big Daddy: Directing Theatre as if Gender and Race Matter, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 81.

noted that Ross Kidd made a similar assessment of his and Martin Byram's roles as the facilitators of the Laedza Batanani festival in Botswana. This critique pointed to the ways in which their negotiations of their own power within the popular theatre process ultimately affected its efficacy as a tool for communal empowerment.

Annie Smith's MA thesis, "Forum Theatre and the Role of the Joker," makes a major contribution to investigations of the role of TO facilitator.<sup>33</sup> Smith, whose work is the result of interviews with twelve Canadian TO jokers, facilitated a discussion between several of her interviewees at the recent Ripple Effect festival, which I will comment on below. Much of her work focuses on the facilitators' perspective of their own work, rather than the ways in which their facilitation effects the workshop participants and spect-actors. Smith's work also refrains from critiquing the facilitators and takes a more journalistic approach which instead reports on their work as directors. Her work is extremely useful, but I would like to go a step further and ask some unpopular questions. To what extent can TO techniques be a vehicle for the sort of "cultural colonialism" Donkin speaks of, in which the facilitators' are positioned as the problem solvers or "civilizers" of a community to which they do not belong but with whom they work? How have facilitators strategically avoided this outcome? A few examples of how practitioners have either adapted the role of joker/facilitator or reconfigured the way this person negotiates her authority will provide some possibilities.

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<sup>33</sup> Annie Smith, "Forum Theatre and the Role of the Joker: Social Activist, Educator, Therapist, Director: The Changing Perspectives of Canadian Jokers," Masters Thesis, University of Alberta, 1996.

Boal has described the joker as someone “who is a contemporary and neighbor of the spectator,” although not necessarily of member of her community.<sup>34</sup> This “neighbor” of the spect-actors facilitates the audience’s interventions in the action of a forum theatre event. Pregones Theatre Company’s adaptation of Boal’s work includes re-envisioning the joker’s relationship to the audience and the other performers. Pregones Theatre, founded in 1979 and based in the South Bronx is dedicated “to creating and performing innovative and challenging theatre rooted in Puerto Rican traditions and popular artistic expressions.”<sup>35</sup> In 1987, after working with Boal, Pregones Theatre began using Theatre of the Oppressed techniques for AIDS education work in New York City. Jorge Merced, associate artistic director of Pregones notes that in 1987, little was being said by Latino artists about the AIDS epidemic.<sup>36</sup> At that time, he was approached by the Hispanic AIDS Forum for help in raising awareness and educating the Latino community about AIDS. From that first meeting, Merced said, stories that formed the basis of their first forum theatre performance emerged. Demand for this work grew at a rapid rate and Pregones continued working with the AIDS project until 1992 when virtually all their resources threatened to become subsumed by it.

In talking about his work with Boal’s techniques Merced discussed adaptations designed specifically for Pregones’ audiences, including a radical alteration of the role of the joker. In Pregones’ performances, the joker took on a much more theatrical persona

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<sup>34</sup> *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 175. Being a “neighbor” of the spectator is not necessarily equivalent to being a member of the same community.

<sup>35</sup> Pregones Press information.

<sup>36</sup> All of Merced’s comments were made in a Interview with author on December 9, 1998.

and function than Boal's "neighbor" intends. The actor playing the role of the joker, rather than try to be an "invisible" mediator between audience and performers, entered the space in costume – all black with a black top hat – and carried a baton of bells which he could use to get the audience's attention. The joker also had a series of stylized movements; Merced noted that "the joker is a character, not an invisible facilitator."

Instead of waiting for audience interventions, the joker would walk amongst the audience and instigate responses with questions or his baton of bells. For example, Merced said that if an audience member so much as sighed, laughed or grunted, the joker would yell freeze and question the audience member about her response, prodding her to think of potential interventions. The actors were all trained to push the audience members to the limit in responding to their interventions. According to Merced, when Boal saw Pregones' adaptations, he reacted positively: "Boal was excited to see how we changed and adapted it to the issue itself and the audience and situation in which we had to perform it." Commenting on the use-value of TO, Merced noted, "Every community has the wisdom to solve its problems, TO is a technique that allows that to emerge, to unlock the wisdom."

At the Ripple Effect festival, Annie Smith facilitated a panel discussion called, "Naming the Structure," which included several TO facilitators. At that event one panelist noted that "working in a community is a dialogue." This initially struck me as a productive way to think of the work. He continued by saying that the facilitator is responsible for being true to what the community wants to communicate and then helping them do that. But surely a conversation has two participants and what each one says is

influenced by the other; what sort of impact does the facilitator's own subjectivity have on his perceptions and understanding of *what* the community *wants*? How does this then influence the issues that get addressed in a workshop and *how* they get addressed? How does his own presence and desire – accompanied by his power as the facilitator – inflect and influence the community's articulation of its own desires? And how is this problem exacerbated when a facilitator is on the outside of the community with which he is working? Many of these concerns echo those articulated by the popular theatre practitioners – i.e., Kidd, Mloma – discussed in chapter one, regarding the impact of the relationship between facilitators and participants on a project's efficacy. Little time was spent, on this panel and at the festival as a whole, interrogating these issues. While such work with a community is, at its best, a true dialogue as Freire imagined it to be, in order for it to be such, both the participants and the facilitators must be ready to learn. As Freire's famous saying goes, "I taught a peasant how to write the word 'plough' and he taught me how to use it."

The events of the two-day TO conference, scheduled as part of the Ripple Effect festival, illustrated the ways in which participants of TO work can be influenced by the structures established by the facilitators. With virtually no planned agenda on the first day of the conference, two festival delegates facilitated a TO-style session designed to allow participants to decide what issues they would like to focus on over the next two days. Within a short time, many participants began to complain about the oppression of

the structure that was being imposed by these two white male facilitators.<sup>37</sup> Several of the image theatre presentations that resulted from the session portrayed those oppressions and the participants' resulting disinterest in the remainder of the conference. After the lunch break barely half of the participants returned. The next morning only a handful of participants showed up and the remainder of the conference was canceled. Their own lack of control over the process dissipated enthusiasm and interest.

My own perspective on these events was sharply different from the majority. The two facilitators – both of whom were experienced TO facilitators – generated what I thought was a very open and provisional structure which invited participation and lent itself to suggesting ways to shape the next two days. It was then up to the rest of the participants to take the initiative to guide the direction of the discussions and activities. I found nothing manipulative in their design or leadership. At the time I was shocked and disappointed that so many TO practitioners gave up so easily instead of returning to the conference to negotiate an acceptable structure. But even my own discrepant perceptions taught me a lesson about the myriad ways in which the format of TO work – who is wielding what power and how – can effect the work that actually gets done.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> My doubt that this was the true source of people's discontent was enhanced by the fact that I, a white woman with a loud voice, stood up and tried to intervene by suggesting that we, the participants, reconfigure the direction of the conference beginning with a list of the issues that emerged from the images created in this first exercise. I kept a running list of these and at the end of the presentations read it aloud, and asked others for suggestions on how to proceed; how can we now take what we have articulated as the issues most important to us and use the next two days to address them? Someone suggested we break for lunch, think things through and then return to share our ideas. None of these issues were ever addressed and the conference spiraled to a close. Clearly, my disappointment was personal as well as professional.

<sup>38</sup> More than a year after this conference, in conversation with Simon Malbogot, it still remained unclear what had actually caused so much dissatisfaction at that event.

Another example of how the facilitator's understanding of what a community wants can shape the issues actually addressed occurred in a forum theatre performance on sexual harassment I produced and performed in as part of the University of Toronto's Sexuality Awareness Week in 1993. The insidious nature of the assumption of similar experience surfaced during the creation of the three scenarios that were presented. A creative team, composed of willing members of the community for which the forum is to be performed, under the guidance of a project facilitator, create scenes representative of their oppressions, which serve as the forum's anti-models. In this case, the facilitator limited the discussion of experiences to male threats of sexual violence until one member of the group said that as a lesbian, she felt most sexually harassed within the university community by the pressure to be involved in heterosexual "mating rituals," including fraternity parties and orientation games. To her, sexual harassment itself was defined in a way that was outside of the scope of the facilitator's focus.<sup>39</sup> It is interesting to note here that the facilitator was male and the other seven members of the creative team were female; the audience was also predominantly female. TO functions within a specific power structure that will inevitably effect the work; if oppressions such as racism, sexism and heterosexism exist, many TO facilitators have argued, then they also exist within the framework of TO. More specifically, I would argue, TO functions within the power structure established and enforced by the workshop facilitator.

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<sup>39</sup> In this performance, one of the three scenes presented dealt with the pressure exerted by women on other women to become involved in these "mating rituals." However had that particular woman not been present, I am certain the issue would have been ignored. To the facilitator's credit, once she articulated her desire, he was responsive and the group developed a scenario based on this theme.

TO can be a powerful tool for democratization, but what it will be able to accomplish is dependent on who is wielding that power. Ideally Boal's techniques, "transform theatre into a democratic arena."<sup>40</sup> But the techniques themselves cannot create democracy; rather the leader or facilitator can use the techniques as tools to create a more democratic arena. Or, the facilitator can use the techniques and still recreate a hierarchical structure in which he or she can pursue a particular ideological agenda. I would like to refer back to a comment made by popular theatre practitioner Penina Mlama, quoted in chapter one. She noted that the attitude of popular theatre workers towards both their work and the community with whom they are doing this work have a tremendous impact on both the efficacy of the work and its ability to realize its goals of empowerment. Schutzman's comment translates the implications this has for TO: "The tools of TO are extremely versatile and it is how they are used that will determine their value."<sup>41</sup>

### **WHO IS OPPRESSED HERE?**

While working in Latin America there was very little need for Boal to address personal and political problems separately; for much of the peasant population with whom Boal worked, personal problems were political problems. "Oppressed" and "oppressor" were discrete and clearly definable categories. The same is not as true of 1990's North America. Moreover, many practitioners have noted that the concept of

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<sup>40</sup> Games for Actor and Non-Actors, back cover.

oppression, generally, is confusing for many North American workshop attendees and few identify themselves as oppressed.<sup>42</sup> Some practitioners have chosen to partially resolve this problem linguistically by renaming their adaptation of the techniques; Seattle Public Theatre calls its TO work, “Theatre of Liberation,” David Diamond, Artistic Director of Headlines Theatre in Vancouver calls his work, “Theatre for Living.” Simon Malbogot noted that when he toured in Turkey with his adaptation of TO, Istanbul newspapers referred to it as Theatre of Provocation.<sup>43</sup>

Identification of “oppressor” and “oppressed” in North America in this post-modern moment when identity is supposedly fluid and shifting has become complicated. Moreover, occupation of oppressor and oppressed class positions are not static. An individual can occupy the position of oppressed in one situation explored by a community, but can then, in another situation become someone else's oppressor. Complicating matters further, in any given social structure – such as the family – the same individual can be both oppressor and oppressed at the same time. This unstable, spiral-like nature of power relations is noted by Michel Foucault: “Relations of power-knowledge are not static forms of distribution, they are ‘matrices of transformation.’”<sup>44</sup> A realization of this complexity emerges in TO work with heterogeneous communities. Too, these matrices of power inevitably change the nature of TO from its Latin American context. For example, Jorge Merced noted that in his AIDS education work within

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<sup>41</sup> *Playing Boal*, 144.

<sup>42</sup> See Lib Spry in *Playing Boal*.

<sup>43</sup> See below for a further description of Malbogot's adaptations. Mixed Company's tour took place in the Summer of 1998.

Latino communities, virtually everyone in a family scene might be identified as oppressed, each by different forces. Popular theatre worker Eleanor Crowder notes, “The logical structures of the method push audiences and players to conclusions about who holds power and how they use it to their advantage. In our context this analysis of power is always a web rather than a line. This means that we focus on the interactions of a group of people rather the conflict between one oppressor and one oppressed.”<sup>45</sup>

Given this web-like nature of the forces of power, showing people the nature of their own unwitting oppressive behavior has emerged as both an invaluable by-product and an inherent structural complication of TO work with heterogeneous North American communities. The most valuable aspect of Boal's work in this new context, according to Schutzman, is “the dramatic collision of [participants'] experiences of oppression with recognition of their oppressive class status.”<sup>46</sup>

Having people who occupy both oppressor and oppressed positions in the same workshop complicates the dynamics of TO as Boal originally designed it. What happens when a forum theatre piece is presented and someone who could more easily fill the role of oppressor volunteers to replace the protagonist and combat the oppressor? A few examples of the consequences of this will illustrate the new negotiations that must take place. Several practitioners have shared stories of incidents in which spect-actors in a forum performance have made requests to replace the oppressor – rather than the

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<sup>44</sup>Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 99.

<sup>45</sup> Eleanor Crowder, “Manitoulin Island: Lessons From the Rainbow Circle,” *Canadian Theatre Review*, 74, Spring 1993, 51.

<sup>46</sup> *Playing Boal*, 143.

oppressed, as is the traditional format of forum theatre – in what the facilitator thought was a clear-cut relationship of power and powerlessness. Marc Weinblatt, associate director of the Seattle Public Theatre (SPT) told me of one such incident in his work. Weinblatt has been using TO techniques in his work with SPT for the past seven years. Theatre of Liberation, as he calls it, “is for anyone interested in using the language of theatre for awareness and transformation.”<sup>47</sup> SPT does a variety of work which incorporates TO techniques; week-long issue-based workshops, monthly public performances with no script, training workshops, and a multicultural professional performance troupe that does forum-style theatre. The techniques are used to address a wide range of issues including racism, water quality, youth homelessness. While doing a forum performance on racism in a high school, a young skin-head raised his hand and wanted to replace the racist white character in the scene, the character that the performers had envisioned as the oppressor. Weinblatt asked the student – “You feel this person is oppressed?” – in order to affirm the structure of forum work. Indeed, he was oppressed, the student said, because he was denied his “First Amendment right” to express his racist ideas. The student replaced the racist character in the scene and released a slew of racial slurs. While, as Weinblatt notes, Boal traditionally only allows spect-actors to replace the protagonist – whoever has been identified as oppressed – in the scene, Weinblatt’s adaptation of the forum structure in this context had a productive outcome: “The school ended up having a real dialogue.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Seattle Public Theatre publicity flyer.

<sup>48</sup> Capitol Hill Times[Seattle], April 8, 1998, p.3

I participated in a forum theatre performance in which a similar intervention was requested. At the 1998 meeting of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education in San Antonio, Texas, Doug Paterson facilitated a workshop the first morning of the conference titled, “San Antonio, Homophobia and the Arts.” The workshop was meant to be a response to a series of political events which had occurred in San Antonio prior to the conference in which the Esperanza Center for Peace and Justice was denied funding from the City Council because of the homosexual content of some of its arts programs, including a gay and lesbian film festival. During that workshop the participants developed a forum theatre piece which they decided to continue working on over the period of the conference and to present at a later event in the conference, “Showdown on the Arts.” The scenario depicted the artistic director of the Esperanza Center as the protagonist – or, oppressed – and members of city council, the media and others as the antagonists – or oppressors – silencing and distorting the events and words of the Center. The artistic director of another local theatre company sympathetic to the plight of the center was also featured in the scene. This character was a potential ally, but in the scene, didn’t have enough strength to be supportive and help the protagonist fight the oppressors.

Half an hour before the “Showdown,” the forum actors gathered outside the main conference room and began calling together the spectators in the hallways. As in all forum theatre performances, the piece was performed once, and then the facilitator, Doug Paterson, invited the audience to think of ways to intervene in the scenario. When Paterson asked for interventions a man stepped forward immediately from the crowd

complaining, “That’s not the way it is.” Paterson encouraged him to replace the protagonist and enact his own solution. But he refused, told us that we had all of the facts wrong and said that he was Jack Finger. It took a few moments before we all realized that this man meant to say that he actually *was* Jack Finger, one of the members of the San Antonio City Council responsible for de-funding the arts center, *not* that he wanted to replace the Jack Finger-type character in the scene as Paterson initially thought. When we realized who he was, Paterson reiterated the rules of forum – that he must replace someone whom he feels is oppressed within the scene – and encouraged him to participate in a “theatricalized” dialogue, but he refused.<sup>49</sup> Paterson, who has founded the Center for Theatre of the Oppressed in Omaha, and has been working with TO techniques since 1991, later told me that that particular moment was one of the most uncomfortable ones he had experienced facilitating TO work. The difficulty in this case lies in the fact that not everyone agreed on the oppression; Finger felt that the City Council’s use of its power was justified, rather than oppressive. Can TO engage such diametrically opposed perspectives in a dialogue?

These two incidents, which represent major disruptions in both the structure of TO and in conventional understandings of oppression, point to the complexities of doing such work in a context which understands “oppression” in different ways and in which power operates, as Foucault notes, in complex matrices. The examples also suggest strategies for using TO productively to engage different communities in dialogue.

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<sup>49</sup> Later that afternoon, during the “Showdown” Finger took the opportunity we had denied him outside to preach his homophobic hatred. Since TO is based in dialogue, its limits become clear when dealing with an individual who clearly isn’t interested in engaging in dialogue.

Certainly the racist youth's slurs were shocking, but they also ripped wide open the ideological differences that existed within that community, and then allowed others to respond directly. At the same time this adaptation raises questions regarding the empowering potential of TO. Were the techniques used to help the skin-head feel empowered to express his racist ideas? Even if they weren't used in that manner in this case, is it possible that they might be used in such a fashion in the future? These examples also reveal ethical dilemmas and call into question the dynamic concept of "empowerment." Could TO could be used to reify and encourage oppression rather than interrogate it? What kind of work can be done, with what sorts of political implications, in the name of TO?<sup>50</sup>

## **DIFFERENCE AND SAMENESS**

As Boal's work moved from Latin America to Europe and North America and began to address more internalized oppressions it also confronted the difficulties of negotiating issues of experiential differences within a diverse group. Theatre of the Oppressed encourages spect-actors to recognize the similarities in their experiences and to express or create a collective idea or image of their oppression. Virtually every step in each of the techniques – forum theatre, cop-in-the-head – requires an audience member to "recognize" the protagonists' oppressors. While the stories explored in TO originate with

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<sup>50</sup> Certainly agit-prop theatre techniques have been co-opted by conservative forces at numerous moments in history to secure power. For one such example, see Diana Taylor's discussion of the military's "performances" of power during Argentina's Dirty War, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's Dirty War*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997).

an individual's experience, the dynamics of the techniques then move towards an exploration of the more general structures which cause the oppressions, again the process of *ascesis*. Even those techniques designed to target internalized oppressions function within this dynamic: "In the Rainbow of Desire as in Forum Theatre work, we work on the case of an individual, and from that individual case we extrapolate into the group present, and then sometimes, from that group into the larger society of which it is a microcosm or a fragment."<sup>51</sup> An issue that emerges from much writing about Boal is the fact that TO techniques were designed to work within homogeneous communities who all experienced oppression in similar ways.<sup>52</sup> Doug Paterson notes, "Forum works best when everyone in the audience has a direct stake in the issue performed."<sup>53</sup> What happens, then, when the power structures being examined are experienced in different ways by different spect-actors, or when members of a group have different amounts of power, some of which is used to oppress others within the same group? For example, how is a workshop exploring sexual harassment in the workplace affected by the participation of male and female employees who all have different amounts of power in their jobs? Even such a workshop with only female employees, all of whom have different status within the workplace, means working with a group who have different experiences and different resources. Does TO inherently elide these differences while seeking to focus on the commonality of the human experience, or are there successful adaptations that negotiate and deal with such difference? As Lib Spry asks, "Can we use

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<sup>51</sup> *Rainbow of Desire*, xx.

<sup>52</sup> See *Playing Boal*, and *TDR* 34(3), Fall, 1990. Especially see essays by Schutzman, Cohen-Cruz and Spry.

TO to understand, acknowledge, and accept differences between us, yet still find links that allow us to work together towards liberation?"<sup>54</sup> Salverson, Weinblatt and Merced have all described encounters with such differences and the strategies they have developed.

Julie Salverson's account of a TO workshop on racism that she facilitated in Vancouver in 1991 demonstrates one strategy for negotiating such issues of difference. Salverson is a Canadian theatre worker and popular educator who regularly uses Boal's techniques. In this particular workshop the group was made up of 28 people, half Caucasian and half Native people and people of color. Other than ethnicity, Salverson says that the group was diverse in terms of their politics, class and experience with anti-racism work. Salverson describes the problem: "As we hit the third day, the people of color became more and more uncomfortable and expressed difficulty exploring their own oppression in front of or with a white group they barely knew. It was extremely painful for them to physicalize experiences of oppression before people that did not share that oppression."<sup>55</sup> The facilitators' solution in this case was to split the group in half – theoretically reinstating homogeneity and safety within the smaller groups – and allow each to discuss issues of racism from their own perspectives. The facilitators' solution effectively erased any differences between, or among, the Native peoples and the people of color who were grouped together, something Salverson, in retrospect felt was enormously problematic.

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<sup>53</sup> "A Role to Play for the Theatre of the Oppressed," *TDR*, 38(3), Fall 1994, 38.

<sup>54</sup> *Playing Boal*, 183.

Were the techniques of TO themselves incapable of exploring differences of experience among spectators? Was this separation and its concurrent assumptions necessary to continue with the activities of TO? Recently, I asked Salverson about the choice made to separate the group in that workshop.<sup>56</sup> She said she wasn't sure if it had been the right decision, and she might make a different choice if confronted with the same situation again. Her comment points to the numerous decisions that must be made, in the moment, as part of the continual negotiation of working with a given community. If TO work is indeed a conversation, then it will be affected both by what the community needs to say and the structure and framework the facilitators give them to do so. But the difficulties that Salverson encountered are, I would argue, emblematic of the challenges popular theatre will increasingly face in this era of cultural globalization, further implications of which I will address in the next chapter.

Marc Weinblatt described two strategies for negotiating subjective differences that he deploys in TO workshops. First, recognizing the complex power of the workshop facilitator and his position as a white man, he always co-facilitates workshops on race and gender with an African-American woman. Weinblatt notes, though, that the concept of homogeneity can be deceptive; even amongst groups that seem to share oppressions, there can be dramatic differences in their subjective experiences of these forces. For example, Weinblatt, who works with homeless youth, notes that while the youth may all share a history of bad families, this is often the only history they share and multiple

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<sup>55</sup>Julie Salverson, "The Mask of Solidarity," in *Playing Boal*, 163.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with author, December 18 1998.

factions can exist within the group. Weinblatt notes that to initiate a “real dialogue” among people of difference, work must be done both separately and then together. He gives an example of a racism workshop. The group split in two with Weinblatt taking over the white group and his co-facilitator taking the group of people of color. Many of the participants in his group, he said, would have been too fearful of revealing and exploring their own racism in a mixed group – the “safety” of the all-white group allowed them to explore their own ideas and prejudices more deeply with lessened fears of appearing to be “racist.” But it is essential that the circle is completed, Weinblatt notes, and these discoveries are then shared between the groups. Perhaps the work in separate homogeneous groups encourages the sort of self-discovery that enriches the dialogue among all participants.

Jorge Merced noted that *Pregones* would do performances specifically for women. Merced explained that it is necessary “to create a safe space or else Boal’s work doesn’t work.”<sup>57</sup> For the women in New York’s Latino community – *Pregones*’ audience – such a safe space was impossible for discussions of family, sex and AIDS with men present. Merced explains that after the half-hour show was finished, and before the joker asked the audience for interventions, the men would be asked to leave. This, Merced said, was their strategy for working most productively with women. Perhaps most importantly, Merced noted that what must be interrogated is the *reason* for separating a group into smaller factions. In *Pregones*’ case, it was done to create a safe space and to help Latina women explore and develop strategies for dealing with a current crisis. The cultural and

political reality of that community at that moment, meant that such conversations had to take place without men.<sup>58</sup> Perhaps what these examples illustrate is not whether TO can be done with homogeneous groups, but rather that TO is one of many cultural tools which must respond to the reality and desires of a given community at a given moment. If at a particular moment in history, certain issues cannot be dealt with in heterogeneous groups, then neither can TO deal with them in heterogeneous groups.

In discussing a workshop he did in Summer 1998 in Turkey on sexism, Simon Malbogot notes how, rather than splitting the group along gender lines, the workshop was structured to allow each to show the others – through theatre – how they experienced oppression. Malbogot notes, “Part of what we are doing is getting a dialogue going, so you show me what it is that you feel is going on and then I can respond. So by having the women show what they thought the men were doing that was oppressing them . . . then a dialogue could begin and it became quite heated, ‘What do you mean, that’s not oppression’ [Malbogot quoting the Turkish men, through the tone in his voice] but yes it was, the women felt it was.”<sup>59</sup> Malbogot, however stresses the importance of responding to what a given community wants and desires from the workshop; if the participants express a desire to explore certain issues separately from other members, the facilitator must obey these wishes. He notes that while there can be productive moments and contexts in which to break up into smaller groups who share the same oppressions, it is

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<sup>57</sup> Interview with author.

<sup>58</sup> Merced – a physically diminutive man – specifically notes that he was the only man present, and that somehow the women didn’t “notice” him as a man, or at least weren’t inhibited by his presence.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with author.

also essential that these fragmented groups come together: “Eventually we must get together to have a dialogue . . . at some point we have to come together to have this exchange and dynamization that is necessary for us to have the kinds of changes that we are talking about.”<sup>60</sup> Malbogat’s emphasis on dialogue across difference, of course also points to the limitations of popular theatre generally because a dialogue requires two willing participants.

What emerges from these various practitioners’ experiences is that no one answer prevails regarding the techniques’ inherent ability to deal with differences. The tools are adapted by practitioners who deploy different strategies to make the techniques most effective for the communities in which they work. Their choices, and the ways in which they shape the work of their facilitators, are what begin to make this work less and less Boal’s work as practiced by others, and more and more the practitioners’ own work as influenced by the ideas and techniques of Boal. Perhaps all of these adaptations do not represent TO the way Boal imagined it, but as David Diamond has noted, “We all live in very different circumstances and different cultures in communities with very different needs. Boal himself, once he left Brazil, could no longer do ‘the work of Augusto Boal’ as it had been done in Brazil.”<sup>61</sup> Diamond points out the way in which Boal’s own practice of TO has been mutable and responsive to the environments and communities with which he has worked. Similarly, North American practitioners must maintain such a

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<sup>60</sup> Interview with author. One of the tools Malbogat uses to bring groups together is the talking circle. Malbogat used this technique in the Parkdale Project in which I participated. All of the participants sit in a circle and are only permitted to speak when holding the “talking stone” which gets passed around the circle. Each person can hold the stone and speak for as long as they wish while everyone else must listen quietly.

sensitivity. It is how they strategize to use TO and respond to their own local communities that will determine the efficacy of their practices. As Merced notes, Boal was glad to see the ways in which Pregones adapted TO to make it relevant and structurally appropriate for their community. But as practitioners begin doing their own work in the name of TO and change it for appropriate communities, to what extent are they doing their own work and to what extent the work of Boal? At what point do we stop describing someone's work as "Theatre of the Oppressed" and instead describe it as something else?

## TRACKING TRACES

Beyond work that uses adaptations of TO structures, many theatre practitioners and educators have been influenced in more subtle ways by the spirit and methods of TO. As witnessed at the Ripple Effect, many have taken the spirit of Boal's work – or a particular idea or exercise – as a point of departure for their own work. Others have practiced TO for years and now find themselves developing their own work in new directions which, although originating with TO, now are distant cousins. Julie Salverson has said that while she continues to enjoy doing TO work in a workshop setting with a particular community she has grown less interested in the performance of such work for larger audiences – i.e. forum performances. She notes that while she has noticed much complexity and subtlety in the creation of characters and situations in workshops, these

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<sup>61</sup> Playing Boal, 52.

tended to become stereotypes when done in performance. Much of the subtlety and complexity gets lost when performed for large audiences. Her own work has become more theatrical; she has collaborated on projects with designers and puppeteers. As a playwright, Salverson has returned to more scripted material, although she notes that much of the research for a play may be done through TO work. The basic framework of forum theatre – i.e. the inherent tensions of “something not being right” – also continues to influence her own writing.

I, too, have noticed in the work I have done with teenagers the way in which complex situations can easily slide into simplified stereotypes in a forum theatre performance. In 1994, for example, I was working as the director of a teen peer leadership program that was to present workshops for other teens on various issues of “prevention.” We had spent much time exploring the complicated and subtle issues around drug and alcohol use and abuse and had designed a forum performance which we thought portrayed some of the choices that are factors in deciding whether or not to “try” drugs. The situation was hardly black and white, rather the protagonist was simultaneously pulled in several different directions. However, when we performed this scenario and asked for interventions, the scene was reduced to an exercise in, “just say no.” As the facilitator for this performance, I attempted to make the decision to “just say no” harder for the spect-actors by complicating the reality of the scenario, but to no avail. In retrospect, I believe that part of the problem was the context in which the forum was being done. There were numerous adult authority figures whom the teens knew present at the performance. I believe that their interventions were what they thought was

expected of them, rather than truthful, and the sorts of behaviors for which they knew they would be rewarded.

In 1992 I worked with Mixed Company on a community-based theatre project with the Parkdale community of Toronto.<sup>62</sup> The project's goal was to create a play that reflected the current concerns of the community, particularly the youth. The first several months' of work included using TO techniques to discover and then explore those issues. Scenarios were developed from improvisations and the use of cop-in-the-head techniques. After this developmental phase of the project, a professional playwright, Rex Deverell, who had been a part of the project from the beginning, created a script based on this work.<sup>63</sup> The Realm of Possibilities did incorporate forum theatre elements, but TO's usefulness to the whole process of creation was much larger than what was reflected in the actual performance, in much the same way that Salverson has discussed.

Simon Malbogat, artistic director of Mixed Company in Toronto, has described the complicated way in which his current community-based theatre work has been influenced by TO: "What I was doing was looking at ideas and applying it to my work in various ways, so I was borrowing from any master, not just Boal . . . for me it has always been looking at what I feel will work with this particular group." Malbogat has combined elements of TO with the Native American teachings of the Deer Tribe Metis

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<sup>62</sup> Mixed Company is a Toronto-based, community arts theatre company. They have hosted several of Boal's visits to Toronto over the past 7 years. Although artistic director, Simon Malbogat, says that his work has moved away from TO over the past five to six years, it is still strongly influential on their work – they now combine elements of TO with other techniques. Parkdale is an economically depressed community in downtown Toronto, with a reputation for being "drug-infested."

Medicine Society. The ideas and structure of cops-in-the-head has influenced the current work he does using masks to represent each of seven basic emotions. The masks, which can be worn by characters in any scenario, were developed to reflect the sorts of emotional manipulation people experience. “What kind of manipulations are they using to oppress us? What I discovered from the tyrant oppressor wheel borrowed form, was what kind of oppressor, what kind of manipulation were they using? What I am really doing is applying the work that Augusto is doing with the work that I am exploring in terms of these teachings.”<sup>64</sup>

Many theatre directors have begun using the techniques of TO – particularly Rainbow of Desire – as rehearsal techniques for character exploration. Boal himself was recently invited to do such work with the Royal Shakespeare Company. Similarly, Kim Kelly, a theatre director and high school teacher, described to me a production of Strindberg’s Miss Julie in which she theatrically realized, onstage during performance, Julie’s “Rainbow of Desire,” by having three different actresses portray three different aspects of Julie’s character, or three different desires. In addition, Rainbow of Desire techniques were used in rehearsal for character development.<sup>65</sup> Numerous theatre educators have brought Boal’s techniques into their classrooms. I have used many of the exercises in Boal’s “arsenal” – what he calls the games that are used to dynamize the

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<sup>63</sup> The play was titled, The Realm of Possibilities. To the best of my knowledge, no official documentation of this project exists and the script was not published. I kept a journal of the developmental phase of the project.

<sup>64</sup> Malbogot noted that he has studied these Native American teachings extensively and has been given permission by the Deer Tribe to use them in his theatre work. He has also been invited back to these Native communities to share his ideas and conduct workshops based on his adaptations.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with author.

senses before beginning other more in depth explorations – in the acting classes I teach. I have found that they help to focus students’ attention on specific senses in a very different way than traditional method-acting sense memory work.<sup>66</sup>

Inspired by Boal’s most recent success melding theatre and politics, theatre director and activist Ian MacKinnon conducted his own experiment in legislative theatre. Fed-up with ineffectual politicians and his own unemployment, MacKinnon co-founded the Art and Performance (A&P) Party in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and ran on the party’s ticket for City Council in 1997. The A&P party credits Boal with the idea to theatricalize politics and run on a pro-arts platform.<sup>67</sup> Ultimately, MacKinnon did not win the City Council seat but his campaign invites comparison to Boal’s own use of theatre for legislation. Much like Boal’s own bid for office, MacKinnon’s campaign itself was a form of theatricalized politics. Despite losing the race, the A&P party garnered a good amount of press coverage in local papers. For MacKinnon, this was not his first encounter with popular theatre, nor with political activism, but rather was an extension of his work in these arenas. MacKinnon appeared at the Ripple Effect with a Boston-based group called Art for a Fair Economy who are working to “find creative ways to challenge the cultural myths that support economic inequality.”<sup>68</sup> MacKinnon and the A&P Party plan to run again in 1999.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Boal’s book Games for Actors and Non-Actors describes all of these games.

<sup>67</sup> The Party’s publicity flyer notes, “The A&P Party was inspired by Augusto Boal.”

<sup>68</sup> Company description as it appeared in the Ripple Effect Festival Program, 11.

<sup>69</sup> Personal email message.

## RIPPLE EFFECT

The Ripple Effect, held in June 1997 in Toronto and hosted by Mixed Company, was the eighth festival of Theatre of the Oppressed. The festival attracted theatre professionals and amateurs, educators, activists and others from over a dozen countries and provided a snapshot of the range of Boal's inspiration and influence. The work of some of those who attended the festival seemed to be directly descended from TO, doing easily recognizable forms of TO such as forum, while others were more spiritual cousins, using their artistic work to fight against oppression but with different techniques. One journalist noted, "One of the most noticeable features of the festival was the diverse range of practice worldwide of Theatre of the Oppressed. Delegates generally agreed that Boal's techniques had to be adapted to suit different contexts and situations. In many instances his techniques had been significantly diluted and interwoven with various forms of experimental and popular theatre."<sup>70</sup>

While the festival provided a wonderful environment to learn about all sorts of Boal-influenced theatre for social change work being done all over the world, it unexpectedly emphasized performance over collaborative problem-solving. It didn't allow for a productive space to discuss difficulties within the work and generate solutions. Many people doing this work seemed to be starting from scratch – having either read Boal's writings or taken a workshop with him – and then all encountering similar obstacles, but in isolation, making the need for collaborative problem solving

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<sup>70</sup> Carmel O' Sullivan, "Join the Ripple – Make Waves," *Research in Drama Education*, September, 1997, 2(2):247-250.

essential. During one of the festival wrap-up sessions, Simon Malbogot asked to what extent those of us involved with and using the methods of TO constitute a “movement.” The question is relevant to the way in which TO work is understood and its relationship to Boal himself. The back cover of Boal’s newest book, Legislative Theatre, credits him as “the founder of the international movement, Theatre of the Oppressed.”<sup>71</sup> But what sort of organization and exchange is needed among practitioners to call the practice of TO a “movement”? Is it simply such because its practice is widespread? Several of the participants of the Ripple Effect made efforts to establish access to dialogue among practitioners. Currently there is an email list of participants of that conference, maintained by Warren Linds, a Canadian TO practitioner.<sup>72</sup> Several links include those with other social change based theatre groups and conferences.<sup>73</sup> But there still seems to be a paucity of communication amongst practitioners (aside from those that collaborate regularly). Other than workshops with Boal, there are few places for TO workers to hone their skills or strategize adaptations, other than while actually doing the work with a community.

## **THE POLITICAL VERSUS THE PERSONAL: THEATRE OR THERAPY?**

I began this chapter by asking if theatre, generally, and popular theatre, specifically, can be a potential tool for cultural intervention at this historical moment. I

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<sup>71</sup> Legislative Theatre, back cover.

<sup>72</sup> It is from this list that I solicited interviews for this chapter.

<sup>73</sup> Such as the annual Theatre and Pedagogy of the Oppressed Conference which Doug Paterson produces each year.

return to this question – which in many ways haunts this entire dissertation – again at the end of this discussion. Much critical reaction to Boal’s work in North America has been a struggle to define exactly what to consider TO – theatre, therapy, activism, pedagogy? Much as popular theatre itself emerged from the intersections of all of these disciplines, I would argue that TO still resides at the center of this web, although it can take on the shape of one of these more than others, depending on the context, circumstance, audience. Boal himself refuses to categorize TO as one or the other, or to make distinctions between those techniques appropriate for therapy, education and politics; he sees them as part of the same dynamic continuum. Boal notes, “At one point it was considered to be not exactly theatre, but something else . . . People said Theatre of the Oppressed is not theatre, it’s politics, it’s therapy, it’s pedagogy. But theatre is politics, it is psychology, it is education.”<sup>74</sup> Translator Jackson also notes the connections between individual therapy and societal therapy: “Individuals can be neurotic – perhaps whole societies, nations even, can be neurotic – and perhaps there is a connection between the two phenomena.”<sup>75</sup> Many practitioners argue that Boal’s work has *always* existed in the murky overlap of therapy/personal growth and political activism and indeed, “blurs the false boundaries between these disciplines.”<sup>76</sup> Perhaps too, in this context oppression occurs in more insidious forms such as racism and sexism, that must be battled, not only on the macro-political level, but also on the level of individuals’ thinking. TO in this context attempts to confront and combat oppression, not only by resisting the oppressive

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<sup>74</sup> *Globe and Mail* [Toronto] May 31, 1997, C10.

<sup>75</sup> xxi.

<sup>76</sup> *Playing Boal*, 1.

superstructure, but also by interrogating the infrastructure – individuals’ prejudices, for example – that keeps it in place.

An example of how TO work strives to exist at the confluence of these different disciplines can be seen in the format of Pregones’ AIDS project. Merced notes that AIDS performances were always conducted in conjunction with a health educator who could provide expertise and refer audience members to appropriate community and health organizations; no performance would be done without one. In Chapter One, I quoted Ross Kidd, who has said popular theatre must make connections with other community organizations in order to sustain and enact the change for which it advocates. Pregones’ work reflects a similar partnership. Nonetheless, Pregones tried to keep its performances theatrical and as Merced notes, this is one of the elements he feels has been lost in TO’s move into North American culture, it has “move[d] into social work and therapy rather than theatre. We always wanted to bring it back to theatre. It’s a show!”<sup>77</sup> Boal’s proposal, he said, is a theatrical one and Boal himself is a man of the theatre.

Some have argued that the contexts in which TO has found itself in North America has led to its dilution as a radical tool for social change. When he came to work in Europe and later North America, the people with whom Boal worked were, as Mady Schutzman notes, “capable of engaging their radical left-wing politics in relative comfort” and, moreover, “therapy and politics addressed different aspects of life and were articulated as separate, even potentially conflicting, cultural endeavors.”<sup>78</sup> TO in

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<sup>77</sup> Personal interview.

<sup>78</sup> *Playing Boal*, 138.

this context has been used to address those oppressions that occupy the personal spheres of our lives. While this may be true, I do not think that this precludes TO from being a tool for political and cultural activism. Popular theatre, as Kees Epskamp notes in Chapter One, must be defined within the particular circumstances of an historical moment; in this historical moment, I want to suggest, there is much work towards social change that can occur through an examination of the internal forces that TO techniques such as Rainbow of Desire allow. I concur with the title of Doug Paterson's article; there is "A Role to Play for the Theatre of the Oppressed" in current struggles for social change.

TO in North America does indeed focus more on internalized oppressions, with goals of personal empowerment and community building. But perhaps one of the things that those who are using TO techniques as an integral part of their own struggles for social change have learned is that political change needs to occur in different locations in this context. TO practitioners are using the techniques to create change on the micro-political level – within families, community organizations, workplaces, personal relationships. Doug Paterson notes, "For there to be truly transformative macro-revolutions there will first need to be truly transformative micro-revolutions within individuals and communities. It is here that TO has a role to play."<sup>79</sup> Similarly, Artistic Director of Headlines Theatre in Vancouver, David Diamond notes, "When individuals don't express themselves emotionally for long periods of time they get sick; communities are the same. One way for our communities to heal is for all of us to take back our rights

of healthy collective expression.”<sup>80</sup> Diamond’s adaptation of TO, Theatre for Living, has become a vehicle for communities to do just that. Chris Weedon notes the connection between social change on the micro-political level and the larger, macro-political level: “Resistance to the dominant at the level of the individual subject is the first stage in the production of alternative forms of knowledge or where such alternatives already exist, of winning individuals over to these discourses and gradually increasing their social power.”<sup>81</sup> Boal himself refuses to differentiate between personal and political change and between the techniques which are appropriate to each.

Maine-based playwright, director and educator Cathy Plourde states her reasons for using TO techniques, making this connection between individual change and larger social changes:

I hope to change the world one person at a time, by offering people—particularly youth and most often girls – the opportunity to express, challenge, explore, redefine, reinvent, revitalize, rethink, and relate themselves in ways that their everyday lives don't necessarily provide opportunities for. I don't have any real idea of what or how I want people changed – it's more that I know there are things that need to be different and that if I can give ten people the chance to make a statement (or ask the

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<sup>79</sup> “A Role to Play for the Theatre of the Oppressed,” *TDR*, 38(3), Fall 1994, 46-49.

<sup>80</sup> *Playing Boal*, 35.

<sup>81</sup> *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, (Cambridge, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1987), 111.

questions), they can do more as ten than I could do as one. Their personal investment dictates the forum and holds the returns.<sup>82</sup>

In her work with young girls, Plourde imagines individual empowerment will yield returns on the macro-political level.

If TO can intervene in the reproduction of power structures in these environments, then isn't it participating in larger disruptions and or challenges to the power structures of the status quo? Perhaps this micro-political social change, which intervenes on a personal level in people's thinking is, in this context, the most effective way to begin to "disrupt hegemonic political and social structures," as popular theatre hopes to do. Perhaps it is not the same sort of radical political act that Boal's theatre in Brazil was and continues to be, but the power structures that hold together American ideas and ideals are also different than those in Brazil and I would argue must be attacked in different ways.<sup>83</sup> Take for example the way in which American culture is identified with "family values"; isn't then the family a potential site for interventions which disrupt larger social structures? It is exactly here at the micro-political level that popular theatre generally, and TO specifically, has a real role to play in challenging hegemonic social and cultural structures and ideas in these new contexts.

Of course, as Honor Ford-Smith noted in the previous chapter, measuring the efficacy of popular theatre is both an impossible task and also misunderstands the ways in which it works. How do you measure people's thinking? How do you then measure the

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<sup>82</sup> Interview with author, November 1998.

ways in which such shifts in thinking affect behaviors? Can I base my own personal conclusions about the technique's efficacy on the small ways in which I have seen participants in TO workshops shift their awareness of situations and their own power? Virtually everyone I spoke with during my research had stories to tell of lives they had seen change doing TO work, most in small ways, a few more dramatically.<sup>84</sup> Is this enough to conclude that TO's interventions on the micro-political level make it a "social practice which has the potential to be a site of radical cultural and political intervention, one which has the ability to disrupt, or at least point to fissures in, the power structures of the status quo," as I defined popular theatre in chapter one? I, of course, think so.

### **THOUGHTS TOWARD A CONCLUSION**

When I began this project and research, I was pessimistic regarding the social and political function of TO in its new home up north. Surely, I thought, TO has lost its radical edge here in North America where it is more likely to be found in educational and therapeutic environments rather than allied with a radical political movement. If so, could it, and did it, still function here as a radical political act of intervention? If not, how could its function be described? This question fueled my research curiosity. And yet at the end of it all, I find myself reevaluating my own understanding of "radical" politics. While North America, and the US in particular, cannot be compared to the Brazil in which Boal developed his techniques – nor to the Argentina and Peru in which

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<sup>83</sup> For more information on Boal's early work in Brazil see Theatre of the Oppressed. For his work since his return to Brazil in 1986 see Legislative Theatre.

he practiced them in the 1970s – it does not mean that oppression does not exist here.<sup>85</sup> Nor does it mean that the oppression experienced in Brazil and in the US can easily fall on opposite sides of the external/internal oppression binary. Certainly, as Boal himself experienced, internal oppression is the prevalent variety in the US, but within many of the communities in which TO workers find themselves working, there certainly are other, complicated and external forms of oppression; Seattle Public Theatre and Mixed Company work with homeless youth, Headlines Theatre works with Native people in Vancouver and numerous practitioners do issue-based workshops on racism. My research has reinvigorated my faith and enthusiasm for TO and has rediscovered the many places at which its interventions are still needed. Certainly TO is like much other popular theatre; the fact that it can be a site for radical political intervention does not necessarily mean that it will be such. TO can be a radical political intervention in North America and some practitioners are using it as such. Others are using it in less radical ways, on a micro-political level, to augment their educational work. But there are too many places and contexts in which TO is being used in North America to generalize; perhaps it simply is that TO can have, and does have, more than one cultural function here.

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<sup>84</sup> I am not quoting any here because most asked to be anonymous.

<sup>85</sup> A number of recent events in New York City have brought this reality into focus. One example is the shooting death of an unarmed African immigrant, Amadou Diallo, in the Bronx, by the New York City Police. The shooting elicited weeks of public protest by a wide variety of New Yorkers including former mayor David Dinkins who was arrested, along with many others, during peaceful protests.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### GRASSROOTS THEATRE IN AN ERA OF CULTURAL GLOBALIZATION

#### Towards a Conclusion

“An unalterable and unquestioned law of the musical world required that the German text of French operas sung by Swedish artists should be translated into Italian for the clearer understanding of English-speaking audiences.”<sup>1</sup>

– Edith Wharton, The Age of Innocence

“Squanto was the Indian who greeted the pilgrims in 1620 in Plymouth, Massachusetts, who helped them through a hard winter, and who spoke good English. To imagine the full effect of this meeting, you have to remember what the ‘New World’ was like in 1620 . . . Think of coming into a new place like that and having the uncanny experience of running into a Patuxet just back from Europe . . . call it the ‘Squanto Effect.’”<sup>2</sup>

– James Clifford, Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century

In much of this dissertation I have argued that locality and specificity are integral to the meaning-making of popular theatre. The exchange between audience and performers and their ability to make more or less common sense of the signs of performance, I argue, are essential to the creation of subversive or resistant meanings. Popular theatre is a social practice deeply embedded in the experience of the people who

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<sup>1</sup> Edith Wharton, The Age of Innocence (New York: Collier Press, 1920), 5.

<sup>2</sup> James Clifford, Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 18-19.

live these stories and whose community has created the conditions out of which they have emerged. Its imbrication in daily life, the cultural history of a people and the contribution these make to the relationship between performer and audience, are what can make popular theatre a *praxis* of cultural and political resistance. In this chapter, I would like to complicate this argument and suggest future directions for inquiry on popular theatre in a world whose imagination of nationhood and locality are rapidly changing. I do not mean to negate or contradict my previous arguments, rather I want to suggest that as we move into an era marked by much more rapid flows of information, culture and travels, the study of popular theatre as a local practice becomes complicated. If popular theatre is indeed a social praxis which is steeped in the particularities of location and living, what are the implications of the increasing difficulty in defining and maintaining a sense of locality?

In this chapter I want to chart two intersecting and overlapping phenomena. First, I want to explore the theoretical implications of cultural globalization for grassroots theatre practices which, I have argued, are so contingent on context and locality for their meanings and efficacy. Second, I want to interrogate interest in third world cultural techniques within the US. While performances by Sistren may signify differently in the US or Canada than they do in Jamaica, as I argued in Chapter Three, what can we make simply of the interest in having Sistren – or other theatre companies with similar goals – perform in these locations? I want to begin this investigation by interrogating my own interest in Sistren, Boal and third world popular theatre. In an era marked by exponential increases in travel – by people, culture and information – the questions I raise regarding

the ability of popular theatre to remain an effective social praxis when relocated or performed for decontextualized audiences will, I believe, become more pressing for those interested in grassroots theatre.

My thinking for this chapter is haunted by several events which seem emblematic of the cultural forces I seek to explicate. As I began working on revisions of Chapters Two and Three of this dissertation – the work based on my field research in Jamaica – I would work in a local cafe to escape my small Manhattan apartment. There are about a dozen cafes within a few block radius of my home; they are all Starbucks. I remember the first time I was sitting in a Starbucks cafe, revising my chapter, and the sound of Bob Marley wafted through the cafe. The irony of this struck me immediately. I thought it was just an odd coincidence, but over the past year I have done work in several Starbucks cafes and the Bob Marley music continues, it is a Starbucks staple. The irony of this is enhanced by Starbucks' reputed business practice of running local coffee shops out of business by opening up in close proximity to other successful independently owned businesses which are unable to compete against the chain and eventually close down. So sitting in Starbucks, listening to Marley croon, "get up, stand up, stand up for your rights," seemed to me both the ultimate irony and exactly the sort of cultural phenomenon that my thinking about the future of popular theatre would need to consider.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, over the five-year period that I have been pursuing my PhD and thinking about popular theatre, the idea of nationhood and ethnicity have radically altered

borders and boundaries around the globe, from the break-up of the Soviet Union, to the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Kosovo, to the proliferation of refugee camps for escapees from ethnic violence in Africa and elsewhere, to the current Kurdish uprisings. A recent New York Times article characterized the preceding decade as one which saw “the demise of a bipolar world” and the “multiplication of nation-states.” Membership in the United Nations, it reported, has gone from 156 to 185 in this period.<sup>4</sup>

In his most recent book, Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century, James Clifford has explored the complicated ways in which travel – both that of individuals and culture – has altered local and global cultures. As Clifford notes in the above quoted example of the “Squanto Effect,” such travels have been influencing culture for centuries. However, the explosion of such travels, made faster and easier by technology, has exponentially increased the magnitude and power these forces have in shaping the way we understand the world’s geography and define concepts such as “local” and “community.” What, then, are the implications of such phenomenon for the practices of popular theatre? How does cultural globalization effect constructions of local, social spaces and in turn the social praxis of popular theatre? My goal in this chapter is not to chart all the processes of globalization; such a project is beyond the scope and applicability of my inquiry.<sup>5</sup> Rather, I want to suggest the complex ways in

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<sup>3</sup> I do not mean to suggest that Starbucks is the only one to commodify the music of Marley, many have done so. Rather, I use this example simply to concretely illustrate my interest in the following theoretical questions.

<sup>4</sup> Serge Schemann, “What’s Wrong with This Picture of Nationalism?” New York Times, Week in Review, Sunday, February 21, 1999, 1 (continued on 4).

<sup>5</sup> For a more general overview on the theories of globalization than I can provide here see, Alan Scott, “Introduction: Globalization: Social Process or Political Rhetoric?” and Cesare Poppi, “Wider Horizons with Larger Details: Subjectivity, Ethnicity and Globalization,” both in The Limits of Globalization: Cases

which these various and diverse forces impinge on local and folk cultures as sites for political resistance and suggest where gaps may lie that provide opportunities for moments of resistance.

Because I would argue that any research on popular theatre – as I have defined it throughout this dissertation – must in part be ethnographic in nature, the discourse on ethnography is a productive place from which to think through the challenges that will face this work in the future. Regarding the changing global terrain, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai notes,

There are some brute facts about the world of the twentieth century that any ethnography must confront. Central among these facts is the changing social, territorial, and cultural reproduction of group identity. As groups migrate, regroup in new locations, reconstruct their histories, and reconfigure their ethnic projects, the ethno in ethnography takes on a slippery nonlocalized quality . . . the landscapes of group identity – the ethnoscaples – around the world are no longer familiar anthropological objects, insofar as groups are no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogeneous . . . the ethnoscaples of today's world are profoundly interactive.<sup>6</sup>

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and Arguments, Alan Scott, editor (London: Routledge, 1997). Also see, Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>6</sup>Arjun Appadurai, Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 48.

The consequences of this “spatial unbounding” have been seen in recent eruptions of regional violence which has spilled over national borders.<sup>7</sup> Too, some of these consequences can be seen in my previous discussion of the challenges Theatre of the Oppressed faced when relocated to North America. Appadurai’s description of a world which is “no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogeneous,” manifests itself in that work as seen by practitioners’ concerns negotiating ethnic, experiential and other differences among participants. TO techniques have been subject to geographic and temporal relocations which have resulted in their use in contexts with radically different ethnic landscapes than those for which they were originally designed. Moreover, Appadurai’s comment suggests that location and group identity are becoming ever more unhitched from one another, making location a diminishing site of social and political cohesion. People in the same geographical location do not necessarily have the same cultural referents and inversely, people with similar cultural referents do not necessarily live in geographic proximity of one another. Homi Bhabha poses the following question: “How do strategies of representation and empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable?”<sup>8</sup> His question is

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<sup>7</sup> For example, a recent New York Times article noted in its report of eight tourists killed in Uganda that the killers were “remnants of ethnic Hutu militias that carried out mass killings in Rwanda in 1994 . . . The attack on a group of 31 tourists appeared to be related to the violence that has beset central Africa for years, seeping over the national borders linking Rwanda, Congo and Uganda.” Neil MacFarquhar, “Eight Tourists Slain in Uganda, Including U.S. Couple,” New York Times, March 3, 1999, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Bhabha, 2.

particularly relevant, even urgent, for a social practice such as popular theatre whose strategy of empowerment depends on locality and the meanings made of shared experiences.

Appadurai further notes that in this era, “The task of producing locality . . . is increasingly a struggle.”<sup>9</sup> How is this difficulty impacting the ability of popular theatre to remain a politically radical practice? Or, as Appadurai asks, “What can locality mean in a world where spatial localization, quotidian interaction, and social scale are not always isomorphic?”<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Nestor Canclini has observed these cultural consequences: “In many countries, national and ethnic symbols are ceasing to be the main references of social identity and cohesion.”<sup>11</sup> As I discussed in Chapter Two, Sistren incorporated elements of Jamaican folk culture in their performances to create a language which would uniquely articulate the history of Jamaican women’s oppression and its material consequences for their daily lives. Honor Ford-Smith notes, “The images and symbols contained within the ritual tradition evoke immediate responses from the audience, because they come loaded with overtones from past and present. They echo in the subconscious of the viewer.”<sup>12</sup> But as such symbols cease to be, as Canclini notes, “the main references of social identity,” how can popular theatre adapt? I noted in Chapter Three the ways in which, already, in Jamaica, young people are unfamiliar with many elements of folk culture that comprise Sistren performances. As the shared cultural

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<sup>9</sup> Appadurai, 189.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>11</sup> “Unequal Partners,” *The UNESCO Courier*, (9) (September, 1996): 29.

<sup>12</sup> “Sistren: Jamaican Women’s Theatre,” in *Cultures in Contention*, Douglas Kahn and Diane Neumaier, editors, (Seattle: The Real Comet Press, 1985), 88.

imagination which anchors popular theatre becomes diluted by the oceanic forces of globalization, can popular theatre continue to survive as a localized praxis of resistance? What means might it have to create fissures in the hegemony of such forces? In this chapter, rather than propose answers, I can only pose questions that are suggested by the specific case studies that make up the rest of this dissertation, for the conditions I speak of are still unfolding and their full implications will only be realized at a point in the future.

Appadurai has proposed a framework for understanding the disjunctures in the current global economy by focusing on the complex web of interdependent “global cultural flows.” “The new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models.”<sup>13</sup> Rather, he suggests a series of what he calls “scapes” – ethnoscapas, mediascapas, technoscapas, financescapas, and ideoscapas – through which to analyse the movements of cultural flows: “The suffix -scape allows us to point to the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes, shapes that characterize international capital as deeply as they do international clothing styles.”<sup>14</sup>

Appadurai’s work suggests the myriad ways in which these diverse “scapes” intermingle and impinge on one another, approaching a theory of cultural globalization much more complex than a one-way flow of culture that could be called domination or imperialism. Many other theorists have also argued against understanding cultural

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<sup>13</sup> Appadurai, 32.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

globalization as synonymous with the process of Americanization or homogenization. In his article, "Across the Universe: The Limits of Global Popular Culture," John Street suggests some of the complexities implicit in such an assumption:

The first challenge to the notion of the global culture is that no such culture exists, in either its unitary or its multicultural form. This is not to deny that the world is increasingly connected up, that there is greater interaction between cultures, only that the net effect is not a plurality of equal cultures, or a harmonious synthesis of them in one global culture. Cultures form part of a struggle for power, in which resources (both cultural and financial) are not evenly distributed . . . Even if there is a global culture, it would be wrong to see it as meaning the same to everyone . . . In popular culture, *context is vital* . . . There is no unitary process of globalization, and the extent of it is dependent upon political structures and forces which are specific to national and local states.<sup>15</sup>

Too, in his exploration of culture and globalization in Zanzibar, Ahmed Gurnah reminds readers that understanding globalization as only the Westernization of world culture fails to account for the ways in which Western culture has been influenced by, for example, African culture. "What I think confuses people is the ability of the West to control the image of world relations through its economic and political dominance and control of advertising. The fact is while there is imperialism of culture, there are equal counter

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<sup>15</sup> John Street, "Across the Universe: The Limits of Global Popular Culture," in The Limits of Globalization, 80-82. Italics mine.

influences which tend to be ignored, e.g. the influence of African music on Western society through the development of jazz, swing, rock, tango, to name a few.”<sup>16</sup> While his comments, I would argue, fail to consider the power differential and economic disparity in these different influences, I think his point supports Stuart Hall’s contention that no form of hegemony is totalizing. There are always momentary ruptures: “Even under hegemonic conditions there can be no total incorporation or absorption of the subordinate classes.”<sup>17</sup> As these theorists argue, globalization cannot be totalizing, or to translate Hall’s point for this discussion – even in an era of cultural globalization, there can be no total absorption or erasure of indigenous or folk traditions.

What virtually all of these theorists agree on, however, is the fact that these global forces are changing both the nature of locality and the ways in which “communities” are imagined. As Appadurai asks, “What is the nature of locality as a lived experience in a globalized, deterritorialized world?”<sup>18</sup> I would like to extend his question as it applies to my investigation and ask: What is the nature and *function* of popular theatre, a decidedly localized social practice, in an era of cultural globalization? How do these forces of globalization and deterritorialization, which affect people’s understanding of both their own locality and its relationship to the rest of the world, impinge on the practice of popular theatre as a practice of radical cultural intervention? In a world, described in the New York Times as one of “porous borders and interconnected economies,” which is “increasingly united by air travel, the Internet, multinational business and international

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<sup>16</sup> Ahmed Gurnah, “Elvis in Zanzibar,” in The Limits of Globalization, 137.

<sup>17</sup> “Culture, the Media and the ‘Ideological Effect’” Mass Communication and Society,” James Curran, et.al. editors, (Beverly Hills, London: Sage Publications, 1979):333.

organizations” what is to become of local, or community-based theatrical practices?<sup>19</sup> In an article on grassroots theatre, Bruce McConachie notes, “As real communities . . . dwindle in significance in people’s everyday lives, the imaginative construction of ‘community’ assumes greater importance.”<sup>20</sup> Grassroots theatre, he argues, has a role to play in “sparking the kind of imaginative work that must precede substantial changes in customary habits . . . surely part of the reason for the success of grassroots theatres is that they provide images for their audiences that help them do the symbolic work of including and excluding that constitutes a community.”<sup>21</sup> McConachie’s point focuses on the ways in which grassroots theatre can influence and encourage specific constructions of community in this fragmenting era. I want to suggest that influences operating in the *opposite* direction are just as urgent for scholars and practitioners of grassroots theatre to consider. How do the various, interactive forces of globalization affect imaginative constructions of “community” and how do these then affect grassroots theatre practices? How is the imagination itself, and the work it does, being reconstituted in this era? McConachie’s conclusion emphasizes the continued importance of both the imagination and the local in the meaning-making process of grassroots theatre: “*How* the show communicates and *what* is communicated must draw on conventions that are locally familiar. In this way, residents can be induced to put their imaginations to work in the symbolic building of community during the show.”<sup>22</sup> I want to suggest that it is *exactly*

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<sup>18</sup> Appadurai, 52.

<sup>19</sup> Serge Schemann, “What’s Wrong with This Picture of Nationalism?” *New York Times*, Week in Review, Sunday, February 21, 1999, 1 and 4.

<sup>20</sup> “Approaching the ‘Structure of Feeling’ in Grassroots Theatre,” *Theatre Topics*, 8(1) (March 1998): 37.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 39. Italics in original.

*because of this* that scholars of grassroots theatre must pay attention to the ways in which the forces of globalization have come to affect what the imagination conjures as “community.” Modernity’s erosion of traditionally bounded communities represents a paradigm shift for the imaginative practices on which grassroots theatre’s “symbolic building of community” and efficacy depend. In putting their “imagination to work” in this symbolic building of community, residents may create meanings that, as Bhabha noted above, are antagonistic and conflictual rather than collaborative.

James Clifford’s writings on diasporas suggest the ways in which locality has become not only slippery but also unbounded by geographical borders and other more traditional boundaries. For example, Clifford notes,

Separate places become effectively a single community ‘through the continuous circulation of people, money, goods and information’ . . . dispersed peoples, once separated from homelands by vast oceans and political barriers, increasingly find themselves in border relations with the old country thanks to a to-and-fro made possible by modern technologies of transport, communication and labor migration. Airplanes, telephones, tape cassettes, camcorders and mobile job markets reduce distances and facilitate two-way traffic, legal and illegal, between the world’s places.<sup>23</sup>

The reality of diasporas and other forms of migration suggests that there may be strong ties amongst people in geographically distant places. Clifford notes, “We often need to

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<sup>23</sup> *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 246-7.

consider circuits, not a single place.”<sup>24</sup> Traveling culture, too, can create such circuits: “The travel, or displacement, can involve forces that pass powerfully through – television, radio, tourists, commodities, armies.”<sup>25</sup>

Both Appadurai and Clifford note the ways in which the relationship between ethnicity and locality has shifted in the late twentieth century. Appadurai notes, “Because of the disjunctive and unstable interplay of commerce, media, national policies, and consumer fantasies, ethnicity, once a genie contained in the bottle of some sort of locality . . . has now become a global force, forever slipping in and through the cracks between states and borders.”<sup>26</sup> As Homi Bhabha notes, “The very concepts of homogenous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or ‘organic’ ethnic communities – *as the grounds of cultural comparativism* – are in a profound process of redefinition.”<sup>27</sup> The challenges that I discussed in Chapter Four which Theatre of the Oppressed has encountered are one manifestation of this. But I think such encounters only represent the beginning of a process that is expanding at an exponential rate. As ethnicity is let loose from its bottle of locality, as diasporas and other patterns of migration change the configurations of the local, and force us to re-examine what we mean by “community,” grassroots theatre too, will need to rethink its relationship with location. This is not to suggest that culturally homogeneous communities for whom certain cultural symbols retain a communal significance do not exist, certainly they do. However, even within such communities exposure to the realities

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>26</sup> Appadurai, 41.

beyond their borders is becoming more and more accessible via various media, and potentially shifting their own imaginations and understanding of their place within the global order. As Rustom Bharucha notes, “In villages which continue to be denied the basic necessities of life, it is possible to see Star TV, MTV, Zee TV, cable TV.”<sup>28</sup> What is perhaps most interesting about his comment is actually the first part of the sentence; “in villages which continue *to be denied the basic necessities of life.*” The basic fact that material living conditions across the globe remain obscenely disparate also means that these audiences *may* do different things with these cultural products, and in turn these cultural products serve different functions within these diverse communities.

Appadurai has theorized that in addition to the concrete changes wrought by global cultural flows, some of the greatest affects of these forces are those to the social imaginary. Building on Benedict Anderson’s influential work, Imagined Communities, which suggested the powerful role of the imagination in the creation of national identities, Appadurai suggests that global cultural flows – particularly those of the media and migration – are creating ruptures that are reconfiguring the social/political function of imagination. He notes,

One of the principle shifts in the global cultural order, created by cinema, television, and video technology . . . has to do with the role of the imagination in social life . . . In the grinding of gears between unfolding lives and their imagined counterparts a variety of imagined communities is

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<sup>27</sup> Bhabha, 5. Italics in original.

formed, communities that generate new kinds of politics, new kinds of collective expression, and new needs for social discipline and surveillance on the part of elites.<sup>29</sup>

Clifford's example of diasporic practices which have created communities that include people living in separate distant geographic locations, suggests the global nature of some of these "new communities." What sort of effect, then do these newly configured communities with "new politics" and "new social needs" have on the practice of grassroots theatre? How, too, do they inflect the politics of relocated popular theatre? Here, I am thinking specifically about the potential, for example, for relocated popular theatre to be performed within diasporic communities that still retain various connections to the "old country." How are the meanings of these performances inflected by the audience's "diasporic practices?"<sup>30</sup> What sorts of meanings would be made of Sistren's performances in, for example, Brooklyn, for audiences constituted of Jamaican emigres who retain connections with the island?<sup>31</sup>

Appadurai's suggestion also helps theoretically in seeing opportunities for points of intervention in the process of cultural globalization. He suggests that the imagination has the ability to *annex* the global, to reconfigure its dynamics in ways that provide for

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<sup>28</sup> "Somebody's Other: Disorientations in the Cultural Politics of Our Times," in The Intercultural Performance Reader, Patrice Pavis, editor, (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 205.

<sup>29</sup> Appadurai, 53-54.

<sup>30</sup> Clifford uses this term to denote the travel between two places practiced by certain people who technically are not in diaspora but whose lived experiences represent connections to more than one locale. See "Diasporas," in Routes.

<sup>31</sup> This question is also complicated by the fact that even within Jamaica Sistren's performances were targeted at working-class women. Many Jamaicans who have emigrated are working class, but many are not. Several women who were members of Sistren currently live in Brooklyn.

local agency. He notes, “The work of the imagination . . . is neither purely emancipatory nor entirely disciplined but is a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern . . . the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work . . . and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility.”<sup>32</sup> Anchoring grassroots performances in locations which hold particular significance for a given community or use of local histories as the source material for community-based performances are examples of attempts at such annexation. Mixed Company’s Boal-based community play, The Realm of Possibilities, discussed in Chapter Four, for example, was framed by a journey through various familiar neighborhood locations. Similarly, Bruce McConachie, commenting on his own community-based theatre work, notes his effort to carve out local specificity by drawing “heavily on local history and set[ting] the stage with local landmarks.”<sup>33</sup> Such a strategy has been deployed by many community-based theatre workers, although many also acknowledge its limitations.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Appadurai, 4.

<sup>33</sup> McConachie, 34.

<sup>34</sup> Contemporary community plays based on local histories can be traced from the work of Ann Jellicoe and the Colway Theatre Trust in the 1980s through US-based companies such as Cornerstone Theatre. For more information on Jellicoe’s work see Baz Kershaw The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention (London:Routledge, 1992) and Ann Jellicoe, Community Plays: How to Put Them On (London: Methuen, 1987). For information on Cornerstone Theatre see, Sonja Kuflinec, “A Cornerstone for Rethinking Community Theatre,” Theatre Topics, 6(1) (March 1996): 91-104. Swamp Gravy, a performance project based in Colquitt, Georgia also operates on a similar principle of creating community cohesiveness through large-scale community productions which are based on local, oral histories. See Richard Owen Geer, “Out of Control in Colquitt: Swamp Gravy Makes Stone Soup,” The Drama Review, 40(2) (Summer 1996). This community-play tradition however, seeks primarily to *celebrate* a community, rather than interrogate its inequities and other injustices.

Despite the forces of globalization and capitalism, individuals in their negotiations of these forces struggle to create imaginative ruptures that in many ways allow for the creation of localized meanings. I do not want to reduce these imaginative practices to the divergent use-values of cultural products in different arenas, although I do mean to include these.<sup>35</sup> I want to suggest that it is in the *process* of negotiating these forces of homogenization and globalization that the ruptures in an otherwise seamless hegemony are created. That process of negotiation is not a static, specific set of steps or activities, but like popular theatre itself is a process that must respond to and with other social, historical and political forces which provide its utterances with contextual signification and social function. Here I want to refer back to Guarav Desai's comments regarding popular theatre as a process, that I quoted in Chapter One:

The social utterance that we conceptualize as popular theatre arises from and constantly interacts with other modes of social discourse. It is never in an exclusively privileged position and thus constantly negotiates and renegotiates its own articulations in the larger societal context . . . This relationship makes the theatre an active interpretive and socially volatile *process*.<sup>36</sup>

I would suggest that the various forces I have discussed in this chapter represent a new set of conditions which may change the practice of popular theatre, and which such a practice will need to confront and negotiate. Scholars of grassroots theatre too, will need to

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<sup>35</sup> See John Fiske *Understanding Popular Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1989) and Ahmed Gurnah for arguments that suggest use-value as a subversive practice.

engage with this discourse in order to generate productive ways of thinking about the impact that these negotiations have on popular theatre's ability to remain a site for radical cultural and political interventions.

Certainly there are regions of the world that are more and less affected by these "global cultural flows." Dwight Conquergood, for example, has chronicled his work designing a health education performance program in a Hmong refugee camp in Thailand. Conquergood has described the refugee camps as "liminal zones where people displaced by trauma and crisis – usually war or famine – must try to regroup and salvage what is left of their lives."<sup>37</sup> He notes: "Betwixt and between worlds, suspended between past and future, they fall back on the performance of their traditions as an empowering way of securing continuity and some semblance of stability."<sup>38</sup> In a world ever more connected culturally and economically, these refugee camps occupy a liminal space where local, ethnic traditions both resume their function as a source of communal signification, and also take on an added function described by Conquergood: "Performance participates in the re-creation of self and society that emerges within refugee camps."<sup>39</sup> Conquergood explicitly marks this work as a direct descendent of the popular theatre practitioners discussed in Chapter One: Boal, Kidd and Ngugi. Similarly, Garcia Canclini modified his comment, quoted above, with the more optimistic note: "We know that the process of globalization does not spell the end of ethnic, regional and national cultures. The

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<sup>36</sup> *African Studies Review*, 33(1), (1990):68. Italics mine.

<sup>37</sup> Dwight Conquergood, "Health Theatre in a Hmong Refugee Camp: Performance, Communication and Culture," in *Radical Street Performance*, Jan Cohen Cruz, ed., (London and New York: Routledge, 1998):221.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

deterritorialization of the arts is accompanied by effective reterritorialization in the form of social movements which place emphasis on local characteristic, and use mass media techniques such as regional radio and television and the creation of micromarkets for folk music and objects.”<sup>40</sup> While the forces of cultural globalization may complicate popular theatre and the negotiations necessary for it to remain relevant, they neither eliminate the need for such a practice nor categorically nullify its politics. I do not want to suggest that globalization somehow makes popular theatre an obsolete practice, but rather that the repercussions of these forces represent new challenges that must be negotiated, albeit in different ways and to different extents in different corners of the globe. Popular theatre, after all, is a process, as described in Chapter One, and that process will be a response to the historical and social forces in which it is generated.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I suggested that popular theatre represented a very particular reaction to the conditions and realities of postcoloniality. Too, I have argued throughout for a period-specific and contextual definition of popular theatre. What I want to suggest here is that the changing shape of the global cultural and financial economy is creating a *new* context in which popular theatre may need to reconfigure itself. In this context, John Street has noted, “Attempts to resist the intrusion of transnational corporations, in the name of local culture or economic autonomy, inevitably fail.”<sup>41</sup> While this may be true, I believe that it will be through its negotiations with the

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Canclini, 2.

<sup>41</sup> Street, 76.

various forces of globalization, through its attempts to resist such intrusion, that popular theatre will discover a productive new self-definition.

## **FETISHIZING THE FOLK**

I am interested in exploring and interrogating the sustained interest in the techniques of popular theatre, an interest which borders on what I will call a “fetishization of the folk.” Why, for example, has Boal been picked up and embraced by so many in North America? Why have academics, the academy, and other institutions embraced his form of political theatre? Why does Sistren get invited to perform in the US on college campuses, or for delegations of visiting American and European groups in Jamaica? Why has little negative critical material about either been generated? How can the fascination with politically motivated performances from third world regions be explained? Having thought deeply about the practice of popular theatre for more than seven years, I find myself wondering about my own passionate engagement with both Boal and Sistren, an engagement that goes beyond academic curiosity. What is it about popular theatre, as developed by practitioners in third world nations, that I find so appealing? Is it part of a nostalgic yearning on my part for a historical time period that I “missed” – one which I imagine was filled with more artistic and political fervor, when making theatre seemed somehow much more noble and dangerous than it seems today? Could I have fetishized popular theatre as the contemporary manifestation of such political commitment? What then are the consequences – political, material and cultural – of this nostalgia?

In her discussion, “Shakespeare as Fetish,” Marjorie Garber seeks to explain the whys and wherefores of Western culture’s fetishization of Shakespeare. She notes that Shakespeare “calls up this nostalgia for the certainties of truth and beauty – a nostalgia which, like (I would contend) all nostalgias, *is really a nostalgia for something that never was.*”<sup>42</sup> What sort of nostalgia does popular theatre “call up”? Garber notes that these yearnings do not correlate with an authentic telling of history; they are a nostalgia for that which never actually was, but which imagination has conjured as a seamless narrative. Perhaps in a historical moment witnessing the erosion of locality, as discussed above, popular theatre “calls up” a nostalgia, for understandings of “community” which somehow exist outside the fragmenting forces of modernity. Perhaps, too, it is a nostalgia similar to my own, which remembers and longs for the time when theatre could more readily be a radical political act.

Christopher Balme’s discussion of the staging of authenticity in tourist performances at the Polynesian Cultural Center (PCC) in Hawai’i, provides theoretical insight for understanding this nostalgia. The PCC is an “ethnic theme park,” where tourists can visit several Polynesian villages, “encounter” natives and witness various native rituals, all of which have been designed and staged to satisfy tourists’ desire for “authentic” Polynesian culture. Balme notes how this desire for “authenticity” is a direct result of the globalizing forces of modernity despite the fact that the tourist gaze is inherently deauthenticating.<sup>43</sup> “The tourist gaze, in its search for the unadulterated as a

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<sup>42</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Symptoms of Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 1998), 167-8. Italics in original.

<sup>43</sup> “Staging the Pacific: Framing Authenticity in Performances for Tourists at the Polynesian Cultural Center,” *Theatre Journal*, March 1998, 50(1). Much of his article sorts through exactly this tension.

counter-model to the alienation of modernity, seems to contaminate the object(s) of the gaze in the very moment of its usually (mass) per- and reception . . . modernity's constitutive alienation . . . has bred as its antithesis the 'invention of tradition,' and the *increasing priority placed on authenticity in objects, people, and places* apparently located outside the realm of modernity."<sup>44</sup> While I do not mean to suggest that relocated popular theatre is dynamically or phenomenologically the same experience as these tourist shows, I do wonder whether the spectatorial desire that attracts audiences to each stems from a similar nostalgic impulse. Are the invitations extended to Sistren to perform in the US a result of a nostalgia for a time and place before and outside the overwhelming forces of globalization in which popular theatre is conjured as an example of "authenticity"? Does the audience arrive at the theatre expecting to see examples of "authentic" Jamaican folk culture? Moreover, is it the opportunity to witness such authenticity that brings them to the theatre in the first place?

At its ideal, popular theatre is a social praxis. But the myriad forces and conditions of cultural globalization have put popular theatre in danger of becoming a tourist performance, an example of "authentic" culture on display in locations disconnected from the social and political situations out of which it originally emerged. I began this dissertation by noting the predicament Baz Kershaw has said faces radical theatre: "To aim to be both oppositional and popular places performance on a knife edge

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<sup>44</sup> Balme, 65-66. Italics mine.

between resistance to, and incorporation into, the status quo.’<sup>45</sup> I want to suggest that the conditions of cultural globalization and the resulting nostalgia for “authenticity” have placed the function of popular theatre on a knife edge between social praxis and cultural tourism. I do not mean to say that popular theatre cannot travel without losing its efficacy, but I do believe that the framework created to contain those relocated performances plays a crucial role in determining their function in a given context. These two potential functions – social praxis and cultural tourism – do not represent a binary but rather are always impinging, to varying degrees, on the meanings being made of these performances.

The following example of two performances by the same theatre company I saw in October 1998, provides a useful illustration of the ways in which the framework and context created to contain relocated popular theatre performances contribute to determining both its function and efficacy. La Fomma, or Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya (Strength of the Mayan Woman), “is a cooperative of Mayan women and children from Chiapas, Mexico, that presents workshops that foster the creativity of women who have left indigenous communities in order to escape political, religious, and economic pressures.’<sup>46</sup> Playwrights, actresses and co-founders of Fomma, Petrona de la Cruz Cruz and Isabel Juarez Espinosa gave the same presentation of their work – which included short personal introductions, a slide history of the organization and a skit which was excerpted from a longer performance – at two different locales. The first was at a

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<sup>45</sup> Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 153.

conference which focused on new work by artists of color in Amherst, Massachusetts, sponsored by New World Theatre. The conference included performances, panel discussions and “case studies” of community-based work. Fomma’s presentation was one of these case studies, each of which was meant to give a “snapshot” of the artists’ work. Implicit in each of these case-studies was the fact that the work could not be precisely recreated in this arena and were only done to give the conference participants an *idea* of the work. The only problem that arose in the Fomma performance was one of translation. The Barnard student who served as their translator was not as fluent in Spanish as many audience members, who corrected her word-choices throughout the presentation. Most, however, in this context were tolerant of these difficulties and during the question and answer period addressed the women directly in Spanish.

Two days after the Amherst conference, the two women appeared at Barnard College in New York City. Invited by Denny Partridge, a professor at Barnard who had also been their liasion at the Amherst conference and who announced their New York performance at that event, the women did almost the identical presentation. The audience was made-up predominantly of young white Barnard students. (Why their performance hadn’t been more widely advertised was a mystery. Indeed, it would seem that a performance in Spanish by Mexican actresses would appeal to the large Latino community not far from Barnard’s campus.) Partridge introduced the women by noting their recent appearance at the Amherst conference and said that being at this conference with the women of Fomma, was “like going out on a Saturday night with the ‘popular

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<sup>46</sup> Conference program, “Intersection: An Intersection of Performance, Practice and Ideas,” Amherst, MA,

girls” because everyone wanted to talk and be with them. At the end of the performance, unlike at the Amherst conference, Partridge displayed various “handmade” crafts items that were for sale. The audience members could “buy” a bit of Mayan folk culture – and whatever cultural capital they felt they would accrue along with it – without ever leaving their campus oasis. At the end of the performance, there was a question and answer period with the same young Barnard student as at the Amherst conference, translating. The first woman to ask a question began her query in Spanish. She was obviously not a native speaker, but made herself perfectly clear. The translator instructed her to only ask her question in English, that she, the translator, would translate it into Spanish for Cruz Cruz and Espinosa, an action that effectively enforced the audience’s mediated interaction with the two women. The woman with whom I attended the show – who had also seen them perform in Amherst – and I both audibly gasped at this request. She was perhaps even more disturbed than I because her Spanish comprehension was much better than mine and she was aware of the many translation errors made throughout the performance.

I would argue that the way in which the latter performance was framed established this performance and the performers as fetishized, anthropological objects to be gazed upon. This was not popular theatre as social praxis, as Fomma’s work struggles to be in its original Mexican context, nor did it have an educational function as I believe it did in Amherst. Rather, this was an example of indigenous, “othered” culture put quite literally on show. In her introductory remarks Partridge said that “there was nothing else in the

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October 8-11, 1998, 10.

world like them [Fomma].” Her comments, I would argue, perpetuate what Balme notes is the “increasing priority placed on authenticity in objects, people, and places.” Too, I was struck by the absurdity of her claim, especially in light of the work I was doing on this dissertation. What I found most troubling about the experience is that an entire class of students was being taught to fetishize these women and their culture through the framework in which they were performing: the introduction, which metaphorically, made them into “the popular girls”; the availability of crafts to purchase after the show; and the mediated communication with the women themselves. All of these structural elements, I would argue, treated Fomma’s performance in much the same way that visitors to the PCC treated theirs; the presentation became a form of cultural tourism and all the better because the students didn’t even need to leave the campus.

Such fetishization of relocated folk culture is not unique to this era, nor is cultural tourism. Clive Barker notes, “Touring theatre has had a long history of cultural colonization and ideological dominance.”<sup>47</sup> Barker is referring to the ways in which colonial powers exported their own cultures to their colonies as an integral part of establishing ideological dominance. What then, in this post-colonial era, might the significance be of the opposite flow of culture, of the ex-colony sending its culture abroad, particularly to the former colonial powers? Important to consider in this endeavor, too, is *how* the culture comes. In the former relationship, the colonial powers were sending their own culture overseas; in the latter example, it is the neo-colonial power that is inviting the culture. Important too, to consider, is who is profiting from

particular flows of culture, although this may prove misleading in terms of where power and agency lie. For example, Sistren's travels abroad proved profitable for them in the form of grant support. Similarly Boal's travels and workshops abroad earn him a salary he could never earn in Brazil for comparable work. So, it would seem that interest in their work has been materially beneficial for both. Ironically, in this cultural moment, when locality is being eroded by the "scapes" of modernity, "authentic" folk culture sells.

### POPULAR THEATRE GROWS IN BROOKLYN

Appadurai's vision of the imagination as capable of "annexing the global" provides for the possibility for the construction of local spaces even within the midst of forces of globalization. In this regard, I think particularly of New York City which is, in many ways, a microcosm for the forces of globalization, diaspora and the blurring borders of local communities. This is a city in which I can travel to and through various ethnic communities on a daily basis; indeed it is a city where I *must* travel through and to these places to conduct the daily business of my life. But the city tests the ability of the imagination to carve out local spaces even when surrounded on all sides, even when reminded in many sensorial ways, of the permeability and artificiality of its borders. Or are these borders really artificial? The writing of this dissertation piqued my interest in exploring whether popular theatre, *as a social praxis* existed in New York and if so what it looked like, and how it functioned. The fact that I have been teaching in Brooklyn for

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<sup>47</sup> Clive Barker, "The Possibilities and Politics of Intercultural Penetration and Exchange," in The Intercultural Performance Reader, Patrice Pavis, editor, (London and New York: Routledge, 1996):250.

the past three years focused the location of my search. There are numerous educational theatre companies in New York (so many that NYU has a separate degree in Educational Theatre), so chronicling that work would be a separate and distinct project. I was interested to find a company that maintained connections with a particular neighborhood and whose goals and methodology were as close to those I defined elsewhere in this dissertation as popular theatre. This search led me to Teens Helping Each Other, a teen peer leadership program in Brooklyn with which I currently work as a volunteer drama consultant. The program was originally conceived as a community outreach program and is affiliated with Kings County Hospital, which provides it with office and rehearsal space and funds.

Teens Helping Each Other (THEO) has grown out of the Adolescent Educational Program based at the SUNY Health Science Center in Brooklyn. Started in 1990, the group is funded to do HIV/AIDS prevention education. As I discussed in Chapter Four, Pregones Theatre began doing similar work a few years earlier. Demand for educational theatre work on issues of HIV/AIDS prevention grew, and the SUNY Health Science Center was able to secure funding for the program that would become THEO from the AIDS Institute of the New York State Department of Health. The availability of funds for such a project was a direct response to the alarming rate at which HIV was spreading amongst inner-city youth. THEO employs teens from Brooklyn to work as peer educators who travel to various community centers in the Brooklyn area presenting to their peers, a combination of skits, songs and discussions on issues related to HIV prevention. The extent of THEO's involvement with a particular community

organization can vary. THEO has ongoing relationships with some community organizations for whom they perform on a regular basis, i.e. once a month. They have done several consecutive months' worth of programs at some public schools and community centers. Director Christine Rucker notes that THEO's goal is never to do one-time only performances, but rather to always provide follow-up work – in the form of additional performances, lectures, etc. – with every audience.

Currently, THEO employs between fourteen and twenty-two teens who must make a minimum one-year commitment to the program. Most remain members of THEO for two to four years. The theatre component of the program is augmented by a street outreach program; the teens of THEO frequently distribute pamphlets and other information about HIV/AIDS at various community venues. The program also provides a variety of supports for the peer educators themselves including, counseling; college application advice; tutoring; and scholarships to graduates of the program who have demonstrated academic excellence and a commitment to the betterment of their community. As Rucker, has noted, "THEO serves not only to spread the message about AIDS but also to enhance the academic performance of its members, their life skills and self-confidence. They help themselves while helping others."<sup>48</sup> THEO, she noted, is committed to the whole life of teens, not simply their sexual health, realizing that all of these factors converge in the type of decision-making that can affect their HIV status. I would argue that this program is a descendent of the popular theatre projects discussed in the preceding chapters of this dissertation. The program's goals and commitment to the

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<sup>48</sup> THEO press information

community it serves make this theatre work a social practice which hopes to intervene in the seemingly inevitable violence and death of so many inner-city youth. The program remains committed to the particularities of the needs of the people in its local community, performing almost exclusively in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods in Brooklyn.

This of course does not mean that the program operates outside the forces of globalization, nor that it need not negotiate these forces. Even though they might live in the same Brooklyn neighborhood, the teens – and the communities for which they perform – are exposed to the realities of life beyond its imagined borders through both their own travels and the sorts of cultural travels Clifford and Appadurai discuss. They try to remain connected to the specificity of their locale through, for example, the use of colloquial and street language, much as the popular theatre discussed in earlier chapters did. They also create characters in their skits that are products of the neighborhoods in which they live. But how successful these efforts are at saturating this work with local specificity thereby creating ruptures in the hegemony of globalization, is unclear to me thus far. In terms of the program's success, Rucker cites the relatively high rate of attendance, in comparison to other neighborhood teens, of its "graduates" to selective colleges.

I would like, at the end of this dissertation, to return to where I began and the questions that initially sparked this exploration. I wanted to gain a better understanding of the role that popular theatre has played as a tool for cultural intervention, critical pedagogy and activism, in order to see how it could enrich my own work in these arenas.

My original idea to conduct field research in Jamaica grew out of an interest in learning techniques that could be extrapolated and incorporated into my own work. But too, early on, I was haunted by the neo-colonial nature of my desire to “borrow” these techniques and have struggled throughout the research and writing of this dissertation to interrogate and come to terms with that. Part of that interrogation is what ended up fueling the theoretical inquiry in traveling cultures.

The title of this dissertation indicates my own interest in the empowering potential of popular theatre, as well as the genre’s self-articulated goals. In the introduction, I asked whether all cultural interventions, or for that matter all popular theatre, is empowering. At the end of this research and writing, I realize that the question, while useful for directing my investigation, is too simplistic. Of course all popular theatre is not empowering; as I have argued throughout, context and power circulate in complex spirals to effect the experience of participants in a popular theatre project and empowerment is not a measurable, quantifiable, tangible or even immediate, outcome. I hope however, that throughout this work, I have suggested that despite its simplicity, this question and its answers are useful tools for conducting the sort of interrogation to which popular theatre must always subject itself. While popular theatre, I would argue, retains the potential to be a viable site for practices of resistance in this globalizing era, the ways in which it negotiates these forces will determine its success. It is the work done to maintain the integrity of such a practice – to keep it connected to the realities of the lives of its audiences and agitate for change – that is *itself* a practice of resistance to hegemonic cultural forces. Popular theatre may not always be successful as social *praxis*, but its

constant *struggle* to be such makes it a vital tool for activists, educators, and politically/socially committed theatre artists.

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