

**Turning up the Volume:  
A Study of the Wan Smolbag Theatre Company**

Robin Taylor  
Oceanik Psi Ltd.,  
Suva, Fiji  
&  
Ian Gaskell  
University of the South Pacific,  
Suva, Fiji

**Abstract**

Research with a highly successful development theatre company 'Wan Smolbag', based in Vanuatu in the South Pacific, was conducted to establish why they have remained effective and successful for almost two decades. Wan Smolbag appear to be engaging in a number of different literacies simultaneously. Theatre performance as one kind of literacy is not part of the traditional ethnic culture. Likewise the development literacies that are associated with the process of modernisation are new to the people of Vanuatu. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed. We used a thematic analysis to highlight and bring out common themes. The results suggest that one of the principle reasons that the company themselves believe why it is that they have remained effective, is because of their attention to the 'art' in their performance rather than merely the 'message'. Implications for the implementation of Theatre for Development are discussed.

**Introduction**

Theatre for Development (TfD) aims to disseminate knowledge and thereby helps to modify attitudes and behaviour in regard to various social problems (Abah, 1997; Bakshi, 1989; Byam, 1999). This form of theatre, has, however, been subjected to questions, particularly from funding organisations, about its efficacy (Bowden, 1999; Dalrymple & Du Toit, 1993; Frank, 1996; Harcourt, 1990). There

is a lack of empirical evidence in the literature that TfD makes any fundamental difference to the audiences watching the performances (Bowden, 1999; Kerr & MacDonald, 1997; Mda, 1993). This lack of supportive data may be an additional contributing factor for why most TfD Companies last for a few months or at best for a few years (Mda, 1993). For the most part TfD Companies must be funded by aid donor agencies as the audience to which the performances are intended are normally not rich enough to pay and thereby support the companies as commercial enterprises. The funding agencies might reasonably ask the following: why use theatre when lectures are presumably easier and cheaper? If general illiteracy militates against the value of brochures or posters, aren't there other media that might work more effectively for our information campaigns? Why, considering the lack of empirical evidence pointing to its efficacy, should theatre be considered as a means of communicating developmental issues to communities rather than, say, the mass media of print, radio and possibly television? Before we renew our core funding, wouldn't it be a good idea to get an impact assessment done?

To the extent that TfD is often assessed purely in terms of a particular developmental topic, it may well be that the research instruments are testing the wrong things, that, as Prentki points out, the focus of evaluation should be on "theatre as development where developmental gains are contained in the experience of using theatre as a communication" (1998: 427). In other words, it is not the message that is important but the medium itself. The fact that the medium is an art form somehow seems to be left out of the inquiry.

Asserting the value of theatre as an educational tool has always been a cornerstone of the various theoretical defences against its detractors. From Aristotle, through Horace, to Bertolt Brecht, theatre has been constantly upheld as transforming, didactic and useful. Aristotle, who refuted Plato's notion that art is an exercise in mendacity and the arousal of negative emotions, gave us a refined theory of imitation and the awkward concept of catharsis by way of rebuttal. The "delightful instruction" of Horace, became a mainstay of the Renaissance response to the perception that drama was either frivolous escapism or morally corrupting. Brecht's *Lehrstücke*, or 'learning-plays', are early

manifestations of his theoretical affirmation that theatre could change and improve the social order. The Medieval Passion Plays, which gave the illiterate access to Bible stories, and the Morality Plays, which taught the doctrinal lessons of Christianity, are examples of what is described in the modern lexicon as “content literacy”.

Theoretical discussions of theatre as an educational tool are complicated by a muddle of labels. TfD and Theatre/Drama in Education are sometimes completely confused (Manyozo, 2002) or seen in a dialectical relationship whereby various practices associated with the former as community-based intervention can be employed in the classroom, the traditional context for the latter (Prentki, 2006). All of the definitions for this kind of theatre are subsumed under the concept of “applied theatre”, namely non-mainstream theatre employed for socially-directed, instrumental outcomes. As the editors of *Applied Theatre Researcher* point out

There is, to the lay publics that form the audiences of applied theatre, a quite bewildering proliferation of titles, categories, genres and sub-genres, nomenclatures that are sometimes disputed territory in the trade. The phrase applied theatre itself is still variously defined. Then there are TfD (theatre for development), TIE (theatre in education with or without hyphens), educational theatre and/or drama, drama in education (is that different?), and community theatre making a comeback. That's to say nothing of a range of categories that are more consistently defined for those in the know, such as playback theatre and forum theatre and its derivatives. Finally there are the portmanteau words like improvisation and role-play that can mean more or less whatever the speaker chooses them to mean ... (O'Toole, & Bundy, 2006).

Historically, theatre has always been used for (or at least justified in terms of) didactic purpose. But in its formal configuration as part of the classroom curriculum, Theatre in Education has been around considerably longer than TfD, which finds its origins in the application by Augusto Boal (1979) of Freire's (1972) critical pedagogies to the medium of theatre (Prentki, 2006). But while theatre in

the classroom has traditionally been used for purposes of literacy acquisition, for example in the Tudor schoolmaster's staging of plays by Plautus and Terence to enhance Latin language skills by both participants and audience, TfD as a whole is concerned with the broader conception of building competence in 'critical literacy' (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006; Shosh, 2005) and what has been called 'social language' (Gee, 2000) or 'social practice' (Carter, 2006; Street, 2003).

The idea of competency is at the heart of the contemporary, expanded notion of literacy, one that extends beyond the conventional definition, the ability to read and write. Just as 'text' from a post-modern perspective is any set of related phenomena, the ability to 'read' that text, to comprehend and respond to it, depends on a learned ability to decipher it as an encoded communication. The difference between the traditional concept of literacy and what is now capitalized as The New Literacy Studies is, in the familiar formulation, the difference between reading the word and reading the world. Street suggests that literacy "is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill" and "that it is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles" (2003, p. 77). Literacy is a term coupled with apparently almost anything that requires deciphering, learning and sharing a set of skills in a particular area, what have been called "communities of practice" (Carter, 2006; Choi, 2006). The re-conceiving of literacy as a broader, culturally and socially-based competence may shed theoretical light on questions regarding the educational value of theatre (rather than other forms of communication) as well as indicate flaws in the choice of variables that have been conventionally used to measure the efficacy of TfD.

TfD is a community-oriented activity. As part of its message-based content and its awareness-raising approach, TfD by informing the community has the power to actually form a community. There is a sense in which all theatre creates a community of its audience, at least for the duration of performance. Functioning as a type of what has been called "constitutive rhetoric", theatre generates a collective identity and attempts to generate consensus (Gaskell, & Taylor, 2004b). But being an audience-centred rather than agent-centred form of rhetorical transaction, TfD, in which the actual performance is only part of an extended workshop process, generates consensus through discussion, debate

and negotiation. In other words it creates a temporary discourse-community based on shared experience in a participatory and dialogic learning process which has been previously referred to as "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave, & Wenger, 2002), or "community of practice" (Carter, 2006).

Our research centres around an extraordinary Tfd company called Wan Smolbag Theatre (WSB). WSB is a professional company based in Port Vila, Vanuatu, a Pacific country about 2000 Km north of Auckland, who have been the foremost practitioners of Tfd in the South Pacific region for almost two decades (see Dagon, 2001). The Company's name, Wan Smolbag, means "one small bag" in Bislama, the *lingua franca* of the archipelago. It describes their minimalist production approach — the Company travels with only a suitcase to contain all their props and costumes. Their drama has covered such diverse topics as: domestic violence, forest protection, AIDS awareness, incest, tourism, reef protection, good governance, dengue fever. Given their longevity and record of achievement, the company serves as a model of its kind. It also presents an opportunity for exploring ways of recording the impact good Tfd has on its audiences. Our interest was in emergent, self-referenced literacies that would have applicability to modern discourses on Tfd in general. In particular, we were keen to explore the arena that much of the prescriptive theory tends to discount the primary reason for using theatre in the first place, namely, that it is a form of artistic literacy.

For us, it is a 'given' that this form of artistic literacy 'works', but we wanted to get a better understanding of why it works. The initial approach to analyzing the artistic process seemed to lie most logically in consulting the company members. Our paper presents examples of individuals engaged in debate and discussing issues in a way that extends the normal, culturally-determined discourse of their social language. Their observations on their own *praxis* are not heavily laden with pedagogical theory. Their statements are, however, infused with an individual and collective sense of purpose. These actors, all of whom are ni-Vanuatu, view themselves as social workers, making a difference and effecting positive change within their larger community. As Gee suggests, "what is at stake—as Paulo Freire knew so well—is the creation, in and out of schools, of social languages

(literacies) through which all of us can read and write more equitable selves and worlds” (2000 : 419).

## **Methodology**

Fifteen members of the Wan Smolbag Theatre group (WSB) participated in interviews and focus group discussions. These individuals included eleven actors, one director/actor, a scriptwriter, a community researcher and a community reproductive health nurse. Interviews followed a semi-script, which allowed a more relaxed style of questioning whilst still asking the essential questions that had been formulated. The interviews and focus groups were recorded to allow the researchers to concentrate on the actual interview as well as allow the interviews to be transcribed.

Situated at the west end of Port Vila, Wan Smolbag Haos consisted of two offices, a performance space with audience seating, a studio and a community health clinic at the rear of the building. Our approach was designed to minimize the intrusiveness of the research process and interviews were fitted around the schedules of the WSB members in their everyday work. Focus groups and interviews took place during the normal working day, which was between 08:30 and 14:00. The recording took place in and around various parts of the theatre company's base house, either in their performance space (focus groups), the recording studio, the health clinic or just outside the building. Interviews were initially conducted with both researchers together in order to establish a semi-structured interview technique that was relatively consistent and comparable. Subsequent interviews were undertaken by each author individually.

Sixteen face-to-face, semi-structured interviews and four focus group discussions were conducted with members of the theatre company over the course of a week. In addition, we stayed to watch the WSB in operation during their rehearsals and management meetings. Wan Smolbag Kids Theatre presented a new production, complete with post-show discussion, to an invited audience on the night of our arrival in Vanuatu. We also had an intensive discussion during one of the evenings with the scriptwriter and the manager/performance director of WSB.

On returning from Vanuatu, the taped interviews, focus groups and discussions

were transcribed and entered into a custom built database that allowed us to 'tag' sections of the transcript with relevant keywords.

## **Results**

The comments that we quote here to demonstrate our analysis, are verbatim quotes. We have made no alterations to their statements. Some of the wording may read awkwardly because of the style of English used in Vanuatu. Many of our respondents are speaking English as their third or fourth language.

### **Indices of the Drama 'working'**

We loosely characterise a development theatre play as 'working' if the drama appears to engage people in viewing the play and subsequently either helping to change people's minds, their behaviour or even just their willingness to discuss a topic. There was not a single WSB member that thought that WSB did not 'work', although there was some variation as to how, or to what extent, it 'worked'. This may not be a totally surprising result as each of the interviewees has a vested interest in the company and indeed earns a salary from it. However, many of the indices indicated by the interviewees can lend themselves to future external verification. For instance, most of the interviewees talked about the fact that the topics they present in drama cannot be simply communicated verbally by an expert. A health worker, for example, could not walk into a traditional village where sexual matters are considered taboo, and expect to be well received whilst she or he talked about how to use a condom. However, if the information is presented in a play, the topic can not only be introduced in what is perceived to be an acceptable context, it can also be subsequently addressed in a post show, question and answer discussion.

Another perceived index for the respondents gave as an indication that the drama had in fact engaged the audience, was the willingness of the latter to question them intensely, many times long after the performance had finished and the discussion period was over. The interviewees also reported anecdotal evidence, that many times technical experts from the health or agricultural ministry indicated that the villagers were more willing to listen to them after WSB had

performed. Indeed, the ministries often do not consider going to communities now without WSB to help introduce the topics. This is again an issue that can be verified in a later piece of research to provide some sort of external verification.

An almost 'inverse' indicator of WSB's success comes from comments from WSB's funders reports who express a concern that some government ministries are relying too much on WSB to do the work that they might be expected to do.

### **'Hooking' the audience with good performances**

All the interviewees considered the artistic quality of the performance to be of vital importance. The emphasis by the interviewees on performance quality is linked to the perceived requirement that the play be entertaining. If it is not entertaining, the audience will not be motivated to stay and watch the play. In all likelihood, subsequent performances will not generate an audience at all.

...when you perform on stage you just need to involve more of the audience. That's where you get people interest on you. If you lost your audience people will just "Oh forget about it, he's a waste time guy, you know in those play!". But if you get people on you side and that's where you can know [that you have captured the attention of your audience]. [WSBM2]

or

[Ian] When you play a bad person, in a play how does the audience view you.

[WSBM1] They hate me.

[Ian] How do you feel about that?

[WSBM1] Yes, it's good for you to hate me because that's the part I was playing.

[Robin] So you know you've done well?

[WSBM1] Yes.

One of the actors comments on the Company's abilities as a performance



ensemble. Notice how the actor makes comparison to other groups who are not so concerned about artistic professionalism.

[WSBM7] ...when someone is missing yeah, his line or her line, someone has to tell “You what to say ...” or they just sit there and someone who is directing has to call out “Your ...” yeah? But with our group when you miss it, I have to work out what’s the next line.

[Robin] And you think the audiences may, they see that.

[WSBM7] They see that difference. And when the other groups go and perform on the islands, when they got stuck, everyone knows “oh they got stuck.”

Regarding the effort put into the acting:

You have to believe like, uh, like I said, like you have to believe in your part, in your character's role to make people believe you.

[WSBM8/2]

Capturing the attention of the audience by artistic means is, then, according to the perception by all the Company’s interviewees, the primary performance strategy. Serious content within the play is conveyed indirectly almost as a by-product of primarily establishing and maintaining a channel of communication with an attentive audience.

### **Wan Smolbag as an ensemble**

At least half the interviewees made comments that related to the close working relationship of the group. The sense of creative collaboration extends to the initial generation of scripts, the rehearsal process and the actual performances, where the actors are mutually supportive. They feel that this close relationship allows them to produce very ‘tight’ performances; covering for each other if, for example, an actor forgets lines or makes other mistakes. Many of the respondents commented on their awareness that a lack of harmony within the group would affect their performances, and that if it does emerge they need to take remedial action.

So, or if you're not happy with someone inside the group, you just can't just leave the group and ... we have to sit down together and you call a meeting, so we sit down and we talk about it, say "I don't like this, I like this". When everything is finished so we come together, shake hands, forgive each other, then continue with our work ... [WSBM7]

Similarly

I don't know, but maybe this is what makes us a good company, all of us sharing, we all work as a team, we all work together it's not like one of us gets cross and just walks off. If I am cross with one of them, I just tell them what I think and we all sit down and talk about everything, we always discuss about everything together. What mistakes we make and how we think he should perform, how he should do this or how I should do this, we all share our thoughts, we all share everything together. [WSBM12]

### **Wan Smolbag's identity & reputation**

At least half the respondents stated that they thought their performances 'worked' because of the identity and 'branded' reputation of WSB. This of course raises the question of how WSB achieved such an identity, but the fact is that they presently enjoy the fruits of their reputation since audiences will make the effort to come and see their plays. Often, audiences will see the same play many times.

In Vanuatu at least, the company's name has now come to be the generic term for a theatre company. We were told that ni-Vanuatu often referred to other companies as 'Smolbags'.

And in Vila whenever they see another theatre group from another place they go "Hey that's the Smolbag from Solomons" but they don't understand that that's got a totally different name it's not Smolbag. But they always say "When went go to town we saw this Smolbag ... the Smolbag that came from Fiji, and the Smolbag ..." every other theatre will be Smolbag whether ..., yeah so... to others its a Smolbag. Every theatre group is a Smolbag group.

That's how they accept it, yeah they don't really understand it but that's it, yeah.' [WSBM6].

### **Artistic strategies to present taboo topics**

All the respondents agreed that one of the most powerful reasons that their drama appeared to 'work' so well was their ability to open up a taboo topic for discussion, by first presenting it in a non threatening way. As an example, a play dealing with the topic of incest, depicted the act of incest on stage using a performance technique called 'out of association character interaction'. The 'molesting uncle' mimed the caressing of 'his niece', whilst the actress playing the niece, situated elsewhere on stage, made her protests against him in a non-associated orientation. To have portrayed this more literally, would have caused huge offence, with either the audience leaving or even a physical disruption of the play itself.

One of the actors had this to say about taboo (tapu) topics.

[Robin] Why, what's special about the drama that make's it work - that allows people to talk about tapu topics?

[WSBM4] Because I think, it's a tapu for them but if you play it in a way that you make joke of it, you like sort of make fun in the play like if I'm a sperm, I just like run in and say "Yeah, I'm a sperm!" and you know – or semen "Yeah I'm a semen! And I'm there, I'm the one who is going to transport you. Right let's go!"

Another actor mentions WSB's success compared to other professionals who cannot talk about the taboo topics.

And we've opened... yeah ... a lot of places where people couldn't talk about subjects. Like the health people, even though they have nurses a lot of the nurses are very scared to talk about family planning and condoms and stuffs in the villages they work at. Even if they're from the same place. [WSBM12]

Despite this, respondents did tell us that they have had plays almost come to a virtual standstill as hecklers have tried to disrupt the plays when taboo topics

have been raised. In other words this seemed, particularly in the early years of WSB, to be very close to the barriers of what is and what is not acceptable.

### **Engagement of the whole community**

The female actors, in particular, stressed that the plays were effective because they reached the whole community, particularly the women and children. If an expert comes to talk to a community, then often this discussion is considered 'men's talk' and intended for the decision makers of the village. However, through a play, the theatre company accesses the whole community.

I mean it's like, even if that person sat down and spoke to the people he might get a lot of people. But with us its the kids who will come, it's the mothers, it's the old people. But with the Forestry person, it might be: the leaders, the men and the chiefs. It wouldn't be the women who would be involved and the kids who would be involved. With us it's everybody, because we have a discussions and exercises for everybody. [WSBM12]

### **Sensitivity to the culture of the audience**

The vast majority of the respondents mentioned their sensitivity to the culture of their audience. If they do a potentially contentious piece of drama, on reproductive health for example, then they often divide the audience into male and female adults and take the children aside to take part in different kinds of games with other members of WSB group.

Sometimes we do this kinds of play like family planning and this. We have to get the adults together and children they have to ... like sometimes its like kastom and culture something, and then I have to look after the kids. Play games with them do anything while their parents are entertained by this play. [WSBM3]

Likewise:

Like if we said "OK, Good morning everyone! This morning we are going to demonstrate to you a condom". No [it] isn't that the way?

We have to divide the people together, ladies on the side, the young people over here, the old man's down there, children could play with some of us around. 'Cause if we would say like in the communities like, they might say we encourage people to use condoms everywhere, anywhere, any time. [WSBM8/1]

## **Discussion**

One of Mda's (1993) assertions is that Theatre for Development (TfD) has suffered from a colonialism of ethnicity, class or education in constructing an understanding from an ethnocentric perspective from each of these cultural divisions. We sought to take this critique on board (both authors are from Anglo-American ethnic cultures) by trying to develop an understanding of the process by using a 'bottom-up' approach. By asking the members of WSB why they thought they were successful, we were able to garner reflections, thoughts and commentaries from members who mainly come from the same circumstances, environment and upbringing of the audiences to which they play. We acknowledge that this is not a fool proof methodology and a radical post-modern perspective might still argue that our presentation of the research, execution and subsequent interpretation is still heavily biased by our own ethnic-culture. However, such a charge taken to its logical extreme contends that no research is ever valid. Instead we have taken the stance that this is one approach and we would like to explore how far it might go to parsimoniously explaining WSB's success.

### **Developing a conceptual model of Theatre for Development (TfD)**

We decided to assume, in the first instance, that some kernel of truth probably exists in the assertion by all company members, that artistic intention and artistic literacy has in fact a direct influence on the apparent success of Wan Smolbag.

At present, the Company has been established for almost two decades. If they claim that the quality of art in their performances is of central importance, then this would appear to be a claim that we should, initially, take seriously. Either WSB are mistaken in their own beliefs and in fact they are doing (unconsciously) what the previous research has emphasised, along the lines of (Bandura, 1977;

Freire, 1972; Fishbein, & Azjen, 1975); or their longevity can be attributed to something previously neglected.

What our respondents tell us that if there is an distinct overt "message" in their performances directed to the audience, it is simply to: look; listen; and to enjoy.

In doing so WSB are in fact tapping into the 'social language' that is encoded in the performance and then decoded by the audience appropriately. In other words as a social act, and theatre has always been considered the most 'social' of the arts, not just in its tendency to depict social groups in action but in its core transaction of bringing people together to share experience, theatre, itself, is social practice and therefore by Street's definition, a form of literacy (2003). To focus on the educational 'message' as the key element in TfD, the conventional 'transmission' model of much early theory and the basis for many of the attempts to evaluate TfD, is to ignore the fact that the medium of theatre is a language in itself. The interviews of the WSB respondents actually seem to support more recent theoretical models that suggest TfD does not work by sugar coating the bitter pill of instruction, but rather, as pure communication. As Prentki puts it

The latter is a more difficult strategy to sell to project-funders who look for more tangible results than the empowering processes involved in participating in acts of fiction. None the less, there are all manner of potential gains from the drama process, especially for those members of a community who are not normally allowed or expected to have a public voice or take public actions within that community (1998 : 427).

Use of an appropriate literacy that is socially embedded allows for many 'side issues' to occur such as: performances that allow the whole community to be exposed to ethno- culturally sensitive issues which are nevertheless accepted within the context of the performance; or to bring up ideas and concepts that would otherwise not appear to be of intrinsic value initially such as conservation issues or good governance.

The underlying development issues, while introduced by the performance, may actually be explored through post-performance discussions and follow-up work by

experts. Exploration of the themes central to the performance piece will often occur through a repertoire of games and exercises with the community members. For example, statue work is conducted with small groups accompanied by a WSB facilitator that explores the topic in a series of linked tableaux demonstrating good and bad sides of the issue in question. These images created by the groups serve by way of theatre language to communicate in concrete visual terms the complexities of particular themes. As Wright & Garcia point out, literacy in drama/theatre "should mean three things: the ability to decode the symbol systems of dramatic performance, the ability to understand how drama/theatre makes sense, and the ability to create something in the medium" (1992). In the work of Wan Smolbag these three aspects of literacy associated with the medium are explored respectively through the performance, post-show discussion and pre-show exercises. If the exercises prepare a channel for communication through participatory expression, and the performance itself constitutes the artistic symbol system, the post-performance discussion, by encouraging reflection and debate, helps to generate 'critical literacy'.

For example, at the conclusion of a 1999 production called "Sonia", a play that addresses the issue of unwanted pregnancy leading to infanticide, the company presented the audience with a series of cards identifying who was to blame. The cards represented Sonia, herself, her parents, the boyfriend, and "other factors". The audience was invited to congregate at one of the cards and with the aid of markers and vanguard paper to indicate the reasons for their choice. In the performance witnessed in Fiji, most audience members tended to blame the girl, slightly fewer the boyfriend who fails to live up to his responsibility, some the parents for failing to instill proper religious and moral values and a few gravitated to "other factors". Each group then elected a spokesperson who addressed the other groups explaining why blame should fall on their selection. After the presentations the group members were then invited, if they had been persuaded, to move to their new choice. As witnessed, a significant number did, in fact, move from their ideologically and culturally determined positions of conventionally apportioning blame to individuals to reassemble at the station "other factors". When asked why, they indicated a new awareness of the social complexity of the issue. All of this illustrates what can be seen as an exercise in critical literacy, the

ability to reflect, to make ethical judgments and to consider variant readings of the same text.

In so far as any donor-funded theatre piece is often only one element in a multi-pronged strategy, the awareness-raising potential of theatre and its power to encourage articulation and critical reflection by community members serves to prepare the community for more conventional sources of information such as posters, pamphlets and talks by experts on the relevant issue. This view of the 'impact' of TfD suggests that such a piece of presented drama's impact cannot be thought of in a conventional cause and effect relationship but as part of an interconnected whole as suggested by (Winner, 1998). Such a model of the 'success' of TfD may be one of the reasons why empirical evaluations on the efficacy of development theatre lacks substantive positive support (Elliott, Gruer, Farrow, Henderson, & Cowan, 1996). For instance, it would be naive to believe that presenting a [good] development theatre on the health dangers of unprotected sexual intercourse, will result in a subsequent short to medium increase in the use of condoms.

If the perception by WSB's interviewees is correct, then determining what makes a play 'good' or not requires an in-depth study of the actual spoken and unspoken 'performance' texts. Conventional analysis of WSB's scripted plays and performance techniques would necessarily be highly subjective. However, we believe that such an analysis would, reveal an emphasis on rhetorically-designed (i.e. persuasive) structures and techniques engineered to generate an audience engagement with the story, characters and situations of the respective pieces. The social development issues in the plays (thematic content) will be inseparably attached to the form and style (artistry) of the performance. Note that the 'persuasion' suggested here is not some form of message-oriented manipulation of response. It is an invitation to engage in dialogue. As suggested earlier, the rhetorical thrust of theatre is constitutive in nature, it is a language that is, by nature, community-forming, one that encourages social action.

## **Conclusion**

Paulo Freire's writings, particularly *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, serve as a



theoretical foundation for developmental projects in general. His emphasis on dialogue and participation as the primary elements in effecting meaningful social change through education have become a refrain for all writing on the subject and a guiding principle for much of the actual practice, especially in terms of theatre. Any theatrical endeavour serving as a catalyst for social change that fails to observe these principles will fail to achieve a process of 'conscientisation' without which there is apparently no true learning. As a consequence, the methods and techniques of theatre for development are often judged according to their adherence to Freirean pedagogy (Mda, 1993).

Subsequent to the qualitative interviews with the company, we were able to match many of the themes and issues addressed above with examples of actual practice in the field. The Freirean emphasis on learning as a participatory and dialogic process, an ideal developed through his literacy programs and implicit in WSB's performance procedures, was illustrated in the latter's use of pre-show audience warm ups and post-show discussion. The creation of communal identity that this entails is central to the company's approach. For example, in a production of a play called *Louisa's Choice*, a piece on domestic violence staged in the round, the community members are called upon to portray the villagers in the play as they judge a debate at a village council. In other words, the production actually stages the idea of the audience-as-community actively involved in ethical decision making.

Similarly, in a production of *Something for Nothing*, a play on sustainable development, the company uses the idea of a "living book" where characters come to life as they are described in a book being read by a teacher to her students. We have suggested previously (Gaskell, & Taylor, 2004a) that the use of literature to educate and transform a represented 'audience' within the play demonstrates a specific theatrical form of literacy, one that is designed to bring about the potential for attitude and behaviour change to the real world audience that actually watches the play. The significance of art as a function of successful WSB practice is, here, thematically incorporated into the play which self-reflexively asserts its own power to educate through the imagination.

In attempting to describe why he thought Wan Smolbag was successful, one of

our respondents (WSBMB8) produced a powerful analogy. He suggested that WSB was “turning up the volume”, which is what happens when people listen to their favourite radio shows. As the good stuff is happening, the volume is *turned up*, as the “boring”, talking parts of the show come on, the volume is *turned down*. When WSB performs, he said, the volume is *turned up*. If, as we have indicated, TfD works primarily because it is an art form, it does so by opening up a channel of communication. It catches the attention of the community. As Prentki points out, “when people’s attention is held through being entertained, they are far more likely to understand and to learn than when a lecture is being delivered to them” (1998 : 429). The value of theatre in promoting social development is not just that it builds competence in communication; it also encourages individuals and communities to learn how to learn.

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