Theatre in the Service of Health Education: Case Studies from Uganda

International organizations are increasingly turning to theatre as a means of raising development issues, exploring options, and influencing behaviour. This paper examines some structures and techniques inherent in this type of applied theatre, analyzing two plays used to supplement AIDS education programmes in Uganda. One is a video production by a typical urban popular theatre group, while the second production exemplifies the Theatre for Development approach through its sub-genre, Campaign Theatre, used to raise awareness on health issues, hygiene, sanitation, child care, and the environment. The study analyzes the performance of the two plays and addresses some contradictions arising from the involvement and influence of external organizations.

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THIS PAPER describes and analyzes Theatre Development (TFD) - i.e., theatre promoting development-projects - and typifies a sub-genre of TFD that has emerged in Uganda and other countries during the last five years, which I call Campaign Theatre (CT).

This distinction is based on a definition of TFD as project-oriented plays aimed at a comparatively small target-group, and concerned with the implementation of one concrete project, such as the building of a borehole. Campaign Theatre is a form of Theatre for Development which is not so concerned with a concrete project but rather with raising the consciousness of people about such topics as health, hygiene, sanitation, child care, environmental issues, or AIDS education. It is employed on a national level in information campaigns, almost taking on the character of an advertisement. Both forms make use of popular theatre elements.

The plays I have selected for discussion are representative of theatre concerned with AIDS education in Uganda. Both were performed at the AIDS Quake Festival on World AIDS Day 1989 in Kampala. One is a video-clip by a popular commercial theatre group, JK Ebonita, and is typical of the way the popular urban theatre groups react to AIDS and incorporate it into their plays. The other, Give a Chance, is an example of Theatre for Development (TFD) - i.e., theatre promoting development-projects - and typifies a sub-genre of TFD that has emerged in Uganda and other countries during the last five years, which I call Campaign Theatre (CT).

The plays I have selected for discussion are concerned with AIDS. I would like to stress, however, that I focus on this one topic not because Uganda is the only country hit by the disease, but rather because President Museveni and his NRM Government, in their attempt to address the issue of...
AIDS, have adopted a very open policy. Uganda is badly affected by the disease, but is also, among African countries, the one which has reacted most vigorously to the pandemic.

Not only the Government and self-help groups, but international aid organizations are committed to combating AIDS, and they increasingly realize that theatre can be an effective instrument to spread information. Because of this, numerous plays concerned with the disease were performed, with varying degrees of success, between 1989 and 1991, providing a singular example for the phenomenon of CT and of its various approaches.

Case Study 1: JK Ebonita

One of the most popular theatre groups in Kampala is JK Ebonita. The group is part of Jimmy Katumba and the Ebonies, a noted Ugandan pop group. They perform each weekend at the Theatre Excelsior in Kampala which holds about 700 to 1,000 spectators, and where their plays and shows are regularly sold out.

One reason for their popularity is that they are bilingual. The actors switch between English and Luganda, enabling both a Luganda-audience as well as non-Luganda speakers to follow the plot; consequently, the audience at the Theatre Excelsior consists of Ugandans belonging to different ethnic groups as well as expatriates.

For a festival on World AIDS Day 1989 in Kampala, JK Ebonita contributed a video-clip with a short play on AIDS. In front of a disco, a young man, Moses, waits for his girl-friend who is late. He falls asleep and dreams of dancing with various prostitutes at the disco. At the end of the evening, he leaves with three women. The next scene – still part of his dream – is set in the village. Moses comes home, very thin, coughing, with a skin disease and stomach pain: the typical symptoms of AIDS. In the background, the three women from the disco can be seen watching in disbelief and horror.

Moses’s mother tries to help him by calling in a traditional healer to treat him. After the healer has left, Moses falls asleep and dreams of a mask dancing around him, singing 'Love more carefully', one of Jimmy Katumba’s favourite hits. Then the scene shifts back: Moses wakes up in front of the disco when his girl-friend arrives, two hours late. He realizes that he only suffered from AIDS in the dream. He and his girl-friend enter the disco where the pop-star Jimmy Katumba is just interrupting his performance for the intermission. Still remembering his dream, Moses steps on stage and sings a song: 'Love more carefully'.

As with most of Ebonita’s songs, 'Love more carefully' is accompanied by dance. In their dances Ebonita typically mix elements of folk-dance with modern disco-dancing. Consequently, their dances include characteristic movements of traditional dances, particularly the shaking of the hips, which are combined with disco-dance features. By performing them on stage, however, in front of a passive audience, the dances have lost their most distinctive characteristic – all members of the community participating – and so lose their original function.

What used to be dances for certain festivities – e.g. war- and wedding dances – are deprived of their content by transferal onto a proscenium stage. No longer alive as elements of Ganda culture, they function as reminders rather than representative elements of that culture. Desai remarks that what originated as a popular theatrical form becomes de-popularized through the process of urban appropriation:

Although it bears a certain formal resemblance to its original source, the appropriate performance ceases to be a site of popular articulation and moves away from the processual discursive practice of popular theatre and towards a different discursive practice.

Costumes in Ebonita’s plays are applied similarly as dance. In the video-clip, Moses and his friends wear western urban dress, whereas the people in the village wear traditional clothes.

The combination of such Baganda elements – costume, dance, music – with those of western culture serves a purpose, since
western dress is associated with progress, modernity, and open-mindedness, and by
displaying some of the attributes of western culture on stage a link is made between
values and customs of traditional Ganda society and progress which is associated
with the West. The audience has the impression of getting the best: it is reassured
that in the course of development it has not
ignored its cultural roots, while at the same
time the notion of progress is conveyed.4

The video-clip conveys the message that
AIDS is caused by promiscuity. This is done
by opposing city life, with all the dangers of
its glamorous nightlife, instead embracing
village life with its traditional value system.
Only when the healer cannot help him any
more does Moses realize the importance of
adhering to traditional moral values. The
contradiction is resolved in the end, when
Moses wakes up and realizes that he has
only been dreaming. In reality, he has only
one girl-friend, and the message is that he
and his girl-friend are both faithful and
therefore not in danger of AIDS infection.

In the song at the end of the video-clip,
'Love more carefully', the importance of this
kind of monogamous life-style is again
emphasized. However, by presenting village
life with its intact value system as solution
while at the same time advocating mono-
gamy, the message becomes ambiguous,
since the Ganda moral system allows for
polygamy. What becomes obvious here is
that two aspects have to be distinguished in
plays for AIDS education: on the one hand,
there is the technical aspect of employ-
ing elements of Ganda culture in order to
appeal to the audience, while on the other
hand the culture has to be infiltrated with
foreign ideas like monogamy in order to
convey the message that only a change of
behaviour can stop the spread of AIDS.5

The message of the video-clip is also
weakened, I think, by the contradiction inher-
ent in the costumes. On the one hand, the
suggested solution is a return to traditional
Ganda moral norms, as implied visually by
contrasting city life, where Moses caught
AIDS, with village life, where he finds com-
fort once he is sick. On the other hand, in the
last scene the importance of monogamy is
demonstrated by showing Moses as having
only one girl friend.

As a result, a contradiction develops be-
 tween the cognitive, rational system of the
audience that understands the demand for
monogamy and faithfulness in order to
avoid the infection with AIDS, and its affec-
tive, subconscious system. On that level, an
appeal is made to traditional moral norms
with visual elements belonging to western
culture. The communication may thus work
only on a superficial level, which may not
result in a change of behaviour.

The main purpose of the video-clip is
entertainment. The actor who plays Moses is
one of Ebonita's best dancers, and in the
disco scene he has ample opportunity to
demonstrate his skills, accompanied by the
popular tunes of Jimmy Katumba's songs.
Then there is the dancing mask which, with
its elaborate costume, is also fascinating to
watch. To a Ugandan audience, these cos-
tumes are appealing in and of themselves,
for after twenty years of almost complete
isolation they now see elements of western
pop culture on stage.

With their elaborate costumes and sound
equipment JK Ebonita begin to fulfill the role
that film and TV have in western culture.
This is also reflected in the design of their
plays. The montage of motives, themes and
structural elements imitates that of foreign
TV serials, as broadcast by Radio Uganda.
What is important in Ebonita's video-clip is
the performance rather than the topic AIDS.

The AIDS Quake Festival

The second play I would like to discuss
works the other way round: here, AIDS
information is the central topic, and every
theatrical device is employed in order to
convey the educational message.

As mentioned in the introduction, inter-
national organizations realize the usefulness
of theatre as a means for disseminating in-
formation and work with Ugandan artists to
carry out AIDS education. I would now like
to describe a project financed by the World
Health Organization (WHO), although other
organizations such as UNICEF, DANIDA, and Action Aid sponsor similar projects, typically carried out in close cooperation with indigenous organizations.

It is thus hoped that the TFD plays will, through their use of theatrical techniques and metaphors, manage to relate to Ugandan society, and not impose foreign ways of communication. Thus WHO financed the AIDS Quake Festival, where JK Ebonita's video-clip was shown, and the organization of the festival was carried out by the Association of Performing Artists in Uganda (APAU). It was part of an AIDS-awareness campaign by APAU, and was sponsored by WHO and the National AIDS Control Programme.

The campaign culminated in a concert on World AIDS Day to educate the general public on the origin, spread, prevention, and control of AIDS. To provide the artists with adequate information, a three-day workshop was held at the National Theatre in Kampala, assisted by the National AIDS Control Programme, which handled the AIDS education. The workshop was attended by a cross-section of artists, and was intended to give a scientific, global, and national overview of the disease, attempting to cover its origin and cause, socio-economic implications, misconceptions and common questions, prevention and control, facts about condom use, and cultural habits that promote the spread of AIDS, identifying and addressing target groups through effective communication skills in presenting the AIDS message and patient care. There was group work and discussions, while the lectures gave a scientific global overview of the disease, its social-economic implications, and medical facts.6

On World AIDS Day 1989 the artists had the opportunity to present their contributions in the Festival held in a gymnasium at Lugogo/Kampala. The fact that Lugogo is a gymnasium, not a theatre hall, illustrated some inherent disadvantages. The acoustics in the big hall were not adequate, and while this did not matter so much for the musical performances, the plays were very difficult to understand for the audience. Additionally, the distance between stage and audience proved to be too great. The middle-section of the hall, where usually ball games take place, was not used for seating, with spectators instead being seated on rising bleachers at the fringe of the pitch.

This arrangement created an unfortunate distance between the stage and audience. Discussions or direct interaction between audience and actors, crucial for TFD plays, were not possible, and maybe not intended by the organizers. The Festival thus had the character of an entertainment show with the audience passively watching.

Case Study 2: 'Give a Chance'

One of the plays performed at the Festival, Give a Chance, was written by the actor and playwright David Kateete. The main characters are a young girl and an old man with the representative names of 5-14 and Oldpa, dialogues between whom comprise the first two scenes. Scene One serves as exposition, presenting the problem, introducing the characters, and explaining that in the aftermath of the AIDS Quake, when AIDS has destroyed life like an earthquake – everyone except 5-14 and Oldpa having died of AIDS.

As the sexually inactive age groups, they are the only ones not to be affected by the AIDS catastrophe.

In Scene Two, 5-14 wants to know why all the other people have died, and Oldpa tries to explain:

Isn't this why all those people were contaminated? All those from 15-25 years to whom sex-mating was a shortlived pleasure, wild and purposeless? All those from there to 40 to whom sex-mating was so sweet and only remedy after the troubles of the day? And those above 40 who had to have a good time before retiring?

To which Oldpa replies:

You have said it again. That is why you are free 5-14. That is why you have to be protected very preservatively. You are the only light of hope for mankind.

The play tries to show that AIDS can only be conquered by education and information. It
is very important, therefore, to make this information available to the children, for it is their generation that can be saved from AIDS. As 5-14 says:

Look at yourself Oldpa. Right now, you are standing for all the grownups. The parents who misguided their off-spring... That is how you grownups wanted us to stay. Half-knowledged. Yet we don't want to be kept in the dark... We clumsily start venturing into the secret lands where the sweet apple fruit yields in abundance.

The issue of the hierarchical nature of Ganda society, which does not encourage children to ask questions, is addressed critically here, and it is suggested that this behaviour has to change: children must be encouraged to ask questions, and have to be enlightened on sexual matters so that they have a chance to avoid infection with HIV.

During the course of the play, concepts such as 'safe sex' and 'zero grazing' are explained and discussed. 5-14 asks questions, just as other children of her age would probably like to ask their parents, but either do not dare, or to which they do not get any answers. A relationship between parents and children is thus demonstrated and suggested that is not known in Ganda society, when children ask questions claiming their right for information.

Oldpa tries to answer these questions. Frequently, he is embarrassed and tries to be evasive, but 5-14 keeps on asking. It is made unmistakably clear that, although it may be difficult and against the behaviour usually adopted towards children, there has to be dialogue. Children have the right to gather all the information necessary to know how to protect themselves.

The Conference of Killer Diseases

Scene Two ends with the appearance of a young man, and all three characters freeze. Then the development of AIDS is enacted in a mime scene. Killer diseases like whooping cough, measles, and diarrhoea are personified, the actors representing them wearing tight gymnastic suits. Through music, dance, and mime, it is conveyed that the diseases are holding a conference with AIDS as their chairman.

The infection with AIDS is visualized by healthy people dancing with those who are already infected, then falling to the ground, and afterwards carrying a banner with the inscription 'AIDS CASE'. Dance here is used as a symbol for sexual intercourse, which is underscored by the tight gymnastic suits of the personified diseases, which serve an erotic function - their goal to attract attention. The actors dancing in tight gymnastic suits are aesthetically beautiful to watch, and this aesthetic function thus appeals to the audience while the erotic function works within the play itself.

The apparent attractiveness of the personified Chairman AIDS becomes a metaphor for sexual pleasure. It is conveyed that this pleasure only lasts for a short time but leads to disease as shown in the dance, when those people who have not resisted the temptation and danced with AIDS become HIV-carriers. When HIV tries to dance with 5-14, the young man attacks and, eventually, beats him, and HIV flees. AIDS has been defeated by the new generation, which has adhered to the principle of being faithful to one partner. The way dance is applied here clearly stands in contrast to how it is used in JK Ebonita's shows. Whereas Ebonita deprives traditional folk dance of its meaning and offers it as entertainment, in Give a Chance a new dance is created, with the aim of communicating a message to the audience.

The play ends with an epilogue. A new generation is born which is free of AIDS, the children of 5-14 and the young man. Oldpa is dying, and once more admonishes everybody to stick to moral values. The play ends on an optimistic note, with everybody singing the title song:

We are here the future generation
That's free of AIDS
We want to see all the sons of creation
AIDS-free
Give a chance to the children of today
To make a future world without AIDS

In Give a Chance, the basic facts of AIDS are
convoked through dialogue, thereby appealing to the rational part of the audience's consciousness. There are also stimulants that trigger the conscientization on the emotional level. In a society such as Uganda, where children are considered to be of utmost importance, the presentation of a child as the only survivor of the AIDS Quake has instant appeal.

On the one hand, the spectators feel pity for the child, who now has to live with the only other survivor, an old man. On the other hand, this appeal to the principle of human continuity and vitality, according to which the continuation of humankind has to be ensured through procreation and children. It is the duty of each member of society to contribute to that continuation. Traditionally, too, old people in Ganda society are treated with respect. Because of their experience, what they say is accepted, so the admonitions of Oldpa to lead a more moral life carry great authority.

The play aims to convey the facts about AIDS by getting the audience emotionally involved in the fate of the young girl, and by relying on an old man appealing to its traditional value system. The reference to the traditional identity is also reinforced by the costumes: the old man wears a traditional garment, a 'kansu', whereas the girl wears a 'kikoye'.

The play identifies promiscuity, irresponsibility, and moral degeneration as causes of the AIDS catastrophe, and the solution is suggested: to lead a life of sexual fidelity. As in JK Ebonita's video clip, a return to traditional moral behaviour is connected with monogamy, whereas the traditional acceptance of polygamy is not mentioned at all. That solution is presented visually at the end of the play, when a new AIDS-free generation is born as a result of 5-14’s and the young man's moral life style. As in Ebonita's video clip, a return to the strict moral system of the Baganda is suggested, while at the same time the importance of monogamy is stressed. Although a monogamous relationship is not part of tradition, Ganda culture is still invoked as an instrument to convince the audience to abandon both prostitution and polygamy as unsafe sexual habits. The appeal, therefore, is not so much to the old moral polygamous system of the Baganda, but rather to a moral system filled with new rules as binding as the old.

The AIDS Quake Festival, which has been recorded on video, has now been edited, and the video is being made available for campaigns in schools.

The Approaches Contrasted

The case studies represent two ways of dealing with the topic of AIDS through theatre in Uganda. One is exemplified by the productions of commercial popular theatre groups like JK Ebonita; the other by the plays produced in co-operation with international organizations and non-government organizations, like Give a Chance.

So far as production techniques are concerned, Ebonita uses expensive and complicated stage technology as well as elaborate costumes in order to increase the entertainment value of the show and to attract larger audiences. In Campaign Theatre, the productions are much simpler. The money is rather spent on the managerial framework and the organization of the project, so that a play can be performed in the service of information campaigns as often as possible, in many places, always conveying the same message.

That the focus in the fight against AIDS is on big, spectacular information campaigns results from the fact that international organizations and NGOs with their own internal pressures are involved. After twenty years of almost complete isolation, and with many current problems, Uganda is a welcome new field for development organizations. Since the war ended in 1986, more and more of them have brought money into the country – a considerable part of it for the fight against AIDS. The money has to be spent, and there must be immediate and quantifiable results to account for its use.

Big information campaigns in that respect serve the purpose of reaching many people so that the educative message is spread most widely, and they bring measurable data in
the form of numbers of spectators. Relying on audience figures as the measure for success may, however, lead to self-delusion. Spectacular events like the AIDS Quake Festival are well attended and therefore appear successful for the organizers in their reports to headquarters, which then give more money to be spent in more information campaigns.

One consequence is that the projects are too focused on Kampala. They are usually designed there, and frequently the authors have the conditions of Kampala in mind when creating the plays. The projects may therefore meet the needs of people in the urban centres, but not those of the rural communities.

Some successful attempts to overcome this problem have been made. Among critics, theatre practitioners, and development workers, there exist various names for this kind of community-building project, although through the use of popular theatre.

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Notes and References

1. Among critics, theatre practitioners, and development workers, there exist various names for this kind of community-building project, although through the use of popular theatre.

2. Ross Kidd describes popular theatre as 'a means of expression which has traditionally been used to educate the young, unify the community, and elucidate the commonly felt concerns and aspirations of the people... Popular theatre builds on an educational approach and means of communication which are already familiar to and accepted by the community. It is their spontaneous means of education and grassroots communication.' See Ross Kidd, 'Popular Theatre and Nonformal Education in the Third World: Five Strands of Experience', in Hansel Ndumbe Eyoh, Beyond the Theatre (Bonn: German Foundation for International Development, 1991), p. 3. For a more detailed discussion of the term see Frederick Cooper, Who Is the Populist? AFRICAN STUDIES REVIEW, XXX, No. 3 (Sept. 1987); Karin Barber 'Popular Arts in Africa', AFRICAN STUDIES REVIEW, XXX, No. 3 (Sept. 1987).


4. Petr Bogatyrev, The Functions of Folk Costume in Moravian Slovakia (The Hague; Paris: Mouton, 1971). Whereas in the national campaigns theatre was made for the population, in development projects with a target-group policy there was a preference for theatre made with or by the local population.

In conclusion, I would like to point out that, although I have treated TFD and its sub-genre CT as isolated phenomena, they cannot be regarded as independent from current development politics. To stress this relationship, however, is not to play down the actual achievements of theatre. Through theatre, changes are brought about more easily than through lectures, radio, and newspapers. Theatre involves people and motivates them for action - which is, after all, its objective.
7. The term ‘zero-grazing’ is derived from cattle breeding where it refers to cattle being kept on one’s own property. In the AIDS campaign it is used as a slogan promoting fidelity.


10. A ‘kansu’ is a long, kaftan-like white garment worn by Ganda men. A ‘kikoye’ is a colourful wrapper, usually in the colours red and yellow. Ganda women wear it underneath their traditional ‘busuti’, a long dress with a wide skirt.

11. In 1991 the School Health Education Project of the Ministry of Education and UNICEF jointly launched a nationwide drama competition in primary schools. One play containing the AIDS message, The Riddle, was to be performed by all the primary schools in the country. Another attempt to reach more communities with AIDS information was made by the Ugandan pop-star Philly Lutaaya, who died of AIDS. Having learned that he was suffering from AIDS, he initiated an extensive AIDS-information campaign which included media other than theatre – video- and audio-cassettes, concerts, and other public appearances. As long as his health allowed he travelled all over the country to reach even remote areas with his message. The aim of Campaign Theatre to reach many people as well as the technological progress which allows for the integration of video, film, cassettes etc., suggests that Philly Lutaaya’s campaign set the tone for the future. Several NGOs show videos of plays about AIDS on information tours through the country.
