

Negotiating Design in University Applied Theatre Projects: The Case of *Safe Cities* (2015)

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ABSTRACT

This account engages the aesthetic possibilities in the choice and use of space in University of Zimbabwe applied theatre project, Safe Cities (2015). This paper argues that design has, for quite some time, been considered peripheral in applied theatre performances, thus creating challenges for designers who seek to foreground communicative efficacy on it. In most university projects, student-practitioners pay particular focus on the performative presentation of their productions, overlooking the influence of space on their performances. This article exposes the blind spots in the choice and use of Beit Hall to host the Safe Cities (2015) project. The article submits that beyond the efficacy of an applied theatre project, it is fundamentally important for applied theatre practitioners to pay particular attention and embed scenography, in its totality, into their presentations.

INTRODUCTION

This account engages the aesthetic possibilities in the choice and use of space in University of Zimbabwe applied theatre project, *Safe Cities* (2015) and, by extension to other similar applied theatre projects. The article adopts, as its point of departure, Christopher Odhiambo's (2004, p. 6) observation that applied theatre projects are first and foremost theatrical "performance about the people by the people for the people, expressing their struggle to transform their social conditions and in the process changing those conditions." This characterisation of applied theatre projects as purely theatrical performances demands an analysis framework that moves away from an emphasis of effects to an aesthetic experience (Thompson, 2011). Consequently, most applied theatre projects in Africa have largely focussed on the efficacy of narratives and dialogic nature of the presentations (Sibanda, 2017). The central argument of this paper, which extends on my argument elsewhere (Sibanda and Gwaba, 2017) is anchored on the pretext that the *Safe Cities* (2015) project was principally a performance presented to spect-actors, witnesses and audiences. As a performance, it was my expectation that the students would deploy aesthetic designs to complete their performance. Yet, when these students were assessed, the aesthetic component was not considered and therefore did not have an effect on the overall marks allocated to the students. It is the contention of this paper that this act is ultra-vires the framing and presentation of the project. I therefore, through this paper, seek to highlight the missed aesthetic opportunities and blind spots that university applied theatre projects such as the *Safe Cities* (2015) project overlook.

SPACE AND POLITICS: PERFORMANCE AND PRACTICE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ZIMBABWE'S BEIT HALL

Space is an important and influential element in applied theatre and theatre performance, in general. It affects and influences the theatrical experience and communicative aspects, and shapes audience meaning and reception of the performance. Performance spaces are a site for the struggle between the power of performance in the arts and the performance of power by the state (wa Thiongo, 1997, p.11). With space come politics, horizon of expectations and meaning (Kershaw,

2000, p. 138). Pearson and Shanks (2001) in Victor Ukaegbu (2013, p 33) submit that, as a result of this politics, expectation and mode of spectatorship, “audiences experience the performance in a state of preparedness which derives from the past experiences and the way in which they have chosen to order them and accord then significance.” The applied theatre practitioner needs to exploit the “different potentialities” (Sloan, 2018, p. 587) that may lie in his/ her chosen space due to these different experiences brought by the participants and facilitators.

The University of Zimbabwe’s (UZ) Department of Theatre Arts uses the Alfred Beit Hall as its performance space. The Beit Hall is a colonial residual space modelled as a proscenium arch design. It is within this space that all university theatre performances, inclusive of the case study project, are performed. The UZ’s Theatre Arts programme, according Robert McLaren (1993, p. 36) was introduced, initially as drama courses in 1983, as a strategy of transforming the University into a ‘people’s university’ through fostering a symbiotic relationship between the university and surrounding communities. In 1988, the UZ introduced the ‘Theatre in the Community’ course with the sole purpose of training students in practice and methodology of theatre for development and theatre in education (McLaren, 1993). The course was divided into three modules: Practical Drama I and II and Community Outreach. Students were taught acting, playmaking, improvisation, script writing and directing under Practical Drama I and II and used the Community Outreach module to gain practical experience through performing collaborative community plays that addressed development issues in the Harare community (McLaren, 1993). This paper submits that three and half decades later, the University of Zimbabwe is still using this model for its applied theatre courses. It is this foundation, pivoted in performance in its strictest sense that I argue in this paper for the inclusion of scenography as a part of the communicative strategy in projects such as the *Safe Cities* (2015) especially in light of new research and developments in the area (Mackey 2016; O’Grady 2017; Sloan 2018).

Although the Zimbabwean socio-cultural and economic landscape has changed over the years, the approach to applied theatre practice at UZ seems to have not changed. While in the early 1980s through the 90s, students collaborated with the prisons and national army, albeit with security imposed restrictions, currently students collaborate

with primary and secondary pupils, government departments and civic society organisations. This comes with its own gate keeping, self-censorship and surveillance challenges. As it came out of the deliberations during the *Safe Cities* (2015) presentation, government institutions view university students as ‘enemies’ because they expose them or put them on the hot seat when they do not have the juridical power to make pronouncements or decisions. As a result the process of getting clearance for applied theatre projects is long, tedious and time-consuming, a privilege students do not have especially in a semesterised education system. These challenges force students to abandon the applied theatre process approach and adopt a performance one, where they present a ‘play’ dealing with issues raised during research and anticipate an in-depth discussion that will yield positive results – navigating towards self- and collective transformation. Because these projects are presented in the Beit Hall, a known performance space with an inscribed conventional horizon of expectations and meaning, I attest that students must adopt a complete approach to performance or they run a risk of being labelled ‘badly performed pieces’.

SPACE AND SPECTATORSHIP

Marvin Carlson observes that spaces determine the social and cultural interpretation of aesthetic designs. The use of a theatre or a space that does not have a link or significance to the community necessitates the semiotic interpretation of aesthetic designs from the perspective of the space rather than community. When applied theatre performances are presented in conventional theatre spaces or rented spaces, the social realities confronted by the spectator are coded differently from his/her conditions in the source community (Sibanda and Gwaba, 2017). Nkululeko Sibanda and Privilege Gwaba (2017, p. 530) further submit that the Theatre Arts degree programme at the University of Zimbabwe has an integrated approach to teaching and learning that demands students to transfer knowledge gained in one course in practical examination of other courses. It is therefore a given that every performance must draw knowledge and expertise from other courses, to enrich the aesthetic image of the final presentation. This provides a need to assess the influence of this teaching and learning strategy on

the execution of applied theatre projects.

A (performance) space has the power to influence and transform the audience into different states of spectatorship. This process of transforming and shaping of participants through space is affixed on conventions attached to the space. Buildings in which performances take place are presented as 'cultural spaces.' These cultural spaces, created by architects, enable practitioners to attach cultural codes that determine the reception and appreciation of performances within these spaces. These cultural codes are not only associated to the physical forms of these spaces, but also the behaviours within these physical forms (Balme, 1999, p. 228). The context specific spatial concepts latent in cultural spaces influence performance space structures in terms of their physical form show that "places of performance generate social and cultural meanings of their own which in turn help to structure the meaning of the entire theatre process" (Carlson, 1989, p. 6). Aesthetically, spatial designs are therefore coded with meaning which influence the spectator's reception of cultural products. The *Safe Cities* (2015) project was staged in the Beit Hall auditorium although the spatial narrative of the performance located the characters in the streets of Harare. Is the contention of this paper that the use of the Beit Hall as a performance space characterised the participants into different categories of spectatorship.

Freddie Rokem (2002) identifies three types of participants who come to a theatre. There's what he calls a spectator, an audience and a witness (Rokem, 2009). A spect-actor is one who watches a performance and participates in it (Boal, 2013). Ken Gewertz (2004) submits that Boal's spect-actor is free not only to comment on the action, but also to step up on stage and play roles of their choice. In doing so, they discover new ways of resolving the dilemmas that the play presents. To bear witness is to interrogate the "role of the person present and by extension, in the act of recounting the event that has been witnessed" (Das, 2016, p. 20). The process of witnessing describes an engagement with artworks that are created with the intention to share intimate experiences such that they might allow for possibilities of social transformation (Das, 2016). Kelly Oliver's (2001, p. 251) conceptualisation of witnessing invokes Augusto Boal's (2013) transformation of a bystander audience member into a critical and participatory 'spect-actor' in performance. Boal's approach to performance separates a [passive] audience from an audience as a

witness by destroying the barriers between a performer and spectator. He observes that “all must act as protagonists in the necessary transformation of the society” (2013, p. 34). An audience member is one who comes into a space, passively watches the performance and does not participate or comment till the end.

The role of applied theatre is to initiate transformation at an individual and collective level. As a result, it demands the kind of a participant who will actively and critically participate in the process of problem identification, critical reflection and action-process towards developing a solution to the identified problems. This foregrounds Boal's spect-actor as the ideal participant in applied theatre. Although Das' concept of the witness highlight characteristics critical to social transformation, the fact that catharsis is at an individual level and does not spur action towards collective transformation creates challenges to an applied theatre presentation, such as the *Safe Cities* (2015) project, achieving its desired objectives. The witness is couched in the hybrid space between a passive audience member and a spect-actor; a no man's land in respect of applied theatre.

STAGING THE *SAFE CITIES* (2015) PROJECT AT THE BEIT HALL

The *Safe Cities* (2015) was a follow-up project to the Uses of Theatre project (2014) conducted by the UZ's Bachelor of Arts Honours Level Two 2015 class (Sibanda and Gwaba, 2017). Initially, it was designed as an intervention to address the frosty and condescending working relationship between the Harare City Council (HCC) and informal traders, at one level and HCC administration and the Greater Harare Association of Commuter Operators (GHACO), representative association of commuter omnibus operators, at another level¹. A need for a safe space for engagement was thus needed urgently for these involved parties and the *Safe Cities* (2015) provided that platform for discussion and interface between ZRP, GHACO, NAVUZ, Ministry of Health and Child Welfare, Ministry of Small and Medium Enterprises, Ministry of Local Governance, Town Planners Associations, Environmental Management Agency (EMA) and Harare City Council on these issues, using the medium of theatre. The presentation modelled as a workshop was conducted at the UZ's Beit Hall with a

¹ Please see Sibanda and Gwaba (2017) for a more in-depth narrative of this project.

performance by the students followed by discussions between the parties present who represented these different entities (Sibanda and Gwaba, 2017).

While the *Safe Cities* (2015) project was performed at the Beit Hall, the 2014 one used an open space at Copa Cabana². Critical to these two performances is that they were meant to attend to the same spect-actors/ stakeholders, with the exception of the multitudes of vendors and commuter omnibus drivers. This transposition of the stakeholders to an enclosed Beit Hall 'safe' space within a recognised university, far-removed from troublesome and ungovernable streets creates a new horizon of expectation and directly affects the process of engagement. This invokes Richard Schechner's notion of "negotiating with an environment, engaging in a scenic dialogue with a space" (1994). In reframing the horizon of engagement from Copa Cabana to the Beit Hall, the spect-actors, performers and facilitators of the *Safe Cities* (2015) had to negotiate with the historically inscribed meanings on the space during and after the performance. Interesting to note is that during the post-performance discussion, spect-actors kept referring to the presentation as a 'performance' highlighting the frame through which they were using to engage both the project and issues raised.

The use of a conventional performance space for a project that demanded a site-specific space moves the presentation away from the basic principle of applied theatre (Nicholson, 2005). When conducting an applied theatre project, one should identify a community and work with the concerned people in identifying common developmental problems. Although, this has its own challenges associated with power, hierarchy and interests, within the UZ set-up, it is the best approach. Community located spaces grant relevancy and contextuality to issues raised as these spaces are usually an embodiment of the totality of the people's lives and experiences. These spaces also grant the site-specificity to the presentation and issues raised in performances. Yet, the students who facilitated the *Safe Cities* (2015), identified a community with a developmental site-specific problem but chose to use the UZ's Beit Hall, a space that belongs to a different community, far removed from these challenges and its own historically generated meanings and horizon of expectation. Once a site-specific community

² Copa Cabana is located downtown Harare. The performance took place on the edge of a taxi rank.

based project is taken away from that community, expectations and meaning of performance change and issues raised lose currency and agency. By bringing the project to the Beit Hall, the students therefore downplayed the agency and currency of the issues raised and sabotaged their project.

From a spatial aesthetic perspective, the Beit Hall was not the best space for this kind of a project because when one walks into the Beit Hall, they come with the expectation of watching a performance or a show, not to be part of a dialogue or discussion. While the students assumed (and expected) that the audience would adjust to the forum theatre presentation, I argue that this was an aesthetic oversight, though historical, and has continued to affect applied theatre projects at the UZ, in this instance created more challenges than opportunities for the students. It is this failure to acknowledge the influence and effect of spatial aesthetics on applied theatre projects such as *The Safe Cities* (2015) that university and by extension, community theatre practitioners disrupt the communicative efficacy of their presentations.

The use of the Beit Hall as a performance space for *Safe Cities* (2015) project created all these three types of a participant. The participants were made up of Theatre Arts students, officials from the Combined Harare Residents Association (CHRA), NAVUZ, Harare City Council, the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education and the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare. As the performance started, the student performers invited everyone to join and participate in warm-up games. The warm up games transformed everyone who participated into spect-actors (Boal, 2013) or “actor substitutes” (Tompkins (2012, p.10). However, these spect-actors did not participate at their free will, as Boal demands, but through compulsion. In such a scenario, participants are always aware that they are part of a scheduled and determined process which must be undertaken so that the project rolls on. Yet, during these warm up games, another group was created; the witnesses. This group comprised most of the invited parties, mainly from the two ministries, City Council and University of Zimbabwe students, who were not part of the Theatre Arts Honours II class. This group witnessed the warm-up games, giggling and laughing at those who made mistakes and encouraging, by clapping, those that did well. As such, this group was not fully active and participative such that they could reach a stage of critical consciousness and self-awareness.

The third and final group, arguably the biggest, that was created and, emerged due to the choice of the performance space, was the (passive) audience. As alluded to before, an audience member is one who enters the performance space, sits, watches the performance, applauds and leaves, without participating or commenting. An audience member is not interactive with the performer or core-audience members. The audience members were largely made up of First Year Theatre Arts students, Ministry and CHRA officials. I observe that these parties, especially those from the Ministry and CHRA simply attended the workshop in response to the invitation. In most cases, these were junior staff members with no power and authority to make decisions and contributions that would have an impact on the issues debated and operation of their organisations. As a result, they sat and took notes, presumably so that they could use them as proof that they attended the assigned event. It can be argued therefore that, some of these officials attend these projects as part of their organisation's public relations management strategies. This is the reason why there have been so many follow up applied theatre projects over the years because issues are not debated conclusively. These audience members only contributed when they had been asked to do so, sitting comfortable in the 'safe zone' provided by the Beit Hall, which sits in the heart of the UZ.

The failure by students to appropriate the Beit Hall into what Jenny Hughes and Helen Nicholson (2016, p. 5) call an 'appropriate ecology' that allow indeterminacy, opens up possibility into potentiality. In using the Beit Hall as a venue for the *Safe Cities* project, the students were operating at a possibility level. Possibility is "what a thing can be said to be when 'on target' and so it is limited by normative notions of what that target should be" (Sloan, 2018, p.586). In staging the the *Safe Cities* project in the Beit Hall, it was therefore received as a 'performance' in its normative sense, rather than an applied theatre performance meant to create a platform for engagement.

If the students had explored the 'potentiality' (O'Grady, 2016) that lay in the Beit Hall through design or took the performance back to Copa Cabana, the *Safe Cities* (2015) project could have modelled its participants into the desired ones if the students had chosen a contextually relevant site-specific site. Although, in every performance one is bound to find all these three types of participants, and even many more, this project desired a specific type of a participant; the

Boalian spect-actor. If the students had taken this project back to Copa-Cabana, where the vendors and commuter omnibus operators work from, the majority of the audience members would have been transformed into spect-actors. The street is more interactive and takes away the surety of safety granted by the university and the Beit Hall. In the words of Cathy Sloan (2018, p. 586) such as a space “evades normativity based on hegemonic values and the imposition of neo-liberal social impact agendas.” Second, as a follow-up project, taking it back to where it was initially performed meant that there was a possibility for and/ of continuity. Some vendors and commuter omnibus operators who participated in the previous edition could have also participated in the 2015 edition, further enriching the discussions. In drawing it away from the initial site of the first performance, continuity was curtailed.

CONCLUSION

I have argued throughout that community theatre practitioners should appreciate and understand the currency of what I term ‘the politics of design’ (Sibanda, 2017). I frame the politics of designs as “a process and conduct of decision making” in the creative process of developing and implementing scenographic designs in performance (Sibanda, 2017, p. 322). For example, the politics of space relates to the considerations of the performance spaces used for rehearsals and performances. Most of these challenges that I have raised specifically with the *Safe Cities* (2015) project are a result of a failure to appreciate and understand the politics of design, which would destabilise the suppositions of the Beit Hall. Key to this failure was the absence of an appointed focal person in charge of design. If the students had appointed a focal person to oversee their design needs, the *Safe Cities* (2015) project would have communicated, effectively, at two levels and allowed its spect-actors to enjoy a total theatrical experience, yet achieve its set objectives.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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