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# THE TRANSFORMATIVE AND HEALING POWER OF THEATRE OF WITNESS

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## Abstract

*This article describes the healing and transformative effects of a social justice theatre program called Theatre of Witness on participants and community members in Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland. It begins with a review of relevant literature, including sections about artistic ways of knowing, transformative learning through theatre and storytelling, and theatre for peacebuilding. The research is still in process; however, the findings have some similarities to research done on other social justice theatre programs used for peacebuilding. The key themes of this program are authentic, vulnerable storytelling through testimonial theatre, and a process of empathy development by humanizing the "other."*

## Résumé

*Le présent article décrit les effets thérapeutiques et transformateurs d'un programme de théâtre de justice sociale, le Theatre of Witness (théâtre du témoignage), sur les personnes participantes et les membres de la communauté de Derry/Londonderry (Irlande du Nord). Présentant d'abord une revue de textes pertinents, il inclut des sections sur les savoirs artistiques, sur l'apprentissage transformateur par le théâtre et le conte et sur le théâtre comme stratégie de réconciliation. Bien que la recherche soit toujours en cours, les résultats sont similaires à ceux de recherches menées sur d'autres programmes de théâtre de justice sociale utilisés pour la réconciliation. Les thématiques clés de ce programme sont le conte authentique et vulnérable par le théâtre du témoignage et un processus de création d'empathie par l'humanisation de l'« autre ».*

## Background

When people from two or more cultural groups interact, cross-cultural intergroup conflict often occurs due to cultural differences, among other factors (Gudykunst & Mody, 2004; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). Sometimes cross-cultural conflict in intergroup relations stems from a difference in worldview, as a result of ethnocentrism and social identity (Tajfel, 1982; Turner, 1987). Cross-cultural tensions and conflict need to be addressed to ensure

more peaceful and equitable intergroup relations. Allport (2008) and others (Bataineh, 2016; Pettigrew, 1998; Wilkinson, 1991) suggested that intergroup relations could be improved and prejudice reduced by intergroup contact, interaction, and dialogue. Based on such interactions, understanding and empathy can emerge (Stephan & Finlay, 1999). Singer and Lamm (2009) defined empathy as the "ability to share the affective experiences of others" (p. 81). Nonetheless, interaction and coordinated dialogue in communities facing conflict are not easy. To address such contentious environments, adult community arts programs can be useful tools for transformative learning and perspective transformation, including the development of empathy and conflict resolution (Bang, 2016).

This article focuses on an adult community arts program called Theatre of Witness (TOW). TOW is a social justice theatre program based on the concept of testimonial theatre (Cohen-Cruz, 2010). This program was founded over 30 years ago in Philadelphia to address intercommunity conflict, and now also exists in Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland. TOW began as a way for Teya Sepinuck (the founder) to explore certain social justice issues and to ensure that marginalized voices were heard. She described the program as follows:

Theatre of Witness is a form of testimonial performance and documentary films performed by people sharing their personal and collective stories of suffering, transformation and peace....the work brings people together across divides of difference to bear witness to each other's life experiences. Performers who have survived trauma, marginalization, oppression, and the complexity of the human experience, address some of society's most challenging issues from a multiplicity of perspectives. The performances weave the performers' stories together with music, spoken word, visual imagery and film into dynamic theater that humanizes the "other" and cultivates compassion and empathy. The result is authentic, raw and powerful theater that celebrates the resilience of the human spirit. (Sepinuck, 2017, p.1)

Over time, TOW has become a source of healing and transformation between perpetrators and victims and between groups of people in conflict.

TOW has performed numerous productions in the United States and other countries. The main locations are the Greater Philadelphia area (1986–2009, 2014–present) and Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland (2009–2014); for the latter, TOW was offered with the aid of peace-process funding from the European Union. Derry/Londonderry and Northern Ireland as a whole have experienced ongoing sectarian, racial, and cultural conflict through the civil unrest often referred to as "The Troubles" (1968–1998). TOW in Derry/Londonderry was centred on bringing people from various sides of the past and present sectarian/ethnonationalist conflict together as participants and audience members. TOW's legacy in Northern Ireland lives on through community workshops in organizations and schools, where former TOW participants use TOW films to help community members discuss and process past and present cross-cultural conflict.

I began to research TOW in spring 2017. I wanted to explore how this program reduces cross-cultural conflict and develops empathy in the participants and audience members in both Philadelphia and Derry/Londonderry. After obtaining university research ethics approval, I began a cross-cultural comparative case study, gathering data through

semi-structured participant interviews and written audience reflections. For the purposes of this article, I will focus solely on TOW in Northern Ireland. I interviewed former TOW participants in Northern Ireland during May 2017. The audience reflections were submitted after the performances (2009–2014) and entered into the theatre archives, which I was given access to.

In all research, but particularly research where deeply ingrained opinions and attitudes are entrenched, it is critical to address the positionality of the researcher. Regarding my social location, I am a middle-class, white, female graduate student. I have some Irish ancestry and am slightly biased toward the Irish nationalist side of the Northern Irish history and current events. I have travelled to Ireland and Northern Ireland three times in the last four years. I have a broad background in the arts and believe the arts have unique characteristics that can help build communication and empathy between diverse groups of people. I am both an insider and an outsider with the TOW program; I am researching the participants' experiences from the outside, but I have experienced insider training with Sepinuck about how the program works.

### **Relevant Literature**

Adult community arts programs are beneficial sites for transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) because they create spaces for aesthetic and extrarational experiences, which provide the foundation for deep learning to occur. Many adult educators and researchers have written about aesthetic and extrarational perspectives (for example, Brookfield, 2005; Brookfield & Holst, 2011; Dirx, 2001; Greene, 1995; Yorks & Kasl, 2002). Arts programs create an awareness of self and an awareness of others, and they serve as a means for social action and a context for learning (Lawrence, 2005b). They also facilitate understanding and dialogue in ways that direct conversations often do not accomplish. Imagination and creative expression allow us to turn inward and examine our consciousness and subconscious. Because the arts are an extrarational way of knowing and doing, they can provide an array of opportunities for deep transformative learning to occur (Hoggan, Simpson, & Stuckey, 2009), which is necessary for personal and social change. This brief literature review will focus on four areas: (1) artistic ways of knowing and transformative learning, (2) transformative learning through theatre and storytelling, (3) social justice theatre research and programs, and (4) theatre for peacebuilding.

#### ***Artistic Ways of Knowing and Transformative Learning***

Theories about artistic and creative ways of knowing grew out of the theories on multiple ways of knowing. Lawrence (2005a) discussed the limitations of traditional ways of constructing knowledge in adult and higher education and made the case for artistic ways of knowing in adult education. Artistic ways of knowing complement Mezirow's transformative learning theory in many ways. According to Hoggan et al. (2009), "Multiple ways of knowing is directly connected to transformative learning in that art and creative expression offer an opportunity for us to engage in alternative forms of expression, which may shift the way in which we view our current situation" (p. 17). Hoggan et al. defined transformation as "a kind of deep learning that challenges existing, taken-for-granted assumptions and meanings, and allows us to learn in a holistic way from multiple parts of self" (p. 9).

### *Transformative Learning through Theatre and Storytelling*

Because of the diverse nature of artistic expression, there are many types of art forms that can lead to transformative learning. For the purposes of this article, I will focus on the use of theatre and storytelling for transformative learning. Role-play and theatre opportunities allow for "trying on" different perspectives and opening one's awareness to other ways of being. Bassett and Taylor (2007) stated that

when, rather than merely watching others do it, people engage in "make believe," they can often temporarily let go of a long-held perspective for another that may be new, different, and sometimes challenging. Engaging in role-play enables someone to be someone else, if only to a limited degree and for a little while...engaging in this intimate way with the "other" often leads the role-player to experience some shift in his or her own perspectives. Using non-rational parts of themselves allows people to access their imaginations and thereby perhaps experience a breakthrough or deepen their self-knowledge and understanding of others. (p. 355)

This quote highlights the effectiveness of role-playing and acting in perspective transformation, and the fact that this type of art form is open to anyone, not just actors. Similarly, Lewis and Viato (2007) discussed the use of Reader's Theater as a tool for transformative learning within the area of teaching and training about human diversity. They noted the power of creating opportunities to encounter the other as a way to develop multicultural competence. They also mentioned that it is important to allow time for reflecting upon and discussing these experiences afterward. The TOW findings presented later in this article support these statements about the potential for transformative learning experiences through theatre and role-playing.

Lawrence and Butterwick (2007) considered the transformative dimensions of arts-based processes. They felt that the arts allow for deeper expression regarding difficult and emotive issues. They noted that the arts can create a space for risky storytelling, when one imagines and connects with one's own oppression and the oppression of others, as well as feelings of empathy. They stated:

Exploring oppression from a transformational learning perspective requires engaging with the subjective-objective dialectic, that is, it involves both the naming of lived experiences that are often painful and traumatic, and also a process of making sense of these experiences in order to collectively and individually take action to achieve social justice. (p. 411)

Butterwick and Selman's (2003, 2012) exploration of popular theatre showed the ways embodied knowing, storytelling, and affective knowing interconnect in popular theatre and become key elements in creating spaces for transformational learning. TOW is another example of this kind of theatre.

### *Social Justice Theatre Research and Programs*

Social justice theatre is a form of applied theatre that focuses on social justice issues. There are many forms of applied theatre. Some broad categories are community theatre, theatre in

education, and theatre for development. TOW is a form of testimonial theatre, which also falls under the umbrella of applied theatre. According to Prentki and Preston (2009), using theatre for social change lies at the heart of Bertolt Brecht's practice and philosophy. They noted that Brecht took Marx's dictum and applied it to theatre, much like Augusto Boal took Paulo Freire's educational philosophy and applied it to theatre. Boal is famous for his *Theater of the Oppressed* (2000) work and techniques. Many forms of applied theatre draw from these roots (Prentki & Preston, 2009).

Prentki and Preston (2009) identified these core conceptual themes regarding the theory and practice of applied theatre: "poetics of representation, ethics of representation, intervention, participation, border crossings, and transformation" (p. 11). Other related themes, such as community, sustainability, and facilitation, are also included. Taylor (2003) described the main purposes of applied theatre:

The theatre is *applied* because it is taken out from the conventional mainstream theatre house into various settings in communities where many members have no real experience in theatre form. The theatre becomes a medium—for action, for reflection but, most important, for transformation—a theatre in which new modes of being can be encountered and new possibilities for humankind can be imagined. (as cited in Prentki & Preston, 2009, p. 14)

Applied theatre practitioners exist all over the world, and as a result, there are many applied theatre programs working toward social change. The Acting Together project (Cohen, Varea, & Walker, 2011) was created with the goal of collecting information about the use of theatre and performance in the creative transformation of conflict around the world. The two-volume edited work includes multiple case studies and reveals the efficacy of theatre and performance used in this way.

### ***Theatre for Peacebuilding***

Theatre is powerful and deeply affects those involved because of its ephemeral nature and the beauty of aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience involves reciprocity between the performers and the perceivers, which lies at the heart of theatrical performance. The editors of *Acting Together* focused on performance through the lens of conflict transformation and peacebuilding. Some of the authors referred to Lederach's (2010) book, *The Moral Imagination*, and how his four essences of peacebuilding fit with theatre and performance because of the focus on imagination. These essences are relationship, paradoxical curiosity, creativity, and risk. The editors of these volumes referred to the creative process of conflict transformation as a permeable membrane rather than a theory of change. This membrane separates art from, and connects it to, society. The following themes emerged from these case studies: memory, identity, justice, and resistance (Cohen et al., 2011). Some of the peacebuilding contributions of TOW are (1) humanizing the other and developing empathy, (2) creating a safe space for authentic storytelling, and (3) motivating personal and social transformation.

### The Theatre of Witness Process

While TOW has some similarities to other forms of applied theatre, it also has many unique characteristics that have been developed by Sepinuck over the 30 years she has practised developing this art form. The TOW process begins when Sepinuck chooses a social justice topic relevant to the community she's working with. She then looks for community members involved with that topic and conducts "listening circles" with them. After this, she selects people to interview, and there are usually numerous one-on-one meetings. She then decides who is ready to work with the "other side" (the "other side" depends on the topic of the production). There are usually 6 to 10 people for each production. After they get to know each other informally, they work for about eight months to develop the production. The script consists of excerpts from the interviews, and the performers work with Sepinuck to refine it into something they are comfortable performing. There are no professional actors involved. Sepinuck also considers artistic aspects like lighting, stage position, music, etc., that help to bring each story to life. Once the piece is complete, they tour and film the production. Sepinuck focuses especially on engaging audiences directly to explore the topic of the production. The film is often used for community education and workshops after the production is finished touring.

One of the keys to this approach, and the way it develops empathy, is truthful storytelling that is authentic and vulnerable. Most participants have experienced being a perpetrator or a victim (perhaps both). They need to be in a personal place where they can handle working with the "other side." Even if they have already undergone therapy and healing, it can still be very emotional and challenging work. They need to garner strength within and from each other to pull through. Overall, working with the other side further develops the participants' empathy for the other and brings about healing and transformation that is visible on stage.

Northern Ireland society is deeply divided due to the country's complex history and The Troubles, so most people fall on one of these sides: Irish/Republican/Nationalist/Catholic or British/Unionist/Loyalist/Protestant. The TOW participants have said they become a family and a support system for each other. Considering that they come from very different parts of Northern Ireland society, this is a very special bond. However, it takes time for this bond to develop, and challenges and growing pains occur along the way. The audience also develops empathy as they bear witness to this transformation and healing on stage or on film. The vulnerability and bravery of the performers often leave a lasting impression on all involved.

Sepinuck created four main TOW productions with her five-year EU peace grant at The Playhouse in Derry/Londonderry. *We Carried Your Secrets* was an intergenerational production involving adults from the period of The Troubles and people from the younger generation still deeply affected by The Troubles. *I Once Knew a Girl* focused on women's experiences during The Troubles, and *Release* told the stories of men from the period. The last production, *Sanctuary*, focused on those in exile, such as refugees and asylum seekers in Northern Ireland. Documentary films were also created about each production.<sup>1</sup>

An excerpt from one of the productions may help to display the depth of emotion and trauma that is exposed in TOW performances. As a child, Paddy was trapped in a car with

1 <https://www.derryplayhouse.co.uk/content/article/theatre-of-witness/10>

a bomb underneath, and his dad was held back by people who were scared it would go off. His dad eventually broke free and grabbed Paddy just in time. They were both injured, but survived. His family never talked about the incident after they returned home from the hospital. Paddy told me during his interview that the TOW process was more therapeutic than years of counselling. Here is a segment from Paddy's story in *Release*, where he performed with men who would normally be considered his or his family's enemies:

How do you handle a bomb?

I was left unhandled.

Unmanaged, unreachable.

Damaged goods.

Some part of me went away that day and never came back.

That bomb, and the near death of a wee boy, has never been acknowledged.

It's not worth an inquiry...

Am I not worth an inquiry?

[A story about his dad's jacket in the closet with the hole from the car nail bomb in it, at the wrist. He would look at it and touch it when no one was around. Some other thoughts...]

You know, sometimes I feel ancient... Sometimes I feel a thousand years old...<sup>2</sup>

A few themes emerged from the review of the interview data (interviewees consented to the use of their first names). The power of authentic storytelling is one recurring theme. In my interview with Paddy, he said, "There's something about the uniqueness of telling your story. Something very powerful about it." Pauline (TOW producer and Playhouse director) said, "Audiences, with tears in their eyes, thank the participants: 'You gave voice to my story today.'" Full disclosure is risky in Northern Ireland society. Many audience members were grateful for the bravery of the performers and their willingness to be vulnerable and open in public. One example from anonymous audience feedback forms (obtained from the theatre archive and used with permission) read, "I feel a part of everyone of you; You seven carry the feelings, stories and secrets of all of us."

This process of truth telling in front of others, especially others whom a person normally would not be open with, contributes to humanizing the other, one of the most significant themes. Another participant, Anne (former IRA paramilitary member during The Troubles), who performed in *I Once Knew a Girl*, said:

If you've already humanized somebody, it's hard to dehumanize them. Before you get to judge somebody, if you've made some sort of connection, it's hard to go back on that connection. It's all about humanizing people.

2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36RUHJGRYSA> (8:55–10:18)

There's a bond that comes in truth and honesty...that vulnerable place where you are saying something out loud that you wouldn't normally in any other situation.

Similarly, Robin (participant, former RUC police officer during The Troubles), who performed in *We Carried Your Secrets*, said:

It humanizes the other...whoever the other happens to be. Once you humanize, you can empathize with someone. Now that doesn't necessarily mean you agree with what they did. But it does involve acknowledging the situations that that person was in at the time. And acknowledging that probably there's a fair degree of chance that if your roles were reversed you might have considered doing the same thing.

Humanizing the other leads to empathy development. Anne said that "only good stuff has come out of this...incredible friendships, incredible empathy, and understanding. Now when I look at things, I look at them from all sides...not just tunnel vision."

Because the audience bears witness to this process on stage, they too develop empathy. Here is some audience feedback: "I am beyond words. A truly moving production. I have empathy and can feel a part of your pain also; it is like holding somebody's heart in your hand and feeling the beat." Because the audience members are so moved, many of them feel led to engage in personal and social change as a result of TOW. One person said, "Very powerful. Thank you for your courage telling your stories. You represent the enormous pain and courage of so many in our country. I feel honoured and enriched and determined to keep working for a better future for our children." Another person said, "Very moving. Powerful. Makes me want to make a difference." These statements are testaments to the impact of TOW on community peacebuilding, healing, and transformation.

There is need for more TOW in Northern Ireland. Pauline said, "People still talk about TOW. People still ask me, 'Is there going to be any more of it?' And a politician, just three months ago, said to me... 'we need more of TOW'...because the past won't go away." In the meantime, the project's impact has longevity through its community workshops, engaging people in necessary dialogue about the social issues highlighted in TOW productions.

### **Discussion**

TOW has shown itself to be an effective form of testimonial theatre. The audience develops a connection to the participants and witnesses their healing and transformation. It helps to humanize the other, see other as self, and see our common humanity. It is transformative in developing empathy in the participants and the audience. The cross-cultural communication and interaction create awareness of the multiple angles/sides of events and conflicts. This helps to reduce prejudice and promotes cross-cultural understanding and healing. TOW also motivates participants and audience members to engage in community social justice work and peacebuilding efforts. In Northern Ireland, participants like Robin are still carrying on TOW work through community workshops with organizations and schools, as well as in their personal and professional lives. This continuity demonstrates the personal and social change aspects of TOW. However, for programs like TOW to be successful, they need funding, meeting and performing spaces, community involvement and support, and the help of volunteers or paid staff members.

## Reflections

As observed in the participant and audience testimonials, TOW has a strong impact on each community with which it engages. Everyone has a story if given the chance to be heard. Often stories involve some sort of trauma and healing that may not be revealed otherwise. Sharing these deeply personal and vulnerable stories with each other creates a supportive space where we can be human together. However, this process can be retraumatizing for some, so it needs to be handled with care (Butterwick & Selman, 2012). If proper precautions are taken, this authentic storytelling process can greatly contribute to the development and nurturing of any community. I believe it should be taught in more adult community arts programs and that it could be used with a variety of artistic mediums, not just theatre. Although TOW has its own form, the concepts, principles, and techniques can be applied to many types of settings.

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