

# The Art of Seeing

Investigating and Transforming Conflicts with Interactive Theatre

Hannah Reich

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# 1 Introduction

Arts-based projects are increasingly finding a space in the realm of conflict transformation (see Cohen et al. 2011; ifa 2011, Arbeitsgruppe Kultur und Entwicklung 2011). John Paul Lederach, the influential scholar-practitioner who coined the term “conflict transformation”, allocates a role for the arts in his comprehensive framework for peacebuilding (Lederach 2005a; Lederach 2005b; Lederach/Appleby 2010). This potential is further recognised and given weight in the discussion of ritual and peacebuilding (Schirch 2005). Other scholars, such as Premaratna and Bleiker, have argued that theatre, as one specific art form, can help foster community dialogue and make an important contribution to peacebuilding by changing conflict attitudes at the personal, emotional and societal level (2010, 377; 384). Interactive theatre is used to foster social change and empowerment in many countries, including in conflict regions (Bteich/Reich 2009; Joffre-Eichhorn 2011; Premaratna/Bleiker 2010; Shank 2004; Thompson et al. 2009).

In the context of conflict it helps to distinguish the general use of interactive theatre for social change and development from its specific use in constructively addressing conflict. Jonathan Goodhand (2006) distinguishes between working *in* conflict and working *on* conflict, and this distinction can be applied to arts-based work in conflict regions. Doing so is helpful in three ways. First, it serves to avoid a naive understanding in which the arts are always seen as constructive – a view which overlooks their very destructive applications. Owing to their power to consolidate individual and group identities across all strata of society, the arts play a key role in shaping different social constituencies (Smith 2000). Second, the distinction between working *in* conflict and working *on* conflict helps to differentiate arts-based work which consciously addresses relationships from other arts-based work which might also have a powerful and positive influence on relationships, but does not tackle them directly in the process of artistic production. Third, this distinction points to the specific challenges of combining artistic work with the craft of conflict transformation, since each field has its own unique logic and rules of functioning. These divergences are articulated in their perceptions of the social reality, in their discourses, and in the very subtle and intuitive processes of formulating questions, setting priorities and making decisions (Kahlenberg 2011).

A further distinction can be made regarding the incorporation of arts-based methods at different stages in the conflict transformation process. Without denying the potential of arts in all phases of conflict transformation, practitioners tend to employ the arts in post-war peacebuilding (Cohen 2003; Zelizer 2003). In the aftermath of violent conflicts, relationships need to be (re-)built across the former conflict lines. This demands the active creation of a space accessible to the members of the different sides of a conflict in which they can interact, share experiences and reflect. Only with such a space is the horizontal and vertical integration of society (and, in turn, sustainable peace) possible (Mitchell 2002; Ropers 2000).<sup>1</sup> The desire to jointly create a performance – writing a script and becoming actors – is a powerful driver for overcoming barriers between people. It facilitates relating to the “other” and sets out a space for interaction, imagination and new experiences.

Applying aesthetic means of communication offers a space for building new relationships which depart from everyday interactions. Artistic work generally requires intensive collaboration. The act of interactively “doing theatre” makes it possible to bring out layers of identity among the participants other than the ones that prevail during violent conflict. Further, the participatory approach provides space for an attentive investigation of one’s own patterns of relating and relationship building.<sup>2</sup> Strongly influenced by the concepts and legacy of Paolo Freire’s liberation pedagogy (Prentki/Preston 2009), interactive theatre fulfils Lederach’s requirement that conflict transformation should employ an “elicitive” approach (Lederach 1995; Lederach et al. 2007). However, the participatory nature of an arts-based process does

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<sup>1</sup> Vertical integration refers to relationships between actors across different social hierarchies on one side of the conflict. Horizontal integration refers to an alliance consisting of actors originating from both sides of the conflict.

<sup>2</sup> This is indicated in the double meaning of the English term “to act”, which carries the tension between “doing” as well as “pretending to do”.

not guarantee its validity in the wider, complex process of peacebuilding. The challenge is to create a participatory process that does more than merely reinforce the prevalent narratives, myths and forms of storytelling that already circulate in the conflict system (Thompson 2004); instead the process should encourage disentanglement from old patterns of meanings and create new signifying practices.

The method of “forum theatre” offers important possibilities for such a participatory process. It is a genre of workshop and performance practice developed by the Brazilian theatre practitioner and erstwhile Member of Parliament Augusto Boal (1931-2009), who founded the Center for the Theatre of the Oppressed in Rio de Janeiro (Boal 2000). Forum theatre is an elicitive method guided by the participants’ inputs which has gained considerable acceptance in many places in the world.<sup>3</sup> Traditionally, forum theatre aimed at empowering marginalised groups, but forum theatre groups and trainers have advanced and adapted the method to different contexts. The force inherent in the embodied, sensual communication enabled through the “aesthetic space” (Boal 1992) in the participatory group work of interactive theatre has inspired practitioners and researchers to use this format for conflict transformation (Bteich/Reich 2009; Joffre-Eichhorn 2011; Werner 2009). Its potential as a tool for building relationships after violent conflict, however, has yet to be fully explored.<sup>4</sup> To accomplish this, the “classical” method of forum theatre, which itself is being constantly developed and adapted, has to be modified in certain ways to fulfil the state-of-the-art criteria for post-war peacebuilding: in other words, not merely working *in* the conflict, but specifically *on* it.

To make the force of interactive theatre more concrete and palpable, I will in the following section refer to a specific case from post-war Lebanon in which interactive theatre was employed for conflict transformation (Bteich/Reich 2009). The second section will examine experiences of the aesthetic space in action, looking closely at its structure, which lends itself to investigative processes, thus allowing for what I call the “art of seeing” to emerge. I will also foreground some of the challenges that accompany its implementation, questioning what I call the “art of telling” in post-war contexts. I want to focus this article on the creative repertoire, and point to the power manifested in a specific way of seeing the world, which can be trained when using creative tools.

In the last section I will conclude by raising general questions and propositions in relation to using arts-based approaches, and specifically interactive theatre, in post-war contexts. In doing so, I situate this piece within a wider search for cultural tools to combat fear, build relationships, raise our consciousness and strengthen the envisioning of different and less violent futures globally.

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed list of groups actively using forum theatre all over the world see [www.formaat.org](http://www.formaat.org).

<sup>4</sup> It has also been used as a method for social change in conflict settings. Some of the better known examples of forum theatre work in conflicts are: the Amani People’s Theatre Project, working specifically on theatre in conflict resolution and community building in rural Kenya; and Jana Sanskriti in West Bengal, India, which uses forum theatre for dialogue between Hindu and Muslim communities and in land-related disputes. Some research has been conducted on community theatre work in the Balkans (including forum theatre) by Kuflinec (1997). See also the research and practice on theatre and performance in conflict zones from the In Place of War initiative (Thompson et al. 2009). In the Middle East, there are a few groups and individuals using forum theatre in community work, such as Ashtar and Sanabel (West Bank), Uri Shani (Israel) and recently the Zeko House (Lebanon).

## 2 Creating Space for Relationship Building: Interactive Theatre in Post-War Lebanon

In Lebanon, the key driving force of social cohesion and fragmentation is the phenomenon of confessionalism (Arab. *ta'ifiyah*) (Glazze 2003; Salloukh 2005). Contrary to common assumptions, however, confessionalism cannot be seen as a primordial relict (King-Irani 2005, 111; Makdisi 2002). Rather, it has to be understood as embedded in the clientelistic social patterns of Lebanese society (Hamzeh 2001; Johnson 2001) and significantly shaped by the civil war. In a study on the Lebanese society, Suad Joseph looked at the micro level of relationship-building and networking in which children are raised (Joseph 2005). Alongside a “liberal” assumption of the subject as having its own rights and duties, she identified within the discourse the importance of “relational rights and obligations” (ibid., 1011). These rights signify claims and obligations which result directly from being in relation with very particular people. This “being in relation” also generates a kind of practical relational knowledge (Park 2006) indicating how to pursue one’s desires within a particular set of relationships shaped by power. Relational, informal structures are crucial for the sustainability of the society at large. The importance of these relations was reinforced through the civil war.

The war and massive displacement caused people to re-settle along confessional lines, fostering inner group cohesion and a perceived distance to the “other”. A poignant consequence of this protracted and displaced strife was the creation of what Samir Khalaf has termed the “geography of fear” (Khalaf 2002, 4). The “geography of fear” points to the way the spaces of war and their “concomitant geographies of fear, started to assert their ferocious logic on public and private spaces” (ibid., 248), thereby fragmenting the country along confessional lines. The displacement of people, the experience of violence and the geography of fear fostered the iteration of emotionally charged and aggressive confessional loyalties (Johnson 2001; Khalaf 2002). Twenty years after the end of the civil war,

*...Lebanese are today brandishing their confessionalism [...] as both emblem and armor. Emblem, because confessional identity has become the most viable medium for asserting presence and securing vital needs and benefits. It is only when an individual is placed within a confessional context that his ideas and assertions are rendered meaningful or worthwhile. Armor, because it has become a shield against real or imagined threats. The more vulnerable the emblem, the thicker the armor. Conversely, the thicker the armor, the more vulnerable and paranoid other communities become. It is precisely this dialectic between threatened communities and the urge to seek shelter in cloistered worlds that has plagued Lebanon for so long. (Khalaf 2002, 27)*

By providing a semblance of security, meaning and a simplified ordering of social life in the midst of the war’s absolute unintelligibility, confessional loyalties helped people survive the brutalities of the civil war. Paradoxically, it is precisely these mechanisms that reinforce the on-going instability that is fed by a lack of well-established relationships between the different groups. These mechanisms influence the course of relationship building and, moreover, they serve as material or as patterns for the “doing of culture” (Hörning/Reuter 2004). Culture in this sense is not so much conceived as a static signifying system, but as the acts and practices of daily life of which the “doing of confessionalism” is a part. With this premise, the investigation of survival strategies does not primarily involve unravelling underlying discourses and

value systems, but rather discovering and subtly changing their actual enactment – the situated physical encounters.

In a collaborative action research project in 2007, conducted by a Beirut-based NGO called *A Step Away* and a Berlin-based association called *sabisa performing change e.V.* forum theatre was incorporated into a conflict transformation framework. The author, on behalf of the *sabisa performing change e.V.*, participated as researcher and co-facilitator.<sup>5</sup> In this endeavour, interactive theatre was adapted into a group process in order to:

- ≡ *Build relationships* between formerly conflicting parties employing its capacity to relate, experience and understand via bodily interactions and an aesthetic communication with and without words;
- ≡ *Investigate relationships and the mechanisms of relationship building* employing not only representational and reflective knowledge, but also the practical and relational knowledge of the participants within the group process of the “aesthetic space”; and
- ≡ *Create space for the imagination and enactment* of new ways for people to interact and relate to each other.

In spring 2007, 14 youths of between 16 and 24 years of age, from a wide range of family and confessional backgrounds (Maronites, Sunnites, Shiites, Druze and Greek Orthodox) participated in the workshops and performances. The group toured Lebanon, presenting their production, discussing it with communities in Beirut and in selected villages in the north and the south of the country.

## 2.1 The Structure of the Interactive Performance

The distinguishing features of forum theatre can be summarised by four elements:

1. It is theatre with *lay persons* (i.e. not professionally trained actors) working on the assumption that lay persons can be as authentic as professional actors.
2. This authenticity is achieved by enacting *real-life experiences*. Stories based on such experiences are identified and collected through intensive group work with the participants.
3. A theatrical piece deriving from the chosen narration is staged and presented in a *forum*. The story is presented in such a way that it ends with a certain point of crisis, a conflict, or an unsatisfying, unjust ending. After this, the audience is invited to come on stage in a so-called “intervention” in which they become the actors, enact other behaviours and bring about other endings. Augusto Boal coined the term “spect-actor” to mark this special position between spectator and actor. This intervention is discussed afterwards in the forum.
4. The interventions, and also the reflection and discussion, are facilitated by a “joker”.<sup>6</sup> In forum theatre, the joker occupies a space in-between the audience and the actors, animating the audience to move from being spectators to actors and encouraging debate about the participants’ perceptions and interpretations of the crisis on stage.

The concept of “aesthetic space” in interactive theatre thus does not refer to a static place, but a dynamic process of group work – a process-space – which can be roughly divided into two phases: a workshop phase, where the script is developed and enacted, and the phase of the interactive performances to a wider audience. The performance in the discussed case consisted of four scenes, interweaving three different plots dealing with everyday occurrences in student life. The crises, deriving from the youth-group’s real-life experiences, related to restrictions on inter-confessional love relationships, difficulties in renting a room from someone belonging to a different confession, and subtle discriminatory acts based on confessional prejudices in public spaces. The play tackled a tabooed contradiction: namely, that although

<sup>5</sup> The project was funded by the Berghof Foundation, Berlin.

<sup>6</sup> The joker plays a crucial role in the performance, as he is the one who is questioning and guiding the interaction with the forum (for further discussion see Snyder-Young 2011).

confessionalism is officially condemned, it is all-pervasive in daily interaction. This was illustrated by two examples:

1. One scene played in the university cafeteria, which was already structured by the different groups belonging to the different communities. Here a dialogue between two students developed into a love story which came to an abrupt halt when the places of residence of the students were named. It highlighted something that is usually taken for granted: that one's residence is influenced by and gives information on one's confession. The need to first find out the confession someone belongs to, before any kind of interaction with a stranger can be pursued, became clear in this scene. It addressed the geography of fear and mistrust that is connected with such confessional attributions – attributions that can be seen as survival strategies in times of crises, yet once internalised as integrated parts, perpetuate themselves in all encounters with “strangers”. The logic of this was questioned by the interveners on stage and thus brought the connection “place=confession=judgement” into the participants' consciousness.

2. During another scene in which students tried renting a room, the neighbouring friend of the flat's owner was distrustfully scrutinising the students because of her fear about not knowing which confession they belonged to. It was not necessary to verbalise the connection of the scene to the issue of confessionalism and its direct impact on the social sense of security: this became amply visible in the presentation through the atmosphere, gestures and body postures, and was thus palpable for the participants in this event. While in daily communication a disapproving gaze has to be hidden, its theatrical articulation, a subtle but explicit enactment, allowed for an acknowledgement of its presence within the performer. As one of the participants mentioned later, it was through this scene that she became aware of how much her interactions are shaped by the confessional ordering of the society (Bteich/Reich 2009).

On the stage, confessionalism became apparent as a phenomenon deeply engrained in the bodies, attitudes and postures of the individuals, shaping both personal modes of relating to others and broader social patterns of relationship building. Participants reported this as being an enormous eye opener. The interactive performances raised the participants' consciousness in a way that is not possible through books, lectures or conferences. Yet, the strength of the realisation is very much bound to the particular context, placing some kind of *in situ knowledge* into its local surrounding where this emotional realisation and the new sets of relationships build it unfold their relevance and power.

## 2.2 Structuring the Investigation: Interactive Theatre as a Learning Site

The aesthetic space of theatre is created through the separation of a space into two realms: one from which one “sees”, and the other which is “seen”. This separating line between the auditorium and the stage does not simply demarcate one part of the space as more visible than the other, as is the case in most public gatherings; nor does it only signify a hierarchy, as the people in the visible part are more easily heard and seen than the rest. Instead, it singles out one part, the stage, to be essentially different. It is coloured with a different form of communication governed by different social laws. In *interactive* theatre, the separating line signifies the difference between the two spaces and makes use of the qualities deriving from that, without marking the people inhabiting the two sections as essentially different, since the spectators also move onto the stage. Due to this exchange of spect-actors, the Boalian aesthetic space becomes very interesting for the craft of conflict transformation. As a learning site, it makes use of the knowledge of the audience, appealing to corporal forms of knowledge and forms of transformation.

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>1. Workshop phase</b>  |  |
| Structured interactive, physical exercises and games (Boal 1992): strengthening the senses (listening, feeling, touching and seeing) and aesthetic expression through working with sounds and “images” (body sculptures); reflection and conscientisation processes; and trust and confidence building exercises. |  |
| <b>2. Performance phase (a forum theatre performance (2-4 hours))</b>   |  |
| Introduction by the joker   | Warming up exercises with the audience and actors  |
| Presentation of the story up to a crisis  | Joker invites for interventions  |
| Intervention by the spect-actors  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>≡ Discussion within the forum facilitated by the joker</li> <li>≡ Intervention by the spect-actors</li> <li>≡ Discussion within the forum facilitated by the joker</li> <li>≡ Intervention by the spect-actors</li> </ul> |
| Discussion in the forum and wrap up by the joker  |  |

Table 1: Timeline of the Forum Theatre Process

With its dialogic group-interaction facilitated by the joker and the specific qualities of the aesthetic space, forum theatre makes people perceive how a particular, personal story is embedded within a broader socio-cultural set-up. Furthermore, because the play focuses on the micro-level of the social setting, small “magic encounters” and moments of change (i.e. changes of gesture, attitude, thought and words), often ignored in normal life, become visible.

Much of the strength of the process lies within the *workshop phase*. Here the participants have the opportunity to relate to themselves and each other in new and unusual ways. They discover neglected patterns of thought or behaviour, notice new potential within themselves and experience new ways of perceiving reality.

It is important to note that the knowledge-generating value does not stem from considering representation as reality, or even as a mirror of reality. Rather, by acknowledging both an essential difference and strong interdependence between representation and reality, we can become aware of our “doings” in real life – including our destructive ways of behaving. This process of conscientisation is strengthened through the desire of the spect-actor to change the represented situation as well as through the reflection and discussion that occurs afterwards. The dislocation of words and gestures from the imaginative theatrical space into social reality supports a shift of perception, laying bare contradictions, questions, and subtle mechanisms or hidden connections. Yet it is not illusive. The depicted and envisioned scenes become real and palpable: the atmosphere of fear, pain, sadness or joy vibrates through the whole place, because the interactions on stage are *real* and therefore capable of being experienced and listened to with the whole body.

Through the interactive auditorium–stage partition, the stage creates a big telescope, intensifying the process of observing, perceiving and recognising. It leads to *seeing* something which had once been invisible due to the mechanisation of daily life (Santos 2004, 177). It is important to note that seeing here refers not only to the visual sense, but also to hearing and even feeling and touching – all the senses employed in any physical presence on stage. Particularly in the workshop phase, as the aesthetic space is extensively used in group work, feeling and touching are major senses through which images are developed. However,



to foster the movement of the audience to the stage, a particular art of *seeing* is demanded, which allows the audience to take action.

Forum theatre demands improvisation on stage, where the subject makes use of all her lived experience and knowledge, to transform the story and move in very different directions. The whole process – from the arrangement of the place, to the way the joker introduces the play (the physical warm-up of the audience), to the dramaturgical set up of the plot (ending with the crisis), to the joker’s questions after the show – all of this is intended to animate spect-actors to intervene and to improvise on stage. It requires the participants to present facets of themselves, safeguarded within the “guise” of the character, and to display experiential and practically incorporated knowledge of interaction in particular contexts. This demands a particular setting that supports spect-actors to enter into such a “liminal space” (Turner 1989; Karl 2005), where they present their emotionally charged agency within a tricky situation, attempting to create change. This setting, facilitating improvisation and deep disclosure, is sustained by a particular *art of seeing*.

The process thus urges the people to adopt an *art of seeing* that encompasses four dimensions:

1. *It is an empathic gaze* that is fostered through the alignment of the observed scenes to the spectators’ own experience. It is this empathic kind of seeing that facilitates understanding of the social mechanisms at play and a search for alternative modes of action.
2. The *acknowledgement of small modes of change* within the interactions. This enables participants to focus on not just what is, but what might become. It also implies detecting hidden connections between thoughts, attitudes and interactions and laying bare the obstacles that hinder the unfolding of different possible futures.
3. This demands a shift from a judgemental to a *non-judgemental view* of a certain behaviour or action. The aim is to identify the particularity of a certain idea, and strengthen or amplify this, in order to investigate the hidden structures shaping agency and to reveal entry points for change.
4. The art of seeing encompasses an *acknowledgement of “seeing” as an active part*. While presenting and performing is easily seen as an active part, observing and watching is often not. But attentive and present observation is critically different to passive, sleepy or voyeuristic surveillance. To fail to acknowledge seeing as an active deed is to ignore a major source for becoming and change.

The *art of seeing* is a process located “precisely on the frontier between fiction and reality” (Boal 1992, 246). To work with this art form is to acknowledge that seeing, imagining and projecting into the future exert a strong force on the unfolding of developments. Such force can be destructive – working unconsciously and unnoticed – but envisioning can also be used for constructive change, as powerfully shown by the futurist research of Suhail Inayatullah (2007). An art of seeing thus offers a lot of potential for the unfolding of spaces for transformation and *rites de passage*.

### 2.3 Challenges of the Forum Structure and its Art of Telling in Post-War Contexts

The aim of the investigative project in Lebanon was to stir up awareness and change, but not to be openly provocative or destabilise the lives of the participants or the audience. It sought to work with full respect for the emotional and physical integrity of the persons involved. For this reason the “classical” format of forum theatre was altered substantially to serve the aim of relationship-building in a post-war context marked by widespread fear and mistrust between communities.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Modifications were applied with regard to the workshop and the performance phase, starting from a careful selection of the participants and choice of the workshop site as well as a careful choice of the partner organisations, who selected the performance site, prepared it, and organised the invitations and outreach activities (Bteich/Reich 2009).

Participants in the workshop and performance had to be selected very carefully. One major selection criterion was the participants’ active involvement in social-political activities. The selection procedure also sought to achieve a balance in terms of confessional background as well as confessional orientation. This meant that *A Step Away* did not simply follow formal criteria like: an equal number of participants from each of the various factions (e.g. “Muslims” and “Christians”), since this would not do justice to the complexity of group allegiances in conflict settings. Other criteria, such as “openness or caginess towards the ‘other’”, “experience with the ‘other’”, and the governing attitudes of their milieu had to be taken into consideration. In doing so, a dilemma was faced: on the one hand there was the aspiration to reach out into the community and work with people unknown to the organisers; on the other, detailed knowledge about the participants was needed to balance the group process and to guarantee some kind of contact afterwards in order to sustain the work. This meant that only people who were directly or indirectly known to members of *A Step Away* were chosen. This was deemed necessary owing to the prevailing insecurity and tensions.

Furthermore the workshop was extended to include modules on conflict transformation and space for shared leisure time (see Table 2). These modifications were made to enhance the trust between participants and their awareness of each other’s positions within society, and to deal with the emotional dispositions of fear and mistrust. This emphasis might be new to forum theatre work, but it is a common feature in post-war peacebuilding group work.

| Archetype         | “Classical” forum theatre   | Forum theatre for conflict transformation   |
|-------------------|---|---|
| General aim       | Conscientisation and empowerment  | Conscientisation and relationship building  |
| Workshop phase    | Open access to all<br><br>Awareness of socio-economic strata of society | Participants and training sites very consciously chosen<br><br>Modules of conflict management training and shared leisure time inserted<br><br>Conflict sensitive script development (“art of telling”) |
| Performance phase | Open access to all who are interested                                   | Conscious choice of places for presentation, not open to all<br><br>The joker has training in conflict transformation   |
| Follow-up         | Participants create their own groups                                    | Other activities which sustain the relationships of the group members   |

Table 2: Modifications in Forum Theatre for Conflict Transformation

Arts-based approaches are yet not common in conflict transformation practice, so scripting and staging the story, taking into consideration what I term the “art of telling”, was a new challenge for the facilitating team, the stage director and the joker. A conscious decision was made not to single out one story to be dramaturgically developed into a scene, as is common practice in traditional forum theatre, but rather to employ several distinct but interwoven stories. Further, the aesthetic space was used to say things by acting them without naming them (e.g. simply showing how people rent a flat, without calling it confessionally-oriented behaviour), while great care was taken in the choice of how and by whom the stories were presented (Bteich/Reich 2009). In all phases – the workshop with participants from formerly conflicting parties, the writing of the script, its staging and facilitation – a lot of emphasis was put on the *atmosphere* in which the investigation took place. It was of utmost importance to ensure an atmosphere that safeguarded the confidentiality of the stories shared and the integrity of the people acting, while nevertheless fostering the ability to question existing perceptions.

As pointed out before, there is a complex interrelation between a spect-actor’s or theatre workshop participant’s sense of security and integrity with the stories staged and told around him, particularly in war-torn societies (Premaratna/Bleiker 2010, 385). As James Thompson (2004) has powerfully demonstrated, interactive theatre builds on the idea that different stories are given space within the performance, and thus implicitly assumes every story’s right to exist. The process relies on the premise that even within one story, other stories could occur as offshoots or re-tellings, so that the performance can potentially unravel itself into a different ending. In the logic of forum theatre, other developments of the events and other narrations are always assumed to be possible.

But what does it mean to question a narrative in a war-torn context, and to allow different “true stories” to exist, where “truth” is intrinsically connected with the “right to exist” and the perception of the self as a “dignified person”? One has to bear in mind that stories, told in a particular way, give order and meaning and thus often serve as a survival strategy to overcome a brutal experience. Especially in situations of violent conflict, such stories are deeply engrained in the bodies of the people and the practices of daily life; they are not disembodied discourses, exchanged with ease (Thompson 2004). In a context where stories and their absolute truth are part of survival strategies, the mere act of questioning a story or assuming it may co-exist with other stories bears the risk of being interpreted as calling into question its right of existence. No matter how innocent the intention may be, calling for multiple interpretations of the past may be a risky enterprise. The strength of the aesthetic space lies in investigating patterns of meaning and interaction and bringing to light their operation as survival strategies that could perpetuate a particular destructive situation. So it is necessary to ask how such questioning can act in an empowering rather than a destabilising way. It must be re-emphasised that the representation on stage takes place in an imaginary space, which is an important quality that allows these stories to be challenged and played with. It is, however, not sufficient: the epistemic attitude towards the presentation and the ontic experience constantly penetrate each other (Thompson 2004). Thus, the trust in the process, in the group, and in the relationships within the group constitute the crucial part.

An additional challenge is this: while the participatory character of this approach means that we must sometimes accept certain dominant, simplified depictions of the world being performed, this can be mistaken for affirmation. This creates a dilemma, as it is precisely simplified depictions of groups and events which must be transformed. In post-war Lebanon, for example, the social mechanism of immediately ascertaining people’s confessional background was scripted into all the different scenes of the performance. But by showing this behaviour as so overwhelmingly present, the performance somehow nurtured the perception that it is inevitable, almost natural – even though through the interactive nature of the performance it was both questioned and challenged. Along with great potential to enhance perception, to unveil shadowed parts of oneself, to experience oneself differently and to elevate one’s level of consciousness, the method of forum theatre can also do harm in post-war contexts, which is why there

is still a great need for further study of the impacts of such practices and for fine-tuning how they are used for conflict transformation.

As has been shown, “classical” forum theatre needs to be sensitively adapted to conflict contexts to generate an environment of mutual respect and safety, free from the fear of backlashes or attacks, in order to stimulate a space for an experimental encounter. Attempts were made to inculcate an *art of seeing* not just during the performance but also during the whole group process: from the creation of the play, to the rehearsals (workshops), to the touring and performing. This *art of seeing* was a strategy to modify forum theatre to emphasise relationship-building and to avoid being overburdened by socially prevalent views and judgements of the “other”. It is important to acknowledge, however, that although these choices built on deep knowledge of Lebanese society and its inter-confessional settings, they were made intuitively. It is therefore difficult to set up general criteria for interactive theatre processes in post-war settings.

### 3 Looking Ahead: Advancing Inter-Professional Learning and Knowledge-Creation

Three qualities stand out in the use of interactive theatre for conflict transformation. First, collaborating on a theatre production yields a common output (the performance), which can be transferred into the public realm. Second, the process is based on body-centred, sensual, palpable forms of communication, which offer a space for healing, becoming and creating. Third, the art of seeing, with its authentic improvisations and moving moments, nurtures a group process with specific social rules different to those of daily life. This carries an enormous force for transcending the normal social set-up, challenging norms and revealing them as socio-culturally constructed rather than eternally given, even if they are often positioned in the realm of the sacred. For this to succeed, it cannot be experienced passively, but rather demands the active involvement of the whole person. This involvement can be facilitated through the *art of seeing*, which is a non-judgmental form of seeing, aligning the observed to the observers’ own experience, appreciating and detecting small instances of change, and acknowledging the power of imagination as an important step for becoming. This active aspect of seeing is further strengthened by the fact that what is presented on stage is not reality, but something taking place in an imaginary realm, which allows a more playful and experimental approach.

Interactive theatre only works through the faith and commitment of the participants in the workshop and the performance. It needs an appropriate milieu, which can be found more often among young people than among adults, as they are often more creative and open to change. Nevertheless the potential of interactive theatre should not be limited to this arena, but explored in the educational realm as a whole. Interactive theatre offers a mode for changing patterns of cultural violence. It may help to detect the subtle levels of fears, desires and tensions in social structures and daily encounters (e.g. gender relations, inter-generational relations, professional relations) that shape patterns of conflict.

In spite of the complexity of conflict contexts, the very act of performed storytelling, listening and re-telling can provide a learning space to unveil unconscious patterns of interaction and meaning. But, as discussed above, such an endeavour can also do harm. Given the vulnerability of post-war societies and the profound impact of experiences of violence, the idea that interactive performance can challenge conflict systems demands further research. The constitution of inter-professional facilitator teams consisting of

artists and conflict managers seems to be an appropriate starting point for working not *in* but *on* conflict. Mixed teams of artists and peace activists offer a lot of potential for generating practices which emphasise reflective, relational and practical knowledge by employing artistic means in their contribution to conflict transformation. Artists and conflict managers live in different professional cultures, employing not only different techniques and *modus operandi*, but also different attitudes, perspectives and guiding norms towards creative processes. This is why honest collaboration between the two fields can be very enriching.

One difference between artists and conflict managers lies in their attitude towards the process: the attitude of the artist is often more about the process of the artistic creation and less about effecting change on others – for instance how the audience behaves after the performance. This attitude creates an opportunity to foster attitudinal change precisely *by not demanding it*. Artists also tend to evaluate their project in terms of the aesthetic value of the final product, which might inspire impact assessment systems that include the aesthetic as an important category.<sup>8</sup> However, people trained in conflict transformation also need to be involved in order to critically reframe artistic procedures in the light of the knowledge generated by peace and conflict research. Conflict transformation provides a set of modes of conduct, tools and experience-based knowledge on how to intervene in a conflict system to calm tensions and create trust and safety.<sup>9</sup> For such inter-professional collaboration it might be meaningful to conceptualise conflict transformation not simply as particular skills and techniques, but more as an “art of relationship-building”, which can be inserted into the artistic group process and production.

In conflict transformation, working in a mixed team of insiders and outsiders as facilitators is common. An internationally mixed team of facilitators brings opportunities for social learning and cultural questioning. However, caution is required when outsiders set up a cultural project in a foreign country. Learning through lived experience is highly contextual and not easily accessible for outsiders. So although global contacts and partners are meaningful and sometimes necessary, it is important that the project unfolds locally.

From the perspective of the local conflict system, then, the outside intervener is only necessary until new forms of relationship can be maintained. The real value of having international facilitation teams engaged in long-term relationships with local partners lies in the potential to transform international cooperation structures themselves<sup>10</sup> and dismantle their hidden agendas.<sup>11</sup>

Readiness to learn from all the “experts” involved is a prerequisite for success and sufficient space and capacities have to be allotted for this learning process within the international, inter-professional facilitator team. This learning can also question stereotypical portrayals of a conflict in the international mass media, policy papers, schoolbooks and everyday discourse. Given the vast linkages between societies, reducing stereotyped portrayals of conflicts can have an impact not only on the conflicts themselves but also on the development of a more sustainable global consciousness of interdependencies.

When Diana Francis claims that “[c]onflict transformation means culture transformation for all of us” (Francis 1999), she recognises that conflict transformation projects are situated within this global framework. Cultural transformation implies critically reviewing how we investigate real-life problems, gather together and create knowledge in our daily lives. It creates a window for introducing new participatory (yet rigorous) knowledge-generating practices into our worldwide interventions and international institutional

<sup>8</sup> See for example Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett’s discussion on arts impact evaluation research (Belfiore et al. 2010)

<sup>9</sup> For example, a common procedure in conflict transformation practice is to do conflict mapping as an integral part of the intervention. Furthermore conflict managers know that working with groups requires ground rules to be agreed in advance. This guarantees that certain forms of communication and decision-making are respected during the group process.

<sup>10</sup> In current foreign policy and development discussions one can observe a shift towards framing international cooperation in the light of analyses of risks and threats (Müller-Hennig, Schulze, and Zupan 2011, 4). This fosters an attitude, enhanced by civil–military cooperation, which draws a clear line between “us” and “them”: the “other” is seen as a potentially unpredictable threat; and cultural differences are viewed with suspicion merged with arrogance and not valued as a source for growth.

<sup>11</sup> For example, international cooperation can be driven by a hidden concern that the “other” remains in his own country and does not migrate to Europe where he might constitute a “security problem”. Peacebuilding efforts can equally assume that the “other” should change his attitude and reject violence, while other uses of violence (e.g. private security forces to protect interest) are seen as legitimate. This critique does not aim at portraying the outsider as “negative” and the insider as “constructive”, as often happens in conflict transformation or development discourses.

set-ups. The more complex and difficult the problems, the more open and participatory the repertoire needs to become. However, we cannot simply amass information. Controlling facts and figures will be impossible. So other approaches which integrate dialogue and metaphorical wisdom, which strengthen our intuitional capacity to order and which raise our level of our consciousness might be needed. Here, I believe peace and conflict research can join an avant-garde in simply *doing* other forms of knowledge-generating practices as part of their whole endeavour, integrating practical and relational knowledge (Park 2006), even if it takes time for such modes to gain widespread acceptance within scientific communities.

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