

Theatre of the Oppressed in the Shadows of Gender Violence

By Evan Hastings

"a brilliant artistic dialogue on gender violence" - *Indian Express* (Nambiar, 2012)

Rape, abuse and harassment are often discussed as if the perpetrators are twisted perverts, strangers lurking in a dark road, or aggressive horny beasts. This trend in the popular discourse doesn't match the reality that the overwhelming majority of victims know their perpetrator. So why don't we talk about it like that? There is shame associated with being a survivor of sexual violence, and the common practice of victim blaming only exacerbates that. Now consider the Indian cultural context, where your actions reflect on your family and community. In Indian society there is a need for a holistic approach that looks not only at individuals in specific instances, but also at social forces that sustain Gender Violence.

Shadow Liberation seeks to create culturally responsive theatre addressing Gender Violence with a sensitivity to shame and claim dynamics. In this article I will discuss Shadow Liberation's approach to Forum Theatre, a participatory form of theatre in which the audience is invited onstage to replace a character and try out a different approach to the problem depicted in the play (Boal, 1979). I'll explain how and why we craft complex characters for our shows, and share some of our experiences interacting with audiences in India.

Shadow Liberation is based out of the Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology in Bangalore, South India. It is an interactive hybrid shadow theatre ensemble with a rotating membership made of 18-22 year old Art and Design students. On the Shadow Liberation website I describe the project as follows:

The brighter the light the darker the shadow. Shadow Liberation uses creatively crafted visual stories to captivate the imagination and invite audiences to interrupt the injustice of gender violence. In the tradition of Forum Theatre, audience members are invited on stage to offer improvisational interventions into scenes depicting oppression. This artistic dialogue offers no quick fix solutions but rather places faith in the emerging ethics of the community to creatively address the problem.

Far from propaganda or "theatre with a message", Shadow Liberation draws on real life stories from the performers themselves to depict the complexity of Gender Violence in an authentic voice. Each scene in the play contains an unresolved conflict. .

In the spirit of dialogue after we perform the play, the performance is replayed for the audience. In the second run the audience is invited to pause the dramatic action and come on stage to replace a character who is lacking power, and improvise an alternate way of dealing with the problem in the scene. In this way we personify multiple points of view and honor everyone's contribution to the ongoing dialogue around Gender Violence.

Shadow Liberation draws from Forum Theatre as model for public performance. We craft plays with a series of scenes containing unresolved conflicts, which is performed once for the audience to witness and consider. The play is then enacted again, this time with the audience having the option to pause the play and intervene to transform the problem being depicted. Augusto Boal asserts that in the Theatre of the Oppressed that everyone is a spectator and actor, what he calls "spectator" (Boal, 1979). The audience member intervening, the spectator, is invited onto the stage to replace a character and try a different way of dealing with the situation. In this way many different ways of dealing with the problem are enacted. This is Forum Theatre. Shadow Liberation performances depart from classical Forum Theatre in terms of Joking (facilitation) style and characterization, as I will describe.

"The Joker should be the most curious person in the room" Augusto Boal said during a Rainbow of Desire workshop at the Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Conference in 2003. In Forum Theatre the Joker is the facilitator, the host, and at times, an instigator. Often Jokers will approach spectators offering interventions with a critical curiosity, interrogating the choices and effectiveness of the intervention. In Shadow Liberation we also bring this critical curiosity, though we emphasize onstage hospitality first and for most. The last thing we want to do is publicly shame someone for offering a controversial intervention, because this makes the stage a less inviting space and can make the Joker seem like a hostile host. Especially since we are dealing with issues like childhood sexual abuse that often has so much shame associated with it. With that stated, this doesn't mean we ignore problematic intervention dynamics, but what it means is that we share the onus of critical curiosity with the audience. After thanking a spectator for their intervention and inviting them to return to their seat, then we ask the crowd about the intervention they just witnessed; this gives space for critical engagement with the ideas while avoiding scapegoating or soapboxing on the behalf of the spectators.

It is important to note that Forum Theatre evolved among homogenous groups of people with a common problem or oppressor. Creating Forum plays in this kind of context frequently results in oversimplification of antagonist characters as tyrants, as often is the experience of these characters from the perspective of those they oppress. These scenes that depict the problem are called anti-models (Boal, 1979). If an anti-model is a question, and clear questions get clear answers, then a situation with an easily recognizable antagonist makes it easier for audiences to engage. But if the anti-model is reductionist, are spectators

lead into a similar trap of "false catharsis" that Boal warns about in his opening chapter of *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal, 1979)? When it comes to violence in the family though, the antagonist isn't only a perpetrator, but a parent, sibling, or spouse, a source of affection.

There is something about a clear enemy that excites people. For example, one of the most popular anti-model scenes we have in *Shadow Liberation* is about sexual harassment on a public bus. There is a man harassing a young woman, escalating from looks, to comments, to unwanted touch. Audience members love to come on stage and yell at the man who is making unwanted advances. People even want to hit him, and many times I've had to remind audiences not to physically assault the actors. Coming onstage and venting anger at men who sexually harass women can be cathartic and satisfying on that level, while it also models ways that women can assert their boundaries. Audiences often comment that such an approach can also escalate the situation and have dire consequences. It's important to explore possibilities, since there is no one-size-fits-all solution for every situation of sexual harassment/assault. In this spirit we can build a repertoire of possible ways of dealing with these situations. As we've witnessed, audiences love to unload on a scapegoat, and we don't take that away from them, but we use that as an entry point into a deeper dialogue. In the same scene we often direct the attention to the bystanders who could be potential allies in the situation. After warming up audiences with the traditional clarity of a Forum Theatre Anti-model, we melt the lines between friend and foe until they are as blurry as they can be in relationship to Gender Violence.

Instead of offering one protagonist throughout the play, we seek complex characterization, and a protagonist in one scene may become an antagonist in the next. For example the woman who was harassed on the bus may, in a later scene, take a victim-blaming attitude toward her friend who is in an abusive relationship. We all have the victim and perpetrator within us, so we seek to create characters that reflect the same. In this way we are able to work on Gender Violence with diverse audiences and incite deeper dialogue. But how are these complex characters created? Let me share with you some of our process behind the scenes.

While creating anti-models, *Shadow Liberation* ensemble members go through a self-reflective journey, exploring their own victim and perpetrator roles in their lives. Often it's easier to speak about getting screwed over than it is to speak about being responsible for someone else's suffering. So the hard work of radical honesty and accountability surfaces secrets that are collective truths. This is achieved while maintaining the anonymity of the participants' disclosures.

"Amazingly soul searching, yet equally entertaining"
- Prof Maya Chakravarti V, Director of the Symbiosis Institute of Media and Communication – Bangalore (Chakravarti, 2011)

In Shadow Liberation we work with personal stories and maintain anonymity in two ways. First, inside the ensemble when we share personal experiences of childhood sexual abuse, domestic violence or harassment, each participant writes or types their experience and all the sheets are collected. These sheets, which don't have the name of the author on them, are shuffled and distributed among the group. Each member reads the story they've been given and develops a solo mime performance that conveys story. These mime performances take place one after another in a circle with sustained ritual silence. Once each person has performed, I invite everyone to put their hand on the shoulder of the person whose mime performance they connected with most. This forms clusters that become small groups who craft anti-models around the thread that brought them together.

Secondly, in the development of anti-models the personal story is a springboard, but we don't focus on the specific details of the personal story, but rather allow the group to project their experiences into the scene. In this way we make amalgamated characters and there is collective ownership of the scenes.

This approach is helpful for the storyteller and the supporting cast members.

This is also helpful so that the person whose story it is can feel distant enough from the anti-model to allow for flexible creative discourse and transformation within the story. Otherwise people can have a hard time turning over control of their stories to the group. In Shadow Liberation personal sharing is viewed as a gift to the group, the audiences and even the great society where we aim to impact a change.

Working with 18-22 year old college students on gender roles is developmentally relevant, as this is a phase in life when the students are figuring out who they are in the world. It's also an idealistic age, when taking up a cause with a passionate sense of purpose comes naturally. But good intentions don't exempt anyone from the need for critical self-reflection. As I wrote in an article for the Teaching Artist Journal:

In reality, even as an anti-oppression theatre project our improvisations were still saturated with gender stereotypes. The tension between traditional gender values and the modern desire for gender liberation was playing itself out in our rehearsals. Young women played ditzy characters objectifying themselves for chauvinistic males. Although the performers knew better, stereotypical characterizations were ever present... Although we didn't always embody the values we discussed, we remained open to seeing our own contradictions. (Hastings, 2011)

The continuous self-reflection within the accountability structure of a theatre ensemble transforms the lives of the student performers. While learning about themselves and connecting with other young people in schools and colleges

across the country, they grow more confident. They become change agents with skills in storytelling, dancing, facilitation and dialogue. As validated at the young performers feel when audience members approach them after the show moved or offering confessions, the greatest impact of Shadow Liberation is on the performers themselves.

Shadow Liberation is doing much more than creating awareness through theatre, it's moving the hearts and minds of young people who are still forming their identities. By adapting Forum Theatre with a hospitable Joker and complex characters, Shadow Liberation has been able to forge a transformative and nuanced dialogue about Gender Violence with people across the Indian Subcontinent. By facing our shadows, we make it ok for others to do the same. By upholding accountability but de-emphasizing individual blame, we make it possible to view Gender Violence in a systemic frame. We invite you to interrupt injustice, and call it by name.

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