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"The Seed That Sprouts Theatre": A Case Study of Theatre for Development in Eritrea

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines the Theatre for Development (TfD) initiatives of UK theatre practitioner Jane Plastow in Eritrea. In particular, it focuses on the Eritrean Community-Based Theatre Project, a project undertaken by Plastow in collaboration with the Eritrean government in the mid-1990s that attempted to use community-based theatre as a tool for social development in post-independence Eritrea. Drawing upon interviews with Jane Plastow and other participants in the project, this thesis reflects on the effectiveness of the ECBTP in facilitating the emergence of an Eritrean people's theatre, as well as identifying key challenges that TfD practitioners face in an Eritrean context. Building upon these observations, it seeks to offer some suggestions as to what role TfD might play in the future development of Eritrea.

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List of Abbreviations

CBT…… ...Community-Based Theatre

ECBTP…… Eritrean Community-Based Theatre Project

EK…….. Efraim Khazai

EPLF…….. Eritrean People's Liberation Front

JP…….. Jane Plastow

NGO……. Non-Governmental Organization

PFDJ…….. People's Front for Democracy and Justice

ST……. Solomon Tsehaye

TfD……... Theatre for Development

TiE……Theatre in Education

TO……. Theatre of the Oppressed

YM…….. Yared Mehzenta

ZACT…… Zimbabwe Association of Community Theatres

"I am not a pessimist. As long as there is the love for theatre, there is always that seed, that one day sprouts up theatre."

- Solomon Tsehaye, Head of the Eritrean Bureau of Cultural Affairs (January 2012)

Introduction: Theatre for Development - In Development

The practice of using theatre as a tool for social betterment in the developing nations of the world has now existed for many decades, but it is only relatively recently that a significant body of critical writing in the field has begun to proliferate. Theatre for Development (TfD) in Africa specifically has been the focus of much critical analysis that has sought to articulate the unique circumstances and challenges faced by practitioners working on that continent. To be sure, the contexts in which African TfD operates vary widely from one locality to the next, and thus to speak of an 'African' TfD in monolithic terms is dangerously problematic. Yet at the same time, to quote Kamal Salhi in his introduction to *African Theatre for Development: Art for Self-Determination:* "since all African countries share the same stresses between the traditional and the modern ways of life, generalizations are still possible" (Salhi 1). Thus from an analytical perspective it is useful to look at specific examples of African TfD work to see what conclusions, or at least observations, can indeed be applied to the broader discussion. This study will take, as one such example, Eritrea, and the TfD work initiated there by UK practitioner Jane Plastow. By outlining Plastow's

work in Eritrea and examining one project in-depth, this thesis will attempt to highlight some of the pervasive challenges that arise for practitioners and/or facilitators in an African context, and in doing so hopefully initiate a discussion around potential ways forward for community-based theatre in Eritrea and elsewhere. The first task of this paper will be to contextualize African TfD within the broader framework of popular and community-based theatre, of which TfD is a close relative and offspring.

A Brief Outline of Terminology

There are many names that exist and are in circulation to refer to the kind of theatre to which I will be referring throughout this thesis. In the broadest terms, I am referring to that kind of theatre which involves some degree and form of participation from a community, and which explicitly aims to achieve the realization of some form of transformation for that community – be it social, political, personal, or otherwise. Depending on the particular school of thought and its corresponding nomenclature, terms like 'applied theatre', 'popular theatre', 'community-based theatre', 'theatre of the oppressed', and 'theatre for development' may be used, at times interchangeably and at times in contrast to each other. While there may be no clear consensus on which name to use and when, it is nonetheless worthwhile to flesh out some of the distinguishing factors of each, if only for the sake of establishing and framing the terminology that will be used within the scope of this paper. The corollary benefit of this will be to ground my discussion of TfD in an understanding of where its roots are located,

both ideologically and historically, as well as of the larger discourse in which – and against which – it defines itself.

Probably the best place to start in an exploration of the trajectory that led to African TfD is at the term 'popular theatre.' There are two reasons for this: the first is that the term 'popular' is arguably the broadest and most inclusive of terms, and as such provides an appropriate entryway into the discussion. The second reason is that 'popular theatre' is, chronologically, the first term to have gained currency among a long succession of ever-changing names for participatory theatre work, each one implicitly claiming to more accurately reflect the nature and purpose of the work to which it refers. According to the cultural theorist Karin Barber in her landmark essay "Popular Arts in Africa", there are essentially two conceptual approaches one can take to understanding the term "popular" with regard to arts, including theatre, in Africa. One implies a general sense of belonging to, or originating from, "the people" – however "the people" may be variously defined. This is a vast, amorphous categorization that, according to Barber, is primarily a negative definition, in that it is defined in terms of what it is not. It is contrasted with 'elite art' – those forms and practices which in the African context were left behind by the European colonists, and which are produced primarily in the urban centres by the intellectual middle-class – and 'traditional art', or those pre-colonial artistic forms and practices which remain more-or-less intact in the present postcolonial era. In this understanding of 'popular art', the popular is that which falls into neither the elite nor the traditional categories. Popular art, Barber argues, tends to arise spontaneously

from the masses, and is intended to appeal to the largest (and often least educated) segments of the population, though it is often capable of cutting through class distinctions. Formally and stylistically it is often hybrid and syncretic, as it negotiates elements of both traditional and elite arts, often borrowing from each indiscriminately. Because it tends to reflect relatively uncritically the society out of which it is produced, popular art is often (though not always) socially conservative, serving to reinforce the dominant social norms of the culture. This is the broader of the two understandings of 'popular art' that Barber illustrates.

The narrower conception of 'popular art' in Barber's analysis is the one with which I am most concerned. It is related to the first definition of 'popular' in its focus on the art of the 'common people,' in contrast to elitist notions of art. However, according to Barber, the differentiation is that this kind of popular art is characterized by serving the *interests* of 'the people', rather than necessarily *originating* from them (Barber). This kind of popular art does not arise spontaneously as a conservative reflection of its social milieu, but rather, it is deliberate and seeks to empower people with the critical awareness necessary to effect social change. Barber writes: "Truly popular art, in this view, is art which furthers the cause of the people by opening their eyes to their objective situation in society. It "conscientizes" them, thus preparing them to take radical and progressive action" (Barber). This kind of popular art (including popular theatre) tends, like popular art in the broader sense, to be formally syncretic and stylistically heterogeneous, relying also on mass, or populist, appeal. However it tends to be much more conscious and self-reflexive about the aesthetic choices it

makes, as it seeks to employ artistic modes for openly political purposes. It is out of this specific approach – that of serving the political interests of the populace – that community-based theatre and TfD grew.

This popular theatre first arose as a politically-charged artistic movement in Latin America in the 1960s. Ideologically, it is most closely aligned with the anti-establishment socialist movement in Brazil that grew in response to the military dictatorship that seized power in 1964 by coup d'etat. Undoubtedly the most important figure from this popular theatre movement is the Brazilian theatre director and practitioner Augusto Boal, who was instrumental in formulating and theorizing a distinct set of popular theatre practices that would eventually become known and utilized throughout the world. Boal's ideas centred on the need to radically reconfigure the function of the theatre so as to eliminate its inherently hierarchical and oppressive structures, and to transform it into a participatory and democratic space in which the people – who would become both spectators and actors simultaneously - could explore their real-world revolutionary potential through drama. These ideas were first formulated and refined by Boal during his tenure at the Arena Theatre in Sao Paulo during the 1960's and 70's. Boal would eventually syncretize these ideas into a holistic system of popular theatre techniques and practices, which he called "The Theatre of the Oppressed" (TO). In 1979, Boal published his first book, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, which remains an indispensable text within popular theatre circles, being the first theoretically grounded treatise to provide a concrete methodology for the practice of a participatory, community-oriented political theatre.

Many critics, theorists and practitioners have pointed to the fact that Augusto Boal was not always the first to use the kinds of theatrical techniques he systematized in TO. Frances Babbage, a prominent Boal scholar and TO practitioner, has written that "certainly, these techniques were not new in themselves, nor were they presented as such. Boal acknowledges the influence of Brecht, and – less obviously – the drama of classical Greece… What was innovative was the specific combination and political application" of such techniques (Babbage 13). From a theoretical standpoint, arguably the two most significant influences on Boal's thinking are, as Babbage notes, the Marxist-inspired political theatre practices of German theatre director Bertolt Brecht, and the radical popular education theory of Boal's compatriot Paulo Freire. Indeed, the name "Theatre of the Oppressed" is a direct nod to Freire's highly influential 1968 book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* Freire, who was also heavily influenced by leftist ideology, believed in the necessity of abolishing the rigid and oppressive structural relationship between teachers and students that was the dominant education model at the time. In his book, he argues that the top-down model of 'active teacher-subject' and 'passive student-object' that is characteristic of the traditional educational model is ultimately designed to support the status quo which grants power to the oppressors, and thus keep the oppressed from rising up. Conversely, Freire's humanist, revolutionary approach to education is designed to stimulate in the oppressed an awareness of their oppression, and in doing so, sow the seeds that will lead to their transformation from passive objects to actively

thinking subjects. This radical approach to education forms the underlying foundation for Boal's TO.

Boal sees an analogy here between the relationship of teachers to students, and the relationship of actors to spectators in the theatre, which he argues is similarly oppressive and uni-directional. TO represents an attempt to reorient that relationship in such a way that the spectators are in fact actors as well, or what Boal calls 'spect-actors.' In response to, and as a further development of, Brecht's Epic Theatre, which seeks to force audiences to reflect critically on the social conditions of oppression inherent in their society as they are revealed on stage, Boal seeks to go a step further by actually empowering the spectators to participate fully in the action and directly influence the outcome of the play as actors. In her book *Augusto Boal*, Babbage paraphrases Boal to say that "theatre cannot be radical by virtue of its message alone. True radicalism comes, it is argued, only through direct participation in, and ownership of, the processes of production and hence in the creation of meaning" (Babbage 41). Boal proposes numerous theatrical techniques, devices and exercises to allow this collective participation in the theatrical process to happen. The most commonly-used technique of TO is Forum Theatre, which allows audience members to stop a performance at any given moment and replace actors on stage so as to alter the outcome of the conflict directly. Boal refers to this process as a 'rehearsal for revolution': the spectators, in the process of becoming 'spect-actors', begin to realize the systems of oppression under which they exist, and start to envision concrete ways in which they can confront and overcome those oppressive

systems. Finally, they are empowered to put those ideas into practice on stage, thus preparing them for the possibility of enacting them in reality. Boal proposes many other techniques as well in TO, but all emphasize the same process of people becoming '*conscientized'* about the societal structures that serve to oppress them, and then becoming empowered to take concrete action through theatre performance.

Jane Plastow, the UK practitioner whose work in Eritrea is the focus of the later chapters of this work, has said of Augusto Boal that "the body of [his] work has undoubtedly been the most influential single input into the area of applied theatre in the past generation" (Plastow 294). However, she and many other practitioners have questioned what they have perceived as the presumed universality of strictly-Boalian TO. In her 2008 article "Practising for the revolution? The influence of Augusto Boal in Brazil and Africa" she cautions against the tendency that some practitioners have of taking Boal too literally and, in doing so, failing to address the cultural and political specificities of the locale in which they are working. She writes:

> The apparently blithe peddling of these forms as universally applicable has to be problematic. In conversations mutual friends have told me that Augusto Boal is happy to acknowledge that his forms should be adapted for use in particular settings… but this is not the impression given by his books or on his courses. […]The problem here is that many of those taking up the techniques of the Theatre of the Oppressed… are likely to feel they must follow the

> rules as set down, and that if these do not work the failure lies with them rather than with problems in the dogmatic outlining of the techniques themselves. (301)

One of the central problems with a too-rigid application of Boal's techniques is that one risks over-emphasizing the importance of the 'revolution.' Particularly in so-called 'developed world' contexts in which participatory theatre is used to engage marginalized groups (at-risk youth, racial minorities, prison inmates, etc.), the idea of preparing for a genuine revolution has little currency, except only perhaps in a distant, non-literal sense of the word. And increasingly this has become the case not only in the developed world: with the collapse of socialism towards the end of the 1980's and the subsequent global spread of capitalism, the kind of revolution to which Boal and Freire allude in their manifestoes has become significantly less realistic throughout the world. For these reasons, many practitioners, while acknowledging the profound influence of Augusto Boal on their methodologies, have nonetheless attempted to distance themselves from TO as a discrete system of theatre practice, opting instead to describe their work in terms like 'Community-Based Theatre' (CBT) and 'Applied Theatre' - terms which are perhaps more accurate than 'Theatre of the Oppressed,' and arguably less ambiguous than 'popular theatre.' Jane Plastow's long-term project in Eritrea, which will be discussed in the following chapter, was titled 'the Eritrean Community-Based Theatre Project,' though by at least one definition the term 'Theatre for Development' would have been as apt a descriptor as CBT.

Jan Cohen-Cruz, another leading Boal scholar and practitioner of TO, offers the following deconstruction of some of the existing terminology as a helpful and productive means of distinguishing one type of work from another:

> Applied theatre is the array of practices that essay to ameliorate situations through such means as building positive identity and community cohesion through the arts. Take, for example, community-based theatre, a popular mode allied with identity politics and targeting under-represented groups in a quest of collective expression. While related to TfD, there are important differences. Community-based theatre is partisan, dealing with a particular group: TfD is bi-partisan, dealing with a particular population AND a 'civil society' institution. (Cruz 115)

Within this framework, 'applied theatre' is, like popular theatre, a broad-based category, but one that seeks more deliberately to be inclusive of the various other sub-categories, thus functioning as an umbrella term. CBT, in contrast to Boalian TO, which seeks to be broadly populist and is rooted in Marxist discourse, tends to focus on a particular segment of a population as a discrete (though often porous) identity-group, and emphasizes an exploration of the unique set of ways in which that group is marginalized from mainstream society. CBT can sometimes originate from the grassroots ('by' the community), but often involves facilitators who may be external to the target identity-group working 'with' the community, and at times even 'for' the community - such as, for example, Theatre-in-Education projects that perform in high schools and target high-risk youth.

Indeed, Theatre-in-Education (TiE) is as much akin to TfD as it is to CBT. Like TfD, it is usually 'bi-partisan,' involving both a target-community and an external agent, such as a non-profit organization. The key difference is that when using the term TfD, the implicit understanding is generally that the external agent is a non-governmental organization, and that 'development' refers to international development, typically in the developing world. Thus while certain TfD projects may focus on education, TiE can refer to projects that are not strictly TfD.

But TiE does share many similarities with TfD, one of the most important of which is the struggle to reconcile a type of theatre practice rooted in the popular, participatory 'bottom-up' ideology of Boal and Freire, with an educational/ development agenda that is fundamentally top-down. In the case of TiE, tensions may arise between facilitators and school boards or education departments, which tend often to hurt the ones for whom the project is intended – the students. Similarly in TfD, populations can at times get caught in the crossfire of competing agendas – of the facilitators, the civil society organizations (often NGO's), governments, and even at times individual community-leaders. Indeed the most distinguishing characteristic of TfD is its bringing together of two very different, and at times disparate, disciplines: the artistic discourse of theatre, and the social-scientific discourse of international development.

In their introduction to the book-length compilation of essays titled *Applied Theatre: An Introduction,* Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston describe the rise of TfD as such:

> As [international] development expanded from its traditional spheres of operation in engineering, economics and agriculture into the 'softer' cultural arenas of governance, gender and, above all, health, so the role for theatre-based processes grew in line with concerns that sustainable change could only be accomplished by transforming attitudes and that theatre is a powerful means of engaging in transformation. (13)

In the African context, according to Prentki and Preston, the growth of TfD as a development tool was most rapid in the 1990's, particularly as a response to "the perceived failure of many of the clinical interventions to arrest the spread of HIV/AIDS" (13). And indeed the benefits to the approach of using theatre as a tool for development are manifold: as Kees Epskamp points out in his book *Theatre for Development*, it is relatively inexpensive as an educational tool; it avoids the problem of illiteracy by using the language of the people; and it confronts local problems with which most participants can identify (Epskamp 21). That being said, TfD invariably faces challenges in attempting to reconcile the agendas of a wide variety of interests invested in any given project, as will be illustrated in my analysis of Jane Plastow's work in Eritrea. Furthermore, the success of TfD can often be hampered by the disconnect between theatre workers and development workers – groups that do not necessarily always speak the same 'language.' Some of these issues will be explored further in the subsequent chapters of this thesis.

The trajectory I have just briefly traced – from popular theatre to Theatre for Development – is admittedly a convoluted one. But one crucial observation to be made is how the politics of the discourse have shifted in response to changing global political trends. Whereas popular theatre, as conceived by Boal, envisioned a world in which the oppressed majority was pitted against the oppressive minority (ie. the state), TfD has shifted dramatically away from this dialectical approach and towards a model in which the state, civil society, 'the people', and even private enterprise, all have roles to play in a collaborative approach to community development. A central question then, is whether this model of participatory theatre is a more realistic and effective one, or simply a watered-down mutation of a movement that has lost touch with its original political impulse. While it may be impossible to reach a definitive answer to this question, one of the goals of this thesis will be ultimately to make some progress towards a meaningful response.

A Case for Eritrea

The approach will be to undertake a detailed and critical review of one example of TfD in a particular context – post-independence Eritrea – in the hopes that my findings will contribute a new perspective to the broader discussion around TfD in Africa, and for the discourse as a whole. It is an approach similar to, and one that draws considerably from, that of international development scholars Kidane Mengisteab and Okbazghi Yohannes in their analysis of post-independence Eritrea titled *Anatomy of an African Tragedy: Political, Economic*

and Foreign Policy Crisis in Post-Independence Eritrea. In that treatise, which is grounded in the social-scientific discourses of political science and economic development theory, the authors also treat Eritrea as a microcosm for Africa as a whole in their discussion of post-independence African development. In their introduction, they explain: "Instead of examining the entire sub-Saharan region, however, we take a case study approach and examine… Africa's newest state[1], Eritrea… We find the lessons we learn from Eritrea's experience to be informative in understanding many of the factors that led to Africa's prevailing predicament" (2). This study operates under the similar assumption that the case study approach can yield results that are applicable in a wider context, given the patterns in political and economic development that Eritrea shares with many other African states, and the ways in which TfD has attempted to address such development issues. Hopefully, this case study can contribute to further discussions around the uses of TfD in other contexts, African or otherwise.

To this end, this thesis will address the following questions:

- What has TfD in Eritrea looked like previously?
- In what ways has it been successful in contributing to the development of the nation?
- What challenges has it faced, and were those challenges shaped by the interplay of dynamics between the various stakeholders involved in the TfD process?

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[1] Eritrea was Africa's newest state from 1993 until the secession of South Sudan from Sudan in 2011.

- What might the future look like for TfD in Eritrea, and what are the requisite conditions for the realization of that potential future?
- What roles can CBT, TiE, and/or popular theatre play in the shaping of TfD's future in Eritrea?

Chapter One of this thesis will undertake a detailed geo-political overview of Eritrea, followed by an exposition of the ECBTP. In this chapter I will outline some of the key ways in which the circumstances of Eritrea's development mirror the circumstances of many other African nations. In Chapter Two, I will discuss the extent to which these developmental challenges impacted, and were impacted by, Jane Plastow's TfD work. This chapter will draw on interviews conducted with participants involved in the ECBTP. Chapter Three will draw upon my correspondence with Jane Plastow herself to offer some suggestions as to what direction TfD practitioners might take in trying to navigate the difficulties of the Eritrean context. The conclusion will revisit some of the questions posed in this Introduction while offering some brief final reflections. Ultimately the aims of this thesis are twofold: one aim is to further the discussion around the ways in which theatre can be used as an agent of social change and development; the other aim is to begin a discussion around theatre in Eritrea, and the ways in which TfD might be able to contribute to the betterment of that particularly troubled and under-studied country.

Chapter One: Making Theatre in a New Nation

Eritrea: A Geo-Political & Historical Overview

Located in northeast Africa along the southern coast of the Red Sea, Eritrea is one of the continent's youngest nations. With the exception of the South Sudan, it is the most recent country to declare its independence, gaining official recognition from the United Nations in 1993. Geographically, Eritrea is situated at the Eastern threshold of sub-Saharan Africa, lying between the other Horn countries of Ethiopia, Djibouti and Somalia to the south and southeast, respectively, and the largely Arab regions of Sudan to the west. As a result of the diversity of its surrounding and historical influences, Eritrea, like most African states, is a poly-ethnic, multi-lingual, and religiously diverse country. Eritrea has no one official language, though Tigrinya and Arabic are most prevalent, and English is commonly used for official purposes. Of its nine linguistic groups, Tigrinya is the most commonly spoken, and is the language of the Tigrinya people who form the majority of those living in the highlands area around the capital city of Asmara. The Tigrinya people, who comprise more than half the population, are predominantly Orthodox Christians, while the various peoples of the rural lowlands are predominantly Muslim. Thus Eritrea is in many respects heterogeneous, and arguably it derives its sense of national identity most strongly from its unified commitment to the decades-long liberation struggle it fought against Ethiopia (1961 – 1991). Though Eritrea shares many cultural similarities with its southern neighbour, politically, the relations between the two countries are highly strained and at times violent. In many ways Ethiopia's occupation of

Eritrea was a colonial enterprise - one inherited from the previous regimes of the Italians and the British.

The history of the modern-day state of Eritrea begins around 1882, when the Italians began to occupy territory in East Africa (including in Somalia, as well as Ethiopia – of which Eritrea was then a part) during the "scramble for Africa," officially creating Eritrea as an Italian colony in 1890. The Italian occupation of Eritrea lasted until 1941, at which time Italy was defeated in World War II and its African colonies seized by the British. Tekeste Negash, in his book *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea, 1882 – 1941*, characterizes the colonial era generally as such:

> …while the Italians attempted with varying degree of success to exploit the human and material resources, they were not in the least interested in laying down the infrastructure (economic and political) for the interests of the inhabitants of the colony… It was contrary to the *raison d'etre* of Italian colonialism… to pursue a development policy favourable for the creation of an autonomous colonial society. (Negash 11)

Thus during this period the level of Eritrean dependence on the Italian colonial administration was high, and as such an organized resistance movement was unable to take root. In fact, Negash argues that, notwithstanding the above quote, Eritreans' reactions to colonial subjection were actually mixed, with some sectors of the population perceiving it as more favorable than the previous political system of the Ethiopians (22). According to Negash, during the (roughly) half-

century of Italian colonial rule, Eritreans experienced a far greater degree of political stability than in decades previous to Italian colonization, owing largely to the imposition of the colonial state as an arbiter of inter-clan and inter-ethnic conflicts: "Put cynically, the Eritreans did not have to work out for themselves the formulae for political stability since the colonial state did the job for them" (152). Negash also argues that during the Italian colonial period, despite the obviously unequal economic relations between the colonial administrators and the native population, the country saw major improvements to the material wellbeing of most Eritreans – largely as a result of the aforementioned political stability. Furthermore, Negash argues that

> the impact of the co-option of Eritreans in the colonial system, and its consequent repercussions for Eritrean identity, was… considerable. After 55 years of separate existence, the lumping together of Eritrea into the newly created [Italian African] empire was bound to put into relief the existence of a separate identity... The effect was… an inchoate feeling of a separate identity which can rightly be identified as Eritrean. (156)

In other words, the concept of Eritrea as an entity distinct from Ethiopia arose as a direct result of the Italian colonial enterprise. As G.K.N. Trevaskis, one of the British administrators of Eritrea in the period following World War II, writes in his book *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition*: "Eritrea is inhabited by a curious mosaic of diverse communities. They have various origins… [but] they have little in common with each other but the accident of their residence in the territory Italy

conquered and named Eritrea" (Trevaskis 17). The capital city of Asmara provides the most striking example of the legacy of Italian influence; as the capital of the Italian Kingdom of East Africa, it saw the proliferation of much Italian architecture in the 1920's and 1930's, much of which still stands today. Thus, the era of Italian colonization had a profound impact on the economic and political development of Eritrea, as well as on its early formation of a national consciousness.

Following the British defeat of the Italians in Eritrea in 1941, the UN mandated a temporary British military occupation of Eritrea, which lasted until 1952. While the British had granted Eritreans some new freedoms via the institution of minor political reforms to the previous Italian social structure (which was basically an apartheid system), the reforms were indeed minor. According to Trevaskis, who documents his experiences as a member of the British Administration in Eritrea:

> To the inhabitants of Eritrea, the change in regime brought little apparent change in the system of government. The various processes of government continued much as they always had… The restrictions of the Hague Convention, the difficulty of recruiting adequate British staff, and a variety of political considerations provided obstacles to any radical reform. (Trevaskis 29)

This period is marked by what Trevaskis calls 'the growth of political consciousness', as tensions rose and hostilities grew towards the Italians (many of

whom stayed during the British occupation and continued to assume high-ranking administrative posts), as well as towards the British, and between the different native ethnic groups as well. During this period, ethnic and religious divisions within the country deepened, and the colonial powers sought to use these deepening divisions to their advantage. The fate of Eritrea was originally meant to be decided by the four Allied powers that had emerged victorious from the war – the British, Russians, French, and Americans – all of whom wanted to secure their own economic interests in the Red Sea basin region. However, the four powers were ultimately unable to agree upon a course of action, with each favouring a different one the following outcomes: Eritrea's federation with Ethiopia; the partition of Eritrea into an Ethiopian-federated (Christian) region and a Sudanese-federated (Muslim) region; an internationally-led transitional administration; an Italian-led transitional administration. The possibility of full-scale Eritrean independence was not seriously considered. It is also worth noting that the Allied powers were not consistent in their support of one alternative over another; the Americans and the Russians particularly were prone to capriciousness and waffling. Ultimately the four powers submitted to their collective incompetence and, realizing that "no agreement was possible… On 15 September [1948] the Four Powers washed their hands of the problem and referred it to the United Nations" (Trevaskis 91). The UN General Assembly, under pressure from the United States (who were allies of the Haile Selassie regime in Ethiopia), ultimately elected that Eritrea would "'constitute an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown.' This decision,

which was more-or-less supported by a majority of Tigrinya-speaking Eritreans, but widely opposed by the non-Tigrinya (and mostly Muslim) population, was then implemented in 1952. Thus began the process of the Ethiopian regime's systematic erosion of Eritrean sovereignty and assimilation of Eritrean people into the dominant Ethiopian culture.

During the decade following the end of the British military occupation, the Ethiopian regime attempted to subvert the legitimacy of the Eritrean federation through various means. According to Kidane Mengisteab and Okbazghi Yohannes: "Ethiopia's language, educational system, civil and penal codes and labor law were introduced into Eritrea and, finally, the Eritrean flag was lowered and the emblems of the Eritrean government were altered" (38). In 1962, the Ethiopian regime, led by emperor Haile Selassie, officially dissolved the Eritrean parliament and annexed the country as an Ethiopian province. Around the same time, an organized liberation movement began to emerge in Eritrea, first initiating military action against Selassie's regime in 1961, and gradually intensifying. However, over time the liberation movement splintered into multiple factions, which were in competition with each other for authority over the movement. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) emerged in 1972 as the sole political body representing the liberation struggle. (The EPLF would go on to form the first civilian government in independent Eritrea in 1991; they remain in power today, over twenty years later.)

The Eritrean liberation war saw its most violent years in the 1970's and 1980's, during which time the Ethiopian regime received much military support

from the United States and then, following the 1974 ouster of Haile Selassie by the Marxist junta known as the Derg, the Soviet Union as well. Also during this period, hundreds of thousands of Eritreans fled the country as refugees, with many taking either permanent or temporary refuge in the Sudan, and many more fleeing to Europe and North America. In the late 1980's, the moribund Soviet Union withdrew its support from Ethiopia in anticipation of its impending collapse, and soon afterward the severely weakened Ethiopian army capitulated. The war officially ended in 1991 with Eritrea declaring victory; in 1993 the UN administered an Eritrean referendum on the question of national sovereignty, with over 99% of Eritreans voting 'yes.' Eritrea was formally admitted to the United Nations General Assembly on May 28, 1993. Though it is impossible to ascertain the number of casualties over the course of the thirty-year war, some have estimated the total number from both sides to be over 200,000.

The promise of a bright future for Eritrea, and the subsequent betrayal of that promise by a government regime that has spiraled at an alarming rate into authoritarianism, secrecy and corruption, is a narrative that has filled many pages in critical scholarly works like Mengisteab's and Yohannes' *Anatomy of an African Tragedy*. Today, Eritrea is known among the international community (to the extent that it is known at all) as a pariah state, largely due to its obsessive and, arguably, self-destructive insistence on economic self-reliance, coupled with its hostility towards the West, NGO's and international agencies. It has also proven to be extremely intolerant of internal dissent, regularly committing gross human rights violations through the jailing and/or disappearing of journalists, political

opponents, writers and other dissidents. This unfortunate situation was, and is, further compounded by the breakout of yet another war with Ethiopia from 1998 – 2000. This senseless border dispute, which cost tens of thousands of lives and many millions of dollars to both countries, was never resolved, (ending only with a tenuous ceasefire) and as such tensions between the two countries have remained high. The Eritrean government has used this tension as a pretense for keeping the country highly militarized indefinitely, forcing many people into interminable military service. The constant threat of conflict breaking out again has also formed the pretext for the regime's refusal to implement the country's constitution, or to hold open elections. Mengesteab and Yohannes, writing shortly after the 1998-2000 war, have succinctly summed up the state of Eritrean 'independence' in this way: "at the beginning of the first decade of the new century, Eritrea's future does not look any brighter than it was in 1961, the year the Eritrean armed struggle began" (96).

Similarities (and Dissimilarities) to other African Countries

According to Mengisteab and Yohannes, there are four crucial obstacles to Eritrea's development that bear comparison to other African countries: 1) the country's existence as a post-colonial nation and product of the 19th century European "Scramble for Africa"; 2) the challenges of an economy that is largely agrarian and limited in scope and diversity; 3) a populace that is ethnically, linguistically and religiously heterogeneous and therefore highly susceptible to fracturing and political instability; and 4) a hostile and often antagonistic

relationship with external agents (international organizations, global powers, NGO's, neighbouring African states) fuelled by fears of economic and political manipulation (29-32). To varying degrees, all of these concerns are important factors in understanding the ECBTP, and likewise are realities that must be dealt with in most African TfD contexts. A closer look at these four characteristics shows that while Eritrea is in some ways unique, it nonetheless exhibits many of the familiar patterns of development-challenges among African states.

With regard to its colonial history Eritrea is, like most African nations, a product of Europe's scramble for Africa in the late 19th century. However, while the vast majority of the continent was colonized by the two great European powers, Britain and France, the Italian colonial enterprise was by contrast relatively small. The Italians also differed considerably in their approach. According to Tekeste Negash, the Italian colonialists were much less committed to the 'civilizing' mission that in other African colonies went hand in hand with the exploitation of raw natural and human resources. For example: "According to the French Colonial policy of Assimilation, the ultimate goal was to bring the colonized to the level of the colonizer, through among other things, the introduction and spread of [a] western educational system… [By contrast] the objectives of Italian colonial educational policy had very little to do with either assimilation or Italianization" (Negash 66). This is significant because whereas the British and French colonies allowed for the development of a semi-elite class of urban African intellectuals who received their education in the European metropoles, such an intellectual class did not materialize to the same extent in

Italian Eritrea. One consequence of this was the inability of the Eritrean people, upon the defeat of the Italians in the Second World War, to strongly articulate a desire for national independence in the way that urban intellectuals have often fueled nationalist movements in other African nations (181). Eritreans' lack of a unified national consciousness rendered it vulnerable to Ethiopian colonial ambitions. Thus Eritrea is both like and unlike other African countries with regard to its historical relations to colonial Europe.

With regard to the Eritrean economy, we see a similar adherence to larger trends in Africa as well. Like most African countries, the vast majority of the population in Eritrea is involved in subsistence farming – nearly 80%, according to the *CIA World Factbook* (214). The remainder of the labour force, according to Mengisteab and Yohannes:

> … remains essentially condemned to specialization in the production of a small basket of primary commodities and extractive resources. This division of labor makes the Eritrean economy globally uncompetitive and significantly limits the possibility of promoting internal economic integration… Again, this is something Eritrea shares with its African counterparts. (30)

These barriers to economic development are a result of a number of factors, including the legacy of a colonial economic model that emphasized raw material export, the lack of a skilled or highly educated workforce, asymmetrical trade relations, and high levels of debt (97). The challenges are further compounded by misguided government policies in the post-independence era, which are hostile to

foreign investment and open markets and are designed to encourage economic self-reliance. Eritrea has a highly centralized command-economy characterized by massive inefficiencies and severely limited economic freedom. While most African states have implemented some degree of protectionist economic policy at some stage in their development, Eritrea has been more militant than most in its rejection of liberal free-market principles. In the context of an undemocratic, single-party state, this has created immense barriers for Eritreans, both inside the country and out, who have attempted to invest in the country to create economic growth.

The third challenge facing Eritrean, and African, development outlined by Mengisteab and Yohannes is the prospect of unifying a society that is highly fragmented along ethnic, linguistic and religious lines. As is noted above, Eritrea is a country comprised of many distinct nationalities – nine to be exact – and is also divided roughly equally between Christian and Muslim peoples. The lumping together of these various groups of peoples into a single national entity is a direct result of the colonial delineation of borders that entirely ignored the existing territorial boundaries between ethnic groups. The often arbitrary nature of the state borders drawn by the colonial powers has wreaked, and continues to wreak, much havoc throughout Africa in the post-colonial era as different ethnic groups struggle with one another for state power and influence. In his book *African Development*, the American development scholar Todd J. Moss writes of the problems caused by ethnic divisions:

> Identities based on blood linkages – be they ethnic, familial, or clan – are very real in most of Africa because, as in Europe, traditional political organization was based on such relationships. Although ethnic identity is a fluid and often arbitrary concept, it seems to nevertheless have extraordinary power to influence how people treat each other. (26)

He goes on to further state that such pre-existing divisions were often exacerbated by colonial powers, in some cases sowing the seeds for later conflict: "In Rwanda, for example, it is not at all clear that Hutus and Tutsis saw themselves as distinctly different until the Belgian authorities classified people as one or the other and then implemented policies of deliberate discrimination" (28). In Eritrea, although ethnic violence has never existed in the way it has in a country like Rwanda, nonetheless tensions have arisen, particularly around the issue of language status in the post-independence Eritrean state. As language in Eritrea is both a marker of ethnicity and, in some cases, religion, the question of which languages would be given official or special status became highly political during the post-independence nation-building effort. Tigrinya literature scholar Ghirmai Negash (not to be confused with Tekeste Negash) writes in an early chapter of his *History of Tigrinya Literature* that in the period leading up to the drafting of the Eritrean constitution, "there always was the political fear, notably amongst some conservative Muslim [factions of society] … that a failure to adopt Arabic as an official language of Eritrea might cause Eritrean Muslims to lose their cultural, socio-political and intellectual experience" (55). This is a fear shared by many

minority groups in other African countries as well. In response to such fears, a key component of the Eritrean government's cultural policy has been the promotion and equal treatment of all languages and ethnic groups, largely as a safeguard against political cleavages within the country. However this policy has arguably been bred more of necessity than of good-will: given the constant threat of conflict with the much larger military of Ethiopia (whose population of over 80 million dwarfs Eritrea's, at just under 6 million), Eritrean unity has been crucial to the country's ability to defend its sovereignty. During the 1998-2000 border war, virtually all able-bodied Eritreans were mobilized. Furthermore, regardless of the official status of any language, in practice the Tigrinya-speaking majority has always held a *de facto* position of supremacy in Eritrea. While this fact has not led to any serious inter-ethnic violence within Eritrea since its independence, it has always maintained a central place in discussions around post-independence national development. Indeed one of the main reasons why the EPLF (re-branded in the independence era as the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, or PFDJ) has been able to maintain such a firm hold of state power for over twenty years has been the failure of a strong and united opposition force to materialize. The diverse demographics of the country have much to do with that failure.

The fourth factor cited by Mengisteab and Yohannes as a challenge for African development is the existence of dysfunctional relationships between African states and external agents such as international organizations, global powers, and neighbouring states. They write that, because African governments are often weak or fragile, "they become vulnerable to external manipulations as

their leaders seek international patrons to subsidize their internal repression or execute wars of aggression against neighbors or to defend themselves against aggression from neighbors in exchange for the provision of proxy services to their external patrons" (31-32). This has very much been the case in post-independence Eritrea. During the 1990's, Eritrea sought to build strong ties with the United States, believing that it could play a vital role in the promotion of American economic and political interests in the Horn region, in exchange for aid and development assistance. However, as Mengisteab and Yohannes point out, this approach to foreign policy has been largely contradictory to the Eritrean regime's core ideology of self-reliance. This inherent contradiction was exacerbated by two important events: the first being the breakout of the border war with Ethiopia in 1998, which put a serious strain on Eritrea's relations with the US. The Americans reacted to the war with great disappointment, as they had hoped that Eritrea would act as a stabilizing force in the Horn region. As a result, the American-led mediation process was viewed with much skepticism by the Eritrean regime, especially given that the US held close ties to the Ethiopian regime as well. The other key event to impact the changing dynamics of Eritrea's relationship to the US was the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and the US's subsequent "war on terror." While on the one hand US-Eritrean relations worsened as a result of the border-war with Ethiopia, on the other hand, Eritrea sought to use its strategically valuable proximity to the Arab world as a means of mending relations with the US, offering its facilities up for proxy use by the American military. However, Eritrean attempts to win American approval have largely

failed, as US administrations have increasingly come to view the Eritrean regime as a threat to regional stability, and lately have gone as far as to accuse Eritrea of providing funding to Islamic terrorists in Somalia. This has led Eritrea in recent years to adopt a much more hostile tone towards the US, and the West in general. Indeed, today, Eritrea's foreign relations are in most cases strained. Not only have its ties to the US deteriorated, but it has also become antagonistic towards the United Nations (which has imposed sanctions on Eritrea over alleged links to terrorist organizations) as well as the African Union (from which Eritrea has withdrawn its representation over a perceived lack of leadership from the AU on settling the border conflict with Ethiopia). Eritrea also maintains tense relations with virtually all of its neighbouring countries, for a variety of reasons. However, the country has kept relatively genial relations with the European Union (and Italy in particular), and has been open to increasing foreign investment from China and South Korea.

These components of Eritrea's diplomatic outlook are, to varying degrees, common among many African countries. Understandably, they pose serious challenges to development. However one other crucial barrier to development efforts that is particularly acute in Eritrea, and perhaps most significant to a discussion about the potential for Theatre for Development, is the extreme difficulty that non-governmental organizations face in trying to work in Eritrea. Most, if not all NGOs have been expelled from the country, as part of the regime's policy of self-reliance. This, as will be discussed in detail in subsequent chapters, has proven the most limiting factor in any attempts to initiate TfD

projects in Eritrea, as such projects are invariably funded by NGOs, and as such are unable to gain approval from government authorities to proceed.

Upon consideration of these four characteristics of post-colonial, post-independence Eritrea, it is reasonable to suggest that the challenges to social and economic development that the country faces are to a large degree challenges shared by African societies in general. While differences exist, arguably an in-depth analysis of attempts to facilitate development in one country – Eritrea – can prove useful to a larger discussion about how best to spur development in other African countries. Thus, the next section of this chapter will begin to examine the Eritrean Community-Based Theatre Project in more detail, with the ultimate aim of positioning that analysis within the larger context of TfD in Africa.

Jane Plastow and Community-Based Theatre in Post-Independence Eritrea

It was at the moment when Eritrea's future looked most optimistic – that brief window of opportunity after its revolutionary struggle had ended, but before the regime had begun to lose the faith of its people - that Jane Plastow was invited to initiate the Eritrean Community-Based Theatre Project (ECBTP). Plastow, who had done much TfD in various African nations prior to her work in Eritrea, became connected with the new nation by way of Ethiopia. She had taught theatre at the university in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa in the 1980s, and was re-visiting Addis in 1992 when she was first introduced to Alemseged Tesfai, head of what was then called the Eritrean Division of Culture (Plastow 145). Tesfai's major task in the post-independence nation-building project was to find ways to

begin developing the arts in Eritrea. This was no small chore, as Plastow notes in her article "Theatre of Conflict in the Eritrean Independence Struggle":

> Culture became a significant arena of politicization and struggle, and the profile of both drama and traditional performance cultures was raised in many minds… many influential Eritreans believed that the reclamation of their cultures and the development of a theatre relevant to all – but now free of government control – was of potential importance in building the new nation. (154).

Thus, upon meeting with Tesfai, Plastow was invited to work with the Culture Division to develop a theatre initiative that would facilitate the emergence of an indigenous Eritrean theatre tradition.

At first glance, the notion of working *with* the government to develop a theatre *free* of government control seems highly suspect. But it is important to note that in these early stages of the nation's independence, the prospect of a truly modern and democratic Eritrea emerging seemed compellingly strong. Given the nature and history of the EPLF during the liberation struggle, it is evident in retrospect that there was at least as much cause for concern in the post-independence era as there was cause for optimism. Yet Mengisteab's and Yohannes' terse summation is telling: "We all missed the clues" (Mengisteab & Yohannes 18). Plastow was no exception. That said she was by no means incognizant of the theoretical potential for a community-based theatre initiative to be hijacked by a top-down state agenda. In another article, "Uses and Abuses of Theatre for Development: political struggle and development theatre in the

Ethiopia – Eritrea war", she writes that her earlier work in Ethiopia was ultimately cut short because the Derg regime became suspicious of her motives. Thus, she writes, "when I went to work for the liberation government in Eritrea the crucial pre-condition was that the theatre produced must be free to say whatever it felt was necessary" (98). From the outset of the Eritrean project, thus, it seems that a fair amount of freedom and autonomy could reasonably have been hoped for. Furthermore, based on Plastow's characterization of Alemseged Tesfai, the minister of the Division of Culture was far more interested in legitimately promoting the arts in Eritrea, than he was in toeing an authoritarian party line. Tesfai, himself a playwright and author who had done postgraduate studies in the United States before returning to Eritrea to join the liberation movement, seemed genuinely interested in fostering a popular people's theatre, free from political or ideological constraints. As such, Tesfai's and Plastow's relationship was highly congenial – so much so that Plastow would later write an article about him in 1997: "Alemseged Tesfai: A Playwright in Service to Eritrean Liberation."[2] For these reasons, the ECBTP was poised, when it finally began in 1995, to evade the issue of state censorship much more successfully than Plastow's earlier work in Ethiopia.

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[2] In it, Plastow illustrates the warmth of their friendship, remarking that upon asking him if he would be interested in translating one of his earlier plays into English for publication, "it was the first time I had had the considerable pleasure of jolting his usual, apparently imperturbable, *savoir faire*. I suddenly saw what this burly, self-confident man in his fifties might have been like as a young man in the early 1970's, when he first came to London and hung out with the hippies around Leicester Square for some days…" (54).

The methodological blueprint for the Eritrean theatre project came from Plastow's earlier work in Zimbabwe in the 1980's. This approach made use of a wide variety of theatrical styles and aesthetics, including indigenous and western-influenced forms, to create a unique community-oriented aesthetic. In Zimbabwe, the community theatre movement was able to branch out and form multiple troupes, which eventually formed an organizing body called the Zimbabwe Association of Community Theatres (ZACT) (Plastow "ECBTP" 387). The goal here, as in Eritrea, was for the movement to reach a level of self-sustainability, which would allow community theatre to flourish as a means of creative expression and as a venue for social dialogue. This approach had achieved some measure of success in Zimbabwe, so the hope was that the methodology could be applied, at least partially, in Eritrea as well.

The Eritrean Community-Based Theatre Project

Though the idea for the project came about during Plastow's and Tesfai's chance meeting in 1992, it wasn't until 1995 that it was finally realized. During the time in between, Plastow was able to secure funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, the British Council and the British Academy for the project (Oxfam would later support the project as well). The initial phase was a three-month workshop-training program, which took place between July and September of 1995. Plastow and three of her colleagues from the UK led training sessions with 57 Eritrean participants, in which they developed basic popular theatre facilitation skills as well as a smattering of other theatrical techniques. The purpose of the

training program was to build the necessary skills so that the trainees could eventually become trainers themselves. This more formal training component was a necessary step towards eventually building a community-driven theatre, as Plastow notes:

> It is essential to understand that Eritrea had been effectively cut off from the outside world for thirty years. The only country whose culture Eritreans had any regular access to during that time was Ethiopia, and Ethiopia was waging a genocidal war aimed at eradicating Eritrean art, Eritrean voices, and ultimately the Eritrean people. None of the trainees we worked with had ever had access to a book about theatre. (Plastow "ECBTP" 386)

In tandem with this theatre-training program, the project also involved a research component, in which the UK cohort worked with a smaller group of Eritrean researchers to begin documenting Eritrea's theatre history. In addition to the country's traditional song and dance forms, there was also a considerable amount of dramatic theatre produced during the liberation war, mostly used as agit-prop to mobilize the populace, but also some more artistic plays such as those written by Alemseged Tesfai. These two foci – the theatre training and the research, formed the core of the three-month program.

The 57 trainees were virtually all ex-fighters of the liberation movement, as well as some urban intellectuals (though these categories were by no means mutually exclusive). There were considerably more men than women. The participants varied in age from 16 to 53. They were chosen by Tesfai because they

had already had some prior involvement in the performing arts. According to Plastow, "some had been full-time theatre or traditional arts workers with the EPLF groups, but more than half were amateurs who were otherwise students, teachers, tailors, farmers, shop-workers, or unemployed" (389). Notably, they were all Tigrinya-speaking Eritreans. In this first stage of the project, the participants all came from one of three cities: the capital Asmara, the second-largest city of Keren, and the port-city of Massawa. One of the long-term goals of the project was to eventually branch out into the other language areas of the country, as the promotion of equality of languages was a key component of the government's cultural development strategy. In practice, this language equality does not exist, nor never has existed, but efforts were indeed made in the ECBTP, with the team extending training to two additional language groups in the rural areas in their 1997 program. The 57 trainees were split into three groups, with the facilitators each working with one group. Two of the groups worked in Asmara (the trainees from Massawa were brought into the capital), and the third group was in Keren.

The idea was that over the course of the three months, the program would move steadily from a theatre-training orientation towards a participatory theatre-workshop orientation. They worked six days a week, for five hours a day. The first month was essentially facilitator-driven; the groups spent one week each on the styles of four major theatre practitioners – Stanislavsky, Brecht, Augusto Boal, N'gugi wa Thiong'o. They did one formal 'lecture' day each week, and the rest of the week would be workshop-based. Though it may seem euro-centric or

even neo-colonialist that the project involved British scholars giving a group of all-African participants theatre lessons on Stanislavsky and Brecht, it must be understood that this is what the participants both wanted and expected. Plastow observes that "what was most striking… was that our trainees were desperate for knowledge of how theatre worked in other places. What they wanted from us was to be taught about theatre – and mostly about acting" (389). This proved to be something of a challenge in the second month, as Plastow's and her colleagues' intent was never to focus solely on western or imported forms. The second month was devoted to indigenous Eritrean performing traditions. Obviously, this took less of a top-down approach, as the idea was for the participants to bring to the table what they already knew. Ultimately they would then try to syncretize the various forms and styles presented in the first two months during the third month, in which they would create the plays. However, the reaction from many of the participants to the 'traditional' sessions was unenthusiastic; some saw it as a waste of time. To those under the impression that the workshop would essentially be acting classes, it seemed a cop-out that the 'instructors' were asking the 'students' to rehearse things they already knew and did not perceive as 'real' theatre anyway. This contingent of the group was, according to Plastow, a small but vocal minority. However, luckily many others instead chose to support the exploration of their domestic traditions.

In the third month, they decided on the issues they wanted to use in the plays. The participants went out into various communities around the country and did research – interviewing people to find out what issues needed most urgently to

be addressed. Some of the main topics that emerged were land rights, veterans' rights, and women's rights. The last one in particular was significant, as improving the status of women had been a major talking point for the EPLF during the liberation campaign. Despite this, Eritrean society was (and is) still highly patriarchal, and in the post-liberation era women – many of whom were also veterans of the struggle – faced grim career and education prospects. Indeed, when the groups presented the plays in some of the smaller villages, these kinds of concerns proved highly contentious among the religious elders of the communities. In the third month, the group developed three plays, each roughly an hour in length, followed by discussion. The aesthetic was loosely Brechtian, while incorporating traditional Eritrean song and dance, and lots of slapstick comedy. Because of time constraints, the facilitators came up with the broad story-arcs for each play based on the content elicited by the participants in the workshops, which the participants (now the actors) then improvised. The performances took place in community halls or outside of schools, and when they later went out on tour into the smaller villages, the actors would generally perform on an open hillside. Plastow writes of the response to the performances: "informal interviews with the audience carried out by actors were extremely positive. What is more, the few remaining trainees whose doubts about the aesthetic merit of our proceedings lasted right up until the tour were now finally convinced… that this form of theatre could work" (394).

Following the end of the three-month program, sixteen of the trainees formed a performance troupe that continued touring around the Tigrinya-speaking

areas of the country, performing to an estimated total of over 90,000 people that year (395). In 1996, two of the facilitators also returned to do a theatre-in-education training course for teachers, while the troupe continued to tour and develop new plays about various social issues, including HIV and aids, dowry payments, and female genital mutilation. It was hoped that the members of the troupe and the other trainees would, over time, train other Eritreans in community-based theatre techniques and that a network of troupes would grow, in much the same way that ZACT had formed in Zimbabwe. To this end, Plastow returned to Eritrea again in 1997 to initiate a follow-up to the 1995 project. This involved two parts: one was a 'training the trainers' program, in which the facilitators worked with some of the trainees from the 1995 project to develop the capacity for passing the theatre techniques on to new communities. The other, as mentioned earlier, was an attempt to expand the reach of the ECBTP beyond the Tigrinya-speaking areas and into the Tigre- and Bilen-speaking regions as well. The 1997 project is documented in an article co-written by the five facilitators of the project called "Telling the Lion's Tale: making theatre in Eritrea." In it, Plastow outlines what the overarching aim of the project, from 1995 through to 1997 had been: "the essential idea has been to work constantly towards handing power and control to participants as soon as possible, and to create a sustainable network of theatre groups in Eritrea which can mutually support each other" (39). And indeed it seems the ECBTP was well on its way towards realizing this potential, though in many ways community theatre in Eritrea, and Eritrea as a whole, was still in its infancy in 1997. Christine Matzke, the research assistant for

the project (who has since become an established scholar of Eritrean and African theatre in her own right), strikes a cautiously optimistic tone in her section of "Telling the Lion's Tale" as she assesses the project's success: "When once again I was despairing about the wealth of material we have no time to tackle, Gerri [Moriarty, another facilitator] remarked that we should be conscious of the fact that we have had time only to find the stepping stones. And this, I think, we have achieved; others can continue to build the performing arts in Eritrea" (Matzke 52).

Sadly, though perhaps not unsurprisingly, the 1998 border conflict and the concomitant tightening of the government's stranglehold on civil liberties have effectively quashed much of the optimism that is reflected in Matzke's quote. Virtually all of the participants in the project were forced to take up arms and serve on the front lines; furthermore, the country quickly became an unsafe place for foreigners like Plastow to visit, and funding from NGO's became increasingly difficult to secure (a problem amplified by the Eritrean government's increasingly paranoid distrust of international development agencies). The long story short is that the ECBTP died in 1998. Since the end of that conflict, Plastow has been able to continue working in Eritrea, but she has focused primarily on theatre-in-education projects with village children. In particular she has done tremendous work in the village of Bogu (near Keren) sponsoring the local school, as well as piloting a program designed to help teachers develop child-centred arts curricula. That pilot project, undertaken in 2005-06, will be discussed in Chapter Three. And though she continues to sponsor the Bogu school today, Plastow has in recent

years shifted her focus to theatre-in-education projects in other East-African countries such as Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya. Without a doubt, the work she and her team have done in Eritrea has been enormously beneficial to the creative and cultural development of that country; whether or not the initial goals of the ECBTP can be revived today, however, still remains to be seen. The following chapters seek to address that very question, and draw upon interviews with former participants of the project to that end.

Chapter Two: Catching Up with the ECBTP

In January of 2012, I was fortunate to receive a travel grant from the University of Alberta's Graduate Students' Association to do field research in Eritrea for this project[3]. During my three-week stay in Asmara, I conducted interviews with members of the theatre community to discuss TfD, and specifically to learn what lasting impacts the ECBTP had on the country, if any. My first research objective was to gain an understanding of the present state of theatre in Eritrea. I wanted to find out, firstly, if there was any theatre of any sort – development-oriented or otherwise – being produced in the country on a regular basis, and if so, by whom and under what circumstances. It is important to understand that while the ECBTP was, strictly speaking, a development project, one of its stated goals was to foster an independent theatre community, which would ultimately go on to produce independent work on its own terms. Thus, figuring out what theatre was being produced in the present day seemed a good entryway into assessing the legacy of the ECBTP. Secondly, I wanted to hear from people who were involved with the ECBTP in the 1990s about what they perceived to be the overall impacts of that project, and their evaluation of it. I also wanted to find out if any attempts had been made to revive the ECBTP after the end of the border conflict, or if any theatre projects of a similar nature had been undertaken. Finally, I hoped to gain some insight into what the challenges are that community-based theatre faces in Eritrea today, and what circumstances would need to exist in order for a sustained community theatre to be possible.

[3] I also presented some of the findings of this trip at a conference of the University of Alberta African Students' Association in February 2012.

Unfortunately, due to time constraints, the difficulty of tracking people down in a country where email and the internet have yet to significantly penetrate the culture, and the fact that the number of Eritreans involved in the theatre community are relatively few, I was only able to set up interviews with two people during my brief stay: Solomon Tsehaye, the current head of the PFDJ's Bureau of Cultural Affairs and former research assistant for the ECBTP, and Efraim Khazai, a prominent actor, director and teacher who was a participant in the ECBTP and who has previously studied theatre at the graduate level at the University of Leeds in the UK. Solomon Tsehaye worked closely with Jane Plastow on the ECBTP in the mid-1990s, having just recently been appointed as head of the Cultural Affairs Bureau at the time. He had been involved in the early planning stages of the project, and worked alongside the facilitators throughout the duration of the project. In my discussion with Solomon, I learned that presently he is no longer working in theatre, and has shifted his focus to research on Eritrean oral poetry. My interview with Solomon took place in his relatively comfortable office in downtown Asmara, following a customary cup of shahi (spiced black tea with sugar) at the Italian-style café bar down the street. Similarly, my interview with Efraim Khazai took place a few days later over tea, at the café adjacent to the lovely Cinema Asmara – the largest and most attractive theatre in the city, where most theatre performances take place. I learned in that discussion that Efraim too works in theatre only in a limited capacity these days; he now spends most of his time working in the film industry as a writer and director. He also volunteers his time to teach acting, directing and playwriting to

high school students as an after-school program – something he has been doing since 1994. Both men – Efraim and Solomon - were extremely friendly, affable, and generous with their time and responses. Between these two conversations, many of the same themes emerged. Namely, that the ECBTP and subsequent TfD/ TiE projects have been highly effective, but that presently the financial resources needed to support such endeavours are non-existent; that there is sufficient appetite for theatrical arts in Eritrea, but that the theatre has been largely hobbled by the emergence of the far cheaper digital film industry; and perhaps most significantly, that there needs to be much more investment on the part of the government in live theatre, and especially in training theatre artists.

In broad terms, it is fair to say that as a permanent, established cultural institution, theatre does not currently exist in Eritrea. In a recent article, Christine Matzke has described the situation thus: "Never the most popular form of entertainment in Eritrea, drama is on the whole in relative decline, with theatre artists increasingly working for the national broadcasting station Eri-TV, or the ever growing digital film industry. In Eritrea, it is not possible to go to the theatre regularly" (Matzke 176). This state of affairs was confirmed to me by both of my interviewees. The stage drama that is occasionally produced is commissioned by the Cultural Affairs Bureau, and is almost invariably done on national holidays – Independence Day (May 24th), Martyr's Day (June 20th), or the day to commemorate the Beginning of the Armed Liberation Struggle (September 1st) (Matzke 178). The content of these performances is highly nationalistic, and essentially limited to state-sponsored propaganda. It often involves the retelling of

heroic stories from the liberation struggle, and generally speaking is intended to lionize the freedom fighters and stoke national pride. The following is Solomon Tsehaye's summation of this kind of theatre, and theatre in general in Eritrea, in response to my question "can you talk a little bit about theatre in Eritrea today?"[4]:

> ST: Unfortunately, theatre in Eritrea is not how it should have been, or how it used to be. It has now been dominated by film, unfortunately… particularly in Eritrea, film has taken off. Those who had been acting or working in theatre have shifted to film. In particular, video film, which is relatively cheaper, in comparison to the sophisticated film industry. It is easy to produce. …. So unfortunately, seeing it from that light, theatre has been suppressed. It has been sort of… sent into oblivion. Otherwise, certain theatre work is subsidized by the government. And that happens mostly during the national holidays – independence day… unless subsidies are given, you don't see any theatre in Eritrea… they are mostly political, agit-prop kind. They are not those that are just produced out of the creation of a certain playwright. They are geared towards a certain topic, which is very much needed during the independence holidays, martyrs celebrations… so I would say, there is very little theatre nowadays.

[4] Note that transcriptions from interviews have been edited only occasionally, where minor changes (such as grammatical corrections) were deemed necessary for clarity. The vast majority of quotations are verbatim.

> The main reason is that the actors, directors, playwrights, are not encouraged financially. They cannot live from working in theatre. That's it. Otherwise, people like theatre. There is a substantial size of audience, that likes theatre, that wants to see theatre live on stage. But because there is this video-filming, being sent abroad, to the diaspora, being sold, it encourages those people. They can get some money out of it. Theatre is not portable, that is not the nature of theatre.

Efraim Khazai, whose English I found to be slightly more strained than Solomon's - perhaps from prolonged disuse - echoed the same sentiment in response to my question of whether many people in Eritrea are involved in theatre today:

> EK: … right now, there is no theatre. It is stopped. No benefit from theatre. You can't have any income, so you can't administer yourself. The best solution is only just to participate in the movies. When you participate in the movies you can get some money, just to administer, and [to stay] alive.

I asked Efraim about the stage productions produced during national holidays. His response:

> EK: Always, during independence day, you have an objective. During Independence Day, you have to write about the heroism, about the historical moments of Eritrea, about the EPLF, about the

> people. But also, social-issue based theatre, we're allowed to stage as well.

I found interesting his use of the word "allowed" - it reinforced my understanding that the subject matter of state-sponsored productions is closely monitored and censored by the PFDJ. Though I was curious to learn more about the extent to which social issues were actually addressed in the holiday productions, I thought it best not to press him on this question. In Eritrea, speaking openly about issues of state censorship and repression of civil liberties is absolutely taboo – especially in a public place like Cinema Asmara, and, for Efraim, with a near-stranger such as myself. In Asmara, it is common knowledge that agents of the PFDJ are lurking virtually everywhere, and so a certain degree of self-censorship is necessary in public discourse. For someone privileged enough to come from a western liberal democracy, such as myself, this certainly takes some getting used to. In any case, the conclusion I was able to reach from other responses in the interviews, and my own personal observation of the state-sponsored productions on TV (they are frequently broadcast on the country's state-run television station, Eri-TV), is that the social aspects of such plays are largely didactic in their presentation, and not involving community participation in the way the ECBTP had. Efraim, I learned, is often involved in the writing and directing of these productions. He also made similar comments about the shifting of performance artists from theatre to video films. In response to my question about what kind of work he and others like him have been doing in the period following the 1998-2000 border dispute:

> EK: Totally changed to movies. Because video films are very easy to do. Then you can get an actor for a few days, then you go and shoot, then you say goodbye. He can return to the trenches, no problem. But in theatre, that actor has to be available for a long time. But during that time, the border dispute, it was not allowed to get actors for a long time.

Solomon Tsehaye made similar remarks regarding the relationship between the theatre and film industries in Eritrea. When I asked him whether he thought there was a sufficient audience for theatre in the country, he said this:

> ST: There is. In fact, it's the film audience. That is the audience for theatre. It's only through the camera that you see it as a film. Otherwise, it is theatre. Of course, the medium is different, but still the ingredient is there. So, there is an audience for it. The problem is, the financial issue.
>
> We have to bear in mind that we are a small country, a small society. And when you divide the country into the various languages, still we become smaller and smaller. And the theatre-goers become smaller and smaller. So we cannot support it.

While it may be tempting to dismiss Solomon's statement equating the filmic medium to 'theatre through a camera' as simplistic, two things must first be understood about the nature of the performing arts in Eritrea. The first is that in Eritrea, the most common style of stage drama has always been highly naturalistic, language-driven theatre. This is largely a result of Eritrean

interpretations of classical European text-driven dramatic forms, as well as influences from Ethiopian theatre practices. To quote Christine Matzke on this subject: "Originating in the early twentieth century and long associated with the Amhara elite, modern Ethiopian drama was initially word- rather than action-based and its relatively static aesthetics can still be traced in some Eritrean productions today" (Matzke 178). In the post-colonial period, and particularly during the liberation struggle, the theatre produced by cultural troupes in Eritrea was generally quite talky and not very dynamic in terms of action on stage. This dialogue-heavy aesthetic continues to be prevalent today in the holiday-productions. This has meant that, artistically, moving from the stage to the video-film medium has required relatively little adjustment of style, given the ease of shooting naturalism on camera. The other factor to consider is that because in Eritrea the performing arts scene is relatively small, many of the players in films are the same people who previously worked in theatre. In other words, much continuity can be traced from the limited theatre activity that existed prior to independence, and the video-film industry that has sprung up in recent decades.

Based on these responses from Efraim and Solomon I had to conclude that, at least with regard to the question of whether the ECBTP was able to foster an independent and sustained theatre tradition in Eritrea, the initiative was unsuccessful. Clearly, this result was influenced by factors largely outside of the control of the project's facilitators: namely, the breakout of armed conflict at the border, as well as the rise of the video-film industry as a cheaper alternative to live theatre.

Nonetheless, I wanted to get a sense from my interviewees of whether they found the project worthwhile, even if it was not sustained in the long-term. Here is Efraim's assessment the project - how it played out, and his thoughts on its effectiveness:

> EK: Theatre was active in 1991, until 1997. Was staged here, at the Cinema Asmara, Cinema Odeon [another theatre in Asmara], …. But in 1997, theatre became collapsed. The reason is, the border dispute. Most of the actors, writers and directors, were young, so they joined the army, and theatre totally stopped here. But in 1995, community-based theatre was introduced to Eritrea, by the British people – especially Dr. Jane Plastow. So, I participated in that training, for three months, then, we started to do CBT ourselves. So, I led two groups, 1996 and 1997. In 1996, we were going to far sides of Eritrean villages, [that did] not [have] access to TV, video, newspapers. Then we went there, and disseminate our message. And the messages, we collected from the people. [So it was] a vibrant message, [the people] wants to hear. So we brought that message, that issue, and we make it… we dramatize it, and we go back to them. And at last, it is participative. It doesn't have a closed ending. We give them a chance how to solve, themselves. And we make it a discussion. There is a joker[5]. The joker introduces them. Then the people are given a chance, how to solve

[5] The Joker, in Theatre of the Oppressed terminology, is the facilitator of a project or workshop.

> the problem. The people go onto the stage, and they take a part, trying to give the solution. That's participative… In 1997 also, we raised different issues, from societies remote from Asmara. And then we dramatized the issues again, and we came back to them. Most of those about divorce. That was a rampant issue at that time. So we dramatized, we gave them, and they were fascinated. And they tried to take a role, to give themselves a solution. And it was effective. The two tours were effective. They were very effective.

While Both Efraim and Solomon were again in agreement in their belief that the ECBTP, and community-based theatre initiatives in general, had had a positive impact on communities, Solomon's comments on the issue were slightly less enthusiastic, seeming to recognize the potential that was unrealized due to the project's abrupt end:

> ST: The main purpose of the community-based theatre, was to equip communities to produce their own theatre, in order to discuss their issues through theatrical means. So, it was from them, by them, for them. So, it was meant to be that. So those people who were trained in Asmara and in Keren, were to be dispersed to different places in Eritrea, to teach community theatre to the communities, and leave them. So that these people, in their villages, those farmers, men and women, children and adults, to use theatre to discuss issues pertaining to their life. That was meant. But unfortunately while it was in progress, the border

> conflict with Ethiopia started in 1998. And unfortunately, the funding stopped. Not only the funding stopped, but those who were active with the community theatre had to be mobilized, to the fronts to fight, as youngsters. So, that was how it stopped. But Oxfam was one of the major funders. They were very keen to continue the funding. And Oxfam was contacted through Dr. Jane Plastow. So, anyway, that was it. Otherwise, we would have seen how people would have received it, with various views. Not fully received, but many things… We would have seen what would have happened, had it continued. But unfortunately due to the war, it stopped.

It was clear to me that Solomon believed strongly in the project. This signaled to me that, as head of the Bureau of Cultural Affairs, there was the possibility that he might be interested in reviving the project in some form in the future. At one point in our discussion, I asked him about a more recent project his Bureau had undertaken in cooperation with Jane Plastow – a Theatre-in-Education program targeted at increasing school enrolment rates for girls in the Afar region of eastern Eritrea. I had heard about this project, and knew that it was one of the few projects that Jane Plastow had been able to initiate in the country following the government's clampdown on NGO-funded activities. However, I didn't know many details of the project, and wanted to know if it could help me in gauging the viability of future CBT in the country. The following is Solomon's response to

my question asking him to describe the TfD project in the Afar region, and to assess its effectiveness:

> ST: Well the program was initiated to promote girls education in the Afar area. It was a pilot project. In the Afar area, girls' education compared to boys' education is lower. So, to promote girls' education, this program was initiated to conscientize people, parents, particularly, of course children, and the community at large, that girls should go to school. Some of them send their girls to elementary schools, and then when the junior school becomes farther, they keep them at home. Because if they go out far from their homes, they think they will face trouble. And further, if the junior school is around, then the high school is farther, then beyond the junior school they don't send them to towns. Because high schools are basically in towns. They don't have high schools in villages. So, to encourage parents to send their girls to school, rather than keep them at home, so that they will be married, so on and so forth, certain dramatic and musical works – songs, poetry, literature, so on - were created, and then there was a touring group. It was theatre and musical performances. For something like, two and a half months, something of that length. And then, there was a radio drama broadcasted on Eri-TV, the Afar program. Because all was in Afar. The target audience was the Afari people, so all the production was in the Afar language. Even billboards will be

planted. They have not yet been planted, due to some budgetary constraints, but they will be planted. If you put billboards, then people always see them, read them, and it helps to sensitize them. So, this was the project.

YM: Do you think that that kind of a project, using theatre and the arts in general, as a way of raising awareness about certain social issues, is effective? Does it work?

ST: it does. It does. It appeals to people's conscience. When you use arts as a tool to sensitize people, it appeals to their conscience. Because, it's thought-provoking. It's entertaining at the same time. It's instructional, and entertaining. It's not dry. It's also … it doesn't talk too much. It selects certain things that people should remember and should think about. That's why it becomes effective. And instructional. So, this project was very effective. People were saying, oh… we have been… some of those people were not sending their children to towns, for fear of their daughters being violated, or being turned into 'city-women', which are not respected, quote-unquote 'city women' are, you can imagine, so on and so forth… Some of the girls in theatres, [acting on stage as] medical doctors, serving their communities, saving many people, ill people, sick people, curing them, so on and so forth. So, they were impressed. "Why not do that?" it does not mean any girl goes to town, then becomes a spoiled person. A person who becomes

> cultured, and very broad, and cures ill people, then, there is no reason why they cannot be impressed by that. They said "wow, we have to learn, we have to send our children to school." So it was effective.
>
> But, to be MORE effective, this type of project has to be sustained. It should not be just one go. It should be sustained and continued. And to do that, one needs to be funded.

Following this brief description of the Afar pilot project from Solomon, our conversation drifted elsewhere. In retrospect, I would have liked to ask him for more details on the project, as there is no information on it to be found in print or web resources – neither Plastow nor any other facilitator appear to have published an article documenting the process. While the specifics of this initiative admittedly remain vague to me, what is clear from Solomon's response is that the project was strongly supported by the PFDJ through the Cultural Affairs bureau, but that it did not last as long as hoped for – almost certainly for financial reasons. I eventually returned to this most crucial issue of funding, but first I wanted to hear more about how the touring productions were received:

> YM: Did you ever experience some resistance from the communities, to the ideas you were trying to promote?
>
> ST: Yes of course, it's natural. And it depends on what type of messages you send. I do remember, in one of the villages, there was an involvement of priests, in theatre, in one of those projects during the community-based theatre practices. And there were

> priests who were involved in the theatre. Not priests themselves, but priests characterized. And the village was called to see, because it was community theatre, and then some of the people were not happy that priests were being represented. The way, they did not like. So, they were not happy, and they had some complaints. And such unhappiness, or such opposition, also occurs again and again. And it's natural; it's a matter of conflict of ideas, conflict of views. It happens. Anyway, one has to be very careful not to antagonize. Particularly careful in terms of religion, religious beliefs, things like that, which are very political, very sensitive, very difficult to attack, or to say negative things about. So, well, verily, such things happen. There is always discussion… You don't always agree.

This response from Solomon suggested to me that, while the project was not community-based per se, in the sense that the issues the plays addressed were predetermined by the facilitators, rather than elicited from community discussion, nonetheless it had a strong community component in the after-debate, which was apparently vigorous and at times heated. I interpreted this as a marker of success, as it meant that the project was able to bring into question certain notions within communities that previously would have gone unquestioned.

Apparently, this project, like the ECBTP, was not sustained beyond its pilot stage either. This seemed to be the prevailing theme of both interviews: that the root cause of the lack of theatrical activity in Eritrea is a lack of funds. Of

course, this is a multi-faceted problem, and one that does not offer any easy solutions. In my interview with Efraim, he suggested to me that the Cultural Affairs Bureau needs to invest more money in theatre subsidies – particularly to fund the building of a new playhouse (as all of the theatres in Eritrea are, properly speaking, cinemas, which were built by the Italians during the colonial period and are in poor condition today), as well as instituting a national arts college. Indeed, the creation of an arts college is something that Eritreans have been waiting for since as far back as independence, when it was first promised by the PFDJ. That promise has, obviously, yet to be fulfilled. The problem seems to be cyclical in nature: in order for performing artists like Efraim to be able to produce theatre in Eritrean communities, they need to have the support of the Eritrean government; but in order for Solomon's bureau to be able to financially support theatre initiatives like the ECBTP, government policy – which is dictated from the top down – must be relaxed so as to allow external sources of funding (like NGOs) to enter the country. But the PFDJ regime appears only willing to relax its protectionist policies once the Eritrean economy has matured considerably on its own. Completing the circle, finally, is the reality that the country's economy can achieve only limited growth while it grapples with rampant un- and under-employment, as people like Efraim face grim employment prospects due to inadequate state investment. Efraim's final comments in my exchange with him help to illustrate this conundrum:

> YM: Let's say, for example, that today somebody wanted to start up a theatre company today. Would it be possible?

EK: Hmmm, you know it's difficult for an individual to start up theatre. Even a group. You know, theatre should be subsidized right now. The Cultural Affairs Bureau should prepare the stuff. You know, kind of a playhouse. Just to keep theatre here. Otherwise, even though there are volunteers to start state theatre, it is simply a will. It cannot be practical.

YM: If there was to be a CBT in Eritrea in the future, what would need to happen first?

EK: Funds should be allocated, first. Everything is possible after that. We have good actors. We have social issues. We need to talk with our people. It's a very mobile theatre. You don't need microphones or anything, just costumes. But I think money is the crucial.

YM: Where do you think that money should come from?

EK: It's a big issue. It's a huge amount of money, even for the government. Right now, you have to pay the actors, per month, around 5000 [nakfa[6]]. The actors in the CBT, they are a large count. They are about 30 or 35 people. Then multiply it by 5000, by 3 months. It's a lot of money. Then there is transportation matters, there is the hotel payments, there is food… it's a lot of expenses.

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[6] Nakfa is the currency of Eritrea. The 5000 figure Efraim is referring to is the standard salary for state employees. Upon factoring in the exchange rate, which is pegged officially at 15 nakfa = $1US, and almost three times higher on the black market (41 nakfa = $1US when I was there), one realizes how paltry a sum 5000 nakfa per month truly is.

In the end, Efraim could offer no clear answers. His attitude struck me as one of resignation - as if he had long since accepted, or at least given up trying to fight, the dysfunctionality of the situation. The problem, it seemed, was simply too systemic, and the solutions too distant, for such idealistic questions as the ones I was asking to be considered realistically. Solomon, while striking a somewhat more hopeful tone, nonetheless gave a similarly open-ended, and ultimately unsatisfying, response as his final thought:

> YM: do you see any potential for something like [the Theatre-in-Education pilot program in the Afar region] to happen in the future?
>
> ST: Well, I am not a pessimist. As long as there is the love for theatre, there is always that seed, that one day sprouts up theatre. But, the economic situation should improve. And those actors, who are need of money to live, which is right, and necessary, should somehow, with the improvement of the economy of the country, should say "we have enough to live on, so why not make theatre?" We can live without theatre. But, we make theatre for the sake of it, for the enjoyment of it, for the pleasure of it. If we reach that state, then there will be hope that theatre will restart again, at a considerable level…
>
> So, yes, there is the hope, given that certain conditions are fulfilled.

In the next chapter, I will build upon findings from an interview I recently conducted with Jane Plastow herself, and attempt to offer some starting points for a continued discussion around the future of community-based theatre in Eritrea.

Chapter Three: What Next?

From the standpoint of trying to gauge the extent to which a TfD project has had a long-term positive impact on a community, one must conclude that the outcomes of the ECBTP are disappointing. Certainly the project had positive impacts in the short-term: it generated an interest in theatre among many Eritreans; it provided a forum for communities to articulate their concerns and collectively search for solutions; it trained a number of people in theatrical techniques that they could ostensibly pass on to other Eritreans; it proved highly enjoyable for the participants as a creative outlet, and for the audiences as well. But in terms of any substantial lasting impact on the country, there was little to be found. Essentially, the project had two overarching objectives, against which one can gauge the project's long-term impact: the first was to stimulate the growth and development of theatre in the country, in the hope that a self-sustaining national theatre industry built upon community-based ideals would eventually emerge "from the ground up." As Chapter Two has made abundantly clear, this goal was in no way achieved. The second overarching objective of the project was to create avenues for expression, by which communities could contribute directly to the economic, political and social development of the country. On this note the results are certainly more difficult to measure, as undoubtedly the ideas presented in the plays during the initial stages of the project would have had some impact. But in the absence of any tangible mechanisms for gauging this impact, it can be said that, at best, any development the country has experienced in the post-independence era can be associated with the ECBTP only in the vague and distant

realm of possibility. Indeed, while it would perhaps be inappropriate to call the project a failure, one would be hard-pressed to consider it a success.

However, it must also be concluded that such outcomes are a result of factors largely beyond the control of Jane Plastow and the facilitators. The border conflict in 1998 and the concomitant political instability were directly responsible for the untimely demise of the ECBTP; and subsequently, the repressive tendencies of the governing party have made it impossible to attempt another project of a similar scope and nature. This has to do with funding as much with ideology: the government's hostility towards NGOs means securing funding for a project like the ECBTP is presently next-to-impossible, and beyond that, the Eritrean government would almost certainly forbid such a project for fear of stoking political opposition. A fact that became abundantly clear to me during my travels in Eritrea is that the widespread popular support that the government enjoyed in the 1990's as the vanguard of the liberation movement has in large part given way to anger, frustration and resentment on the part of the populace. Many Eritreans with whom I spoke believe that the government's hard-headed approach to development has had the adverse effect of isolating the country from the outside world, and effectively crippling its economy. Thus, while the government may have once been supportive of the communitarian spirit of an initiative such as the ECBTP, presently its relationship with its people is one characterized by distrust and hostility, rather than the collective optimism that once existed. As Plastow has made clear to me in my correspondence with her (transcribed below), an essential condition for any TfD work that she does is that the participants must

have absolute freedom to shape the content of the work. It is highly unlikely that such a condition would be granted to any TfD practitioner by the current regime.

Reflections from Plastow

The following is a transcription of Jane Plastow's responses to a number of questions I posed to her about the ECBTP. The correspondence took place in November of 2011. As will be made clear, her responses lend credence to a number of the observations stated above. I wanted to get a sense from her of how she, as the facilitator, felt the project went overall. As such, some of the questions are more specific to the themes addressed within the scope of this thesis than others, while some provide useful background information. I was curious to know if she felt any differently about the project now, with the benefit of hindsight, than she did at the time her articles on the project were published – some fourteen years earlier. I also wanted to know how she compared her work in Eritrea to other countries, as I thought this might help in understanding both the peculiarities of the Eritrean context, as well as possible lessons to be learned from other places. And, like in my interviews with Solomon Tsehaye and Efraim Khazai, I wanted to gain a sense from Plastow of what prospects she saw for a future community-based theatre in Eritrea. Plastow, like the others, was more than happy to discuss her experiences with me, and gave generous responses. Following the transcription, I will attempt to synthesize some of the themes that emerged from her responses, the responses of my other interviewees, and my

additional background research, to offer some of my own thoughts as to what might benefit theatre in Eritrea in the future.

> YM: How would you compare the work you've done in Eritrea with work you've done in other African countries? When you consider the conditions under which you work/worked in Eritrea, and compare them to the conditions in other countries, what are your thoughts on the viability of Eritrea as a place to do Theatre for Development, both now and previously?
>
> JP: When I first went to Eritrea it was quite extraordinary as I had complete carte blanche in terms of both form and content. This is very unusual and was a delight. I had complete state support and highly motivated ex-fighters for the first workshops, with enormous commitment to making a wonderful new country. We also had audiences in the thousands and were able to reach probably a quarter of the population with our first theatre tours. It was quite unique. This persisted for the years from 1994-1997. In 1998 we made the piece discussed in "Telling the Lions Tale" where for the first time party officials started to make noises about the villagers not being 'on message' – this was in the build up to the border war of 1998-2000 which changed everything. I refused to consider

making new work for the state after the millennium show[7] as there was no longer any real freedom of speech.

YM: Looking back on the community-based theatre project you undertook in the mid 90's, how do you feel generally about that work? What about the project are you most satisfied with, or proud of? Are there aspects of the project that you either regret, or things you wish you could have accomplished?

JP: I have hugely happy memories of that time, and I think we did some really good theatre training, which subsequently spread out to a huge range of youth groups in the later 1990s with trainees becoming trainers and the seven Eritreans who came and studied at Leeds all going back to work further with various theatre groups[8]. What was good was that people started to own and develop the work themselves. So a group of trainees started an Oxfam sponsored group after the 1996 training which made and toured very good work about FGM and dowry payments.

In hindsight I rather cringe at the first HIV/AIDS play I made which had a rather stereotypical portrayal of key agents in passing on the virus.

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[7] "The millennium show" was a production of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *I Will Marry When I Want*, translated into Tigrinya by Alemseged Tesfai in 2000.

[8] Efraim Khazai was one of these seven. In my conversation with him, he told me that he believes he is the only one still actively doing theatre work in the country.

YM: I'm curious about the ECBTP's relationship to the state's development agenda. Based on your characterization of your relationship with Alemseged Tesfai in the early 90's, and his enthusiasm for the arts, I get the impression that the state was very receptive to the idea of community-based arts, and was committed to fostering a tradition of free artistic expression. Would you say this is accurate? Did you experience any conflicts of interest between the kind of work you wanted to do, and the overarching state agenda, over the course of the project? Ie. were there any state-imposed parameters to the project which you found to be limiting?

JP: I first went on condition that we could make theatre about whatever the participants decided to be important. The state was massively supportive – funding all participants for three month training courses and touring expenses – I only raised the money for the Europeans coming over to do the training. Alemseged in particular wanted Eritreans after years of being closed off from the world to have access to as wide a range of arts as possible and he was very important at this time.

There are still important Eritreans who care passionately about the arts but this conflicts with the control freak-ery of the state apparatus.

YM: You mentioned in your article "Alemseged Tesfai in Service to Eritrean Liberation" that with regard to NGOs, Alemseged was "deeply suspicious as to whether they really had anything worthwhile to offer Eritrea." But at the same time, the ECBTP, like so many of these kinds of projects, was funded by NGOs like Oxfam and Christian Aid. I'm wondering if that additional factor created any tensions in the project – either between yourself and the NGO's, or between Alemseged/ the Eritrean government and the NGO's? Or were the various 'agendas' more or less aligned?

JP: The work would never have happened without outsiders funding as I had to raise the funds to take over training teams for months at a time. The first funders were Rockefeller and the British Council. Later Oxfam were major funders of the touring work. They were all prepared to put nearly a million pounds into three touring companies in three Eritrean languages over three years before the war blew all plans out of the water. This is probably my greatest sorrow as this would really have embedded community theatre practice. All funding was given on condition that no constraints were exercised over content which originated purely from the concerns of the participants. This is pretty unique. Oxfam wanted to fund because Eritrea was already closing in on NGO's and I remained in good odour. But the key thing was freedom to work

with the people's agendas not those of state or NGO's. I do not work otherwise.

YM: In terms of the project's methodology – with particular regard to the training programs – do you think the process was an effective way of a) addressing social issues in a community-based, participatory way, and b) helping to foster a distinctively Eritrean theatre aesthetic? If you could go back and do it all again, would you have conducted the project any differently, methodologically speaking?

JP: Well what a very big question. There had been no formal theatre training ever when I went to Eritrea. The dominant style was a sort of heightened slightly melodramatic realism. Unlike other parts of the continent there was no syncretic theatre pulling together folk forms and dialogue drama. I remember when we did this for the millennium production of Ngugi's I Will Marry When I Want Alemseged who translated it into Tigrinya was almost in tears. He had kind of invented modern drama ideas in the trenches as fairly naturalistic but he said this mixture of indigenous and international was what he really wanted.

We experimented with lots of different forms. Notably actors were initially resistant to learning from indigenous dancers and musicians – this was definitely a kind of cultural snobbery. I had to get my

partner from the Bureau of Cultural Affairs, Solomon Tsehaye to come and persuade people to give it a try – then of course they loved it.

We did not develop an aesthetic. I didn't think that was my job. I always asked people to try things out on the basis that I would not be staying but they would so they could use whatever they found relevant. Each project involved new experiments with form to see what people found most conducive.

YM: Was there any way for your team to evaluate the success of the project? If so, based on such evaluation was the project successful/ effective?

JP: Well – did we make loads of people love theatre and want to be involved – yes. Did we make a substantial social impact – no – you need longer repeat involvement.

Did we leave anything - well some people with more ideas about making theatre, but politically it has become impossible. This was quite outside our control!

YM: Could you describe how the project ended? I understand that the breakout of war in '98 meant that the project could not continue; but what specifically was the cause? Was it that the participants had to leave to serve? Or was your team of facilitators unable to enter

> the country? Or did the government cancel the project? Or did the funders pull out? Or was it some, or all, of the above? Can you explain how it all played out?
>
> JP: Quite simply I would not consider working without meaningful freedom to discuss what we wanted, and Oxfam pulled out because everyone was temporarily sent off to the war. They have asked me to put on Shakespeare subsequently but that is not my thing.
>
> YM: Finally, do you see the potential for a future community-based theatre in Eritrea? And if so, do you see it as potentially arising out of another project of the sort you undertook, or is it more likely to emerge 'from the ground up'?
>
> JP: Not until the government changes radically.

Plastow's evaluation of the situation in Eritrea, much like those of Solomon Tsehaye and Efraim Khazai, was bleak. Obviously, the conditions under which the ECBTP was able to take place in the mid-nineties were considerably better than the conditions the country faces in the present-day. Specifically, at the outset of the ECBTP, Plastow enjoyed the benefits of a receptive and open Eritrean government that supported the work, financial backing from various external agencies, and generally optimistic prospects for the future development of the country. Today, none of these benefits exists. As Plastow mentions in the interview, the border war from 1998-2000 saw drastic changes to the government's attitude with respect to civil liberties and the freedom of civil

society, as key resources – human and financial – were diverted toward the country's military and defense policy. In the aftermath of the border conflict, the government's willingness to support an arts and cultural policy has been at best piece-meal, and in general it has been more ready to support Theatre-in-Education programs than TfD projects of the sort that the ECBTP was. The pilot project in the Afar region to increase girls' school enrolment rates is one example: because the project involved working with schoolchildren to develop artistic and cultural skills, it seems to have been deemed 'safe' by government authorities. Certainly, it addressed issues that were controversial (as Solomon Tsehaye pointed out in our discussion, the project inevitably ruffled some feathers) but ultimately, working with young children meant that serious criticism of state policy would not be an issue.

Plastow mentions in her interview that her greatest sorrow is the failure of the ECBTP to 'embed' community-based theatre in Eritrea. This ultimately is the most important question to address: how can community theatre be embedded into the cultural policy, and eventually, the culture, of Eritrea? As Solomon Tsehaye has rightly acknowledged, "it cannot be just one go." Projects need to be sustained, and in order to be sustained, they require funding. And funding will only materialize if the government is behind the projects. But certainly it is not enough to wait around until "the government changes radically", as Plastow tersely suggests would be requisite. In the absence of such radical change, it may be the case that the path of least resistance towards embedding CBT in Eritrea is through Theatre-in-Education programming. While it may not be feasible to

initiate a full-scale TfD project of the scope of the ECBTP right now, at the very least, embedding theatre and arts training in public education institutions may be an important first step towards one day seeing a vibrant theatre community in Eritrea.

TiE Now, TfD Later?

In the remaining pages of this thesis, I will attempt to articulate a number of reasons why I believe that at the present juncture, a Theatre-in-Education approach is the most feasible path forward for the future of Eritrean theatre. While in some ways this may seem like a different beast altogether when compared to the grandiose aims of the ECBTP and its place within the larger nation-building project of the state, arguably in terms of long-term impact a TiE approach may be the most realistic way to involve theatre in the country's nation-building effort. As mentioned above, one major reason for this is that education-based theatre initiatives are considerably more likely to be supported by the Eritrean government. But in addition to this, a TiE approach offers a number of other advantages: from a funding perspective it is less costly than large-scale TfD projects with adult participants; from a methodological standpoint it is easier to evaluate impacts and gauge overall success; and perhaps most importantly, from a development standpoint, TiE operates within the framework of an existing institution (the school), and therefore is more likely to become embedded in social and cultural practice. Ultimately, this increases the likelihood of long-term sustainability. The pilot project in the Afar region that Solomon Tsehaye briefly

described to me is one good example of how theatre has been used in an educational setting as a means towards social development in Eritrea. I will briefly outline one final example, which I believe is instructive in pointing to the potential for theatre to work cooperatively with the development agenda of the Eritrean state.

In December of 2005 and January of 2006, Jane Plastow collaborated with a team of researchers in the field of education at the University of Leeds to implement another pilot project (similar to the Afar project) in six primary schools in two Eritrean villages. The pilot project had two components: one involved using drama with grade-five schoolchildren to identify issues and problems that students had with their educational experiences, and the other involved working with Eritrean schoolteachers to develop arts-based and child-centred pedagogies. The project grew out of earlier work done in Eritrea by the educational research team, which determined that there was "a lack of child-centred teaching strategies and of creative arts work in the Eritrean education system" (Plastow 345). According to Plastow, in her article "Finding children's voices: a pilot project using performance to discuss attitudes to education among primary school children in two Eritrean villages" the stated aims of this pilot project were:

> To find ways of using the creative arts to make learning in Eritrea more child-centred, to give children a creative voice in the education system, to make education culturally appropriate to each of the country's nine language groups, and to build an appreciation of the

> importance of the arts in educating children into their communities. It is an ambitious programme, but it is helped by the receptiveness of the Eritrean government to the drive for empowerment behind our arts-based agenda" (346).

The project was implemented in two villages – the Tigrinya village of She'eb, and the Bilen village of Bogu. Unlike the ECBTP, the pilot stage of this project was quite short – just three-day workshops in each of the two villages – but the idea of course was that after the pilot stage the project would continue, expand, and eventually be integrated into the curricula. This ultimately did not happen, but interestingly, not for the reasons one might expect.

The format of the project was in many ways similar to that of the ECBTP, though on a contracted scale. Jane Plastow, along with a team of facilitators who specialized in TfD, worked with the schoolchildren – 30 children from each village, between the ages of 11 and 16. The purpose of the workshop was to identify problems that the children faced at school. The sessions began with warm-ups and theatre games, and then gradually moved through group discussions, drawing sessions, and basic image-theatre to elicit the ideas from the students. Some of the themes that emerged as concerns for the students were: punishment from teachers (both the sort, and the severity, were issues), inadequate facilities and equipment at the school, and the difficulties of having to learn other languages. In the Bilen village, this meant learning Tigrinya and English, while also studying in the native Bilen language – part of the Eritrean government's policy of language equality. Finally, the facilitators took these

themes and worked with the students to devise short plays, which the students then presented to their teachers.

Simultaneously, the educational researchers worked with the teachers to develop pedagogical strategies that were more attentive to the needs of the children, and that also included arts education as a central component. The idea was that the theatre facilitators would work with the kids, the educationalists would work with the teachers, and then in the end they would come together to discuss the contents of the plays. These discussions proved to be productive for all involved, as Plastow notes in the article:

> In the discussions after each play and in the evaluations teachers handed in, we found that everyone had liked the drama, and a considerable majority said it was the most enjoyable part of the workshop. A number of teachers commented positively on the fact that it had made them think more about classroom management and discipline issues, and that they now had ideas about how they could use drama in the classroom. (352)

Much like the ECBTP, the "Finding children's voices" pilot project was successful in using theatre techniques to address social problems in Eritrean communities and to find community-based solutions to those problems. The significant difference, of course, is that "finding children's voices" was implemented in an educational setting, and involved children as well as adults, whereas the ECBTP worked primarily with adults. However, what is crucial to take away is that the Eritrean government was very supportive of the project –

largely because it fit conveniently into the regime's overarching development strategy, which in the context of education included the promotion of language skills, and the cultivation of arts and cultural skills in schools. And, perhaps most importantly, the project posed no significant threat to the regime. Plastow concluded her 2007 article on the pilot project by stating:

> The Eritrean Ministry of Education and the Asmara Teacher Training Institute have been enormously supportive of this project and we are now seeking funding to expand research and training to 60 further schools, with the long-term vision of embedding arts training, child-centred learning, and the valuing of children's voices and cultures within the national primary education curriculum. (353)

Sadly, the potential of this project was cut short when in 2008, the lead educational researcher from University of Leeds on the project, John Holmes, passed away. Through the John Holmes Educational Trust For Eritrea, which Plastow co-founded with Holmes and named in his honour, Plastow is able to continue supporting two schools in She'eb and Bogu; however, the "finding children's voices" project was never expanded. This represents an as-yet unrealized opportunity for the potential embedding of theatre and artistic practice in Eritrean communities, at least at the level of primary schools.

Embedding Community-Based Theatre in Educational Institutions

The late UK scholar and TfD specialist Kees Epskamp has identified four key components of a successfully implemented TfD project. According to Epskamp, any TfD initiative should involve social embedding within the community; cultural embedding within the community; educational embedding within the community; and sustainability of the development effort (Epskamp 91). The first is related to the idea that the work should be participative, and generated from the grassroots of the community. The second involves adapting the TfD activities to meet the needs, and suit the experiences, of the participants. Arguably, what is needed presently and above all in Eritrea is the third criterion: educational embedding. It is necessary for there to be institutionalized outlets for people to express themselves creatively and artistically, and for them to voice their concerns and ideas about the development of their communities. Currently, as Efraim Khazai pointed out to me in my interview with him, there are no formal educational programs in the performing arts in Eritrea – community-based or otherwise. The classes that Efraim teaches to adolescents, for example, are entirely extra-curricular for the students. Jane Plastow's "finding children's voices" pilot project was a significant attempt at rectifying this problem; however, sustainability – Epskamp's fourth criterion – is required. The good news, though, is that there is some reason to believe that education-based TfD initiatives are a real possibility in Eritrea, given the government's strong receptiveness to the "finding children's voices" pilot. If the educational embedding of such a program were achieved – such as through the implementation of theatre and arts education

in national school curricula – it would plant the seeds of a future social and cultural embedding of TfD in Eritrea.

There are many reasons to think that primary arts education is the most sensible place to start in building a future for theatre in Eritrea. The most immediately obvious reason is that because the government is generally supportive of the idea that arts and cultural skills should be developed in schools, TfD projects are possible in an educational setting, while they may not be in an adult-education setting. As Epskamp writes: "the attitude of African authorities towards TfD has been quite unpredictable: it has shifted from support to repression and back, since the authorities themselves are often the targets of criticism emerging from the theatrical productions" (Epskamp 83). Obviously, this is an enormous obstacle from the standpoint of sustainability; thus, having a government that is supportive of the work is an invaluable asset.

With respect to funding, it seems also to make sense to start with primary education first, and work gradually up from there. When compared to the prospect of funding an arts college at the tertiary level, or subsidizing a sustained adult TfD initiative such as the ECBTP, implementing arts-based curricula at the primary level becomes a relatively inexpensive investment. Teachers would need to be trained; however, facilities and infrastructure would not be needed urgently, as the educational institutions exist already. The return on such an investment, though, would be huge in terms of the potential for widespread understanding of, and appreciation for, the importance of theatrical and other creative skills. The natural result of this, ideally, is that in time community-based theatre will arise

organically from within the communities themselves, as creative capacities are harnessed and cultivated. In the long-term, the need for investments in facilities and programming of a larger scale will become manifest, such as the arts college that Efraim Khazai mentioned was a promise of the Eritrean government. These things will undoubtedly take time, but if a strong demand is evident on the ground, the pressure can have a motivating influence on the decisions made at the top.

Another benefit of the embedding of participatory theatre practices in educational institutions is that it becomes possible to measure the impacts and effects of the programs with greater precision. In a classroom context, teachers can track progress over extended periods of time and recognize the acquisition of skills and development of aptitudes. An important part of ensuring that TfD initiatives are sustainable is ensuring that positive development can somehow be measured. Funding – whether it be external or from the government itself – is likely to be continued only to the extent that the benefits of the work can be demonstrated.

Finally, the most important and fundamental goal of any community-based theatre initiative is to *empower* communities, and in this regard, enabling young people to develop creative solutions to complex social problems through the education system – one of the most fundamental institutions of any society – is an extraordinarily empowering thing. Beginning arts training at a young age means that future community-based theatre endeavours will truly be “grassroots” and relevant to specific communities, because students’ creative capabilities will

develop at the same time as they develop an understanding of their social environment and the challenges it presents them. This is contrasted with the necessarily top-down approach of the ECBTP, by which foreign facilitators (like Plastow) work closely with government agents to train trainers who in turn impart skills and ideas upon the communities, in the hope that they will somehow penetrate to the grassroots. By implementing long-term projects designed to instill at an early age an appreciation for the power of creative arts to ameliorate social conditions, TfD workers could ensure that arts-based, community-based development truly originated from the ground up. The beauty of this is that, in contrast to the antagonism between grassroots community theatre and what Jane Plastow calls "the control freak-ery of the state", a TiE approach can grow from the grassroots while also working *in concert* with the government's nation-building agenda. The two are not mutually exclusive. On the importance of art in education, Epskamp writes:

> A side-effect of including … performing arts in the basic educational curriculum is that it might strengthen the cultural (ethnic) and/or national identity. In countries making a huge effort to consolidate national identity… emphasis in art education is laid upon common traits among the aesthetic traditions of many disparate ethnic groups. (124)

Which is to say that, in a country as diverse as Eritrea, cultivating an understanding of, and appreciation for, the ethnic and linguistic diversity through creative exploration can be a nation-building endeavour in itself. The "finding

children's voices" pilot project is evidence of this: through the students' own theatrical exploration they came to address important issues surrounding the power dynamics of language in Eritrea, and were able to express their appreciation for the country's linguistic diversity even despite the challenges it brings. Both by Jane Plastow's standards, and by the standards of the Eritrean government, this surely must represent a positive step for the relationship between theatre and national development. It is reasonable to believe that if more and larger TiE projects are implemented in the future, they will bear similar and still sweeter fruit. Perhaps these are the necessary seeds to which Solomon Tsehaye was referring in the statement quoted at the outset of this thesis.

Conclusion

In the introduction to this thesis, one of the questions I posed with regard to the ever-changing face of the applied theatre movement is whether or not the drift away from overtly political popular theatre towards an institutionalized development approach constitutes a betrayal of the core principles of the movement. At the risk of irking those practitioners who reject a Boal-centric view of popular and community-based theatre, one might be inclined to ask: "what would Boal think of the trend towards integrating popular theatre techniques into the larger framework of international development?" Certainly, if one were to take the various forms of applied theatre described in the introduction and plot them on an ideological spectrum, Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed would be diametrically opposed to the TfD and TiE approaches. Boal's radical anti-establishment methodologies, deeply rooted as they are in the left-wing politics of fellow Marxists like Freire and Brecht, are starkly at odds with the development approach which seeks to work *within* the institutions of existing social structures to effect change, rather than *against* them. The drift from the latter towards the former mirrors the global decline in leftist politics in general, and in the western world in particular, since the end of the Cold War. As communist parties have largely disappeared from the political map, and socialist parties have in most cases abandoned the wholesale fight against the capitalist economic order in exchange for ameliorative, rather than revolutionary, policies, so too have many in the applied theatre movement given up the goal of working towards a full-scale people's revolution. Many have chosen instead to seek ways of partnering with

like-minded organizations and institutions, such as NGOs, non-profits, and of course, governments, driven by financial necessity, a belief that such an approach is more likely to achieve results, or a combination of both. Does this mean that popular theatre has "sold out"?

To begin with, it is worth pointing out that if it has, Boal is no less guilty of the sellout than any one else. While in the 1960s and 70s he may have advocated for the use of TO as a means towards the political end of revolution, it is also well known that by the 1990s he had been elected as a city councilor in Rio de Janeiro, and had developed techniques like Legislative Theatre, which aimed to involve his constituents more directly in the process of political decision-making. To be sure, the political conditions of Brazil in the 1990s were very different from the political conditions of the late 1960s; still, it is hard to deny that Boal's willingness to integrate his theatre methodology into the existing framework of political power represents an ideological shift away from the militant radicalism of his earlier work and theory. But perhaps a more pertinent task than to ask, pseudo-religiously, "what would Boal do?" is to ask whether or not a more conciliatory approach, such as that of Legislative Theatre, TfD, or TiE, is more realistic in any given context. As Jane Plastow has argued quite compellingly in the case of Eritrea, all signs seem to point to 'yes.'

With regard to the political climate in Eritrea and the extent to which it allows for a truly free and open popular theatre, the reality is quite clear: it is not likely to happen under the current regime. This is a sad reality, but it is one that is by no means unique to Eritrea. In 2009 Plastow wrote that "Artistic activists in

Africa have often been imprisoned and in some cases even killed, so calling for revolution – even practicing or 'rehearsing' overtly radical solutions to issues – is often not something to be undertaken lightly" (Plastow 299). And while Eritrea should not be singled as the sole perpetrator of such acts, it is fair to say that the degree of civil repression is especially troubling in the small Horn nation, from which all independent media, virtually every NGO and most foreign embassies have been expelled. In a country that has such few conduits to the outside world, and in which the people are so completely repressed internally by their own government, it is necessary to take advantage of any available opportunities for social, cultural, and economic advancement – regardless of whether or not such opportunities live up to some abstract Boal-ian notion of ideological purity.

In the last chapter of this thesis I have tried to argue that in practical terms, what that might mean for TfD practitioners is focusing their efforts on education-based TfD projects in the short and medium term, with the aim of building the foundations upon which grassroots community-based theatre can develop in the long term. This is based on the notion of *embedding* developed by Epskamp, and the idea that in order to achieve the social and cultural embedding of TfD in a society like Eritrea's, educational embedding is the necessary first step. 'Culture' and 'society' are very large and unwieldy concepts; it is by no means easy, nor perhaps even desirable, for TfD practitioners to go about embedding new artistic practices into cultures and societies willy-nilly. Educational institutions, conversely, are necessarily constituted by design. What a people choose to embed in their educational institutions is what will ultimately become manifest in the

culture and society of that people. Thus, it is logical to think that if community-based theatre is to take root in Eritrean society as a legitimate and valued means of confronting social issues and working towards community development, it must first take root in the educational infrastructure that will shape the culture and society of tomorrow. Jane Plastow's "finding children's voices" pilot project, as well as the pilot project in the Afar region described by Solomon Tsehaye in Chapter Two, seem like good starting places for charting the course of that future.

In the short-term, this could mean collaborations between the Eritrean government, TfD workers, and school children to develop programs in schools that encourage kids to express, through theatre and drama games, aspects of their environments that they would wish to see changed – at home, at school, on the playground. In the medium term, more and more teachers could be trained in community-based theatre techniques, and programs could be expanded and integrated into the public education curriculum throughout primary and secondary school. In the long-term, tertiary institutions (such as the few community colleges that exist in Eritrea, as well as its sole university, the University of Asmara) could experiment with new degree programs in Drama and Theatre, and potentially course offerings in Theatre for Development or Community-Based Theatre. The aim would be to train educators to once again take theatre out into the communities of the country, like the ECBTP had done. Having the educational infrastructure in place would ensure, or at least increase the likelihood, that such an endeavour could be sustained in a way that the ECBTP could not. Of course, these possibilities can only be realized in the fullness of time, and with sustained

funding and external support. But starting small – with lunchtime or after-school programs for primary school kids in some schools, for example – has the potential to generate the interest, and the appetite (both external and from the government), for larger and more sustained efforts.

Without a doubt, after-school drama programs for primary school children are a far cry from the "rehearsal for the revolution" that is Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. Yet at the same time, it bears remembering that Boal's TO took its impetus from the radical pedagogical theory of Paulo Freire who was, first and foremost, a teacher. When viewed in this light, one in fact finds much affinity between the TiE approach and the radical origins of the applied theatre movement. Both maintain, at their core, a desire to fundamentally reorient the relationships between teacher and student, between communities and society, and to empower the powerless with the means to chart their own future. The sooner those seeds are planted, the sooner that future can begin to sprout.

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