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Abstract

While conflict can be a constructive force for change, it can also degenerate into a destructive force that often creates misunderstanding, disputes, hostility, crises and violence. Likewise, difference may also have positive connotations such as unity in diversity, mutual disagreement and peaceful co-existence but it can also assume the mantle of binary oppositions such as self and other, us and them, centre and margin, superior and inferior that create foundations for conflict. This article argues that it is the binary dimension of difference that acts as a major source of destructive conflicts. By playing with different models of human conflict, the article examines how applied drama can help in the process of conflict management.

Introduction

This paper aims to explore how applied drama can speak to the question of difference as a primary source of conflict. Terms such as 'difference' and 'conflict' easily lend themselves to jargon if they are not properly contextualized. In this paper, 'conflict' will be viewed as an opposition or clash of ideas, values, interests and actions that results in a struggle over rights, power, status and resources (Augsburger 1992; O'Toole, Burton and Plunkett 2005). By itself, conflict can be a constructive force for change when it offers people an opportunity to respond to challenges, to search for alternatives and explore new ways of being. It is when conflict degenerates into a destructive force that it creates misunderstanding, disagreement, dispute, contradiction, incompatibility, hostility, crisis and violence. Likewise 'difference' may have positive connotations such as unity in diversity, mutual disagreement and peaceful co-existence. But it is when 'difference' assumes the mantle of binary opposites such as self and other, us and them, centre and margin, superior and inferior, right and wrong, that it creates a foundation for conflict. This paper argues that it is the binary dimension of 'difference', when personal or group interests become so entrenched or invested that individuals cannot accept or recognize the needs and interests of the other that is a major source of destructive conflict.

Conflict and Applied Drama

The prominent Indian theatre practitioner, Rustom Bharucha (1996) argues that differences can be dissolved when they are acknowledged, articulated and confronted. He gives the example of the Indian *sangam* custom where different communities, classes and castes come to a sacred river to immerse themselves and re-emerge with a deep sense of being rejuvenated. The *sangam* custom creates a cultural space for dissolving differences, although provisionally. Bharucha (1996) concludes that there is no possibility of rejuvenation without the confrontation of difference. Likewise, drama creates a safe space for dissolving

'the complacencies and securities of our imagined homogeneity and fixed cultural identities, as in the *sangam* experience, (in order for) differences to be articulated and shared' (Bharucha 1996: 165).

From their experiences with the DRACON International Project, John O'Toole, Bruce Burton and Anna Plunkett (2005: 23) also point out that drama itself is about

'the clashes and conflicts of *personality*, of *values*, of *attitudes*, of *emotions*, of *interests* both internal and environmental, of *philosophy* and *ideology*, of *ethics* and *morals*' (2005:23) (author's emphasis).

By playing with models of human conflict, drama confronts the contours of human behaviour and relationships so that differences can be addressed. O'Toole, Burton

and Plunkett (2005) find close parallels between drama and conflict management through the use of similar terminology such as protagonist and antagonist, facilitation and mediation, tension and escalation, simulation and role play, participation and negotiation, climax and crisis, denouement and resolution.

However, one cannot ignore the divergencies between drama and conflict management such as the real (or 'as is') and the fictional (or 'as if'), empathy and distance (often experienced in drama only), experiential engagement and 'third party' involvement. The linking thread that runs through all these convergencies and divergencies appears to be the question of difference. As Dale Bagshaw et al. (2005: 120) have concluded, drama taps into the collective unconscious to search for the archetypal differences lodged in the history of humanity that transcend everyday reality but subtly influence it. It is the 'playing out' of these archetypal differences that seem to present themselves as conflicts.

To explore how difference relates to conflict, I will use the illustrative paradigm of a gendered narrative based on an Irish folktale called the *Seal Wife* (O'Neill 1995; Taylor 2000). This folktale was used by the Acting Against Conflict Project as a stimulus for their applied drama workshop during the Global Majority Organisation's training seminar on conflict management held at the University of Johannesburg in June and July, 2009 and during the Drama for Life Festival at the University of the Witwatersrand in August and September, 2009. The *Seal Wife* story will be examined according to how it acted as a creative approach to understanding conflict through an exploration of the gender differences that are inscribed in the narrative. Although the focus will be on gender difference, this case study can also relate to other analogous situations of difference such as race, class, ethnicity, religion, culture and ideology.

The reason for using creative art such as stories in exploring serious issues like conflict lies in art's transcendence over the imagination. In the words of the conflict theorist, Paul Arthur:

Transcendence takes many forms, but one form it can take is the role of art. ... While only a simple concept, the telling of one's story is a crucial step towards healing, both as a victim and as a perpetrator. Stories need to be shared, and giving a voice to those involved in conflict is a crucial way to heal the wounds and achieve a lasting peace (2007: 2).

Imagination can unleash the thought processes necessary for brainstorming new ideas, feelings and possible courses of action. By using metaphor, analogy and symbol, imagination makes it possible to come up with ideas on how to deal with situations of conflict without the need for censorship or judgement. As a function of play, imagination engages with fantasy, humour and enjoyment to transcend the internal and external forces that often inhibit the creative problem solving of conflicts. As Howard Gruber (2000: 356) noted, exposure to diverse experiences, preference for the novel, receptivity to metaphor and analogy, the capacity to make remote associations, independence of judgement and the ability to play with ideas

are some of the factors that characterize creative problem solvers on matters of conflict.

Conflict and Gender Difference

As a gendered narrative, the *Seal Wife* drama will be viewed as a microcosm of male and female relationships that are implicated in different types of conflict. As such it is necessary to assess how gender difference may be regarded as a source of conflict. Suzanne Williams, et al., trace the source of gender conflict when they assert that:

People are born male and female but learn to be boys and girls who grow into men and women. They are taught what the appropriate behaviour, attitudes, roles and activities are for them, and how they should relate (to each other and) to other people. This learned behaviour is what makes up gender identity and determines gender roles (1992:4).

Gender conflict arises when society differentiates between the qualities of what it is to be a man and a woman as socially and culturally constructed rather than biologically determined. When social roles, interactions and relationships are defined in terms of male and female categories, women are often disadvantaged in terms of access to power, rights, resources and other needs. When coupled with ideologies such as patriarchy, religion and politics, gender difference creates unequal relationships between men and women that ultimately lead to conflict.

The *Seal Wife* drama depicts how egotistic, aggressive and dominant behavior tends to be associated with masculinity, or what is deemed appropriate for men, what Donna Pankhurst calls,

‘cultural constructions of manliness’ (2000: 11).

In other words, a culture of masculinity means that for a man to be a ‘real’ man, he has to be in a position of dominance. The opposite is deemed true for what is associated with femininity. The *Seal Wife* story also portrays qualities of submission, passivity and obedience as consonant with the female gender. Pankhurst (2000) argues that it is easier to interrogate conflict, and hence influence behavior change, by looking at masculinity and femininity as gender categories. The *Seal Wife* story thus acts as a creative platform for interrogating gender difference, or the clash between masculinity and femininity, as a major source of conflict. The narrative ‘transports’ participants into the world of fiction so that what cannot be done on the plane of reality can be experimented with and tested in the world of fantasy, dreams and the imagination.

Stages of Conflict

For both the Global Majority Seminar and the Drama for Life Festival workshops, the Acting Against Project team of facilitators had planned to explore the question of difference in the *Seal Wife* narrative by bridging Enhanced Forum Theatre (O'Toole, Burton and Plunkett 2005) with Friedrich Glasl's Conflict Escalation Model (1997). According to Bruce Burton (2006), the limitations inherent in Augusto Boal's (1979) forum theatre, such as its overriding tendency to solve the oppression of the protagonist instead of exploring it in depth, has compelled many theatre practitioners to not only adapt forum theatre but also integrate it with other forms of interactive theatre. Enhanced Forum Theatre is an integration of forum theatre with process drama, also known as Drama in Education, a spontaneous and experiential mode of interactive drama. Cecily O'Neill explains that:

'the primary purpose of process drama is to establish an imagined world, a 'dramatic elsewhere' created by the participants as they discover, articulate and sustain fictional roles and situations. As it unfolds, the process will contain powerful elements of composition and contemplation, but improvised encounters will remain at the heart of the event as the source of its dramatic power' (1995: xvi).

By blending elements of process drama with forum theatre techniques, enhanced forum theatre allows participants to explore issues as complex and problematic as conflict in greater depth, thus further enhancing their understanding of both form and content.

To give the enhanced forum theatre workshop a structure that could effectively engage with conflict, the project facilitators employed Glasl's Conflict Escalation Model (1997). The advantage of this model lies in how it enables participants to explore conflict through its different escalating stages. These stages of conflict are as follows:

Glasl's Conflict Escalation Model

Stage	Description
1. Latent	when the conditions for conflict present themselves as potential tensions or clashes over rights, interests, power and authority. Such tensions have not yet reached a point of crisis but are still ' <i>hidden</i> ' from the protagonists.
2. Emerging	when the conditions for conflict begin to move towards a point of crisis as those affected become partially aware of the ' <i>brewing</i> ' tensions.
3. Manifest	when the conditions for conflict come out in the open as tensions over rights, interests, power and authority ' <i>explode</i> ' to a point of crisis and become visible to the protagonists and by-standers.
4. De-escalation	when action is taken to ' <i>defuse</i> ' the escalating conflict in order to prevent, manage and possibly resolve it. It is often the task of

	third parties from outside the conflict, or by-standers, to intervene or mediate in the conflict.
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Latent (or Hidden) Conflict

After the project facilitators had enrolled participants through warm-up games and exercises, the narrator brought them into the make-believe world of the *Seal Wife* story and this was followed by group tasks as follows:

- Narrator: *Once upon a time, there was a young fisherman called Patrick. For three days, Patrick watched a very beautiful woman sitting on a rock along the seashore. After a while, this beautiful woman would put on a skin, change into a seal and disappear into the sea. On the fourth day, Patrick decided to steal the woman's skin. When he stole the skin, the woman was forced to follow him to his cottage and become his wife.*
- Group Tasks: Participants were divided into groups of four or five members and asked to select what they thought were the most significant moments between Patrick's first encounter with the Seal Woman and taking her away to his cottage. They were then tasked to create still images or tableaux of these chosen moments focusing on situations of 'hidden' tension between Patrick and the Seal Woman. Each group then presented its still image while other groups watched and reflected on the potential tensions arising from the image.

In process drama, participants actively project themselves into the dramatic action through empathy and distance as well as engagement and detachment. They are directly involved in the 'authoring' of the 'script' as they enter in and out of multiple roles. In the process, a dramatic world is created in which the participants construct an alternative reality through their own agency, authorship and self-representations, what Lucy Voss-Price calls, 'the playwright function' (1998: 25). As Cecily O'Neill (1995: 90) points out, process drama evokes different levels of engagement where participants commit themselves to the living moment. For instance, the still images that were created by different groups during the Global Majority Seminar resonated with potential meanings that could be further explored, articulated and developed. The images reflected the latent tensions associated with forced marriage. Some of the meanings arising from the still images included the following:

- The Seal Woman looking helpless as Patrick steals her seal skin
- Patrick carrying the Seal Woman on his shoulders and heading towards his cottage
- The Seal Woman trying to resist Patrick's grip and looking back towards the sea
- Patrick dragging the Seal Woman as he enters his cottage

Augusto Boal (1979:137) argues that the image or sculpture has an extraordinary capacity to make thought visible. Not only does it have the capacity to suspend time, making it possible to read the present, the past and the future, but it can also embody a multiplicity of meanings at once. The end result is to challenge participants to engage in what Lev Vygotsky called the 'dual affect' (in Bruner 1976: 549), to see themselves as both active participants and critical observers. The participants do not merely compose the images but also perceive their meanings in the process of reflection-in and/or reflection-on-action.

During the collective reflection session the following mixed views from participants reveal the latent nature of conflicts that arose out of the still images:

- 'The woman had no choice but to do what he wanted, to be his wife'
- 'The sea and the sand were not happy with the way the woman was treated'
- 'She was being forced, she was going against what she wanted'
- 'He wants her but she wanted the best of the two worlds, the sea and Patrick's'
- 'The woman was brutally beautiful, she could have resurrected, but he was persistent and perseverant'

From the still images, participants came to understand how Patrick appeared to impose his patriarchal ideology on the Seal Wife. The images told the story of concealment, denial and repression of the Seal Wife's identity, rights and interests. Even at this latent stage, the nature of gender conflict was evident in the incompatible differences between notions of masculinity (what it meant to be a man) on Patrick's side and femininity (what it meant to be a woman) on the Seal Wife's side. Quite often, male dominance is seen as the exercise of masculine power and authority in order to contain women.

Emerging (or 'Brewing') Conflict

- *Narrator: Patrick and the Seal Wife stayed together for seven years and had three children. A time came when the thatch on the cottage had to be replaced. As the 'thatcher' was working on the roof, he came across the seal skin, and threw it down with the old thatching. The children found the seal skin and ran with it to their mother. That night, while Patrick and the children were asleep, the Seal Wife took her skin, went back to the sea and was never to be seen again.*
- **Group Tasks:** In the same groups, participants were asked to create short live frames or dynamised images of what they regarded as moments of rising tension in Patrick's family. They were to select these moments from the time Patrick began to stay with the Seal Wife to her return to the sea. The groups then presented their dynamised images to others followed by reflection.

Margaret Drewal (1991) has described improvisation as the moment-to-moment maneuvering based on acquired in-body techniques in order to achieve a particular style of performance. As a function of play, improvisation often operates through spontaneity to question, redefine and transcend the structure of reality itself. In his book aptly entitled *The Playful Revolution* (1992), the community theatre practitioner, Eugene van Erven argues that spontaneity is a key ingredient in the process of liberation. It is by acquiring the ability to think *for* and act *by* themselves that people are able to resist oppression. Following Erich Fromm's (1960) philosophy of 'positive freedom', van Erven (1992) points out that spontaneous activity enables the marginalized or subalterns to break through the 'culture of silence' and strive for freedom. Their thinking, feeling and behaving become expressions of their original selves rather than of automatons. Thus both improvisation and spontaneity create an aesthetic space for a culture of freedom rather than silence.

In relation to conflict, improvised encounters allow participants to give form to their imagination by discovering and positing alternative worlds for themselves. In a way, improvisation acts as a kind of midwife for creative transformation. The improvised images that were created by participants in the Seal Wife workshop showed how conflict had escalated from the latent to the emerging or 'brewing' stage. The Seal Wife had lived with Patrick for seven odd years and they had three children. But all these years could not solve the intractable nature of their differences. As Howard Gruber (2000: 353) has noted, under conditions in which subjects are not able to communicate freely, differences become disagreements that are difficult to resolve. The Seal Wife was torn between two worlds, the world of 'humans' in which she felt trapped and the world of 'seals' to which she belonged. As she continued to feel this increasing tension of metaxis which she had tried to avoid for so long, it was perhaps inevitable for her to reclaim her identity even at the expense of her family. For instance, one group from the Global Majority Seminar presented dynamised images of the Seal Wife holding her newly found seal skin but finding it difficult to make the decision to abandon her three children. Even after kissing them as a farewell gesture, she still felt the pain of leaving them.

During the reflection session with participants, some castigated the Seal Wife for abandoning her children while others empathized with her for reclaiming her identity. Gruber (2000) argues that conflict triggers rigid thinking, which when coupled with restricted judgement, anxiety and frustration produce a negative condition best represented by Johan Galtung's (1997) conflict triangle as follows:

Conflict = Attitude + Behaviour + Contradiction (ABC)

In other words, conflict is a triangular construct involving negative attitudes that build up into destructive behaviors that are realized through contradictions. What comes out as destructive behavior is only the visible part of latent attitudes and internal contradictions. In the case of the Seal Wife, the incompatible differences arising from her relationship to Patrick creates a fertile ground for the escalation of conflict. Even though such differences remained hidden for a time, when they came to the surface, they became manifest conflict as shown by the Seal Wife's abandonment of Patrick and the children. As Dale Bagshaw, et al (2005) point out,

there is always a possibility that latent conflict can transform into emerging and manifest conflicts. The opposite is also true, that emerging and manifest conflicts can also have latent aspects as when the Seal Wife and Patrick hide their true attitudes from each other.

Manifest (or 'Explosive') Conflict

- Narrator : *As she returned to her seal community, the Seal Wife did not receive a good welcome. The King gathered the seal community together to ask the Seal Wife many questions : Where had she been for the past seven years? Who had she been with? Why had she come back? What had she brought into the community? How long will she be staying?*
- Group Task: Participants were asked to select one of the dynamised images presented during the emerging conflict stage and transform it into a forum theatre model play. They were then introduced to Boal's forum theatre techniques, especially how they were going to be invited to participate in the dialogic exploration of the challenging circumstances confronting the Seal Wife when she returned to her seal community.

Forum theatre is part of Augusto Boal's arsenal of problem-based participatory performances designed to empower individuals and communities through dialogic interventions. As part of Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979), forum theatre's primary objective is to:

'encourage autonomous activity, to set a process in motion, to stimulate transformative activity, to change spectators into protagonists. And it is precisely for these reasons that the Theatre of the Oppressed should be the initiator of changes the culmination of which is not the aesthetic phenomenon but real life' (Boal 1992: 245).

The ultimate goal of forum theatre lies in changing the spectator into a protagonist, or an oppressed subject who undergoes a process of liberation that can eventually be transferred to the larger society. To that end, a brief model play is created that lays the basis for a theatre-based dialogue in which a participating audience, called 'spect-actors', intervene in order to try and change the outcome of the forum scene on behalf of the protagonist. The forum scene includes other characters, called 'antagonists', who embody and maintain the oppression through different conflicts of interest targeted against the protagonist. The rehearsal of the forum scene acts as an aesthetic space for intervention by spect-actors. The spect-actors can take on the roles of either the protagonist or the antagonist as they experiment with alternatives. This experimental change happens through the application of different techniques, such as simultaneous dramaturgy, hot-seating, role reversal or inversion, thought tracking and repetition (Boal 1979, 1992, 1995). The facilitator, called 'Joker', manages the forum scene by presenting the actors, engaging with spect-actors and controlling the whole intervention process.

The conflict theorist, Peter Coleman (2000: 431) argues that identity-based conflicts such as gender difference are tied to the most fundamental human needs involving survival, security, safety, power and resources. Therefore conflicts over such basic human needs are often experienced as threatening the very existence of those involved. In the case of the Seal Wife, the forum theatre scenario depicts the resistance of the other seals to allow her back into the community. The reasons for the seal community's refusal include :

- Lack of trust regarding the motives behind the Seal Wife's return
- Fear of human diseases that may threaten the health of the seal community
- Threat posed to the culture of the seal community by human contamination
- Ignorance and confusion about whether the Seal Wife was still the same as other seals
- Anger over the Seal Wife's tendency to alienate herself from the seal community

As these identity-based conflicts are played out, the Seal Wife increasingly finds herself faced with a double yoke. While she can no longer return to her human family, she is rejected by her own seal community. She experiences what Edward Azar calls, 'structural victimization' (in Deutsch and Coleman 2000: 433), a condition where individuals are denied their rights, identity, dignity, security and voice. The focus of the forum scene was therefore targeted at trying to de-escalate the manifest conflicts affecting the Seal Wife.

The attempts made at de-escalating the conflict during both the Global Majority Seminar and Drama for Life Festival workshops resulted in a stalemate. Peter Coleman suggests that when parties are faced with an intractable conflict, the initial step should be to address what he calls 'ripeness' (2000: 437). The idea should be to defuse rather than further escalate the conflict. Ripeness involves a genuine commitment by all concerned to change the direction of the escalating conflict towards de-escalation. This implies changing the nature of the relations between the conflicting parties from a competitive and destructive orientation toward a cooperative and constructive (or peaceful) co-existence. The idea behind ripeness therefore is to minimize difference by introducing change forces such as neutral third parties. The joker or facilitator overlooked this crucial requirement, hence the conflict remained in a state of unripeness. Using hindsight, the joker could have selected sympathetic members from the seal community to act as change agents who could argue in support of the Seal Wife. This could have helped to reduce the resistance forces opposing ripeness and facilitate the shift towards a real desire for reconciliation.

What happened during the Drama for Life Festival workshop tended to further escalate the conflict when one of the spect-actors who intervened as the Seal Wife challenged the Seal King by telling him that she was going to return to the seal community whether he liked it or not. She violently argued against the idea of perpetuating victimhood and wanted to promote freedom at all costs. I would agree with the approach of solving such deep-rooted conflicts through constructive

controversy. Rather than polemicise one's truth or virtue through fixed mindsets, the option is to examine the context, or to look at the larger picture, and create consensual relationships that are based on mutual gain, trust and reciprocity. In the words of Peter Coleman (2000: 469),

'Instead of relying on the Golden Rule that emphasizes one's own subjective culture, peacebuilders follow the Platinum Rule: Do unto others as they would do for themselves if they could' (2000: 469).

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated how applied drama, in particular enhanced forum theatre, acts as an effective medium for understanding and mediating conflict. Using the metaphor of the *Seal Wife* drama, it was possible to engage the imagination in order to enable participants to transcend the internal and external forces that often inhibit them from confronting negative conflicts such as gender difference. Through the multiple readings that emerged from a combination of process drama and forum theatre, participants were able to understand how gender difference can be a causal factor in the escalation of conflict.

The implications of an applied drama approach to understanding conflict are quite far reaching. Morton Deutsch and Peter Coleman (2000) have argued that the failure to achieve peace is in essence a failure of the imagination. While humanity spends a huge amount of energy and resources on creating violent means of resolving conflicts, such energy and resources could be directed towards waging peace. To that end, applied drama acts as a creative, collaborative, problem-solving and non-violent approach to understanding and managing conflict. As Isaac Newton once said,

'If I have seen farther, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants' (in Gruber, 2000:354).

Likewise conflict can be transformed, and peace can be attained, by a concerted willingness to stand on each other's shoulders in spite of any differences, as Barucha (1996) observed during the Indian *sangam* custom.

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