

## Theater and Transitional Justice in Afghanistan

### *Creating Spaces for Change*

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In the context of conflict and its aftermath, opportunities for sharing war-related experiences are important—not only for individual healing, but also for restoring collective memory and repairing the social fabric in which individuals are embedded.<sup>1</sup> Trauma survivors often find that their experiences are open-ended; they do not live with memories of the past but rather with an event that “has no ending . . . no closure, and therefore . . . continues into the present.”<sup>2</sup>

Reconstructing narratives of past events and telling stories may be ways for individuals to regain a sense of normalcy and closure. Sharing stories and reclaiming truths can serve as a means for collective change; it can be a political process.

After more than three decades of war, many Afghans have lived with conflict and abusive political leaderships all their lives. Hopes for a more peaceful, just future grew after the U.S.-led military intervention in 2001, but they have been shattered with the reemergence of abusive leaders, corrupt institutional structures, and violent conflict. As a consequence, opportunities for expressing opinions about past and present violations are diminishing by the day. Public space in which to talk about the legacies of war is fast disappearing.

In this context, traditional human rights and transitional justice mechanisms may not be immediately viable for ensuring any form of recourse. Alternative ways must be identified to empower individuals as well as to open up spaces for change beyond the traditional mechanisms used in postwar contexts. Community-based, participatory theater is a method that has already helped create positive impulses for peacebuilding and transitional justice in Afghanistan.

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<sup>2</sup> Shoshana Feldman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 62.

## Theater as a Medium for Memory and Truth-seeking

A central tenet of transitional justice is the need to give voice to victims of trauma and human rights violations in order to build a more just and peaceful future.<sup>3</sup> However, the arena and methods for this process are still sometimes contested, in particular between judicial responses and nonjudicial responses that may include artistic/social theatrical approaches.

While transitional justice mechanisms—from truth-seeking to trials—are by their very nature performative, offering a forum for victims’ testimony, only a select number of victims are able to participate. This can make certain individuals and groups feel excluded and keep certain truths unexamined.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, in criminal justice settings participants are constrained in their responses, given the strictures of formal proceedings and may face adversarial questioning of their experiences. Rather than set the scene and express themselves freely, victims must confine their explanations to the questions asked. One witness before the Special Court for Sierra Leone noted that while in the courtroom each witness speaks for him- or herself, in the context of a play participants are able to present their stories simultaneously to show how different elements of their respective experiences are linked.<sup>5</sup> Many critics argue, however, that deploying more expressive or theatrical devices in a trial setting in particular—creating a “morality play”<sup>6</sup>—can impede due process and result in unfair trials, further setting back the establishment of rule of law.<sup>7</sup>

It is nonetheless difficult, and likely undesirable, to remove emotive forces entirely from formal transitional justice mechanisms. One could argue that the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) live public hearings were in effect performances and were *effective*, however imperfectly, in facilitating transition from a racist, totalitarian state to a nonracial democracy because they were *affective*.<sup>8</sup> The sense of performance was not due to scripted testimony or action but came out of participants’ spontaneous emotional responses to the proceedings.

Theater has been used intentionally and explicitly in conjunction with other truth-seeking processes. The nongovernmental organizations that sprang up as offshoots of Sierra Leone’s TRC specifically used storytelling and drama as means of outreach and education, to inform the population about the TRC’s main findings.<sup>9</sup> Officials in charge of Peru’s TRC enlisted the Lima-based theater collective, Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani, to help with outreach. The Yuyachkani collective had been performing in Peru for 30 years prior to partnering with the TRC, with the aim of “imagining Peru”<sup>10</sup> as a coherent nation despite the pervasive violence of the civil war through

<sup>3</sup> Louis Bickford, “Transitional Justice,” in *The Encyclopedia of Genocide and Crimes against Humanity*, ed. Dinah L. Shelton (Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan Reference, 2004), 1045.

<sup>4</sup> Ksenija Bilbija, Jo Ellen Fair, Cynthia E. Milton, and Leigh A. Payne, “Introduction,” in *The Art of Truth-Telling About Authoritarian Rule*, ed. Ksenija Bilbija, Jo Ellen Fair, Cynthia E. Milton, and Leigh A. Payne (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Stepakoff, 23.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Osiel, *Mass Atrocity, Collective Memory, and the Law* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997), 57.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Osiel, *Mass Atrocity*; Martha Minnow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998); and Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963).

<sup>8</sup> Catherine M. Cole, “Performance, Transitional Justice, and the Law: South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” *Theatre Journal* 59, no. 2 (2007): 179.

<sup>9</sup> Stepakoff, 25.

<sup>10</sup> Francine A’ness, “Resisting Amnesia: Yuyachkani, Performance, and the Postwar Reconstruction of Peru,” *Theatre Journal* 56, no. 3 (2004): 400.

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**ICTJ's Afghanistan Program**

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- Cooperates with Afghan and international organizations working for justice
- Strengthens international and national efforts to create a justice centered peace process
- Supports the national consultation and documentation efforts of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission
- Assists Afghan civil society groups, including exchange visits, fellowships, workshops and individual mentoring groups, including through theater initiatives

“cultural engagement with the indigenous and *mestizo* populations and with complex, transcultured (Andean-Spanish) ways of knowing, thinking, remembering.”<sup>11</sup>

Yuyachkani’s goal was to serve as a mediator and conduit to the public hearings between the government-operated TRC and rural populations, who until recently saw the state as an enemy of the people. The theater group not only acted out the TRC’s itinerary, but also used the performances to transform ordinary public spaces temporarily into places for ritual and reflection. This highlighted the transition from previous periods of conflict to the new democracy in a manner that was “participatory for the community”<sup>12</sup> and sought to foster individual transformation.

**Participatory Approaches to Theater and Social Change**

Having audiences actively participate in the transformation process is a central principle of community-based theater. It offers participants a means to analyze their past in the context of the present, and to invent and shape their futures according to their needs, determined through participatory theater exercises and games—without having solutions imposed on them by experts.<sup>13</sup> The underlying assumption is that people are all equipped to be actors and to take center stage. The main theatrical focus is on dialogue, with the explicit aim of allowing participants to take control of situations.

Community-based theater is most closely identified with Brazilian theater director Augusto Boal and his *Theater of the Oppressed*, which launched an international movement using his techniques as vehicles for participatory social change. Boal developed a process whereby audience members, so-called spect-actors, can stop a performance and assume a protagonist role onstage to change the dramatic action, propose various solutions, discuss plans for change, and train themselves for social action.<sup>14</sup> The theatrical act itself becomes a conscious intervention and a rehearsal for social action based on collective analysis.<sup>15</sup> Among the components of Boal’s approach are 1) Image Theater, a basis for other participatory theater work that asks participants to transform their own or others’ bodies into representations of particular situations, emotions, or ideas; and 2) Forum Theater, which allows audience members to stop a scene or play showing a conflict that the characters do not know how to resolve/transform and suggest and try possible solutions. “Joker” characters serve as neutral moderators between the actors and the spect-actors.

Playback Theater is another widely used technique in community-based theater. Developed in the United States in 1975, this method enables an audience member to tell a story from his or her life and then watch as actors and musicians immediately recreate the scene, giving it artistic shape and coherence.<sup>16</sup> The assumption here is that when memories are told and retold, they transgress the original boundaries of the individual storyteller’s space, time, and body and are relocated into the bodies and

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<sup>11</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 192; A’ness, 399.

<sup>12</sup> A’ness, 399.

<sup>13</sup> “Tears into Energy: Community-based Theatre and Transitional Justice,” United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), unpublished report, April 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Arvind Singhal, “Empowering the Oppressed through Participatory Theater,” *Investigación y Desarrollo* 12, no. 1 (2004): 146.

<sup>16</sup> Bev Hosking and Christian Penny, “Playback Theatre as a Methodology for Social Change” (paper presented at the DevNet Conference, Wellington, New Zealand, December 2000).

minds of the performers and audience.<sup>17</sup> By telling, watching, or even participating in a performance, the experiences of others become collective, and, while this cannot recreate with any degree of accuracy the emotional scope of generalized mass violence, it can give an audience the feeling of actually being there, providing a space for shared memory.

These forms of participatory theater have been used in various post-conflict and transitional contexts, including Burundi,<sup>18</sup> the Democratic Republic of Congo,<sup>19</sup> Kosovo,<sup>20</sup> and, recently, Afghanistan.

### Theater, Transitional Justice, and Afghanistan

Transitional justice issues are politicized and highly sensitive in Afghanistan. Lack of accountability has enabled warlords—politico-military leaders with continued links to illegal armed groups—to become part of the new national and community elite. Many of these leaders are alleged perpetrators of war crimes or other serious human rights violations, and their continued access to power contributes to an atmosphere of fear.

As a result, it is necessary to create “safe spaces” to encourage opportunities for discussing experiences of conflict and exploring accountability. Afghanistan has a long tradition of oral storytelling and performance, but modern Afghan theater—borne out in the early 20th century as a practice and form of entertainment—was suppressed during years of conflict. Since the 2000s, it has started to reemerge and is becoming one means for this exploration as well as a subtle mechanism for social change.<sup>21</sup> Given Afghanistan’s low levels of literacy, theater and other unwritten means of communication and engagement are ideal for outreach.<sup>22</sup>

The use of participatory theater techniques to broach transitional justice topics is a recent innovation.

In 2008, two pilot workshops on community-based theater and transitional justice were launched, each for a different victims’ group in Kabul. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) held the first workshop, and the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) helped initiate the second.

Each workshop involved a gender-mixed group of participants working together for two weeks using various theater games and techniques. Each one culminated in the performance of a play based on the issues raised during the workshop and developed by the participants.

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<sup>17</sup> Nick Rowe, *Playing the Other: Dramatizing Personal Narratives in Playback Theatre* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publications, 2007), 15.

<sup>18</sup> “Burundi Update,” Search for Common Ground, June 2008, [http://www.sfcg.org/programmes/burundi/burundi\\_update.html](http://www.sfcg.org/programmes/burundi/burundi_update.html).

<sup>19</sup> “Centre Lokole/Search for Common Ground’s Participatory Theatre for Conflict Transformation,” Search for Common Ground, [http://www.ceri-sciencespo.com/themes/re-imaginingpeace/va/base/Congo\\_1173192498.pdf](http://www.ceri-sciencespo.com/themes/re-imaginingpeace/va/base/Congo_1173192498.pdf); and *Participatory Theatre for Conflict Transformation: Training Manual* (Kinshasa: Search for Common Ground, n.d.).

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Chadwick, “Working in Kosovo on a Participatory Theatre Project on Missing Persons,” AZ Theatre, <http://www.aztheatre.org.uk/index.php?page=war-stories-kosovo>.

<sup>21</sup> See “OSI FORUM: Reviving Theater in Afghanistan,” Open Society Institute, [http://www.soros.org/initiatives/mena/events/theatre\\_20050728](http://www.soros.org/initiatives/mena/events/theatre_20050728); “Bond St. + Girls Theatre Group in Afghanistan,” Theatre without Borders, <http://www.theatrewithoutborders.com/node/376>; and Natalie Lindo, “NI Play on Afghan Tour,” BBC News, Aug. 1, 2008, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/northern\\_ireland/foyle\\_and\\_west/7523299.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/northern_ireland/foyle_and_west/7523299.stm).

<sup>22</sup> This includes fine arts, poetry, film, television, and music.

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The first workshop resulted in a play, *Tears into Energy*, made up of six scenes: a prologue, four main scenes (on female schooling/forced marriage, freedom of expression/torture, the years of civil war, and escape/migration), and an epilogue.<sup>23</sup>

In the second workshop, participants developed a play, *Light in Dark Nights*, comprising five scenes: a prologue, three main scenes (on the demise of the Communist regime and the circumstances of former regime supporters, female schooling under the Taliban, and land usurpation/displacement), and an epilogue.<sup>24</sup>

Both plays were presented to preselected audiences of about 60 to 70 people; most audience spec-actors for the first workshop were women.

Despite the fact that most participants had little to no theater experience, all managed to engage not only in workshop activities but in the live performances as well. The audience/spectators also took to their roles, coming to the stage to change the outcome of the plays.

Following the workshops, in 2009 ICTJ, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), and Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung (FES) initiated an intensive six-week training-of-trainers and on-the-job training program for the newly formed Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization (AHRDO). Established by a number of young human rights and civil society activists, its aim is to create an Afghan-led and -run theater- and arts-based transitional justice platform in Afghanistan. Initial projects included a human rights theater initiative, participatory theater sessions on issues related to the 2009 presidential election, and a pilot gender-theater workshop for widows' groups.

The most recent culmination of AHRDO's work was the creation of a play about three decades of war in Afghanistan based on 10 true stories from Afghan victims collected during the participatory theater workshops. The play, *Infinite Incompleteness*,<sup>25</sup> was performed in December 2010 at the French Cultural Center in Kabul for an audience of nearly 250 Afghans and included a post-performance discussion in honor of Human Rights Day and Afghanistan's National War Victims' Day. Future plans include a national and international tour of the play.

These projects have fostered discussion, laughter, and tears among heretofore unheard and unconnected victims' voices. They have also had some ripple effects.<sup>26</sup> It is however too early to say whether such work will have an impact on the broader transitional justice discourse.

As one participant in the training-of-trainers session stated, "Participatory theater . . . is a very useful and effective means which would need to be accompanied by

<sup>23</sup> "Tears into Energy."

<sup>24</sup> Hjalmar Joffre-Eichhorn, "Light in Dark Nights: Community-Based Theatre and Transitional Justice in Afghanistan," unpublished report, January 2009.

<sup>25</sup> In the play, a woman, the Butimar-e Kabul, walks the streets of Kabul in search of her disappeared children while three Afghan men tell the tragic stories of different male and female victims, using the victims' original words and language, speaking in Dari, Pashto, and Hazaragi. While telling these stories, the men simultaneously engage in three repeated activities: building and rebuilding structures in Afghanistan; uncovering and documenting mass graves; and carrying war supplies. During the play, each man gradually tries to impose his truth of the past onto the others. The play ends with the Butimar-e Kabul bearing life in the midst of violence, hopeful that better times will finally come to the people of Afghanistan.

<sup>26</sup> After having seen participatory theater, residents of one village in Bamiyan Province went on to form their own victims' rights organization and are eager to use theater methodologies in their own initiatives. In addition, women participating in the gender pilot developed theater games on their own that better reflected the Afghan context.

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complementary means in order to mobilize civil society on transitional justice.”<sup>27</sup> This view recognizes that participatory theater is but one method of raising transitional justice issues, and unless accompanied by other initiatives, it is unlikely to trigger significant change. Further investigation and implementation are needed to determine whether the participatory theater techniques can move beyond creating spaces for discussion and help mobilize a sustainable transitional justice platform.

Nonetheless, the recent work in Afghanistan signals, in a small, targeted way, that participatory theater has the capacity to explore the legacies of conflict and to establish spaces for discussion. It has also allowed for significant female participation, providing a modicum of agency to victims in general and women in particular. These are small gains, but in a context in which movement on accountability is at a near standstill, they are worth pursuing and building upon.

#### Conclusion

Context can be helpful when comparing judicial and artistic/theatrical methods for transitional justice: if one approach is relatively weak, the other may become more central to national healing.<sup>28</sup> This is certainly the case in Afghanistan, where impunity is rampant and the space for accountability continues to shrink. Beyond gathering testimony, documentation, and outreach, the arena for formal transitional justice mechanisms remains limited, but arts-based approaches may be suitable even when large-scale public discussion about the past is not yet possible. Much like the Yuyachkani’s performances during the war years in Peru, performance in this type of setting can serve not only to denounce but also to defamiliarize the violence people live with every day, exposing its absurd and dehumanizing effects.<sup>29</sup>

Participatory theater techniques create space for discussion and can allow for local ownership of the process of remembering, taking into account its religious, ethical, cultural, social, and psychological dimensions by addressing individual and collective needs.<sup>30</sup> This is important as approaches to memory that privilege the individual fail to do justice to the cumulative and collective nature of trauma suffered by communities, literate or not.<sup>31</sup>

In most cases, only a select number of individuals are able to speak out in trials or truth commissions. Performance can give voice to the many who are unable to participate formally, as well as initiate or further inform the collective memory of a conflict. Theater’s ability to engage multiple temporalities simultaneously could possibly help foster memory of the past and visions of the future, shedding light on the meaning of transitional justice in specific contexts.



The International Center for Transitional Justice works to redress and prevent the most severe violations of human rights by confronting legacies of mass abuse. ICTJ seeks holistic solutions to promote accountability and create just and peaceful societies. To learn more, visit [www.ictj.org](http://www.ictj.org)

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<sup>27</sup> “Transitional Justice Theatre Training of Trainers Project,” ICTJ Assessment, unpublished report, August 2009.

<sup>28</sup> Cambodia is one place where the arts have been the main vehicle for victims of the genocide to communicate their experiences, because the tribunal was slow to start. See Stepakoff, 23-24. Colombia is another setting where local arts-based initiatives at present stand in for formal national transitional justice proceedings. See also Marcela Briceño-Donn et al., eds., *Recordar en conflicto: Iniciativas no oficiales de memoria en Colombia* (Bogotá: ICTJ, 2009).

<sup>29</sup> A’ness, 400.

<sup>30</sup> Ly Daravuth, “Notes on Pchum Ben,” working paper, *Recasting Reconciliation through Culture and the Arts*, Coexistence International (Waltham/Boston: Brandeis University, 2005), 4.

<sup>31</sup> Taylor, 193.