



Volume 5 Fall 2020

2020

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Recommended Citation

Mehrotra, Chetna; Amin, Sooraj; Karkera, Roshan; and Champaneri, Viral (2020) "Application of Applied Theatre Online with children and its Effects in the Indian Perspective during COVID Age," *Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Journal*: Vol. 5, Article 15.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/ptoj/vol5/iss1/15>

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Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Journal

Vol. 5, Issue 1 (Fall 2020)

Applied Theatre Online and its Effects in India during the Pandemic

Chetna Mehrotra¹, Viral Champaneri, Roshan Karkera, and Sooraj Amin

The health crisis of COVID 19 in 2020 forced nearly everyone in India to stay mostly indoors, resulting in heightened oppressive situations due to collateral damage to the social and economic framework in most of the country. Trying to make ends meet, families have been challenged. During this time while so many things were shut down Rangbhumi (An Applied Theatre Organization) launched workshops and performances online. Using Theatre of the Oppressed, Playback Theatre, and other allied practices of Applied Theatre we tried to reach people and listen to their voices. Through these initiatives we observed and studied the effectiveness and efficiency of online sessions, looking at them as a tool to be used in the present and the future for creating safe spaces to share. This article documents and evaluates some of that work.

In the middle of 2020, while most things were shut down because of COVID 19, Rangbhumi (An Applied Theatre Organization) launched a series of workshops and performances online to reach people quarantined in their own homes. Using Theatre of the Oppressed, Playback Theatre, and other allied practices of Applied Theatre we tried to reach people of all ages and listen to their voices. Through these initiatives we observed and studied the effectiveness and efficiency of online sessions, looking at them as a tool to be used in the present and the future creating safe spaces to share.

This article will examine online Applied Theatre training workshops and sessions conducted by Rangbhumi with the goal of fulfilling three research objectives:

- To determine if Applied Theatre works in online sessions.
- To ascertain which Applied Theatre forms are most efficient and effective when used online.
- To determine if the online model of Applied Theatre is useful in creating a safe sharing space among the participants to help them deal with oppression and isolation.

¹ I would like to thank my son, Adi, for being extremely patient while we were working on this article and for supporting us even when he himself was itching to go out but couldn't due to country wide lock down owing to the COVID fears. I would also like to thank my partner, Abhinav for assisting in the research and helping us figure out the structure for article.

This conclusions in this article are based on analysis of online Applied Theatre workshops conducted by Rangbhumi involving schools, children, organizations, and groups using various forms. The study assessed the perspectives of both the facilitators and the participants on how Applied Theatre worked for them and what they perceived as outputs and achievements.

About Us

Rangbhumi is an Applied Theatre organization founded in 2010 with a vision of creating spaces of joy and compassion, equitable spaces where people could express in their own voices. Rangbhumi works as an integrated curriculum partner with schools and our annual curriculum includes modules of Playback Theatre, Theatre of the Oppressed, Theatre in Education, and Drama for Learning & Reflection (DFL). We also partner with NGOs and open learning centers to create equal opportunity spaces for people across all socio-cultural backgrounds. Rangbhumi uses Applied Theatre to create learning spaces for corporate organizations developing a diversity and inclusion framework. These activities explore themes like unconscious bias, prevention of sexual harassment, gender sensitivity, and creating inclusive work spaces. Rangbhumi was founded by Chetna Mehrotra and currently has three other core members who are from diverse backgrounds such as banking and finance, engineering, and the corporate sector. They are Viral Champaneri, Roshan Karkera, and Sooraj Amin.

Introduction – Applied Theatre without physical presence

Theatre is generally defined as a physical discipline in which body and eye movements play key roles in creating expressions. Its applications often require a generous physical space, multiple individuals, and an audience witnessing the creative expressions. The emergence of COVID-19 though has changed the dynamics to a great extent. Applied Theatre is no longer the same; the absence of a physically connected space, audience, and practice have seemingly rendered it toothless. Because there were many discussions among theatre makers about whether the rules for Applied Theatre needed to be changed, but very little activity, Rangbhumi decided to create online huddles, performances, and workshops.

Applied Theatre and Various Performing Arts

Applied Theatre is an umbrella term that defines theatre which operates beyond the traditional and limiting scope of conventional Western theatre forms. It is often characterized by work which deliberately engages in spaces or with groups of people where mainstream theatre still fears to tread. (O'Connor and O'Connor, 2009) Applied Theatre is

the base from which several art forms can be studied and their uses determined. This section will discuss the limitations as well as the advantages of the Applied Theatre models, theories, and related art forms which were used by Rangbhumi in online sessions with the participants.

Applied Theatre reduces the distance between the practitioners and the participants (or the audience) to enable interactive discourse and make everyone an active theatre creator. It is often structured as a response to the changing dynamics of social or political space. Applied Theatre originated “in the soil of progressive and radical people's movements in various places around the world,” and has a deep-rooted relationship with the characteristics of nations and people living in them. (Prentki and Preston, 2009, 13)

The pandemic of 2020 has exposed the world to a deadly medical emergency and has altered social and political dynamics to such an extent that all we tend to see are losses everywhere, along with desperate social distancing which in turn hampers theatre practice. The pandemic has forced theatre forms to adapt to it and find an alternative which can connect people to each other while keeping them physically separate but still engaged in Applied Theatre practice.

In a literal sense, Applied Theatre practice refers to applying theatre in daily life, at work, at home, during deliberations, in public or private discourses, etc. Several forms are considered to be legitimate tools to understand a social point of view and harness space to create a theatrical environment which allows sharing among people and enhances people to people connection. Rangbhumi employs our interpretation of Theatre of the Oppressed and Playback Theatre based on that definition.

Theatre of the Oppressed (TO):

TO was created/founded by a Brazilian theatre visionary Dr. Augusto Boal for the purpose of community-based education which emphasizes theatre as a instrument to bring about social change. As a philosophy, Boal felt that “The Theatre of the Oppressed is theatre in this most archaic application of the word. In this usage, all human beings are Actors (they act!) and Spectators (they observe!).”

In its original form, TO was a “set of dramatic techniques whose purpose [was] to bring to light systemic exploitation and oppression within common situations, and to allow spectators to become actors”. (Coudray, 2017) It began during Boal’s work with the Brazilian peasants but now it is used all over the world, with all types of communities

and people from all walks of life for social/political activism, community building, healing, and even proposing government legislation. While many think it is a propaganda form or a political tool, it is neither that nor is it an entertainment theatre. Inspired by the works of Paulo Friere in the field of education, especially *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, TO focuses on education and activism. Boal's vision in creating TO was to gift theatre to non-actors and the common people. He wanted TO to be practiced by the oppressed people themselves and not only by professional actors.

COVID-19 times, though, brought a unique form of oppression situation where there is no clear idea about who can be called the Oppressors, largely due to the lockdown and the isolation. Isolation for an extended period of time can affect mental health. Mental health is not often spoken about on the Indian subcontinent; people resist the idea of being “mentally weak” or “mad,” etc. That's where TO can be of great support for the people who are not so open about the issues they face and feel lonely. Toynee Hall, United Kingdom is a place which has invested deeply in TO and has had several testimonials validating the essence and importance of TO in “tackling loneliness or isolation through interactive workshops” (Allsey, 2019). Rangbhumi wanted to examine whether this approach would work from the Indian perspective, and most importantly, online. Our Applied Theatre workshops led to the revelations which are discussed in this paper and which may throw some positive light on the implementation of performing arts in its online avatar.

Playback Theatre:

Playback theatre is a community-building improvisational theatre in which a personal story told by a group or audience member is transformed into a theatre piece on the spot by other group members. Playback theatre combines artistic expression and social connection based on story-telling and empathic listening, thus bringing together modes of thought to promote healing. (Moran, et al.,2011)

Founded in 1975 by American theatre practitioners and social activists Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas, Playback practitioners believe in creating a holistic place where all stories, no matter how simple, how ordinary, or traumatic they are, will be made into theatre. It is designed to create a space where one's individuality is respected and honored and yet focuses on building and keeping the community together. Since this involves strangers and most of them are accustomed to privacy and isolation, the importance of a safe and respectful sharing space is paramount. (Salas, J., 1983).

The safe sharing space means people open their minds and speak about latent events, traumas, etc. as a part of the process and when stories are played back to tellers, it helps tellers relive them but with other people. This may well have a soothing effect knowing that they are not alone anymore and others know of their suffering. That may result in a partial form of healing – even though it is not a medical claim, it may well be a byproduct of the process.

Since Playback Theatre is an expressive art, it helps people going through transitions and isolation where they feel they are either stuck or unsupported. It helps them in dealing with the changes or the stagnancy in their lives. “The language of art and creative expression can speak to us in ways that words cannot speak” (Rogers, 2007, 4). Playback’s group-based process is “an efficient and effective way to offer emotional support” (Worden cited in Rogers, 2007, 7). It is quite evident that it can be used to help people deal with their past, with grievances and transitions, or help them become more resilient to the changing dynamics of their lives.

Applied Theatre performed with COVID-19 affected people of any age provides them with an array of options to speak, to listen, to absorb, to view things differently, to find emotional support, and to revel in the presence of options.

Applied Theatre in Action Online – the Rangbhumi SAC partnership

Spark A Change Foundation (SAC) is a non-profit organization which aims at ensuring quality education, mentorship, and equal opportunity for every child regardless of their economic background to help them attain their potential. Rangbhumi partners with SAC for an integrated yearly program where we work with two age groups, 9-12 and 13-17. The children are from the slum areas of Mumbai, India where their family members/parents are employed as laborers and domestic help. There are 30 children, half identify as male and half as female. We have Applied Theatre sessions twice a week with the children enrolled with SAC.

For the first project we conducted twelve online Applied Theatre sessions with the children, some of which are highlighted below. Analysis of the implementation of techniques was broken down into sub-sections and done with surgical precision so as to observe if and how each step worked with the participants. Here is how we implemented the sessions.

Session 1 – Objective: Introduction

This started with a basic introduction of each other and telling participants about Rangbhumi and what we were there to work on. Following some warm up exercises, we went onto work on their social skills which involved sociometry questions. The children were asked to describe themselves by using an object. That's when they went into brain churning exercises and came out with theories about themselves and how they look at themselves, what they want, etc. Children were asked to share their stories of COVID time at home during the lockdown and how they felt about it. Rangbhumi facilitators then did a Playback Theatre performance of their stories.

Session 2 – Objective: To identify Self-limiting barriers

At the beginning of the session, children were given a virtual walk through to an experience zone by our facilitators. The experience zone had live images of different fear factors including Darkness, Coronavirus, and Self-limiting barriers. Facilitator's shared their own stories, one of which was about a self-limiting barrier, and others did a Playback Theatre performance of the story. Students reflections on what had transpired so far in the session were in sync with what we were trying to achieve through the performing arts.

Next was an Image Theatre exercise where two images were created by the participants; one image represented "fear" and the other "leaving the fear behind." Participants each wrote a letter to themselves about self-limiting barriers and shared them with the facilitators. The session ended with the participants making a promise to everyone. *"I promise myself that I will break my self-limiting barriers and move ahead in life."*

Session 3 – Objective: To work on story building and performance making through sound

With each passing session, children were better able to understand what they were doing and why they were doing it. They started to enjoy the work. This session too started with an experience zone where we worked on storytelling and improvisation along with exploring camera techniques.

We prepared for the next activity with some warm up songs and a magic ball exercise. We then moved to a sound exercise where absolute silence was observed and participants had to find three sounds they could hear in a minute. Then with videos off participants were asked to make all the sounds they could hear during the stipulated time frame. Small groups in breakout rooms created sound scales with a beginning, a middle, and an end. They had the liberty to choose scenarios such as a train station, traffic jam, school or college, or maybe time at a market.

At the end of the session, we discussed the rationale behind the tools and activities done during the session and how these tools are important in learning and implementing Applied Theatre programs.

Session 4 – Objective: TO exercises

This session explored which TO exercises worked on line with these participants. We tried a sequenced jump for de-mechanization and worked with Columbian Hypnosis and a Columbian Hypnosis forum. Sequence jump is a warm up exercise where we intend to break familiar patterns of body movement through varied forms of sequencing movement and rhythm. The Columbian Hypnosis forum is a space where one participant may hypnotize others while they are speaking their part in a rehearsal and also involves hypnotized participants being directed to break the hypnosis in a creative fashion. We ended by inviting the children to write a poem on fear and keep it with themselves.

Session 5 – Objective: Voice throw and Performance creation

This session was of utmost importance as this was the penultimate session where we received reflections from the participants about all the scenarios we had worked on along with the TO tools which were implemented during the course. Most of the reflections were about being lost or being together during tough times and not losing the way.

The session began with vocal warmups and songs followed by a voice throw exercise during which the facilitator guides the participants to visualize throwing stones far into the sea from the beach. Each stone represents a vowel. The pitch and intensity of the sound of each vowel gradually ascends and then descends with the projectile of the imagined stone. We returned to a Columbian Hypnosis forum and some of the interventions revealed that the participants not only wanted to move away from the oppressor but also wanted to ascertain how they would behave in the place of oppressor. This was remarkable from the prism of Applied Theatre. We wanted these types of moments to result in the participants asking themselves hard questions and figuring out the answers on their own.

We also included exercises from *Games for Actors and Non-actors*, where different professions were involved. One of the professions was that of police. A few days earlier the participants were addressing their grievances over the strictness of cops during the COVID-19 forced lockdown in their locality and how they didn't like the behavior of the cops. However, during the exercise, they explored the challenges of the profession and they began to consider that police might well be stressed because people do not listen to them, they have a stressful job which involves patrolling for long hours, and COVID-19 only makes it tougher. This finished with the realization that we have to find

empathy toward each other's struggles and nobody is enjoying the stress and the panic the pandemic has caused, although everyone is doing their part, willingly or unwillingly.

Session 6 – Objective: Performance rehearsal

The session began with the usual warm up, followed by a bubble action exercise, a circle song with varied pace, and TO exercise working on the equilibrium of the body. In the Bubble Action exercise there is an imaginary bubble which is passed on from one participant to another and often comes with a question “What are you doing?” The other participant then changes the shape of the bubble and responds with a verbal action saying, for example, “I am playing cricket.” The bubble is then passed on to each and every participant and its shape, size and weight changes during the entire process at different points. This exercise is done to create a stimulus for imaginative activities.

The circle song activity creates sounds similar to war cries and highly energizes the participants and ensures a deeper level of engagement. The first line of the song is “Hey Ya Ho” and the second line is “Ho Ho Ho Ho ho hoo ho.” We divide the lines among the children so that half of them would sing the first line and the other half would sing the second. The same song then is orchestrated in various tunes, voice pitches, and pace where lines would be switched, overlapped and sung rapidly. During the TO Exercise participants are asked to balance an unbreakable plate or a bowl on a body part while walking. For example, one student walked with a bowl on her ear while another walked with a plate on his head. The exercise aimed at breaking habits of body movement by challenging muscle memory and de-mechanizing the usual pattern of the movement of one's body.

When the entire project was initially discussed, the Spark-A-Change Foundation did not propose any sort of presentation nor did we approach the sessions with the intention of culminating in a performance. Those were the initial days of creating a relationship with the group. However, as we progressed, we felt that if the group created something together, it would unite them in additional ways. We did not want to create a Forum Theatre at this stage since we had never met the students in physical space and we were still learning about their set up and surroundings. Also, they had never experienced theatre in this form before. So, using the TO exercises with which they were familiar as a performance seemed right.

To that end participants were asked to write letters to the facilitators about the various oppressive emotions they were undergoing in their lives. They wrote about relationships, getting a good academic score, lack of accessibility of technology, etc. These letters were to become a part of the performance.

Spark-A-Change Foundation – Performance Flow

The 40-minute performance began by introducing all the actors. We used Walk – Stop – WORDS which invited everyone to speak words related to feelings and experiences of fear or struggle.² Each student spoke parts of the Hindi Poem – डर से मत डर (*Do Not Fear the Fear*) and workshop participants read the letters they had written based on their experiences of fear, conflict, and struggle. Student participants created images based on their journey with SAC and Rangbhumi and other SAC Members were asked to share their responses. At the end the facilitators performed the collective feelings and experiences of the audience using the Diamond form of Playback Theatre in which actors gather the immediate feelings of the audience; then one performer speaks the emotion being expressed by an audience member and the other performers echo it back. It is called Diamond because in the physical space the actors stand in a shape of a diamond.

Impact of Applied Theatre on the participating SAC Students

The participants shared their experiences about the online Applied Theatre sessions: how they started, what they had in mind, and how the workshop series turned out in the end. They also shared how Applied Theatre impacted their lives and what it meant to them. The following quotes from SAC students illustrate the major points expressed by the participants.

WS – Starting with the welcome song, and the whole experience of the sessions, it gave me a joyous feeling and kept motivating me to come to the next sessions. It was a thorough enjoyment and I would love to come back to it again.

G – My most memorable theatre exercise was Walk-Stop opposites game (where you gave us instruction and we should follow like sit, stand, jump, go right, etc.). Magical ball includes mental exercise where we have to think what we can make that's why I liked that.

I realized that during lockdown instead of watching movies on the phone or playing mobile games, we can do several things. Due to theatre class, we experienced that by taking small things like scarfs, we can make several things and play with them. Theatre session is like a family, we can talk in a friendly way, we enjoyed, had a lot of fun, etc. I could also meet my friends who otherwise stay far away from me. There was always a unique element and we did new things. We felt motivated because we were kept engaged without a prop or an instrument and that the scripts were prepared so quickly that it doubled up my interests, I figured that the longer I stay in these sessions, the more I will learn and will

² Walk-Stop-Words – During the initial process, we had invited the children to share a few words explaining how they feel about their existing conflicts and what three major and emergent feelings they have. Walk refers to their journey, Stop refers to the conflicts which hinder them, and Words are the immediate emotion they feel about that particular conflict. The movement is a metaphor which describes the journey of life, the obstacles we face in our journey, and how we deal with them.

become more skilled.

R – Even before the theatre sessions started, I had a feeling that this is going to be very interesting and there will be whole lot of fun involved in it. We could work on role-plays, and Magic ball was a brilliant exercise which fastened my reflexes right in the middle of it. I absolutely loved the Letter Writing exercise as it allowed me to share my feelings. I would personally love to attend these sessions again with the same fun and enthusiasm.

R & N – Initially we used to think that Theatre is just about watching movies but now we have learnt how to express, create images and various sounds through it. Initially we were apprehensive whether we would be able to do it or not. We also had other work and tuition. But then we started enjoying your sessions and we made sure that we will find time for these sessions, anyhow. And there we are. The network used to fluctuate but we never felt lost as we had your support. Chetna ma'am would also repeat for us if we didn't understand anything in the first place. We would like to learn further whatever all of you teach us and also learn creating more expressions through theatre."

Observations by Rangbhumi Facilitators

The Rangbhumi facilitators found the children willing and a confident and were very appreciative of their zeal to learn about and fight against hindrances without much ado. The children learned very quickly and evolved sharply in the very few sessions we had with them. Though the lack of physical space was perceived as a major hindrance at the start of the session, we realized that except for the fact that the screen was small and not every participant was visible at all times, it was a meaningful experience and not once was any learning missed by the participants. They all duly participated in all the exercises and modalities, they learned the aesthetics of the performing arts, and even learnt to use screen positioning. The Image Theatre exercises worked so well that we believe they illustrated what Paulo Friere said about how dialogue creates long term memories and programs neurons. This experience might create a lasting impact.

The participants were immersed in the entire process and received the learning so well that it never felt like this was our initial experience in this type of workshop. The group dynamic was well coordinated, their confidence level was high, they were not disturbed by any obstacles, be it poor network, smaller screens, etc. The participants were sincere with everything they did. The limitations and challenges which the participants shared in their letters were related to their career hopes, education, getting the right mentors from SAC, availability of resources during the lockdown, availability or the lack of a personal mobile phone, diminishing quantity of rations at home, etc.

During in person sessions we always demanded strict punctual appearance, although we feared that could not be

maintained online. But even when participants joined with a delay of 5-10 minutes, no alarm bells went off and we kept our trust intact that all of them would be present – and that's what happened.

Augusto Boal said that knowledge acquired aesthetically is already in itself the beginning of a transformation. These sessions were a true transformation for us and the students. We began an evolution of the Applied Theatre sciences and we came to believe that online sessions of Applied Theatre have a lot of scope and can achieve great heights during the COVID-19 era.

Conclusions:

Many people thought that when schools and institutes closed because of the pandemic, academics and learning shut down too. But adversity provides a challenge to artists to be resilient, to stand up and discover possibilities that can be converted into opportunities. Online Playback and Theatre of the Oppressed performances by practitioners around the world gave Rangbhumi the spark that was needed to begin our journey. We found we could create joyful and somatic experiences for students whom we have not met in physical space.

One of the conclusions that can be drawn is that with the right and conscious approach, Applied Theatre can be used to create spaces where children can share their told and untold feelings and thoughts and feel less alone. Children could relate a lot with each other's personal experiences during the period of lockdown. Through Applied Theatre they could experience for themselves that there are other children who are sailing on different boats, but in the same storm.

Both the students and facilitators discovered the way to make their virtual space come alive by using GIFs in chat box, virtual backgrounds, theatre books, theatre lights, masks, and dupattas (scarfs). We witnessed the dramatic transition of the approach from the mere adaptability of theatre through technology to a more celebratory life experience.

Children found the space comfortable enough to share stories about how they helped their family members in their household chores along with exploring their creative abilities in cooking, artwork, and many more areas. Participants felt a sense of security with family around them, but at the same time claimed personal space allowing them to feel uninhibited in the presence of family members. The online platform was easy to learn so they developed a sense of independence. Parents were intrigued by the practice of home plays (assignments) that were

shared in the session. This helped generate a broader sense of curiosity that resulted in the children doing research on topics of their own choosing, identifying a conflict, and working on resolutions.

The creative use of online space grew among facilitators and participants. The children started looking at their academics through the lens of Applied Theatre. While discussing what they liked to do and didn't like to do, they revealed how they did not like to attend academics online due to continuous classes.

We invested our time in learning about mental health, theatre techniques, and pedagogies from educators, psychologists, folk theatre artists, and national and international Applied Theatre practitioners. Our opportunistic approach helped us to implement what we learned in workshops, performances, and panel discussion.

Future Potential

Our findings demonstrate the powerful implications of using the web as a medium to reach places not possible to access when we were working in physical space. We discovered that we could activate audio, visual, and kinesthetic senses of participants which is an integral part of de-mechanization, de-structuring, and dismantling in Theatre of the Oppressed. On an online platform, we can focus on only those senses that the actor/performer wants to showcase. With the staggering outreach of mobile phones across the world, the online Applied Theatre module can connect with both urban and rural parts of the country.

These findings point to a potential mechanism to develop a completely new theatre module that can be implemented in both education and corporate sectors. The existing modalities of Applied Theatre – such as Drama for Learning and Reflection, Playback Theatre, Image Theatre, Forum Theatre, Theatre in Education, etc. – can be implemented and curated into online workshops and performances for an audience. Future research could continue to explore how close online media can parallel theatre physical space. We might also explore how the skills utilized in Applied Theatre online are implemented in students' daily lives and what has changed for them.

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