

# QUESTIONING SOCIAL JUSTICE

## A dialogue on performance, activism, and being in-between

*Asif Majid and Elena Velasco*

Since the 1990s (if not before), the term “social justice” has come to be deployed in a range of contexts. It is often used to characterise change or progress-oriented endeavors, particularly in activist or artistic spaces. Yet the term has rarely been defined or critiqued in a way that specifies its intent, particularly as it relates to the artist-activist communities that use it freely, the fluidity of the concept, and its increasing neoliberalisation (Riguer, 2017; Smith, Stenning, and Willis, 2008; Wilson, 2007). How, then, can “social justice” be a useful term in applied performance, if it has not first been questioned? To that end, we (Asif Majid and Elena Velasco) have edited down three months of email exchanges between the two of us, authoring a dialogue that draws inspiration from other applied performance practitioners using correspondence as a way to ask important questions (Ahmed and Hughes, 2015; Heritage and Ramos, 2016). For us, those questions are: 1) What opportunities and challenges does applied performance face when embracing or rejecting social justice? 2) Following anthropological notions of self-reflexivity, how does our own positionality, relative to those with whom we work, shape what we see those opportunities and challenges to be? and 3) What possibilities for action emerge from our critical dialogue, action that is disseminated through artistic performance?

Our shared positions are as scholar-artist-activists who seek to facilitate performance processes and products that enhance social justice possibilities. At the same time, we often find ourselves in the position of sharing racial, religious, and/or ethno-national identifications with those with whom we work. For one of us, Elena Velasco, extensive and ongoing theater-making work with and about undocumented, Latinx immigrants in the United States has complicated the notion of “social justice” in theater, notably how to achieve that lofty ideal for those who have long been the target of xenophobia and highly politicised persecution. For the other, Asif Majid, the experience of devising with Muslim youth in the securitised and highly surveilled British context asks questions of power, as well as whose story is being told and in what manner. Our experiences have also overlapped when working with Convergence Theatre in Washington DC, a performance collective that examines many of the same questions that we ask here.

On Sat, Jun 16, 2018 at 4:17 PM, Elena Velasco wrote:  
My dear friend,

I will do my best to keep my thoughts organised. This week has been quite thought provoking and challenging, and yet there are others more directly affected by these tragedies' causes that I wonder at my internalisation of these events.

Though I have long been committed to the immigrant community, particularly my Latinx community, the actions taken by those in power in the US have exacerbated my anger and desperation. Long before this current administration, I was aware of and affected by the raids conducted against my undocumented brothers and sisters. I have had students flee with families to avoid their last known address. These scenarios were only the prelude to our nation's current atrocities. I have shifted from desperation at the separation of parents from children, to sheer outrage at the justifications of these actions that bastardise religious text.

How in this can theater even matter anymore? How can I "apply" theater in a way that makes any impact? How do we engage those who have been hidden behind walls, under silver blankets, in emptied Walmarts?

To reach these communities, we must combine our efforts with those who work in the legal system. We must work with groups that have training in mental health, with non-profits who understand social services. And as much as it pains me, we must also reach those who capture, imprison, and blindly follow what "the law" dictates.

Applied performance must build coalitions. I want to believe again that applied theater is a rehearsal for the imminent revolution. I want to believe again that we can exercise free speech and it will matter. And I want so much to believe that we can move hearts and minds.

paz,  
Elena

On Fri, Jun 22, 2018 at 10:07 AM, Asif Majid wrote:  
Hi Elena,

So much to take from what you wrote, but I can work most productively with one word: coalitions. It brings to mind other "co" words, like collaboration, collective, co-performative, connection, contingent, and community.

As you know, devising is core to my practice. For many practitioners, it merely implies an uncertainty about performance. But for me, that uncertainty is not enough. It needs a "so what?" I find the "so what" is only apparent when radical potential is realised *in relationships*, in mucking through uncertainty with others. That is what is so powerful about what you wrote: not the plight of experience, but the standing with. When the nation, an "imagined political community" (Anderson, 2006: 6) collectively decides that separation of something so basic as family is not what this nation is – ironic, considering the US' genocidal history and its continued occupation of indigenous lands – it imagines itself in a particular way. It performs a specific identity.

We, with an activist politics, talk about social justice and change in the context of action; but what of the social? What of the relationships and people we hold dear? What of the fact that my

first performance teacher was my grandmother, who – with no performance background – saw me drumming on pots and pans as a two-year old and told my mother to ensure I continued performing throughout life? How do we maintain those connections? Social justice relies on the relationships we have. Too bad that it takes us until those are on the brink of destruction to act.

To push forward, challenge injustice, and enact change, we must have networks that work. We must have politics that uplift as much as they condemn. We must have counter-publics: “communities and relational chains of resistance that contest the dominant public sphere” (Muñoz, 1999: 146). The hope that we need springs eternal, but only when we build *with*, rather than *together*. That “with” returns us to the applied, always and forever embedded in relationships.

Sincerely,  
Asif

On Sat, Jul 14, 2018 at 6:01 PM, Elena Velasco wrote:

This past week, Convergence Theatre opened *Guerrilla Theatre Works: A New Nation*, the third installment of a devising structure that can be broken apart and performed as pop-up activist art. The performance ends with audiences connecting to local leaders, linking the performative to direct action outside the theater. These leaders vary greatly in background, yet each emphasised the same point: story generates empathy, which builds community. When story is shared, the “co” appears. Most significant is that we are called in communion. I recognise the Judeo-Christian implications of that word, but something spiritual happens when a group of individuals sits together to witness another’s story. That deepens when the group is asked to translate the story into action. Communion is the start of coalition. No longer does the individual think about what is done together, side by side, but rather acts in communion; their action is impacted directly by another’s.

This is what theater must do if we are to function as a community that works with one another – we must act. The origin of the word “drama” comes from the Greek *dran*, meaning “to do” (Wallace, 2007: 204). That is the actor’s job. The artist cannot merely indulge in inactive emotional purgation. One must do what the character is driven to do, prompted by a need or goal. If we focused more time on doing rather than witnessing, the stories we share would go outside the theater. Ironically, that is the issue with many spiritual communities today – the word does not give way to action.

paz,  
Elena

On Sun, Jul 15, 2018 at 11:27 AM, Asif Majid wrote:  
Hey Elena,

I’m struck by the (almost) formulaic nature of your statement about what story does: “story generates empathy, which builds community.” Even more interesting was: “When story is shared, that ‘co’ appears.” But is that always the answer? I think about situations in which sharing stories

isn't what's needed because they may reinforce the difficulties of those sharing. What if sharing silence, or a meal, or childcare responsibilities is preferred? Can these constitute applied performance? Perhaps that's where your second point about the etymology of "drama" comes in. Maybe, performance as a sense of creating community is about doing. But often, the emotion precedes any doing.

Applied theater scholar-practitioner James Thompson echoes this. While his early work highlights applied performance's "instrumental intent" (2006: 18), his later work emphasises the radical potential of creating beautiful things (2009). It's a messy space. But our decisions of what to do on stage, what types of communities to form, and what types of actions to undertake are not always driven by needs or goals. Underlying emotions may also drive them. Isn't theater aesthetic first? What might it mean to form an applied social justice performance community based on shared emotion?

Sincerely,  
Asif

On Thu, Aug 2, 2018 at 2:13 PM, Elena Velasco wrote:

Migo,  
Indeed, "sharing story" can appear a reductive term for what I envision. No, to "share story" is not enough, but let's examine what can transpire when embarking on this act of connection.

Sharing story is the entry way into the unknown by inviting, tempting, or even subversively luring the onlooker into an experience that must be seen and remembered. This is where I believe your "co" appears. When story is truly "shared," there is a partnership or unspoken agreement between artist and spectator (Brook, 1968). In oral storytelling societies, the storyteller emerges from among the masses and, though the text may reflect the past, actions within the narrative are present tense. Sharing story is a form of communion that informs and can generate empathy. Yet the act of storytelling is not limited to verbal text. Silence, sharing a meal, caring for a family member – these are shared actions and within them memories are created, becoming the heart of the story.

Sharing story is engagement that inspires action, as there is untold power within story. What I am proposing is harnessing the aspects of story that impact or demand action. If my goal is to affect change, then simply sharing story is not enough, no matter how elaborately staged or extensively designed. Drama requires action. Breaking bread can be a part of this act, as in Bread and Puppet Theater's work where the scent of baked sourdough and garlic aioli waft through the air (Estrin and Simon, 2004). Caring for a child is part of that sensory-friendly experience in theater, too. Inherent in all of our actions are the seeds of story, but purposeful awareness initiates empathy. Making space for that story to spark action or mobilise the masses is where applied theater can take story beyond the stage.

If in the end we are only our stories, then we have truly lost all when those actions and players are erased from memory. Story must become the change.

En paz,  
Elena

On Fri, Aug 3, 2018 at 9:50 AM, Asif Majid wrote:

Hi Elena,

From this, I'm reminded of time spent working in Maine at a summer camp called Seeds of Peace. Seeds started as a camp for Palestinian and Israeli youth to engage in intensive daily dialogue sessions, facilitated by pairs of Palestinian and Israeli educators. The dialogue groups attempt to provide a platform for helping both sides understand one another, working towards more positive relationships. Ropes course activities, living together, and breaking bread complement dialogue. The young people are intentionally compelled to have conversations and share stories with people they might not otherwise meet. Seeds has other programming, but I want to attend specifically to the Palestine/Israel dimension here.

Two of the organisation's biggest critiques – from within and outside – are that it normalises the occupation of Palestine through its language of “the conflict” and that it fails to support Palestinian and Israeli young people after they have returned to “the region.” It has been many years since I worked for Seeds, and I know that efforts have been underway to respond to the second critique (perhaps even the first). But what's relevant here is that sharing stories between Palestinian and Israeli youth was only good enough for so long. The organisation was founded around the time of the Oslo Accords, and I was 20 years old when I worked for them. Now, approaching age 30, even as Seeds continues its summer camp, the occupation of Palestine continues apace. There is no sign of Israeli land-grabbing slowing, nor is the country recognising Palestinian rights. I'm not pinning all hopes for change on Seeds. But the power dynamics of Israel's apartheid-like domination of Palestine with Western complicity are not questioned, challenged, or overturned by Seeds' commitment to sharing stories. If anything, they may in fact be normalised.

Think of Seeds as an applied performance intervention. Young people come to dialogue, perform particular stories, and are expected to affect change upon their return. This performance makes murky what those lived realities are, but it does not disturb overwhelmingly real power differentials. There may be a social dimension to the campers meeting new people and hearing new stories, but there is little justice and no equity. A common question campers would ask was: “So what?” Why talk ourselves to death but still return to a reality that does not live up to what we now think is possible? The sharing of stories can be unfair.

Is empathy enough? Part of this is in language. You used the singular “story” quite a bit, relative to multiple “stories.” Novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2009) discussion of the dangers of the single story comes to mind, as do totalising singularities like “the region” and “the conflict.” Multiplicity is the wonderful messiness where social justice and applied performance intersect. I want to live in and sit with that messiness, embracing its uncertainty. Better yet is if that messiness happens *with* one another.

Sincerely,  
Asif

On Fri, Aug 10, 2018 at 4:17 AM, Elena Velasco wrote:

Language is complicated. In my physical theater work, I have become more convinced that the word is limited. I intentionally use the singular form here for, to your point, there are dangers in assuming a single definition. One must be cautioned in believing that a word possesses only one meaning. But I recall that dictionaries recognise that most words have multiple definitions.

Whether I refer to “the word” or “the story,” there is far more to discover than one narrative. Then why use the singular?

Intersection. It is the *intersection* of a word’s multiple understandings that comprises our present acceptance of it. What can and should be questioned are whose understandings and experiences are helping to define that word. It would seem that the intersectionality of definitions is the origin of empathy, not because there is one definition for a word, event, or – daresay – story, but because the multiplicity of definitions reveals commonalities.

As you note, sharing is not enough. And empathy? Sorry, but “empathy” has become the enemy. It has meant that in the wake of preventable tragedies, “empathy” should be enough. Too many affected by the mass shootings at Stoneman Douglas, Sandy Hook, San Bernardino, and elsewhere have dismissed the “empathy” of elected officials. “Thoughts and prayers” have proven no substitute for action.

I think of this in the same way I view catharsis. For the cathartic dramatic climax of a “story” to truly “move” an audience, the proof would be that the audience mobilises. However, the norm in US theater is audiences believing that the theater will “change” them, but their catharsis incubates inertia, creating a facade of action. Like your example with Seeds, the empathy amounts to little. It becomes the antithesis of social change.

I also recognise that “change” is not inherently positive or negative; it does not ensure “progress.” Marginalised communities across the US witnessed “change” in November 2016 and continue to feel its effects. Your Seeds example excellently demonstrates how even the lofty goals of a well-meaning social justice program can instill a false hope of change. It is not enough to merely share story or break bread partly because the goals of these actions are not clearly defined. Instead, we must remember and push against the hundreds of years of colonisation and imperialism that have preceded recent moments of “change,” moments that only reinforce systems of oppression. Our theater must be the “rehearsal of revolution” (Boal, 1979: 141). If we do not *act*, there are no forces to push them back.

paz,  
Elena

On Thu, Aug 16, 2018 at 3:02 PM Asif Majid wrote:  
Hi Elena,

Having previously argued for the potentially problematic nature of story, I now find myself troubling that idea. I’m a bit uneasy at your statement that “it is not enough to merely share story or break bread partly because the goals of these actions are not clearly defined.” While I grant that doing both for their own sake might not be enough, defining the goals of those actions might be embedded in undertaking the actions themselves. What if breaking bread or sharing story leads to accidental creation of community, from which creating community *becomes* a goal? Creating community results in strong bonds, from which trust and work towards a shared future can emerge, or otherwise present a radical alternative vision of how things can be.

And, take that statement to its logical conclusion. Performance or social goals become so defined such that failure to hit them with 100% accuracy constitutes a failure of the process itself. I’m not convinced that such single-mindedness is necessary for a holistic striving towards social justice that invites multiple voices to take part in collective struggle.

The social change goals of a given applied performance experience may be more effectively left to a later moment, to emerge from within that experience. Holding space for that possibility is difficult, yet sorely needed. In an age when doing for the sake of doing is the norm, there is radical potential in stillness. Maybe, more than anything else, that is the revolution we need.

Sincerely,  
Asif

On Wed, Aug 29, 2018 at 5:52 PM Elena Velasco wrote:  
Buenas dias migo,

As is your nature to seek and search in divergence – an endearing quality that always prompts deeper discourse – I have taken time to let your words rest. These days, I stand between the impulse to take immediate action in extremes and the reminder to move forth in calculation.

The phrase that remains with me is “radical potential in stillness.” While every generation has its own manifestations of “radicalism,” there is something both exciting and threatening about it. Radicalism is a predecessor for and outcome of change, which seems to be the heart of applied performance. This presumes definition and objective, coming almost full circle to the catalyst for our inquiry. Freebody et al. write that applied theater practice “is relational” (2018: 2). But it must yield a visible effect. It must work towards a more just, equitable world that fosters intersectionality, guiding us towards local or global communion and community. Potential and stillness easily can shift into inertia – and they often do.

I can only hope that the stories I share will go forth, becoming the flint that sparks action. What I am writing may sound like the work of a missionary, yet I am plagued by the urgency of those who bear my skin, blood, and history. It is hard not to doubt the effectiveness of my actions as an artist when I see a social embrace of white supremacists’ ideals. Perhaps I blur the purpose of applied performance with activism. Yet, shouldn’t our art move others to action? Is theater not inherently political, as we are political beings? Applied performance may begin with the simple acts of breaking bread and sharing story, but the process must take effect beyond the converted. Collaborative performative actions need to pave intersectional paths leading us to greater peace, not become words that fade in an echo chamber.

paz,  
Elena

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