

Anthology Vol. 2: Chapter 1 Summary

PERFORMING CROSS-CULTURAL CONVERSATIONS: Creating New Kinships Through Community Theatre

by Eugene van Erven and Kate Gardner

Community-Based Theatre

In this chapter, Eugene van Erven and Kate Gardner, two international community-based theater artists from the Netherlands and America, respectively, explore cross-cultural dialogue through the framework of theatre. The authors believe that the creative capacities nourished through the artistic process help community members view each other in more nuanced ways allowing for strong relationships to be built across ethnic, political, and religious divides.

By analyzing two different community-based theatre projects, defined as works developed from the content of peoples' everyday experiences, the authors invite the reader to imagine the power of theatre, “for teaching people from all walks of life that they can transform their lives—painful and traumatic as they may be—into something moving, beautiful, comical, and spectacular.”

Both authors begin by reflecting on the early personal experiences which motivated them to create theatre projects that reach across borders and create new connections. Van Erven then describes his involvement as an invited observer and documenter in The Father's Project, a locally-rooted theatre program in The Hague, Holland, while Gardner, who founded the *BrooKenya!* project, provides a firsthand account of how she created a community-based soap opera with international volunteer writers, actors, and filmmakers.

Part 1: The Father's Project

The Father's Project was developed in Laakkwartier in The Hague, a largely working-class community experiencing socio-economic issues and demographic changes due to immigration primarily from Muslim countries. The play was staged at the Fathers Centre “Adam”, an initiative founded to provide support and skills to men struggling with divorce, job loss, homelessness, and socio-cultural adjustment.

Van Erven discusses the activities involved in developing a play at the center in 2006. Theatre director Marlies Hautvast created the play, titled *In the Name of the Fathers*, from personal stories gathered in interviews with and group discussions between men at the center. When production for the play began, thirteen men of different cultures and backgrounds signed on as actors. Van Erven explains that, during the one-year

development period, “a sophisticated inter- and intra-cultural dialogue formed the foundation for a unique collaboration between professional artists and artistically untrained participants.”

The distilled content from these interviews and dialogues transferred to the rehearsal space, which became a safe arena to honestly discuss experiences regarding taboo subjects such as incest, and physical and sexual abuse. The program used improvisation to develop themes which then entered into the play. This enabled the performance to facilitate further dialogues in which the performers tackled prominent cultural prejudices. On stage, cultural “others” would display familiar patterns of behavior recognized by all. Performing these moments required performance member to drop simplistic views of amorphous ethnic groups for a more complex view of the individual.

The story of Turkish immigrant, Bilal, is one example. Though he feared his community’s reaction, Bilal felt safe enough within the context of the play to discuss abandoning his practice of Islam. After the performance, his family was surprisingly empathetic; his Father-in-Law told him, “I never knew you were having such a hard time back then. You almost make me weep.”

Van Erven analyzes what he sees to be strong and lasting effects in the community because of the aesthetic and ethical quality of the artistic process, from the initial interviews to the professionally produced play. Benefits include the deeper reflection the participants experienced regarding the qualities they wish to embody as men, the confidence they gained by performing, the audiences' appreciation of how the play’s themes resonated with the specificity of their experiences, and the manner in which a true coexistence emerged not by negating difference but by allowing the time and consciousness-raising activities to respectfully engage it.

Part 2: *BrooKenya!*

The format of the *BrooKenya!* Theater project was an international soap opera staged in two disparate cities: Brooklyn, NY, USA; and Kisumu, Kenya. The production explored many themes within the two communities including family life, racial identity, and poverty. It highlighted the possibility of expansion of the worldviews of the two communities beyond their borders, an act that participants in the project hoped would bridge the gap of distance and cultures to develop a new paradigm from existing socio-cultural norms to a more universal understanding of human experience.

In 2002, without institutional support, Kate Gardner launched this “grassroots global soap opera” in collaboration with Kenyan poet, teacher, and development consultant Kitche Magak. For the next three years, they organized and worked with a team of filmmakers and 150 volunteer residents from around the world to write, develop, and film the project.

Both settings explored sexual mores in the age of AIDS. The Brooklyn scenes show a lively engagement of sexual identity and responsibility, in the midst of the city’s rich and

sometimes stratified cultural and racial identity. The Kenya setting focused on the challenges of the social norms that straddle traditional and modern western Kenya.

One of the first scenes shows the character Miderma confronting her husband Lela about his affair 25 years ago with a Brooklyn woman named Jaxx. Miderma is desperately frightened that Lela's family is pressuring him to get a second wife to give him the son she has not been able to produce. When she finds out that Lela and Jaxx's affair produced a son, she is furious. But she soon sets into a motion a scheme to travel to the U.S., to bring the now young man back to Kenya and save her position within her marriage and her husband's position within their culture. Through the family story, the project confronts the prevalent issues of poverty, joblessness, HIV/AIDS, teen pregnancy, and gender inequity.

The dramatic scenes of *BrooKenya!* and the challenges of collaborating across such different cultures brought home many of the issues facing the soap opera's makers and their communities, including socio-economic conditions, women's desire for empowerment, the realities of global and personal identity. Although the issue looked different between the countries, as well as among different social strata within each county, the producer and audiences alike were moved by the universality of their human experiences and relationships.

Gardner says of the project, "*BrooKenya!* created an avenue for intense social interaction where people appreciated and built with their differences...I was struck by how—in the course of putting on a show—people from different backgrounds so easily built relationships across ethnic, political and religious divides. Performing together seemed to give them the freedom to be other than what they were defined to be, allowing them to create an immediate sense of community that transcended social segregation."

Part 3: Thoughts on Theories and Practice

In this last section, van Erven and Gardner explore powerful examples of community theatre processes, highlighting "community art-making and peacebuilding," "cross-cultural dialogue and development," and "aesthetics and assessment."

The authors discuss their work in relation to several social thinkers including Lev Vygotsky who saw creative imagination as necessary for effective social functioning and Jean Paul Lederach who developed the concept of a "moral imagination."

The authors share ideas on how community theatre correlates with peace building and coexistence. According to them, *BrooKenya!* and *In the Name of the Fathers* prove clear examples of the moral imagination by providing an arena for citizens to remain grounded in present reality while engaging their creative imaginations to perceive of and work towards an improved future.

The processes of both Gardner and van Erven highlight journeys of self-discovery in the era of globalization, exploring the risks and prospects that lead to edifying new kinds of

cross cultural relationships. The resulting atmosphere supports citizens to believe in their power to transform “what is” into “what is possible.”

More From “Creating New Kinships Through Community Theatre:”

- Van Erven describes in some detail the development and purpose of the Fathers' Centres in the Netherlands. He also provides specifics on the lives and personalities of many of the participants in the program.
- Van Erven presents examples of several scenes from the play with analysis of their meaning for the participants. He includes thoughts on difficulties that arise within the community theatre format such as attendance problems and attrition caused by people returning to their home countries.
- In presenting and analyzing her experiences with *BrooKenya!*, Gardner includes scenes from the play and quotes from writers, actors, viewers and supporters. She relates how the cross-cultural connection of *BrooKenya!* included citizens from Lima Peru after one of the collaborators relocated there.
- Gardner provides details of the show's development process, ruminating on “Participatory Educational Theatre,” educational theatre in Africa and her initial attempts to focus the work on issues of HIV/AIDS.
- The chapter includes a benefits analysis that considers the actions of American and Kenyan participants during the post-election violence in 2008 and subsequent developments which underscore the skills gained by program graduates.