Book Review

The Performance of Peace

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“Acting Together: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict, Volume I: Resistance and Reconciliation in Regions of Violence”
A book edited by Cynthia E. Cohen, Roberto Gutiérrez Varea and Polly O. Walker

Notre Dame professor John Paul Lederach, in his foreword to “Acting Together: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict, Volume I,” recalls the response of a group of upper-caste Nepali teenagers to a Gurukul Theatre performance of a poor, uneducated servant girl’s plight. “I never thought our maid had a story,” one girl said. “I forgot she was a person.” In this volume, edited by Cynthia E. Cohen, Roberto Gutiérrez Varea and Polly O. Walker, artists and peace builders demonstrate how ritual and dramatic performance create a safe place for truth telling, insight and dialogue to spur people on either side of brutal conflicts to effect positive change when culture, trust and language have been savaged by destructive violence. The belief in an “urgent present,” as playwright Erik Ehn calls it, in which “change can occur,” is what performance and peace building have in common. Performance is filled with the potential to recognize the self and the other. It can bring the exiled back to light. It can make the invisible visible.

If the impetus for this study came from artists and peace builders in post 9/11 America determined to resist our political isolation, it is the cross-cultural collaboration with artists and peace workers across the globe that makes “Acting Together” such an exciting and important read. The case studies reflect an impressive diversity in the conflicts—crimes against humanity, genocide and systemic, structural violence—and practices explored in the former Yugoslavia, Uganda, Sri Lanka and Israel as well as Argentina, Peru, India, Cambodia and Australia. Symposia at New Dramatists, Brandeis University and La Mama in New York, focusing on “creative approaches to reconciliation” and supported by Cohen’s coexistence program at Brandeis, laid the groundwork for this invaluable reference for practitioners of performance, activists and peace builders working locally and globally. It is a welcome addition to training programs and will inspire creative thinking about positive action in conflict regions.
A primary inspiration for “Acting Together” was Lederach’s “The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace.” The moral imagination is firmly rooted in reality but also capable of envisioning a different, more positive one. Peace builders must recognize, as Lederach writes, “that the well-being of our grandchildren is directly tied to the well-being of our enemy’s grandchildren”; “locate a greater truth” by creatively grappling with “seemingly contradictory truths”; believe the creative act is always possible even “where violence dominates and ... creates its greatest lie: that the lands it inhabits are barren”; and step “into the unknown without any guarantee of success or even safety. ... Violence is known; peace is a mystery.”

“Volume I: Resistance and Reconciliation in Regions of Violence” is divided into two sections. The first, “Singing in the Dark Times,” examines peace building performance during ongoing conflict. The second, “Holding Fast to the Feet of the Rising Condor,” explores peace building performance in the aftermath of mass violence. The conflicts are violent in the extreme. Human lives are lost, communities gutted, cultures destroyed. But the crucial questions posed here are ones not often encountered in war correspondence: How can one resist violence and injustice without becoming a victim or an avenger? Can people of actively violent cultures be made to see their complicity and work for positive change? For performance to creatively transform conflict, it must transmute polarized perceptions of “enemies” into tolerance of differences and awareness of untapped potential. In the regions of violent conflict, practitioners found that nonviolent resistance can reveal suppressed truths and allow marginalized voices and “otherness” to be heard.

In “Theatre as a Way of Creating Sense,” Dijana Milošević, the bold artistic director of DAH Teatar in Belgrade, emphasizes the importance of giving a voice “to the ones who cannot otherwise be heard” under a harsh Serbian nationalist regime:

“When we decided to create performance in the main square in Belgrade, we knew that it could be dangerous. But we felt that we had to take the risk because we had the privilege of a public voice. We physically felt that people on the street needed to hear the truth, to hear that they were not alone in their pain. They needed to know that perhaps there was a way for them to speak in public about their beliefs. In that way we provided a model for action. After the performance, many people came and thanked us because they had finally heard publicly something they knew and felt to be true, but that was officially denied and was forbidden to mention.”

In “The Created Space: Peacebuilding and Performance in Sri Lanka,” Madhawa Palihapitiya, a conflict resolution practitioner with extensive experience mediating between the Sinhalese and Tamil populations, focuses on two peace building artists. The Sinhalese filmmaker Dharmasiri Bandaranayake’s production of “The Trojan Women” used Brechtian alienation to elicit empathy from both Sinhalese and Tamil audiences who recognized their own senseless warfare in the play. Dr. Kandasamy Sithamparanathan founded the Theatre Action Group (TAG) to explore how new rituals can enable Tamils to articulate and overcome deep trauma stemming from abduction, displacement, rape and the violence of war.
Playwright/director Charles Mulekwa, in “Theatre, War and Peace in Uganda,” writes, “I believe that once people think critically about their lives, they can be activated.” Later in the chapter he says, “When we see our own condition on stage, it becomes less terrifying, less impossible to discuss.”

In “Theatre, Resistance and Peacebuilding in Palestine,” Abeer Musleh, a Palestinian youth development worker, writes about the poignant efforts of the Ashtar Theatre in Ramallah and the Alrowwad Youth Theatre in the Aida Refugee Camp in Bethlehem to instill pride, express dreams, overcome fears, solve problems, resurrect culture and nourish the ability to envision a different reality—the first step to change—especially in children:

“During one of the activities, an actor asked the students what they wished to be when they would grow up, and the boys responded with jobs such as taxi driver and garbage collector. One boy said he wanted to be a fidae (freedom fighter). ... It hurt, Aoun [artistic director of Ashtar] says, to hear such wishes and to realize how limited the options are for these children. The second shock came when the actor asked the children what they would wish to be if they did not live in Palestine, in the midst of war and poverty. The children had no ability to imagine or dream about being in another place or in a different kind of situation. ... This kind of nourishing of the imagination is an important part of building a healthier, more peaceful society.”

Aida Nasrallah, a Palestinian-Israeli poet and performance artist, and Lee Perlman, a Jewish-Israeli coexistence expert, co-wrote “Weaving Dialogues and Confronting Harsh Realities.” They attempt to bridge the chasm between Jewish and Palestinian Israelis. What makes this chapter fascinating is the interweaving of their two points of view. Even as Perlman approaches Nasrallah to collaborate with him on the study of the Arab-Hebrew Theatre in Jaffa, she is suspicious of his motives and their dialogues capture the tenuous, sensitive unfolding of their relationship across the territorial, cultural, religious and ethnic divide.

In “Fires in the Memory: Theatre, Truth and Justice in Argentina and Peru,” director Varea recounts, among other things, a powerful and psychologically brilliant framing of the Greek classic “Antigone” from a survivor’s perspective, by the Peruvian Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani:

“What makes Ralli’s ‘Antígona’ different, and a riveting work of theatre, is not only that Ismene, the sister, is beautifully revealed at the end as the narrator, but also that she tells the story as an act of restoration, to do what she had been terrified to do before: to put the remains of her siblings to rest. At the end of the play, Ismene says, ‘Tell Polynices to forgive me for doing now the task that I could not do in due time, because I was frightened by the gaze of power.’ ”

Experimental playwright and performer Ruth Margraff celebrates Indian playwright Manjula Padmanabhan, who penned a shocking, visceral play, “Hidden Fires,” dealing with the Gujarat massacre in which Hindu extremists killed approximately 2,000 Muslims in 2002. Padmanabhan opens with a savage monologue in which a Hindu rioter admits to killing innocent Muslims—“In his final moment, he looked straight at
me. The heat of his life was like a blaze in my face! And then ... he was out”—and closes with the actors, all of them Hindu, sprawled on the floor in “a silent alliance with the victims of Gujarat, seeming to embody and amplify the unspoken truths of Muslim voices denied, ignored and disappeared without a trace.”

In “Alive on Stage in Cambodia: Time, Histories and Bodies,” playwright Catherine Filloux writes of her 20 year engagement with the Cambodian people, ignited when she created an oral history project with Cambodian women, Catholic sisters and Cambodian monks in the Bronx. Her plays deal with the trauma of surviving genocide, and she discusses how the process of creating her cross-cultural opera—“Where Elephants Weep,” in which traditional and contemporary Cambodian ritual and music meet—worked to foster reconciliation and peace.

Walker’s case study, “Creating a New Story: Ritual, Ceremony and Conflict Transformation Between Indigenous and Settler Peoples,” provides a fitting conclusion to this volume. Walker is part Cherokee, part Settler, and knows the cost of land grab and colonization in her bones. She describes the long overdue joys of the Two Rivers Powwow in which Settlers are invited to participate in Methow rituals in memory of the expulsion of the Native Americans in 1886. She also explores the Myall Creek Memorial Ceremony in Australia, an act of reconciliation to remember and mourn the slaughter of the indigenous people at the hands of stockmen in 1838. Such ceremonies, with their emphasis on acknowledging grave wrongs, respecting difference, engaging with multiple worldviews, and healing, help the descendants of the dispossessed and dispossessioners free themselves from the grip of history.

These ventures are as intense and complex as the conflicts that give rise to them, but one thing is brilliantly clear: The human spirit is resilient. Roberta Levitow, a founding member of Theatre Without Borders, recalls, in her preface to this book, the healing power of a midnight Eastern Orthodox candlelighting ritual in bleak Romania: lights in the darkness, each kindling other lights. By reconstructing what is lost, by healing what is broken, by creating space for new visions of the world, of ourselves and others to emerge, we blaze a trail for greater understanding, empathy and peace.

Jean Randich, who is a professional freelance theater director, has worked with Catherine Filloux, Ruth Margraff and Roberta Levitow in that capacity.

**Acting Together: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict, Volume I**

By Cynthia Cohen (Editor); Roberto Gutierrez Varea (Editor); Polly O. Walker (Editor); Dijana Milosevic (Contribution by); Charles Mulekwa (Contribution by)

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