

“Peace begins within us!” – Fragments of the “Creative Camp for Peace Building” in Nepal

As artists we like to consider ourselves as the progressive elements of society. We like to imagine that we push the social boundaries that limit peoples’ freedom of living, experiencing and dreaming. We like to imagine that we are the ones tearing off the masks of society disclosing the ugly truths, dissecting the darkest shades to find the antidote inside of our wounds, so that we can heal and thrive for beauty, peace, joy and togetherness.

Whether in theatre-halls or on the streets, we hold the mirror in the face of society. We take reality and transform the bitterness into dazzling lyrics, alluring whispers or screams of pains which can no longer be overheard. “Wake up! Look at what you do to your people! Look what happens when you deny people citizenship and identity; when you deny their right to exist and to belong! Who are you to have this kind of power anyways?”

But how do we make sure that we don’t become the mirror image ourselves? Aren’t we part of the exact society we are trying to push and to pull and to transform? How do we avoid becoming the dunning teacher with the upraised index finger, who tells HIS students what to do and how to behave? How do we escape those values, behaviors and structures which stimulate conflict and exclusion that we have grown up with and internalized? And how do we defend our aesthetical and artistic values against the pains of artists living at the edge of financial collapse and social exclusion? Wouldn’t it be so much easier to just conform to the mainstream narratives; to get the praise of our families we are longing for so very much and to tap into the glamor that comes when we re-produce the structures and ideas of power, that have existed before we could even hold a pen, caress the strings of a *Sarang*¹ or set a foot on stage?

Being an artist is certainly not easy and being an actor and especially an actress seems even harder. We are so good at acting and pretending, sometimes we get lost in it. And, my dear readers, being an artist is hardly peaceful; most of the time it is painful and messy; most of the time it is easier to focus on others’ challenges and conflicts, than to engage with our own; like tearing off society’s mask, but never our own. But: it is exactly in this personal experience and engagement, in this vulnerability, where the potentials for and of arts and social transformation are hidden and waiting for us to be re-discovered.

Theatre and Peace Building

Theatre has the potential to engage participants with different backgrounds and to build communities based on shared experiences and emotions. Creative processes re-connect us with our holistic self, the people around us and the environment we live in. Re-building these relationships allows us to experience different perspectives and to acknowledge contradictions, multiple truths and paths – in- and outside of ourselves. In turn, we can become active creators of alternative narratives and visions for our futures, which make conflicts less threatening potentials for destruction, but rather opportunities for growth and change.

¹ Traditional Nepali folk instrument

“Look at your wounds and you will find medicine!”, Hector Aristizabal howls at us - the 30 theatre-artists, who dance intertwined with each other in a room in Pokhara that reeks of the sweat of our bodies and the tears of our hearts. And who would be better to know, than him!?! A psychologist, a Theatre of the Oppressed-activist, who shares his stories and pains without fear, ruthless but never careless with his audience – the time when he grew up in Medellin, one of the most violent cities of the world; the time when he and his brother were imprisoned and tortured by the Colombian military; the time when he had to identify the lifeless body of his brother marked by the hatred of others; the time when he transformed his pain and found the blessing next to the wound². He certainly gives hope, this Colombian fellow, who talks so much himself and tells us to shut up and create an image instead.



We are not in Medellin. We are in Pokhara, the second-largest city of Nepal and most savored by its tourism. We are theatre-artists and -activists, poets, dancers and singers – all in one and one in all. We come from all across Nepal; from Far East to Far West. In times of socio-political protests when people from the hill-sides and people from the plains do not dare to acknowledge each other’s humanity or space; when generational and social hierarchies draw rivers with more water, than the *Bhagmat³* has ever seen, between us; when talking about males, females and all that lies between is so threatening that we rather drown in the silence of the unspoken word; in these times we come together for ten days to share our stories, to sing and dance, to learn, to laugh and love and grief together.

Hector guides us through the first six days. We play together, wake up our bodies from the mechanization and numbness that comes with daily routines and life; we learn not to be afraid of mistakes, but to celebrate and embrace the changes that come with the unexpected. “Games function like a true democracy would” – Hector tells us, “a set of rules so that we can play together, but never fixed, always growing and transforming.” And so we learn to laugh, not at us, but with us. We learn to love, not the illusion of the other, but the reality that is our self.

² Aristizabal, Hector/Lefer, Diane (2010): *The Blessing next to the Wound. A Story of Art, Activism, and Transformation*. Lantern Books: New York.

³ River running through Kathmandu Valley and of high spiritual importance to Hindus and Buddhists.



Slowly, slowly, we move towards the high peak of the week – we all know it, the Cops in the Heads are coming for us trying to tear apart our Rainbows of Desire⁴. But with Hector and the community we have created amongst us, we dare to confront the cops. Who is this Cop, this voice, in my Head that tells me to kneel down and make myself small in front of the people

who have stolen my land three generations ago? Who is this Cop in my Head that tells me that I'm a whore if I want to be an actor? Who are you to tell me I seduced my rapist? We peel off the Cops in our Heads like the onion's skin, we plead with them, we shout with them and slowly, slowly, to the rhythm of the drum and the cheering of the audience, we transform with them. We stop running, we stop fighting. The chase is over. We stand up to the Cops' face. The fear is gone. The anger is gone. The agony is gone. I am you and you are me. I cannot deny you, but I can engage with you, be aware of you and transform you, me, always me. And so we hug our Cops and dance with them, we laugh and cry and kiss them. The Cops? They are lost, no idea how to respond to this outburst of love and empathy. And so we leave them behind, move on with the knowledge that they will never have the haunting power over our life again which they used to have. With the practice on stage inscribed in us, we know we are ready now to go outside of ourselves, outside of this rehearsal-space and to confront the Cops' headquarters located in our social realities.

And at the end of the day we see the sun rising up and the moon falling from the sky. Where there is light, there is



⁴ Rainbow of Desire is a family of techniques developed by Augusto Boal – founder of Theatre of the Oppressed – which is also called “the Boal method of theatre and therapy”. It allows and encourages participants to analyze invisible and conflictive elements of relationships with themselves and others to search for alternatives and practice relevant dialogue on stage. For further information see: Boal, Augusto (1995): The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy. Routledge: Oxon.

darkness. Where there is pain, there is healing. Where there is grief, there is love. Peace does not come easily, we have learned. But we are a community now. Some might leave us, others will join. But the memories will stay with us, of the times when we overcame the empty stream of words and connected with our whole being to share the stories of our life. Peace, we now know, begins within us. It is not something to preach or to teach. It is something we have to do every day. And this we can share and spread amongst our audience.

About the Camp:

The Creative Camp for Peace Building was organized by Mandala Theatre and supported by Civil Peace Service/GIZ. It was held for ten days in October/November 2015 and invited 30 artists from all across Nepal representing different theatre-groups and freelancers to join a workshop facilitated by Hector Aristizabal mainly focused on elements of “Rainbow of Desire”, storytelling and rituals for healing. Furthermore, after the workshop the 30 artists came together as part of Nepal’s Forum Theatre Network to practice further relevant methods, to review and discuss the network’s past and future engagement and actions towards supporting conflict transformation, dialogue and peace building through theatre and arts.

Discussions and practices were also supported by the “Acting Together”-Project by Brandeis University and Theatre Without Borders. The literary resources and film materials made available for the Camp’s participants stimulated deep discussion and inspiration regarding artists’ role in social transformation and the creation of aesthetical and transformative moments through theatre and artistic expression.

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Disclaimer: The content represents the personal experience and impressions of the author only. The article was prepared for Civil Peace Service’s newsletter and as a publication at Brandeis University’s Homepage in the context of the Acting Together-Project.

More information regarding Mandala Theatre can be found via: www.mandalatheatre.com