

# THE THEATRE OF HOPE

## *Development communication in Malawi*



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**M**y fellowship proposal was a little ambitious. In less than two months, I would intern with Malawi's most popular education-entertainment agency, study the history of regional development communication at the national University, practice Theatre-for-Development in two rural villages, and lead a seminar on the art form with the nation's Writers Union. How on earth would I fit it all in?

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Fortunately, the universe was conspiring in my favour. After two international flights, a cross-country bus-ride, and countless taxicab fares, I arrived in Blantyre, eager to embark on a short internship with the Story Workshop and explore Malawi's largest commercial city. I was warmly welcomed by the organization, which uses magazines, radio programs, original music, and Theatre-for-Development projects to advocate issues such as food security, civic responsibility, and women rights. Over the course of two weeks, I was introduced to each step in the communication process, from research to scriptwriting, studio recording to monitoring and evaluation procedure. After shadowing Smith Likongwe, the organization's Theatre-for-Development facilitator, I became more comfortable with the working environment and grew in confidence. I had been hesitant about using foreign, potentially alienating theatre exercises in rural Malawian communities, but after Smith's success with simple activities like trust falls and "one-sentence story," I concluded that some games can bridge the most diverse cultural contexts.

After visiting the National Museum in Blantyre and the University of Malawi's Chancellor College in Zomba, where I gained valuable knowledge about the history of Theatre-for-Development in Malawi, I returned to Lilongwe, the capital city and my personal base camp for two rural village stays. It is impossible to summarize everything that happened in the villages of Mpemba and Chakhala, for I spent every minute immersing myself in the life of the communities, inquiring about various development issues, and working towards their critical, theatrical representation. However, if I were to tell one story to capture the inspiring spirit of a community engaged in positive social transformation, it would be this one...

After leading several workshops on how the community might discuss development issues using indigenous theatrical forms, I was anxious to see whether they would rise to the challenge. It is difficult

to find words to express my joy and admiration when, the night before our final performances, I heard the native *nsindo* dancers approaching my compound, solemnly thrashing their shields and singly, "By reason of love of money [prostitution], many people die of Aids." Although village life, with its deeply divisive patriarchal structure, seemingly endless run of funerals, and lax time management, posed numerous obstacles to the project's goals, my time in rural Malawi has been one of my most enriching life experiences to date.

The final stage of my project transported me back to Blantyre and the offices of the Story Workshop, where I supervised a workshop on the principles and practice of Theatre-for-Development for a dozen new members of the Malawi Writers Union. Although I enjoyed explaining my findings, I was more interested in listening to what the participants had to say about their writing, their society, and how they might play a part in their country's development communication movement. If these young writers can summon the courage to attack controversial issues and elucidate their complex ethical, political, economic, and cultural implications, the future of Malawian dramatic literature is in good hands.

It would be nice to say that I walked away from my project "enlightened," elevated by my attempt to "save Africa," but nothing could be further from the truth. While my translator Peter and I were advertising door-to-door, or hut-to-hut, about our first Theatre-for-Development session in Mpemba community, we stumbled across a local youth club rehearsing a play about the dangers of *Fisi* (hyena), a traditional cultural practice whereby a man is tasked with impreg-

nating the wife of a sexually inadequate husband. A similar encounter took place in Chakhala village, where we found another grassroots drama group established by unemployed secondary school graduates. As it turned out, both villages were practicing Theatre-for-Development long before I showed up! They did not require my college education or books on critical pedagogy. They had independently discovered how art could serve their community's needs. Ideally, development should cut dependence on

foreigners out of the picture. After all, isn't that what development means?

Ultimately, it was the Malawian people who made this fellowship possible. Without their willingness, their generosity, their openness, we would have made no progress. It was they who let me live in their homes, drink their water, and lead them in crazy *azungu* (white person) theatre games. They were the performers in plays about Voluntary Counseling and Testing (VCT) for HIV/AIDS, deforestation, and family planning. They explored how to use traditional dances such as *chintali*, *mchedza*, and *nsindo* to educate their own communities. They were all development agents. They were all Burch Fellows.

There is a plethora of wise Malawian proverbs, but the following one remains my favourite: *Mutu umodzi suzenga denga* (One head doesn't carry the roof). In my fellowship proposal, I described how this project "represents the climax of a personal odyssey." I was wrong; it's only the beginning, and more importantly, it's not just my journey. What did this project do to me? It made me want you to join the movement. Because we can only do it together. "We are all actors," according to Augusto Boal, the legendary Theatre-for-Change practitioner. We all have a role to play.

