

The Contribution of Culture in Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion
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Culture – a forceful resource in combating exclusion

Culture is undoubtedly one of our most underestimated tools for social change. Often, we believe that culture has an exclusive value in itself. Culture, in all its forms, shapes and expressions, is not often or adequately enough interpreted or implemented from an instrumentalist perspective, where it has a sociopolitical aim... may they be noble or not.

Considering numerous examples throughout history, from critical reflections in the amphitheatres in Ancient Greece, to Augusto Boal's revolutionary Theatre of the Oppressed in Brazil, to the unprecedented mobilization of artists from all ethnic backgrounds promoting Barack Obama during the 2008 election in the US, to Iranian female hiphop artists resisting the current regime ... and so on and so on... it is rather counterproductive that we do not display higher ambitions regarding the role and relevance of culture for combating poverty and ending social exclusion and discrimination in our societies.

Case Study – The Electra Project/s

In 1999, a young woman of Middle Eastern origin was murdered in the north of Sweden. The perpetrator was a male relative. The reason for the murder was that she has "shamed" her family. This particular case catapulted a new and controversial terminology, "honor killing" into debates in media, academia, politics and the civil society in Sweden.

At the time, I was engaged as a director at the Uppsala City Theatre. Soon after the killing of Sara, the young woman, I started to rework the ancient Greek tragedy Electra. The "honor"-orientated theme of the play was very much present in the tragic death of Sara. The modified plot was set in modern times, revolving around the lives of a "migrant" family living in Western Europe. The play was presented from the perspective of a young woman, Electra, caught in various cultures, norms and expectations.

Already from the start, it was clear that this play had to actively engage a "new" audience; on stage, behind the stage and in front of the stage. It was equally essential that this new audience would have the possibility to interact with the "old" audience, principally consisting of white, middle class culture savvy people with limited knowledge and experience about social exclusion and stigmatization.

A group of adolescent boys and girls from a marginalized neighborhood of Uppsala, dominated by first and second generation of "migrants", were invited to participate in the reading and reediting of the script. The play, a work-in-progress was brought to

schools and discussed, which encouraged more young people to become involved in the Electra project. During these sessions, dramaturges participated in the heated discussions and integrated debated concepts and misconceptions about honor, sexuality, gender, tradition, multiculturalism, violence, marginalization, punishment and alternative solutions into the play. In addition, the script was also brought to prisons where young male inmates participated in the ongoing dialogue.

The young team rehearsed twice a week (and sometimes more) with the professional cast and crew of Electra. They shared diaries with each other and the cast in order to secure a more personal exchange of thoughts and feelings that surrounded the project. Meetings with academics, children rights defenders, police and other legal authorities were organized, which contributed to a healthy debate with a group that generally is talked at or about, but seldom with. Even parents and the immediate community became engaged in the dialogue, which added a more family-based inter-generational perspective to the project.

The finalized script was staged in marginalized areas as well as more affluent neighborhoods and venues, such as the Royal Dramatic Theatre where “old” and “new” audiences viewed the play together. The interaction within the audience was a captivating element of the overall project. Here, people from diverse socioeconomic, ethnic and age groups that seldom meet one and other on equal basis spoke lively about the characters and how they reflect upon the challenges and opportunities in a multicultural society.

Soon after, schools and educational centers started to order the play, which was accompanied by facilitators leading workshops before or after the play.

Consequently, spin-off plays such as Electra’s Sisters, Electra’s Brothers and the Electra Show about Electra’s parents, were produced by Riksteatern, Uppsala City Theatre and Fryshuset, a renowned Swedish youth institute. The plays toured the country. They further developed the themes of the play, and yet each of them focused particularly on the different roles and expectations of siblings and parents in regards to challenges facing a modern multicultural society and young people.

The impact of theatre on reality and the impact of reality on theatre were now intertwined, which I believe is one of the factors behind the success of the Electra project.

The core methodology in the entire process was based on sociopolitical empowerment through creative self-empowerment. By providing forums and resources to traditionally marginalized and excluded groups, the group could on an individual and collective base empower itself. It also could express its strengths and contribution to the society in general and their community in particular. At such instances, it is crucial to break the victimhood cycle, which does not enable critical thinking or empowers the very people who feel or/and are treated as “victims” to become agents of social change.

In addition, it was pertinent for the Electra project that it would not be a traditional ad hoc cultural activity, i.e. a play presented within a specific timeframe. Instead, spin-off empowerment projects, aimed at, for and by young people principally from

“migrant” groups were initiated. Projects such as Sharaf’s Heroes and Heroines that continue to shed light on issues related to gender, violence and human rights; and supporting young people whose rights and freedoms are infringed at home or at school.

For the young team members, their involvement became an entry point into the labor market and social inclusion. Today they work as actors, producers, social workers, youth activists and journalists in Sweden.

Empowerment & Inclusion at Riksteatern

Similar methods have also been integrated in projects and productions developed by Riksteatern in Sweden and abroad.

Last year, we cooperated with the Ghana National Theatre and co-produced African Cinderella, a modern day fairy tale set in an African setting focusing on the universal rights of the child and women. This production that toured in both countries was also accompanied by much attended workshops about human rights, the responsibility of the state (but also parents and schools) to respect and enable children’s rights, and the correlation between access to education and poverty reduction.

The mutual cooperation and exchange of ideas and creative expertise between Sweden and Ghana placed development aid and cultural cooperation on an engaging and educational level. It was an effort between partners from cultural and social sectors, from grassroots community centres and schools to international rights-based NGOs such as Action Aid and UNICEF, to ministries and governmental bodies, such as the Swedish Institute and the Swedish International Development Agency.

Alliances across sectors and art forms are indispensable for any sustainable and holistic socio-political change and movement. Reinventing the wheel, straining resources through similar projects and competing about the attention of the same “target group” should be a mishap of the past. Intersectional and strategic cooperation is a panacea for poverty reduction and any form of human rights violations.

Such alliances also require more than ad hoc projects. Ongoing monitoring and follow-ups through further development of projects must be taken into consideration already on initiation and planning stage. These steps are resource and time consuming; but essential if we wish to measure genuine and sustainable progress.

Recurring Challenges

As recognized by article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which currently 160 states, including all EU-members, are a party of; the state must recognize the right of everyone to take part in cultural life.

The right to take part in cultural life must include both the right to participate; that is the right to produce and perform, but also the right to receive; to have access to various forms of culture, disregarding socioeconomic, ethnic, gender, age or any other identity-based (and power-related) factor.

As the title of the Covenant displays, culture is interdependent to social and economical spheres. Without cultural rights, no social or economical rights can be fully enjoyed!

Today, we are still lacking full representation of the society on the participation and the receiving end of access in and to culture. As artists we must examine more often how our methods and projects contribute to inclusion at best and exclusion at worst, of various marginalized groups in society.

The same arguments can be used for cultural politics and policymaking that affect more areas in the every-day life than certain aspects of the culture sector. More and better diversified voices from political and civil sectors are vital for the well-being of culture. The ambition must also be that these voices can represent them selves or their communities on their own terms.

Therefore we must become stronger and more vigilant in identifying relevant partners and allies, may they be for internal recruitments or for external projects and campaigns. Representation and the right to interpretation is indeed a matter of power.

Culture is a process; it is not a disposable product or a historical building. The role and relevance of culture in reduction of poverty and exclusion, and as a fabric in democratizing states and communities must not be neglected in favor of superficial debates about artistic quality. These discussions seldom disclose whose definition of quality, on which criteria and for which audience, we are referring to.

This constitutes one reason why we sometimes do not reach the harvest time; hence we miss out taking the next step in our joint projects. This challenge is often based on the fact that we may share common goals within our organization or with our partners, but we do not necessarily share a mutual understanding of a timeframe and consequences related to timeframes. We must become more long-term orientated; otherwise our visions – that are based on a long-term framework – will not be fully conceptualized and realized. We must not base our approach to time merely on our budgets. Our budgets are often granted by donors with their own specific and short-term timelines. Donors that are dependent or interlinked with governmental bodies and political agendas and priorities, which are relatively temporary and unpredictable.

As artists we also need to challenge our work habit and ethics to jump from one act to another, without foreseeing how and why we can develop the thought process that was created with the crew and audience during the performance. This method too requires a different view on timeframes and a more holistic understanding of set goals.

Finally, we must not fear failing. I believe this is another factor behind frail or absent evaluations and follow-ups that may require substantial change of approach to the projects. We need to celebrate successes (which to be honest, many of us still have not mastered) but equally we need to embrace failures in order to improve future efforts. This challenge requires further development of evaluation tools and continuous dialogue with our partners in field.

Final Words

As activists and artists we should not merely strengthen our organizations and movements to be a forum for art and theatre where we experience the stories of Othello and Sheherzade.

We should see our work as a platform, where ideas are exchanged, where we- as artists and citizens- are invited, and sometimes even forced, to question norms,

traditions and existing solutions, to question our politics and priorities... but also leadership. We require and request leadership that does not fear creating mental juxtapositions in many languages in order to set thoughts and feeling in motion. I believe and hope that at Riksteatern we are aiming to be part of this cultural platform and pioneer in courageous leadership.

Facts about Riksteatern:

Riksteatern, the National Touring Theatre, was established 75 years ago with the mission to create mental juxtapositions in many languages in order to set thoughts and feelings in motion.

More than 40,000 members build this theatre of possibilities, and create Sweden's largest meeting place for culture. Riksteatern is set firmly in tradition, yet continues to seek new expressions, new audiences and new artists.

www.riksteatern.se