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Theatre that is more than entertainment

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A group of people performing for an audience can be more than just entertainment; it can be a way of helping people understand issues and to make changes.

What people usually understand as theatre is a collective enterprise by a whole group that includes the actors, the technical hands, the place of performance and the audience.

While this type of theatre still belongs to our age, people are searching for new types of theatre to communicate ideas for development.

The usual forms of communication don't do it: they don't eradicate hunger, can't guarantee good health, build up industry, agriculture and housing, nor establish social and political institutions.

But theatre can be a tool for a country's plans for development in the 21st century.

Theatre provides entertainment, true, but also information and education and can deal with a wide range of social issues in an understandable and interesting way.

People's theatre, participatory theatre, community theatre, street theatre and theatre for development have now become familiar names in countries as distant as Peru and Fiji.

Theatre can be used as a communication language by any person, with or without artistic talent.

Importantly, it can be used by oppressed or isolated communities to express themselves, their ideas and feelings.

Development theatre is used mostly to take messages to rural and urban poor communities, who often have no really good idea of the social issues of governance and livelihood that are generally controlled by wealthier upper classes.

It carries messages such as how communities can improve agriculture and nutrition, encourage literacy, improve the health environment and sanitation.

It can cover social issues and such matters as laws and their effects, the impact of modern family planning methods and gender equality.

Development theatre needs the appropriate language, environment, participation, culture and time.

It uses all sorts of ways to get the information across, from straight drama to song and dance.

The songs are usually simple, catchy tunes with a clear message, composed and sung by the theatre workers, sometimes together with the audience.

The theatre performers usually use indigenous art forms, speak and sing in people's own language using the slang and speech reflects the community's own experiences.

The performance has to be something that the audience understands and that doesn't break any community tabu.

Development theatre performance often take place in the place in the open air, without needing a formal theatre building and is far removed from the proscenium box stage that emerged from 16th century renaissance theatre.

Open air performance makes the relationship between performers and audience closer and can allow actors and audiences to become both teachers and learners at the same time.

The aim of this sort of theatre is to help make people more socially aware and can deal with current political, economic and legal issues that affect everybody's lives and wellbeing.

People's awareness can be the right weapon for confronting social problems and theatre is the way they can learn about skills needed to solve those problems and create a better society.

It helps people understand about social and moral gains and can show them how to exercise the power of opinion to influence the issues that affect them most.

In Fiji there are favourable situations for using theatre for development which could bring about change in people, communities and society.

People in Fiji have their own identity, myth, culture and tradition. They have also their own performing art techniques.

If socio-cultural and economic problems of Fiji are identified and researched accurately, the development theatre idea could use the ingredients already present in the community for social and individual development.

Examples of development theatre in Fiji:

WRATH is a new theatre run by students of the Fiji National University Lautoka Campus Drama Club who are creating a 25 minute play with an all female cast on the theme of alcoholism. It is about the struggles of a single mother with a strong message of opposition to the nuisance of alcoholism and the need for resistance and restrictions, and openness not recklessness. It uses local culture with a modern treatment in an open setting. At the end of the play, the characters sing an angry song and then have a question and answer session with the audience.

WAC, Women's Action for Change collective runs Fiji's only fully professional community theatre which has been performing throughout the country for about 15 years. WAC has brought messages to urban and remote rural communities on topics ranging from the dangers of smoking and the benefits of preschool education to domestic violence and the importance of voting. It uses song, dance, tradition and drama and creates its own plays, costumes and settings for indoor and street performances. WAC is a nongovernment organisation that receives some direct aid funding for its work and also sells its performances to other organisations who want to spread particular messages through theatre. WAC's white minivan rocking up rural roads with a load of musical instruments, costumes and actors is a familiar sight, particularly in areas where the organisation works on helping communities with conflict resolution.

