

How to create popular theater

What is it?

Theater is one of the oldest forms of storytelling known to humans. Through layers of image, sound, word, movement, metaphor, story, emotion and humor, theater offers the opportunity to reflect on our lives in new ways. It reaches into our hearts and imaginations to engage audiences intimately and inspire new perspectives.

Theater styles range from tragedy, comedy, musical, mime, clown, puppetry, street theater, folkloric storytelling and community ritual to classical Shakespeare. Popular theater can utilize any of these styles with the purpose of building community representation and empowerment.

We use the term "Popular Theater" to refer to theater that is of, by and for the people to develop awareness and insight about political, social, and personal issues.

What are the benefits?

It gives people a voice to tell their own stories. It can be designed to educate, motivate, heal, persuade, generate dialogue or help communities explore solutions to their problems.

There are diverse approaches to creating an original piece of theater, and there is no "right way." This How-to offers a basic outline to get you started. Please refer to the reading list for resources that contain specific theater exercises.

Involve your participants in making decisions to the greatest extent that is possible and appropriate. Take into consideration their level of interest and ability as well as your time and resource constraints. You will need to balance the need for quality and mobilizing initial interest with the need to teach participants to undertake the process themselves.

- 1. Create a theater ensemble** - The participants of a popular theater ensemble are usually community members and people who have a stake in the same issues. Once you have recruited the group, it is a good idea for them to come up with a name that reflects its group identity or mission. (This helps to avoid or counteract a tendency of the community to refer to the group as "the (artist name)'s group.")
- 2. Identify the issue** - Popular theater should be relevant and based on the real life issues and stories of everyday people. The purpose of a play might be to voice something of concern to community members or to tell the community's history. You might lead the group through a process to identify important issues by facilitating a brainstorming session or interviewing community members. You can decide by taking a majority vote and/or soliciting the input of the NGO staff.
- 3. Research and gather information** - Help the group to look at all different perspectives. This will give the theater play a more complex and comprehensive view of an issue and help the group have clarity about what they want to communicate with the play. Remember that conflict creates good drama!

Answer the questions:

- What are the facts?
- What are the root causes of this issue?
- What is the background or present situation of this issue?
- What can be done about it?
- Who are the players?
- What do you want to say?
- What are the potential outcomes?

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Most theatrical performances require the collaborative efforts of many creative people working toward a common goal: the production.

There are many elements to theater and therefore many ways for the community to participate. In addition to the actors and the audience, other traditional elements include a written script, choreography, costumes, scenery, lights, sound, music and props. People who don't want to perform can contribute by making the costumes, painting the backdrop or running the sound.

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Here are a few research techniques to help you answer these questions:

- Interview community and business members about how the issue affects them.
- If the group has access to computers, the internet is a good source of information! Have the participants look online and search for material about the theme - poems, songs, newspaper articles, essays or visual images that will provide different opinions, perspectives and messages. If access is an issue, the facilitator can bring in these materials and have the group analyze them collectively.
- Facilitate story circles to collect personal stories to represent in the play. See the following section for story circle methodology.

- 4. Decide the basic style, content and structure** - Now you have to figure out what you're going to say and how you're going to say it!

Style - Decide how you want to tell the story. Do you want to adapt an existing folktale or well-known legend? Is it a realistic narrative, an exaggerated satire or a poetic metaphor?

Content - All good stories contain certain elements. When filling in the main body of the story, identify the **5 W's: Who, What, When, Where and Why.**

| Content | |
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| Who | Who is involved or affected by this issue? Who is the "protagonist" or the main character of the story? This is most often the character that the audience can relate to or empathize with. Who are the "antagonists" or those who oppose the protagonist? Who are the supporting characters or others who are a part of the story? |
| What | What happens in the story? What internal or external influences are acting on each other? |
| When | Does it take place in the past, present or future? |
| Where | Where does the story happen? |
| Why | What does each character want? What motivates them? What stops the characters from getting what they want, and how do they overcome these obstacles? It is often easy to "demonize" the "bad guys." The play will often be more effective, however, if you can understand and convey their internal motivations, adding depth to all of the characters. |

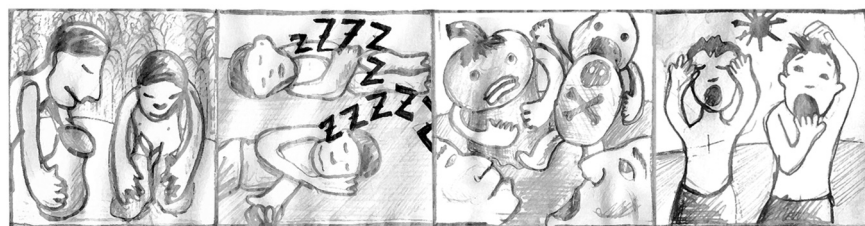
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Structure - In its most basic essence, drama needs to have a conflict in order to create dramatic tension. It can be an external struggle between people, such as between workers and bosses, or between opinions, such as whether or not to cut down the forest. It can also show the internal struggle of a character trying to overcome an obstacle.

To create the basic structure, make a storyboard, which is a visual map of what happens in the play. Draw a box for each scene, and make drawings inside that represent the main action. Make sure that each story has a beginning, middle, climax and ending.

| Structure | |
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| Beginning | How does the play start? What is the initial action that gets the play going? |
| Middle | What events take place that build toward the climax? |
| Climax | What is the turning point or high point of the story? |
| End | What is the final conclusion of the play? In popular theater, you can offer a resolution that you want to promote or you can choose not to resolve the problem. The ending can remain in question so that the audience can discuss or improvise their own solutions. |

This storyboard shows the beginning, middle and end of the play in which farmers dream about the dangers of pesticides.



Beginning
MesoAmerica
before the
colonialists

Middle
The dream

Climax
Visit from the
future

End
Waking up

- 5. Develop the play** - Once you have the basic idea and structure of what happens, the director leads the group to generate content by exploring some or all of the following elements. Now is the time to put the meat on the bones. The play can be very simple and include only a few of these elements or be much more complex, depending on the amount of time and resources that you have.

Once you have a lot of raw material to choose from, it is usually easiest to have one person or a small committee write the script. Write a draft, act it out, get feedback and make revisions if needed.

Theatrical elements are like the ingredients of a recipe. They are the different components you can include to make your play and spice it up!

| Theatrical elements | |
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| Characters | Develop character sketches. Explore the character's thoughts, desires, fears, dreams, strengths and weaknesses. Have participants write a short biography of their characters. What might be their internal motivations, childhood memories or significant relationships? Discover the posture, personality traits, movements and voice of each character through improvisational exercises. To develop authentic expression, each member of the group must know their character well! |
| Written text | Generate original text, poetry or monologues through creative writing exercises. Select or agree upon the best excerpts and incorporate them into the script. Develop dialogue by having the participants improvise individual characters and role play different interactions. Take notes or record the improvised scenes and transfer the recordings to text. |
| Soundscape | Use recorded or live music. Does your play need sound effects such as a thunderstorm or jungle sounds? What kinds of rhythms can you use to tell your story? If you don't have access to instruments, try making sounds or percussive beats with the body or found objects. |
| Creative speaking techniques | There are a variety of ways to narrate or tell a story collectively. Actors can create a vocal collage by echoing lines, repeating text or saying lines simultaneously. |

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| Theatrical elements <i>(continued)</i> | |
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| Movement | In theater, body language is essential. Explore telling the story through movement—use facial expressions, create frozen sculptures or images with the body, move in slow motion, perform gestures at the same time or one after the other like a cannonball. Spatial relationships reveal power dynamics and levels of intimacy. Are people close together or far apart? Use a variety of levels—low to the ground, medium height or high on a chair. |
| Props | What objects does the scene need? They may be literal like a telephone, or they may be symbolic such a long piece of blue fabric to represent a river. Make a list of all your props and keep them on hand. |
| Backdrops | What kind of illustrated scenery do you need to create the location of your scene? Depict the location through simple paintings in the background. Or as a basic backdrop, you can hang a large piece of black fabric behind the actors and create an instant theater curtain wherever you go! |
| Costumes | What do the characters wear? Go to used clothing stores, use different colored fabrics or make your own. A simple costume design is for the whole cast to wear the same color. |
| Puppets and masks | Can the characters or concepts be represented through a puppet or mask? For example, can greed be represented by a puppet of a monster with dollar bills in its eyes? Does your play have animals or archetypes that can be acted out with masks? |
| Determine roles | The actors can be cast through auditions, chosen by the director or collectively determined by the group. Usually the lead roles are played by those who have more acting skills, confidence and stage presence. Create roles for everyone, drawing on their unique strengths and talents! |
| Rehearsal schedule | Make your expectations clear regarding punctuality and attendance. Since theater is a group effort, everyone needs to be able to count on others to show up for rehearsals and to come on time. It is important to be clear about this expectation from the beginning and make sure that everyone can make the commitment! |
| Theatrical skills | Acting and improvisation, vocal creativity and projection, body language and character development. For specific theater exercises, please see the reading list and resource section. |
| Blocking | Blocking is the basic movement that each character makes while on stage. For example, blocking for a scene might be: character Fulana enters from the right side, runs quickly across the stage and hides beneath a chair. Have the actors write down their blocking in their scripts. |
| Memorizing text | Set clear goals and deadlines and do frequent “run-throughs” where actors just say the lines without doing movements and blocking. |
| Performance locations | Know the size and conditions of the performance locations. These may change from show to show. Try to rehearse in the space beforehand so that the actors know the dimensions and how to enter and exit. If this is impossible, you can mark out the size of the stage in your rehearsal space. |
| Positive and constructive feedback | Provide feedback so that everyone feels included and motivated to improve quality no matter what level they are at! |
| Practice the bow! | Discuss the importance of receiving applause after all their hard work. |

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6. Rehearse - Once you have the script and design of the play, the cast needs to rehearse. Practice, practice and more practice!

It is important to have a clear and consistent rehearsal structure. This creates an effective and safe space for people to work together. While developing popular theater is a collaborative process, it is easiest and most effective to have one artistic director. In rehearsals, actors can have a tendency to tell each other how to act or what to do. This can become very confusing and cause hard feelings. Have a clear process for the actors to give their ideas and feedback to the director or to each other at a specified time.

Use this as a potential rehearsal structure:

- a. Start off with warm-up activities to develop theatrical skills, trust and the ability to work together as a cast.
- b. Develop or polish individual scenes.
- c. Give notes. Once created, have the actors run a particular scene, series of scenes or the whole play without stopping. While they are acting, take notes about what is working well and what needs to be improved. Give the notes to the actors at the end and, if appropriate, have actors give feedback to each other according to a process agreed upon in advance. Have them write down the director's comments in their script or in a special notebook. This is a good time for actors to ask questions or make comments and suggestions.
- d. Create a closing activity or ritual. This can be a one-word check out or physical gesture such as a group clap or yell.

7. Production - Now it's time to perform the play. There is no theater without an audience! The magic of theater is that it is live, and the energy and responses of the audience are felt immediately. Make sure to consider the following:

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| Schedule | Arrange performances in schools, community centers or established cultural events. |
| Publicity | Get the word out! Announce the performance through fliers, at schools, in church or over a megaphone. |
| Transportation | Determine how the cast or the audience will arrive. Also determine who is responsible for transporting costumes, props, music, sound system and/or lights. |
| Post-performance dialogue | <p>If possible, after the performance, have an open discussion with the audience to get their responses, input, questions and reflections about the issue and the play. Have someone write down the comments so you can use them later for evaluation. If you do not have a dialog immediately after the performance, try to find another way to get the audience to reflect upon the same questions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did people like or not like? • How did it relate to their own experience? • What did they learn about the causes of the situation? • What kinds of actions did it inspire toward creating change? |
| Debrief with the cast | Reflect together on the performance experience. What went well? How did the cast work together? What kind of impact did you have on the audience? What can be improved? |