**Performance Activism:**

**An Emerging Global Strategy for Reinitiating Human Development and Creating Community**

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*Unpublished talk delivered at the 2017 Japan All Stars Workshop: “The Future of Performatory Psychology in Action,” University of Tsukuba, Tokyo*

*August 17, 2017*

**Introduction**

I’ve been a theatre artist—an actor, playwright and director—and a progressive political activist since I was a teenager. My passion to eliminate poverty, war and inequality has always informed and infused my theatre work. I also have a doctorate in theatre history and have studied the various forms of theatre and its social role in many cultures. It’s not surprising, therefore, that I have been drawn to and have played a modest role in shaping the growing tendency—which we now call performance activism—that brings performance off the stage and into daily life as a method of engaging social problem and creating community.

The people who have, and are, bringing performance activism into being around the world are not all theatre artists, nor are they all political activists. Many of them, like many of you, are educators, psychologists and therapists. Others are medical doctors, organizational consultants, social workers and outside-of-school youth workers. They are people seeking, from their various social locations and disciplines, an effective way to address the pain and alienation of their clients, the learning and development of their students, the social ills of their communities. Each of them would have a particular way of explaining how they came to performance activism and describing what it is. I speak to you from the vantage of my particular history and concerns as a political activist and theatre maker.

From the political perspective, performance activism is both a reaction to the failure of old ways of protesting, organizing and exercising power and also a discovery about how people grow and develop.

The failure of old forms of activism has been frustrating people for decades. Street demonstrations have lost their power to impact significantly on those in authority. The marches all over the world on February 15, 2003, involving tens of millions of people, the largest synchronized protest in human history, failed to prevent the American and British invasion of Iraq. The Occupy Movement, which spread rapidly from New York to major cities all over the globe, generated a lot of talk, but had no impact on the unequal distribution of wealth. The Black Lives Matter movement in the United States has not resulted in the conviction of a single police officer for the killing of a Black man or boy. The Arab Spring has led to violent repression, the civil war in Syria and a military dictatorship in Egypt that is worse than the one they started with. Even when the revolutions of the 20th Century appeared to succeed, they failed. They failed for many and complex reasons to be sure, but at root they failed because they were unable to continue the development of human beings and therefore unable to sustain and develop the revolutions that human beings had made.

Why have the old forms of protest become impotent? In fake democracies like the United States and Japan, which allow for elections but where the outcome of most elections are controlled by the big corporations who fund the candidates and the parties, those in authority do not feel the least bit beholden to or frightened of masses of people protesting. They control not just the government but also the media, the schools, the economy. In dictatorships of various kinds, where the state is less developed and weaker than in the industrialized so-called democracies, those in authority have no reservations about jailing, torturing and killing their people. In those instances where progressive revolutions succeeded for a time it was because the revolutionaries proved better at using violence than those they overthrew. But jailing, torturing and killing people is corrupting and dehumanizing. Violence is certainly capable of destroying human life and institutions. However, whatever its political, religious or ethical motives, it doesn’t lead to anything qualitatively new—it doesn’t lead to development.

Performance activism embodies a fundamental shift in the way (some) people are working to bring about social change. In the modern era, the dominant modality of social change has been confrontation, demonstration and protest. The assumption behind this modality is that conflicting interests can only be overcome by antagonistic struggle, and usually those on either side embrace antagonistic ideologies as their guide. Performance activism embodies a new modality that draws upon the human capacity to play, create and perform. It is creative and emergent, as distinct from ideological. The premise is that people—even if and when their economic, social and/or political interests are in conflict—are capable of creating new relationships, new activities and new ways of moving forward together. How?

By giving to each other. A performer gives her/his movements, sounds, words, emotions, ideas, and conflicts to the ensemble. The other performers build with that giving by, in return, giving their responses to the offer, the performance gift. Performance, even when scripted, is essentially the activity of accepting offers and adding to them. In this sense, to use the language of Japanese philosopher Kojin Karatanin, giving is the “mode of exchange” of performance.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Performance activism, like other types of progressive activism, is against injustice and oppressive authority. However, because it involves performing—that is, collectively imagining, in action, new possibilities—it is inherently re-constructive as distinct from de-constructive. And because it involves giving and accepting of offers, it is inherently a collective, community-building activity. Performance is reconstructive (as distinct from destructive) and thus, a developmental activity. Performance is beginning to emerge as the nexus where social activism, community building and development meet.

**Performance, Development and Community**

Here we have to wrestle with three concepts/activities: performance, development and community. They are terms with many and often significantly different meanings in various social, economic and cultural contexts—and, of course, different languages.

When I use performance (*enso*) I’m not talking only, or even primarily, about what happens on a theatre stage or movie screen. Acting (*engi*) is a subdivision of performance; it’s performance that is done in front of an audience usually to tell a story and evoke an aesthetic response. When I use performance in “performance activism,” I’m talking about the broader human capacity to knowingly and simultaneously be who-you-are and who-you-are-not (or who-you-are becoming). This human capacity, which is found in every culture on the globe, can take place off stage as well as on. Indeed, it’s when performance is liberated from the institutional constraints of the theatre that its ability to impact on social relationships and human possibility become most manifest.

Fred Newman, whose organizing and intellectual work laid the foundations for how I understand what we now call performance activism, articulated his understanding of performance this way, “We understand performance very broadly. From our point of view performance might have nothing to do with being on the stage. We think you can perform at home, at work, in any social setting…With the proper kind of support, people discover that they can, that we can, do things through performance that we never thought we could do…In a sense, we’re trying to broaden each person’s notion of ‘what you’re allowed to do.’”[[2]](#endnote-2) Performance activism is giving not only individuals but also groups and communities of all sorts a much wider range of what they “allowed to do.”

Performance activism is not political theatre, although political theatre is a part of it. Just as performance is a larger category than acting, performance activism is a broader activity than theatre. Its distinguishing feature is that it brings performance off the stage into various aspects of mundane daily life—classrooms, hospitals, workplaces, refugee camps, prisons, the family dinner table—and gives ordinary people permission to and a means of becoming co-creators of new possibilities. The activism of performance activism is the activity of giving and playing together with new ideas, new emotions, new versions of ourselves, new relationships, new ways of doing community. Embodied in performance activism (consciously or not) is the notion that creativity is the collective process of reorganizing what exists. What else is there to create with? Therein lies the connection of performance to development.

Development (*kaihatsu*), like performance, is word with many meanings.

It is used in economics, psychology, politics, and technology. The understanding of development I find most helpful relative to the discussion of social change is rather simple: development, as I use it, is the ability of individuals and groups to see new possibilities and to act on those new possibilities. The creation of new possibilities is precisely what play and performance allow us to do. The development that takes place through performance activism can’t be predicted or dictated by ideology because the activity of performance is emergent, that is, it is coming-into-being as it happens.

My colleague Lois Holzman, has said, “I believe that we human beings create our development—it’s not something that happens to us. And we create it by creating stages on which we can perform our growth. So, to me, developmental stages are like performance spaces that we can set up anywhere—at home, school, the workplace, all over.”[[3]](#endnote-3) That is what performance activists do—they set up stages (some literal stages, most not) that allow human being to play and perform and in the process grow and develop.

Performance and development are collective, not individual, activities. We human beings perform and develop together, in groups. There are lots of names for the groups created. In theatre and music they are called ensembles (*ansanburu*). The early 20th Century psychologist Lev Vygotsky called these group activities Zones of Proximal Development. In the context of performance activism, I use the word community (*komyuniti*) because it implies groups of people supporting and sustaining each other over a long period of time.

The conventional understanding of community is not developmental. The unusual meaning refers to the people who live in a particular geographic area, such as a resident of Tokyo or the people of a particular ethnic group, such as the “Japanese community” in Brazil, or people engaged in a particular profession, as in the “tech community.” These are essentially conservative understandings of community because they’re based on who we are as shaped by history, for example being a community of those with a common Japanese ancestry; or they’re based on what currently exists, for example, who we are by virtue of where we live or work. A conventional community binds people together over a long period of time, but what binds them is static and backward looking.

The community, the ensemble, the Zone of Proximal Development generated by performance activism is not static or rooted in the past. Its members are not determined by pre-existing categories; it is open to anyone who wants to participate. It is creating itself as it performs. The community created through performance is not so much a *thing* as an *activity*. And that activity is development, creating new possibilities through play and performance.

The community generated by performance activism may be short lived. Some performance activists lead projects in various locales and then move on. Others, such as the community that Dr. Holzman and I have helped to build, has sustained itself for decades, expanded out of New York City and become an international network connecting performance activists and ongoing performance communities in many parts of the world. Even when the community generated by performance activism is short lived, it leaves those who were involved in it with the experience and tools to generate more ensembles, more communities. When it finds a way to sustain itself and continuously grow in different countries and cultures, it has, I believe, the potential to qualitatively change the world for the better.

In either case, the type of community emerging through performance activism is a breakthrough social construct because it’s the activity of bringing together people—often from very different social strata—to build something new. It provides a space and the encouragement to be giving in a culture dominated by getting. Instead of simply opposing what is, as the old social activism, for the most part, does, performance activism and the communities it builds provide ordinary people in all walks of life and in all cultures with a means of creativity taking care of their needs and wants, making new social discoveries and generating new possibilities that don’t depend on the past, the government or any other imposed authority, including that of knowing what to do or how things will turn out.

**Some Examples from Around the World**

Performance activism has emerged over the last few decades in many parts of the world. As I noted at the start, some performance activism has, like me, has its roots in theatre. Other roots are in the performative psychology of social therapy; some, as teachers seek new ways to help their students learn and develop, in education; some, as doctors look for more growthful ways to relate to their patients, in medicine; organizational managers seeking to deal with employee relations and organizational stagnation have turned to performance; in some cases, as organizers experience the growing impotency of old organizing tactics and ideologies, it has emerged directly out of community, political and youth organizing. All of these various strains and tendencies are now increasingly encountering, learning from, and influencing each other.

Let me share some examples from around the world.

The Pandies’ Theatre of New Delhi, India, founded by Sanjay Kumar in 1993, started as a conventional theatre, doing politically progressive plays in a theater. Gradually its actors went to the streets and began talking with children, women, slum-dwellers, and the homeless and began creating plays with and for those they were talking with. For example, their 2013 production *Offtrack* was created out of a series of workshops conducted in reformatories and shelters with over 400 children who had lived on India’s railroad platforms, surviving for the most part as sex workers and using drugs. Through the process of creating the play together with the Pandies actors, the children went through a therapeutic process, created a critique of the mores of middle class India, articulated a collective vision of the future and, when the play toured India and beyond, it became part of an effort to bring about humane legislative policies toward the rape of boys in India.

Dancers have also emerged as performance activists. In Peru, Ursula Carrascal involves children from very poor areas, including those who live in environmentally toxic areas, in “Eco Dance,” her environmental education dance program. Among the works created with these children is “Dance to Survive,” (2012) a performance created by children of the indigenous Cantagallo people who live on a garbage dump next to the Rimac River in Lima. Their dance gives them possession of their people’s traditional culture and, at the same time, puts forward their demands for environmental clean up and concerns about global warming.

Another dancer activist is Paola Lopez, originally of Bogota, Colombia, now living in El Paso, Texas on the Mexican border across from Juarez, Mexico, one of the most violent cities in the world. Lopez organizes American dancers and dance students from the U.S. to cross over to Juarez and do dance and movement workshops with women and children. The workshops explore and engage the violence and fear in their lives. She also organizes performances that are both aesthetic and political and that focus and project positive cooperation. For example, on the day that Trump was inaugurated President of the United States, on The Paso del Norte Bridge that spans the Rio Grande River between El Paso and Juarez, Lopez organized Mexican and American women to braid their hair together, creating a living, human connection spanning the border between the two nations.

In some cases, performance activism has emerged from psychotherapy. In Calcutta psychologist Ishita Sanyal teaches improvisation to the schizophrenic outpatients at Turning Point. Their performances in public squares are designed to develop both the patients and the community by changing the perception they both have of the mentally ill.

Hector Arisitzabal, who is based in Los Angeles, was trained as an actor and a psychotherapist and arrested and tortured by the military in his native Colombia because of his brother’s suspected membership in the leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). He now tours the world performing the experience of his torture and then leading workshops with audiences exploring how collectively we can build new possibilities out of trauma.

In 2006, Dr. Lenora Fulani, a well-known grassroots leader in the African American and progressive communities of New York City, launched Operation Conversation: Cops & Kids. Fulani was trained as a developmental psychologist at university and as a social therapist by Fred Newman. After a yet another unjustified killing of a young Black man by the police, she and Newman decided to see if performance could be used to create an environment that allowed New York City police officers and young people of color from poor communities to have an honest and growthful conversation despite the hate and fear that divides them. She began holding workshops in community centers around the city in which ten police officers in uniform and ten young people from poor communities come together. Under her leadership or that of other facilitators who she has trained, the cops and kids play theatre games, improvise silly scenes together and begin to relate to each other as human beings instead of as enemies. Then, under the leadership of Fulani or the other facilitators, the cops and kids hold honest and difficult conversations. The cops and kids are supported throughout to be both playful and giving to each other.

The workshops proved so popular and successful that a few years after they started, the New York City Police Department initiated a partnership with the All Stars Project and made Operation Conversation: Cops & Kids an official part of its training. For the last six years all new police officers are required to attend a public performance of the workshop. Cops and Kids is a particularly clear example, I think, of performance activism’s method of bringing very different, indeed antagonistic, kinds of people together not to demonstrate or exacerbate grievances but to play with and be giving to each other as a means of creating new kinds of relationship with each other.

This is just a tiny sampling of the performance activism emerging around the world. I’m hopeful, though, that it gives you a feel for how it’s emerging as a creative response to local and global social problems, an approach that is reconstructive and generative of new ways creating possibility. Performance activism involves the giving mode exchange in which we use our differences and our creativity to discover new ways of relating to each other, in the process changing ourselves and our world. It is changing, through its practice, the very meaning of activism, of performance of politics itself. Performance activism is not a different tactic to achieve social change; it is a qualitatively new strategic approach to human growth and social transformation.

1. Karatani, Kojin, The Structure of World History: From Modes of Production to Modes of Exchange. Trans. Michael K. Bourdaghas. Duke University Press, 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Newman, Fred, introductory remarks to performance of *Trouble*, an improvised play directed by Newman at Performance of a Lifetime in New York City, June 1, 1996, audiocassette. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Holzman, Lois, “Developmental Stage,” *Special Children*, July 1997: June-July 1997: 33 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)