

Developing Street Theater on Human Rights in a Multilingual Country: An introspective article

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Abstract: This article looks at different approaches to staging Street Theater about Human Rights in a multilingual environment. Theater on the streets intended to convince passers-by to stop and watch a short skit needs to attract with visual and theatrical techniques, but since Human Rights are conceptual, the actors need to get their message across using words audience members can mull over. How can a maximum number of passers-by be reached in an urban environment where there are three, even four, national languages? Research is ongoing.

Keywords: street theatre, mime, amateur actors, Amnesty International, human rights.

In light of the fact that I am resuming leadership of a Street Theater group focused on presenting Human Rights issues for Amnesty International Luxembourg (AIL) after a 15 year hiatus, this article is my attempt to take stock of lessons learned in the past so as to launch an even more convincing and theatrical Street Theater project in 2023. I did not train as a Street Theater director, and so it has been learning by doing; each Street Theater skit is an “experiment” in how to best reach an audience of passers-by.

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Do our skits arrest people in their path, because – like a Venus flytrap – they manifest enough of those quintessentially spectacular qualities that provide an attracting appearance? Once stopped, do our passers-by start to think about the messages about Human Rights² they are presented with; do our passers-by acquire a newly awakened critical faculty? Do these entertaining skits leave a lingering afterthought in these passers-by; do they qualify as a form of *Lehrstück*?

Message-driven Street Theater depends on entertaining the eye but also and perhaps more importantly the ear. Even if we have caught an audience of passers-by with our on-street (as opposed to on-stage) antics, if they can't grasp what's being said, then the message will never be more than a message in a bottle, forever floating on the high seas.³ So, in this article I am looking at three Street Theater performances from the past – 15 years ago – which were consecutive attempts to tackle the challenge of reaching multilingual passers-by.

I am fortunate to be resuming Street Theater projects in 2023 and will continue to research – with the participation of Amnesty International Luxembourg members, none of whom has been trained in the performance arts – on ways to rapidly and attractively dramatize messages in public spaces about the sanctity of Human Rights. The appeal of such theatre research is that our objective will be to find dramatic methods that reach out to a mixed, multilingual audience.

² See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/human-rights/universal-declaration/translations/english>

³ This is an over-simplification in that the actors are invariably Amnesty International paying members who are amateurs in the world of performance. They have joined the Theater Group as people who agree with Amnesty's letter-writing campaigns and its non-aggressive research-based way of attempting to free people who have been tortured or imprisoned for expressing their beliefs; the participants implicitly concur with how AI values Human Rights. Nonetheless, by staging a skit that examines one or the other human right the actors are themselves gaining insight and knowledge about that Human Right. So, the goal is twofold: to reach the passers-by but also to offer the actors a chance to identify more closely with the ethical values of AI and to evolve their own personal thinking on ethical matters.

Skit experience 1

Trafficking of Women. An attempt to bypass language by use of mime

In Luxembourg, there are three official languages: Luxembourgish (Lëtzebuergesch), French, and German. Luxembourgish was added as an official language in 1984. However, since Luxembourg houses a multitude of European Union (EU) institutions, with the expansion of the EU in 2004 to include Cyprus, Malta, and eight Central and Eastern European countries, and with the UK at that time still a member state; English became an important vehicular language. Additionally, there has been a large Portuguese and Italian population living in Luxemburg since the mid-twentieth century: initially they were brought in as workers in the construction and steel industries and their spouses but by now are multi-generational communities. Spanish, Polish, Swedish, Finnish, Romanian, and Russian are frequently heard. As of 2022, people from 175 different nationalities reside in Luxembourg. Fifteen years ago, the range of nations represented was similar although their numbers were fewer.

The initial Theater Group at Amnesty International Luxembourg (AIL) was comprised of AIL members in the now- defunct English section who met regularly to write letters in English for the perennial letter-writing campaign of Amnesty International's (AI). When we began, I realized that the county's multilingualism was a challenge. Logically, I thought to avoid the problem by avoiding words altogether. We would stage a mime about the trafficking of women! Voilà! Problem solved!

Or was it?

The pantomimed skit about the trafficking of women was performed repeatedly during a two-hour period at a corner of the Place d'Armes downtown Luxembourg city on a Saturday morning when many of the passers-by would be heading for the open air market around the corner. I intended to have the stereotype of the trafficking narrative on-street staged as a series of inevitable occurrences. First, a man woos a girl; then he takes her to a foreign land. At the border, the man asks his girl to give him her passport for safekeeping. Once over the border, he refuses to surrender the passport and, illegally in the country, she has lost all rights to autonomy and self-determination. All of these steps were converted into easily recognizable

actions: they meet, they become amorous, he takes up a small suitcase and points forward, they walk forward and arrive at a long rope lying on the asphalt of the Place d'Armes which delineates the point of transference where the woman surrenders her passport (and hence her liberty) to the boyfriend shepherding her across the rope and symbolically into a foreign country. When she surrenders her passport, her male partner pulls twine out of his pocket and attaches her to him. She has not only lost her passport but also even the chance of escaping. All is mimed and physical; there are no spoken words.

The young and earnest actors were inexperienced; I was inexperienced as a Street Theater director – but I can't be sure that these factors were to blame for the fact that passers-by causally strolled through our on-street pantomime time and again! Never before exposed to Street Theater, not given a sign that some kind of stage or enclosure representing a stage was before them, and with no dialogue to draw their attention to the action, no passers-by stopped and gathered, and our performance dropped into the bottomless pit of the unremarked!

No! We had not solved our problem!

Skit experience 2

Freedom of Speech. Presentation in three languages

Article nineteen of the Human Rights Act states that “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”. Amnesty International takes this Human Right very seriously.⁴ The Street Theater skit in which the right to freedom of expression was the theme was my next attempt at attempting to catch the attention of the public.

I directly addressed the issues that were problematic in our first attempt. This time, AIL arranged for us to perform on a raised platform (about 20 cm off the ground, low enough to be near the street level) in the

⁴ See <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/freedom-of-expression/>.

middle of the Place d'Armes. We were integrated into an AIL campaign event that included speeches by the chapter's president, so we were announced ahead of time. The skit had dialogue in it adjusted to the multilingual audience.

This Street Theater skit on the right to free speech is a brief poetic and danced work in which a neutral protagonist bandages the faces of the "people" (3 dancing AIL volunteer actors) – in particular, their mouths – with long strips of medical gauze which effectively prevents them from speaking. As poetic images of nature are evoked, delivered by the protagonist and by actors speaking the lines in alternative languages, the protagonist frees the bandaged actors by removing the extremely long roll of bandage that had interconnected the actors, giving them the opportunity to speak again and offering the hope of a kinder future.

Not surprisingly in that I frequently stage dramatizations of narrative poems I have written, the words the actors say are poetic. The lines are short but full of imagery. For instance, there is a line that says where there is suppression of free speech, then words are silenced but the thoughts that lead to words can never be eradicated; this chain of events was likened to the fate of Torrey Pines in my hometown of La Jolla, in southern California. These trees grow almost exclusively in that region of the world, and although they are wind battered, threatened by salt spray, and subject to drought, they continue to survive as beautiful if stunted specimens. The use of a nature-referencing non-aggressive metaphor for how freedom of speech cannot be extinguished forever avoids triggering politicized thought-reactions in the audience that might make them inured to the image of the gauze being wrapped around and then removed from the gently swaying actors on stage.

Most important of all is the fact that every single line was spoken in three different languages by three different actors. Since all Luxembourgish speakers also know German, which is the first language of instruction in Luxembourg primary schools, the languages selected were German, French, and English.

Additionally, to prevent boring the spectators and passers-by with a talky and static skit, the dialogue was delivered during the lengthy flowing movements when the actor playing the role of the protagonist moves around the platform encircling the heads and mouths of each of the softly swaying other actors with an extremely long (pre-prepared) strip of gauze. Then,

when transformed into the liberating protagonist, she removes the gauze. The image of each of the bound actors (three in number) interconnected by a billowing white medical gauze strip is very striking, and the performance was compelling enough for it to be written about in a local newspaper, thus further disseminating its influence.⁵

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Journée internationale de soutien aux victimes de la torture, hier à Luxembourg

Ne pas taire les traitements cruels

Aux longs discours, *Amnesty International* Luxembourg a préféré une représentation théâtrale aux gestes symboliquement forts et aux paroles poignantes pour attirer, hier sur le temps de midi, l'attention du grand public sur le thème de la torture et des traitements cruels. Une action qui s'inscrit dans une lignée de manifestations tenues hier par *Amnesty International* aux quatre coins de l'UE dans le cadre de la Journée internationale de soutien aux victimes de la torture.



Sur la place d'Armes, les militants d'*Amnesty International* ont sensibilisé le public aux actes de torture et au problème des victimes réduites au silence. (Photo: Michel Brumat)

■ «Certains sont prêts à torturer et à tuer pour faire taire la liberté. Mais là où il y a un mot, il y a aussi une pensée humaine. Nous pouvons torturer jusqu'au silence tous les mots qui existent, mais les pensées qui ont fait naître ces mots ne pourront jamais être supprimées par toute la torture du monde...» Ce texte, interprété hier sur la place d'Armes par quelques militants d'*Amnesty International* et né de la plume de l'auteur Dana Rufolo (du *Theatre Research Institute of Europe*), dénonce les actes d'oppression et de torture mais se veut également un appel au grand public à ne pas rester muet lorsque les droits humains ne sont pas respectés.

Lors de cette manifestation, Frank Wies, le président d'*Amnesty International* Luxembourg, est également revenu sur certaines pratiques telles que les détentions secrètes: «Les Etats européens ne doivent pas fermer les yeux sur les arrestations, détentions ou transferts de personnes qui se font en dehors de toute légalité, notamment dans le cadre de la guerre contre le terrorisme.» Dans ce sens, les passants étaient invités à signer des cartes postales incitant les Etats européens à ne pas soutenir des actions internationales qui vont à l'encontre des droits humains. Ces cartes sont destinées au chef de l'Etat français, Nicolas Sarkozy, car son pays assumera la présidence de l'UE à partir du 1^{er} juillet.

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Fig. 1: Article in *La Voix*, 27 June 2008

Performing in a designated street space using multiple languages was successful.

⁵ *La Voix*, 27 June 2008.

Skit experience 3

Torture. Presentation in English with actors inserting words and monologues in their own languages

Article five of the Declaration of Human Rights specifies that “no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.” In 2008, when Amnesty International was focusing on the inhumanity of torture, I directed a skit of mine for AIL that describes how torture is institutionalized through public indifference.⁶

In the film of the Street Theater skit *Torture*, to which a link is provided in endnote five, the actor playing the role of the victim of torture – the consequence of him having participated in a public demonstration protesting the government’s actions in some unidentified way – is a Syrian refugee who had recently arrived in Luxembourg and who was a member of AIL. Although the skit was delivered in English, he stepped forward in one scene and made a speech in his native Arabic where he emotionally denounced torture. Similarly, an actor who came from an African country delivered a speech against torture in her native dialect (I am unable to recall with certainty what country she had emigrated from). It is a more psychologically complex way of approaching the multilingual complexity of Street Theater than in the *Freedom of Speech* skit, in that it centred more on the actors involvement with the message of the skit, giving them the opportunity to express strong feelings in their mother tongues and therefore inserting a certain psychodramatic element into the performed skit. It was a directorial choice that I didn’t even reflect upon, because it was apparent especially with the Syrian actor/AIL member that he was deeply steeped in memories of the war crimes he’d seen in his country, and it seemed imperative that he be given some public way to give vent to his emotions without requiring him to “act” these out in English.

In the film of *Torture*, the scenes where these two actors spoke in their native languages were edited out. You only see sections where the dialogue is in English.

⁶ See a film of the Street Theater skit against torture at the website of Theater Research Institute of Europe: <https://www.theater-research-institute.eu/amnesty>.

It was appropriate to use one dominant language, given the dramatic rather than the poetic form of this skit; it would have seemed stilted if the action stopped in order to repeat the lines in other languages. In the dreamy *Freedom of Speech* skit where time is drawn out and abstracted from the rhythms of daily life, the repetition of lines in three languages is tolerable because the performance style permits an intuitive understanding that language is sounds to which a meaning has been affixed. The dance and poetry created willingness in the audience to perceive language as sound and to therefore sense the musicality of the lines in the one or two languages used which they did not necessarily understand.

There are two elements of spectacle introduced in *Torture* that increase its attractiveness as performance. One is the visual element of each actor carrying a full-length paper cut-out of himself or herself as a character: the victim of torture, the actor representing confused public opinion, the actor representing a prison guard, and the actor representing a mother whose son was tortured. The actors were given an alternative self, a role to play; unlike in *Freedom of Speech*, they do not play themselves. I hate to reference the *Verfremdungseffekt* here, but in effect that is a bit what the mechanism was and might explain why especially for the Syrian actor it was easy for him to address his audience passionately in Arabic.



Fig. 2: TRIE Justice and Amnesty International scene from Street Theatre on Torture, rue de la Poste, Luxembourg

The second element of spectacle is the prison guard's song that he initiated and that then all the actors sung: "Oh, I'm just doing my job, doing what I'm told, Keeping myself alive. I believe the man in charge knows his job and that's why I'm just doing my job, doing what I'm told, Keeping myself alive. Keeping myself. Keeping myself. Keeping myself alive".

Other theatrical attributes are the protagonist's red nose and her commedia dell'arte manner of presenting herself and the use of cue sheets to encourage the public to sing along with the prison guard's song.

Despite these extra elements which mean the skit is likely to seize the attention of passers-by, *Torture* does not necessarily resolve the problem of reaching a multilingual audience. In conclusion, in my renewed mandate to create Street Theater for AIL, I need to develop a form of presentation that combines the rhythms of a poetic skit with the comedic elements of a fast paced and theatrical skit. The messages about the value of Human Rights must be not only simple, direct, and immediately graspable for the audience of passers-by but also comprehensible since it is the message (as opposed to money in a hat) that is the whole reason for performing Street Theater on Human Rights.

Let the research continue!

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DANA RUFOLLO is the founding director of Theater Research Institute of Europe (TRIE, asbl) located in Luxembourg, Europe. She presently writes theatre criticism for Plays International & Europe online, the successor to the theatre magazine that she edited until 2022 and which supplied subscribers worldwide - above all, American universities.

Rufolo is a playwright and a narrative poet who has had two works performed: I am Viola da Gamba of the Singing Building with two actresses and original gamba music composed by Philippe Partridge, and presently JOYN: A Marriage Made in Megaheaven which premiered at the state theater of Konstanz, Germany on 3 December 2022 with three actors and four dancers choreographed by Martin Anderson. Her next dramatic narrative poetry project will be a site-specific performance piece involving San Francisco, New York, and Seoul.

Besides engaging in Street Theater, Rufolo enjoys giving workshops on the art of contemporary theatre and performance criticism that teach participants how to write critiques themselves. She uses her training as an Art Therapist specialized in Drama Therapy (DESS from Paris V and Luxembourg University) to engage in theatre-based peace and conflict resolution projects.