

*A Journal Entry about Developing
a Street Theatre Play for Amnesty Luxembourg
Related to the Subject of the Intersection between
Human Rights and Climate Change*

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When I wrote Street Theatre plays for Amnesty Luxembourg 15 years ago, the group I worked with was constant over three or four years. Now, I can't keep the same participants for more than a matter of months. I've seen a Syrian participant drop out because he finally found a job, an Iranian participant drop out because her mother in Tehran is ill and she can't risk having an Iranian border controller find something in her record that associates her with Amnesty International, and tragically a Luxembourgish trumpet player who accompanied the song that began and ended our 2024 street play on human rights needed to drop out after a diagnosis of terminal cancer. These are all understandable reasons. The new recruits have to agree to stay in the group until we've performed in the city on July 1, 2025. I've no plans for long-term theatre projects; it is a compromise. I don't know why people are shy about joining a theatre group that promotes human rights. Present-day Amnesty members prefer to write letters protesting unfair incarceration or to participate in women's day or LGBTQ marches – extremely important activities, but they involve less private initiative.

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Street theatre workshop Amnesty Luxembourg. Outside tongue twister practice session.

I guess theatre isn't valued in this highly capitalistic country, top heavy with banks and European institutions. Not many people here read the proclamation on World Theatre Day 2025 by Jeffrey Eric Jenkins, the president of the International Association of Theatre Critics where he stated that, "This global celebration calls on us to reaffirm our commitment to the stage as a place of truth. Theatre is not merely a cultural expression – it is an act of resilience in a world too often silenced by fear... While the authoritarian regimes consolidate power and distort cultural narratives to suit their own ends, the role of theatre as a vehicle for truth-telling has gained new urgency." The truth is there is little money to be gained in doing theatre. I'm a volunteer, and so are all the actors. They are members of Amnesty Luxembourg who volunteered to join the theatre group.

Everyone in the latest Amnesty Street theatre group is an amateur. This is an additional problem in a country that feels little affinity to theater as a form of expression. People will want perfection when they watch our performance, and that is not what they are going to get. I realized after giving my first workshop in acting skills to the theatre group that nowadays Street

Theatre for political objectives – in this case to foster consciousness about human rights – requires professional actors or their equivalent. It requires hours of training during short intervals of time to produce actors capable of producing a street play that is convincing to spectators who are not deeply committed to a cause such as defending human rights. This is what I have learned, and this is why I conclude that human rights education is not best served by Street Theatre if the actors are amateurs.



Street theatre workshop for Amnesty Luxembourg. mirroring movement exercise.

The Workshop and its Goals

In late March, I offered a (cost-free, naturally) workshop to develop acting skills in my garage to the Amnesty Theatre Group participants so as to prepare the 2025 Amnesty Luxembourg Street Theatre play I wrote and which is called *When the Nonhuman Arrives*. The objectives were to teach voice projection, articulation, movement, and improvisational skills. The final activity was to then start working on the script.

Warm-ups consisted of mirroring each other in groups of two; both in acting and in art therapy this exercise is common. The participants mirrored one another's movements to oldies jazz-inspired music, and then they incorporated sounds into the mirroring of movements. Each person in the mirroring pair was the leader initiating the movements for five minutes each. Response was slow, with the leader's initial movements reflected back after a delay of a second or even more; the man-woman couple, people who had never met before, was particularly unable to synchronize their movements. When participants were invited to add sounds to their mirroring movements, a participant from a conflict-ridden area of East Europe imitated the sounds of military personnel issuing orders; she spoke loudly and aggressively although otherwise she is softspoken. All this is valuable information if one is running an art therapy session, but considering that these people were going to be acting in a play soon, it was not particularly comforting to see how much work would be required to teach the group to coordinate their movements.

Work on tongue-twisters was more successful, perhaps because everyone had in hand a paper with the tongue-twisters printed on them, and holding a paper made the participants feel more secure. The tongue-twisters were in English, the common language of the group. To give the Frenchman amongst us a sense of equality since he pronounces English words with an overpowering French accent, I asked him to lead us in reciting French tongue-twisters; we did so outside, for it was a balmy day. Leading us did give him a sense of authority, and he was adamant about correcting our pronunciation. It was finally an exercise where the group seemed to come together as one body.

I again took over to lead anaerobic breathing exercises and vagus nerve exercises. The group was happy to learn something new.

I'd prepared two poems, one by Walt Whitman and one by Theodore Roethke for the group to read. I meant for them to choose which of the two they preferred to prepare and recite, but immediately each participant asked to recite a personal favorite poem and they searched for the poem on their phones and recited the poem holding their phones and not a sheet of paper in their hands. Only one participant created a movement sequence that reinforced

the words and message of the poem; the others showed no knowledge yet of how to transform words they have read into a performance. Again, I saw that hours of training would be required before rehearsals began, and I knew it was impossible to increase the skillset to an acceptable level for none among us was able to meet as often as would be necessary.

When the participants were asked to prepare and then perform a dramatic reading of a sample from their own writings (which they had been asked to bring along), again the participants' fuzzy speech, soft voices, and reluctance to interpret the lines showed that they were mentally still rooted in a world measured by literature and sub-vocalized reading. I saw no evidence that earlier work that day on voice projection and articulation had been assimilated.

Lastly, I had the group watch the "globe scene" in Charlie Chaplin's film *The Great Dictator*. I told them that an enactment of this scene was to open my street play for Amnesty Luxembourg titled *When the Nonhuman Arrives*. In it, aliens are observing Earth. They are applauding the self-destructive actions of human beings. The aliens are gleeful, because soon the humans will have exterminated themselves and they can take over the Earth and turn it into a hospital planet where their own sick and dying can recuperate or turn into humus. The aliens become infuriated, however, when they observe a crowd of protestors on the Earth who are marching for human rights and recognition of climate change. They send one of their kind down to Earth to tell the protestors to quit protesting, as they do not wish to wait a moment longer than necessary to take over the Earth.

I had selected the two most accomplished participants to play the aliens who enact the scene of holding an inflated globe I offered as a prop and playing with it in an ecstasy of possessiveness. Quite possibly because the model scene derived from a film and not from literature, the participants showed genuine enthusiasm in playing with the globe and imitating the hand movements of Charlie as the dictator. This sign of interest is heartening and will sustain me during the development of the street play in time for the July 2025 performance, but I also once more understood that to fully exploit the physical aspects of the street play would require many more hours of work together than was available.



Street theatre workshop for Amnesty Luxembourg. Playing with the world.

In conclusion, I realize that I have kept companies like the Bread and Puppet Theatre or the San Francisco Mime Troup alive in my imagination, but the kind of company which attracted people who share a passion for theatre or even also a shared passion for human rights is not possible to build in the milieu in which I am working. No students have ever asked to join the Amnesty Luxembourg theatre group, and the participants either struggle with immigrant status and worry about making ends meet or else they have high paying jobs and many additional commitments. It is no longer an era where amateur groups can take center stage in the midst of a public space and expect to have their sentiments of justice resonate with the passing crowd. In terms of cultivating activists, theatre is not the most effective these days in wealthier European countries like Luxembourg. We need to remember that Street Theatre was and can again be a valuable form of public provocation, but for the time being it is better to use more conventional forms of teaching critical thinking and fostering tolerance.

A JOURNAL ENTRY ABOUT DEVELOPING A STREET THEATRE PLAY FOR AMNESTY
LUXEMBOURG RELATED TO THE SUBJECT OF THE INTERSECTION ...

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Rufolo's dramatic poetry performances I am Viola da Gamba (poetry and music) premiered at the Conservatory of Luxembourg in 2013 and Joyn (poetry and dance) premiered at Konstanz, Germany in December 2022. She develops street theatre productions for Amnesty Luxembourg and is presently marketing several new plays.

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