

The background of the cover is a complex, abstract artwork. It features a dense layer of colors including bright yellows, oranges, reds, greens, and purples. The texture is rough and painterly, with visible brushstrokes and some darker, more muted areas interspersed with the vibrant ones. The overall effect is one of energy and creativity.

A GRASSROOTS LEADERSHIP AND ARTS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE PRIMER

**for Educators, Organizers,
Activists & Rabble-Rousers**

Edited by Susan J. Erenrich and Debra DeRuyver

Chapter 1

The Winter/Summer Institute in Applied Theatre: Creating With the Community

Introduction

by Susan J. Erenrich

This chapter is penned by my dear friend Katt Lissard. Katt and I were colleagues at The World Culture Open, a nonprofit in New York City, whose mission is to “promote and advance a worldwide open culture movement”

(<https://www.worldcultureopen.org/about>). At the time of our initial meeting, staff members at the organization were working on the FESPAD dance festival. FESPAD, which was initiated by the African Union in 1998 post-Rwandan genocide, aimed to “bring together Africans and to promote the culture of peace through African traditional dances” (XinhuaNews, 2018). For Rwanda, who was entrusted with its organization, FESPAD was an attempt to bring restoration, healing, and peace back into the country (Mushimiyimana, 2018).

Our time at The World Culture Open, however, was short-lived. After a major philosophical dispute with the CEO over her top-down leadership practices, the entire staff staged a walkout and quit. Contrary to the CEO, we were all firm believers in the pedagogy of Paulo Freire and Katt and I were Theatre of the Oppressed (Augusto Boal) practitioners. Both Freire and Boal understood that leadership in oppressed

communities had to be collaborative, collective, horizontal, and bottom-up in order for change to happen. Allies need to be catalysts for community and movement building. They are there to support the efforts of people indigenous to the area, because they are best at shaping their own destiny.

Prior to our decades-long friendship, Katt had already been involved in best practices in her theatre work in Lesotho, South Africa. Her chapter, *The Winter/Summer Institute in Applied Theatre: Creating With the Community*, is based on her experiences. It is an exemplary model of how friends of those struggling for equality, justice, and human rights should partner with those directly impacted by oppression.

I hope readers are inspired by Katt's piece. It is a salient glance into how art can move mountains – even if they are small ones.

Works Cited

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The Winter/Summer Institute in Applied Theatre: Creating With the Community

by Katt Lissard



Chapter 1 Image 1

Caption: Bilingual (Sesotho/English) post show talk-back led by Selloane Mokuku, Lesotho – WSI Malealea Festival 2008

Credit: Photo used with permission from the photographer Katt Lissard

Prologue – The Contamination Waltz

It's July 2008, the dead of winter in the high mountains of Lesotho, a small landlocked sub-Saharan country surrounded by South Africa. An audience of over 600 people from the seventeen rural villages that make up the stark, stunning Malealea Valley has

gathered on this bitter but sunny day for The Winter/Summer Institute's (WSI's) Festival.

We're mid-way through the final performance of *It's Just You and Me ... My Wife and Your Boyfriend* — a collaborative creation between WSI actors and local villagers, the outcome of ten intensive days working together. *The Contamination Waltz* is a comically chilling scene, the pivotal moment of the show where we “perform concurrency” — a network of interconnected lovers coming together, then unraveling in the wake of HIV/AIDS. We've carefully constructed our theatrical concurrent network using immediately recognizable characters suggested by the village performers. The first link in the chain is the sanctimonious married man in the village who claims to be devoted to his wife when everyone knows he's been sleeping with her best friend for years — his wife takes one extended arm, his girlfriend the other.

The audience bursts out laughing, elbowing each other and hooting at the actor playing the sanctimonious man. “That's how it is!” a villager wrapped in a traditional *Seana Marena* patterned Basotho blanket exclaims. “That's just how it is!”

The wife of the sanctimonious man offers her unattached hand and her lover, a retrenched miner sent home from South Africa, comes swaggering forward into the chain to claim it. The miner is followed quickly by his other long-term girlfriend (his childhood sweetheart), who has also been carrying on for several years with her boss at the liquor store. Moments later the miner's girlfriend and her boss and her boss's wife join the chain. Next up, the principal from the primary school comes forward and attaches himself to the boss's wife while extending his free hand to the new intern at his school.

The increasing complexity of the entwined network with its clandestine duplicity has the audience in hysterics. Their comments and laughter grow louder as the chain becomes even more intermeshed. The sense of fun and shared recognition continues to grow until the final link appears — The Visitor, a handsome mysterious traveler from far away, steps forward.

He takes the free hand of the last lover in the chain and introduces HIV — the virus symbolized by yards of brilliant red silk whisked in, out, and around, infecting the entire network of lovers. The audience falls suddenly silent and reflective.

The next scene begins in a graveyard.



Chapter 1 Image 2

Caption: Arrival of The Visitor – Julius Nkosi, South Africa; Despina Stamos, U.S.A., 2008

Credit: Photo used with permission from the photographer Limpho Mokuku



Chapter 1 Image 3

Caption: Rehearsing the spread of the virus – WSI & Malealea Community, Lesotho 2008

Credit: Photo used with permission from the photographer Limpho Mokuku

Entry Point

The midwinter spectacle of *The Contamination Waltz* played out in the mountains of Lesotho as the finale of The Winter/Summer Institute's 2nd International Residency. The Malealea Festival performance was the culminating event of a month of intense collaboration that enabled us to create scenes that were intimate, unsettling, thought-provoking, and entertaining. Our portrayal of this complicated but ordinary pathway for the spread of HIV through a multiple-concurrent-partnership (or MCP) was so thoroughly engaging for the rural community who gathered to witness it because characters captured recognizable nuances of behavior and displayed an insider's ear on local gossip. The characters were suggested and brought to life by village participants in our collaborative process, many of whom we'd been working with for the second time –

a reconnection that opened the possibility for increased familiarity and the ability to go deeper into issues, questions, ideas, and contradictions that came up in the work.

The story of how we first came to be in Lesotho creating theatre with participants from the U.S., the U.K., South Africa and Lesotho, along with villagers from the rural Malealea Valley, was the end result of months of planning, hundreds of international email exchanges, dozens of meetings, weeks of preliminary research by facilitators and students, exhaustive fundraising efforts and painstakingly detailed preparation. But it's a story that began, as many projects do, with a series of chance encounters, unexpected connections, and happenstance.



Chapter 1 Image 4

Caption: Litseo Mosenene, Lesotho; Melissa Shetler, U.S. A.; Kim Hess, South Africa; Ufoma Komon, U.K.
– WSI Launch, Lesotho, 2006

Credit: Photo used with permission from the photographer Rik Walton

Our launch in July of 2006 involved ten colleagues from three different continents and an initial cohort of 22 students from four universities and 30 villagers. The ten co-founders included community development activists, REFLECT practitioners (An acronym for a community empowerment system developed around Paulo Freire's work: Regenerative Freire Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques), university professors, adult education advocates, and theatre makers. Pressed to name this new project in the very early days when the offer of a sizable grant suddenly appeared, we became *The Winter/Summer Institute* – signifying our multi-cultural, multi-country and multi-climatic nature: July is winter in Lesotho and South Africa and summer in the U.S.A. and the U.K.

HIV/AIDS – Gossip & Silence

Our work in Lesotho was motivated by the urgency of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the sub-Saharan (Lesotho has the 2nd highest infection rate in the world according to UNAIDS “AIDSinfo” [Accessed June 2019]). It began through a shared desire to find ways to use theatre to make a difference in confronting the virus.

WSI's ten co-founders (Chris Dunton, Rethabile Malibo, Selloane Mokuku, Ntsele Radebe, Moso Ranoosi – Lesotho; Gillian Attwood, Alta Van As – South Africa; Katt Lissard, Lucy Winner – U.S.A.; and Nigel Watson, U.K.) were already involved in a range of projects related to art and social change – a Theatre for Adolescent Survival project in New York City, choir-building in Gauteng (Johannesburg), people's theatre and REFLECT circles in rural Lesotho, and practical theatre training in the U.K. I was teaching at the National University of Lesotho in 2005, working with students and colleagues in the Theatre Unit there, as well as with the AIDS Outreach office on

campus. Asked to create a performance for an all-campus AIDS Day, seven students (all young women) and I began work on a devised piece about getting tested, which quickly brought a powerful contradiction between agency and stigma to the surface expressed in the tension between gossip and silence. The show's echoed taunt: "*Do you want to hear what I heard?*"

When WSI came together the following year for our first international month-long residency, we decided to use the contradiction as a potent theme. Our work took shape through the lens of gossip and silence, a generative frame that allowed us to look at cultural paradox and the way it influences behavior, decision-making, gender inequity, and agency, starting from the complicated entry point of whether or not a person chooses to get tested.



Chapter 1 Image 5

Caption: The Gossips rehearse – Litseo Mosenene, Lesotho; Sarah Owen, U.K. Roma, Lesotho 2006

Credit: Photo used with permission from the photographer Rik Walton

Our first international residency was a rollicking, enthusiastic, challenging baptism by fire. Applied theatre projects focused on social change share elements of philosophy and methodology, and many look to the theory and practice of Augusto Boal (a Brazilian theatre practitioner and political activist, Boal was the founder of Theatre of the Oppressed) as a starting place (or one of several starting places). An early strength for us was in having gathered a group of co-founders who were also core facilitators, and who brought multiple modalities, diverse creative aesthetics, and complementary pedagogical experiences to this collaborative experiment. Though Boal was an important foundation for some of us, we didn't start from a single agreed-upon philosophy or one common methodology or a required skill set beyond an eagerness to discover what theatre could bring to the community conversation around HIV/AIDS.



Chapter 1 Image 6

Caption: Playing AIDS: Condom Candy – Ntombi Khumalo, South Africa; Mohapi Moeketsi, Lesotho; Canedy Knowles, U.S.A. – WSI Malealea Festival 2011

Credit: Photo used with permission from the photographer Jussara Santos-Raxlen



Chapter 1 Image 7

Caption: HIV/AIDS Orphans sign in English on the route to the Mohale Dam (a tourist destination) next to a Lesotho Highlands Water Project marker – Lesotho 2006

Credit: Photo used with permission from the photographer Eric Feinblatt

From that focused improvisational beginning, we've continued to develop a creative process that shares some methodology with the fields of applied and devised theatre, along with earlier roots in theatre for development, but which also includes elements unique to WSI. We were in the process of finalizing a "Field Guide" for our work scheduled to launch in Spring 2020, when the global pandemic necessitated rethinking and reformulating a tool originally intended for live, on-the-ground community interaction and collaboration. The Guide will still include a collective narrative that

traces our history, process, mistakes, learning, methodology, and theatre-making – along with supplemental images, scenes, songs, and resources. But we are reframing and reformatting our exercises, examples, creative tasks, templates, and dialogues to include both virtual and live versions and options. Once published, the Guide will be a layered exploration that presents tools to facilitate using our work for community-building, activism, racial justice, research, conflict resolution, problem-solving, group learning, and artistic expression – all within the context of creating performance.

WSI's work began as a response to the devastating HIV/AIDS pandemic in one very small country on the African continent. We began with the idea that theatre, created collaboratively, could have some kind of impact. We don't have a prescriptive approach to what might constitute change or what, specifically, to change. Our main effort has been to encourage dialogue and to collaborate with communities to discover what might be areas of concern or interest to the community that would be "served" in some way by creating theatre with us about those areas of concern or interest. There are complex social issues surrounding the HIV pandemic – some of them glaring and obvious, others subtle, nuanced, and surprising. Over the years many of those issues have found theatrical expression through our collaborative work.

From the start, our experiences in Lesotho have been built on a combination of synchronicity, intention, and collaboration. Our entry point was a very specific antagonist in a very specific place, but the key to the process we've developed has always been the community.

Working With the Community – Not Just in or Around It

WSI doesn't just go into a community, do a show, and leave. We do a show, but we present it as the first step in a dialogue with the community. We initiate a conversation with the show we've created and performed, but the next part of the exchange comes from the community.

An example from a recent international iteration of WSI illustrates how this works: The initial WSI performance is created by our cohort of student participants in collaboration with core facilitators. It's the first thing we do when we gather in residency in Lesotho, although the process begins in the months leading up to the residency through shared thematic readings, resources, and ideas between the participating schools. Once in Lesotho, we spend an intense three weeks creating a show based on the issues and concerns of the students. We then use the show as the springboard to doing more collaborative work with the villagers.

In this case, we'd just performed *Would You Still Love Me If You Knew? (Ha U N'u Tseba, Na U N'u Tla 'N'u Nthate?)* in front of the Malealea Valley's small rural mountain health clinic for nearby communities. The show was built around "secrets" and everything that simple word might contain. It included scenes of a young man coming out to his father and refusing to go to Initiation School, a corrupt priest exposed for pocketing most of his congregations' tithes, an accusation of marital rape, and a disturbing trend where children play various AIDS games. The show included a thread of dark comedy facilitated by two Tricksters and a lot of music.

We were in the "gathering" phase of our work, post-show brainstorming in small groups with village participants, asking what had worked for them, what might have rung true, and, more importantly, what might be missing. In other words: What do we keep, what

do we get rid of, and what do we need to make together that comes from “here” (i.e. from the village)? We gather these reactions, thoughts, ideas, phrases and then we move on from there to make new scenes with the villagers using WSI’s process of improvisation, creative tasks, small group presentation, feedback, and shaping.

There are always unexpected things that come up, things we’d never know or hear about or be given access to if we didn’t come into community with people by first sharing something and then asking: What did we get right? What did we get wrong? What should be here that isn’t? It’s important to note that it’s not just the foreigners from the U.S., U.K. and South Africa who wouldn’t be privy to these reactions, ideas, and criticisms. The National University of Lesotho students are also seen as “other” by villagers, even if they originally came from a rural area, as most do. Once they enter the university, they become part of a different social class.

We’re often provocatively surprised and/or chastened by the gravity of these initial feedback sessions. In this particular session an elder whispered, “*Girls are disappearing from the villages and no one is talking about it!*” Silence. For a moment no one could speak. His raspy, hushed exclamation touched on so many complicated issues: sex trafficking, poverty, gender inequity, the spread of HIV, the social hierarchy (even in bare-bones villages) of those girls who might be targeted and those not, and the fact that “*no one is talking about it!*” ... for multiple reasons.

In the show we created with the community, his astonished line is whispered in both English and Sesotho (Lesotho’s official language) — *Girls are disappearing from the villages and no one is talking about it! Girls are disappearing from the villages and no one is talking about it!* — as the transition out of one scene focused on a pregnant

teenager and into a new one where a village girl is lured away by a slick procurer with the promise of “a job in town.”



Chapter 1 Image 8

Caption: Sex Trafficker Buying Silence – Sekoai Mahlaka, Lesotho – WSI Malealea Festival 2011

Credit: Photo used with permission from the photographer Katt Lissard



Chapter 1 Image 9

Caption: Prayer as Power against HIV rehearsal -- WSI & Malealea Community -- Lesotho 2011

Credit: Photo used with permission from the photographer Jussara Santos-Raxlen

The job proposition includes a wad of cash given by the Trafficker to the girl's family, a "friendly loan" the girl can repay once her fabulous new life begins. The parents are sworn to secrecy.

The more we worked on the scene with the village actors, the more obvious it became that the specifics of what we were creating were drawn from one participant's immediate, shattering loss. Lesotho's villages are often desperately poor. Part of the shame of this particular secret and one of many reasons "no one is talking about it" has to do with poverty and the way people are manipulated because of it. We might all say we understand poverty is a universal ingredient in sex trafficking — but breaking that down at the local level, performed live, was compelling.

That's an example of creating with community members that was fairly straight forward and went well. A more complicated example would be this: Every time we've worked with a rural community a storyline comes up or a scene is proposed about taking a person sick with HIV to the *sangoma* (traditional healer) **and** to the health clinic **and** to the priest or preacher. Also, typically, the clinic usually wins the contest of which of these is the best treatment for the one who is ill. On a recent trip there was a heated debate between those who were "for" the clinic and those who were "for" the *sangoma* and those who were "for" religion and prayer.

On one hand, this was a positive development because we were being brought into the intricacies and nuances of the debate. Instead of village performers appeasing what they presumed were our outsiders' expectations — i.e., someone sick with HIV should go to the health clinic — they insisted on the complexity they experienced in the face of this deadly illness. On the other hand, the scene this all-encompassing approach gave rise to was fraught, tedious, and interminable, an epic tale full of lengthy monologues and sermonizing — there was a lot to work with! And, eventually, we were able to turn it into a sharply comic scene that took all the conflicting solutions (Western medicine, traditional medicine, religion) and presented them in a highly provocative but satiric way, which left the door open to multiple resolutions depending on the needs of the sick person.

In the end, the HIV-positive person was taking ARV's, using herbs prescribed by the *sangoma*, and his mother was praying for him. Which, when you think about it, is exactly what people do everywhere. Rarely does someone only go to the doctor or to the

alternative healer or to the minister; we approach illness through multiple routes and seek out multiple paths to a cure.

Advocating for the health clinic is part of advocating for testing and for an approach to the spread of HIV that takes all aspects of community health into account. We wanted to support and encourage people to use the clinic and to access the advantage of knowing their status, but it was crucial to communicate and to perform the multiple avenues of approach the community was negotiating and to present a way to balance those possibilities.



Chapter 1 Image 10

Caption: Leading Day One Warm-Ups – Molomo Ramothello, Lesotho & Malelea Community – Lesotho 2008

Credit: Photo used with permission from the photographer Limpho Mokuku

Trusting the Process

As we continue to explore this work, one of the lessons we learn over and over again is the way theatre allows crucial things to be said “creatively” that might not be said otherwise and how exhilarating and empowering that can be, not only for rural villages in places like Lesotho but for participants in WSI who come from big Western cities or university faculties or professional theatre companies. You can put words into the mouths of characters created through our process and those characters can say to a neighbor or a husband or a friend what you, the performer, can’t say yourself. You can challenge stigmatizing rumors, expose domestic violence, negotiate condom use, critique corruption, take a stand — finally give confident voice to what you’ve been thinking.

Through all our work we’ve continued to “trust the process” — not only the creative process we’re developing, but the notion that process itself is fundamental to art and to social change.

About the Author

Katt Lissard is the artistic director of The Winter/Summer Institute (WSI), an international HIV/AIDS & Theatre for Social Change project based in New York and Lesotho, southern Africa (wsimaketheatre.org). A teacher, writer and performer, she spent two years in the Theatre Unit at the National University of Lesotho as a Fulbright Scholar (2005, 2012), where she taught, directed and devised shows — WSI grew out of her early work there. Recent publications on her work in Africa: “Venus in Lesotho:

Women, Theatre and the Collapsible Boundaries of Silence,” in Palgrave Macmillan’s anthology *Feminist Popular Education in Transnational Debates: Building Pedagogies of Possibility* and “Viral Collaboration: Harmonising to defeat AIDS in southern Africa,” in *SATJ/South African Theatre Journal*. A longtime faculty member of the Graduate Institute at Goddard College, Katt currently teaches in the Department of Ethnic and Race Studies at City University’s BMCC in New York.