

5-2023

Social Justice Theatre and the Impact on Theatre Artists

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SOCIAL JUSTICE THEATRE AND THE IMPACT ON THEATRE ARTISTS

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Stevie Taken
May 2023

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ABSTRACT

Theatre as an agent for social change has significantly impacted communities and entire countries. Examining how subversive theatre impacts those who engage with it to affect positive social change is a worthwhile endeavor. Theatre possesses the power to inspire empathy in people, which leads to progressive political action. This study explores the impact of participating in social justice theatre has on the artists who engage in it.

The literature reviewed in this study examines the impact attending subversive theatre has on audience members, its aim is to inspire empathy as a tool to create progressive social change. This study expands upon those findings but differs by taking a closer look at the ways in which participating in social justice theatre has an impact on those who engage in it.

This study sought theatre artists currently active in social justice theatre to participate in a qualitative research project. Eight participants were selected and interviewed individually over zoom. All zoom interviews were transcribed. The researcher took handwritten notes, with no identifying details. Thematic analysis was used to process data gathered during the study.

The researcher identified six major themes: White Comfort vs. Brown and Black Discomfort, The Culture of White Supremacy, Empathy, The Relationship Between the Performance and Audience, Politics, and Risks. Key findings include the participants' embodiment of empathy and love for people who exist within oppressive systems, and their resilience to adversity.

Future research might study the effectiveness of social justice theatre as a social work tool for intervention within oppressed populations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my research advisor Dr. Laneskog for her expert guidance throughout the data analysis and writing process for this study. Your kindness and encouragement helped sustain me through the most challenging portion of this project. To Dr. McAllister and Dr. Li who were my research professors in my first year of the MSW program at Cal State San Bernardino. You were so helpful in aiding me to find the topic that most speaks to my passions for the arts and social justice. And to all my professors whose enthusiasm and belief in my potential as a social worker will continue to inspire me as I pursue my future in this profession.

DEDICATION

I am most fortunate to be the daughter of parents who are unfailingly supportive. Mom, Dad, without your support I would have not been able to even consider returning to school so that I could pursue an advanced degree. Because of my fortune to have you as my parents, my life has already changed for the better, and will now and forever be the better for it. I know that you are proud of me because you have both told me so, I am also proud to be your daughter. This accomplishment is for all of us. Thank you, thank you, thank you, I love you very much.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	
How Theatre is Used for Social Justice Around the Globe	1
Relevance to the United States	2
National Relevance.....	3
Macro Aspects	3
Micro Aspects.....	4
A Social Worker’s Role in Theatre as an Agent for Social Justice	5
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	
Theatre as Activism for Social Change	6
Commonalities	6
Differences.....	7
Gaps in Literature.....	8
Theories Guiding Conceptualization	8
Systems Theory	8
Oppression Theory.....	9
Social Change Theory.....	10
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS	
Introduction	11
Study Design	11
Sampling.....	13

Data Collection and Instruments	13
Procedures	14
Protection of Human Subjects	15
Data Analysis.....	16
Stage 1: Open Coding.....	17
Stage 2: Axial Coding.....	17
Stage 3: Selective Coding.....	17
Stage 4: Conditional Matrix:	17
Summary	18
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND RESULTS	19
White Comfort vs. Black and Brown Discomfort	20
Culture of White Supremacy	23
Empathy: Love for Other People.....	26
Politics	32
Risks.....	34
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION	37
RECOMMENDATIONS	39
CONCLUSION.....	40
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE.....	41
APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL LETTER	43
REFERENCES.....	46

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

How Theatre is Used for Social Justice Around the Globe

In many countries worldwide, people experience extreme oppression by their native governments and structured systems. Some countries ruled by harsh regimes abuse power and deprive people of freedoms, adequate resources, and participation in their government. Injustices experienced by those who are oppressed elicit feelings of helplessness and defeat. Unable to imagine their worth and capabilities caused by witnessing the suffering of loved ones and others in their communities, revolution/liberation may be impossible to imagine. But then some rise in the face of oppression to make their voices heard in acts of defiance and activism. In many parts of the world where oppressive governments reign, brave subversive acts of defiance by performance and theatre artists challenge authority to return power to the people. Courageous and creative artists risk the threat of imprisonment, exile, and even death.

There are theatre artists in the world who, at risk of their peril, stage forbade anti-government performances as a form of protest (Rettman, 2021). They do so to send a message to their oppressors and, more importantly, to their compatriots. Co-founders of the Belarus Free Theatre, Natalia Kaliada and her husband Nicolai Khalezin, live in exile in the United Kingdom, where they were given asylum in 2010 after receiving death threats from agents of their native

government for continuing to stage anti-Belarus regime plays around the world (Rettman, 2021). Despite living in another country with full citizenship, they continue to receive death threats from their native government, likely funded by the illegitimate president of Belarus, Lukashenko. After fleeing their home country, their successors at the Belarus Free Theatre continue producing subversive, anti-government plays for community members and in some public spaces as protests. The artists often suffer consequences, including jail time and threats of physical violence (Rettman, 2021). Suppose they can demonstrate to their fellow nationals what oppression is and what it looks like and empower them not to accept it. In that case, change is possible, but only after a critical mass of people united in a common goal are ready to do some challenging and dangerous work.

Relevance to the United States

Theatre artists utilize performance art as a form of activism within the United States to create social change. A theatre company based in New York City called the Tectonic Theatre Project (TTP) devised an impactful play called the '*The Laramie Project*' following the murder of Mathew Sheppard, a young, gay man who was the victim of a hate crime in his town of Laramie, Wyoming in 1998 (McKenna, 2014). TTP traveled to the city to conduct their investigation into the events which led up to the murder. They interviewed several residents of Laramie, including friends and family members of Shepard's. From those

interviews, the theatre company developed a script that reflected the common social issues of homophobia and anti-LGBTQIA+, which permeate the social fibers throughout many communities within the states (McKenna, 2014).

The play garnered publicity and exposure worldwide, with many community and school-based theatres accessing the performance rights to expose its message to their audiences. One high school theatre teacher from an affluent and primarily white Christian neighborhood in New York state used *The Laramie Project* as an intervention for her students who participated in the pursuit of production (McKenna, 2014). She assessed the students' change in their behaviors and attitudes toward the LGBTQIA+ community by instructing them to keep journals and record their progression of thinking during the process. Some of the students who participated in the production had gained empathy for and insight into the experiences of the LGBTQIA+ community. One of her students even came out as queer on stage to the audience and their own family during one of the performances (McKenna, 2014).

National Relevance

Macro Aspects

It is essential for artists, social workers, and any other person, regardless of their profession, who care about freedom and liberty, to participate in the perpetuation, restoration, or proclamation of freedoms (Stanton, 2021). No country is immune to the potential hazard that is the dismantling of a free

democracy and the rights within it. In the United States, we only need to look as far as our government and the fallout of the events in response to the election of President Joe Biden in 2020. It is believed by some experts on laws on democracy in the United States that the insurrection of January 6, 2021 is only a single incident in what could be a series of future events which could lead to the destruction of democracy in this country, unless people act.

Social workers in the U.S. who believe in social justice understand that liberties and freedoms bestowed on us here are not guaranteed as permanent. Our freedoms must actively be maintained. Therefore, social workers must also understand and appreciate the significance of public demonstrations and activism to protest oppression and adversity. Texas Governor Greg Abbott passed a restrictive reproductive rights law that criminalizes individuals seeking to terminate a pregnancy after six weeks, an egregious attack on people's constitutional right to access abortions (Najmadadi, 2021).

Micro Aspects

Engaging in democracy and casting a vote in an election expresses the power of autonomy and individual freedom (Boal, 1974; Friere, 1968). Whether the individual casting their vote is conscious of the implications and the sacrifices made to secure that freedom or not, the truth is our rights and freedoms are never guaranteed. When we take these for granted and are apathetic, we make ourselves vulnerable to oppressive systems. When people are oppressed, they must rise from it, and those who engage in uprisings and protests must be those

who are the target of the oppression. They must be their own saviors (Boal, 1974; Friere, 1968).

A Social Worker's Role in Theatre as an Agent for Social Justice

Social Justice is one of the core values of Social Work (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008, preamble). The injustices of the world are of concern to those who are drawn to this profession. As social workers who subscribe to the core values of this practice, illuminating social injustices and inspiring empathy in others who do not personally encounter those injustices are imperative. Social injustices, which may seem insignificant to most, can have huge life-altering consequences for people of marginalized identities. Social workers also subscribe to the core value, the dignity and worth of the person, meaning all persons (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008, preamble). Theatre as an agent for social change has significantly impacted communities and entire countries (Brueggemann, 2014). Examining how subversive theatre inspires those who engage with it to inspire the future for potential positive change is a worthwhile endeavor. Theatre possesses the power to inspire empathy in people, which leads to progressive political action. This study explores the impact of participating in social justice theatre has on the artists who engage in it.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Theatre as Activism for Social Change

Commonalities

Prior research examines the effects attending subversive theatre has on the attitudes and perspectives of the audience members (Bowels, 2019). Many have asked if theatre effectively influences audience members, sometimes targeting specific communities, to inspire empathy for certain marginalized groups. The results seem to allude to the positive. Surveys given to audiences before and after performances suggest that attending such events enlightens and inspires empathy. The post-show surveys indicate most audience members polled had gained new perspectives into the lived experiences of 'others' with whom they have had no previous insight (Bowels, 2019; Blackburn, 2018; Vogel and Eckstein, 2018).

Empathy is a strong common thread amongst the themes embedded in previous research. Repairing conflicts between groups that are opposed to one another within their communities or between individuals and their communities improves the quality of life for all. Emphasizing hope for change by sharing stories will inspire empathy for others and affect positive social change. Empathy can be the catalyst for transformation (Blackburn, 2018; Bowels, 2019).

Blackburn posits theatre has the power to transform its audience by having them bear witness to the experiences of those whom they oppose via live

performance. The effects can lead to improving intergroup relations, prejudices subsiding, and healing within communities. Kiener in Bowels' shares the impact social justice had on the sense of community on the campus of Whitworth in Spokane amongst the students, both participants and audience felt more of a connection to one another after the campus' hosted a piece of social justice theatre highlighting issues of socioeconomic discrimination within the community (Bowels, 2019).

Differences

The ideas of how to go about utilizing theatre for social change differ in each article. Some highlight the power of aesthetics within social movements. Alluding to the power of marketing and people's tendency to become influenced by aesthetically pleasing or alarming images. Propaganda in that context can be used for progressive ideals and plagiarized and used for the opposite of the originators' intent (Reed, 2019).

Reed uses the Black Power movement of the 60s and 70s to demonstrate the influence theatricality can have on demonstrations and urges his readers to recognize the relationship between the politics and the poetry of theatricality (Reed, 2019). Reed makes the argument that theatricality is essential to appealing to the humanity of people and can motivate people to break the chains of oppression and inspire movements for social change (Reed, 2019).

Gaps in Literature

What is not addressed in the literature is the impact participating in theatre as activism for social change has on the theatre artists who engage in social justice theatre. There was some revealing information about some performers involving the creative process and their input on the material. However, nothing of their involvement with social justice before or after engaging in subversive theatre (McKenna, 2014). In the interest of how the participants think or how they behave and engage in social justice before, during, and after participating in subversive theatre, there does not seem to be much, if any, research examining their experiences as theatre arts activists.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Systems Theory

Several, if not all, of the articles supporting and informing this study take a Systems Theory perspective when examining the social issues being challenged by communities engaging in theatre as activism for social change. The participants are part of a system that they did not choose, a system that controls their freedoms and/or limits their autonomy. So, before individuals can challenge the system, they must first become aware of the limitations within which they function. Then they can target the issues and resist the systems of oppression (Blackburn, 2018), (Bowels, 2019), (Vogel and Eckstein, 2016). Systems Theory is used to better understand the parameters of oppression, including the chinks

in establishments. Systems Theory examines what power structures are currently in place, creating the circumstances for oppression to take place. Where do the participants fall within the power structure that is creating the oppression they experience?

Oppression Theory

Oppression exists and is persistent in every society, Oppression Theory is a crucial lens for examining the warning signs and recognizing the patterns of oppression. People who have power over others are incentivized to maintain their power because they benefit from the inequities inherent in the systems. Those who are subordinate are not given power by those in possession of it. Therefore, those who are oppressed must take charge of their empowerment and liberation (Friere, 1968; Rashid, 2015; Vogel and Eckstein, 2016).

This study uses Oppression Theory to help identify areas in need of change; it also highlights potential areas of conflict within a system that are directly affecting the participants. Illuminating who is benefiting from the oppression being inflicted. For example, if a theatre artist creates subversive theatre targeting the current and ongoing attacks on women's right to accessible and safe reproductive health care, we will need to ask, 'who is benefitting from the act of oppression?'. Are they the politicians seeking funding for their campaigns and power? Oppression Theory identifies the targets of our resistance.

Social Change Theory

Various prior research used social change theory as a lens to examine the experiences of participants engaging in social justice theatre (Rashid, 2015). The need for social change due to the adverse effects of the status quo on some community members was also prevalent in many of the reports (Reed, 2019). Social Change Theory is relevant to this paper because my research question speaks to the need for and purpose of social justice theatre. Social Change Theory is the hopeful spirit involved in participating in subversive acts. We dare to imagine what life could be like when the current challenges we experience were extinguished. It is the inspiration that fuels and sustains social justice movements. The Critical Consciousness of the population collectively comes to the awareness of their oppression and determines for themselves what they want their lives to be (Blackburn, 2018; Christensen, 2013).

CHAPTER THREE:

METHODS

Introduction

This study sought out several theatre artists from Southern California and other parts of the United States region engage in subversive social justice theatre for activism and social change. This was a qualitative study to gain insight into the experience of social justice theatre from the perspective of the theatre artists. This chapter lays out the methods by which the study was carried out. Those methods include study design, sampling, data collection and instruments, procedures, protection of human subjects, and data analysis.

Study Design

This research aims to gain insight into the lived experiences of theatre artists who engage in subversive social justice theatre, examine their process, and whether those consequences have any bearing on a person's emotional, social, and political life. This is an exploratory research project which utilized qualitative research methods in the form of interviews.

There are many strengths to a qualitative study approach. Giving focus to eight people gave the participating theatre artists the full attention of the interviewer allowing the opportunity for a more in-depth and detailed personal account of their experiences. The interviewer set a welcoming and confidential tone in each interview, encouraging the participants to take their time, if needed,

to elicit more thoughtful responses. Working and focusing on eight theatre artists over a series of interviews created occasions for reflection by both the interviewer and participants, which lead to meaningful discoveries.

Some limitations to highlighting eight individual theatre artists as opposed to giving focus to an entire theatre group with multiple artists include: hearing from one individual at a time share their experiences is individualized, it did not include multiple voices of varying perspectives in the same interview. At the same time, working with an entire group as one has the potential to inspire more lively conversations, sparking thoughts about shared experiences that the individual may not have recalled on their own.

Another limitation to focusing on several individual theatre artists is the relationship between the interviewer and the participating artists. Once trust and rapport are established, the participating theatre artists may feel pressured into giving the researcher answers that are socially desirable or that the participants feel are what the interviewer wants them to give. Given the nature of the research, one might assume the researcher is in favor of subversive and disruptive theatre. Therefore, the participant could be influenced and feel obliged to please the interviewer with their answers. In addition to the participant's potential bias and inclination to give socially desirable answers to interview questions, the researcher's biases could be a limitation of this research.

Sampling

To find participants for this study, since the population is very specific, non-random sampling was used to find social justice theatre artists who are best situated to give the most relevant insight into the focus of the research. Theatre artists with a history of activism, whether recent or long withstanding, were sought. The researcher sent several messages to social justice theatre artists in the Southern California region and other parts of the United States via searches on the internet and personal network. After the researcher contacted interested parties, she conducted casual informative interviews via telephone or zoom and selected candidates who were qualified for this study considering their past and current social justice theatre projects.

The researcher composed an introductory email making initial contact with potential participating theatre artists. After receiving a response from a potential participant, the researcher followed up with a proposed time for a casual interview to further describe the purpose of the research, mutual interests, and potential benefits the study could lend to both the world of social justice theatre and the field of Social Work.

Data Collection and Instruments

To conduct the interviews, the researcher invited participating theatre artists to join zoom meetings. The researcher conducted pre-interviews to explain how the researcher intended to proceed with interviews. The researcher shared

background information, including the researcher's own relevant theatre experience. The researcher investigated the participating theatre artist's background relative to their past engagement in social justice theatre, collecting information available online via newspaper articles, past show posters, theatre reviews, etc.; the purpose was to conduct more personal and informed interviews.

Relevant demographic information related to the participating theatre artists were collected and noted. That information included age, amount of theatrical experience, years active, gender identity, race identity, and geographical location, which has been kept confidential. The researcher developed a qualitative interview guide with open-ended questions and follow-up prompts designed to garner more relative and potentially interesting themes of Social Justice Theatre and activism. These questions offered the interviewees opportunities to share their experiences freely and of their own accord.

Procedures

The researcher searched for participants through a few different methods. She used the internet and conducted a google search for social justice theatre artists in Southern California, which connected her with an artist who then shared the researcher's recruitment flyer on their social media, which lead to connecting with other artists who then referred her to others. The researcher also posted her recruitment flyer to relevant special interest groups via Facebook. Finally, the

researcher contacted artists in her personal network of friends and colleagues. Eight participants in all were recruited and interviewed. Of those participants who were selected and agreed to participate, the researcher sent each individual confirmation for interview times and dates via email which included details regarding the nature of the research being conducted, expectations for the interview, informed consent, and a zoom link. For a couple of the participants who had follow up questions, the researcher made contact via phone conversation.

Each zoom meeting lasted an average of 45 minutes to 1 hour. Interviews within those meetings were an average of 30 to 45 minutes. Each interview was led into with an unrecorded casual pre interview and ended with a brief unrecorded post discussion. The same questions were asked to each of the participants with individualized follow-up questions based on answers given by each of the participants. The questions asked are as follows: What does social justice mean to you? What changes in society would you like to see? How is social justice theatre (or live performance) useful at affecting social change? Are there any risks involved in the work you do? What compels you to engage in the work of theatre for social change?

Protection of Human Subjects

After the participants were selected and interviews scheduled, the researcher took precautions to maintain participants' confidentiality. Due to the

often-controversial nature of the topics of social justice theatre, the confidentiality of the participating theatre artists is essential for their well-being. The researcher was mindful of obscuring any identifying details shared by the artists to help ensure anonymity.

The zoom interviews between the researcher and social justice theatre artists, and all recorded materials, are saved on the google drive provided by the California State University of San Bernardino, which is encrypted, and password protected. The researcher ensured that both she and the social justice theatre artist were situated in secure, confidential, and safe locations for each interview. After the research is concluded and after the publication of this paper is completed, all recorded materials resulting from this research will be saved for three years and then destroyed.

Data Analysis

All zoom interviews were transcribed. The researcher took handwritten notes, with no identifying details. Thematic analysis was used to process data gathered during the study. The researcher identified major themes and sub-themes which emerged from the data and used codes to arrange them into analytic categories. The researcher read the data multiple times to ensure that the themes and subthemes identified accurately represent the study.

The researcher utilized a Bottom-Up approach to the data analysis. After conducting interviews with participants, she looked at the collected data and

determined patterns of common themes presented within and built statements reflecting discoveries. The researcher continued data analysis according to the following stages.

Stage 1: Open Coding

Open Coding involves going through the transcriptions, reading the narrative, and naming different phrases and sections to build codes that summarize what is being said.

Stage 2: Axial Coding

Axial Coding is the process of finding the connections between the different Open Codes.

Stage 3: Selective Coding

Selective coding is the process of telling the story of what the data indicates by building upon and using theories to gain perspective into the story of the codes and their connections.

Stage 4: Conditional Matrix:

Establishing a Conditional Matrix is the process of analyzing how the data collected in the research fits into the larger picture of what is known about micro practice and micro practice. It explains how the data is analyzed and how the research fits into what we understand about the field of Social Work.

Summary

This study sought social justice theatre artists who are currently active and ventured to gain their perspectives on their work throughout the processes. The researcher conducted a series of interviews with selected participants.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The aim of this study is to examine the impact engaging in theatre for social change has on the artists who participate in it. To gather information provided by the participants and consider the similarities or differences in their experiences. To gain insight into their inspirations and motivations for creating subversive works and inquire about their resilience in the face of adversity.

The participants in this study are theatre artists of differing demographic backgrounds. Eight participants total: six cis women, and two cis men. Participants range in age from early 20s to 60s. They are writers, directors, comedians, producers, designers, choreographers, company directors, artistic directors, performers, and teachers; all of whom wear at least two of those titles. Their racial identities vary from mixed race (American Indian and white), Latinx, Egyptian American, and white. Two participants immigrated from their native countries, all currently live within the United States (California, Minnesota, and Washington DC).

The researcher identified six themes from the interviews which are discussed in this chapter. They are 'White Comfort vs. Brown and Black Discomfort', 'Culture of White Supremacy', 'Empathy: Love for Other People', 'The Relationship Between Performance and Audience', 'Politics', and 'Risks'.

White Comfort vs. Black and Brown Discomfort

A few of the participants shared candidly about the disappointment and betrayal experienced because of the apathy of white friends in the fight for social justice and equity. They especially noted those white friends who profess to be liberal and/or progressive. White comfort prevails over the injustices imposed on people of marginalized identities. Participants explained that the largest insult is the failure of white progressives to recognize and acknowledge the hypocrisy of their inaction.

I always thought these progressive, liberal friends of mine would have been marching in Selma or at least taken part in the civil rights movement. I thought they would have stood in front of holocaust trains, would have protested at the slaughter of indigenous people, but they wouldn't have. That's what I've learned. They wouldn't have because they aren't now. They're not doing anything. The world is burning down and they're like, "doo doo doo, I'm comfortable, I have my wealth. I don't have to do anything..." It makes me sad... I feel really betrayed, like they don't give a fuck. They actually don't give a fuck; that's what it feels like. (Participant #8)

Participants explained that white people can easily, and often effortlessly, refrain from engaging in matters of social justice, because they are not negatively affected by the many injustices within the systems which are steeped in white supremacy. If they are challenged to acknowledge the benefits they reap

because of the oppression of marginalized folk, they often respond with defensive fragility, then seek white solidarity and return to the comfort of white privilege. But their retreat from engaging in social justice does not go unnoticed.

So, you know, it frustrates me, because there is a lot of fragility in the world, and I think that folks (white folks) will give themselves a pass. I believe we are all called to engage in social justice in our own way” (Participant #7).

The absence of people willing to engage in the liberation of all people puts a strain on those who do show up. If they choose inaction, that does not come without repercussions. Their passive non-choices are not as passive as they would like to believe, they have a negative impact on artists participating in activism.

I feel like I struggle with energy for the work sometimes, but also just frustration that there aren't more of us here... It feels like those of us who have the passion and the drive and the energy, get worn out because others are OK to sit back. So that's why I say we are all called to this. As human beings, we are called to this... I wish there were more of us to feel the conviction and the energy, (Participant #7).

Further, another participant expressed frustration with white colleagues' unwillingness to stand for the rights of all. “I think it is about time that white people stand up... in the world, white people have caused the issues and are in the positions of power, so it's time for white people to stand up.”, (Participant #8).

They went on to further express the noticeable absence of white people in the world of activism.

I find activism lacking in white culture, honestly. I think there are a lot of activists in black culture and indigenous culture, you know with people who have a marginalized identity. I believe that those who are in power, or are part of the populations that have power, they are comfortable in their privilege, and they aren't motivated to do much to help the oppressed. And I think people don't give up that power without pushback, and so white cis straight men aren't going to give up that power without activism, without people taking a stand, and without people standing up for the rights of everyone. So yeah, I think it's necessary, and I think it's lacking (Participant #8).

Participant #3 mirrored these sentiments noting that the responsibility of ensuring the rights of all is for everyone to become involved. The burden should not rest solely only those who are negatively affected by inequities but be embraced by all as a noble and necessary quest. "I've been thinking a lot in the recent years about calls to action and what our responsibilities are as individuals, and how we can best contribute with the circumstances we're in... I do believe we all have a collective responsibility to further social justice..."

Culture of White Supremacy

Many of the participants in this study spoke to the prevalence of white supremacy and the influence it has on the many systems within our culture. The culture of white supremacy perpetuates inequities among marginalized groups which necessitates progressive social change. There was a common thread noted of the need to broaden the inclusion of voices of people from diverse backgrounds to strengthen efforts for social change. When asked what social justice means to her, Participant #1 stated, "Equaling the playing field, acknowledging my white privilege, stepping aside when I can..., acknowledging racism in all of its many systems." They also gave an example of how white supremacy culture enabled certain elite choreographers to appropriate forms of dance, for which those elite choreographers were celebrated as pioneers in their time.

Modern dance is the thing that propelled women in a male dominated field, but some of these women, including Martha Graham and Ruth St. Denis, were appropriating from other cultures, and sharing it as new at the same time when people of color had no access to the stage, (Participant #1).

Participant #6 shared his journey as a white cis male entering the world of activism and wanting to lend his talents to the cause of social justice. He

expressed his gratitude to the friends in his life who were pivotal in his awakening to the power of diversity in the work of activism.

I was trying to get together a group, and she (roommate) told me afterwards that it was kind of weird to be in a room with a bunch of just straight white men talking about social justice issues. I didn't get it then, but she helped me to understand because she trusted me. These are all things that I was just a little naïve to. Especially because I was spoiled in college just having my college in a very rural area of Minnesota, this social justice theatre group was very diverse. So that was a challenge because I had taken things for granted. And since I took it for granted, I didn't realize that because of its diversity it was also strong. Along the way, I needed people that believed in me enough, and that were close enough to me to say, 'hey, maybe you're not going about this in the best way'. And I appreciate that so much.

For those who have always benefitted from white supremacist systems, the process to understand the many nuances of the systems, takes humility and the willingness to decenter themselves.

Another participant spoke of her experience within the culture of white supremacy from a different perspective of that from the white participants. For people of color, racism is learned and internalized. Participant #8 speaks about the experience of being a child and understanding the cultural devaluing they learned based on their appearance.

I felt that even just having brown eyes, being brown meant that you were less than from a really young age. I didn't know that consciously, it was a subconscious belief that I was less than my white sisters, because we are mixed. I have white, blue-eyed sisters. And I knew that they were worth more than me in the culture. Like I had that feeling inside of me, even though I couldn't have articulated it for a long time, it was just a feeling I had. They mean more, they are more important. It took a long time to unpack that.

It could be presumed that in the same way, the white blue-eyed sisters also understood subconsciously that they were valued more culturally.

Regardless of our individual racial identity, we all exist within racist systems which benefit white presenting individuals and oppress those of marginalized populations. The work of progressive social change and the potential outcomes has promise to uplift everyone. A piece of the resistance to progressive change for many white people is the mistaken belief that for systems to be equal and accessible to all people, then white people would somehow be at a deficit.

That's a lifelong unpacking of white supremacy. Like for all of us, no matter our race, because we grew up in that (white supremacy). We've internalized it, we've embodied it... It's an ongoing, lifelong practice of noticing bias, of noticing racist thoughts, of noticing where that shows up. (Participant #8).

Empathy: Love for Other People

Every participant interviewed for this study spoke of empathy and love for other people, not just for the people in their lives, but for the love of all people. They especially emphasized empathy and love for people of marginalized identities. Participant #4 spoke of the power of theatre and a play's influence on an audience member's response to seeing a play centered on women's experiences navigating reproductive healthcare in a precarious political climate.

I saw this production and I was gutted. I suddenly understood what women are going through (Participant quoting an audience member's experience upon seeing a play on reproductive justice). I think that is the power of theatre. Because it has to do with empathy. You're watching human beings up there. You're watching them tell a story, and it's about empathy. It really brands people in a whole different way.

When asked what it is that compels her to engage in theatre for social change, Participant #3 spoke of her familial connections to the arts and service work, and her desire to blend both in her work.

My matrilineal lineage is made of people who have been nurses and healthcare providers. It is something that I feel connected to and I also matrilineally come from a line of women who wanted to be artists, and were for a time, and then pivoted to service work. And I do think that art can be service work. And so, there is a heart of service that I like to lead with.

Participant #4 also connected the example from her mother and the way it has influenced her in her life and as an artist.

My mom was a social worker. She was working in Yakima, Washington. And she was all about justice for the people. So, I am sure that that was something that got embedded in me early on. And when I morphed into theatre, that just became part of what I did.

Like Participants 3&4, Participant #6 also spoke of his desire to use his talents for the good of others.

I kind of have to do the things that I have a passion for and that I'm talented at. I like to think that I am a talented moderator and teacher.

Therefore, I also have a passion for it. So, let me blend that talent and passion and do something that helps others.

Love was an ongoing theme throughout all the interviews. Participant #5 offered what his definition of love is when asked what compels him to engage in social justice theatre. "One thing that keeps me going is that I don't think I can enjoy living in a world without knowing that I'm not contributing to the world's growth. That's I guess my definition of love." (Participant #5).

In her work as a theatre artist and as a leader within her organization, Participant #7 talked about how she frequently finds herself in rooms where there is discussion on divisive and politically charged topics. She is also often the one who is leading these contentious debates. She spoke of her approach to meeting opposition with a quote which expresses generosity and compassion.

There's a quote from the poet Rumi, a Sufi poet that says, 'Out beyond ideas of right and wrong there is a field and I'll meet you there', that for me is a space that I feel very passionate about. Which is the human space. That says yes, there are disagreements and yes there are issues, and we all want to make advancements in different ways. But we have a common humanity.

With all the participants, there appears to be something innate in each of them that compels them to act on impulses which are informed by their compassion and love for other people. Participant #8 shared where she draws her inspiration to continue her work towards a more equitable society. When asked what compels her to do the work of art for social change, she replied

I can't not. I can't not do it. I think that it is empathy. I think too much, I feel too much. I am a highly sensitive person, so I think that empathy is a part of it. I think that also there is ancestral memory and trauma and a resilience that informs me as well. But I really hope that even if I weren't mixed race that empathy would be enough... And I think it's just because I really do want all people to have the same privileges as white straight men.... I think that exposure and just caring for people who are personal in my life, within that expands to the community at large. I mean, I don't even have to know you to care that you suffer.

Relationship Between the Performance and the Audience

The participants in this study emphasized the importance of engaging an audience and the potential for affecting positive change by eliciting responses to the performance their audience attends. There also appears to be a special relationship between performance and audience when the performance is happening live and in the moment.

It's about real human beings right in front of you. You are engaging with them. Every night the play is created between the audience and the actor, in the space between, that's why every performance is different. Because you have different people in the audience, we are all bringing in our own associations, our hopes, our needs, our desires. (Participant #4)

Participant #3, whose social justice cause addresses reproductive justice issues, spoke about what she refers to as 'public recollection', or 'cultural memory', and how theatre is a place where collective values are presented. She spoke of the cultural phenomenon that childbirth is meant to be forgotten and how she uses theatre to combat that misbelief by centering childbirth in her work.

The theater is a site of public recollection. The things that we choose to place on stage or choose not to place on stage is a reflection of what we value. And the fact that birth and childbearing experiences have for so long been conceptualized as events that are meant to be forgotten. So much so that there is the adage, 'oh, it's like childbirth you forget the pain' because we are not actually meant to remember or value the experiences inside of the room in which people are born. Since the person being born

doesn't remember, obviously. But the person giving birth does... It's not true that people just forget their childbirth experiences... So, placing experience on stage is insisting that this is worthy of cultural memory...

Participant #3 also shared her witnessing the impact that performances and representation of childbirth on stage has on the audience. The responses she receives from audience members vary from shock to gratitude and exemplifies the lack of childbirth content in the mainstream media.

I will hear just that this is the first time that they have seen stories like the stories that I tell presented on stage before, first of all. And second of all, a lot of our cultural representation of birth in media representations on TV for example are not physiologically accurate and not emotionally resonant and they just don't get a lot of attention. Most birth scenes in media are like 30 seconds to 2 minutes long, so just the attention being placed on it, there's a lot of shock and gratitude that I hear from people.

Within the theme of the relationship between the performance and the audience, a couple of the participants stress the importance of a healing element when stories that otherwise go unrepresented are placed in the center of the stories presented.

Theatre, regardless of its social components, brings people together. If there is a component that is healing, then that healing can help facilitate social justice. Even if it's (the performance) not about identities or oppression. But when an audience with people from this neighborhood

come to see a play, there is alleviation... It's a powerful thing for people to see themselves, (Participant #5).

Dispelling myths and cultural misbeliefs and presenting more accurate representations on stage is essential to healing between the performance and the audience. "I want to make sure that I reach as many people I can with the material so that I can open them up to receiving more accurate information and even do some healing" (Participant #3).

Theatre artists feel empowered when they tell their stories. The performance space is a place of validation and offers artists an opportunity to control the narrative. "I think storytelling is one of the best possible activist opportunities because I tell you a story that you cannot refute; my story is mine.", (Participant #6). Some theatre artists employ a method and style of theatre which encourages the audience to participate in the narrative, transforming a passive audience into storytellers. Participant #7 describes an example of engaging audience participation and the undeniable impact of live storytelling.

It's a 30-minute play that then involves role play where the audience gets to create new choices that might change the outcome. What I love about it is you can't argue with someone's true story. When you're in the room and you say this is a true story and we're putting it on for you live and in person, you can't deny us.

Politics

The aim of social justice theatre, or performance as activism, is to subvert oppressive systems for the purpose of progressive social change. Participants in this study utilize their talents to advance causes they feel are important politically. “I find theater to be useful in the way that I would say can impact social consciousness. My theater project is committed to placing births in public memory to further reproductive justice.” (Participant #3)

Participant #7 gives an example of how she navigates discussions with political leaders who oppose progressive ideals. She talks about the way coded language is used and how language is influenced by the power of the government.

I was in conversation with someone who works for a school district and they were letting us know that there was a key board member in that school district who is in that space using the language of “we don't want to be part of this ‘woke movement’”, which is, you know, a lot of the political language coming straight from the White House... that is the status quo and regurgitated from white supremacy culture and people of privilege; and so on. But I know that when I'm in the room with that person's child, in their community, that I need to be very careful with how I am inviting them into a dialogue that may be about acknowledging someone else's existence, like someone who is LGBTQIA+ for example, which is a hot topic in that district. So, I am mindful that sometimes we are censored and

we're careful with what we say, but we still believe in growth, and we still believe in incremental steps towards justice, (Participant #7).

She recognizes circumstances where she is needing to work with people who are triggered by 'woke movement' language, that censoring her own language can be a strength when communicating. Knowing what to say and what not to say is useful to her as a way to progress conversations that include marginalized populations within the community, she is working so that the goal of inclusion and equity is not disrupted.

Participant #7 is engaged in facilitating conversations that directly influence policies in her community. She creates theatre that initiates dialogues between policy makers and voters.

The city of San Diego is looking to advancing housing access, and they brought in our company to be an engagement partner to support people and having conversations and deepening understanding about this housing action plan, giving feedback about the plan. So, in that case, I'm interested in theater and creativity and creating a dialogue to have a meaningful conversation that will progress our ability to change policies around housing.

Having access to an audience that is in proximity to the center of government in this country is an immense and rare privilege. Participant #4 speaks about her understanding of the opportunity that privilege gives her and how that informs what she chooses to present on stage.

What we create on stage reflects what's happening in society... because we are in Washington DC, which is the capital of politics of the world, this is a place where you can actually speak truth to power. Officials of Washington come to see plays here, or their staff members do, who have even more to do with policy. If we can touch their brains in certain ways, then we have done our job.

Risks

Common themes of challenges and risks were repeated throughout most of the interviews. The work of social justice activism can be risky, according to the interviewees, regarding the potential for hostile responses from audiences, or anyone who may oppose the ideals presented in the performances and feel emboldened to counter with threats to reputation, employment, public defaming, or even physical harm. Despite many challenges, pushback, and risks, the artists feel compelled to continue engaging in activism in answer to a need for progressive social change.

Participant #3, who presents stories revolving around reproductive rights, spoke of presenting material that most everyone, whether performer, collaborator or audience member, have deep, complex, and sometimes mixed emotions.

You come up against so much shit that people have internalized about the subject matter. Just so much misinformation that has to be dispelled. And so much charged cultural material surrounding people's rights to

abortion... people aren't, they're just not open to it the way that they are open to like Hello Dolly or Romeo and Juliet; they're just not. So, you really have to balance your artistic sensibilities with the mission driven aspects of the work; people have responded to my plays in very polarized ways...

She went on to talk more specifically about challenges highlighting reproductive issues when considering our culture's limited education on the subject and the shame we adopt as a result.

What are the challenges? I would say that the first word that comes to mind is ignorance. Because I think the work that I do specifically... when you're trying to amplify voices that haven't been heard, stories that haven't been told, our cultural vocabulary surrounding the topics that we have is very limited. Our education about the body, about Physiology, is often very limited. So, you come up against ignorance, you come up against people's shame a lot of the time. And there's a certain level of taboo involved in any of the discussions. It's very risky for the artists to be delving into the subject matter. A lot of them have internalized shame, trauma, misunderstanding about their own bodies. And so, people bring a lot of baggage into the space that typically isn't unpacked, (Participant #3).

Participant #8 compares the emotional risk of doing the work of activism and the physical risk marginalized people can face in their daily lives, and how she bargains taking on the emotional risks as a choice.

The risk is emotional from where I'm working... I think that's why sometimes white people don't want to engage because it feels risky. It feels emotionally risky. When we're thinking about risking what marginalized people face, like the difference between physical risk, like actual physical risk to your body and emotional risk, not that the emotional risk is not important, but it's a different level of risk, right? And so, yeah, I can get over that risk, I can face that risk. I can face that potential emotional pushback or harm or because I think the importance of doing the work overrides whatever kind of pushback I'm going to get.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This study sought to gather experiences from artists who participate in theatre for social change and grasp an understanding of the impact that has on artists. To compare their related experiences, how they reflect another's or differ. And to discover where they draw their inspirations and motivations for engaging in the work of social justice despite potential challenges or risks.

The findings of this study indicate a range of experiences and impacts on artists who use their talents for the purpose of activism and social change. These findings expand on the literature, this study focusses on the impact on the participants, whereas the literature discussed in chapter 2 largely addresses the impact the performances have on audiences (Bowels, 2019; Blackburn, 2018; Vogel and Eckstein, 2018). The participants in this study shared their motivations for engaging in social justice theatre. All participants spoke of their compassion, empathy, and love for other people, especially for those of marginalized identities. Despite whether they themselves experience adversity due to racial identity, gender, or class, they are compelled to do the work of social justice activism in effort to create a more equitable society for everyone. Their contributions to progressive social change are made by the impact they strive to have on their audiences.

The participants in this study each have unique backstories and life experiences which guide their worldviews and influence the art they create. This

study's findings are consistent with the literature discussed which suggests social justice is a motivating factor for all who participate in theatre for social change,(Bowels, 2019; Blackburn, 2018; Vogel and Eckstein, 2018). The findings from this study expand on this by inquiring from each of the participants their personal motivations and inspirations for engaging in the work of social justice theatre. There are countless worthy social issues to address throughout the world, all of which necessitate attention and effort. The participants in this study expressed passion for a range of causes on which they choose to focus their work and create progressive social change on issues they deem most important and personal to them. They emphasized issues of gender equality, racism, white supremacy, and reproductive justice, among others. This study's uniqueness is attributed to the individuals who participated and offered their distinct perspectives.

This study expands on a few themes from the literature review including empathy, politics, and risks. The literature shows the impact performances have on audiences in the ways of inspiring empathy as a tool for social change (Bowels, 2019; Blackburn, 2018; Vogel and Eckstein, 2018). Participants of this study also spoke of the power empathy can play by enriching an audience's understanding of the experiences of others. In addition, this study shows the trait of empathy the participants embody and how that influences their work. Politics and the power of government over people within oppressive systems was addressed in the literature review and expanded upon in this study (Boal, 1974;

Friere, 1968). And risks to those who engage in social justice theatre were addressed in both (Bowels, 2019; Blackburn, 2018; Vogel and Eckstein, 2018).

LIMITATIONS

Despite these discoveries, this study is limited by the small sample size of participants. Eight participants do not sufficiently represent the population of performance artists who engage in theatre for social change. The participants may have felt compelled to give socially desirable answers to the researcher knowing that the researcher is also a theatre artist and is in favor of subversive art forms. The researcher herself is a white cis female who benefits from the privileges of white supremacy. Her privileges are a hindrance to fully understanding the perspectives of those of marginalized identities, which are discussed at length in the interviews. Further research should seek a larger number of participants and include the voices of those representing more diverse backgrounds.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Social Justice theatre may be useful to the profession of social work as an intervention. Theatre for social change can be a powerful tool for presenting narratives which reflect the lived experiences of marginalized populations. It could be effective at empowering people living within oppressive systems to participate in creating progressive social change and liberation.

CONCLUSION

There are two discoveries made in this study which stand out the most. They are the capacity for empathy and love for people the participants display, and that of their courage despite the risk of harm to themselves. The participants spoke on the ways they are impacted by the suffering of others more so than their own struggles. They are compelled to spotlight contentious material at the risk of emotional labor to themselves because to not do so would perpetuate the suffering of those who are the target of oppressive systems. They draw courage to face adversity from the compassion and empathy they possess.

Social justice theatre exists in response to the oppression people of marginalized identities face at no fault of their own. There are many types and methods of protests in the world that anyone can engage in when they feel compelled to act. Theatre for social change is a unique type of activism in the way it presents stories to audiences with live performers. The potential for impact on audiences and the performers is incomparable to any other art form because of the transformative power of the energy exchanged.

APPENDIX A:
INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTERVIEW GUIDE

What does social justice mean to you?

What changes in society would you like to see?

How is social justice theatre useful in effecting change?

Are there any risks involved?

What compels you to engage in social justice theatre?

APPENDIX B:
IRB APPROVAL LETTER

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

October 21, 2022

CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Protocol Change/Modification
IRB-FY2022-218
Status: Approved

Deirdre Lanesskog, Stevie Taken
CSBS - Social Work
California State University, San Bernardino
5500 University Parkway
San Bernardino, California 92407

Dear Deirdre Lanesskog, Stevie Taken:

The protocol change/modification to your application to use human subjects, titled "Subversive Theatre as Activism for Social Justice and the Impact on Participants" has been reviewed and approved by the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). A change in your informed consent requires resubmission of your protocol as amended. Please ensure your CITI Human Subjects Training is kept up-to-date and current throughout the study. A lapse in your approval may result in your not being able to use the data collected during the lapse in your approval.

This approval notice does not replace any departmental or additional campus approvals which may be required including access to CSUSB campus facilities and affiliate campuses. Investigators should consider the changing COVID-19 circumstances based on current CDC, California Department of Public Health, and campus guidance and submit appropriate protocol modifications to the IRB as needed. CSUSB campus and affiliate health screenings should be completed for all campus human research related activities. Human research activities conducted at off-campus sites should follow CDC, California Department of Public Health, and local guidance. See CSUSB's [COVID-19 Prevention Plan](#) for more information regarding campus requirements.

You are required to notify the IRB of the following by submitting the appropriate form (modification, unanticipated/adverse event, renewal, study closure) through the online Cayuse IRB Submission System.

1. If you need to make any changes/modifications to your protocol submit a modification form as the IRB must review all changes before implementing them in your study to ensure the degree of risk has not changed.
2. If any unanticipated adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research

study or project.

3. If your study has not been completed submit a renewal to the IRB.

4. If you are no longer conducting the study or project submit a study closure.

You are required to keep copies of the informed consent forms and data for at least three years.

If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, Research Compliance Officer. Mr. Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at mgillesp@csusb.edu. Please include your application approval number IRB-FY2022-218 in all correspondence.

Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,

King-To Yeung

King-To Yeung, Ph.D., IRB Chair
CSUSB Institutional Review Board

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