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How to Effect Change Through Theatre

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Professor Caroline Good

FYS: Activist Theatre

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How to Effect Change Through Theatre

I have been reading books and watching movies all my life, but I've never seen a play till this year. What struck me the most when I first went was just how personal the story feels when you're watching it unfold right in front of you. It's an incredibly unique and powerful experience, vastly different from the effects of a TV show or novel. That level of connection between production and audience is one of the key reasons that live theatrical performance has been one of the most prevalent and influential forms of communication since the earliest days of society. Every story has a message, and theatre is an exceptional way of conveying that message with heart and soul to an audience. But if all theatre has a message, then what defines activist theatre, the productions with the biggest and most direct impact on those that watch it and society as a whole? Activist theatre can be defined not just through its presentation or stance on a social or political issue, but with its clear and direct call to action; the piece must in some way urge the audience to react to the issue being discussed in a specific way. This is the key factor in turning a production with an activist message into a true piece of activist theatre, and it is clearly present in the productions of The Freedom Theatre and El Teatro Campesino. These two theatre troupes excellently combine cultural influences with social and political messaging to convince their audience of their stance and push them into action.

You're sitting before a darkened stage in an abandoned building somewhere near the Jenin refugee camp in occupied Palestine when two spotlights shine down on the stage. One illuminates a musician surrounded by a myriad of instruments, and the other a small white mat. Several performers walk onto the mat. They're all barefoot, dressed in plain black clothing, and have their hair pulled up. Then, they begin their performance. Except you notice something's missing. Actually, a lot is missing. Where is the set? Where are the props? There are none. The setting, action, plot, movement, characterization, everything is conveyed without physical props or set pieces. Instead, the actors act not just as characters, but as car doors, motorcycle handles, kitchen counters, and anything else they need to communicate the story. On top of that, there are no special effects of any kind. All visuals are performed by actors, and the production's incredible and nuanced sound design is conducted by a single musical performer, who plays not only representative music, but performs all necessary sound effects as well. And all of this is happening within a rectangle not much bigger than the few seats around you. Or, as the program in your hand explains it, a stage "as big as Palestine." This combination of unique and powerful techniques allows you to hear their message, their call to action, and in general be amazed at the time and dedication put into this production, *Return to Palestine* (2017), by The Freedom Theatre.

This experimental and radical production follows Jad, the son of Palestinian refugees now living in America, as he returns to his homeland in search of a better understanding of the conflict facing his people and a stronger connection to his cultural identity. Along the way, he learns a great deal about the oppression of the Israeli occupation, choosing to stay and fight instead of returning home like he originally planned.

Return to Palestine provides strong and personal commentary on an incredibly divisive and yet overlooked contemporary social and political issue. The Israel-Palestine conflict is one with an intense and bloody history, often told from the Israeli perspective. It's crucial that this does not remain the case, as it's one of their founding tenets that "the occupation of the mind was more dangerous than the occupation of the body" (Schneider). Rarely in the West is the Palestinian side ever represented. And while this play is usually performed around Palestine and the surrounding region, whenever The Freedom Theatre takes it abroad, they always follow it with workshops and discussions aimed at raising awareness of the Palestinian struggle, debunking misinformation and spreading the truth to all who will listen. This is a perspective that is desperately needed, with so few people truly understanding the nature of the conflict.

Return to Palestine paints that picture very clearly, with an unabashed bias towards the plight of the Palestinian people. The Israeli military is consistently and undeniably portrayed as the antagonists, with main characters struggling to simply travel through their country without being stopped and harassed, told where they can and cannot go, and facing oppression at every turn. This oppression is a critical aspect of the production. But again, message alone isn't enough to qualify as activist theatre. It's the production's final scene, in which Jad decides to remain in Palestine to fight for his people in an emotional and eloquent soliloquy, explaining why he feels that that is more important than returning to his family, why the people of Palestine are facing such intense oppression, and indirectly urging the audience to take a stand along with him that make *Return to Palestine* an incredible and complex example of the ways emotion and culture can be effectively combined into an excellent and moving piece of activist theatre.

You can feel the searing heat burning the back of your neck as the people surrounding you shuffle around the back of the flatbed truck. You were just on your way to the store to pick up some groceries when you noticed this unusual crowd gathered a little down the road. As you approach, a few people climb up onto the back of the truck. Based on their clothing and demeanor, you guess they're farm workers. Your assumption is proven right as they briefly explain who they are: a group of farm workers on strike. They're called El Teatro Campesino, and they're here to perform a few skits, or "actos". The performances are short but surprisingly effective. With no real set to speak of, and very basic props, they rely their acting and communication skills to convey their stories. For one, they have some cardboard signs tied around their neck. For another, they put on various different hats and act according to their hats. Despite the variety in the actos, they all have a common theme: the struggles of Latino farm workers.

El Teatro Campesino was born out of the Delano Grape Strike, in which over ten thousand largely Latino and immigrant farm workers went on strike to fight the ways in which they were being exploited by major agriculture companies. After five grueling years of picketing, the strike was eventually a success, with the unions receiving all of their demands, improving working conditions, pay rates, and overall quality of life for thousands of immigrant farmworkers. This was largely due to the strike generating "the most successful consumer boycott in the history of the United States" (Garcia). And one of the primary ways the picketers convinced consumers to join their boycott was through the actos of El Teatro Campesino.

These skits were short and straight to the point. Many highlighted the injustices faced by the farmworkers, the poor working conditions, unfair compensation, predatory agricultural practices, and dozens of other issues. Other actos were more direct in their explanation of why

the farmworkers were striking, or why people shouldn't cross the picket line. These complex and intense social issues are "played with a positivistic approach that do not just appeal the audience, but helps them develop a sense of awareness and empowerment" (Butticé). Whatever the theme was, the actos were very clear and vivid in their communication of them. Often being formed quite literally on a picket line, there was no doubt in their messaging or their call to action, and therefore no doubt that each and every acto was an incredible piece of activist theatre.

These two pieces of theatre have been hugely influential in their impact on society and politics. Both are still operating to this day, with The Freedom Theatre expanding its reach and El Teatro Campesino covering broader and more diverse topics, each continuing their proud history of changing minds through theatre, which is truly its most powerful ability. The theatre may have started as a form of entertainment and recreation, but it quickly became an engine of communication and change, arguably one of the most effective ones out there. No other medium can come close to achieving the level of connection and communication possible with a well trained and thought-out theatrical production and an engaged and participatory audience. And in a time characterized by conflict and social issues, the power of change that activist theater can bring is absolutely crucial. Because as much as people would like to believe it, history isn't over just yet. The world around us is still very much in motion. If we want to ensure things towards a better future, then we need groups like The Freedom Theatre and El Teatro Campesino to keep showing people the incredibly powerful, personal, and emotional ways theatre can be used to effect change.

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