

RESEARCH PROPSAL

by EDMUND CHOW

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Background

I received my M.A (Educational Theatre) from New York University in 2007, with a specialisation in applied theatre with grassroots communities, having already taught drama and lifeskills to both secondary students and prison inmates in Singapore for a number of years, which I continued until 2011. From my practice, I have observed that participants often bring into a theatrical space their social and personal issues. The social dynamics are played out in their dramas. Through dramatic conventions and interventions, theatre offered the participants perspective-taking, community-bonding, and relief.

My PhD research is a deeper and wider exploration on the functions and effects of theatre with grassroots and disenfranchised communities. More specifically, the principal objective is to investigate and document the contemporary theatre of Afghanistan in the post-Taliban period, and to observe critically the impact and functions of theatre arts as embodied practices in the last 10 years.

Research Question

Essentially, the question to be asked is: *What are the functions and meanings of contemporary theatre in post-Taliban Afghanistan?*

Research in theatre and performance has examined the relations between performance and war (see Hughes 2011, Thompson 2009, Kuftinec 2009, Thompson, Hughes & Balfour 2009, Balfour 2001, Obeyesekere 1999), with an identification of key themes on the controversial functions of theatre (peacebuilding, healing, reconciliation, protest, affect, nationalism), its intended and unintended effects (remembering, testimony, trauma), forms of engagement and delivery (local-global, insider-outsider, interventionism-propaganda), as well as the complexities of representation and the ethics in research (use of new technologies). In part, this study is an extension of the investigation on performance in war zones, specifically in Afghanistan – a site that has so far been excluded from in-depth fieldwork due to security reasons.

Following the interdisciplinary inquiry in anthropology and theatre (see Shevtsova 2009, Turner 1987, Schechner 1985), this study locates both performance defined as “a doing and a thing done” (Austin 1955) and performativity defined as “citationality” (Butler 1993) as forms and practices embedded within cultural norms (see Worthen 1998, Diamond 1996). Researchers have used the verb ‘performing’ in Performance Studies, from ‘performing’ the war on terror (e.g. Brady 2012), to ‘performing’ social roles in everyday lives (e.g. Goffman 1990). ‘Performance’ analyses of contemporary texts and theatre productions are sometimes investigated (see Hughes 2011), but many of these studies primarily focused on cultural performances outside institutional theatre settings. This research will thus examine the performance styles, forms, and practices from within the Afghan National Theatre as iterative practices reflective of the Afghan social condition.

Justification

This study is motivated by the limited research on Afghan theatres (e.g. Grima (1992) on performance of emotion among Paktun women; Mills (1991) on the rhetorics and politics of Afghan traditional storytelling; Gartenstein-Ross and May (2010) on Afghan-Pakistan ‘performance’ on militant Islam and security; and Khan Aqa Soroor (2000) on a brief chronology of folk forms and celebrity actors and directors). In a more definitive book on Afghan culture, music and film appear to be the more dominant performance arts, with no mention of theatre (see Loewen & McMichael 2010). So this will be the first detailed study to fill the literature gap, by documenting the history of the National Theatre, and interrogating larger issues around culture and society. More specifically, this study seeks to map out the types of performances, motifs and themes embedded in their plays, the behaviours and gestures adopted in movement and styles, their sources of funding, and where, why, and how these are performed.

More importantly, this research study raises ethical questions on war-making, especially if conflict is a result of “performed practices of violence” (see Thompson et al 2009). Afghanistan is in a precarious political position; it is trying to reconstruct itself even though it is still embroiled in internal and external conflicts. This research seeks to explore the relationship between theatre making and the current state of the conflict. Critically, it will

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examine how theatre organisations and professionals have worked with communities through the arts, in order to investigate the impact international presence and their policies have on cultural and institutional practice.

Design

To examine the forms and functions of contemporary Afghan theatre, this research involves a close study and collaboration with Afghan actors from the National Theatre as the first point of entry.

The scope includes a critical observation on performance practices (e.g. types of cultural performances, theatre forms including puppetry and circus, the content of the plays, themes and issues discussed, rehearsal techniques including methods of playwriting and storytelling, audition practices, and audience's reactions to the plays), institutional practices and ideology, as well as artists' motivations, and theatrical influences.

The design of this study takes on an **ethnographic** approach. It will span 12 months, which will be a substantial period in the second year of my PhD study.

To understand a culture that is foreign, it is necessary for the researcher to limit cross-cultural barriers. Time is needed to learn the language and culture, while developing trust between researcher and subjects. Ethnographers recommend a timeframe between six months to a year for fieldwork (see Doheny-Farina & Odell 1985), or more to allay suspicions of locals towards cultural ethnographers (see Robben & Sluka 2007). To enhance cross-cultural communication, I am currently studying the Persian language.

Where methods are concerned, **interviews** will be recorded, translated and transcribed; the rehearsal process and performances will be **photographed** and **filmed** for closer analysis; and **literature** of theatre history, if any, as well as brochures of previous productions will be collected and further analysed.

As a **participant-observer** of these processes, I will engage in pieces of self-reflexive ethnographic writing, where common themes and debates will be examined.

Ethics

There are complexities to the logistical and ethical arrangements, from safety and security of persons involved to confidentiality of data and datakeeping. I have made – and am still making – relevant contacts with various organisations in Kabul, and partnerships have been forged. A more detailed report will be submitted to the Ethics Committee of the University of Manchester for final ethics clearance and approval.

Further Queries

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