

CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGE IN COMMUNITY THEATRE: GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

Cross-cultural exchange in community theatre provides a distinctive and dynamic lens through which global ideas can be investigated and comprehended. This research investigates the multiple interactions and influences that occur when various cultural expressions intersect in community theatre contexts. The study examines numerous case studies from diverse countries to demonstrate how community theatre acts as a platform for cultural discussion, encouraging mutual understanding, respect, and creative creativity among participants. The paper examines the mechanics of cultural adaptation, the obstacles and opportunities of cross-cultural collaboration, and the transforming influence on local communities. The case studies demonstrate how community theatre may bridge cultural boundaries, improve social cohesion, and increase creative expression by bringing various cultural narratives and artistic traditions together. The study also looks at how practitioners might facilitate these conversations, highlighting the importance of cultural awareness, adaptability, and new techniques. The findings highlight community theatre's ability to serve as a catalyst for social change, encouraging communities to embrace diversity and collaborate on common goals. This research intends to add to the larger conversation on cultural exchange and give useful insights for practitioners, scholars, and policymakers interested in the transformative impact of community theatre in a global setting. Finally, the paper urges for the acknowledgment and promotion of community theatre as an important component of cultural diplomacy and international cooperation.

Keywords: Cross-cultural Exchange, Community Theatre, Cultural Adaptation, Social Cohesion, Cultural Diplomacy

Introduction

Community theatre is a theatrical production created to address a specific issue in a community. Usually created by and for the community, this type of theatre performance aims to solve a problem that has been identified as impeding the development of the community in question (Ushie, 2020). It is also called a performance created entirely within the community without assistance from outside parties, a collaboration between community members who are not professionals and professional theatre facilitators, or a performance created entirely by theatre professionals and directed towards a specific community (Simon and Delyse, 2015, quoted in Ushie, 2020). Diang'a and Kebaya (2016), says that contrary to eminent theatrical productions, the bulk of Community theatre groups in the area employ storytelling, dramatic conversation, drumming, dance, oration, and post-performance debates in an interactive sphere between the performers and the audience (community members). Most of the time, during the performances, it is difficult to tell who is performing and who is watching because audience members frequently join the performers on their own volition.

Community theatre provides direct chances for community members to take part in the development and staging of local plays. Two benefits come from having community people actively involved in this dramaturgical process. They are; it enhances cultural authenticity and Representation and it increases community engagement and empowerment. One of the key components of community theatre is instilling a sense of ownership in the participants' own cultural history, which is something that the performance helps to achieve (Kellin, 2001, p. 155). In addition, there are artifacts and indicators of the community's broader socio-political and economic structure inside this sense of its cultural heritage. Thus, community involvement in the dramaturgy process is crucial since it aids in capturing the essence of the songs, dances, and storytelling inside the community. These narratives, melodies, and dances have the power to convey both prevailing and opposing views of the community (Kershaw, 1992, p. 246)

In community theatre, "cross-cultural exchange" describes the process by which people from many cultural backgrounds join together to share, cooperate, and learn through theatrical endeavors. In the context of

community theatre, this exchange entails a dynamic engagement in which many cultural expressions and views are presented, negotiated, and synthesized (Gonzalez, 2017). Through the production of scripts, staging, and performance techniques that incorporate many cultural characteristics, people from different cultural backgrounds collaborate to create performances in community theatre initiatives.

Also, Community theatre provides avenues for the exploration and public presentation of various cultural narratives. These areas give cultural narratives a platform so that others can hear them and appreciate them (Cohen-Cruz, 2012). Events like community gatherings, festivals, and workshops allow various ethnic groups to interact directly. Through shared experiences, these activities foster respect and understanding amongst people (Seymour, 2008). An example of cross-cultural exchange in community theatre is Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed which facilitated cross-cultural dialogue and social change (Boal, 1995) and the Tanghalang Pilipino in the Philippines which showcases how community theatre can bring together diverse cultural traditions to address social issues (Duby, Marc & Lauwrens, Jenni, 2022).

So, it is evident that cross-cultural exchange in community theatre is an effective means of promoting understanding amongst people, social cohesiveness, and cultural enrichment as community theatre fosters a collaborative environment where various artistic traditions and cultural narratives can coexist and thrive by uniting people from different origins. Community theatre is a vital part of the global cultural debate because it is an open and dynamic type of theatre that promotes international cooperation and cultural diplomacy.

Origins and Evolution of Community Theatre

The origin of Community Theatre can be found in the collective performances of classical Greece and Rome (Martino, 2024). In these countries, plays that frequently addressed social, political, and cultural topics were seen by the public during theatre events. Because these early theatre forms represented the ideals and issues of the community, they were by nature community-oriented. Collaborative performance is ingrained in the long-standing traditions of many indigenous civilizations worldwide. These performances, which aimed to preserve and transmit cultural knowledge and customs, frequently combined storytelling, dance, and song (Mbara, 2017).

In the early 20th century, Community Theatre experienced a comeback, especially in reaction to social and political events. Groups like the Workers' Theatre Movement in the UK and the Federal Theatre Project in the US used theatre as a vehicle for activism and education, addressing social issues and involving communities via performance (Haisan, 2020). Community theatre grew significantly following World War II as part of larger initiatives for community development and cultural revitalization. Community theaters were founded in several nations to promote their respective national and cultural identities (Inyang, 2016). The amateur theatre movement grew during the 1950s and 60s, as community theatres were founded in towns and cities all over the world. These theatres produced plays that were pertinent to their communities and gave local talent a stage (O'gorman, 2019)

Community theatre and social reform movements developed a tight relationship in the 1960s and 1970s. Theatre professionals addressed gender equality, civil rights, and other important societal issues through the medium (Haisan, 2020). The emergence of theater as a vehicle for social change gave rise to strategies like Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, which promoted audience involvement and engagement with social issues. During this time, grassroots theater movements gained popularity, emphasizing the inclusion of underrepresented voices and local storytelling (Haisan, 2020).

Community theatre has evolved into a more professional industry in recent years, with numerous companies now getting financial assistance from both governmental and non-governmental institutions (Inyang, 2016). With community theaters presenting a broad variety of plays, from classic works to fresh, creative compositions that address current themes, the diversity of shows has also risen. Additionally, the frequency of collaborative initiatives amongst international theater companies has increased, resulting in a better exchange of ideas and practices. Community theatre is still developing today, with a major emphasis on representation and inclusivity (Donelli, 2021). In order to ensure that their plays reflect a wide range of cultural experiences, theater groups deliberately seek out to involve diverse communities.

Case Studies of Philippines in Asia and Brazil in Latin America From Latin America–Brazil

Theatre of the oppressed is a community theatre in Brazil developed by Augusto Boal in the 1970s (Demirdiř, Muharrem, 2023). Theatre of the Oppressed is a form of community theatre that uses performance as a means of promoting social and political change. Its main objectives are to empower marginalized communities by giving them a voice through theatre and to encourage dialogue and critical thinking about social issues (Katsaridou, Martha & Vio, Koldobika, 2015). In Theatre of the oppressed, a play is performed, and audience members are invited to step into the roles to explore different outcomes and solutions to the problems presented, participants use their bodies to create images that represent their experiences and issues, fostering empathy and understanding (Sajani, N., et al, 2020).

More interestingly, actors perform in public spaces without the audience knowing it's a performance, challenging social norms and behaviors. Theatre of the Oppressed has been used worldwide to address issues like racism, sexism, and economic inequality, it creates a safe space for participants to express their concerns and explore solutions collaboratively and this methodology has been adopted and adapted in various cultural contexts, demonstrating its universal applicability (Demirdiř, Muharrem, 2023),

From Asia- Philippines

The Cultural Center of the Philippines' (CCP) resident theater company is called Tanghalang Pilipino (Cultural Centre of the Philippines). It was founded with the intention of producing, advancing, and popularizing Filipino theater that honors the nation's rich cultural legacy. Through theater, the group hopes to honor and maintain Filipino culture, promoting pride in the country and furthering the growth of Philippine theater arts. Tanghalang Pilipino is a theater company that produces a wide variety of plays, including adaptations of foreign texts, modern plays, and traditional Filipino plays. The company engages a wider audience and develops fresh talent through community outreach, training programs, and seminars (Diamond, 1997).

Tanghalang Pilipino has a history of bringing international plays and literary works into Filipino settings while maintaining the spirit of the original works, making them relevant to local audiences. Among them are the Filipino-reimagined version of Shakespeare's play "Der Kaufmann" (The Merchant of Venice), which explores themes of justice and discrimination that are relevant to modern-day Filipino society (word press, 2013), and Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman" (Pahimakassa Isang Ahente), which is adapted and set within the struggles of a Filipino family, emphasizing issues of familial expectations and economic hardship (Word press, 2014). By viewing universal themes via a Filipino lens, these adaptations help close cultural divides by making the subjects more approachable and relatable to local viewers.

By exposing Filipino audiences to classic works of foreign drama and literature, they help foster cultural exchange (Malabanan, 2022). In order to incorporate a variety of viewpoints into its performances and promote intercultural communication, Tanghalang Pilipino often works with theater groups and artists from around the world. One instance is the Theater Exchange between the Philippines and Japan, which has led to collaborative shows and cross-cultural interactions, improving understanding and fostering artistic development (Takiguchi, 2011). Through these partnerships, Filipino theater artists are exposed to international techniques and trends, which improve their abilities and expand their creative horizons. Through collaborative productions and tours, they also give foreign audiences the chance to engage with Filipino culture.

Tanghalang Pilipino incorporates traditional music, dance, and storytelling into their plays in order to highlight the Philippines' many indigenous cultures. An example is the "Mga Ama, Mga Anak" (Fathers and Sons), a play that incorporates traditional Filipino values and indigenous practices, providing a platform for indigenous voices and narratives (Word Press, 2014). These productions promote the preservation and appreciation of indigenous cultures, ensuring that traditional practices and stories are passed down to future generations, they also foster a deeper understanding and respect for the cultural diversity within the Philippines, promoting national unity.

Comparative Analysis of the Case Studies

1. Cultural Exchange Mechanisms

Philippines focus on integrating diverse cultural elements into their performances, while **Brazil** emphasizes interactive methods to engage communities directly in the process of cultural exchange. Both initiatives incorporate traditional practices and collaborate with different cultural groups, but the Philippines' approach includes significant international collaborations, enhancing global cultural exchange.

2. Social Impact

Brazil's "Theatre of the Oppressed" emphasizes social cohesion and activism and targets specific social issues and marginalized communities. On the other hand, **Tanghalang Pilipino** in the Philippines balances cultural preservation with innovation, using adaptations and collaborations to stay relevant in a global context.

3. Artistic Approaches

Philippines combine traditional and contemporary techniques, adapting foreign works and showcasing indigenous cultures. **Brazil's** methods are more radical and participatory, aiming to empower and activate audiences through engagement and direct involvement in the performance process.

In all, the Philippines' "Tanghalang Pilipino," and Brazil's "Theatre of the Oppressed" each provide valuable insights into how community theatre can facilitate cross-cultural exchange and address social issues. While their methods and focuses vary, they both demonstrate the transformative power of theatre in promoting cultural understanding, social cohesion, and community empowerment.

Mechanisms of Cross-Cultural Exchange in Community Theatre

By fusing diverse cultural components into its plays, Community Theatre acts as a potent vehicle for intercultural communication. Here, we look at how language, dance, and other cultural components are used by Community Theatre to promote cross-cultural dialogue.

1. Language: Use of Translation and Multilingual Performances

Community theatre frequently translates plays from other cultures into the native tongue in order to adapt them (Garles, 2011). Through this procedure, the core of the original work is preserved while making foreign stories accessible to local audiences. Subtitles or supertitles can be used to make sure that the audience understands the conversation in performances that stay in the original language. This method makes the performance inclusive while preserving the integrity of the original language. In certain community theater productions, several languages are used in one performance (Garles, 2011). This encourages viewers to respect many languages and represents the linguistic diversity of the community.

2. Music and Dance: Incorporation of Diverse Musical and Dance Traditions

In order to generate distinctive sounds that represent the diversity of the participants, Community Theater frequently combines musical traditions from other nations. Traditional instruments, tunes, and rhythms from many cultural origins can be incorporated into this fusion (Lewis, Jerome, 2013). Theater shows can incorporate live music performances by musicians from diverse cultural backgrounds. This gives musicians a platform to share their heritage and improve the authenticity of the cultural portrayal. It is possible to include a variety of dance styles into a play's plot to highlight the rhythms and movements that are particular to various civilizations. This covers classical dance forms, modern dance genres, and traditional folk dances (Lewis, Jerome, 2013).

3. Cultural Elements: Adaptation of Traditional Practices for a Global Audience

Culturally-specific traditional storytelling methods can be modified for community theater productions. This includes utilizing folktales, myths, and legends to communicate universal themes and morals (Adie, Edward & Afo, Donaldson, 2018). Various cultural rites and practices can be included into performances by community theater (Asante, 2020). This could include celebrations, rituals, and traditional dress, offering an insight into the customs of many societies. Additionally, customs can be modified to suit the performance's particular themes or the modern setting (Asante, 2020). This guarantees that the cultural components are pertinent and appealing to a worldwide viewership.

In all, through the imaginative application of language, music, dance, and cultural components, Community Theater promotes intercultural dialogue. Community theatre fosters a dynamic environment for cross-cultural communication and understanding by embracing translation and multilingual performances, combining a variety of musical and dance traditions, and adapting traditional methods for a global audience. These techniques support the overarching objective of promoting intercultural harmony and respect in addition to improving the artistic caliber of the performances.

Challenges and Opportunities Faced in Cross-Cultural Exchange in Community Theatre

Community theatre faces common challenges such as cultural misunderstandings and logistical issues. Cultural misunderstandings can arise when diverse cultural expressions are integrated into performances, leading to potential misinterpretations or misrepresentations of traditions and values (U., Adie & Okoro., et al, 2014). These misunderstandings can hinder the authentic portrayal of cultural narratives and cause friction among participants. Logistical issues, including limited resources, funding constraints, and coordination difficulties, further complicate the production and dissemination of community theatre projects (Scholarworks@gvsu & Balfour, 2011). Ensuring the availability of venues, securing financial support, and managing the schedules of diverse cast members can be significant hurdles (Scholarworks@gvsu & Balfour, 2011).

Despite these challenges, community theatre offers substantial opportunities for growth. Fostering international collaborations can enrich the creative process by incorporating diverse perspectives and techniques, enhancing the quality and appeal of productions (Shulamith, 2010). These collaborations can lead to cultural exchanges that broaden participants' horizons and promote global understanding. Additionally, developing new artistic forms by blending traditional and contemporary practices can innovate the theatre landscape. This approach allows for the creation of unique, hybrid performances that resonate with a wide range of audiences (Asante, 2020). By addressing challenges and leveraging opportunities, community theatre can continue to evolve and make a meaningful impact on cultural dialogue and artistic expression.

Impact of Cross-Cultural Exchange in Community Theatre on Local Communities

Community theatre significantly enhances social cohesion and cultural appreciation by bringing diverse groups together to share and celebrate their cultural narratives (U., Adie & Okoro., et al, 2014). It fosters a sense of unity and belonging as individuals collaborate on creative projects, breaking down social barriers and building mutual respect. For example, Tanghalang Pilipino in the Philippines as aforementioned showcases indigenous and contemporary Filipino culture, enhancing cultural appreciation among audiences and participants alike.

The transformative impact of community theatre on local communities is evident in various initiatives. Brazil's Theatre of the Oppressed as aforementioned also empowers marginalized groups to voice their concerns and explore solutions through interactive performances, leading to increased community engagement and social activism. In the Philippines, Tanghalang Pilipino's adaptations of foreign works foster a greater appreciation for both local and global cultures, while workshops and collaborations with international artists expand the artistic horizons of local performers. These aforementioned case studies illustrate how community theatre not only strengthens social bonds but also nurtures a deeper understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity, ultimately contributing to more cohesive and culturally enriched communities.

Skills and Training Needed for Successful Cross-Cultural Community Theatre

Successful cross-cultural community theatre requires a blend of artistic, interpersonal, and cultural skills. Practitioners need to possess strong communication abilities to navigate language barriers and facilitate dialogue among diverse participants (Ilie, Oana-Antonia, 2019). Cultural sensitivity and awareness are crucial for understanding and respecting different traditions and values (Inyang, 2016). Adaptability allows practitioners to modify their approaches based on the cultural contexts they engage with, ensuring inclusivity and relevance. Additionally, collaboration and teamwork skills are essential for fostering a cooperative and creative environment (Shulamith, 2010).

Training programs for theatre practitioners emphasize these skills through various methods. Workshops on cultural competency provide insights into different cultural practices and effective ways to engage with them (Uher., et al, 2023). Language training, including basic phrases and cultural idioms, can bridge communication gaps and enhance mutual understanding. Role-playing and immersive experiences allow practitioners to practice adaptability and problem-solving in real-time scenarios (Garles, 2011). Best practices include ongoing cultural education, seeking input from community members, and incorporating diverse cultural elements into performances authentically. By prioritizing continuous learning and community engagement, theatre practitioners can create impactful cross-cultural theatre that resonates with diverse audiences and fosters cultural exchange. These training programs and best practices ensure that practitioners are well-equipped to navigate the complexities of cross-cultural community theatre.

Conclusion

Some important conclusions from research on cross-cultural exchange in community theatre are as follows: Through collaborative creative initiatives, community theatre efficiently promotes cultural awareness and social solidarity among disparate groups. As demonstrated by Brazil's Theatre of the Oppressed, it tackles social issues and strengthens neglected communities. The Philippine theater company Tanghalang Pilipino serves as an example of the benefits of cross-cultural exchanges and partnerships. Cultural misunderstandings and administrative difficulties are frequent obstacles, but they are countered by growth-promoting chances like international cooperation and the creation of novel artistic forms.

Further investigation into the enduring effects of community theatre on both participants and spectators might yield more profound understanding of its transformative capacity. Examining how digital platforms support intercultural theater both during and after pandemics may open up new opportunities for international cooperation. Furthermore, comparative research between various locales and cultural backgrounds may provide light on commonalities and distinctive methods, enhancing the international conversation about community theatre.

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of community theatre as a weapon for international collaboration and cultural diplomacy. As a grassroots method of cultural exchange, it brings people together to exchange viewpoints, customs, and tales. Community theatre promotes respect and understanding between people, which makes the world a more harmonious and peaceful place. It offers a forum for communication and cooperation, dismantling barriers based on cultural differences and fostering global solidarity.

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