

Forum Theatre, Disability and Corporeality: A Project on Sexuality in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This article discusses *Visionaries*, a forum theatre project on sexuality and disability in Zimbabwe. Focus is placed on the notion of beauty and its association with myths of sexuality among disabled and non-disabled persons. The paper posits that forum theatre can be a significant site to negotiate the complexities and possibilities of disability and sexual corporeality.

This article discusses *Visionaries*, a forum theatre production which explores the relationship between politics of corporeal beauty and sexuality in the context of disability discourses. *Visionaries* was devised and performed by disabled students from the University of Zimbabwe in partnership with theatre arts students from the same institution. The authors of this article were facilitators of this action research project. The sexuality of disabled people is a subject that is yet to gain sufficient attention in both academic and public spheres in a conservative Zimbabwean society. Several myths surrounding the subject complicate the matter (Chivandikwa; Matereke and Mungwini 2). The challenge then becomes one of identifying strategies of contesting stereotypical and normative constructions of physicality, while at the same time empowering the marginalised. Performance on and by disabled people has been identified as one of the strategies through which myths and stereotypes on the bodies of disabled people can be deconstructed (Kuppers and Marcus 150). Performance seems to occupy a central place in exploring, subverting, negotiating and affirming 'the meanings of bodies' (Kuppers, 'Unknown Body' 129). The central questions guiding the analysis of *Visionaries* are:

- a) What are the possibilities and complications of using forum theatre in negotiating the politics of sexual corporeality in Zimbabwe?

- b) How can insights from forum theatre productions impact and benefit disabled people?

The article's contribution is in the form of three observations emerging from the analysis. First, inspired by the recognition that performance enables 'bodies, metaphors and breaths' to come into contact with each other (Kuppers and Marcus 151), the article argues that the simultaneous dramatisation of pain (oppression), pleasure, humour and 'seriousness' in forum theatre can activate participants into deep engagement and awareness of the dynamics and complexities of aspects of the sexuality of disabled people. Second, forum theatre performances can destabilise the boundary between the private and public dimensions of alternative sexual corporealities. Lastly, in the context of action research, ideas from forum theatre discussions can be 'immediately' implemented in the ontological realities of oppressed groups.

Background and Context of the Play

We had always wanted to facilitate an applied theatre project with disabled students, who are at the periphery of cultural, social and political spheres at the university. However, our efforts were met with various barriers which included the reluctance of the students to participate in theatre because at that time (2007-09) most students were out of campus residence because of serious water shortages at the university. This made it difficult to get sufficient time to participate in rehearsals. An opportunity came in 2010 when the Director of the Disability Resource Centre invited members of the Faculty of Arts to respond to specific concerns on matters affecting the academic and social lives of disabled students.

At this meeting we were to respond to the question of why our department (Theatre Arts) did not recruit disabled students. While this question was factually accurate, we did not have sufficient knowledge to determine whether this was because of departmental policy. However, we seized the opportunity to invite students to collectively devise an applied theatre project which would explore possible solutions to the challenges faced by disabled students at the University. The students agreed to participate in the project. However, because of the heterogeneity of the group, it was decided to include several plays focusing on a

variety of challenges faced by different groups of disabled students. One group decided to focus on albinism and harassment in lectures, the second on disability and marginalisation in sports participation, while the third focused on physical disability and medical oppression. The fourth group, which is the focus of this paper, decided to focus on disability and sexual politics.

Initially, *Visionaries* had three visually challenged students from the faculties of law, social science and engineering. Three female theatre arts students were invited to assist in basic acting and playmaking processes. After the first performances of all the plays at the inaugural University of Zimbabwe Disability Arts Festival held in April 2011, the increased awareness of *Visionaries* grew and there were several requests to have the play performed at various forums in Zimbabwe and South Africa.

This project is set against a background of Zimbabwean society which has been and continues to be concerned about the shape, size, nature and configuration of the body in conceptualising economic, social and political citizenship. Zimbabwean society has created barriers, discourses and structures that regulate sexual relations and practice. For example social norms stipulate *rooranai vematongo* ('do not marry a stranger'). Metaphorically, those whose corporeality is untypical are strangers, whose sexual behaviour and expression should be regulated and controlled.

Visionaries: Performance Text

Cliff fails to resist Kim's sexual advances. Kim's motivation for seeking a sexual relationship with Cliff is the myth peddled by her friend Regina that having a sexual relationship with a visually challenged man enhances her chances of securing the love of rich Nokia, the 'coolest' young man on campus. Regina also points out that Kim's sexually transmitted infection will be miraculously cured if she engages in a sexual relationship with Cliff. Cliff's struggle to resist Kim's seduction is compounded by pressure from Hardlife (Cliff's visually challenged friend) who regards Kim as a 'perfect gift from God'. *Visionaries*, is an improvisational text that maintains a basic structure while leaving room to incorporate suggestions and debates from forum sessions. The basic performance text is as follows:

- i) A health officer demonstrates the proper use of a condom. Cliff, Hardlife and Norma are clearly out of the discussion. The Health Officer refuses to assist the disabled trio from accessing information as he considers them angels of God who do not indulge in sex.
- ii) Regina and Kim: Regina advises Kim to seduce Cliff in order to win Nokia and also to have her sexually transmitted infection cured.
- iii) Kim and Cliff: Kim makes several attempts to seduce Cliff.
- iv) Hardlife and Cliff: Cliff tells Hardlife that he is fed up of Kim's advances. Hardlife insists that Cliff should seize the opportunity to get a 'perfect gift from God', unlike Cliff's current girlfriend who has 'several defects'.
- v) Cliff and Norma: Kim enters to disrupt the two young lovers. Norma protests by bolting out of the room. Cliff eventually succumbs to Kim's seduction.
- vi) Kim and Cliff: Kim insists on having sex with Cliff without a condom. Cliff is reluctant. Cliff struggles to open a condom while Kim refuses to assist him. Cliff gives up on his attempt and proceeds to have unprotected sex.

Forms and levels of oppression in *Visionaries* do not strictly adhere to the conventional Boalian forum theatre in which there is a single, unmistakable embodied antagonist (Baxter 140). Instead, *Visionaries* has several oppressors and antagonists. The main protagonist is Cliff, while Kim is the main antagonist. However, Kim also oppresses Norma. The health officer oppresses Cliff, Norma and Hardlife. Hardlife is an embodiment of internalised disability oppression. These 'innovations' came from the disabled students who expressed that they did not want to have a single oppressor to show the complexities of oppression that they faced.

Forum Sessions: Politics of Sexuality and Corporeal Misrecognition

This article focuses on public performances at the University of

Zimbabwe, Midlands State University and the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa. The Midlands State University performance was held on 16 October on the occasion to commemorate HIV awareness among disabled students. The University of Witwatersrand performance was held during the Drama for Life (DFL) annual *Sex- Actually Festival* (1-9 September 2011). In all these performances, most forum interventions focused on the politics of sexual relations, particularly the misrecognition of sexual corporeality of disabled students. A lot of interest was also generated around the possibilities and challenges of sexual relations between able bodied and disabled students.

At the University of Zimbabwe performance, a male student suggested to Cliff in a hot seating session that there was no genuine sexual relationship between an able bodied student and a disabled student, to which Cliff wittily retorted: 'how could I lose such an opportunity to enjoy those fleshy hips?' At the same time, this scenario generated intense debate as some female students intervened to replace Norma in order to challenge Kim. One male student suggested to Cliff that he should insist on using a condom. Cliff responded that it was a good suggestion as long as 'you lend me a pair of eyes' to be able to open the condom. Here we see how disabled performers can use the fictional context to celebrate difference and affirm 'the pleasures of disabled lives, different sensoria or ways of being in the world' (Kuppers and Marcus 143). At the Witwatersrand performance, one young non- disabled lady implored Cliff to have his sexually transmitted infection treated and go back to Norma. While some male disabled students cheered this suggestion, most disabled girls protested. The same suggestion was hinted at the Midlands State University performance, prompting one visually challenged female student to remark that, going back to Norma was an unacceptable oppression which must be dealt with. She highlighted that male disabled students become interested in "us" after they have been "used" and dumped by their angels'. Another interesting response was on the celebration of the virility of visually challenged people. This is the scene between Regina and Kim where the former peddles the myth that visually challenged people are highly erotic because, '*vakakubata maimwana munozhamba*' ('when a visually challenged person caresses you, you will lose your mind with erotic pleasure').

At the Midlands State University and the University of Zimbabwe performances, this scenario drew wild cheers of approval from disabled male students as if to 'market' their erotic prowess. One male visually challenged student remarked that this was a 'scientific fact' because disabled males compensate for their lack of sight with an 'electrifying sense of touch'. Clearly forum theatre sessions provided space to expose, challenge and debate the misrecognition of disability sexual corporeality (Peumans 94).

Eroticism, Desire and the Disabled Body

The disabled body has been rendered sexless and disability discourse has not been sensitive to the sexual corporeality of disabled people (Shakespeare 179). In *Visionaries*, there is an attempt to re-invest focus on the 'disabled body' by investigating the deep concerns, desires and experiences of disabled people. The characters in the play who inhabit 'affected' bodies reveal their emotional and sensual lives that go beyond the stereotypical representations of mainstream cultural medium (Rembis 52). Cliff and his girlfriend, Norma, are shown as experiencing a healthy physical relationship and exhibiting and exchanging emotional energies usually 'denied' or ignored in normative discourses about the disabled body. Through their flourishing relationship, there is a displacement of the concept of 'lack', which resonates with what Gudlin refers to as a construction of 'not so sexy bodies but nonetheless sexy beings' (14). The two characters in love show that they have a positive relationship with their 'undesirable' bodies as they desire each other, an adverse challenge to the dichotomy of body and affection, physical attractiveness and sexiness. Society's narcissism of bodily configuration is thrown into question as the two young lovers show that non-physical and psychosocial qualities of individuals can supersede body limitations. In short, the two disabled characters function to resist the identity of docility in sexual matters (Peumans 94).

The play reincorporates the discourse of corporeality and sexuality by exploring the fantasies, eroticism and sexual desires possessed by the 'affected' body. Socio-cultural representations of the affected body suggest that the performativity of the body is in crisis when disability is present in normative sexual terms (Rembis 21). The prevailing images of masculinity portrayed in

the play, and of disability, challenge the normative representations of masculinity and disability. Cliff *and* Hardlife speak passionately about their desires and sexual needs. Watching the two young people speak animatedly about their sexual desires and engagements redefines the assumptions of physical determination in the negotiation of masculinity and disability. However, at the same time, reconstructions and renegotiations of masculinity and disability are undertaken within discourses that endorse body configuration as determining attractiveness and desirability. Hardlife explains to Cliff that Kim's body configuration is that of an 'angel' and her curvature is extraordinary as compared to that of Norma, Cliff's current girlfriend. In the first place, the performers critically appropriated normative ideals of beauty in the Zimbabwean context and further destabilised these normative expectations, giving credence to the argument that disabled bodies in performance space can trouble normative boundaries of physicality (Kuppers, 'Deconstructing' 27). Meanwhile, *Visionaries* does not gloss over the sexual limitations imposed by visual impairment. For instance, Cliff's access to sexual practices is limited because he cannot open a condom and therefore engages in unprotected sex.

Fleshy Hips and Plumpness: Femininity, Sexuality and Body Perfection

The conflict between Kim and Norma is a contest of socially constructed body ideals and sexual attractiveness. As soon as Kim is convinced that a sexual intercourse with Cliff will cure her of her sexually transmitted infection, she becomes determined to win Cliff. In Africa there are explicit and implicit perceptions on the relationship between physicality and sexual attraction (Matereke and Mungwini 10). In Euro-America, the image of the female romantic body seems to be a tall and slender woman, which has been characterised by critics as the tyranny of slenderness and perfection (Louis 160). Yet in the African and Zimbabwean contexts, plumpness and roundness have connotations of sexual attractiveness. With the above 'assets', Kim is shocked to realise that a visually-challenged young man is reluctant to 'partake' of her 'obviously' sexually-attractive body. Earlier on, she had arrogantly boasted of her beauty contest accolades such as 'The Miss Legs', 'Miss Fleshy Hips' and 'Miss Kissable Lips' awards.

The students' crafting of Kim's character was highly satirical to mock the basis of body discrimination. Kim's arrogance, that it is easy to win Cliff at the expense of a 'little blind girl', is evidence of the extent to which society relegates and denigrates the sexuality of atypical bodies (Shildrick 223). This scenario brings to the fore the contradiction of normative ideals of corporeality. For instance, the image of a plump woman as a sexually attractive body is a product of colonial western stereotypical constructions of a hyper-sexualised African woman who has large buttocks, hips and breasts (Matereke and Mungwini 12). The performance unmasked this contradiction in a thought-provoking and humorous way.

Controversies and Complications

Forum theatre is not automatically empowering, liberating and democratic. Dwyer has argued that the forum space is not a value-neutral space and that different social groups such as sponsors, facilitators and audiences have conflicting ideological interests (201). Outlined below are three complications and controversies that saddled the project.

The first relates to the gap between the ideal of forum theatre and the specific social realities of a given context. Ideally, in forum theatre spectators who intervene to correct or change an oppressive environment should belong to the same class as the protagonist who is struggling to overcome oppression in a given scenario (Dwyer 203; Baxter 133). In most cases, only a limited number of visually-challenged people intervened. Although this did not compromise the quality of the debate, the preferred situation would be one in which members of the affected social group would be more visible in order to generate authentic responses from their lived experiences. In a performance at the University of Zimbabwe, the intervention of one visually-challenged male student was quite fascinating, as he used his walking stick to challenge Kim before he embraced Norma in a romantic way. Such corporeal interventional texts would have been more beneficial to the project than the verbal texts that emerged from visually-challenged students. One of the reasons for such 'limited' corporeal intervention was that although most scenarios relied heavily on dialogue, there were other non-verbal elements which emerged during improvisation. Although most of these images were fascinating, they were inaccessible to

visually challenged people. That is perhaps an inherent complication of theatre, especially improvisational theatre. Some of the most powerful theatrical images can be visual in the form of movement, gesture or design. An example is the scene in which Kim comes to disrupt a romantic encounter between Cliff and Norma. Kim tries to adjust Cliff's neck tie which was 'wrongly' placed by Norma because of her visual challenge. The gestures and the facial expressions of the actors were the most intriguing aspects of the scene. As a result, some visually-challenged students would be surprised to hear others laugh and would rely on colleagues to catch up on the drama. This complication affected the number of corporeal interventions from visually-challenged spectators. However, at the same time, visually-challenged students could relate and respond to most scenarios without necessarily seeing every visual image. This could therefore suggest the need to expand the notion of corporeality to include the multi-sensory aspects of performance that include both audio and visual communication (Chivandikwa). One strategy that we intend to implement in future performances is to allow participants to stop the performance and engage the protagonist or antagonist without necessarily getting into the performance space so that there is no specifically designated performance space. This will make it easier for participants whose disability might restrict their movements and gestures.

Another controversy arose from a female nurse who intervened at a public performance at a disability festival held on 7 April 2011 at the University of Zimbabwe. At this performance, there were many stakeholders, who included university executives. The scene in which Cliff fails to open a condom was a source of worry to the Dean of students, under which the Health Services Department falls. He perceived that the scenario meant that the disabled students were not receiving sufficient sexual education and quietly instructed the nurse in charge of the university clinic to intervene. However, since she had come a bit late, she had not been apprised of the 'rules' of forum theatre. She therefore made a 'speech' in which she remarked that: 'Disabled students are the most users (sic) of condoms at the university'. The implications of that remark were largely negative. The implied message was that disabled students were excessively sexual, which is another negative construction. In a conservative society like Zimbabwe,

the notion that one uses condoms a lot has serious connotations of promiscuity. About three weeks after the public performance, a meeting was held between the students participating in the forum theatre and the nurse. The students then explained to the nurse that, in fact, the Disability Resource Centre is centrally situated so that all students find it as a convenient place from which to collect condoms. This meeting was fruitful because the controversy was incorporated into subsequent performances as discussed in previous sections. Nevertheless, the point still remains that many people who attended the public performance in question got the 'wrong' impression about the use of condoms by disabled students.

The final controversy relates to personal convictions and democratic engagement within a forum theatre context. When the students had agreed to incorporate the aspects of the controversy discussed above, they decided to add a scenario which depicts a health officer who is demonstrating the use of a condom, using real condoms and a stick to resemble the penis. The student who played the role of the health officer flatly refused to use the above aids on personal grounds. A heated debate ensued in which other students accused the former of hypocrisy. Although we managed to intervene and move the process forward, what clearly emerged was that issues relating to sexuality are deeply emotional and are inflected by political, cultural, religious and psychological factors. These variables can limit the extent to which one can use a public medium such as forum theatre to deeply engage sexual corporeality.

Outcomes of the Project

This section briefly outlines some of the major outcomes of the project. First, the project managed to foreground the disappearing bodies of disabled students from the public sphere (Kuppers, 'The Wheel Chairs Rhetoric' 84). For example, after several performances, both public and private media houses started to write stories about the group using the performance to discuss HIV and AIDS, sexuality and disability (Chivandikwa). The Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) interviewed students who participated in the project and went on to formulate a television programme on disability and sexuality under the weekly programme Youth Forum. The second major outcome is the production by an Art and Design student from Chinhoyi University of Technology

of HIV and AIDS and sexuality information in braille for the benefit of visually challenged students (Chivandikwa). The third outcome is a cordial relationship between the Health Services Department at the University of Zimbabwe and students from the Disability Resource Centre. The Health Services Department now incorporates the needs of disabled students in their workshops on sexual and reproductive health. These outcomes become significant when one considers that sexuality is a taboo subject in Africa and Zimbabwe.

Conclusion

The article has shown how discussions from forum theatre inspired the implementation of beneficial programmes which were sensitive to the needs and challenges relating to the sexuality of disabled students. In future, we hope to explore some of the contradictions that emerged during the course of the project. For example, the politics of gender and sexuality among disabled students deserves further interrogation. The article has revealed that the presence of disabled performers in the performance space can simultaneously reveal and complicate 'hidden' knowledge about the sexuality of disabled bodies in ways that are pleasurable, thought-provoking and challenging to normative discourses on sexuality and corporeality. Within the context of action research, this 'revealed' knowledge can be immediately applied for the benefit of the oppressed groups. This has shown that forum theatre offers a productive and pragmatic space in which the private and public dimensions of the politics of sexuality and corporeality in the disability discourse can be challenged and negotiated to empower the marginalised.

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