

Chapter 9

Textualizing the HIV/AIDS Motif in Theater–Against– AIDS Performances in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This chapter studies the theatrical and cultural texts that are performed through a Theater for Development (TFD) rubric known as Magnet Theater, which uses theater-based outreaches to mobilize people in low-income communities into forums that discuss HIV/AIDS and how its problems manifest in their localities. Using examples from performances of four theater groups that operate in Nakuru and Mombasa towns of Kenya, the chapter examines how the performances textualize, thematize, and theatise the main issues in HIV/AIDS as seen through the perspective of the performers and how the targeted audience reacts to these “AIDS performances.” Beyond studying the theatrical outreaches, the research for this chapter surveyed communities in which these performances have taken place to further appreciate how the motifs discerned from the theatrical outreaches compare to realizations of the AIDS problem in the communities.

BACKGROUND

Taking account of the proliferation¹ of theater-for-AIDS-education programs that have happened especially in East Africa in the last decade, it is

deserving to problematize this performance rubric as not only a major emerging genre of the TFD² field, but also as an illustration of new media that textualizes new issues which are confronting the changing socio-cultural scene in East Africa. Recent studies in Kenya³ show general evidence that despite reported high levels of HIV/

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AIDS awareness and increasing availability of AIDS prevention services, far fewer people are changing risky behaviours, coming forward to utilize counselling and testing services or seek anti-retroviral (ARV) treatment. The main reason behind this AIDS intransigence is cultural taboos that sanction silence about HIV/AIDS, because it is inappropriate to talk about sex, AIDS, and its related dynamics such as death.

To address this intransigence, many prevention programs have adopted theater-based interventions to mobilize members of the community to combat behaviours that perpetuate AIDS stigma, and motivate them to use prevention services. These programs have been gradually mainstreamed into a critical media of targeting cultural stereotypes that minimize the people's confidence to confront the HIV/AIDS problem. The theater-based outreaches that form the base of these programs capitalize on the cultural cognizance that performance uses the ludic licence of theatricality to create non-judgemental forums in which people can speak out about sensitive issues without the inhibition of being stigmatized by their neighbours and friends.

Working from a premise that the theater-against-AIDS-interventions are an effective tool of conscientization against HIV/AIDS stigma, this chapter examines how the theater programs conceive, perform, and discourse on the HIV/AIDS themes in their performance texts. I examine the themes presented by the dilemma-skits, issues that are raised from the theatization of the AIDS motifs during the outreaches, the text, and context of the discussions that ensue and how these relate to what the society outside the outreach space think is the face of the AIDS problem in their communities.

The texts and contextual data for the performances analysed in this chapter were collected through participant observation and memmoing of outreach performances which I participated in three consecutive summers (June-August) in 2005, 2006, and 2007. During these months, two research assistants and I embedded with four the-

ater groups that performed a theater-against-AIDS TFD rubric which they call "Magnet Theater", recorded their performances and interviewed participants while taking part in the outreaches as members of the theater groups. Two groups, RE-PACTED and TEARS work in low income areas in Nakuru municipality of Rift Valley province. The other two, KWACHA Afrika and The House of Courage perform in the Kisauni/Bombolulu/Bamburi and other low-income neighbourhoods in and around Mombasa city, coast province. We attended as many of their preparation meetings as possible, rehearsed with the performers, acted in the dramas, and took part in the post-performance discussions. After three years of researching the interventions, I conducted a survey in the communities where these performances happened to establish whether the community cited the same issues that featured in the performances as the face of their AIDS problem and how the performances may have impacted their attitudes towards seeking HIV/AIDS testing and treatment. The analysis in this chapter relates the motifs in the performances to the responses from the survey. Findings on the impact of the programs in these communities are presented elsewhere⁴.

WHY THEATER?

The reasons as to why theater renders itself useful to the anti-AIDS movement lies in both the role of performance in East African cultural traditions as well as the aesthetic theory behind the value of theater as a 'socio-conscientization' medium, to paraphrase Augusto Boal's term. Firstly, popular theater is traditionally an integral part of the expressive cultures of most Kenyan, and indeed African communities. Africans are not only predominantly oral in their cultural practices, but also espouse theatrical performances as a spontaneous, public activity whose value includes entertainment and education. For example, Ngugi wa Thiong'o explains the phenomenon that there is nothing like

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