

## Introduction

**T**HE PERFORMANCES IN THIS SECTION are grounded in traditional forms passed down over generations, often providing a cultural formulation of the values and behavior of people linked by a common past, present and aspiration for the future. Typically combining entertainment with education, such performances address themselves to whole communities. Already conceptualizing their audience as a united collective, a valuable pre-condition for social change, these performances take place in public by-ways where people tend to congregate. As radical street performance, they have been contemporized by filling their collectively meaningful form with current issues of group importance.

The paradox is that traditional performance's historical role is to conserve a culture over time, not to change it. In situations of colonization as described by L. Dale Byam and Ngūgī wa Thiong'o, when change is imposed from the outside, drawing on traditional performance can help keep a people intact, focusing on their own definition of themselves and their agenda. Quite often the performers come from the same community as the audience and the expressive practices, resulting in a kind of mirroring between them.

In other situations, such as that analyzed by Dwight Conquergood, those instigating the performance do not come from the same community as the intended audience but may recognize tradition's crucial role in what he calls continuity, stability and recreation of self and society. The difference between audience and performers in the work Mark Sussman investigates is mediated by a generically popular form, the circus, beautifully subverted here by its contemporary content.

## Dwight Conquergood

### HEALTH THEATRE IN A HMONG REFUGEE CAMP

#### Performance, communication and culture

**T**HE STREETS OF WHICH CONQUERGOOD writes are in a Thai refugee camp, where Hmong people, forced from their mountain home, eke out an existence. There the traditional cultural forms offer sustenance, continuity and a vehicle for learning how to adapt to wrenchingly difficult and unfamiliar living conditions.

Ban Vinai refugee camp is located in an isolated, hilly region of northeast Thailand. The camp has a population larger than any city in this remote area, and surpasses even Loei, the provincial capital. All of the approximately 48,000 residents are crowded on to 400 acres of undeveloped land. The camp space is intensively used because refugees are forbidden to go outside of the camp without the express permission of the Thai camp commander.

Ban Vinai is the largest gathering of Hmong in the world. The Hmong refugees used to live in small mountaintop villages in northern Laos where they tended animals and grew dry rice and corn in fields cleared from the forest. When US forces withdrew from the area in 1975, Laos collapsed and came under the rule of a government hostile to the Hmong who were viewed as collaborators with the enemy. Almost overnight they were thrown into a densely populated camp and had no time to develop adaptive cultural traditions, let alone garbage disposal systems. As a result of grossly inadequate housing, latrines, and facilities for waste disposal, the camp has serious hygiene

and sanitation problems. Imported and simplistic health slogans would not work for Ban Vinai. What was needed was a programme that was sensitive to the refugees' history and the specific problems and constraints of the camp environment.

The refugee camp may lack many things – water, housing, sewage disposal system – but not performance. No matter where you go in the camp, at almost any hour of the day or night, you can simultaneously hear two or three performances, from simple storytelling and folksinging to the elaborate collective ritual performances for the dead.

A high level of cultural performance is characteristic of refugee camps in general. Since my work in Ban Vinai I have visited or lived for short periods of time in 11 refugee camps in Southeast Asia and the Middle East, not counting a shantytown for displaced people in Nigeria. In every one of them I was struck by the richness and frequency of performative expression. One explanation for this is that refugees have a lot of time on their hands to cultivate expressive traditions. But I think there are deeper psychological and cultural reasons for the high incidence of performance in the camps. Refugee camps are liminal zones where people displaced by trauma and crisis – usually war or famine – must try to regroup and salvage what is left of their lives. Their world has been shattered. They are in passage, no longer Laotian, certainly not Thai, and not quite sure where they will end up or what their lives will become. Betwixt and between worlds, suspended between past and future, they fall back on the performance of their traditions as an empowering way of securing continuity and some semblance of stability. Moreover, through performative flexibility they can play with new identities, new strategies for adaptation and survival. The playful creativity enables them to experiment with and invent a new 'camp culture' that is part affirmation of the past and part adaptive response to the exigencies of the present. Performance participates in the re-creation of self and society that emerges within refugee camps. Through its reflexive capacities, performance enables people to take stock of their situation and through this self-knowledge to cope better. There are good reasons why in the crucible of refugee crisis, performative behaviors intensify.

#### Developing popular theatre

In conjunction with Hmong refugees and a local Thai employee of the International Rescue Committee, I helped design and direct a health education campaign which used this wealth of performance. A refugee performance company was established to produce skits and scenarios. Drawing on Hmong folklore and using traditional communicative forms such as proverbs, storytelling, and folksinging, it was able to develop critical awareness about the various health problems in Ban Vinai.

There is always the danger, however, of appropriating performance and using it as an instrument of domination. I wanted no part of the puppet theatre approach used by some expatriates as simply another means to get refugees to do what bureaucrats think best for them. Instead, I hoped that performance could be used as a method for developing critical awareness as an essential part of the process of improving the health situation in the camp. My project was aligned with the popular theatre approach to development and political struggle that is being used with success throughout the third world, particularly Africa, Latin America, and Asia. This theatre movement frequently draws inspiration from Paulo Freire's fieldwork as documented in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1986). Augusto Boal (1985) and Ross Kidd (1982, 1984) are perhaps the best-known names associated with the popular theatre, or people's theatre movement. Fortunately, a sizable body of literature is developing around this kind of third world theatre (Bustos 1984; Desai 1987; van Erven 1987; Eyoh 1986; Kaitaro 1979; Kidd and Byram 1978; Thiong'o 1981, 1983, 1986). In *Helping Health Workers Learn* (Werner and Bower 1982) – which is the companion volume to the widely distributed *Where There Is No Doctor: A Village Health Care Handbook* (Werner 1977) – there is an excellent chapter on politics, health, and performance entitled 'Ways to Get People Thinking and Acting: Village Theater and Puppet Shows.' This work perhaps more than any other inspired my efforts in Ban Vinai.

In popular theatre, the process of developing the performance is as important, if not more so, than its final presentation. The backstage processes of researching and developing culturally appropriate materials, the participatory involvement of the people are as significant as any explicit 'message' communicated in a skit or scenario. For popular theatre to work effectively as a tool of critical awareness and empowerment for oppressed peoples, it must be rooted in and begin with their cultural strengths. Of course, even before the Hmong became refugees, oral traditions and cultural performance were the primary ways of educating the young and promoting beliefs and values among adults. Instead of aesthetic distance and other concepts of elite theatre, popular theatre is contingent upon what Kenneth Burke calls rhetorical processes of 'identification' and 'constituentality' (1969: 19–23).

Health workers wanting to use popular theatre must become participant fieldworkers. Getting to know the culture is important not just as a technique for collecting appropriate materials and ideas to be worked into performances but as a way of earning the community's trust and respect. No matter how flashy and entertaining the health show, village people are wary of outsiders who drop in for a day or two and then leave. Refugees, even more than villagers, have good reason to be skeptical of officials who hold themselves at a distance. The Hmong have a proverb: 'To see a tiger is to die: to see an official is to become destitute' (Tapp 1986: 2). When a health worker gets involved, becomes part of the struggle, that speaks as forcefully as any line in a performance script. Ndumbe Eyoh said it clearly: 'There seems to

be no other better way than associating fully with them, meeting them in the villages, joining them in their daily chores and sharing with them their lifestyles' (1986: 23). That is why it was crucial for me to live in the camp with the Hmong, although that was considered a great oddity by the other expatriate agency workers who commuted from Chiang Kham village, an hour's drive away. I hoped to break the pattern of importing the knowledge of 'experts' and distributing it to the refugees, who were expected to be grateful consumers. I wanted to help demonstrate to both expatriates and refugees that dialogue was possible.

Bartering health advice and practices with traditional healers was one of the methods that worked well for me and prevented the programme from being too one-sided. For example, early in my fieldwork I fell through a bridge and gashed my toe. Herbalists treated my wound with soothing poultices from a glossy-leaved plant. Within a week the wound had healed. Due to the camp conditions, I also suffered frequent intestinal disorders, and consulted women herbalists who gave me a root to chew that eased the problem.

I tried to engage in a dialogue through which each culture could benefit from the other. This was particularly important as refugees were accustomed to having expatriates undermine, even outrightly assault, their traditions.

### The rabies parade

The first test was whether or not the Hmong would accept a popular theatre approach. Could we gather an audience? That test came earlier than I had planned when five rabid dogs rampaged through the camp biting children. It was proposed that IRC use its funds to buy a rabies vaccine and inoculate all the dogs in the camp. The vaccine was purchased and IRC personnel were at their stations ready with needles to vaccinate the dogs. No dogs arrived. The problem centered on communication. The Hmong were not boycotting the rabies programme. They simply were baffled by this strange procedure, or unaware of it. There was no effective way of getting the word out as to where, when and why dogs should be brought to the IRC stations for injections.

At that time, I had just arrived in the camp and was beginning to work with the newly recruited refugee performers/health workers. We had developed some characters based on stock figures in Hmong folklore and were designing and constructing costumes and masks. We were just starting to mesh as a group when the IRC director approached me and asked for help with the rabies vaccination project. Time was running out. The camp dogs would have to be vaccinated soon to prevent Ban Vinai having a serious rabies epidemic.

The performance company agreed on a grand, clamorous, eye-catching 'Rabies Parade' that would snake its way through all sections of the camp. The tiger costume – appliqued cotton fabric with a long rope tail – was



Figure 27.1 The tiger leads the Rabies Parade, Hmong refugee camp, 1985 (photo by Dwight Conquergood).

almost finished, so it was agreed that the tiger would be the lead figure in the parade. The tiger is a trickster in Hmong folklore and mythology. We knew the tiger would draw attention and inspire awe. The tiger would be followed by a nature-spirit, a ragged costume with long coloured strings for hair, that would sing and bang on a drum. That noise, we hoped, would reach people inside their huts and bring them out to see the commotion.

We agreed that the chicken, a feathered costume with a striking cardboard mask that covered the entire head, would be the pivotal figure. After the dancing tiger and the clamorous nature-spirit got people's attention, the chicken would talk through a bullhorn and explain in terms the Hmong would understand, the seriousness of rabies and why it was important for every family to round up the dogs and bring them for injections. The chicken couched all this in an appeal to protect the children and then gave specific instructions for each neighborhood in the camp as to where and when they should bring the dogs. The chicken was chosen to be the leading speaker because in Hmong lore chickens have divinatory powers. They are frequently used as offerings in spirit ceremonies to lead the way to the sky kingdom. Hmong naturally associate the chicken with divination because, as was explained to me, 'Who is the one who knows first when the sun comes up every morning?'

In terms of its ability to gather an audience, the Rabies Parade was a huge success. However, the real test was whether or not the Hmong would bring their dogs to the vaccination stations. The next morning, on watch at

the first station, I saw dogs come pouring in. We could not vaccinate them fast enough and by the end of a week we had vaccinated almost 500 dogs.

### Incorporating feedback

We took advantage of the performance company's initial outing to elicit direct audience feedback as part of the process of testing, developing, and refining our concepts. Throughout the development of our health theatre programmes, we actively solicited feedback from Hmong elders. One elder critiqued the performers on three points: (1) the plain-clothed performers and stage managers should wear traditional Hmong clothes, and not Western-style T-shirts and trousers available in the camp through charity outlets; (2) the backup music for the dances should be authentic Hmong, not Thai or Western-influenced melodies; (3) the rhymed chants were a little off from the traditional Hmong prosody and so he taught the young performers the correct speech patterns.

Through other critiques we learned that a few people found the masks and the tiger scary and worried that some of the children's spirits might be scared away and they would fall sick. This was very serious. If one shaman attributed the sickness of one child to spirit-flight precipitated by the parade, the Ban Vinai health and performance company would be destroyed. No accusations came but we did decide to modify our staging techniques as a result of this feedback. Powerful characters like the tiger would no longer play directly to the audience. Instead, we would direct the energies of the tiger and other masked characters inside a circle, using an onstage focus. These dramatic characters would interact in an animated way with one another, but not directly confront the audience.

### Mother Clean

We did not want to lose the power of open-form communication, so we needed a narrator character who could safely and directly address audiences. Proverbs are an important and popular communication form amongst the Hmong. We wanted to use a character who could recite health proverbs and tell stories and who would have a special rapport with small children. This led to the creation of our most successful character who became the symbol for the entire health communication programme: the beloved Mother Clean (Niam Tsev Huv), our cleanliness clown. She was the collective creation of the entire performance company. In fact, the performance company worked collectively on all phases of the performance process, from research for scenarios to composing songs and proverbs to costume construction. Except for the tiger's mask which I purchased in Loie, all of the costumes and props were handmade from local materials.

Once we had demonstrated that performance was an appropriate and successful way of communicating with the Hmong, we set to work on the environmental health problems of the camp. Instead of blaming the Hmong for the poor health conditions and issuing messages instructing them to change their behavior, we developed performances that would stimulate critical awareness about the camp environment, particularly how it differed from the Hmong mountain villages in Laos. Once their radically changed living conditions could be brought to consciousness through performance, the Hmong might understand the need for changing some of their habits to adapt to this altered situation.

## Garbage

We mounted a series of performances focused on the problem of garbage in the camp. The first thing we had to do was problematize 'garbage.' In a traditional Hmong village, garbage was not the problem it was in Ban Vinai. If all disposable waste is organic, and you live in a small hamlet on a windswept mountain slope, then pitching waste out of the door is not a problem. It becomes instant feed for the household pigs or it biodegrades. In the context of a crowded refugee camp, however, this means of waste disposal has radically different consequences. We wanted to get this message across without demeaning the Hmong and suggesting that they were dirty.

Ban Vinai is notorious for the image of refugees relieving themselves in the open space. This act, so shocking to 'sophisticated' sensibilities, functions discursively as a sign of 'the primitive.' Before I left Bangkok en route to Ban Vinai, I heard stories about this behavior from other aid workers and came across this motif in written reports as well as oral anecdotes. This recurrent image is psychologically and rhetorically interesting for what it reveals about our discursive projections of the Other. My observations are that the Hmong are a very modest people. The act does not occur with the frequency the stories imply. However, you have only to spend three days and nights in the camp in order to understand the environmental circumstances that produce such behavior even occasionally. Living in the camp with the refugees and experiencing these environmental constraints and indignities was instructive for me.

Our 'Garbage Theme' month featured Mother Clean in one of our most successful scenarios. Drawing on the evil ogre character from Hmong folklore (poj ntxoog), we created an ugly Garbage Troll in soiled ragged clothes and a mask plastered with bits of garbage and dirt. The Garbage Troll would lumber into the centre of the playing space and begin dramatizing the behavior to be discouraged – peeling eggs and other food and throwing the waste on the ground, picking up dirty food from the ground and putting it into his mouth, and so forth. After a few minutes of this improvisation, the Tiger

would charge on stage and rebuke the troll for such unseemly behaviour. The Tiger would growl and snarl and pounce at the impassive Troll, all the while making verbally explicit how bad this behavior was. The Tiger would give up and leave but then the Pig would run out on stage and fuss at the troll for his disgusting conduct. The young performer who played our Pig was a gifted clown and there would be much farcical business between the Pig and the Garbage Troll until the Troll drove the Pig away. Then the Chicken would follow suit and sagely admonish the Troll about the environmental consequences of his behavior and how he would make children sick by throwing garbage all about. The Troll would respond by throwing more garbage on the ground and at the Chicken, driving the latter away.

From a considerable distance, Mother Clean would slowly sweep toward the dirty Garbage Troll. The children forming a circle around the playing space would have to open up their ranks to permit Mother Clean's passage. They would call out, warning her to beware of the nasty Garbage Troll. But Mother Clean would be unaware of the danger; absorbed in sweet thoughts she would sing to herself and dance as daintily as her bulk would permit. The children in the audience would increase the volume of their warning cries until Mother Clean heard and caught sight of the Garbage Troll. Unafraid, slowly, triumphantly she would sweep toward the nasty Troll huddling in the dirt making menacing noises. She'd reach down, pull him up by his hands, then, in a moment of redemptive grace, remove his dirt face mask and wash his face and hands. Transformed, the Troll and Mother Clean danced as music was played from our battery-operated cassette player. Tiger, Pig, and Chicken rushed back on stage to dance and sing with Mother Clean and the redeemed Troll. Our refugee health workers, wearing sandwich-board posters with the health theme boldly lettered, would join the circle, and Mother Clean would slowly spell out and read the poster proverbs for those in the audience who were nonliterate. She would talk and invite comment and discussion about the theme.

Mother Clean would lovingly amplify the message of the proverb, pointing out that Ban Vinai is very different from the mountaintop villages in which the Hmong used to live. She exhorted a change in behavior without degrading the people whom she was trying to persuade, locating responsibility in the environmental circumstances. Everyone could agree that indeed Ban Vinai was very different from their former home. After establishing that premise, Mother Clean then could make the point about the need for adaptive response to this new situation.

This scenario was staged three or four times a week, each time in a different section of the camp. In this way we could reach most of the camp population in a month's time. Each day we would find a wide place in the road, or a clearing between houses, and use that empty space for the performance. One of the company members would walk around the area with a bullhorn announcing the performance. The performances were so popular

that we sometimes had crowd control problems, with people pressing in so close that there was no room for the performers to move. One of the company members, usually the one who made the initial announcements over the bullhorn, would serve as 'house manager.' He would draw a large circle on the ground with a pointed stick and declare that area the players' space, off-limits to curious children. This strategy worked, except for the occasional dog that wandered on stage.

Over the next few years, Mother Clean became fully integrated into the culture of Camp Ban Vinai. Literacy textbooks produced in the camp print shop were illustrated with images of Mother Clean. Mother Clean hand puppets were made in the camp and used for entertainment and instruction. Mother Clean puzzles delighted children. The ultimate test was that Mother Clean had been invited by the Hmong leaders to perform at the New Year Festivities, the most important and elaborate celebration of Hmong culture.

### In retrospect

As I critique my work in the camp I realize that I should have developed more consciousness-raising performances specifically for the expatriate health professionals. They needed to develop a critical awareness about health problems in the camp at least as much as did the Hmong. Directing most of the performances to the Hmong resulted in a one-sided communication campaign and subtly reinforced the prevailing notion that the Hmong were primarily responsible for the bad conditions.

The ideal is for the two cultures, refugees' and relief workers', to enter into a productive and mutually invigorating dialogue, with neither side dominating or winning out, but both replenishing one another. Intercultural performance can enable this kind of exchange.

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