
NEWSLETTER

Rethinking Reconciliation: Using Theater to Overcome Fear and Generate Empathy

Having helped catalyze the field of transitional justice with its founding meeting in 1992, the Project on Justice in Times of Transition is looking to stimulate thinking about the gaps in knowledge and practice that remain prevalent in deeply divided societies such as Palestine/Israel; Sri Lanka; Northern Ireland; Bosnia among others. The dominance of international prosecution for war criminals and the tendency to consider truth commissions as a tool for healing the past, have drawn attention away from community reconciliation, especially in countries with longstanding and complex identity conflicts. New approaches are desperately needed.

*PJTT Editor **Arielle Berney** recently spoke about these issues with **Madhawa Palihapitya**, the former Director of Programs at the Foundation for Co-Existence in Sri Lanka who now teaches at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. He recalled what he learned from his experiences engaging in high-risk mediation and conflict prevention efforts between the government of Sri Lanka and the Tamil Tigers, especially in the eastern areas of Sri Lanka. Reflecting on the Palestinian Authority's recent bid for statehood at the United Nations, Palihapitya indicated he believes that redressing fear is at the heart of community healing. In his experience, theater is a particularly useful tool for addressing these hard issues.*

Confronting Underlying Fears

Having grown up in Sri Lanka during the 25-year civil war between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil Tigers or LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), Palihapitya is no stranger to conflict and is familiar with the barriers to reconciliation. Whether it is a protracted social conflict between Israelis and Palestinians or Sinhalese and Tamils is irrelevant, the parallels transcend borders. “The issue is fear. People are controlled by fear of differences, of other faiths, of other identities.”

Palihapitya stresses the need for people to overcome these fears. “Most fears are unfounded, but violence, suspicion, suicide bombings – these things make fear personal.” He recalls traveling to

the Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka, where much of the fighting took place, and seeing whole Tamil communities completely bombed out and decimated. “Until that point, I had thought that a suicide bombing in Colombo was the worst thing, but then you see that it’s possible to feel for the other side.” Empathy, he believes, is the key to conquering fear.

Reconciliation at the Local Level

Yet, while empathy might be conceptually obvious, changing behavior and overcoming anger and hurt is not so simple. Reconciliation is difficult in protracted social conflicts. “Answers to these issues are complex; they are as long and drawn out as the problems themselves.” It takes hard work; he likens it to marriage.

In his work with Sinhalese and Tamils during the war, Palihapitya dealt with hostilities on both sides, going from angry military officials to dangerous Tamil Tigers, with each side quick to call him a “traitor” should anything unwelcome happen. He was even trailed by an armed LTTE guard wherever he went, a reminder from the Tamil Tigers that he needed to watch his step. Yet both sides allowed the conflict resolution work to progress, because these were problems that needed to be solved.

There are various ways for a community to reach the critical juncture at which they decide to actively change their present situation. Sometimes it takes a horrible tragedy to get to this point. Palihapitya recalls one incident in Eastern Sri Lanka where riots had been flaring between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. There had been an attack on a group of pregnant women as they were walking to a health clinic. Both sides realized that something had to be done. The two communities’ leaders were convinced to meet: one an LTTE political officer and the other a religious leader, who in this case happened to be a chain-smoking, alcohol-drinking Buddhist monk. Palihapitya was skeptical that the meeting would yield any fruitful results.

When the two met for the first time in the LTTE official’s home, the Tamil leader had laid out a white sheet on the chair for the monk, a show of respect. This set the tone for the meeting. Within minutes the Sinhalese monk had promised to control his community if the Tamil Tiger leader would do the same. It was a deal.

Not long after this meeting, a group of Tamil youths attacked a truck carrying Sinhalese civilians. The monk called up the LTTE leader who responded by having the hooligans publicly whipped. In return, the monk stopped any of his Sinhalese community members from retaliating. “This is my theory,” Palihapitya says after recounting this episode, “if there’s proximity to the danger or the violence, the chances are that leadership will have a different approach, no matter what people from up above tell them.”

"It is an issue of proximity. If you have felt a bomb blast, smelled the smoke, seen the blood, then you know that this is not the way to live. This is not life."

It's for this reason that he believes that change must come from the people, not from any top-down political measures. "It is an issue of proximity. If you have felt a bomb blast, smelled the smoke, seen the blood, then you know that this is not the way to live. This is not life."

Palihapitya sees similarities between the conflict he grew up with in Sri Lanka and that in Israel and Palestine. He likens the Sinhalese to the Israelis: both are the majority in their countries but a minority in the region. The Tamils are like the Palestinians, minorities within the country, but majorities regionally. "The Sinhalese are a majority with a minority attitude. They too think they are the chosen people. But chosen for what? To have conflict with other God-made creatures? That's absurd!" He marvels that with so many shared cultural and religious values the Israelis and Palestinians can't get along. "It's baffling. They have so much to work with."

In response to the primordial issues that are often dredged up between Israel and Palestine, he states, "We live now. Why do we want to live like we did 2,000 years ago? We didn't even brush our teeth back then! Why is that the gold standard?" He calls for people to start living in the present.

Theatre as a Tool for Change

Theater, Palihapitya believes, can help explore and acknowledge the "here and now." Theater is all about the present, with every performance a little bit different. It can steer audiences away from their discriminatory inclinations by directing their attention to what is happening in the moment, right in front of their eyes. It is interactive – "the performer adjusts to you; it is very human." The right production can have a very real effect in terms of humanizing the other side – through emotion, empathy, and especially humor. Identity becomes more malleable as theater permits both performers and audience to try on new ethnicities, religions, personas, and roles. In this way, theater helps erode the asymmetry between understanding of our own lives and how we perceive the experiences of others.

Palihapitya also explains that "there is an element of play in everything – in politics, war, everyday life," such as with the calculated political posturing unfolding after Palestine's bid for statehood. Yet in scripted theater, "Performance can deal with these things in such a way that the ridiculousness becomes evident," reminding us that local plays can be more honest and grounding than political acts on the global stage while providing a safe space for expression. Audience members can shout barbs at the actor dressed up as the Prime Minister with no consequences. They can laugh and enjoy the slapstick absurdity of the performance. In Sri Lanka such satirical comedies "provided the space for political bloodletting – otherwise there would have been strokes."

As a practitioner, Palihapitya was driven to ask: "How do you evaluate the impact of theater? It isn't tangible." Yet, he knows the effect of these productions. He watched many politically satirical performances in Sri Lanka as a boy and saw the performers poke fun at the leaders of the country, felt an easing of the tension in the audience with the flagrant flouting of the taboos on speaking out. "There was something that drove me to come back and write about this art form years later, and that's an outcome." He mentions an LTTE official now living in Switzerland who participated

in a theater program and years later told Palihapitya: “It made a moderate out of me.”

In Israel and Palestine, Palihapitya believes that theater can play a similarly beneficial role. At the very least, it can help the two sides share information and experiences in a non-threatening way. “Play is fun and entertaining. Your mind opens up and you become more receptive and not as fearful.” Another benefit of play is that “no one accuses you of starting a revolution, even though in your mind it is a revolution. And there are others in the audience feeling this too.” That is the potential power of theater. Even if a performance simply alerts people to the fact that the issues are not as black and white as they had once seemed, “realizing the complexity is itself a powerful change agent.”

Theater allows people to acknowledge what is occurring in society all around them. “There needs to be that recognition that what’s happening shouldn’t be – it’s created. Since it’s created, it can also be changed.”

Change from the Ground Up

In his conflict resolution work, whether at the local, state, national or international level, Palihapitya has found “a huge disconnection between people and policymakers.” He notes, “people in government don’t want to acknowledge that they are part of the problem and not necessarily part of the solution.” In many cases, the people in power are so far removed from the realities on the ground that they’re incapable of giving the people what they really want.

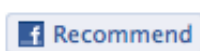
“Governments, military leaders, politicians – they’re still important – but they can’t be trusted in these complex, protracted social issues comprised of social, political, religious and economic elements. Normal negotiations can’t resolve it.” Palihapitya believes that the people on the ground need to make the change. “It is not easy to find a solution. It needs to get worked out every single day, like life itself.”

As Prime Ministers Abbas and Benjamin Netanyahu are busy performing on the global stage at the UN, some local theater might be in order too. “Society is changing a lot and theater is one tool to help realize that change.” While working towards reconciliation is not easy, theater is a way to lighten the process while still communicating and promoting learning. Empathy cannot be gained over night, but if theater programs can help to dispel fears and build understanding, then that is a crucial step in bringing opposing sides closer to reconciliation.

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For more information, please visit **The Project on Justice in Times of Transition** at www.pitt.org

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The **Project on Justice in Times of Transition** assists leaders in divided societies struggling with conflict, reconciliation and societal change by facilitating direct contact with leaders who have successfully addressed similar challenges in other settings. By mobilizing our international network of seasoned leaders and practitioners to share their experience, we put the Project's mission into action. Our powerful methodology of shared experience is grounded in two core principles: that people can learn from each other and that people can change.