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## **THEATRE EDUCATION AND GENDER EQUITY: POSSIBILITIES FOR THE MILLENNIUM**

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and Kudakwashe Sambo**

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### **Abstract**

*The article explores possibilities of enhancing theatre education for purposes of challenging and dismantling gender exploitation and oppression in order to facilitate social, political and ideological processes which can foster gender equity and harmony. It proceeds from the recognition that theatre practice in Zimbabwe is still fraught with gender biases, contradictions and inconsistencies. In order to address this challenge, the article explores and proffers specific strategies in ensuring that gender sensitivity becomes a critical element of every production in theatre education at both the theoretical and practical levels. Consequently, a distinguishing tenet of each of the possibilities explored in this article is the need to regard each element of theatre construction processes as a teaching and teachable moment for gender consciousness. It is envisaged that with such an approach, preschools, primary and secondary schools, tertiary institutions and grassroots/ professional theatre groups will acquire relevant knowledge, skills and competencies that will make theatre a strong arena for constructive and inspiring gender dialogue. Gender equity as one of the millennium goals is not an insurmountable task. Theatre education can play a significant part towards its realisation.*

### **Introduction**

Written works on theatre in general have engaged the theme of gender in varied ways (Chinyowa 2002; Chivandikwa 2004, 2009, Zenenga 2007). These have largely focused on gender insensitivity, biases, stereotypes and the limited depth in character construction in Zimbabwean theatre. The major objective of such works has been an attempt to use theatre to promote gender relations and engagements which are consistent with the lived experiences of Zimbabweans. Consequently, this article seeks to explore how theatre education can contribute in raising awareness of gender sensitivity and the promotion of gender equality in kindergarten, primary, secondary and tertiary schools as well as at grassroots level. This derives from the recognition that when it comes to gender issues, theatrical studies and practices do not appear to be as systematic and consistent as might be desirable. For instance, most theatre productions on gender are occasional commissioned works in theatre for development. In addition, in Zimbabwe, if not Southern Africa, there are apparently no courses in gender and

performance studies. Yet theatre could be one of the most effective art forms that functions as a socialising agent.

This article also examines opportunities of expanding the potency of theatre education to serve progressive gender functions. This exploration is premised upon the realization that theatre-makers have a heavy responsibility in crafting dramatic themes and characters whose gender implications have a significant cultural and socializing function. In this millennium, the world is still currently characterized by deteriorating human interactions and relations. Theatre is one of the effective and immediate art form that cuts across barriers towards harmonizing human relations including gender (Kisense 1999). Another realisation is that:

Contexts such as drama, participation, role-play sequences based on analogous real-life social narratives may unlock children's latent potential and support developing social competence [...] this will happen as they consciously adjust their behaviour using analytical, logical thinking processes. An important proviso however, is that they are then enabled afterwards to make links between the fictitious drama and real-life situations (Peter 2009: 11).

While the above specifically refers to narrative pedagogies in schools, the principles that are espoused work in almost every theatrical context as long as there are deliberate efforts to make sure that performance contexts suit the socio-cultural contexts of both performers and spectators. What will be emphasized in this article is the necessity of ensuring that audiences and performers make links between fictitious drama and real-life situations. The considered view is that this takes a lot of learning and teaching in theatre education.

Trends that have characterised the construction of femininities and masculinities and their cultural, social and ideological implications are also examined with the hope that these reflections will challenge and inspire theatre-makers and practitioners in Zimbabwean theatre to devise plays with a significant socialising function. At the same time, it is anticipated that this article will also motivate readers/ spectators of theatre works to be gender-sensitive in their interpretations. After examining central issues in the artistic construction of femininities and masculinities, the article argues that theatre-making and education in Zimbabwe could be an arena for constructive and inspiring gender dialogue.

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Considerations**

In this section, we essentially examine femininities and masculinities as social constructions in patriarchal systems. Femininities are therefore what females are expected to do in terms of socio-cultural, economic and socio-political roles

and functions. In other words, individual females are taught and learn how to be feminine through a process of observation and socialisation (Wood 1999). A major element of this socialisation involves 'domestication' which refers to the confinement of women to the domestic sphere, attempts at excluding them from active participation in the public realm, as well as the expectation that women should be humble, subordinate to men in society (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2004; 231).

While masculinities are generally plural, changing and contextual, we endorse the general definition that;

Masculinities are those behaviours, languages and practices, existing in specific cultural and organisational locations, which are commonly associated with males and thus culturally defined as not feminine so masculinities exist as both positive, in as much as they offer some means of identity signification for males and as a negative, in as much as they are not the 'other' (feminine). Masculinities and male behaviours are not the simple product of genetic codings or biological predispositions (Whitehead and Barret 1999:15).

However, in exploring the imaginative or theatrical constructions of masculinities, we emphasise that masculinity is replete with contradictions, diversity, fluidity and complications which seem to have been largely overlooked in theatrical constructions. The argument that we will pursue is that theatre education needs to take on board such complexities in order to deepen the socio-cultural, ideological and aesthetic appeal or potency of theatrical productions. This becomes very critical if we realise the crucial role that formal schools play in the formation of masculinity by offering opportunities for masculinising practices and the creation of masculinity 'often associated with violence, misogyny, and homophobia' (Swain 2004:225). Consequently, theatrical interventions can offer alternative and challenging forms of 'progressive' masculinities that are consistent with the gender aspirations of the millennium.

Gender equity is a critical aspect of human development and civilisation. As a result this study singles the "Just Development Theory" as one of the most relevant perspectives to inspire gender equity in the millennium. It is a theory that emphasises equity, democracy and social justice to combat vulnerability, isolation, exploitation and gender oppression (Clark 1997: 27 in Ndlovu, 2001: 23). It largely focuses on the advancement of human capacities, freedoms and most importantly, it acknowledges that oppression retards human progress.

The above theoretical perspective on development can inspire the construction of images and metaphors of theatre that focus on gender equity. These insights can be systematically merged with the potential of theatre to open space for

dialogue and negotiation which dialogue can be subversive (Leezenberg 2009: 162).

Albert Bandura's "Social Learning Theory" is also applicable particularly at the primary and secondary school levels of Zimbabwean schools. Bandura (1986) recognised that people especially young people learn how to change their behaviour by watching other people. Therefore in theatre productions, actors can demonstrate inspiring behaviour for an audience. Bandura argues that the character who changes behaviour from risky to safe behaviour demonstrates to the audience that change is possible and that character can be a model that young people emulate. We appropriate Bandura's theorisation to explore possibilities and conditions under which theatre education in educational institutions can be harnessed to challenge homophobia, misogyny and other ills that negatively impact on gender equity and harmony.

### **Masculinities in Zimbabwean Theatre**

This section examines trends in the construction of images of masculinities in theatre which seem on the whole to suggest that theatre has not challenged myths and social stereotypes that are problematic in gender relations. We analyse these images against the recognition that masculinity is a social construction and it means different things to different people at different times and that masculinities are not a product of the biological but historical and social constructions (Sotelo and Messner: 2005, Kimmel; 2006, Zenenga 2007). The first observation, however, is that at a general level, stereotypical constructions of masculinities in Zimbabwean theatre tend to be uninspiring and limited. The second challenge is that excessive and exaggerated manifestations of manhood are taken as 'fact' or as the 'natural' behaviour of men. What is taken as 'natural' is in fact man-made, both as a social order and description of that order as natural and physically determined. This is critical because people's perceptions of reality are cultivated by the media they consume and the more they consume certain kinds of media, the more the influences of such media manifest themselves in their attitudes and behaviour (Chari in Vambe and Rwafa 2008).

In some HIV/ Aids- related theatre productions, the disease is constructed as a phenomenon that comes from female prostitutes, and men are treated as 'victims' of prostitutes (Rohmer, 1996; Chivandikwa 2004, 2009). In *Another Chance*, Titsvalo a 26 year old priest is 'infected' by Rhoda and Beauty who are cast as vibrant sisters in the ministry. There is an interesting contradiction because in some instances, playwriting celebrates masculine virility and masculine sexuality is usually constructed as conquest over women while female sexuality is treated passively. This is evidenced in *At The Verge of Breaking Down*, a First Year Playmaking production where Zack gloats over his sexual conquest on Tinashe

whom he believes he has impregnated. His friend Blessing 'congratulates' him for proving his sexual prowess.

Patriarchal ideology is in most instances 'reproduced' passively without challenge or problematisation. Where it is challenged, it is challenged out of context in such a way that the challenge loses resonance with the socio-cultural context in which the play or performance text functions. There are some commissioned performance texts written from too 'radical' feminist perspectives which have offended conservative communities. For example, constructions of images of men cooking or washing baby nappies have been dismissed or not taken seriously by female spectators. On the other hand, men have sometimes been offended by such images (Chivandikwa 2004: 211). If such 'radical' performances can only also foster anger and ridicule, then there is need to consider other approaches which can engender reflective engagements with theatre audiences. What playwrights seem not to consider is that not all men benefit equally from the institutions of patriarchy and that some forms of patriarchy are culturally elevated above others in certain times and places (Cleverly 2002). This is particularly true for commissioned theatre productions. For example in *Allegations*, Spud and Reason are physically and emotionally abused by Cde Hokoyo and his colleagues who represents the 'politically elevated' masculinities. The playwright captures the violence that the characters experienced through Reason's narration of the ordeals he went through;

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The youths broke into another song. I was told to lie down and raise my feet. I was beaten heavily under my feet as the villagers sung to my re-orientation. I was meant to be the evenings' entertainment. As I lay on the ground, taking a break from my beating, my mind cleared up. I knew those youths! Tindo was Tendai the son of the late Gava. The other boys were also from around. Hokoyo was a new breed of war veterans too young to have been in the liberation struggle but somehow recognised as a veteran. The technique was fear. I had been terrorised, the villagers were terrorised. (p. 5.)

Given the above, this article argues that such constructions do not generally engage the audience deeply such that the socialising function of theatre is severely compromised. Sometimes one gets the impression that masculine agency is over-celebrated and romanticised. Assertive, courageous, heroic and progressive figures are usually male. Perhaps it is necessary to point out that there are notable exceptions to this trend, and these include Stephen Chifunyise in his social plays, Daniel Maphosa in *Red Button* and other plays as well as Cont Mhlanga in some of his political plays which feature heroic and courageous, assertive and progressive female characters.

The above general criticism should not be construed to suggest that theatre-makers who project patriarchy without problematising it necessarily do so from a deliberate ideological intention to propagate patriarchal domination. Sometimes this is a 'natural' tendency to write what already exists in society. There is a general pattern to write what 'is' as opposed to what "should be" or "what can be". Perhaps this is borne out of the conceptualization that drama/theatre is an 'imitation' of reality. The interpretation is that art or theatre is a 'mirror' of society. This definition might be acceptable in a context where the objective is to please or 'entertain' the audience. However, when it comes to instances where theatre aspires to have a critical social function, such as in gender relations, theatre can not afford the luxury to passively 'mirror' society. There is need to problematize and engage deeply with socio-cultural and socio-political relations.

A possible explanation to the apparent celebration of masculinism at the expense of women is that most playwrights are male. Factors causing this scenario are both historical and ideological. It is therefore possible that unconsciously, most male theatre-makers proceed from "their own" ideological stand point. Whatever the motivations, it is important to note that romanticizing and celebrating masculinity without challenge in theatrical works poses serious challenges in terms of harmonising and improving gender relations. This is not to say, however, that male theatre-makers have "impaired" social or moral vision. Far from it. In fact, elsewhere, it has been observed that some performance texts which have been conceived, devised, written, produced, acted and directed by women do not necessarily advance the cause of women. Some performance scripts that have been written by women also lampoon and ridicule women while "accepting" negative or oppressive masculinities (Chivandikwa 2009: 183).

Oppressive, arrogant and impudent masculinities are projected through characters such as Cde Babamunini and Sekuru in *Waiting for Constitution*, Nimrod's and Yakhani's father in *Tomorrow's People* and Miilo in *Madman and Fools*. Cde Babamunini and Sekuru are portrayed as representing hegemonic masculinities as they dominate all the discussions the family has gathered for. Throughout the play, they do not accept any other views from the other members of the family particularly the female characters whom they regard as 'unfit' in contributing to the discussions.

Such representations have become a stereotypical image of the masculine identity and this article suggests that these attributes which coincidentally borrow from the patriarchal tradition may need to be engaged fully because such imaging of masculinities can foster negative or undesirable reception of spectatorship. In the first instance, stereotypical or exaggerated masculinities may not be challenging to the audience. Male spectators might remain comfortable and see oppressive images of masculinities as 'natural.' It is also possible that female

spectators might interpret oppressive masculinity as very close to their oppression and think that female domination by men is "natural" and inevitable. Of course, this is a simplification of theatre spectatorship since the reception of productions is subject to complex performance and socio-cultural dynamics. However, the point still remains that unchallenging images of masculinity do not seem to foster ideological and social efficacy in gender dynamics.

In short, it is submitted here that problematising masculinity should not be necessarily synonymous with 'feminine insults' or 'male bashing'. We have already noted that patriarchy and perhaps together with capitalism have created different forms of masculinities. As a result, there are some men who are victims of the patriarchal ideology (Segal: 1990). In light of this perspective, it will be misplaced for theatre-makers and readers/ spectators critical of masculinism, to 'vent' their anger on all men who are arguably in most cases victims of hegemonic masculinities (Greenglass: 1982). Consequently, it is contended here that writing and reading masculinities in Zimbabwean theatre has been done from emotional, simplistic and idiosyncratic motivations rather than 'scientific' perspectives. The next section focuses on femininities.

### **Theatre and Femininities**

This section briefly examines challenges, tensions and some successes which have been encountered in the processes of constructing and consuming metaphors of femininities in theatrical discourses particularly in schools. An inescapable observation is that an overwhelming number of theatre-makers have consciously or unconsciously crafted images of femininity which are problematic in terms of their potential to subordinate or perpetuate the subordination of women to negative structures of patriarchy. For example, in *Another Chance*, Pastor Titsvalo's wife Rosemary remains faithful to her husband even when the husband sleeps around with church sisters including the infected Rhoda and Beauty and contracting the HIV virus. Despite her husband's infidelity, she has to conform to the patriarchal expectations of perpetual and unconditional subordination to her husband.

Images of prostitutes, frail and weak women, gossiping or noisy old women, materialistic wives, tyrannical female bosses or employers and ungrateful or unreasonable mothers-in law populate theatre stages with stunning consistency or regularity. In *Buddies for Love*, Thoko, as a subject of stigma and discrimination, turns to her teacher for help. The teacher takes advantage of the situation and resorts to force in satisfying his sexual desires. Thoko is portrayed as weak and fragile and unable to defend herself.

While this could be understandable from a historical perspective, it is important for artists to take advantage of the liberatory potential of the theatrical space to make significant contributions in gender relations.

As already mentioned, there are some notable achievements that have been made to date. The possibility that women may be genuinely equal to men still appears to be enormously threatening. Current hegemonic discourses seek to emphasize male underachievement (Weiner et. al, 1997) However, we can not delight in isolated individual efforts, there is need to be deliberate and systematic; from small kindergarten improvisations right across professional theatre productions. Negative constructions of femininity can be challenged and changed in the theatrical space. For example, the stereotype of men as bread winners and boys as the top achievers in school or in communities at the expense of females has not been systematically challenged in theatre. The possibilities of projecting females as breadwinners and academically intelligent girls in a more positive and heroic light than simply as suffering, miserable victims of rape and sexual abuse, or underachievers in school has hardly been pursued in most theatre productions (Chivandikwa 2004). Such imaging in theatre cannot ensure that theatre plays its part in inspiring, motivating and challenging society to have a closer look at its own social systems, structures and institutions in terms of the extent to which they relate to the position of women.

Following the above, another area where theatre makers might need to be more sensitive is the issue of the dialectic between the female body and the female mind or heart. Indeed, the female body has been politicised almost across all cultures for generations and Zimbabwe has not been an exception. Perhaps, there is no harm in appreciating and celebrating female beauty where it is necessary. However, there is a difference between objectification and appreciation (Goffman; 1976). In University of Zimbabwe First year Dance Productions, girls wear short skirts exposing their legs, thighs and breasts are barely covered subjecting them to objectification by the male gaze. One gets the impression that theatre at times concentrates too much on female bodies and consequently fails to appreciate or recognise that women have great brains and big hearts in addition to 'pretty' and 'sexy' bodies. For example, in "*In The Moment*", men urge women to use their bodies as tools for survival. The lines below stress this point.

Madala: I'm not asking you to love him. I'm asking you to give him a chance. Go out with him for a month or two. That won't kill you. Sisi you must think of survival first. Use what God gave you to survive.

Nomsa: Enough. If you really like your manager that much, then go out with him yourself.

Madala: Can I ask him to come here? He can give us some cash, at least enough to settle the electricity bill.

Nomsa: Don't call him, I'll get the cash.

Officer: You have already failed. Let me call him.

In *Madam Speaker Sir*, women who hold seats in cabinet are subjected to insults simply because they advocate for gender equity. Their male counterparts see them as prostitutes.

Madam Speaker: I would like to recognize the presence in the speaker's gallery of the members of the women's coalition and other gender groups.

Members: *Inzwa. Inzwa. Ngavachiroorwa mhani vakadzi ava. Mahure!* (Listen, listen. Its time these women get married. Prostitutes!)

This attitude is clearly reflected in our theatre productions where both creators and some spectators engage in the female *gaze* (Chivandikwa 2009: 183). In short, this means there appears to be a big challenge for playwrights, directors, designers, actors and spectators to refashion femininities in theatrical discourses.

Some, if not all, of the above challenges have serious implications on the teaching and learning of theatre in Zimbabwe. Consequently, subsequent sections of this paper focus on how the above challenges in the construction of images of femininity and masculinity can be improved using educational theatre as one of the critical institutions for gender equity. We consider a systematic and holistic approach which takes into account pre-school to higher education theatre practices as well as theatre knowledge and skills from professional/ grassroots practitioners.

### **Preschool Drama/ Theatre Education**

Theatre or dramatic play has been identified as a critical tool in the socio-cultural, emotional, physical and cognitive development of young children particularly in the pre-school and early primary school levels. Scholarship from fields such as educational psychology, theatre and African traditional performances seem to contend that theatre or drama can have a profound impact in shaping the way children perceive their immediate environment and relate with others in the future (Bolton 1984; Chinyowa 2004; Ngugi 1987; Gaptu 2004; Neelands 1987; Peter 2004; Whittington and Floyd 2004). This means that already there is strong motivation to use theatre across the whole curriculum of preschool children.

Children at this stage have enthusiasm for dramatic activities and imaginary contexts are ideal for their learning (Vigotsky 1978). It is therefore critical and strategic to take advantage of these imaginary contexts to instil relevant skills and attitudes in gender negotiations. We examine here four possibilities in preschool dramatic play contexts in which gender values and attitudes can be explored, reflected upon, challenged and reinforced.

In order to achieve the desired cognitive and socio-cultural potency, theatre in preschool ought to be highly participatory at the levels that are appropriate to children. The levels and extent of various forms of participation can depend on context, the theme being pursued and the level of motivation among participants. However, we contend here that the most ideal situation is one in which children create their own stories, write scenarios, direct, design, act and cast roles with minimum and timely assistance and guidance from the teachers. Of course this requires a high degree of negotiation and decision-making in order to balance the needs of high participation and teachers' interventions (Gaptu 2004). With such high levels of participation which the dramatic fictional context can easily engender, relevant themes on gender such as power dynamics, cultural differences, gender roles, rituals and traditions can be skilfully weaved into performance discussions both inside and outside fictional roles. This would be the most critical function of the teacher-to be alert on any possibility of engaging the gender meanings and implications of any expressive form in children's dramatic narratives. For example, some narratives can be examined to explore gender based bullying at relevant levels of different community contexts. This can ensure that dramatic play achieves more goals than preparing the way for the learning of 'literacies' based on the use of symbols like reading, writing and drawing (Vigotsky 1978). In short, a highly participatory dramatic context can influence positive and critical engagement skills which can be used later in life by preschool children (Gaptu 2009). We recognise the possibility of taking advantage of these learning and teaching opportunities to reinforce and foster positive and relevant gender interactive skills and attitudes.

It has been noted that social and cultural contexts are important in the study of human development (Hargreaves 1996 in Andang'o 2009). The argument is that issues of learning and teaching should therefore be approached with respect to the culture and society in which they exist. For our present purposes, the implication is that dramatic constructs can make use of both contemporary and traditional cultural practice not only to enrich the performative aspects, but also to tap on some critical symbols that relate to gender meanings. This is critical in this millennium in which teachers can easily use videos and other media that are not rooted in the cultural experiences of the children and this can create some cultural dissonance. This is not however, to deny the need to awaken international consciousness among young children. Our view is that these dynamics can be

really critical in gender explorations especially at this early age where young children can internalise images very easily (Ngugi 1987).

We reiterate in this article the possibility that gender consciousness can permeate the whole preschool curriculum especially where dramatic constructions are involved. There are many activities in pre-schools which make use of dramatic play or theatrical constructs and it is possible that each one of them provide a gender-engagement opportunity. At every level of dramatic construction, including storyline-building, scene-creation, directing, acting, scenic design and casting, pre-school teachers can dexterously encourage and negotiate positive gender consciousness and practices. For example, many pre-schools devise very brilliant and deeply engaging Christmas plays which are artistically polished. Such productions which are also watched by parents of the children can be ideal contexts to reflect critically on gender issues. In these very popular end of year productions, we note the potential to 'deconstruct' gender roles in casting. For example, in most pre-school productions, the soldiers who come to kill Jesus are men. If girls are cast in these roles, this can be a potential area of reflecting on gender relations in both the fictional construct and the society of the children. The same goes for popular traditional narratives which can be adapted to suit this pre-school level.

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 Elliot (2007 in Peter 2009:16) calls for an 'aesthetic pedagogy which is conceptualized as:

...a heightened sense of human consciousness and knowing in learning contents that develop from issues of life open to a diversity of outcomes, with conversation in the core...

The above view can be combined with Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Perspective in which learning combines continuous processes grounded in experiences and resolution of tension and conflict, interactions, adaptations and the transaction between social knowledge and personal knowledge. Based on these perspectives, dramatic narratives can ensure that socio-centric learning (Gaptu 2009) occurs here. The use of relevant props, language and other expressive forms can enhance a socio-centric perspective which fosters cooperation among participants in relevant aspects of the fictional constructs. In such a context, images of femininity and masculinity can be reflected upon in ways which can positively influence the young children in their latter lives.

The above possibilities which are grounded in psychology, educational theatre and child development perspectives will only be realised if pre-school teachers are provided with relevant skills and techniques which place strong emphasis on gender dynamics. This is crucial because it has been noted that not all interactive

dramatic contexts necessarily engender socio-cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). This therefore calls for deliberate, systematic and strategic approaches which take into account gender at every stage of the dramatic context in pre schools.

### **Implications for Theatre Education in Primary and Secondary Schools**

Theatre can be used as an avenue to explore possibilities for the reformation of deeply-seated gender beliefs. Instead of presenting masculinities as uniformly dominant and largely benefiting from the socio-political and patriarchal system, the theatre space can help challenge these beliefs. Dramatic presentations in primary schools continuously present males as irresponsible drunkards and drug abusers, wife barterers and violent beings. We argue that this 'forecloses' possibilities of engaging the young generation into a 'gender dialogue' capable of producing 'gender sensitive' creators and audiences of artistic and cultural products. Stereotypical imaging can consequently be replaced by alternative and positive images which will help create a gender-balanced society. The greatest challenge that the teachers or drama facilitators at primary school level face is the need to avoid the tendency of creating dramatic presentations and plays which thrive more on 'gender conflicts' which range from the personal to the domestic. Perhaps in order to address the above challenge, there is need to construct images of gender tensions and interactions alongside other social variables such as age, class, race, ethnicity and religion. It therefore means educational theatre that aspires to ameliorate gender disparities should be approached from a multi-disciplinary perspective.

The theatre space has the potential to challenge patriarchal institutions which privilege male dominance. At primary school level, it is suggested here that plays can find avenues to escape dealing with stereotypes and other traditional representations/ misrepresentations. The learning process especially at primary school might be regarded as a level at which subjects are still at a malleable age and hence the subsequent constructions of gender roles and attributes easily cement into 'reality' and will largely have a determining influence on their 'lifetime' perceptions of gender differences.

Thematic preferences, allocation of roles, construction of characters and their visual presentation should also help to problematise masculinities. Masculinities have tended to be viewed as a 'default' sex on which standards of behaviour and social interaction are based. Theatre in primary education can be used to show or interrogate discussion, reorient perceptions of masculinities, suggest ways and challenges for the construction and representation of masculinities. Theatre can function as a concept to provoke people to engage in gender dialogue. The traditional dances practiced in the primary schools' extra-curriculum activities which are normally pencilled for the third term can be used to reconstruct positive

and reformed images of masculinities and femininities. Instead of 'faithfully' reincarnating these traditional forms at the aesthetic level such as movement and rhythm, possibilities of merging and fusing these with contemporary gender discussions can be considered in order to meet Millenium Development Goals (MDG's), global trends on development as well as cultural and national demands.

It is suggested here that in the construction of characters, theatre makers may also need to consider 'complex' character-constructions because they determine how the same subjects interact in social circumstances. Alternatively it would be ideal to create compelling characters who readily find avenues and ways of dealing with their problems at hand than make them 'cry' because that would seem to mark resignation and failure on the part of the subjects. To realise such an ideal, both students and teachers involved in the process of theatre-making may need to be exposed to basic skills in scriptwriting such as the technique of using the concept of three-dimensionality (Hatcher 1996) in character construction at a much sustained level. This could ensure that primary and secondary school theatre productions have complex characters that are compelling with the potential to problematise gender consciousness.

Theatre can be used as an ideological tool in order to challenge the social stereotypical barriers in the theatre making process from the writing of the scripts, thematic issues to be dealt with, characterisation, casting, costuming and the delineation of space. For instance, different spaces tend to be associated with different kinds of people - bars are associated with men and kitchens with women. What happens then when men are found in the kitchen and females in the bars or when men and women change roles? Theatre education at these levels can begin to explore the dynamics of space in relation to spatial configurations and beauty of movement or gesture. The skills and knowledge coming from such an exploration is useful to interrogate the dynamics of space in social contexts and its implications on gender.

There is need for re-socialisation of students in order for them to construct alternative images in both dramatic and socio-cultural spaces. Students are usually informed by their socio-cultural realities from their communities so there is need to expose them to various non-realistic dramatic styles which can assist them to imagine other possible gender relations or dynamics which are beyond their repertoire. In some instances, realistic styles of theatre-making would tempt theatre creators to reproduce internalised negative gender images. For this to be realised, teachers in charge of theatre need to be trained through workshops specifically meant to orient them to these non-realist dramatic styles, watching non-realistic professional productions presented at theatre festivals such as HIFA (Harare International Festival of the Arts) and university culture and performance workshops where the teachers are exposed to non-realistic productions produced by experts in playwriting and directing.

We contend that the above suggested approaches in primary and secondary school theatre education if implemented systematically, can ensure that theatre productions are of high standard which meet the general cultural competence that we expect students to have at these levels. We recognise that high quality productions necessarily attract large audiences and therefore theatrical contexts can be manipulated to become sites or forums for reinforcing gender equity, consciousness and attitudes which are an integral component of human civilisation and development in the millennium.

### **Higher Education and Grassroots Theatre Knowledge/ Skills**

It seems there is the urgent need in this millennium to narrow the gap between higher education and grassroots and professional knowledge and skills. The latter has generally been associated with elitism, sophistry, abstraction, criticality and at times Eurocentricism (Grange 2005: 1214, Blunt 2005: 1376, Soudien 2006: 949, Wyk 2004: 208, Botha 2007: 207, Sirayi 2007 :36). The former depending on context and motivation is usually conceptualised and described in terms of nativity, backwardness, authenticity and historical functions. For example, some post-colonial African scholarship has tended to celebrate the function of indigenous art forms in cultural regeneration, educational revival and developmental goals (Asiam 1999, Odhiambo 1999; Chinyowa 2004; Mlama 1991; Ngugi 1987). It is very possible, and in our view, extremely imperative, that theatre which aspires to foster gender sensitivity and equality should combine the positive aspects of both categories. In both theory and practice, higher education and grassroots and/ or professional knowledge can be complementary and mutual rather than dichotomous.

In higher education there is emphasis on problematisation and critical engagement which in general terms might not be very prevalent in grassroots theatre practices and institutions. At the same time, it appears there is immense talent, vocal and physical expertise, aesthetic depth and profound skills in grassroots/ professional theatre practices which in most cases are taken for granted without adequate documentation and careful study in universities and colleges. For example, while the *Jerusarema* dance seems to have been taken very 'seriously' by politicians, private business companies and civic organisations and the United Nations (UN), universities and colleges do not seem to have taken very systematic and deliberate approaches not only to theorise and problematise, but also to appropriate its aesthetic beauty. Perhaps more importantly, for our present purpose, a university can partner a traditional dance group that specialises in *Jerusarema* dance to produce a dance-drama on the 'sensational' sexual connotations of the dance as a discursive site for gender relations in both historical and contemporary contexts of the dance. In such collaborative educational theatre projects, both grassroots practitioners and university learners and researchers can exchange

views, competencies, experiences and perspectives in a theatrical forum whose impact can positively influence both participants and the communities in which they study and practise their theatre. This is because as an example, Theatre for Development workshops in Cameroon proved to be; "a veritable medium through which men and women came to understand each other better and sought ways of living together more as partners than subordinates and superiors..." (Samba 2005: 215). The theatrical space is a potent tool in gender consciousness and constructions. Therefore, it might be critical to combine grassroots and/ or professional skills with critical elements which are normally associated with higher education. Such collaborative projects are possible because some university communities sometimes 'successfully' partner grassroots communities in negative gender ideological projects. For example, (Chitando and Chitando 2004; 14) observe that:

It is significant to note that even progressive sections of society can be quite conservative when it comes to women's issues. University of Zimbabwe male students easily join hands with commuter omnibus touts in regulating female clothing....

Theatre education that involves university researchers or learners and grassroots practitioners can study and dramatise gender conflicts and contradictions such as the above with a view to influencing positive change in communities. Another possibility that can be explored from such a partnership is the need to study and practice theatre from a gender perspective in the context of a multidisciplinary approach. Universities offer many courses in history, religion, social science, literature and international relations just to mention few relevant examples. These disciplines offer diverse perspectives and insights on gender conflicts, contradictions and myths which can be dramatised and deepen the levels of conflict in theatrical productions in ways which can challenge and enlighten both performers and spectators. For example, the "myth" about Africa having oppressed women while Western women are "free" from patriarchal oppression seems to be perverse (Steady 2005; 317, Lazreg 2005; 70). Such "myths" can be interrogated in theatrical discourses which target both elite and grassroots audiences.

A multidisciplinary approach would also ensure that every aspect of theatre studies and practice is sensitive to gender dynamics. This means universities curriculum on women will not be only limited to applied theatre, but even apparently "pure" technical courses such as design, acting and directing also focus on gender issues in both theory and practice. We note that generally in Zimbabwean researches, studies and practices, the above technical aspects of theatre hardly focus on gender. The social dynamics of the millennium seem to dictate the

need to imbue every aspect of our cultural and educational endeavours with the utmost desire to engage in activities which can help society to dismantle and mitigate all forms of gender contradictions and oppression.

The above ideals we argue can be realised if we take seriously the view that "theatre is collaboration in the 'purest' sense of the word – it is co-labour, working together. This co-labour exists on many levels...." (Waincott and Fletcher 2004; xix). We appropriate the above perspective to submit that theatre education can have progressive ideological efficacy in gender relations if there is strong collaboration between higher education theatre practitioners, researchers and grassroots/ professional knowledge/ expertise.

### **Conclusion**

This article has explored possibilities of using theatre education in the enhancement and advancement of gender equity in Zimbabwe. The need to adopt systematic, deliberate, holistic, integrated, focused and consistent approaches in theatre education in the service of gender equity is compelling. The theoretical and conceptual basis for the potential social efficacy of theatre education appears to be strong. However, the challenge is to identify specific strategies and conditions under which the potential of theatre to foster gender harmony can be realized. While we have proffered specific suggestions and possibilities, our major point of departure is the need for coordination, collaboration, and strategic vision among theatre practitioners and educational institutions such as pre-schools, primary and secondary schools as well as tertiary institutions. Government ministries responsible for education and culture, civic organisations which deal with human rights or development and private institutions may need to be sensitised to provide resources and support that are needed in the training of theatre practitioners, teachers and lecturers in institutions of higher learning to achieve the above ideals. We argue that, in the context of the above, every moment and stage of theatre-construction processes can be strategically turned into a gender-reflection experience. We cannot at this stage envisage a single technical, aesthetic and social aspect of theatre education and construction that is devoid of possibilities and opportunities for gender reinforcement, negotiation and engagement within the overall goal of achieving gender equity in the present millennium.

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