

# Analyzing Global Models of Applied Theatre

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes global models of applied theatre to identify the conditions under which performance creates meaningful sociopolitical change. Drawing on case studies from Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and the Global North, this paper argues that applied theatre is not a universal art; rather, it is shaped by the political histories and cultural context in which it is practiced. Three patterns emerged from the research: in authoritarian contexts, participatory models like forum theatre or legislative theatre provide means of civic agency. In trauma-affected societies, drama therapy and traditional performance offer cultural healing, and in democratic but inequitable societies, awareness-raising and argumentative forms of theatre can challenge societal norms. Across all regions, cultural adaptation and long-term commitment are also important factors that improve the efficacy of applied theatre practice. This paper synthesizes these findings into a typology linking sociopolitical situation to theatrical recommendation, offering a framework for practitioners and scholars. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that applied theatre is not universal; it is a context-sensitive art that can instill real sociopolitical and community change.

## Keywords

Applied Theatre, Forum Theatre, Legislative Theatre, Theatre for Development, Drama Therapy, Global Theatre, Sociopolitical Change, Theatre of the Oppressed

## 1. Introduction

Applied theatre—the practice of using theatre practices or theatrical techniques to address real-world sociopolitical issues and inspire positive social change—has emerged as a powerful driver of political change around the world. From the origins of forum theatre in Brazil to street theatre in India, practitioners of applied theatre

have pioneered the performing arts' usage for civic engagement.

This paper seeks to uncover how applied theatre can be effectively adapted to different cultural and national contexts to best tackle sociopolitical issues. Through a thorough comparative literature review of case studies of applied theatre in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, the Global North, and Asia, this paper examines the shortcomings and successes of culturally adaptive theatre interventions around the world.

This paper analyzes applied theatre practices by examining the forms that have proven most impactful. Case studies were selected to provide a comprehensive overview of many different geopolitical histories, including post-colonial, post-authoritarian, conflict-afflicted, and democratic states. This paper assesses "impact" through a qualitative means: this can manifest itself in community engagement, integration into educational institutions, and, if applicable, policy influence. In analyzing each case, this paper considers how political and cultural histories have shaped the efficacy of applied theatre and the means by which applied theatre is most uniquely effective in different places.

The following section of the paper will discuss the theoretical foundations behind applied theatre that will be used to evaluate the following global case studies. It will provide a more in-depth definition and history of Applied theatre and its global variants. Following that will be a brief explanation of the methodology used for this paper, which is a literature review. Next, the paper will analyze case studies of instances of Applied theatre in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, South and Central Asia, the Global North, to determine what adaptations, if any, are needed to successfully utilize applied theatre for sociopolitical change. Impact will be defined through policy, community, and educational influence.

## 2. Theoretical Foundations

Applied theatre is a broad term to describe performance techniques designed to engage communities in political discourse or social change. It is a technique used globally and regionally, whether formal or informal—theatrical performance has been found throughout history in global cultures, and has been used to promote political objectives.

The issue with the practice of global applied theatre arises when techniques are transplanted from one cultural context to another without adaptation, namely, from the Global North to the Global South. This poses ethical concerns, potentially perpetuating oppressive savior dynamics between the practitioners and people, misrepresenting the cultures of the audience, or focusing on short-term impact rather than long-term discourse. These effects have the potential to create a disconnect or resentment between the practitioners and public, which can in turn hinder sociopolitical discourse. Thus, it is important to recognize what types of applied theatre are best suited for different cultural contexts, so as to provide the best impact to the nation.

From colonial times, the imposition of art by colonizing force has created re-

sentment, cultural disruption, and skewed perceptions of local cultures.

In one key instance, French colonial forces in Algeria took misrepresentative photos of the Algerian women they encountered, though the women usually remained veiled as per their cultural customs, French photographers hired models to pose as Algerian women or paid them to wear more revealing and sexual clothing that fit their preconceived notions (Alloula, 1986). In 2017, under the Trump Administration, US national security advisor H.R. McMaster cited one of these skewed photographs to urge the President to commit more troops to Afghanistan, hoping to prove the pre-existing American influence through the western clothing shown in the photographs (Moffitt, 2017). This instance shows how art forms that seek to impose preconceived notions of a group rather than seek authentic cultural understanding can contribute to larger, skewed political decisions, ultimately countering the very purpose of applied theatre.

More broadly, instances of colonization have created resentment and social disorder in the affected communities. Consequences of colonization include issues with new colonial boundaries, increased conflict between ethnic groups, growing inequality, and unequal access to vital resources, skills, and experiences (Marker, 2003). These impacts are a cause for resentment among many colonized people, creating the idea that their poverty is caused by Western colonizers. This type of political anger is detrimental to social cooperation, thus countering the intended positive effects of applied theatre (Webster et al., 2022). Thus, applied theatre practitioners must be cautious to ensure their art does not create similar effects by imposing culture without cultural consideration.

Recent scholarship in applied theatre emphasizes the importance of adaptation in shaping impact. In their book *Applied Theatre Second Edition: International Case Studies and Challenges for Practice*, Prendergast and Saxton emphasize that applied theatre is less of a fixed pedagogy and more of a spectrum that requires adaptation (Prendergast & Saxton, 2016). Another comparative work, *Critical Perspectives on Applied Theatre*, argues for the viewing of applied theatre through a transnational, not static lens (Hughes & Nicholson, 2016). Built on these insights, the typology developed in this paper creates a practical guide for practitioners to alter applied theatre to the flexible contexts of nations it is implemented within.

### 3. Methodology

This paper utilizes an in-depth literature review in order to determine how different means of applied theatre can best impact different cultures. This review will include primary and secondary articles and texts, and where needed, interviews and theatre reviews as well. These sources together will serve as case studies to best analyze the impact of applied theatre in different nations. To ensure balance, cases were selected so that each continent or region received relatively equal attention, avoiding the overrepresentation of specific perspectives.

Each case was analyzed for political history, cultural context, and observed outcomes. The analysis showed patterns across cases, which were then formalized

into a typology linking sociopolitical conditions to effective applied theatre forms. This approach does not aim for exhaustive coverage of global practice but rather for the development of a framework that can guide future research and practice.

Databases such as JSTOR, Project MUSE, Scopus, and Google Scholar were searched to select case studies for this paper, with keywords being the region's name, "applied theatre", "theatre of the oppressed", "political theatre", or "theatre for development". Inclusion criteria required that case studies explored the specific technique of applied theatre used as well as its impact, yielding a final sample of 28 peer-reviewed articles and case studies for analysis.

## 4. Global Case Studies

### 4.1. Latin America

#### Theatre of the Oppressed

Arguably, the most impactful and consequential instance of applied theatre is Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), originating in Brazil (Boal, 1979). Augusto Boal was raised in Rio de Janeiro and attended Columbia University in the 1940s-50s with an interest in theatre from an early age (Paterson, 2013). After completing his degree, Boal moved back to Brazil and worked with the Arena theatre, leading to his experimentation that led to the creation of the TO. Boal wrote numerous books and won the seat of Vereador of Rio, which is similar to a city council seat.

The TO originated from Boal's work with the working and peasant classes, synthesized with the vision of Paulo Freire and the Pedagogy of the Oppressed. The TO aims to use theatrical techniques to empower and liberate communities, inform sociopolitical change, and stimulate meaningful discourse. While Boal did not create applied theatre as a concept, the TO is a foundation for many practices of applied theatre and has significantly impacted applied theatre as a whole. There are many different models of applied theatre under TO.

The first type of TO is newspaper theatre, using image, sound, and music to combat censorship in the press. Newspaper theatre was born out of a military dictatorship in Brazil that established a violent authoritarian regime that often censored communication among the people (Santos, 2015).

Another type of TO, invisible theatre, was created out of the need to practice applied theatre when, due to oppressive circumstances, an actual theatre was unavailable. Viewers are real participants in the theatre piece who discuss and opine on various acts and happenings, thus making this technique more of a discussion than a theatrical production (Boal, 1979).

The practice of image theatre was created in response to the need for collective organizing among groups that spoke different languages. In image theatre, issues and emotions are depicted through images (Boal, 1979).

Forum theatre is one of the most actionable forms of applied theatre-in this type, a scene or play shows how a protagonist does not know how to fight against a situation of oppression, and audience members are invited to replace the pro-

tagonist onstage and act out potential solutions. The oppressive dynamic depicted in the play is modeled from real-life issues, allowing participants to seek alternatives to not only transform the plot of the show but also their own realities (Boal, 1979).

The practice of the rainbow of desires grew from the idea that in many places he visited, Boal found that people felt oppressed without a tangible oppressor. In situations without traditional indicators of oppression, such as terrorism, authoritarianism, or restriction of rights, it might be difficult to identify and understand internalized oppression. The rainbow of desires theatrical technique allows participants to define and understand their oppressors theatrically (Boal, 1979).

The final mode of Boal's TO is legislative theatre, which used techniques from all the previous forms to change citizen desires into laws (Boal, 1998). Forum sessions are followed by a chamber where laws are designed based off solutions found during the performance. The actors then pressure policymakers to enact their proposed laws, thereby transforming theatre into an advocacy tool.

Of the different forms of TO introduced in Latin America, legislative theatre proved to be the most effective, leading to the passage of thirteen laws during Boal's government (Boal, 1998). As detailed in Augusto Boal's book, *Legislative Theatre: Using performance to make politics*, one successful law passed through this technique was The Law of Geriatric Care (Law no. 1023/94). This law requires municipal hospitals to provide for specialized geriatric care, which was lacking in Rio at the time. The vote was won in the Chamber by 25 votes on November 22nd, 1995. A following law required that hospitals must have a designated number of beds for geriatric needs, as well as facilities for elderly patients to be accompanied by relatives (Boal, 1998).

The fourth law that Boal's TO passed prohibited irreversible and harmful mental illness treatments, including electric shock, imprisonment, and psychological aggression. Another law related to mental health designated the Casa das Palmeiras, a mental health facility, as a public utility, thus providing more legal privileges and tax exemptions (Boal, 1998).

Another law passed through the legislative theatre method required landlords to put a small platform on the ground below hanging garbage bins and telephone kiosks to improve accessibility for the blind. Another legislation obliged the city to supply plastic bins and bags to street traders to clean debris after markets (Boal, 1998).

Boal also spearheaded the passage of two laws aimed at raising awareness about the Indonesian genocide in East Timor by naming a state school "Free Timor", and designating a day of solidarity. Another education-related law required that state schools must enable parents to choose the school that their children go to maximize convenience, given that the state schools have enough space and workers. Another law required motels to charge the same rate for all couples regardless of sexual orientation, fighting homophobia and sexism against same-sex couples (Boal, 1998).

The most important legislation that the TO helped pass was a law that protected witnesses of crimes: this law was replicated by other cities and was considered for being the model for the national law dealing with witness protection. Though many laws in Brazil at the time were loosely enforced, the TO not only passed these laws but also used their craft to apply pressure to the government (Boal, 1998).

Legislative theatre helped promote not only official laws, but also social change and smaller action as well. When a young Black man was beaten and accused of stealing from a shop, members of Boal's cabinet protested the actions and empowered the man to enter a lawsuit in which he won. Additionally, Boal's troupe performed a play called *A Piece of Me*, which aimed to raise awareness about child prostitution and abduction.

The success of Boal's TO, specifically the model of legislative theatre, indicates that Latin American communities benefit most from pragmatic models of applied theatre that allow practitioners to have a tangible role in making change. This may be due to a number of reasons, including Latin America's history of authoritarianism, popular exclusion from politics, economic inequality, and pre-existing reliance on storytelling and music.

One reason why legislative theatre might appeal to Latin American audiences is due to the history of authoritarian regimes and military leadership in the region (Contreras Urrutia, 2021). Weak democratic institutions, unequal social structures, and populism make Latin America especially prone to authoritarian leadership. Legislative theatre may provide a sense of participation in the legislative process that is often lacking from these authoritarian regimes. Boal specifically focused on advocating for marginalized and "voiceless populations", including "homeless youth, black university students, battered women, blind people, and other groups", thus providing political participation to those who rarely receive it (Legislative Theatre, n.d.). Additionally, since pre-Columbian times, theatre and performance existed as a means of storytelling—it enabled indigenous communities to share their traditions and issues affecting communities (Polio, 1985). Latin America's history explains why legislative theatre has proven so beneficial: it is a practical method of advocacy that places power into the hands of the voiceless.

## 4.2. Africa

In Africa, the popular method of applied theatre was Theatre for Development (TfD), a strategy for education and development through theatre that was inspired by the Pedagogy of the Oppressed, similar to TO (Kvam, 2012). This paper will focus on TfD initiatives and other similar applied theatre initiatives in Ghana and Nigeria.

### Ghana

In Ghana, the implementation of TfD arose from ongoing performance and concert party traditions, mass education campaigns in the 1940s, the UNESCO Puppet for Community Development project, and other community projects. Theatre was already considered a means for political liberation and empowerment, leading

to a conducive environment for TfD.

Before the introduction of TfD in Ghana, however, theatre was used as a tool of domestication of the colonized. The concert party travelling theatre, a travelling theatre movement intentionally meant solely for entertainment, was commissioned by the British to be turned into a propaganda tool during the post-World War II era (Balme & Hakib, 2023). Catherine Cole, a professor in English, Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies, claims that concert parties transformed the “public consciousness in Ghana during the post-war and independence years”. Though this form of applied theatre was not specifically for development or political progress, it is important to note that practitioners “adapted their shows to the language needs and aesthetic tastes of particular audiences”, which Cole attributes as a reason to the movement’s impact. The concert party travelling theatre was a key influence on TfD, because in the absence of literacy, this movement proved the power of theatre in shifting popular viewpoints. The first president of Ghana after winning independence, Kwame Nkrumah, promoted applied theatre and concert parties as a part of his cultural development agenda (Balme & Hakib, 2023).

In 1948, a mass education and community development campaign began in Ghana during colonial times. These campaigns were designed to train leaders and create more community understanding. These programs aimed to train leaders in social development and stimulate rural communities. To further these efforts, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Simister, 2013) sent Josef Holler, a puppeteer, to integrate puppetry into community development programs. Participants were challenged to identify pressing issues, research them, and express their findings through puppetry. This program introduced the concept of live performance as a tool for community development and political action, thereby laying the groundwork for TfD’s implementation in Ghana (Balme & Hakib, 2023).

In Ghana, TfD has produced measurable, community-level shifts when projects are co-created with residents and practitioners are committed to follow-up action. In the realm of environmental health, a theatre initiative in Woara Beba reported gains in public hygiene and heightened public awareness of waste management by embedding performances in an ongoing process rather than just one-off shows (Asante & Zakaria, 2021). Some challenges that applied theatre initiatives faced in Ghana included sustaining the impact from the performances as well as adjusting to the accepted cultural norms of the people. Additionally, the group Theatre for a Change’s Old Fadama program used forum and legislative theatre in order to improve knowledge on contraceptive usage, sexual and reproductive health and rights (Kabelka et al., 2023). According to an interim impact assessment and later evaluations, audience members experienced positive behavior change and further understanding of the play’s subject matter (Simister, 2013). When applied theatre relies on community building and long-term impact rather than short-term intervention, it can foster targeted sociopolitical change, associated with improvements in awareness, attitudes, and behaviors.

## Nigeria

TfD has emerged in Nigeria as a response to local narratives and responsive to urgent community needs. One prominent example is the Living Earth Nigeria Foundation's Community Theatre Initiative where groups were trained to develop and perform stories that depicted relevant community issues. After workshops and performances, evaluations showed positive behavior changes and more questioning of government. It is important to note that "these results were achieved not through the conventional packaging of theatre for rural people but by equipping them with requisite histrionic, production and management skills to develop and practice their own culturally relevant theatre based on identified local problems" (Betiang, 2010) Thus, impactful theatre methods allowed community members to advocate for issues that are important to them in culturally relevant ways.

Applied theatre was also used in Northern Nigeria during a time when there was heightened violence around ethnicity and religion. Practitioners carried out a survey in various communities, which informed the play that was performed, then was followed by a moderated debate (Abah et al., 2009). Rehearsals and performances ended up being a learning experience between Muslim and Christian participants, who were "enabled to hear different and unimagined sides of the story" (Abah et al., 2009). According to surveyors, remarks like "You see, we have all been used and dumped" and "We have killed each other for nothing" were common. The project was able to "raise people's consciousness", allowing them to be more receptive to the "community-based organizations that embrace social action and the change that it produces".

Nigerian political history is marked by colonialism, military rule, and challenges during the switch to democracy (University of Central Arkansas, 2019). Thus, this approach to applied theatre aligns closely with Nigeria's history: communities might be skeptical to top-down messaging, but more receptive to locally driven conversations. TfD consistently was able to foster dialogue, encourage meaningful behavioral changes within the population, and foster a climate for long-term social change.

## 4.3. Middle East

### Palestine

Palestinian theatre offers a unique look at how both a nation's political history and national trauma can impact applied theatre efficacy. The Ashtar theatre, formed in 1991, uses theatre performances and training to promote progressive social goals (ASHTAR Theatre, n.d.). The Ashtar theatre primarily uses the technique of forum theatre pioneered by Augusto Boal. Forum theatre allows spectators to view a theatrical representation of a social issue and insert themselves into the scene in order to try potential solutions.

The implementation of forum theatre indicates that Palestinian practitioners might benefit from feeling a sense of agency in the art that they create, similar to the phenomenon found in Latin American theatre. Palestine's modern history has

been marked by colonization, occupation, and a lack of control, all of which influence the preferred theatre practices. After the fall of the Ottoman empire, the British Mandate for Palestine placed Palestine under British occupation from 1923 - 1948 ([Great Britain Contributor & League of Nations, 1922](#)). This British occupation set the scene for conflict between Palestine and the newly established Jewish state of Israel. Namely, the Arab-Israeli war and Six-Day war, which led to the capturing of the Gaza strip and West Bank, exemplify this conflict ([Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, n.d.](#)). Such political upheaval has instituted a culture of resistance and survival that forum theatre helps give voice to. Theatre becomes a political act when individuals are restricted.

However, especially in the past two years, Palestine has also suffered from intense national trauma as a result of its conflicts with Israel, which is also ameliorated through theatre. In light of the October 7th, 2023, attacks and increased attacks in the West bank, the Ashtar theatre organized a production called the Gaza Monologues, highlighting the stories of targeted Gazan children and people. They hope to create larger international awareness of the conflict in Gaza, saying that there has been an “outpouring of solidarity and support and support for Palestine through artistic expression”. ([ASHTAR Theatre, 2024](#))

Another Palestinian theatre, the Freedom Theatre, has produced over 25 plays in Jenin refugee camp, aiming to make art accessible and impactful. By using aspects of forum theatre to “deconstruct an oppressive reality and make it comprehensible”, the Freedom theatre addresses the trauma that refugees face through representing them and providing them agency through theatre ([The Freedom Theatre, 2025](#)).

By allowing Palestinians to acknowledge and feel their trauma and then instilling a sense of political agency to solve those problems, Palestinian theatre organizations foster both personal healing and political progress.

### **Lebanon**

In Lebanon, applied theatre is combined with dramatherapy, a form of therapy that uses theatrical techniques to facilitate psychological growth ([Berghs et al., 2022](#)). One particular organization that is spearheading this collaboration is Catharsis: Lebanese Center for Drama Therapy. Founded by Zeina Daccache in 2007, Catharsis directs plays performed by inmates about their experience, thus facilitating individual healing and also motivating larger political change ([Catharsis, n.d.](#)).

Catharsis's first work, *Twelve Angry Lebanese*, was based on the play *Twelve Angry Men* by Reginald Rose. Daccache observed as throughout the 15-month rehearsals, prisoners became more disciplined, communicative, and ate and slept better ([Daccache, 2022](#)). The eventual performance was presented to ministers, judges, and authority figures in Lebanon. In the play, prisoners discussed Law No. 463/2002, a policy that reduced sentences for those with good behavior, which was not properly enforced. Two months after the performance, the sentence law was successfully applied ([Daccache, 2022](#)).

Next, in 2011, Daccache oversaw the production of *Scheherazade Diary* in Baabda Women's Prison in Beirut (Daccache, 2022). Prisoners were often victims of domestic violence who were not protected by the law. In order to advocate for laws protecting survivors of domestic violence, the production showed depictions of violence and also included a depiction of the proposed law. The law was adopted in 2014, after the production was shown to lawmakers and officials (Salame, 2018).

In 2016, Catharsis put on a production of *Johar... Up in the Air*, which critiqued prison conditions and mental health stigma. Since it was performed by prisoners who had to face the issues depicted in the play, audience members reflected on the experiences of the prisoners through performance (Salame, 2018). The play led to the creation of two draft laws that pushed for protection of mentally ill inmates and inmates sentenced for life (Friedrich Naumann Foundation, 2021).

Finally, the play *Shebaik Lebaik*, a collaboration between Catharsis and the Migrant Workers Task Force, called for the repeal of a law saying migrant workers are prohibited from having romantic relationships in Lebanon. The law was later abolished in 2015 (Friedrich Naumann Foundation, 2021).

These plays, as well as their creative processes, were filmed and documented by Daccache. For example, the documentary *Scheherazade's Diary* highlights the personal experiences of some of the prisoners that relate to the messages of the play, both to facilitate personal healing and also show audience members that the events in the play are not purely fictional, they are drawn from real stories (Synergos, n.d.) The documentaries also help Catharsis have an impact outside of just Lebanon, thus expanding the reach that the play's messaging can have.

#### 4.4. Asia

##### India

The prominent form of applied theatre in India during the 1940s to today is street theatre, a form of theatre meant to engage the common man, specifically meant to involve people who are not usually able to or interested in seeing theatrical productions (Agarwal, 2021). This especially includes individuals in rural areas, for whom street theatre became the "main source of entertainment especially in the post-harvest season of the agrarian communities" (Akpodiete, 2025).

In the British colonial period, the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA, n.d.) promoted street theatre performances to raise awareness on injustices by the British Raj. IPTA highlighted progressive voices, often tackling issues of labor issues, famine, and daily struggles under the colonial government (Thakur, 2024). IPTA's success was largely attributed to its adaptability: it changed performances based on the language, tradition, and theatrical history of the places they performed. Before performances, practitioners explained the context of the issues depicted in the play particular to the area in which the performance took place. Additionally, practitioners adopted different historical theatrical techniques when traveling to different places: for example, in Bengal, performed *jatra*, a traditional form known for dramatic acting, high energy music, and elaborate costumes (Bhatia,

2004). Meanwhile, in Andhra Pradesh, IPTA adapted their performance to align with the practice of burrakatha, in which three performers take on the roles of a main performer, a joker, and a politician.

The most famous IPTA play, Nabanna (Harvest), raised awareness and money for the Bengali famine of 1943 (Bhattacharya, 2018). The play, performed throughout India, raised hundreds of thousands of rupees to support famine recovery and inspired a later film, Dharti Ke Lal, which further spread IPDA's message and influence (Ranjan, 2015).

While IPTA split around the time of partition in 1947, it inspired later applied theatre organizations. One such organization, Jana Natya Manch (Janam), formed in Delhi in 1978 as a response to the National Emergency, a period of creative and political subjugation (Mahiyaria). Janam's first play, Machine, criticized the capitalist "machine" rising in India at the time. This play was extremely successful, performed to many industrial labor unions affected by rising capitalist influence (Mahiyaria, n.d.). Janam's plays were not inherently didactic; rather, they were aimed at showcasing conditions. They do not intend to force any viewpoint onto the audience, rather, it aims to simply bring light to existing issues through theatrical portrayal.

Another influential Janam play was Aurat, which translates to Woman, written for the North Indian Working Women's conference (Bharati, 2017). Aurat reflects on Indian patriarchy and women's societal status. Though it was criticized for only being a surface-level criticism of the patriarchy, it was performed 2,500 times in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, making it widely influential (Bharati, 2017).

Indian applied theatre revolves more about presenting issues and raising awareness rather than aiming to promote a specific agenda or solution to the issue. From its earliest ruling empires, India has maintained regionalism and does not have a long history of authoritarian or oppressive regimes. Post-independence, the Indian constitution established a democratic form of government (Price, 2022). Thus, political expression was less of an issue in India than simple awareness and expression of political issues on a widespread scale. Given how populated India is, it makes sense that a form of theatre that exposes sociopolitical issues on a large scale would be most beneficial for the nation.

### **Cambodia**

In Cambodia, applied theatre arose out of the Cambodian Genocide as a way to recover from trauma (University of Minnesota, n.d.). During this genocide from 1975-1979, between 1.5 million and 3 million Cambodians were killed by the Khmer Rouge, who took over the country post-civil war (University of Minnesota, n.d.). The genocide was part of an attempt to create a class-less agrarian society, meaning that religious and ethnic minorities as well as "intellectuals", including doctors, lawyers, and clergy, became targets. Cambodian targets were systematically executed and forcibly displaced by the regime until communist Vietnam took over (Genocide in Cambodia, 2023).

Genocide created immense trauma amongst survivors: there has been a high prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, antisocial tendencies, and recurring nightmares (Agger, 2015). Trauma can ripple throughout generations and institutions. This is exacerbated by the fact that Cambodia is a “face culture”, meaning like other Asian countries, maintaining a socially acceptable reputation is key. Thus, many survivors may feel the need to suppress their trauma, thus intensifying it.

The Cambodian Peace Gallery is a museum attempting to tell Cambodian stories and facilitate trauma recovery (Hardman, 2021). One exhibit in collaboration with the nonprofit Phare Phonleu Selpak (PPS), which translates to “The Brightness of the Arts”, seeks to “preserve, teach, and pass down practices of Cambodian circus, theatre, dance, and other fine arts” (Hardman, 2021) PPS has toured internationally to broadcast Cambodian arts to a larger audience, but most importantly, has pioneered arts education programs. In PPS classes, students reflect on socio-political issues, including the genocide and present issues of labor conditions and domestic violence, using the arts as a healthy coping mechanism. PPS reaches over 1,000 students annually, allowing students to express themselves through art and create constructive dialogue around pressing issues. Through sharing their cultural art, the PPS teaches students to “be proud of their traditional arts and embrace their Cambodian identity, despite past trauma” (Hardman, 2021).

Many arts ensembles have been dedicated to promoting Cambodian traditional performance, such as the Sophiline Arts Ensemble, formerly the Khmer Arts Ensemble (Angkor Database, n.d.). Their works intertwines Cambodian history and folklore with pressing issues: for example, the dance-drama *A Bend in the River* retells a folklore about a young girl whose family is eaten by an alligator, relating the girl’s journey of coping with trauma and loss to survivors of the genocide. For the composer of the piece, Him Sophy, “the performing arts represent pathways to personal and social healing” (Grant & Harper, 2015). Sophy has also created works specifically about the genocide, namely the album *Bangsokol: A Requiem for Cambodia*. The album urges listeners to “remember the scars of the past so that we can learn how to forge a new path in the present”, acting as a peace memorial and a driver of dialogue about the genocide (Bangsokol, n.d.). In the words of Phloeun Prim, the executive director of the arts organization *Cambodian Living Arts*, the album shows that “artistry remains alive despite a genocide and an attempt to eradicate our culture” (Bangsokol, n.d.).

## 4.5. Global North

### United Kingdom

The United Kingdom has a long tradition of using applied theatre with many movements and companies emerging to use arts to support marginalized voices. Among the most influential are the Theatre Workshop, the Gay Sweatshop, and the Talawa Theatre Company. These works both dramatized relevant issues but also empowered audiences, making the stage an active forum for social issues.

Founded in the 1940s by Joan Littlewood, the Theatre Workshop became an

influential player in British theatre, focusing on telling stories of working-class life. Their most well-known production was *Oh, What a Lovely War!* (1963), which used satire to portray World War I from the viewpoint of a common soldier. The play helped raise awareness about the disenchantment felt by average soldiers during the war and change perspectives from the usual romanticized view of the conflict (Billington, 2014). In an interview with Murray Melvin, an original cast member of the play, Melvin said that WWI veterans were able to open up more about their trauma because they felt represented by the candid portrayal of the war (Garner & Melvin, 2023).

Another important movement that took advantage of applied theatre was the LGBTQ+ rights movement through the Gay Sweatshop. Founded in 1974, the Gay Sweatshop was one of the earliest openly gay theatre companies in the UK, during a time when LGBTQ+ identities were stigmatized and criminalized (Freeman, 2014). Such plays both provided a safe space for LGBTQ+ individuals but also promoted discourse about the mistreatment and stigma LGBTQ+ individuals faced. One play titled *Compromised Immunity*, revolving around the AIDS crisis, created a national media storm when cleaners at the theatre were worried about contracting AIDS after the performance (Freeman, 2014). Additionally, the company toured small towns, and in many locations, they were the only openly LGBTQ+ individuals in those areas. Their presence was able to give hope to some of the closeted individuals in these areas. The Gay Sweatshop also used their art to make a political message: the plays *This Island's Mine* and *Twice Over* both opposed Section 28, a law that banned funding for positive portrayals of homosexuality (Freeman, 2014). By pursuing sociopolitical goals and creating conversation around controversial issues, the Gay Sweatshop was able to empower LGBTQ+ visibility and resistance. Together, the LGBTQ+ and workers' rights movements were amplified by applied theatre, which was able to create safe and representative spaces, as well as foster discourse (Freeman, 2014).

### **United States of America**

In the United States, applied theatre has long been a tool for addressing social issues and amplifying marginalized voices. This reflects the nation's history of racial, economic, and political struggles.

American applied theatre has been a driver of mobilizing social change for various civil rights movements, including the African American civil rights movement and Native American rights movements. For example, the Free Southern Theater (FST), founded in 1963 as a way to inspire reflection and mobilization among Black Americans in Southern states (Free Southern Theater, 2024). FST encouraged audience members to voice their opinions during the performance, allowing them to join actors onstage and contribute to the play, thereby contributing to the political discussion that the play depicts. In the words of FST organizers, theatre was viewed as "the most effective means of filling the void created by the omissions and distortions of the local press, radio, and television" (Inwood & Alderman, 2021). Practitioners hosted workshops and discussions about the perfor-

mances, allowing Black Americans to recognize, question, and ultimately act against their own oppression. But, more than just a driver of social change, the FST also evolved to become a place of recreation and repose. Oppressed Black audience members were given the opportunity to rest at the theatre after long days, and though this initially angered the practitioners who were aiming to invoke thought and discourse with their art, they soon evolved to understand the needs of their audience.

In one famous example of responses to this era of American applied theatre, Fannie Lou Hamer, a prominent civil rights activist, was in attendance at the play *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett (Friedman, 2025). This play follows two men waiting for a person named Godot, who they believe will bring them salvation. Yet, Godot never arrives. In response to the performance, Hamer remarked: “We’re not like these two white guys. We’re not waiting anymore for somebody to show up and give us what we need to go forward. We’re taking this into our own hands, voting, and expressing ourselves. That’s what we have to learn from this play” (Larocco, 2015).

Hamer’s reaction exemplifies how politically charged theatre can mobilize action and inspire marginalized communities to fight against their oppressors. Additionally, the response to FST performances shows how theatre was not just a place to escape, it was also a place for audience members to think critically and react to ones’ situation in the world in a communal, accepting space. Especially when many Black Americans were not given time to rest or reflect among greater sociopolitical challenge, theatre offered a place to reflect, understand, and act.

In addition to aiding the 1960’s civil rights movement, applied theatre practices also played a role in Native American advocacy. Native Voices at the Autry (NVA), a theatre company housed in the Autry Museum of the American West, is a prominent figure in the realm of Native applied theatre (Native Voices, n.d.). Native Voices arose out of the desire to perform Native plays at Illinois State University, yet many reputed theatre companies did not know of any Native plays (Syler & Banks, 2019). Native Voices thus pioneered the writing of original Native plays and the creation of festivals and workshops highlighting Native stories.

Jean Bruce Scott, a co-founder of Native Voices, told the Autry in a 25th anniversary interview that during the 2017 theatre season, NVA produced the play *Off the Rails* by Randy Reinholz, which is an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Measure by Measure* focusing on the “painful legacy of Indian boarding schools in the American West” (Scott & Reinholz, 2019). Scott said that majority of the audience members had not seen a Native written play. In the months following the performance, theaters from around the nation told Scott that they were entertained, moved, and educated by the play (Scott & Reinholz, 2019). Their performance gave other larger theatres confidence to produce Native plays as well. Thus, the expansion of Native applied theatre not only allowed audiences to learn more about the represented issues but also encouraged similar activity from other theatre companies.

Finally, another notable demographic that has used applied theatre to further

sociopolitical objectives is women. One particular set of techniques that feminist applied theatre often uses is absurdity and grotesque. The play *Fairview* follows a Black high school student, Keisha, a top student and athlete. Though the play begins normally, four White spectators begin meddling with Keisha's life and impose stereotypes about Black women, affecting the plot of the play—for example, one of the observers forces a pregnancy test into the storyline, claiming that Keisha is pregnant. This assumption becomes true in the storyline, and the audience watches as Keisha's bright future is taken from her (Cross, 2024). The audience is presented a story of how white patriarchy can damage female coming of age, allowing them to reflect on their own implicit biases. Similarly, in the play *Schoolgirls*; or, the *African Mean Girls Play* by Jocelyn Bioh, the “Queen Bee” Paulina is pressured to use a skin lightening cream in order to win the Miss Ghana pageant and gain the acceptance of her peers. She ends up overapplying the cream, and the audience watches as her skin melts off her face (Cross, 2024). This scene not only encourages a sense of disgust towards the actions onstage, but also toward the societal pressures that pushed Paulina to make that choice. The play is a commentary on colorism and beauty standards for women, using grotesque to incite disdain towards racist and patriarchal systems.

By portraying traumatic events like these onstage, feminist applied theatre allows audience members to reflect on their own involvement in such tragedy, making them hyper-aware of the presented injustice (Cross, 2024). The African American, Native American, and feminist applied theatre movements showcase how American theatre is often used to expose oppression and mobilize marginalized groups.

## 5. Synthesis and Discussion

### 5.1. Cross-Case Insights

#### **Political history shapes the optimal form of applied theatre**

Analysis of the global case studies demonstrates a consistent relationship between a nation's political history and the forms of applied theatre that achieve the greatest impact. Theatrical models are most effective when they consider a society's political structures and historical and cultural experiences.

In authoritarian or politically exclusionary contexts, such as Augusto Boal's Brazil, contemporary Palestine, or regions of Africa under restrictive government, participatory and practical forms of theatre, such as legislative or forum theatre, have proven effective, as exemplified by policy passage in Latin America and behavioral change in Africa and Palestine. These methods directly involve audience members in decision making and problem solving in a political climate where civic participation is denied or limited. In such contexts, applied theatre should maximize audience interaction, whether this means opportunities for audience members to join the performance, or discussion opportunities after performances. When possible, practitioners should seek to connect performance to institutional change, such as creating mock congresses or advocating for solutions derived from the per-

formance.

In post-conflict or national-trauma contexts, such as places where violence, genocide, or long-term conflict has affected social trust, effective applied theatre takes advantage of drama therapy and performance rooted in tradition. These approaches can help validate and progress from societal trauma. In the global case studies, such methodology proved effective in Lebanon, Cambodia, and Palestine. Catharsis in Lebanon used dramatherapy techniques and performances to not only facilitate prisoner healing, but also to create tangible legislative change. In Cambodia and Palestine, initiatives like the Sophiline Arts Ensemble and Gaza Monologues used cultural performance and representation to encourage discourse about violence, as well as promote local resilience. Practitioners should focus on trauma-informed and culturally informed performance, allowing them to validate and progress the audience through trauma.

Finally, in nations that are democratic but still suffer from social inequity, performance should focus on raising awareness and setting agendas. With basic political expression legally protected, emphasis shifts to exposing systemic inequality and mobilizing public opinion, often done through street theatre, satire, or grotesque. These forms seek to provoke dialogue or reflection, particularly around ideas of class, race, gender, or sexuality, to name a few prominent causes. From the case studies, these techniques worked best in India, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In Indian street theatre, performance exposed issues surrounding capitalism, feminism, and income inequality, using theatre to spread awareness of less-talked-about issues. Similarly, theatre in the UK used identity-affirming and satirical narratives to tackle militarism and LGBTQ+ rights, allowing them to uplift marginalized groups. In the US, initiatives like the Free Southern Theater and Native Voices show how applied theatre can mobilize oppressed voices, as well as encourage other theatre companies to do the same. In these political contexts, practitioners should prioritize access to the theatre, whether that means free or open venues or usage of media to popularize art. Theatre should be a form of argument, using techniques like grotesque or satire to challenge the norm.

#### **Cultural adaptation is key to impact**

Across all contexts, cultural and societal adaptation was key to impact. Projects that incorporated local language, performance tradition, and sensibilities were better at engaging audiences and creating change. For example, street theatre in India modified its performance based on regional forms of classical performance (jatra in Bengal, burrakatha in Andhra Pradesh), ensuring that their performances would culturally resonate with the audience. Similarly, in Cambodia, initiatives like PPS and the Sophiline Arts Ensemble use traditional Cambodian performance to teach students and audience members to be proud of their traditional art, which is essential especially in times of national hardship. In Nigeria, applied theatre was devised from community surveys, ensuring that performances were authentic and depicted issues that individuals cared about and were actually affected by. For this type of performance, practitioners should focus on involving local artists and per-

formance techniques, making a point to integrate indigenous values and narratives.

### **Long-term, community-driven engagement works better than one-off performances**

Case studies show that in most cases, sustained engagement provides more durable change than isolated performance. One-off performances, while sometimes effective for awareness-raising or mobilization, don't always produce policy follow-through or behavioral shift. Thus, long-term projects allow for theatre to create long-lasting impact. This is exemplified by case studies in Lebanon and Nigeria: in Lebanon, Catharsis's prisoner interventions often took over a year, allowing incarcerated performers to fully absorb performance techniques. This allowed for Catharsis to facilitate not only legislative advocacy but also personal transformations. Similarly, in Ghana, Tfd's public health initiatives used performances in an ongoing process rather than standalone shows, allowing them to better influence audience behavior and knowledge.

In the case that a region fits more than one sociopolitical context, practitioners may want to pick specific qualities that are to be addressed in the region and blend applied theatre elements that address those concerns. For example, a post-conflict and authoritarian state may want to blend cultural performance techniques with a forum theatre component.

## **5.2. Typology of Applied Theatre Models by Sociopolitical Context**

Drawing from the comparative analysis above, the following typology summarizes the relationship between sociopolitical context and effective forms of applied theatre (**Table 1**).

**Table 1.** Applied theatre typology.

<b>Context</b>	<b>Political and Cultural Conditions</b>	<b>Most effective form of applied theatre</b>	<b>Why it works</b>
Authoritarian or Exclusionary Regimes (e.g., Latin America, Palestine, parts of Africa)	Limited political voice, oppressive governmental institutions, weak democratic institutions	Forum theatre, legislative theatre, or theatre for development	Gives citizens a direct role in shaping solutions, providing a voice in an otherwise exclusionary political climate
Post-Conflict or National Trauma Recovery (e.g., Cambodia, Lebanon, Palestine)	History of war/genocide, social mistrust and trauma	Drama therapy, traditional cultural performance	Validates local cultural identity, combines personal healing with acknowledgement of social issues
Democratic but Socially Inequitable (e.g., India, UK, US)	Political freedoms exist, but systemic inequalities persist	Street theatre, awareness-raising plays	Engages mass audiences, challenges norms to provoke reflection and action

**Continued**

Colonial or Post-Colonial (e.g., Ghana, Nigeria, India)	Colonial resentment, history of cultural imposition	Locally adapted theatre using native languages and forms	Builds legitimacy by respecting local traditions
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**5.3. Implications and Limitations**

The typology proposed in this paper has several implications for the study and practice of applied theatre. Theoretically, this paper shows that applied theatre cannot be seen through a universalist lens, rather, its efficacy is reliant on individual political history, cultural tradition, and experiences from marginalized communities. This reinforces the need for practitioners to ensure that cultural contexts and sociopolitical climates are taken into account when developing and administering applied theatre.

Practically, this typology offers a tool for practitioners and educators to shape their applied theatre. By assessing whether a given context is shaped by authoritarian exclusion, collective trauma, or democratic inequity, practitioners can best select and adapt models that align with community needs. This paper also emphasizes that applied theatre must use co-creation and local leadership to drive civic engagement. This paper also emphasizes that theatre is not solely a means for entertainment, it is also a driver of civic engagement, community development, and legal reform.

At the same time, several limitations must be acknowledged. Methodologically, the selection of cases, while geographically and politically broad, cannot represent the full diversity of global applied theatre. The typology simplifies governmental structures that might overlap (for example, a state might be democratic or trauma-affected), thus requiring a unique blend of recommended applied theatre forms. The sample relied on within this paper is not exhaustive, and it is recommended for practitioners to do further research into the places in which they intend to perform applied theatre. Furthermore, deviations may arise from practical implementation. Many successful initiatives relied on charismatic leaders or institutional support (for example, Augusto Boal in Brazil or Zeina Daccache in Lebanon), adequate funding, and trained facilitators. These are all also important factors to consider in the efficacy of applied theatre; however, this typology offers a starting point for practitioners looking to create culturally informed, impactful applied theatre.

**6. Conclusion**

Applied theatre, in its many global forms, demonstrates the power of performance to move beyond solely entertainment and function as a tool for civic engagement and sociopolitical change. The selected case studies illustrate that applied theatre becomes most impactful when it is carefully aligned with political and cultural histories of the communities it seeks to serve.

This paper provides three central insights. First, political history fundamentally shapes the forms of applied theatre that are most effective: participatory methods thrive under authoritarian governments, trauma-informed and dramatherapy approaches resonate in trauma-afflicted contexts, and awareness-raising models work best in democratic inequitable societies. Second, cultural adaptation is key to impact; interventions succeed when they use local tradition, language, and performance work. Third, long-term projects cause deeper change than one-off interventions, allowing them to create more long-lasting impact.

The typology developed in this paper offers a framework for understanding these patterns and offers a tool for practitioners and scholars seeking to apply theatre as a means for sociopolitical engagement. While it cannot address every individual and complex sociopolitical situation, this typology offers a starting point for practitioners looking to employ applied theatre in different contexts. Ultimately, this paper shows that applied theatre is not a one-size-fits-all model, it is a context-sensitive practice that has the power to change communities if recognized as a tool for collaboration and progress, not imposition.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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