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MAPPING ETHICS IN APPLIED DRAMA AND THEATRE

In his dealings with the world the excellent person is not invariably for or against anything. He is on the side of what is appropriate.
(Confucius, Analects, 4:10 in Yu, 2007: 140)

INTRODUCTION

This chapter opens with an attempt to understand the nature of ethics in the contemporary world and proceeds to consider how ethics relates to the theoretical framework underpinning the practice of applied drama and theatre. The second part of the chapter investigates the ethics of applied drama and theatre through reflections on workshops held at the University of the Witwatersrand with delegates to the Drama for Life Initial Africa Research Conference on Applied Drama and Theatre. This was a particularly appropriate forum for such an investigation as one of the themes of the conference was: what ethical positions, values and principles could be most appropriate in guiding practitioners, participants, researchers and other stakeholders in applied drama and theatre practice in the context of HIV in Africa? The Drama for Life Programme had been specifically set up in 2008 to provide further academic education for practitioners addressing issues related to HIV/AIDS in the field throughout the SADC region. The conference attracted delegates from the whole of Africa, from Britain and from Australia. Thus the ethics declaration which concludes this chapter reflects the feelings and thoughts of a widespread number of people working through drama and theatre.

Whose ethics?

Why should applied drama and theatre practitioners be concerned with ethics? There is a general understanding that our practice investigates the problematic nature of societies and human choices and is in the best interests of those who participate. This seems like an ethical pursuit; however there is a danger in assuming that our work is ethical just because we are interested in solving problems fairly or in helping people to assume responsibility for their lives. In a contemporary postmodern world and particularly in a post-colonial context, inherited ethical positions need to be interrogated. In a multi-cultural context it can no longer be assumed that we have a common understanding of ethics. This is especially so in relation to issues of power and equity in the search for economic,
social, gender and environmental justice. It is also important for applied drama and theatre practitioners to be self-reflective and aware of ethical implications because our work is based on critiques of hegemony and the hidden nature of unequal power relations. We have a responsibility to live up to the nature of the thinking which underlies our practice. It is helpful therefore to start by trying to understand firstly the nature of ethics in our contemporary world and secondly the theoretical framework on which our practice is based.

**Bases for contemporary ethics**

Prozesky (2007) has argued that contemporary ethics should provide a basis for global living. As such, ethical thinking has to take into account major developments occurring throughout the world and reshaping it. The first of these he names as the spread of democracy and the significant impact this has had on how political power may be held. A democratic society, according to Constitutional Court Judge Albie Sachs (2009), promotes the values of openness and accountability and of human dignity, equality and freedom. The establishment of democracy in South Africa has led to the establishment of a Constitution in 1996, considered to be one of the most progressive in the world, which includes a Bill of Human Rights. Both of these provide important guidelines for ethical practice. According to Helen Nicholson (2005b: 130) writing on human rights in performance, human rights ‘remains one of the abiding utopian ideas over which there is general international consensus’ and includes ‘transcultural ideas of morality and humane standards of living’. At the same time she warns that the discourse on universal human rights has grown out of and expresses the principles of western liberal democracy which embraces capitalism.

Democracy implies that power should be shared equally amongst all people and conversely that all of us have the responsibility to ensure our own good citizenship, in order that the values of democracy prevail. These values are categorised as:

- equality, fairness, inclusiveness, constrained personal freedom (which allows each of us to be as free as possible, as long as the same is possible for everybody else and nobody gets hurt) and what we might call provisionality … never allowing any individual, leader, party or policy to have absolute status and immunity to change, for the simple reason that we are human and all our structures are fallible. (Prozesky, 2007: 24)

The spread of democracy and its focus on egalitarianism has meant that public institutions (e.g. tertiary education) and private relationships (e.g. the structure of the family) have shifted to accommodate greater equality amongst people. A democratic society upholds the principle of human dignity, it “repudiates forms of oppression, hardship, division and discrimination … and aspires to accept people for what they are. It presumes diversity and welcomes and treats everyone with equal concern and respect” (Sachs, 2009: 214).

A second major development has been the growth of cultural diversity within states as populations have moved as a result of better opportunities, war or other upheavals. This exposure to other cultures has made us increasingly aware of the diversity of ways in which ethics can be thought about and practiced, necessitating a more open-minded and inclusive understanding of what ethics in the contemporary world might be. However not all developments have encompassed