

Legislative Theater and Modern Slavery: Exploring a Hyperlocal Approach to Combatting Human Trafficking

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Since 2018, Act for Change (AfC), a Ghanaian applied theater company, has been using Boalian theater techniques to address issues of modern slavery and human trafficking in their community. Here, using the framework of Boal's Legislative Theater, we discuss the ways in which AfC has developed Boal's work, innovating it within a specific context to find new and powerful ways of using performance to engage with intractable issues of modern slavery and human trafficking. Focussing on the specific dynamics of a single community, this article explores how employing a 'hyperlocal' approach in James Town, Accra, enables a focus on the local stories that highlight how modern slavery and human trafficking operate. More specifically, while using a Marxist-Freiran framework and by engaging with Augusto Boal's concepts of Legislative and Forum Theater, this article focuses on how performance methodologies can engage with complex international issues by developing intra-local dialogue and partnerships at the local level. The goal here is not to

argue that community action can act as a replacement for statutory instruments or state-led initiatives, but that they are a potentially significant and under-developed complementary tool in the fight against modern slavery, as they place the community and the survivor at the center of change. By taking this approach, we aim to reflect on how theories of legislative theater can aid the development of a hyperlocal methodology and how the project in James Town exemplifies modern legislative theater practice.

Keywords: applied theater, Ghana, community theater, modern slavery, Augusto Boal, Paulo Freire

Act for Change is a community theater company in James Town, Accra, Ghana. Over the course of a four-year research project in collaboration with researchers at the University of the West of Scotland, they worked with survivors of modern slavery in the James Town community using Boalian performance techniques to center survivors' narratives and lived expertise, and to develop dialogue around modern slavery and human trafficking between survivors, schools and the wider community.

Modern slavery is a growing global issue. According to the latest Global Slavery Index report, there has been a significant rise in people living in conditions of modern slavery since 2015 (Walk Free 2023). Strategies for tackling modern slavery, forced labour, and human trafficking exist at the international level through conventions administered through the International Labour Organization (ILO), but there remain significant issues of implementation at the national and local level. In Ghana, which is the focus of this article, there are a number of relevant statutes, which are considered below, as well as a National Plan of Action for the Elimination of Human Trafficking in Ghana (NPA). However, there is little evidence that the approaches outlined in the NPA are having an impact at the community level. For example, the NPA, which represents the state's most explicit attempt to develop and implement a coherent strategy for addressing human

trafficking and modern slavery, calls for, amongst other things: “regular community engagements in the form of testimonies from rescued victims and their families” (Ministry of Gender 14), and a directive to “form and strengthen school and community-based child rights clubs” (15). However, there is little detail in the NPA about how community engagement should be achieved or what support is available to do so.

Between 2018 and 2022, a research team made up of Dr. Collins from the University of the West of Scotland and Nii Kwartelai Quartey and Collins Smith from Act for Change, worked with survivors of modern slavery, NGOs and local community stakeholders in a research project that examined the specific local factors that enable modern slavery and human trafficking. Both Quartey and Smith are from James Town and have worked on numerous community engagement projects in the area as performance practitioners. Their company was the partner throughout the research project and is amongst the foremost applied performance companies currently working in West Africa. Dr. Collins has worked with Act for Change on various projects since it was established in 2011. Working in James Town, an area of Accra that sits on the coast, and drawing from traditional Ghanaian performance practices (Donkor 43-44), the team used forms of performance methodology derived from Augusto Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed, to engage survivors and then bring those stories to the community. This approach was designed specifically to address two issues: firstly, a lack of opportunity for survivors of modern slavery returning to James Town to talk about their experiences, and secondly, an absence of community-level dialogue about the risk and nature of modern slavery in James Town.

This approach highlighted several issues that we engage with throughout this article. Firstly, how can performance be used to effectively center the narratives of the people that legal systems talk about? How can participatory theater support existing legal structures in order to lead to inculcate collective awareness and action in relation to intransigent issues? And, finally, how can performance methodologies be used as dialogic tools of co-creation, not just between participants, but between participants and the broader community? In order to address these questions, it is first useful to set out some of the defining issues of modern slavery in James Town and then examine the existing legal framework.

Ghana and Modern Slavery

Ghana has well documented issues with modern slavery, which, as Scarpa notes, covers areas of “forced labour, the bonded labour/ debt bonded practice, forced prostitution and sex slavery, the worst forms of child labour, trafficking in persons, and early and forced marriages” (4). Drawing on Kevin Bales, Scarpa further notes that modern slavery is characterised by “very low purchase cost of slaves, very high profits for the exploiter, [...] surplus of potential slaves and irrelevance of ethnic differences” (4). In terms of people trafficking and forced labour, Ghana is noted as a “source, transit and destination country for men, women and children” (Atugabu 35). Global Slavery International estimates that in Ghana 133,000 people are living in modern slavery, and gives a Government Response Rating of CC, the third lowest category (Walk Free 2023). In 2017, the Western Regional Minister, Gifty Kusi, stated that as many as 1.86 million Ghanaian children were ‘victims of forced labour’ (Wamakor 2017).

The annual Trafficking in Persons report (TIP), 2017, produced by the U.S. Government, downgraded Ghana to the lowest Tier 3 level for consistently failing to address contemporary slavery in the country. The failure to tackle issues of modern slavery and people trafficking has real economic impact. Potential restrictions to US Aid and funding from the Millennium Challenge Corporation can amount to millions of dollars of development money being withheld from the country (TIP, 2018). Though the 2018 TIP Report notes multiple areas where government is not demonstrating sufficient intent to address the issues of modern slavery, it upgraded Ghana to a Tier 2 country after Ghana committed USD 83,866,652 over five years to addressing the issue (NPA 30).

Since 2018, the Ghanaian government has begun to increase the number of investigations into people trafficking and forced labour, inaugurated a specialist board and began the dissemination of awareness-raising materials. In 2017, 6 traffickers were prosecuted under the Anti-trafficking Act, as compared to none the year before. In a 2019 interview with CNN, the Minister of Information claimed there had been 13 convictions in 2018 (Coorlim). Hence, though the top-down approach is leading to some progress, it is not commensurate with the scale of the problem.

James Town and Modern Slavery

As with the broader picture in Ghana, James Town is a source, transit and destination point for modern slavery. The types of slavery noted by the ILO's 2018 TIP Report correspond closely to those that we identified in the first stage of the research project in 2018 (Collins and Quartey), namely: forced child labour in the fishing industry, sex work and young women leaving to work in the Gulf states. They also correspond to the definition of modern slavery provided by Scarpa above. Specifically, the types of modern slavery found in James Town are young boys being recruited to work in the fishing industry on the Volta Lake, young girls being brought to James Town to sell goods on the roadside and for sex work, and educated young women being recruited for domestic service in the Gulf states (Collins and Quartey). The nature of modern slavery in James Town is strictly gendered with domestic and sex work falling to girls and women, and fishing falling to boys. Though James Town remains a thriving fishing port, boys are not recruited into the local industry but removed from their community and relocated to the Volta region, where they have no network and do not speak the language.

Though gender is a key factor, there are several issues that are common across the different types of modern slavery. Firstly, recruitment is often done through intermediaries with family members or family friends acting as informal agents. These agents approach families or individuals with promises of schooling for their children or the opportunity to travel abroad and earn money in the case of domestic workers in the Gulf. Underpinning these interactions is a sophisticated network of intermediaries and agents who control and coerce individuals at every step of their journey. One of the key findings that came out of our work was the complicit silence that surrounds modern slavery (Collins and Quartey).

The interaction between traditional practices of apprenticeship and modern slavery is contentious and complex, particularly in cases of practices on Lake Volta. A CNN report on child slavery on Lake Volta stated that there are as many as 20,000 children involved as modern slaves in the fishing industries (Coorlim). The reaction of the Ghanaian government was mixed, with the Minister of Information, Kojo Oppong Nkrumah, calling for immediate action, and some Ghanaian academics questioning the veracity of the figure and

putting the experience of young people involved down to traditional systems of patronage and apprenticeship, along with western bias (Mensah and Okyere). Though Mensah and Okyere raise critical questions, particularly around consent and misrepresenting vulnerable young people, multiple sources, including the ILO, specifically highlight practices on Lake Volta as falling under the Worst Forms of Child Labour. Moreover, evidence of the selling of boys from James Town into this industry was found during our research. Though it is not the focus of this article to disentangle this issue, we would emphasise that the Boalian approach taken in this research has centered on the lived experiences of survivors of modern slavery. Hence, if in discussing their experience, they have identified that it is consistent with modern slavery, then that is sufficient. Moreover, as explored below, these experiences are consistent with Ghana's domestic legislation that protects against modern slavery, human trafficking and forced labour.

Ghana's legal framework

Within the top-down framework of Ghana's current approach to modern slavery, ministries, government and civil institutions are involved in tackling human trafficking and the worst forms of child labour in Ghana. Several international bodies are also involved in monitoring Ghana's policies and actions. All largely agree that the Ghanaian government has made progress since 2017 but that progress is slow and the funds allocated are insufficient (ILA 2018). However, the key question to emerge from this is whether the effects of these changes are being felt at the community level or by survivors of modern slavery, which, to date has not been explored. With this in mind, it is useful to examine what Ghana's obligations are under international conventions, and what policy and legislative tools Ghana's government has in place to support survivors of modern slavery. To provide some context, the following is a brief analysis of Ghana's domestic legislation and policy approaches to the tackling of modern slavery. As these have been developed with reference to Ghana's obligations under various international conventions, it is useful to discuss these first.

International instruments

At the international level, the main framework for tackling modern slavery is two parts of the International Bill of Human Rights: the Universal Declaration on Human Rights 1948, (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, (ICCPR), which are administered by the United Nations (UN). The UDHR states that “no one should be held in slavery or servitude, slavery in all of its forms should be eliminated” (Art. 4), and Article 9 of the ICCPR recognises the right to liberty and security and prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention (Art. 9.3). Though the Declaration and the Convention set down the guiding principles of international Human Rights law, the topic of modern slavery has been given a sharper focus in the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, which require states to meet specific targets. The eradication of modern slavery falls under UN Sustainable Development Goal 8.7, which calls on member states to:

Take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms. (UN, 2020)

One of the key indicators of whether a state is in compliance with international norms is the ratification of the International Labor Organisation’s conventions. These are divided into three categories: fundamental, governance and technical. Ghana has ratified eight of the ten ‘fundamental conventions’ between 1957, the year of Ghana’s independence, and 2000 (International Labour Organisation, 2023). Additionally, there are a number of technical conventions that Ghana has not ratified; these include the Work in Fishing Convention, 2007, and the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011, both of which are pertinent to the forms of modern slavery found in Ghana.

The principles covered in the ILO’s fundamental conventions are also included by the ILO’s Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, 1998 (DFPRW). In order to monitor compliance with the DFPRW, the ILO undertakes annual reports, which noted in 2015, 2016 and 2017, the same period during which Ghana was categorised as a Tier 3 country in the US Department of State annual

Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Reports, a “failure [by the Ghanaian government] to respect the reporting obligations on the application of standards” (ILO, 2017). In 2018, the ILO issued a General Direct Request to the government of Ghana, noting that “none of the eight reports requested [that year] have been received” (2019). Hence, though Ghana has ratified the Conventions, its compliance is unclear.

In 2000, Ghana ratified the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999. Art. 7(2) calls for effective and time-bound measures for preventing the engagement of children in the worst forms of child labour and for providing the necessary and appropriate direct assistance for the removal of children from the worst forms of child labour, and their rehabilitation and social integration. The lack of rehabilitation and social integration was a clear issue for the survivors we interviewed and engaged with during the project, and it was precisely these issues that Act for Change was able to engage with through community performance (Collins and Quartey).

The ILO noted “with deep concern” (2016) the prevalence of children who have been trafficked or sold into fishing activities or are otherwise engaged in hazardous fishing activities in the Lake Volta region. It notes “with regret” (2016) the absence of information regarding the Analytical Study on Child Labour in Lake Volta Fishing in Ghana, which highlighted that

Many trafficked children are used in the fishing industry. According to the Ghana Child Labour Survey Report (2003), over 49,000 children are involved in fishing in Ghana: 87 percent boys, 13 percent girls: 25 percent are children 5-9 years of age, 41 percent are 10-14 years of age, and 34 percent are 15-17 years of age. (Government of Ghana and ILO 2).

Though the sample sizes were relatively small, 350 children across 10 districts (7), the findings are consistent with our research in James Town with survivors of slavery who had been taken to work on Lake Volta.

What comes through this analysis is a lack of urgency and engagement on the part of the Ghanaian government. Though there is an

acknowledgment of the problem of modern slavery within Ghana, there is a clear sense of frustration at the international level that Ghana's government agencies are not making progress more quickly. Furthermore, it is clear from our engagement with survivors that the forms of child labour and modern slavery that concern the ILO do exist at the community level. The lack of reporting and reliable data means that issues of children being used in fishing on Lake Volta remains contentious as, in some instances, it exposes a tension between traditional practices of apprenticeship and human rights law (Coorlim; Mensah and Okyere). However, by centering on the stories and experiences of survivors in our project, one of whom had been trafficked to Lake Volta and returned to James Town several years later, we were able to communicate this story directly to a community audience and so highlight the fact that one person's lived experience has a significance and potency that goes beyond statistical data.

National legislation and the NPA

Ghana has a number of relevant statutes that, taken together, provide a useful framework for defining what constitutes modern slavery, human trafficking and forced labour. The types of modern slavery we identified clearly fall under the legal definitions outlined below. To begin with, Ghana's 1992 Constitution protects citizens from slavery and forced labour under Section 16 (1 and 2). Section 28(d) protects children (defined as a person below the age of eighteen years [28(5)]) from exposure to physical and moral hazards. Section 28 sets down that:

Every child has the right to be protected from engaging in work that constitutes a threat to his health, education or development.

1. A child shall not be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.
2. The Constitution is the highest law in Ghana and taken together, Sections 16 and 28 clearly protect against the practices of child labour highlighted in our research in James Town.

The Children's Act, 1998 defines the minimum age at which a child can work as 15 (section 89); though they can engage in 'light work' from the age of 13 (section 90). 'Light work' is clearly defined as "work which is not likely to be harmful to the health or development of the child and does not affect the child's attendance at school or the capacity of the child to benefit from school work" (90[2]). This definition rules out the working practices of children on Lake Volta noted in the 2013 Analytical Report and through our research. Where 'light work' may encompass traditional practices such as a family taking in the child of a relative and requiring that child to undertake housework. However, that does not, then, extend to hazardous practices, or work that interferes with the child's ability to attend school.

Under the Labour Act, Art. 58(1), "[a] young person shall not be engaged in any type of employment work likely to expose the person to physical or moral hazard". Again, a young person is defined as a person under 18. Both the Constitution and the Children's Act, 1998 define a child as a person below the age of 18. Together with the Labour Act, 2003, both statutes clearly preclude the types of work described by survivors in our research.

The Human Trafficking Act, 2005 takes a different approach, setting out a number of statements that highlight the responsibilities of the community, rather than the rights of the individual. For example, Art. 6(2) states that "A person who fails to inform the police commits an offence and is liable on summary conviction to a fine of not less than two hundred and fifty penalty units or a term of imprisonment not less than twelve months or to both". Where human trafficking is so bound up in recruitment via informal networks of extended family and family acquaintances (Collins and Quartey), emphasising the role of the community to report trafficking represents an interesting change in approach, placing an obligation on the community without providing effective reporting mechanisms or clarity on what constitutes human trafficking as opposed to traditional practice.

Despite the law being 'on the books' the TIP report, 2018 notes that the government has not reported any cases. Interestingly, the report does highlight that two traffickers were ordered to pay restitution to the victims of human trafficking, but states that there is no information on whether they "complied with the order" (200).

From the above discussion, a number of things are clear: firstly, Ghana does have domestic laws in place to tackle human trafficking and child labour. Secondly, Ghana has ratified several international conventions that are designed to deal with child labour, modern slavery and human trafficking. Though both the Human Trafficking Act and the Children’s Act have provision for reporting and prosecution, no legal instrument discusses mechanisms for protection of survivors.

The NPA was developed in association with the Canadian Government and UNESCO and is the most significant acknowledgement of the breadth and scope of the problem facing Ghana in terms of human trafficking and modern slavery. It outlines four aims:

1. Prevention of TIP;
2. Protection of TIP victims;
3. Prosecution of TIP offenders; and
4. Partnerships with stakeholders to combat TIP.

Though it is important to highlight that the NPA recognises the need to safeguard victims of TIP, as previously noted, Ghana’s history of enforcement in this area is poor and the budget allocated over five years is relatively low. Specifically, in terms of protection, the Ghanaian government has budgeted USD 15,767,753 over 5 years. In terms of protection, the NPA notes that

the plan recognises that providing enhanced care and protection to victims is the combined responsibility of a number of agencies and stakeholders. Victim care is a central theme of the plan and includes the rescue of victims and runs through to providing adequate privacy, security, health and psychosocial support during the investigation, trial and rehabilitation stages (5).

The agencies and stakeholders identified in the NPA include various government ministries, the Human Trafficking Management Board, the Human Trafficking Secretariat, the National House of Chiefs. However, absent from this list are schools, NGOs and local community organisations. Interestingly, given the nature of our project, discussed below, strategies include developing public campaign programmes on human trafficking, especially in high-risk communities (11). One of the suggested activities is to “develop and implement media tools, using

print, broadcast, new media, billboards, dramas [...] to raise greater awareness". (11). There is, therefore, an awareness at government level that arts and media have a role to play in enacting policy in this area.

In line with our findings, the NPA highlights the 'increasing trend' of young men and women leaving for the Gulf States. Notably, the NPA states that "after their return, many report being deceived, overworked, starved, abused, molested, and/or forced into prostitution" (2). In terms of reintegration, the NPA notes an intent to "establish [a] management system to follow-up on the return, protection, rehabilitation and reintegration of victims" (29) and to ensure that origin and destination countries contribute to the costs of doing so. An output in this regard is the establishment of a database, which the ILO noted in 2018 was 'being developed'. In order to support reintegration of survivors of modern slavery into their communities, the NPA suggests it will "[p]rovide community sensitization and knowledge enhancement to prevent stigmatization towards rescued and re-integrated victims through the development of community engagement programmes" (17). The responsibility for this lies with the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, the National Commission for Civic Education, the Department of Social Welfare, unnamed NGOs, and the Information Service Department. Again, there is no mention of community involvement in leading this 'knowledge enhancement'.

The NPA represents an acknowledgment by the Ghanaian Government that there is a serious problem with modern slavery and human trafficking in Ghana. Moreover, it highlights a small but significant shift away from a solely national level policy-driven solution to a slightly more nuanced multi-stakeholder strategy. Though there remains an emphasis on the state, there is an understanding that community actors have a role to play, particularly when it comes to reintegration of survivors.

It is here that we argue a legislative theater approach could be most beneficial to achieving the aims of the NPA, and so the Ghanaian government. The project we undertook, discussed below, highlighted many of the issues detailed in the NPA and effectively operationalised the NPA's desire to sensitize communities and reintegrate survivors. Here, then, we examine the potential of Forum Theater to bridge the gap and act as an interlocuter between survivors and the community.

Modern Slavery and Legislative Theater

The research project took place from 2018 to 2022, in three phases. In the first project, *Hidden Histories: Untold stories of James Town and Slavery*, the research team explored the links between historic and modern slavery in James Town, through a series of ten interviews undertaken with survivors of modern slavery and individuals with a particular knowledge of the history of James Town, the dynamics of colonialism in the area and traditional government. In terms of survivors, we talked with people who had been trafficked as children from James Town to work in the fishing industry further north on Lake Volta, and others who had been trafficked to the Gulf states for domestic work as school leavers. We engaged with local NGOs who work with people experiencing slavery in James Town, particularly young girls who are brought for sex work under the pretext of a better education. Through these interviews, we explored the perceptions, experiences and mechanics of modern slavery and how it operates in the area. In addition, borrowing from Wellington's (2018) methodology of community and architectural analysis, we considered the history and built environment of James Town and how merchants' tunnels were used to move enslaved people from '*m*)*mli*' (*moumes*), a Ga word that describes a merchant's house as both a fort and a prison, unseen to the coast (Collins and Quartey 9). As well as capturing the hidden nature of the slave trade in James Town, the tunnels reflected a sense of unseeing, a purposeful obfuscation that enables the community to ignore what was there. This provided a clear parallel with the lived experience of survivors of modern slavery, all of whom noted the difficulty of making their experience seen by the broader community.

Throughout all the stages of the project, theater practitioners at Act for Change ran drama workshops in a local high school with young women who were at particular risk of trafficking, and developed performances based on the testimonies of survivors, which were then shown back to community audiences. Increasingly, these performances acted as an opportunity for dialogue between the performance and the audience.

The company was founded in 2011 and is led by Collins Seymah Smith and Nii Kwartelai Quartey. Since its inception, Act for Change has used theater as a means of engaging their local community in

issues that are particularly acute in James Town, from sanitation to domestic violence and sexual and reproductive health. As the resident company of the James Town Community Theatre Centre, the members of Act for Change are now well established as community activists and are very well networked within James Town and Accra more broadly. Consequently, they are able to undertake work in schools and attract an audience to the Theater Centre at short notice.

The play that resulted from the first stage of research in 2018, *Ode to the James Town Child*, directed by Quartey, was shown in local schools and at the company's performance venue in James Town in July 2018. The performance played to nearly eight hundred people across three performances, with audience members clearly engaged in the themes explored and the lives of the characters. After each performance, the audience was invited to offer strategies to the protagonists, essentially presenting suggestions to stop them being lured into modern slavery. Though the suggestions were powerfully emotive, they did not offer the kinds of practical strategies capable of addressing the core issue: that modern slavery in the community or affecting members of the community was easy to ignore. For example, common suggestions were to pray or talk to the police. However, this obfuscated a community level responsibility to acknowledge and learn from survivors who return to the community. Reflecting on our approach, we considered how we might better facilitate an empowering process which could create space for the survivors to tell their own stories whilst engaging with the community as less of a passive audience and more of a collaborator.

The second phase of the project was a series of drama workshops in schools, where AfC practitioners worked with a group of female students who were nearing graduation. As a group who were particularly at risk of recruitment into modern slavery, the participants were attuned to pressures of being young women leaving the school environment and the associated expectations coming from families and community to be economically active, contribute to the household and, if possible, travel overseas. Here, they were identifying, through performance and without the pressure of an external audience, the complex network of push and pull factors that leave young women vulnerable to modern slavery. One of the key issues to emerge from these workshops, which took place weekly over two months, was that the participants began to identify practices in the community,

or that they had heard of, as falling within the definition of modern slavery and human trafficking.

The latest stage of the project to date was a three-day workshop event at the James Town Community Theater Centre. Hosted by Act for Change, the event brought together survivors, NGOs, school students and teachers with whom the project had previously engaged. The three-day workshop was grounded in Freire's Popular Education theory in terms of its designing, planning and implementation. In this context, we created space for the 'Facilitator' role, which Quartey and Smith assumed, guiding the learning journey of the participants identified as 'organic intellectuals'. This stands in contrast to the traditional role of an 'Expert or Teacher' in the classroom, who possesses all the knowledge to be imparted onto the students (Freire 72). By challenging and destabilizing power dynamics in the process of knowledge creation, the space effectively democratized the participants' learning experience.

Employing the spiral model of learning, the workshop harnessed the insights and perspectives of participants in exploring the issue of modern slavery. Drawing upon Ghana's rich cultural heritage, the workshop embraced activity-based and participant-centered methodologies such as sculpture, drama, storytelling, songs, and other popular art forms. This innovative approach allowed participants to utilize familiar learning aids from their own culture, fostering meaningful reflections on the pressing matter of modern-day slavery. Following the sharing of knowledge and experiences among participants, patterns emerged, prompting a collective analysis of these shared insights. Commonalities and differences were examined, facilitating a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Additionally, the facilitator introduced new information on legal instruments and frameworks pertaining to modern slavery. This encouraged the collaborative expansion and creation of fresh knowledge and theories, transcending the limitations of the individuals present in the room. Consequently, a supportive environment was cultivated, empowering participants to apply their newly acquired knowledge and skills within smaller groups, subsequently presenting their findings to the larger collective. This interactive process enabled participants to practice newfound abilities, develop strategies, and formulate action plans, fostering a sense of agency and preparation for real-world implementation. Together, the participants explored

their experiences of modern slavery, which they then turned into a community performance piece following a Boalian model. One of the key outcomes of this stage of the project was that the survivors were trained in community performance techniques: one of the survivors acted as the joker/facilitator in the community performance, thus acting as both a metaphorical and literal interlocutor between experiences of modern slavery and the James Town community.

Developing Boal in James Town

Inspired by Paolo Freire, Boal's practice aims to re-establish the role of the spectator and their relationship to the action taking place on stage. More specifically, during Theater of the Oppressed projects, the aim is to eliminate passive spectatorship and develop a constructive, theatrical, problem-solving dialogue between actors and 'spectators' (Boal's reconstructed term for an active audience) (*Theatre of the Oppressed* xxi). Drawing parallels between Freire's teacher-student relationship and Boal's actor-spectator, both practices discuss the importance of knowledge not being inherently owned by one side of the fence. Quite the opposite, both sides of the conversation are knowledgeable and the process of teaching/performing becomes a creative dialogue that enriches all.

After interacting with local communities during a production of *Zumbi* in the early 1960s Boal's practice began to center the people they were performing to, rather than the messages the production team found important. As Boal reflected: "Before that encounter we were preaching revolution for abstract audiences. Now, we met 'the people' [...] How should we speak to these real people? *How could we teach them what they knew better than us?*" (*Hamlet* 194). The idea of 'preaching revolution for abstract audiences' is a particularly relevant one when discussing political theater that deals with real people and their stories and naturally goes back to the Freirian concept of learning. More specifically, Freire indicates how transformation might be effected at the local level (Freire 95); where the learning environment might potentially be transformed from one of 'cultural invasion', where one party assumes the power to 'transform' the other (e.g. preaching revolutions to abstract audiences), to 'cultural synthesis', where a climate of dialogue and reciprocity enables people to realise their capacity to discover their own transformative

possibilities. Freire identifies that in cultural invasion, the actors draw the thematic content of their action from their own values and ideology; their starting point is their own world, from which they enter the world of those they invade. In cultural synthesis however, the actors who come from ‘another world’ to the world of the people do so not as invaders. They do not come to teach, transmit or give anything, but rather to learn, with the people, about the people’s world. In cultural invasion the actors superimpose themselves on the people, who are assigned the role of spectators on a narrative that is chosen for them. In cultural synthesis, the actors become integrated with the people, who are co-authors of the action that both perform upon the world.

Though the principle of cultural synthesis is clearly applicable in the work undertaken by Act for Change in James Town, what is equally interesting is how it resonates with specific traditions of Ghanaian performance. One of the most recognisable forms of Ghanaian theater, *anasegoro*, was developed in the 1960s by Efua Sutherland and her company at the Ghana Drama Studio. Influenced by the cultural policies of Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana’s first president, Sutherland investigated ways to develop a theatrical tradition in Ghana rooted in traditional village storytelling, or *anasesem*. The *anasesem*, or Ananse stories, focussed on the spider god Ananse and his various exploits (Collins 186). To develop *anasegoro*, Sutherland borrowed from both the narratives – for example in her play *The Marriage of Anansewa* – and the styles of storytelling found in Ghanaian villages. This included the *mboguo*, which Donkor describes as “an embodied interactivity” that is designed to unsettle “authorial knowledge and authoritative knowledge” of the storyteller (40). Within a village context, the storyteller leads the narrative, but as the audience listen, they can interrupt, so disrupting the narrative and repositioning the power balance of the event. This structural element removes the storyteller’s omniscience and makes space for the audience to shift the direction of the narrative. Thus, the audience in Ghana’s precolonial performance traditions possess a significant agency in the storytelling event. This tradition, later formalised by Sutherland, has been established as a central tenet of Ghanaian theater since independence. Being invited to engage in and be part of the performance event, rather than a passive spectator, is part of the backdrop of the audience’s relationship with performance. Hence, its application within Forum Theater is by no means an alien prospect.

When exploring the practice of Theater of the Oppressed, it is often seen as a tree with multiple branches, practices and aesthetics, but Forum Theater is probably the most commonly used one. Forum Theater is comprised of a group of people, performers and spectators, who are looking to solve an issue faced by the community for which nobody has the answer. During this problem-solving process, the performers present a scene in which the issue is clear, followed by spectators being invited, by the Joker (the facilitator of the Forum), to join the action on stage and enter the scene. Replacing the protagonist at any moment of the scene they find crucial, these spectators reveal, by means of theater, thoughts and desires relatable to the group to which they belong. As Boal discussed: “Even if it fails ten times, the process does not fail. The process was good, because by trying and trying and trying you develop the capacity of analysing and looking for solutions” (Boal et al.). Forum Theater is not about finding the right answers, but about working with your community in order to workshop possible solutions to very real problems.

Moving on from Forum Theater within the Theater of the Oppressed tree is the Direct Action. According to Boal, “during Forum Theatre we have ideas but the main aim is the Direct Action where we change the reality, it is important to not only understand the reality but to also modify it and transform it” (Boal et al.). This transformation can be on a personal or a community level. According to a different interpretation, also by Boal in his book *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed*, Direct Actions “involve the theatricalisation of protest demonstrations, peasants’ marches, secular processions, parades, meetings of workers or other organised groups, street commissions etc., using all available theatrical elements, such as masks, songs, dances, choreography etc.” (6). Either approach to Direct Action, within Boal’s framework, aims towards turning art and theory into reality which can then lead to change, which takes us to Legislative Theater. Legislative Theater aims to harness that change and in combination with Forum Theater to produce a truer form of democracy by influencing the legislative system. As Boal defines it, Legislative Theater is: “A set of processes which mixes Forum Theatre and conventional rituals of a parliamentary chamber or assembly, with the objective of arriving at the formulation of coherent and viable bills of law. From this starting point, we then have to follow the normal route for their presentation in legislative chambers and put pressure on the legislators to approve them” (6). Even without the final

step that Boal offers here, Act for Change aimed to use Legislative Theater in a hyperlocal manner, in order to address vital issues that affect the participants, in order to connect local communities in James Town with modern slavery survivors through narrative and creative problem-solving dialogue.

At several points throughout the project, Act for Change practitioners engaged community audiences, stakeholders and survivors as spectators. The results of these interventions were at points powerful and galvanising. For example, when, during one performance, a female school student declared to 500 of her peers that she would 'rather eat stones' than have her future children taken from her, the room cheered and applauded. Equally affecting, was when participants in school workshops were able to critique common practices and everyday interactions with a fresh understanding of how they might be, or could lead to, modern slavery. In another instance, students questioned existing policies on modern slavery and suggested ways of improving policies by referencing the domestic strategies that ended the Guinea worm infestation in Ghana. Here, the public were given incentives for reporting cases of Guinea worm and the students drew an effective analogy both between the insidious character of modern slavery as a societal disease, and an effective community-based solution driven by the government. Throughout these performances, the research team observed and noted the reactions and asked the audience to write down a strategy they would use if they were the protagonist. These approaches developed a large data set that clearly demonstrated an appetite at the community level to acknowledge and address the problem of modern slavery, which to this point had not been clear.

During the final phase, a survivor, acting as Joker, formed the performance narrative, selected the spectators and engaged directly with the community audience on what success looked like for the protagonist. This achieved two important things: firstly, it opened hitherto closed lines of communication between survivors of modern slavery and the community and, secondly, it reframed the community as a body capable of suggesting and enacting solutions that complement existing policy. As the performance was played through for the second time, the joker invited the spectators to shout 'freeze'. This stopped the action with the performers holding their position as though time had stopped. The audience member would then

touch the actor they wanted to replace in the scene and enact a new strategy. As each intervention unfolded and the action played and replayed, the joker and the audience began to discuss the viability of the approaches. Here, the research team in Ghana saw for the first time the audience talking with a survivor of modern slavery about their experience and what could be done to safeguard others in the community.

As noted, the NPA directly calls for engagement with the community but without a clear sense of how such engagement should be achieved or to what end. Here, the community as a self-selecting audience, not only bore witness to the stories of survivors of modern slavery but interacted, engaging in meaningful dialogue with a survivor through the frame of performance. The documentary *Practising Freedom* (Sarkodee), that accompanied this phase highlights the direct action of audience members to suggest and enact solutions. Though, in practice, the solutions may be ultimately unsuccessful, it is the engagement itself that is significant here, as a forum had been created in which a community-level dialogue could take place. As Collins Seymah Smith, Director of Act for Change said, this was 'James Town talking to James Town about James Town' (Murray). Interestingly, due to covid restrictions, Dr Collins was unable to travel to Ghana for the final phase of the project and his absence resulted in clearer lines of communication between the participants, and then between the performance and the community audience. One of the striking elements that the documentary shows, is that the conversations that take place during the performance do so in Ga, the local language, rather than English. Without the UK-based academic in the audience, there was no pressure for the dialogue to be filtered or take a perspective from outside the community into account. Ultimately, the Boalian practice of deconstructing the role of audience/actor sits well with the Ghanaian community storytelling drama, which runs akin to the theory of 'cultural synthesis' embedded in Ghanaian performance traditions. This way, it became a useful and appropriate tool for combatting modern slavery in James Town in a manner that complements and gives substance to the slightly nebulous ambitions set out in the NPA.

Conclusions

Boal's work has been applied in multiple contexts around the world. The application of his approach in James Town has enabled both an important forum for community discussion to take place and to see the potential of Legislative Theater as a way of supporting and complementing state-led policy initiatives that raise awareness around modern slavery. This type of performance-based approach becomes useful, because if individuals who become caught up in modern slavery and human trafficking survive their experience and return to their community, their reception is complex. Though James Town is a tight-knit community, survivors can find themselves ostracised. These issues were consistent across all the survivors we interviewed in the community, and this raised the issue that not only were survivors not getting the support they require, but that there was no mechanism or forum through which to tell their story and so warn other potentially vulnerable individuals.

Though the NPA suggests that community awareness projects should take place, it does not provide any examples of projects that have taken place or are currently running. There is little mention of the role of schools, community groups, local government, religious groups or traditional groups. In addition to that, we need to acknowledge the difference between awareness (which is what the NPA suggests) and meaningful participation (which is what grassroot organisations have to offer). What this project demonstrates, is that the community is capable, on multiple levels, of building bridges and developing vital workable solutions to the issue of modern slavery and human trafficking. From awareness raising to problem solving and enforcement, the various community stakeholders involved in our project positioned themselves as articulate, creative and solution-centered. The NPA places responsibility for addressing Modern Slavery on state agencies, and while keeping this pressure on, we argue that resource would be better directed towards organisations working at the community level who, like Act for Change, understand their own community. This 'hyperlocal' approach, which foregrounds community knowledge and networks, allows for sustainable links to be built up over time and so for change to be affected incrementally with community stakeholders, rather than imposed upon them.

There are, of course, limitations to this project. One is that understanding the lived experience of participants, whether survivor, community member, school pupil or theater practitioner over time is complex. Therefore, being able to know what the long-term impact will be, is the subject of future research. Clearly, the opportunity to develop workable policy is desirable. It is not possible to prevent human trafficking and modern slavery, however, it is possible to develop meaningful dialogue at the community level. Moreover, the potential replicability of the project, using performance as a framework for complex and uncomfortable community dialogue, is something to pursue further.

The legal framework for addressing modern slavery and human trafficking in Ghana clearly exists, with a balance struck between the rights of the trafficked individual and the requirement of witnesses to report instances of trafficking. What our project demonstrates, is that when the stories and the agency of survivors are central to the project, and community groups are invited to engage, discussion and action is forthcoming. Fundamentally, this is how this approach and the adoption of Boalian techniques are valuable. The promotion of dialogue through structured drama-based interactions, can provide a safe space for participants to share their – sometimes challenging – narratives, while Legislative Theater provides a framework which can push the context further. As a result, this project argues that while remaining rooted in local communities, this kind of work can inform the policy work that is already taking place in and beyond Ghana, preventing vulnerable groups from recruitment into modern slavery and supporting those who return.

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