

ABSTRACT:

In the last thirty years, most post-colonial African states have adopted alternative approaches to development as a means to target the 'poor', who are left out of mainstream development discourse and practice. At the forefront of these ways of engaging the 'poor' has been the use of participatory theatre methodologies. A number of these techniques referred to as *Theatre for development*, *Participatory Educational Theatre* or *People's Theatre* have been inspired in part either in theory or praxis by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* or Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*. The subsequent development of *Forum Theatre* as a methodology within *Theatre of the oppressed* has not only had impacted on alternative approaches to development in Brazil where it originated, but also in over seventy five countries around the world. The language of consciousness, oppression and development is pervasive in the praxis of most groups (largely theatre groups attached to civil society initiatives) implementing forum theatre in Africa. However, there has been little feminist research done to assess the applicability of the methodology whilst working with a heterogeneous group where the notion of oppression may not be shared and where the political issues border on the personal. This thesis examines the utilization of forum theatre techniques to explore the processes of gendering women within a workshop consisting of twenty-three young women in Manenberg, South Africa. It examines the opportunities that these techniques provide the group in uncovering, understanding and questioning the practices, norms and patterns that inform the construction of femininity. This thesis draws on theories of community theatre praxis in South Africa, gender and development discourse as well as research on contemporary 'rites of passage' practices in Manenberg. As a qualitative study embedded in feminist epistemology and feminist activism, this research utilises a range of methods, including participant observation, appreciative inquiry and second hand ethnography. These methods are used to critically analyse the opportunities and gaps that emerge when using forum theatre with this particular group. My positionality as a researcher and activist is engaged in this thesis as a critical site for reflection and analysis. This research establishes that forum theatre through specific activities provide the space for the exploration, analysis and comprehension of the gendered experiences of the young women in Manenberg. However there are methodological shortcomings, which are pointed out as areas for future research.