“The Collapsible Space Between Us”: Refugee Theatre as a Tool of Resilience in Kenya

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Can creative expression be a platform for healing and resilience in communities that have been subject to violent conflict? Refugees provide an example of one such group that struggles to rebuild lives post-conflict. This paper provides a case study of urban and camp-based refugees in Kenya who participated in theatre projects. The research examines initial effects of their participation in these theatre projects and then follows up three and four years later to review the longer term impact on participants. It identifies positive and negative effects of their involvement in theatre projects through participant observation, interviews, and focus groups. Through an analysis of this data, the paper also identifies conditions under which theatre can make a positive contribution to building resilience in refugee participants. These conditions include participant ownership of the project and creating an environment of trust in which stories can be shared and isolation reduced.

Kenya has been the host to large, protracted refugee populations for decades. Refugees often spend decades in camps and in urban centres, struggling to find ways to rebuild their lives after being forced to flee violent conflict in their countries of origin. UNHCR uses the term “durable solutions” to refer to long term options for refugees, which include integrating in countries of asylum, repatriating to their countries of origin, or being resettled to third countries.[1] However, these macro-level solutions are largely beyond the control or access of individual refugees. Another perspective on durable

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solutions is for refugees to engage in activities that build resilience and enable them to cope with their current reality and whatever direction their lives may take. The term resilience is used in a number of disciplines; in physics it describes the ability of materials to bounce back to their original shape after being exposed to external pressures. It also refers to the ability of living systems to rebuild their balance after shocks or continued periods of stress.[2] A succinct definition is "positive adaptation despite adversity."[3] The interconnection between resilience and peacebuilding is seen in peaceful societies that display high levels of resilience.[4]

Within intractable conflict environments, how can refugees develop positive identities and become agents of their own personal change? How can theatre as one form of creative expression be a platform for healing and resilience in refugee communities? Although there are increasing examples of artistic tools used in peacebuilding initiatives, especially in the area of theatre,[5] some academics note a prevalence of largely anecdotal research reports that describe primarily positive effects.[6] This paper provides an empirical study that examines effects of refugee participation in applied theatre projects. As a qualitative study, the number of refugees interviewed is not a representative sample, but it provides meaningful examples of peacebuilding performance work. Significantly, I was able to follow up three and four years later to monitor the continued impact on refugee participants. Positive effects reported by participants who engaged with theatre include increased communication skills, positive self-identity, and increased confidence and hope. Negative effects include retraumatization, lack of sustainability of the initiative, and lack of participant ownership. Finally, the paper identifies conditions under which theatre can make a positive contribution to building resilience in refugee participants.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research was carried out in Kenya in 2011 and completed in follow up visits in 2014 and 2015. The research focused on two groups of refugees who were involved in theatre projects, one based in a refugee camp and the other comprising urban refugees. The camp-based group, Dadaab Theater Project (DTP), included ten refugee youth from different countries living in Ifo refugee camp in the Dadaab camp complex; the urban refugees were a group of eight young Congolese women who called themselves the Survival Girls.

The research methodology included semi-structured interviews with each participant in both groups, and four focus group discussions. In 2011, I held a focus group discussion with seven of the DTP members and a separate focus group discussion with six of the Survival Girls. Then, in 2014, I conducted a combined focus group discussion with two DTP members and two Survival Girls members, and another combined focus group discussion with four DTP members plus one of the directors and one of the Survival Girls in 2015. Interviews were conducted primarily in English and French, and interpretation was provided by a fellow actor in the few occasions when that was required. There were multiple interviews and email exchanges from 2011 to 2015 with the two directors of DTP (Michael Littig and Juliana Bloodgood), with the director of the play for World Refugee Day (Richard Hess), and with the director of the Survival Girls (Ming Holden). I interviewed representatives from organizations using theatre in peacebuilding in Kenya (FilmAid, Amani Peoples Theatre, and Irex Europe) and representatives working with peacebuilding NGOs (Life and Peace Institute, Nairobi Peace Institute, and Mennonite Central Committee). I also interviewed two Kenyan artists and UNHCR staff coordinating Community Services projects in Kenya. I observed the dress rehearsal of the plays produced by the two groups, as well as their performances during World Refugee Day in Nairobi. Thus, data sources were triangulated through conducting interviews, observing performances, and accessing secondary documentation.

When I returned to Kenya to follow up with the refugee participants in 2014 and 2015, I met again with representatives of both urban and camp-based refugee theatre groups, individually and in focus groups. This allowed us to discuss probing questions of sustainability and ownership of the initiatives. I was able to verify what they were doing and the impact their participation in the theatre project had on them a few years later. The following is a collation of data gleaned from the research.

CONTEXT

For decades Kenya has dealt with large refugee influxes as a result of conflicts in the neighboring countries of South Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Refugee camps were established close to the borders with Sudan and Somalia. Since the early 1990s, Kenya put into place an encampment policy, which obliges the majority of refugees to remain within UNHCR-administered refugee camps. Refugee camps are

generally situated in remote and arid regions that are barely able to sustain sparse local populations. Therefore, host communities lobby the Kenyan government to limit the refugees' agricultural activities. Dadaab, the site of my camp-based research, is referred to as a refugee camp complex as it has evolved from two camps totaling about 90,000 refugees when it began in 1992 to five camps of almost 500,000 refugees at the height of the Horn of Africa famine in 2011.[7] The Dadaab refugee camp complex became the fourth largest urban population in Kenya.

Although refugees have escaped the political violence within their home countries, protection issues persist in countries of asylum. Refugees are often victims of individual and community conflict, such as rape, spousal abuse, and ethnic violence. Inter-community conflict is a significant issue in the camps as minority refugee groups are often the targets of the majority Somali community. Within the camp context, identity and belonging are the basis for protection and a social safety net, especially for refugees from minority groups. One refugee actor who came to the camp as a young boy shared his refugee experience:

> My first time to hear the word "refugee" and to see a refugee camp, it carried many troubles. There was no blue flag [of Somalia] but only a narrow tent that was hot during the day and cold at night, where bandits could creep in. My younger sister died of complications after being raped . . .[and] this made me hate and hate and hate. Many were the times when I asked myself where I belonged, but remained unanswered. I realized that I had nothing that could give me my identity and a sense of belonging; . . . currently I feel I am abandoned and lost in between nowhere.[8]

In 2011, Kenya's urban refugee population was estimated to be 50,000 individuals and, in 2015, the estimated population was similar.[9] Although the encampment policy has been in place for decades, Kenya has allowed some refugees who can manage to live independently to remain in Nairobi. Refugees living in Nairobi are registered by Kenya's Department of Refugee Affairs and given refugee identity documents. However, they are still prone to arbitrary arrest and detention, often in order to procure a bribe for local police. One participant reported that Kenyan police refer to refugees as "ATM machines." Urban refugees do not receive any form of regular assistance: "Without adequate support, many refugees are forced

into poorly paid jobs and find it difficult to afford adequate essentials such as food, housing, healthcare and education."[10] They often lack the means to sustain themselves even in the most basic manner. Urban refugees have very limited access to economic activity as they often lack authorization for regular employment; therefore, they face serious limitations to economic self-sufficiency and are prone to sexual and economic exploitation.[11]

The Democratic Republic of Congo, the former home of the Survival Girls, has been generating refugees and internally displaced people for decades. Eastern Congo has suffered from ongoing violence perpetrated against civilian populations by government forces and a number of disparate rebel groups. Violence in this region is marked by such brutality as pillaging villages, abducting children to use as soldiers, and using gang rape as a tool of war.[12] This violence has resulted in large internally displaced populations as well as a steady flow of refugees to surrounding countries. The Congolese refugee population in Nairobi was estimated at approximately 5400 in 2011.[13]

The UNHCR identifies three durable solutions for refugees: (1) Repatriation to their country of origin once it is deemed safe. There have been large repatriation movements of refugees worldwide, such as Afghans, Mozambicans, Angolans, Liberians, and Sierra Leoneans. However, the refugee populations in Kenya do not have a positive prospect for peace or stability in their home countries and therefore repatriation will not be an option in the foreseeable future. (2) Local integration into the country of first asylum: this requires the host country to grant permanent resident status to refugees, thus giving them access to most of the rights and services of its citizens, such as free movement, the right to work, and access to primary schools. Almost no asylum countries, including Kenya, offer local integration to refugees. Movement is restricted and refugees are usually not given work permits. (3) Resettlement to a third country: this solution is to identify countries willing to share the responsibility of humanitarian protection with first asylum countries by accepting a quota of refugees to be resettled permanently to their country, eventually gaining citizenship.[14] The top three countries of resettlement are the United States, Canada, and Australia.

Only a very small percentage of all refugees have access to one of these durable solutions. For the vast majority of refugees, the actual "durable solution" is to survive for decades in camps or urban settings.[15] Consequently, the context of a research project with refugee populations is one of conflict

and insecurity with limited future options and limited resources available. Given the lack of freedom of movement, limited audience, insecurity, and identity-based violence, refugee theatre is not unlike using theatre in prisons. When funds are prioritized for food and medicine, few social programs are available in relation to the large refugee population. Participation in a theatre project for refugees is, therefore, not the casual choice it might be for young people in a developed country environment where this is one of many opportunities. Rather, it provides hope for future opportunities as well as a meaningful activity on a daily basis.

REFUGEE THEATRE PROJECTS 2011

The refugee theatre projects that are the focus of this study were initiated by Great Globe Foundation—a small, dynamic American organization founded by actors/directors Michael Littig and Juliana Bloodgood. Great Globe Foundation uses the creation of theatre pieces to contribute to peacebuilding: "Theatre is a powerful medium for raising awareness, generating discussion, and changing attitudes, particularly when a community is actively involved in telling its own story. Theatre becomes the vehicle for participants' expression of identity, and an emotional catharsis."[16] As professional actors rather than development practitioners, they were influenced by the acting traditions of theatre theorists Jerzy Grotowksi, Konstantin Stanislavski, and Peter Brook, as well as the philosophy of Augusto Boal, rather than methods such as Theatre for Development.[17] Having used theatre with youth in other international settings, they found ways to incorporate the participants' cultural traditions along with the above approaches.

The two directors spent eight months working in Dadaab refugee camp with Film Aid as their local partner and with UNHCR assisting in Nairobi. Ming Holden, a young American woman with a background in creative writing, came to Nairobi on a Rotary Peace Fellowship for a period of six weeks to coordinate the urban refugee project, which became known as the Survival Girls. Both groups had the concrete goal of creating an artistic piece that would be performed for World Refugee Day 2011 in Nairobi in the presence of a large public audience that would include urban refugees, UNHCR and NGO staff, and Kenya's Minister of Immigration. Dadaab Theater Project and the Survival Girls became the focus of my research.

Dadaab Theater Project

The DTP comprised ten refugees living in Ifo, one of the refugee camps in the Dadaab camp complex. They were from eighteen to twenty-eight years old and had lived in the camps for periods of three to twenty years. By design, it was an ethnically mixed group, including individuals from Somali, Somali-Bantu, Ethiopian-Anuak, and Sudanese communities. It was also a diverse group in terms of educational background, ranging from refugees who had completed high school to those with very limited formal education. The group started with five Somali women, but four of them were forced to drop out due to family obligations, including one arranged marriage. One brave Somali woman remained. Posters invited refugee youth with an interest in drama, dance, and/or poetry to come for auditions. Participants received training through which they would develop and perform theatre pieces. As an added attraction, five young American actors came to Kenya to perform with them. The opportunity to exchange artistic practices with Americans served as a great enticement.

The refugee participants expressed the desire to gain concrete skills, such as writing, acting, and group facilitation. They hoped these skills would increase their possibilities of finding work with an organization in the camp or enrich their options if they returned to their countries of origin; more than this, they expressed the desire to be part of a group of people who understood each other's experiences. One Dadaab participant stated, "My feeling for my country and my people makes me write poems because there is no other way for me to express what I feel." Another participant stated that her objective was to come together with others to learn how to create and perform but also to be a positive force within the wider refugee community: "There are so many voiceless people in the community, so many untold stories. We want our stories to help others so their voices are heard outside of Dadaab." All the refugees were trauma survivors, having fled violence in their home countries, some alone, some with family members, some as small children, and some as adolescents. Most had witnessed family members being killed.

Littig and Bloodgood used a variety of theatre techniques to engage the personal experiences of all participants. Though their techniques were western in orientation, they learned about and encouraged expression from the participants' cultural traditions. Hence, performances included Somali poetry and singing and Ethiopian storytelling. Theatre techniques included

free writing, and open discussion that allowed refugees to share what issues they brought to the performance space, out of which performance themes were identified. Such personal exploration became the material for the theatre performances, as well as a vehicle for deeper self-knowledge. Writing exercises using prompts, such as "I am, I remember, I hope," allowed for personal exploration of their hopes, dreams, and memories. At the end of each session, they would debrief with each other before leaving the practice. English was the language of practice and performance as it was the common language for all the refugees.

None of the four American facilitators had worked in a refugee context, which became evident through some struggles they encountered. Part of their initial plan was to find and recruit what they referred to as master teachers-actors or performers from different communities. However, the performers they were able to find would not participate without being paid, which was not part of the budget or project philosophy. Moreover, the cultural leaders who came initially did not want to be mentors; they wanted to perform. The directors realized that the presence of such master teachers could have reduced the creativity of the participants who would likely cater to the expert and not express themselves. A second idea was to develop a training manual as a concrete product that could be used after the project ended. However, it became clear early on that, rather than a training manual, participants were hungry for mentors who would "take them by the hand and tell them that they matter."[18]

Initially, attendance for DTP participants at training sessions was sporadic and directors reported that they had to "pull them along to stay committed."[19] Participants wanted to see immediate and tangible results and their attitude was "what's in it for me?" As Bloodgood observed, "they were always trying to find what they could get from every person. My response was, 'what I have to offer you is my heart and commitment and mentorship and friendship. I will also give you my T-shirt, but it isn't about that; that's not why I'm here.'" As the project continued and participants gained trust in the facilitators, their commitment and motivation increased.

Despite their lack of targeted experience, they had a genuine commitment to the individual refugee participants. This relational offering and the commitment of all participants was solidified during the final phase of the project. As planned, at the outset, five young American actors came to Kenya with theatre director Richard Hess. Hess directed the creation

of a theatre piece combining the works of the refugee and American actors, which was performed for World Refugee Day. The Americans and the refugee participants prepared in advance something that reflected what they remembered from their respective pasts. Each group then performed these pieces the first night they were together. The artistic and cultural exchange between American actors and the refugees was a focal point of this project, providing the richness of a bi-directional learning process.

One of the refugees wrote a poem, entitled "I Remember," about his flight experience, which he shared with the American actors before they came to Kenya. The young Americans were so moved by his poem that they incorporated his words into their own presentation, which they performed for the refugees on their first night together in Kenya. They could not know the reality of being a refugee, acknowledged with the words, "I don't remember . . . but I do now . . . " Nevertheless, the refugee author and all the refugees watching were deeply moved by this performance. The author shared, "I remember writing the poem 'I Remember.' I didn't feel so much writing the poem, but when the Americans performed it, then I cried, because then I felt it. They had understood exactly what I had written. Maybe they thought it was just words, but it was not. We felt deeply from their performance." After the American students performed their piece for the refugees, there was a moment of silence, then the refugees leapt up and embraced the American students and both groups of youth stood crying in each other's arms for several minutes. Littig shared, "this moment was a complete offering of respect, trust, gratitude, and appreciation and led to a powerful opening within the refugee youth."[20]

Enhanced by their preparation before meeting, the two groups had an intense and productive four days together, resulting in the creation of a theatre piece that would be performed for World Refugee Day. They titled their creation *The Collapsible Space Between Us*. This title was borrowed from the writing of a Sudanese refugee resettled in the United States who, from his perspective as a refugee, poignantly describes the need of sharing one's story:

> I speak to you because I can't help it. It gives me strength, almost unbelievable strength, to know that you are there. I covet your eyes, your ears, the collapsible space between us. How blessed are we that we have each other? I am alive and you are alive and so we must fill the air with our words. I will fill today, tomorrow,

> every day until I am taken back to God. I will tell stories to people who will listen and to people who don't want to listen, to people who seek me out and to those who run.[21]

These words could easily have been written by any one of the refugee theatre participants; they apply appropriately to the strong relationships that developed between participants with very different backgrounds—not just Americans and refugees, but between refugees from different clans and countries. This quotation illustrates the need to have authentic stories heard. The theatre directors were very concerned with the authenticity of the creative experience. They were not interested in having participants simply mimicking "NGO-speak"—the educational phrases that participants thought the project coordinators wanted to hear. They took the time to lead participants to understand who they were as human beings by posing deeper questions. Theatre was not merely a technique or a tool; rather, it was "a process that led to a better understanding of others and self."[22]

During their eight months of training in the refugee camp, DTP created a theatre piece called *Nalichoo*, a term from the South Sudanese Dinka language. *Nalichoo* was a composite sketch from the free writing and personal experiences of the group members. It was the story of a mythical land called Hambrecia, which was torn apart by tribal warfare. A young man and woman of different backgrounds fall in love, but her family does not approve of their relationship. The story ends in tragedy when the young lovers become separated in a no man's land between their country of origin and asylum from which they can neither go back home nor onward. This is the refugee dilemma: identity is lost with neither a way forward nor a way back. The young lovers end up separated from each other and from their families in a lonely limbo. They are caught in a collapsible space. In this case, it is not the differences that have collapsed but personal identity and options or, in refugee parlance, durable solutions.[23]

The (Muslim) Somali woman performed with one of the (Christian) Ethiopian actors, but this was not well received by Somali refugee leaders who warned that, for them, it is taboo for youth of different religions to perform together. This cultural faux pas was likely due to the directors' lack of previous experience in refugee contexts. Two non-Somali actors quit the theatre group as they were afraid of being stoned or killed by Somali refugees. However, the Ethiopian actor in the scene chose to stay and participate in a discussion that included Ethiopian and Somali camp leaders. After this

incident he observed, "The NGO needs to stick around to solve the problem of communication. We could have been beaten, but we stuck around until everyone understands."[24] The result of this discussion was increased understanding and support for the theatre project from the Somali camp leader and the agreement that the play could continue to be shown with the provision that they exchange the Ethiopian for a Somali actor in that piece.

The Survival Girls

In the urban context of Nairobi, the decision was made to focus on young refugee women as they were deemed particularly vulnerable. Several refugee women responded to an invitation to participate in a theatre project. They were urban refugees between the ages of seventeen and twenty-four who had come to Nairobi between 2005 and 2010. The invitation was to receive training and to create and perform a piece for World Refugee Day. There were no auditions; rather, those who demonstrated interest and commitment by being present day after day for practice formed the group. Eventually, eight young Congolese refugee women became part of the group and chose to call themselves the Survival Girls.[25] Language provided an interesting dynamic. Holden facilitated her teaching sessions in English, since all participants spoke English, but the women chose to create the play and perform in Swahili—their native language and a language of Kenya. They incorporated traditional dance and singing from the Congo into their stories. This maintained the refugee women's central creating role and Holden's facilitation role.

All the Survival Girls were trauma survivors. Four of the eight reported having been raped; three of them had been gang-raped. One young woman had been suicidal and was still fragile in 2011. Holden aptly observed, "I was not working on a trauma piece; I was working with trauma victims. It's not the same thing at all. It's not a play; it's their life."[26] Although she had no formal mental health training, Holden was herself a trauma survivor and she knew that the girls would not be able to perform or to experience healing unless they felt emotionally and physically safe.

The project provided a space for the refugee women to express themselves safely and freely. Holden created a physical "safe space" into which the women could retreat if they did not feel like participating. She was determined not to retraumatize them, to the extent of excusing them from a public performance if necessary. She told the girls that they were

never obliged to perform if at that moment they felt at emotional risk. In my experience, this kind of care—for the individual above any program outcomes—is unusual. There was also an agreement of confidentiality; everything that emerged during the theatre games and storytelling would remain within the group. Finally, within this safe space, one of the girls recounted her experience of rape to the group, thus freeing others to also share their experiences. This became a central theme of their performance. As one member recounted, these were the wounds that needed to be healed: "There was so much raping and killing. This play is a story from our hearts. We express it in drama; when we act we are relieved." Holden assumed that, as trauma victims, participants would benefit from connecting to their bodies through the physical engagement of singing, acting, and dancing, which are also integral elements of their cultural expression.[27] Participants discovered the physical actions that embodied the felt experience of their stories.

The type of audience and audience reaction was a key element in the reception and impact of the performances. Theatre researcher Richard Schechner distinguishes between integral audiences for whom the play has special meaning, and accidental audiences who come to see a show with no specific background experience or agenda.[28] The Survival Girls learned that the prior experience of audience members would influence their response, whether the actors were performing to an accidental crowd in the street or to an integral audience of people who had experienced deep trauma. One example came from performing a piece at a centre for vulnerable refugee women: "When we performed at Heshima, girls started crying, and they were very traumatized. Even though our performance ended on a positive note, saying that we will overcome, still they were traumatized, because we performed scenes of how we have suffered." Although they had not planned for a discussion after the performance, they were able to adjust their program and incorporate an ad-hoc debrief session.

FINDINGS

What did refugee participants report that they gained from their participation in the theatre projects? Because the responses of the refugees from the urban and the camp theatre projects were so similar, and the research is not comparative in nature, I have combined their responses in my findings and analysis. Below is a summary of what refugees of both projects reported that

they gained after participating in the projects in 2011.

Table 1. Themes from Interviews with Refugee Participants

What participants stated that they gained	Number of responses (N=46)	Indicative quotations from discussion participants
Writing/publishing/ becoming known	10	I am publishing my work; I am becoming known.
Public speaking/acting	8	I gained acting/performance and public speaking skills, now I can talk in front of a big crowd.
Confidence	7	At first I had no confidence, but I gained confidence. I became a skillful drummer and more confident to act.
Positive identity	6	We were all victims of circumstance in our home countries. Now our identities have expanded and deepened.
Hope	4	Now we have hope, and our future will never be the same again.
Healing/resilience	5	This gave us transformation and healing that my story and pain has been recognized.
Relationships	6	People I have lived with for four years have not been able to share with me what this group has shared together in just a short time.

Their responses indicate that the goals they articulated before beginning this project were more than met. They had indeed gained concrete skills: writing in English, performing, public speaking in front of a large audience. They reported an increase in confidence, self-esteem, positive identity, hope, and healing, leading to increased resilience. They also spoke of the strong relationships formed with each other and with the American participants.

Project coordinators noted that participants had developed a sense of community and purpose. They trusted each other, they asked each other for help, they had become less shy, they laughed more, and, importantly, they continued meeting together after the formal project had ended. They all hoped that the theatre group could continue past 2011 to be a venue for different refugee groups to learn about each other's cultural traditions as a peacebuilding initiative.

Refugee participants reported increased communication skills, confidence, and self-esteem. By its nature, theatre is well suited to improve communication skills, an observation confirmed by all participants. They recounted an increase in written and verbal creative expression, in particular the ability to speak in front of a crowd: "Before I could not stand in front of an audience—I was afraid and I felt my English was not good enough, but now I can communicate well and it makes me very happy" (Survival Girl). This significant improvement in their communication skills led to increased self-esteem and confidence. One DTP participant reported, "Before I was not known; now I am known. Now I am writing poetry and singing." The same sentiment was expressed by the members of Survival Girls: "Now people know who we are; now I am one of the Survival Girls."

Littig observed that as individuals began to find confidence and power in themselves, they literally began to find their voices. At the beginning of the training, finding strength and volume was the most difficult component of their vocal work, perhaps because it affected cultural expectations and norms regarding the voice and psychological ownership of power and self-esteem. As participants began to strengthen the physical and technical aspects of their voices, their self-esteem increased.[29]

Not only did refugees find their voices physically, they also found their voice in terms of a deepened understanding of their identities: "We were all victims of circumstances in our home countries." One Somali participant shared, "one of the most disturbing and embarrassing moments I always encounter is whenever I want to identify myself; I am forced to say, 'I am a Somali refugee living in Kenya'—no longer Somali, and not Kenyan—lost in between, so where do I belong?" The directors noticed a significant difference between the refugee youth who grew up in refugee camps, outside the natural venue of cultural expression, and those who came to the camp as adults and had a solid foundation in their own cultural identity.

As they participated in the theatre project, they forgot their status

as refugees and felt they were human beings first. Peace practitioner and academic John Paul Lederach identifies insecurity and voicelessness as repercussions of protracted violence and displacement and suggests that a sense of place, safety, and voice are precursors to building resilience.[30] Holden avers that "identity is the story we tell ourselves about who we are, our cultural narrative."[31] What have the refugees' narratives been? One participant of DTP described himself as "temporarily a refugee in Dadaab." This is in a camp context where the protracted refugee population arrived in 1991, twenty years before the time of data collection. The Survival Girls, as Congolese in Kenya, experienced discrimination. The girls were always reminded that they do not belong: "In Kenya they throw that back in my face; they say, 'you refugees!' and use it as an insult. I want to feel proud to be Congolese."

The ability to talk about negative aspects of their cultural identity and look critically at these practices within a safe space was also a positive outcome. Their theatre pieces explored issues such as female genital mutilation, forced early marriage, and rape as a tool of war, among others. One response to the question, "how is cultural identity expressed through art?" is that it is expressed truthfully. The refugees shared the most culturally taboo aspects of their identity. Understanding of identity and history worked to connect people from dramatically different worlds. This became the collapsible space, between home and asylum, with only the negative identity of refugee, a label that people seek to lose as soon as possible. Thus, theatre became the tool to connect identities, expressed in this way: "I know who I am; therefore, I am confident enough to let you be who you are."[32]

Participants in both groups expressed the need for hope. They expressed that, at the deepest level, their need was to find hope—hope of having a positive future, accomplishing something, being respected, being known, and, most importantly, seeing family members again. All participants articulated a hope in education as their ticket to a better future. Most refugee participants hoped to return to their villages as they pictured them before the war. Even the ones resettled in other countries planned to return to their countries to visit, if not to live. They hoped that any skills gained could be eventually used to develop their own countries. One DTP participant expressed his hope in this way: "I want to say that everyone should hear these stories of loss. As you can see from the darkest sides of the world where power is in the hands of rulers . . . they are showering the bullets upon

innocent people, killing them, torturing . . . but they will see that hope is alive and well in the world."

What is the relation between their dreams and their current reality? Another Dadaab participant declared, "Hope is a luxury we cannot afford." One member of the Survival Girls attempted suicide when it appeared that her chronically ill father would not live long enough to be resettled to another country. Littig observed that, more than hope, refugees rely on determination: "the resilience to get out of bed every morning and find a way to move forward somehow, to feed your family and keep your children in school, and help them when they become ill. Every day they operate at the bottom rung of a hierarchy of basic needs."[33]

The ability to share traumatic stories in a safe environment was the beginning of their healing process. Together, the participants decided that their group would be a place to talk about the deep pain within them. They had all suffered from trauma and most of them had not had a venue in which to share their traumatic experiences with a group. This sense of safety was created by maintaining confidentiality, debriefing after each practice, and ensuring that the women felt free not to participate. One Survival Girl participant stated, "To disclose such things without permission would be like making the person become naked in front of others." However, when their stories were shared voluntarily in a safe environment, they were prepared to incorporate these traumatic events in their theatre pieces. They declared, "It relieves our hearts of the pain that lives there. The words can come out of us in a healing way." Healing moves victims to become survivors, gaining personal agency and control: "Before I could not tell my story, I would just start crying, now I can tell my story, and I feel healed. We gained confidence, to speak our hearts, to act in front of others." They tell new Survival Girls members, "It's not that we forget the past, but we talk about it together, so we can then put it behind us and look toward the future. Then you don't need to keep going back all the time, but you can move forward."

One of the most striking results of these theatre projects was the close and trusting relationship that developed during the two theatre projects. This had a profound impact on all participants—the relationship of the refugees with their American directors, their relationship with young American actors who joined them for a week and performed with them, and the relationship that developed between refugee participants. All the refugee participants expressed the importance of these relationships because of the

deep level of trust and respect that developed among them. They confirmed that their involvement with the theatre project took them out of isolated spaces to discover that they were not alone in their experience: "We never thought that we could become so close to each other and that we could share so deeply. Now we can all safely express our feelings" (Survival Girl). Diverse individuals became close-knit groups who trusted each other with their deepest secrets. The level of their commitment and relationship of trust and their ability to empathize on a deep level meant that the coordinators were more concerned with the refugees as people than on producing outcomes for funders. The Americans reciprocated this closeness. Several times in his blog journal, Hess declared, "it touched me to my core."

FOLLOW UP: 2014

In my research journal in 2011, I wrote of the refugee participants: "They have gained skills, new perspectives, new friends, stronger identities, but what will last? In what circumstance can these theatre projects continue, or what do they morph into?" I came back to Kenya in June 2014 and again in August 2015 to answer these questions. These return visits gave me the opportunity to follow up on the refugee participants, and to find out where they were, who was still involved in theatre, and what impact from their participation in this theatre project they might report three and four years later.

In 2014, I met with individual refugee participants from both Dadaab Theatre Project and from Survival Girls who were in Nairobi, and I organized a focus group with representatives from each group. These participants assisted me in connecting with some of the other refugee members who were now spread around the world. Participants were provided with the list of skills they had reported gaining in 2011, as well as the goals that they articulated for their future. I then asked them to comment on whether they had accomplished these goals, whether they had continued to improve on the skills gained—writing, public speaking, acting—and whether they felt stronger, the same, or weaker in the areas of hope, healing, positive identity, confidence, and relationships, which they had articulated in 2011. Below is a summary of their replies.

What were they doing in 2014? Out of eleven participants of the DTP, two refugees had returned to Somalia, one Somali man had left the camp to work as a driver in South Sudan, two young men from Ethiopia were

studying in Nairobi, and four of the refugees were still in Dadaab. One who returned to Somalia was working with the Ministry of Education and delivered a Ted-X talk in Mogadishu. One Somali refugee became a journalist working with one of the NGOs in the camp and another was finishing high school. Some still hoped to be resettled to another country and some still hoped that someday they could return to their home countries. Of the original eight Survival Girls, three were still in Nairobi, one had returned to DRC, and four were resettled to France, Australia, and the United States. Of the three in Nairobi, one person was sponsored to continue her education and the other two occasionally volunteered with NGOs, which provide a small stipend.

What was their involvement in theatre? Having begun in 2011, DTP ceased to function by the end of 2012. Very serious security incidents in Dadaab Refugee Complex began in 2011, including the kidnapping of international workers and assassination of Somali refugee leaders. Many international NGOs, including Great Globe Foundation, were not able to sustain their programs in this unstable environment. The refugee participants met a few times after the American coordinators left. Their initial meetings early in 2012 were full of enthusiasm and hope to continue. They nominated formal positions for the group, such as chair person, vice-chair, and secretary. Unfortunately, the logistics of trying to meet in an insecure camp environment without institutional support proved too difficult and, after a few meetings, the group lost momentum. In addition to the insecure environment, they reportedly lacked a charismatic leader who would draw in the participants. However, it is significant to note that most of the refugee participants became leaders in other groups and initiatives in the refugee camps. Some of them were hired by implementing partners. One young man became involved in a radio program in the camp and another started a theatre group at his school.

Conversely, it was amazing to discover that, despite all the challenges and no institutional support, the Survival Girls were still active as a theatre group in 2014. The three original Survival Girls who were still in Nairobi continued to lead the group and other members had joined. The size of the group remained between eight and twelve young women. They met monthly and continued to write plays, sometimes on commission and sometimes out of their own life experiences. They performed pieces for UNHCR on female genital mutilation and for another NGO for International Day of

the African Child, and participated with Kenyan street performers on topics of gender-based violence.

How did the participants’ situation in 2014 compare with the hopes they expressed in 2011? I asked them what impact from their involvement in the theatre projects they could report three years later. Participants did gain skills, but they all wanted more training and the chance to use what they had gained. Several refugees affirmed that their participation in this theatre project had a significant impact. They confirmed that they were able to build on the skills they had gained in 2011. Some of them were able to fulfill their dream of continuing their education. One person confirmed, “It was theatre that did this for me.” The fact that several participants moved on to leadership positions in their communities or in organizations is significant evidence of a continuing benefit.

The Survival Girls reported their continued involvement and motivation: “We wanted to help other Congolese women, as well as women from other countries, to talk about their past, to overcome their trauma. We keep meeting because there is such need—refugees keep arriving, coming with their trauma, needing help to survive.” They have been able to move beyond a focus on their own need for healing to the needs that they see in the new refugee arrivals to Nairobi. “Does theatre work?” I asked them. “Yes,” one said, “look at my smile; it works.” Three years later, Survival Girls participants were enabling new refugee arrivals to tell their stories, using theatre as the platform to gather together and perform to a wide variety of audiences.

FOLLOW UP: 2015

I returned to Nairobi again in August 2015 and was fortunate to be there during a return visit of Michael Littig. I arranged another focus group meeting with Littig, four of the DTP refugee actors, and one Survival Girl actor. E-mail contact was established with two other DTP participants and two Survival Girl participants. From these participants, it became clear that that their lives continued to unfold in hopeful ways. For example, one former DTP participant was facilitating a poetry project with Anuak youth which was being set up by Littig. A Sudanese participant was completing a certificate in journalism at a school in Nairobi and another had become a pastor in the camp. The refugee who had been working for the Somali Ministry of Education was now studying in United Kingdom. Two of the Survival Girl members were accepted for resettlement to Canada. Interestingly, one of the

DTP refugees expressed no desire to be resettled to another country. Rather, his goal was to use his skills to help his own community: "What I need is to help my people; wherever I go I will love that idea. In my country I was beaten up for my face, because I was from an Anuak village."

What of their individual successes did participants attribute to their involvement in the theatre projects? They still affirmed that the project had a profound effect on them from which they continued to benefit even four years later. They built on the positive identity and confidence that they had gained during the project, and this assisted them to pursue their personal goals. Littig acknowledged, "Members of the group have thrived in ways we could never have imagined."[34] After reflecting on his experience with the project in 2011, one participant expressed a profound connection between having his story understood and moving toward healing and reconciliation: "I felt I received my own words from them which they gave back to me, and I received them in a way I did not expect—they became a mirror for me. I felt like, if someone was going to kill someone, but they would find their way back to peace."

Regardless of these gains, as refugees, they still lived in precarious situations with limited future options. The DTP directors felt this keenly during the project and, four years later, Littig described his emotional experience after the project ended: "Dadaab was a purgatory; I was haunted. During the project I felt like I failed every day. My involvement in DTP shattered my belief system in commercial theatre. I lost belief in myself. After my involvement in Dadaab and as I continued acting, I kept asking the question, 'For what . . . ? I do this play, for what?'"

The strength of his reaction was surprising, as was the resulting existential question this raised for Littig. The profound reply from one of the refugee participants upon hearing Littig's confession was even more striking: "Michael is holding a torch for us, but the torch is reflected in a mirror, so although we can see him clearly, he himself is blinded." Despite this reaction immediately after the project in 2011, Littig continued to communicate with the refugee participants and returned to Nairobi in 2015 to initiate a poetry project with Anuak refugees, coordinated by one of the DTP participants.

In 2011, Littig observed in the midst of the project, "if this is an isolated project it becomes another broken dream or shattered experience for the refugees." However, when I followed up in 2015 with the question of

what they felt needed to be sustained out of the project, he replied: "What needs to be sustained is the development of these individuals. They want to continue creating, continue being known, and continue personal development." He went on, "We don't need '*DTP: The Sequel*.' If the refugee artists can become teachers themselves, they can pass on skills so that others can also use theatre as peacebuilding. They become agents of their own change. The only way to move forward is to help someone else; DTP participants have been helping others in their communities."

ANALYSIS

My research question was to determine how theatre as one form of creative expression can best produce positive outcomes for refugee participants, weighing the risk of harm against the prevalence of benefits. Certainly, in such a project challenges abound due to the complex nature of a refugee context; the risk of harm must be a primary consideration. The project facilitators had not had previous experience working in a refugee context. This was most apparent in the decision to allow a Somali Muslim woman to perform a love scene with a Christian man of another ethnicity, and in the lack of preparedness after the Survival Girls performed a play to another group of traumatized refugee women. Both situations were resolved rapidly, but, with more experience, they could have been avoided.

Another challenge was managing diverse cultural expressions among refugees and between refugees and the American facilitators. Although acting exercises were based on Western approaches, the refugee actors used their own cultural traditions in their storytelling, thus incorporating Somali and Anuak poetry and Congolese dances. Sustainability of the projects also arose as a concern of the refugees. DTP was not able to continue due to the sudden devolution in the security situation. Amazingly, the Survival Girls did continue to meet and perform, even with no institutional support.

In light of the above critique and based on the analysis of all the data, the following paragraphs identify conditions that affect the ability of theatre to contribute to resilience in refugee participants, and negative outcomes to avoid.

Participant Ownership versus NGO or Donor Control

Even if the project is externally initiated, as was the case for the two refugee theatre projects in this study, participants need to be actively involved at

the outset in articulating their personal goals for the project. In this way, all participants are genuinely invested in the initiative, as was evidenced by the depth of their engagement and level of sharing. The ownership is obvious in hearing the voice of the individual, refugees using their own language, and telling their story without a formula being imposed. This is in contradiction to those who join a project for the stipend or T-shirts and sodas that may be provided. Their superficial participation produces the catch phrases they assume donors want to hear but lacks ownership or personal transformation. As Littig avows, "NGO-speak is false promises, banalities, lack of care or respect for words or stories or the humans in front of you. Authenticity and truthfulness is a huge aspect in the face of all the NGO-speak; . . . something begins to happen when the person is able to tell their story, to be heard and understood, to begin healing."

When projects are initiated externally, participants often have the hope and expectation of ongoing support and feel that the responsibility to maintain the initiative will continue to be external. Littig acknowledged, "We knew that we would not live in Dadaab forever, so how do we run this project with integrity, without becoming just another broken promise?"[35] The challenge for project directors is to balance the responsibility to remain present to a group that has entered into a vulnerable space of deep sharing with caution to avoid developing dependency. This requires a well-considered exit strategy that takes these factors into consideration. Such a strategy could include discussion of what initiatives should or could continue and what resources can support these initiatives.

An Environment of Trust and Confidentiality versus Retraumatization

Violence is often perpetrated by state agents who are meant to protect victims and, as a result, the victims' trust has been betrayed. This is one factor contributing to trauma and, consequently, trust needs to be slowly regained in order for people to be able to tell their stories. This happens in a safe environment, which honours confidentiality and the right of participants to choose when they are not ready to take part in activities. Their timely involvement creates the first step to healing. Trauma survivors report that this opens up the possibility to talk about painful past events that has previously been hidden and considered shameful. This applies to the physical and emotional safety of the environment. "A current trauma victim," Holden said, "can't deal with past trauma."[36] Individuals and communities cannot

heal when they continue to feel unsafe.

NGO staff who have limited experience working with trauma survivors can retraumatize people, either from a lack of awareness or because they care more about meeting donor project requirements than the well-being of participants. This can happen, for example, if they do not provide the safe space for participants to share or withdraw, and if they do not have a relationship of earned trust with participants. David Diamond asks of community theatre, Whose responsibility is it to ensure safety? Can theatre become exploitive of the very people it should serve?[37] One notable aspect of this research was the depth of the relationships formed through this project. The strong and, so far, lasting relationships were developed through mutual respect, sharing, and evidence of the investment and trust of all participants.

Having One's Story Heard versus Isolation

Much of the therapeutic value of storytelling through theatre is in providing a witness in the form of an audience. In the process of creating performances from personal traumatic events, the refugees first articulated to themselves in their journals what they needed to say, then they told a small group of trusted people, and then they told an audience through their performance. Most of the refugee respondents reported a feeling of isolation prior to their involvement in the theatre project. Either they had not shared their traumatic experience with family members or it was simply not a topic for discussion. One participant stated, "before this project I had nowhere to express my deep feelings; no one knew what I had been through. Where else could I go and share? Now my heart is a bit liberated."

Those who have been victims of violence need to have what happened to them acknowledged; they need a witness, an audience to hear their story. This acknowledgement assists in turning victims into survivors. A DTP participant shared, "No one came to say to us they are sorry for what has happened in our country. But performing gave us transformation and healing that my story and pain has been recognized." The young American actors were first a witness and audience for the refugees' stories; then they took these stories and performed them back their first night together in Kenya. The response of the refugees to being heard and understood was immediate and profound and formed the basis for the development of their personal and artistic relationships. This initiative was an example of previous strangers entering into the lives of others through stories and then being able

to better understand their own story and identity.

Resilience

How did theatre contribute to building resilience in refugee communities? Holden observed of the Survival Girls, "I am in wonderment at their resilience, their life and spark. They should need more security than they have, but look at them—they are bright and sharp and sparkling—how do they cope? It flies in the face of trauma theory."[38] The departure point was performing their stories. As McKnight posits, "The stories of a [resilient] community are a narrative . . . [that] gives body to the collective, . . . the beginning of myths that memorialize and remind us of the epic nature of our journey together."[39] Participants tapped into their source of creative expression in a safe environment; as they communicated their stories and had a sense of being heard and understood, it led to mutual understanding and confidence. Their resilience developed because of the energy that they invested and their ability to take advantage of this opportunity. They reported increased hope, a positive perspective on their futures, and strengthened sense of identity. This became evident in concrete ways:

- The Survival Girls in Nairobi continued to meet and to perform, regardless of financial compensation.
- The original members are now helping other vulnerable refugee women to tell their stories and begin their healing process.
- One DTP member has started a theatre group at the school he attends and he is coordinating a poetry project for Anuak refugees.
- Several members gained various leadership positions—in other NGOs in the camps and, in one case, upon return to the country of origin.

Resilience is not simply coping, it is transformation; "through the fires of change" something new emerges, like a phoenix rising from the ashes.[40] All participants—refugees and Americans—in the two theatre projects reported this as a transforming personal experience.

CONCLUSION

What did the participants gain in the act of play-building? It became the vehicle not just for building skills, but for building identity, confidence, and relationships that led to hope, healing, and increased resilience. Two

surprising results emerged from this study: one is that the Survival Girls continue to function with no external sponsorship. The second is the depth of the relationships that formed between all participants. Despite the directors' lack of peacebuilding experience and the refugees' initial uncertainty, the authenticity of all participants paved the way for the successful outcomes described here.

Theatre may not transform conflict but it can transform participants. As Leonard Bernstein observed, "Art never stopped a war and never got anybody a job. That was never its function. Art cannot change events. But it can change people . . . because people are changed by art—enriched, ennobled, encouraged—they then act in a way that may affect the course of events . . . by the way they vote, they behave, the way they think."[41] Based on the response from refugee participants—in 2011 and three years later in 2014—and based on the evidence of positive changes in their lives and continued involvement in theatre projects, one could call the impact of this project transformative.

What is the significance of the collapsible space into which participants entered? The space collapsed between people from very different worlds, between telling their stories and being understood, and between their trauma and their healing. At the end of the project, Hess asked of their involvement, "Did it help in a tangible way? A tiny stone thrown into a pond will cause ripples far beyond the source of impact. I feel like we threw a boulder."[42] Individual trauma survivors can rarely control the circumstances at the macro-level of durable solutions, but they can decide on their personal response. Resilience was the durable solution gained by these refugee participants who had the tenacity and commitment to take advantage of the experience, and to use it to transform their futures.

ENDNOTES

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3. Roberta R Green, ed., *Resiliency: An Integrated Approach to Practice, Policy, and Research* (Washington, DC: NASW, 2005), 5.
4. The Institute for Economics & Peace, Measuring Peace in the Media

2011, 2, http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Measuring-Peace-in-the-Media-2011-Report_0.pdf.

5. See, for example, Cynthia Cohen, Roberto Gutierrez Varea, and Polly O. Walker, eds., *Acting Together I: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict: Volume I: Resistance and Reconciliation in Regions of Violence* (Oakland, CA: New Village, 2011); Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston, *The Applied Theatre Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008); Monica Prendergast and Juliana Saxton, *Applied Theatre: International Case Studies and Challenges for Practice* (Intellect, 2009).

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7. Kenya Comprehensive Refugee Program (UNHCR, 2014), 6.

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9. Kenya Comprehensive Refugee Program, 6.

10. Alison Parker, *Hidden in Plain View: Refugees Living without Protection in Nairobi and Kampala*, (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2002), 15.

11. Parker, *Hidden in Plain View*, 10.

12. Always on the Run: The Vicious Cycle of Displacement in Eastern Congo, Human Rights Watch, September 2010, 15, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/drc0910webwcover.pdf/.

13. UNHCR, UNHCR Statistical Summary (Geneva: UNHCR, 2012), 4.

14. UNHCR Global Report on Durable Solutions, 6.

15. UNHCR Global Report on Durable Solutions, 11.

16. Juliana Bloodgood and Michael Littig, Dadaab Theater Project Report, Great Globe Foundation, June 2011, 16.
17. Julianna Bloodgood and Michael Littig, interview with author, 15 June 2011.
18. Bloodgood and Littig, interview, 15 June 2011.
19. Participants' hesitancy to engage is also reported in Prentki and Preston's The Applied Theatre Reader, 288.
20. Michael Littig, interview with author, 21 June 2011. Kuftinec, in *Theatre, Facilitation, and Nation Formation*, relates a very similar incident occurring with Bosnian refugee actors in Mostar. She refers to such moments as "deep witnessing, internalized thoughtfulness" (67).
21. Dave Eggers, *What Is the What* (New York: Vintage, 2007), 535. These are the words of Sudanese refugee Valentino Achak Deng, on whom Eggers based this novel.
22. Bloodgood and Littig, interview, 21 June 2011.
23. I was struck by the parallels between this scenario from their experience and the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet, underscoring commonalities in experiences of loss of home and complexities of identity.
24. DTP focus group, 18 December 2011.
25. Ming Holden has described her experience in an E-book, T*he Survival Girls.*
26. Ming Holden, interview with author, 23 June 2011.
27. Recent research on the physical effect of listening to music may shed light on such suggestions regarding the physical connection to healing emotional trauma. The pleasure of listening to familiar music releases the neurotransmitter dopamine, triggering the limbic system, the most primitive part of the brain. This in turn results in a release of pure emotion. Valerie N. Salimpoor et al, "Anatomically Distinct Dopamine Release during Anticipation and Experience of Peak Emotion to Music, *Nature Neuroscience* 14, no. 2 (2011): 260, doi:10.1038/nn.2726.
28. In Prendergast and Saxton, *Applied Theatre*, 18.
29. Littig, interview, 21 June 2011.

30. John Paul Lederach and Angela Jill Lederach, *When Blood and Bones Cry Out: Journeys Through the Soundscape of Healing and Reconciliation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 58.
31. Holden, interview, 23 February 2013.
32. Littig, interview, 21 June 2011.
33. Littig, interview, 23 August 2015.
34. Littig, interview with author, 23 August 2015.
35. Littig, interview, 21 June 2011.
36. Holden, interview, 23 June 2011.
37. David Diamond, email exchange with the author, 9 February 2015.
38. Holden, interview, 23 June 2011.
39. John McKnight and Peter Block, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehlers, 2010), 95.
40. Steve Doughty, “Gifts from the Holy Resilient,” *Weavings* 28, no. 2 (2013): 5.
42. John Gruen, “Leonard Bernstein,” *Los Angeles Times*, 31 December 1972.
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