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Supplement to

Vidya: Theatre as Development

***Seagull Theatre Quarterly* issue 39, September 2007**

(Guest Edited by Franc Chamberlain, UCC, Cork, Ireland)

Editor's note: There were a number of unexpected delays in the production of STQ 39, the material for which I submitted in June 2006. I didn't see any proofs of the issue and, for some reason, the interview with Mojisola Adebayo was excluded from the final print version which was published in September 2007. This interview complements the interview with John Martin in the same issue, and is also referred to by other contributors.

Text © Mojisola Adebayo and Franc Chamberlain, March 2008.

Interview with Mojisola Adebayo ¹

Franc Chamberlain

In this interview Mojisola Adebayo gives a personal account of her involvement with Pan Centre's Vidya Comes to Life and reflects on issues of postcolonialism and questions of power and empowerment whilst discussing in some detail the processes of training the company and the making of the shows.

Franc Chamberlain: How did you become involved with the Vidya Comes to Life project?

Mojisola Adebayo: John Martin, whom you know very well, asked me to get involved, I think on the basis of the Arts against Race Violence work that I'd done in Camden Borough [London], and because of my Forum skills; I had known about Darpana and met Mallika [Sarabhai], but that was it really... And there wasn't a great big lead in, it was: "Do you want to come to India, do this project, this is what it's about, come and share some Forum skills, stay open, learn a bit of Gujarati?"

And you said?

Yeah. But I did have hesitations about it in terms of suddenly finding myself in the position of going: "Oh, what about colonialism? Am I buying into all that again? Why is the National Lottery asking us to go?". I did have queries about it. I knew there were Forum practitioners already in India, I didn't know anyone in Gujarat but I did wonder whether I should be going; whether there were already practitioners out there that could be doing that work, and the ethics of that...

So what tipped the balance?

What tipped the balance was that, from my understanding, part of the prerequisite of the National Lottery's funding of the project, was to have British facilitators involved, or British input, and so I thought if it's going to happen anyway and if I'm already thinking about that and if there already going to be British facilitators then perhaps I should go with that in mind. To go with an awareness of that potential difficulty in mind, to think about it, stay open and then I would learn something, as a black person, being in that kind of position. One of the first questions I asked of the group was: "How do you feel about *me* being here? There are really amazing practitioners here in India", and they said: "Who?", and I said: "In Bengal. Do you know Jana Sanskriti?". And they said: "Yeah, but they're Bengali, they speak Bengali...they've got a different culture, they look different, they sound different, their culture's different, and your culture's different. To us they're foreigners. You're a foreigner, they're foreigners, it doesn't matter". Which is the translation I got through Manisha [Mehta], and I thought to myself: "Don't be so ignorant about India, it's huge, it's a vast place".

¹ Original interview took place in London 2004 and has subsequently been edited and modified by Franc Chamberlain in consultation with Mojisola Adebayo.

How long did you go out there for the first time?

The first time I went out there was for two months I think...

Were you on your own, or you with John?

I think John had done two weeks training with the group, and then we did two weeks together. And then I did two weeks on my own as lead facilitator, but with Manisha's help. So six weeks and then I stayed for another couple of weeks. So there wasn't a lead in, but those initial two weeks with John taking the lead enabled me find my feet a little bit.

So what was he doing?

He was doing really intense physical work, skills training in performance, drawing on all kinds of different cultural influences.

Was he doing his intercultural performance training?

He was doing his intercultural performance training with a bit of Jacques Lecoq, and a bit of this and a bit of that and it was very, very intense, very sweaty, very hard work.

So how were the group by the time you met them? After these two weeks of intense training with John?

They seemed to be ecstatically happy: a very, very happy group of people. They were very open, hard working, and questioning in terms of their physical approach to the work. Not so much critically questioning but: "How do we do this better?" "How do I breathe like this?", those kinds of questions. And they were getting to know each other and bantering with each other and that whole group dynamic thing of: "Who's the leader here?" was all starting to take shape, and: "Which roles are we playing?" And the roles were falling into place fairly easily: the spokesperson, the joker character, the clowns...

So, John's physical training gave them a way of generating performance energy and developing physical fitness and flexibility. You've already said that the group was, by this point was starting to bond through the process of the work and the different roles that are coming in. At what point the Forum work come in and how does it come in?

Even in the first two weeks, from memory, I think I started to bring in a few games to get the group orientated to the way that I might work and to get me familiar with them. So really through play to begin with and introducing the idea of desire and drama, a lot of it being about the passionate conflict of desire. So getting them to find what they want in a game: "I want to touch you / you don't want to touch me", or "I want that boy / you don't want that" whatever it is, just getting them to explore and have fun with desire. From there, when I started to work with them on my own, asking them to think about,

what happens when your desires aren't met, when somebody's stopping your desires being fulfilled. Not in an abstract way, we were very clear that it shouldn't be too philosophical or abstract: it had to be quite concrete. So very, clear kinds of games looking at structures of power, physically, on stage and that kind of thing.

So like, the great game of power?

Yeah, that kind of material.

What about the earlier desire ones, are they kind of our exercises are they exercises you took from somewhere else, or they're your own exercises?

Lots of exercises drawn from Boal's books and, and exercises that I've made up or picked up along the way.

Give us an example?

Well, like blob tag! Just a game about, about trying to get everybody in a group and nobody wants to be in the group and the person chasing has to try and get everybody into the group, it's just a really simple tag game. Also things like, 'group yes' which I think is from Keith Johnstone ...what does the group want, and we have to agree all at the same time about what we want... anybody in the group can suggest something and if anybody doesn't want to do it then, then they don't have to, so the aim is to try to find what the group wants. And different rhythm games around desire and stuff like that. It's hard to describe, but loads of games, loads of exercises, loads of games about power and all that...and then into stories, storytelling.

In the process of teaching them, is there a lot of non-verbal communication going on?

Yeah, especially with the Vidya group. I have fragments of Gujarati but tried not to overload on language and not to over rely on interpretation. So, I would just physically 'do again'. If they were in pairs then I would get with a pair myself and just wave two fingers in the air or whatever. If it's put one hand behind your back I'll just put one hand behind my back. I get them to replicate, just using sign language stuff, and just start playing. There was something very fulfilling for them to discover what the game was just by playing, by not thinking about it too much, by not questioning it too much, just: "You discover what the game's supposed to feel like". Which is something I didn't get as much working in English, working with spoken language, because even in setting up the game and somehow describing what the game is going to feel like, there was a huge desire to play, to laugh, to be silly. Lots of silliness going on there, irrespective of age, a kind of real revelry in it all. Delight in it all.

So what happened by the end of those two weeks with John?

For the first two weeks with John I introduced a little bit of my approach which is mainly play, and then the beginning of the next two weeks was more thinking about power, and power relationships and what power feels like, and who's got it, when and how they use

it, so games around leadership, games like Colombian Hypnosis, and the Game of Power. And also drawing on the kind of work around character that John was getting into in terms of body shapes, and spatial relationships, lots around spatial relationships, and reading images, reading and describing. That was a really big thing actually where the verbal stuff did come in, for them anyway, to get practice describing what they see and not taking for granted what's already there. In terms of play and throwing themselves into work physically, there wasn't any holding back and they found that really accessible. But in terms of describing images, lots of people found it really, really difficult, and I think that's partly where the work's coming from. From Marx's point of view we allow ourselves to be washed over and to take our surroundings for granted and I was surprised at how difficult it was for lots of people to say: "There is a table in the *middle* of the room" as opposed to: "There's a table..." just objectively describing a situation, environment, and the relationship between bodies, that kind of thing. And then to begin analysing images was really challenging for people. There was one moment when we did the Image of Oppression, which is a really extended exercise that culminates in every member of the group having sculpted an image of whatever oppresses them. It was shortly after the earthquake, and lots of the images were of people in what, from my eye, might have been described as earthquake situations, you never really know, but lots of people lying down, lots of people looking up at the heavens, lots of fearful bodies. And slowly, as these kind of images are starting to repeat themselves, I was just digging a little deeper in terms of what they saw, and why. What the oppression was in those images because defining oppression is tricky, across languages anyway it's a tricky thing, but, where was the oppression? This is a sad thing, a terrible thing has happened, but where is the oppression? Where is the power? We've done all the work around power before. And so the people were starting to describe the pictures and I'm saying: "Where are we?" and they're talking about the kind of environment they're in, and I said: "Why are the houses falling down?", "Because of the earthquake", "Did all the houses fall down in Ahmedabad?", "No not all the houses fell down", "Which houses fell down?", "The houses that weren't built very well", "Who built the houses?" etc. But the initial answers to the questions were: "Because of God", "Because of the earthquake", "Because that's what God wanted". But I kept picking at this: "OK so God wanted the houses to fall down, but why did they fall down?" "Why did God want some houses to fall down but not other houses to fall down?" and it was a really tricky moment. That was one moment when John and I were clocking each other to go: "How much do I push these questions? How much are these questions in themselves questioning peoples' cultural beliefs and are they oppressive questions? Are they patronising questions? Are they judgmental?" Difficult. But at the end of the exercise it was just left hanging in the air. So: "Maybe God wanted the houses to fall down, but some houses fell down and some houses didn't, and the houses that fell down were built badly. Why were they built badly? Were they allowed to be built badly? Or are there rules that said they shouldn't be built badly? Who made those rules? Do you have any contact with the people who make those rules?" and all that stuff. But to get to that kind of level of questioning and analysis took a long time.

So we've got a process of conscientization, a making conscious of the processes that are operating that they haven't really thought about. But as they start to think about them, as they enter into the dialogue, they know the next answer. So they're not being led to a

necessary end. You're not starting from position Z it's these peoples fault, you're just asking the question in response to each answer, and that allows them to think more broadly and deeply about the issue. So maybe they hadn't thought about why God chooses these particular houses to fall down rather than those, maybe that's always a mystery, but then as soon as they're starting to think about it that changes. I guess it's patronising, or not, depending upon the attitude of the questioner.

And also the attitude of the interpreter; Manisha is very skilful. But I always think with the work there must always be genuine questions from everybody, and there's something very useful about ignorance sometimes, perhaps not ignorance but lack of knowledge, in that you ask genuine questions and people have to think about the answers. And I find that a lot, not just in India, in anywhere I work. But sometimes it's really, really useful, when people take on board your tourism, your strangeness, your foreignness, and help you, to understand what's going on.

So, you've got a group that's developing performance skills, that's playing with power, that's engaging in a kind of awareness raising process that was new to them: reflecting on things. What were the themes of oppression that came out for them? Were there key ones?

The earthquake theme obviously, but that wasn't something we developed actually. The other work that came out through improvisations was stuff around domestic violence and child labour, people being forced into child labour, and also abuse at work. Human rights stuff really. Food. The unequal distribution of food amongst children in families, i.e., boys getting more food than girls, and alcohol abuse and the effects of that.

So you've got these themes...what happens next?

What happens next is the lengthy process of story sharing and listening, mostly personal stories, and finding different ways into people opening up and sharing stories, but also through the invention of stories and drawing on myths and fairy tales and inventing their own fairy tales and reinventing established ones that had links with these themes. But lots of exercises around finding stories really. That whole storytelling thing was part of the training because it was going to aid them in terms of devising and approaches to structuring stories. So there were loads of sitting around in a circle exercises, of one word at a time, a sentence at a time, fortunately/unfortunately and lots of different approaches to piecing stories together, and trying to understand what makes us want to listen to a story, what makes us want to get to the end, and all that. And so a lot of the material was coming out of those storytelling exercises as well. From Manisha's point of view, there are lots and lots of note taking, as we're constantly asking what's exciting us here, what if somebody tells a story and everyone goes huhhhhhhhuhh? What's that giggle about? What's that nod about? What's that silence about? What's that head shaking about? Just watching the group really. Especially when I don't have language, I'm just trying to listen to the music in the room. So after lots of story sharing, identifying different stories that people had resonances with and then we did a lot of work around structure, around play structure, because Forum is a fairly classical structure:

protagonist, problems, ups and downs....so thinking about how to structure a very basic kind of Forum style play, coming from my tradition anyway.

So where are we now, how many weeks in are we now?

We are, onto structuring, I'm alone with them, so we're around week five and the next week is really building the plays, without me as a director, but just being there to help shape according to what's needed in terms of Forum, but it was really important that I wasn't needed because they were the directors, they needed to make this stuff themselves, and Manisha had to take the lead there, and for them to find out what was going to work within their own communities, communities that I know very little about. So, it's really skills based, cooking up the material, thinking about how to structure it and then getting them to fill the material into the structure and then I did a bit of tweaking work. So by week six, they've got the pieces, they had four pieces I think, four Forum pieces, or two Forum pieces and two straight pieces, I can't remember.

And that's in six weeks.

Yeah.

How many hours a day are they working?

Seven.

Seven hours a day.

Yeah.

Every day?

Six days a week.

Six days a week, seven hours a day for six weeks with people who have no experience of performance....

A couple of people had experience of, of singing and a little bit of storytelling maybe, but very little. People that didn't have televisions, people that didn't have mirrors, so all that stuff around mirroring: "Yeah, yeah it's universal", Rubbish! Only if you've got a mirror or a river to look in, you know. It was incredibly fast. I mean an incredible process, incredible, that they had at the end of six weeks -- and I must check the weeks, I'm doing this from memory -- that they had the pieces that were strong enough to perform. I mean there was a marked difference when I went back in terms of the quality of those pieces but they were all right.

They were ready to go in front of an audience from scratch after six weeks. Working with their own material based on their own experiences. So in those first pieces were they working off these themes of domestic violence, child labour, abuse at work, food and alcohol, or had they shifted by then?

There was a very strong piece around child labour and abuse at work, and there was another one around violence against women.

I know that domestic violence was something that really got to Manisha. When we went through one of the slums where women were burned regularly.

Yeah, and that featured in one of the plays. It was a 'kitchen fire'. I think that might have been the second year, but, yes, it all stayed in there. It was interesting because when I went there was a massive list of issues to deal with, and I always find that a bit tricky because I always try to go from the stories and what comes out randomly, so although that the issues were in the back of my mind I was trying to forget them, because if they're real issues they'll be in the stories.

So when you went to Gujerat, I've got this sense of you already having your own practice: classes, workshops, training programmes that you do, and a whole rag bag of exercises that you draw from; that you have a scheme or a pattern that you go through. How much of your work did you have to change for the specific situation?

A lot. I know it's always different but I had no plan for how to teach a game without language and so it was kind of hit and miss. How to play in intense heat, how to play games, run aroundy type games, which are great warm ups, the concept of warming up in England is a very different idea, sometimes it's just really about building your body temperature.

What I found very challenging was how to deal with, and to stay aware of, people's emotional journey, without verbal language, and without previous experience. If I'm working in Europe, people readily come forth and say: "I found that really painful, I found that really difficult, I found that I felt very angry at that moment". But the Vidya group had probably been rarely invited to share their emotions in a group setting, I think that's partly cultural but also partly in terms of class; they're not asked what they think about the world very much. When we did: "How did you feel about those", there was just a nodding of heads and silence and kind of 'hmmm', and not a sense of really feeling that. So it was about finding other ways to pick up on how people were feeling about stuff. When the material got deeper, when we were doing scenes around rape and domestic violence and child abuse and kitchen fires... there would be women - and men, but lots of women - who had been in really horrendous situations, the situations of the plays really so it was important to find other ways of sensing group, to find out how they were doing really. I can't say how, just kind of conversations over tea and coffee, and, and noticing silence and atmospheres, reading the different kinds of head movements, what those said, and asking open questions.

Would be helpful to develop, in those circumstances, exercises that would enable people to find a language for their experience, which is THEIR language of experience? Something that doesn't have to be translated into a set of categories about emotions but simply: "What happens there?" and I might say: "It feels like there's a huge weight...." Without needing to translate, but something that will allow them to develop from there.

I'm thinking again about something that's taken for granted maybe, as you say it's very difficult to describe: "There's a table in the centre of the room", it might be very difficult to describe the actual bodily experience that's occurring at the moment when talking about rape, it's not as simple as saying: "I feel sad", so something that would help develop that would be useful.

Yes definitely. Definitely. And the group found their way of doing that. How they liked doing it was to sit in a circle at the end of the day, and for me not to be saying too much, and to have time and to be silent, and eventually somebody would say something. But much more time needed to be given. They did the usual round robin: "How's everybody feeling?", "How did that exercise feel...?" but also just allowing time for what needed to emerge.

Were there any changes you needed to make on a more general structural level in the sense of the order in which you did things? You've got a physical training that leads into games, that then leads into storytelling, that then leads into performance making, which seems to be a pretty traditional Western trajectory. Were there any adjustments you needed to make to that trajectory? I know that this might not be a meaningful question...

It's an interesting question but I don't think so actually. I don't think so. I think I knew, aside from being constantly coming back to new stories and songs, and being open to new, that once those storytelling channels had been opened that you just had to keep them open because people were constantly coming in going; "I heard a new story today", "I have another story today", even in rehearsal process: "Somebody told me something yesterday, can I share it with the group?", or "I have a song that I learned last night, can I share it with the group?". So it was important to be open to the stories and the songs and the ideas that keep coming in, even right up to: "We're going to perform today", "Yes but I have a story", and it's: "OK, go on...".

So you wouldn't normally have that openness?

I probably wouldn't... I've never had that in that kind of very rich kind of way. Usually I'm working with a group and they're just obsessed with getting the show on, which they were here as well but the process had opened so much to them that the idea of: "We're not sharing stories now we're rehearsing" didn't mean much; it was all part of the same process for them.

Because they hadn't got, I suppose it is in my question isn't it, this idea of structure, that model that's perhaps taken for granted by us. So this time it would be you who's taking it for granted.

Absolutely, and even though I might work with groups who have never made theatre before, like Cardboard Citizens, or whoever, they've probably got some other kind of models like school drama, or other kinds of processes that they've been involved in, even therapeutic processes that they might have been involved in, that have a very similar kind of shape.

And experience of film and television at least.

Yeah. So it was very enriching for me as a theatre maker because it was just open so as soon as the doors were open: “Oh, so I can tell stories now?” “OK, I’ll just keep telling stories”, “Oh, so this is how we make a song together, let’s make...”

“...lots of songs...”

“I’ve got four more songs today.” “Oh I was up last night I’ve made a few songs can we sing them?”...That’s wonderful, but it’s never ending... And also the sense of longevity that I’ve never had in that way before, that they were doing a job and that it was all material, that this could be our next show after this show... they were constantly generating material. Which was amazing.

So it’s almost, it’s almost like this fantasy of creativity that we have....that somehow if we could just open the door, then people’s creative ideas would just flood out....

Yeah.

And then I get frustrated because my students, they just do it for this lesson and they go away and they shut down. Whereas what you’re describing here is almost my ideal situation, just where people keep going, caught up in the process

Yeah. It’s because they’ve discovered where the pleasure is... they’ve discovered that it feels really lovely, to have a story and be heard. To play a game... So the overriding feeling I always got was that they were discovering where the pleasure was and they weren’t letting go of it; they just kept going with it. It is interesting you asking me questions about adapting games and changing exercises and developing new exercises and although I’m sure new work did emerge, -- and as I’m talking and thinking I can see images in my head where I think: “Oh yes that was a new thing that came out of working with Vidya” -- it’s incredible how flexible a lot of the work was. But what was enriching for me was also that they would bring their childhood games and play them and they would teach me their games and their songs, lots of that. They would teach me their stories that they had heard as children, all that, and they would reinvent stories and teach each other those things. Creativity comes fast when the pleasure’s there. One of the most moving exercises I did with them --and I don’t know whether I would do it again, in retrospect but I learnt from it -- was the ‘Hours of the Day’, just a meditation on their day. There was what they would do pre-Vidya, and there was a lot of sitting down, making basic food too, but lots and lots of sitting down, lying down, lots of inactive bodies, lots of sad faces, and I kept saying different times, different days of the week and there was lots of depression, depressed bodies. And then, going off into sort of fantasy, I remember suggesting a ‘wonderful day’, the ‘best day ever’. Lots of people just stopped, and just looked at me. And so I did a different day and, kind of closing the exercise and talking a bit about it, giving a bit of space to respond, I said: “What happened on the best day?” and, there were smiles and silence and people looking around at each other and I was trying to understand what was going on. Bhikkiben, the spokeswoman, spoke up and said: “This is the best day” and it was like: “That’s why we did nothing, because it’s here,

it's Vidya, it's the best day of my life, it's today". ...but it was also very sad because there's that knowledge that they go home and the slums are still full, their families are not in Vidya, there's only a small group of them, so it was happy but it was also really sad, and probably a quite painful exercise for them. I think they felt very exposed in that moment, because they could see from me I suppose that there was an expectation that something would change.

Did you have that expectation?

I suppose I did, yeah, that maybe Saturday would be different from Friday.

But they're not?

But Saturday wasn't much different from Friday, maybe for a couple of the Muslims but nothing particular. It was painful for them to reflect in that way, en-team, and I don't think I had ever really realised that. It's the kind of exercise I wouldn't do in a prison; it can be very depressing. What do you do? Three o'clock on a Monday is the same as three o'clock on a Thursday, and it was very similar for slum dwellers.

So there we are. You've done six weeks and you're leaving.

But before I left we did open performances in Darpana, to try out the shows before they had a bit of a break and worked with some other people to polish the shows, after we left. Manisha directed. Anyway, the basic structures of the plays were there and there were lots of people at the open rehearsal. And it was such an interesting experience, because after this incredibly fruitful experience there were lots of quite high brow people, perhaps intellectual artists coming along and being *really* being critical of the work and being very detached, and thinking themselves above intervention, and that was quite damaging actually I think. Interesting, but very, very undermining. One moment I remember, there was the protagonist in the play, I think she also wrote it, and she couldn't speak but she wrote poetry and she was the girl who was forced into labour and eventually sexually abused by her boss. She became pregnant and she couldn't express herself, but she used to write, and from memory I think one of the interventions was around encouraging her to write more and to write more poetry and to express what was going on for herself and to use her writing. Someone in the audience said: "This is ridiculous intervention, ridiculous idea, people in the slums don't write, people in the slums don't make poetry. Maybe if she'd got to university, or if she's from another background, but people in the slums don't make poetry." And the group was really hurt by this guy, you could see from their faces. I can't remember if it was me or Manisha or someone piped up and said: "The people in this room are from the slums and they've been making poetry for six weeks, don't tell us that people in the slums don't make poetry, songs are poetry, stories can be poetry, poems are poetry", that kind of thing. There was quite a lot of that kind of resistance, and criticism, and so that's very interesting, who comes to that dress rehearsal and what that's for, and who it's for. It seemed to be trying to give some credibility to the project by inviting all these people in.

Whose idea was it?

It was probably mine, or Manisha's.

It's just the way you spoke about it...almost as if it had been something imposed upon you...

Yeah, again, one of my stock processes probably, an assumption that it would be a good thing before going off to try some ideas. I can't remember exactly, but I certainly would have been in favour of it, me or Manisha or John probably the three of us. But it was awful.

You wouldn't do that again?

No.

I understand that, initially, there was a plan to invite a writer into the project to help shape the plays. Was there, in the Vidya team, a lack of confidence in the ability of the group to produce their own text?

Yes, to shape them, to shape their stories. In terms of my own practice I suppose, I was never interested in the writer; I've never worked with a writer at the first stage of a group. So, I thought that unless it was really a prerequisite of the project I wouldn't have worked with one. Don't get me wrong, I consider myself a writer, but to bring in an outside writer that had not been in the process with the group, I just wouldn't be interested in that, but it was, so it was a really interesting learning.

I have faith in people to write, or if they can't write, I'll write things down and they can give it back for, for approval, I've never worked with an outside writer. Can't understand why I would.

No. (laughter)

If it's about working with these people's words, then why would I want to get somebody else? So it was always curious to me as to how a writer was there. I think it becomes an interesting question, if we're doing something to say: "These are possibilities, let's discuss the place of the writer. Who are the writers? Who writes?" That would be an interesting question to hear answered. So when we have these events around India [Autumn 2004] that could be a really interesting discussion. Whose language is spoken, never mind the story, but whose language is spoken, what's the place of the writer, who is the writer?

So, you've done six weeks, seen the thing, now you're off.

Yeah.

Who's left?

Manisha, and the group.

Did Manisha get any kind of special training?

Not really...and in terms of models of practice I think it's a good question. Because, it was kind of 'on the job', but I think Manisha is a miracle and it might not have gone so well if she hadn't been. A lot of the success of the project I think was about personality and that's everybody as it always is anyway, but there's something in terms of modelling good practice that it's really important for me to think about. What did I do? Which exercises did I do? There are models in there that work and are there things in there that don't work and I got away with them because we all got on so well. And I think the way that Manisha was supported, trained, encouraged, the fact that it's gone so well is a lot about Manisha's personality and her, her stamina, her emotional, physical stamina, to keep it going. And to be frank about it I think it's really problematic, I think that she was under incredible strain, incredible pressure and not really being trained. She just happened to be great, and also, she was an interpreter and interpreting is a whole profession in itself, she's a facilitator, and we just hoped that she'd be a good director, as well. And she wasn't the only person supposed to be involved with directing, and that was another breakdown in the project, which is about the management of the project really. But she did just happen to end up as the artistic director of Vidya. I don't know what her title is but that's what she is. She's directing the shows, she works with the team, she's very involved, but she's having the outside eye in the shows. And actually that is a really tall order.

After six weeks?

Yeah. She knows what theatre is but she'd never directed a show before in her life.

So is she getting any supervision at all? Or are they just out on their own?

Manisha will talk a lot about this, well hopefully she'll talk about it but she might not as well. She's supposed to be being supervised but it's not really happening...She didn't seem to be being supported, looked after, supervised, nothing really, she was just really, really isolated. There was also the problem with the change over of the administrator and the long gap without one. Getting another administrator in was really problematic, all kinds of breakdowns. I don't know how things run in the Indian arts world but Manisha's experience if she'd been in London? I don't think people would have been able to get away with neglecting her like that, and putting so much work on her, and having such high expectations of her with little support supervision and training.

But she's met those high expectations?

Yeah, so she *is* a miracle. And she has become a theatre director; she's taught herself to be a theatre director.

Which is a kind of process of empowerment?

Yeah, and she's the kind of director that's a facilitator, she draws heavily on the group and I'm sure the group probably direct their own scenes as well. I'm sure it's not the standard kind of director role.

So after then six weeks, and you're gone, and then you come back again.

A year later.

And what's happened?

Their performance level has just....

Risen, expanded, developed...

Yeah. Wow! And Manisha's confidence as a director is there. She's a director, and their willingness and their confidence in making work on their own is immense. But they're also a little tired of the games, and the exercises...

So they need new ones.

Yeah, especially in terms of discipline, of keeping your body in shape and keeping your body expressive and all that kind of stuff, they're bored with it and they're tired. So John came in with a whole load of sort of fresh exercises.

So what were you doing? Were you running workshops again that time round?

Yeah.

So you were running new games, refreshing previous work?

Yeah, and particularly trying to respond to what they felt their needs were, what their gaps were. And also building some new material, shaping a little bit of what was already there, just giving a bit of directorial support, so there was a little bit of that in there, but also looking at the role of the Joker and trying to get some good Forum theatre Jokers out of them. That was the main aim...where they felt that the gaps were.

Right so, the first time through, the first six weeks, you're taking a group of people who basically know nothing at all about theatre and performance and you're training them up, in an incredibly short time, to make Forum performances that are about their own experiences and key issues in their community that they then take back into their communities. And you set them up to be self-running for the next year although there's supposed to be some supervision. The next time you return, your aim is to find out what it is the group needs.

Yeah. Yeah.

So, you're responding to their needs, rather than coming from a place where you 'know' what they 'need'. In the first instance you've got the information, you've got the skills, they don't. It's a transfer of skills and information.

Yeah

As well as you learning about them. But basically you're enabling....

Yeah.

The second time round they're now equipped enough to say: "We've been doing this for a year. ...This is what we need from you."

Yeah...and this is our play that we've been doing, what do you think? There was of course some kind of indication...joking is usually the next stage...but I was interested to see what they were already doing in terms of joking: who's joking, how were they doing it, and how was it going? And it's all very well in the workshop but could they tell me if it's working or not, if people are getting up and how they're getting up. And so then I was watching shows in the slums and watching them perform and seeing what the shows were like, and how the joking was going. But it was tough, very tough, that time round, because there was the feeling that they knew they were quite good, and they knew they could do it, so it's just pushing a little bit more, of going: "Yes people get up, but what are they doing when they get up?" or "What is the quality of the discussions?" and "What else can we do?", and "How many get up?", and all those things. And that was when - this is coming back to something we talked about earlier - I started to think more about the form of Forum and its limitations. I had thought about this before but really struck me in India that, very occasionally, in my experience, you get a sense that somebody's getting up who is not necessarily hugely confident or assertive but they have a real desire, need, to change, to rehearse for change, all that. And you can get that sense from the audience, that they think, "Oh yeah, this is somebody who is really..." and you just get the sense that actually this isn't just somebody who's just going to get up and have a laugh, someone who's really confident. But most interventions that I've seen over the years, and in India, seem to be people intervening that, already have some stuff in the bag that they are displaying to other people: "This is how you do it"...that kind of thing. Especially with men getting up - men intervening in the pieces in India around women, for example, seems to be problematic sometimes, men in place of little girls and trying stuff out. And how Forum is designed for the audience to reflect the protagonist and all that kind of thing. But in a slum? I mean, you can't hone down who your audience is, it's everybody, and cows so it can be anybody who says: "Stop!". It can be a landlord, or an abusive father, or a little girl, whoever. So, potentially, you can have lots of mouthy, assertive people getting up and having a bit of a barney, and getting off and going: "Yeah! That was entertaining!" But what do we learn from this? I've only seen a handful of Vidya performances, and I did see children get up on stage in front of hundreds of people, trying stuff out, who were not necessarily hugely confident. I did see conversations happening in groups around in the slums with the actors talking to people, and I did see the Joker facilitating from the front as well. So it's all there. But I must emphasise as well that it was never just Forum work, there were always a couple of

Forum shows and a couple of 'straight' plays, but very street style, fairly didactic. Also Image theatre stuff. There were songs to raise awareness, songs to stimulate the audience, songs to attract an audience, other forms as well ...not just Forum.

And then did you go back again?

No.

What kind of documentation would you like to see published on Vidya?

I really like this idea of a workbook, I know that it's already an idea that's been floated, with models of practice based on experiences from Vidya. I would like to see a video with that workbook. I'd like a CD of all the songs that were written - with lyrics, in English for me as well please. But there have been some absolutely incredible songs that have been written. I think that's it.

What do you think should be in that workbook?

What I'd love is a book with lots of descriptions of different exercises and little examples of how that affected a particular person. So for example, one person might describe a game she did in a workshop - and she might need a bit of a reminder or whatever - and another might say how she felt about that exercise. Not as a suggestion: "This is how you're going to feel!", but just different experiences of how those things felt. I get a lot of people saying to me: "I tried an exercise from *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, and it didn't work" or "the group got really angry", or "the group got really depressed" and I think sometimes for people picking up handbooks, there needs to be a kind of sense of reality about it, that sometimes exercises don't work and sometimes they do, and it's really hard to tell why.

And sometimes when they get angry it is working?

Yeah, so flavours of responses to different games, and definitely something that has different kinds of voices describing the games. Games and exercises, processes, are so hard to describe and, and they're never neutral, and a lot of these kind of books are written as if somehow there's a neutral approach to them but I, would just be really fascinated to have the different voices of Vidya group members describing different games and how they would describe a game differently from what I would. I think describing a game is like describing a painting. There are certain shapes, but...

Anything else you'd like to see in it?

Lots of photographs or images of people, not just sketches. Also some games are really good for two people, and some games are just fantastic with about thirty people, and really naff with five, or really, weird and embarrassing with ten. So I'd like there to be something that dealt with that.

So what would you contribute to such a book?

Probably something around facilitation, and the processes of drawing and structuring stories for Forum. I think there's a real gap there in terms of materials. I mean, for example, in Augusto's books, you get all these games and descriptions of Forum but how on earth do you get a story out of it, how do you facilitate that? In terms of care and emotional responses and.... I've been in some damaging situations with Forum and storytelling and Playback theatre, for example, sharing the story in front of 200 people and then somebody going: "No we'll not have that one we'll have that one", and the treading on people's self esteem and histories. I think that can happen a lot. So something around that balance between care and creativity. I don't mean care. It seems like a slightly naff, patronising word, but being sensitive and creative at the same. So what is that moment when somebody says: "When I was fifteen I had a baby and it was a little girl, and my mother in law didn't want this little girl, so in the middle of the night she came and put poison in the baby's mouth." When, as a facilitator, I listen to that story, half of my brain is going: "Oh my goodness, how is this person right now with this story? How much do they want to say? How is everybody else? How do they feel about what they are hearing? What's going on for the group? What's going on for that person? How do I support them", and another half of my brain is going: "Wow I can see it now, there's a scene where the mother comes in, in the middle of the night, and she puts the poison in the baby's mouth, and then the whole audience, two thousand people go (sharp intake of breath). That's the moment people go: "Stop"". In my head I'm directing it and in another part of me I'm facilitating; how do I keep the balance?

That feels a good place to leave it. I look forward to hearing more about this, but for now, thank you for your time and generosity.