

# WOMEN TAKING CENTER STAGE: Organizing Women Through Community Theater

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*"Together, the community and the artists devise a performance with the intention, not only of entertaining, but also of saying something about the community's life experiences, memories of the past, and hopes and fears for the future."*

*-Richard Fotheringham*

## Abstract

*This article is an account of a theatre practice among community women in a rural community in Aurora. It tells of how nine women create community among themselves, make theatre a platform for advocacy and action, and take center stage by making private issues public, transforming personal narratives as performance materials for public discussion. By using theatre as the strategy for advocacy on women's issues and organizing work, the women were able to redefine politics, counting creative cultural action and women-specific processes as political and community women artists as political actors.*

## Introduction

Despite the strong association of Philippine drama to the nationalist movement in the late 60s, the theatre tradition in the country has been dominated by the so-called "bourgeois theatre in English," primarily staged in private schools, performed by professional theatre companies and patronized by the US-educated artists and people from middle and upper class origins (Legasto, 1994). As counterpoint to this mainstream theatre practice is the People's Theatre, which evolved out of the people's movement as an articulation of the struggles and problems of the poor and marginalized Filipino masses.

The People's Theater is often referred to or used interchangeably with street theatre and community theatre, even by practitioners and activists as well. In contrast to the bourgeois theatre, it is mass-based, issue-oriented, and dialogical. It is produced by non-professional artists as well as, activists and performed in non-conventional theatre settings that include plazas, basketball courts, streets, or in open spaces. In practice, it affirms empowering traditions and cultural forms in local communities. It raises the awareness of marginalized people towards taking action to change their situation.

A later development in People's Theatre is the integration of women's issues in its projects and agenda, eventually giving birth to a new theatre practice presently categorized as women's theatre. Though borne out of the people's movement and having commonalities with the People's Theatre movement, women's theatre has developed over time, carving its own distinct identity. In this article, I will be talking about a particular women's theatre experience as practiced by grassroots women in Baler, Aurora Province showing a distinctly Filipino and Third World women's theatre.

I chose to consider the subjective voice - a first person account, me, being a participant-observer of the entire process. For me, the subjective voice is both liberating and an alternative as it challenged the impersonal, omniscient and so-called "objective" patriarchal perspective that renders certain experiences invisible. But, in trying to give new meaning and analysis to the experience, I also considered the objective point of view. Hence, this article will not sound too personal and self-indulgent.

Consequently, I arrived at a decision to use both - my personal voice will intersperse with the objective point of view, like the "zoom-in, zoom-out" mechanism of a camera lens.

This article is divided into six (6) sections: the first section describes the context in which these women live; the second section lays down some theoretical concepts I used in making sense of this particular experience; the third, is a brief profile of the women who became instrumental in using theatre to organize other women and to advocate for change; the fourth, describes how these women make theatre and create their kind of aesthetics; the fifth, describes the process they underwent in organizing themselves as a theatre collective and as a women's group. At the end, the insights gleaned from this experience serve as its concluding points.

cal and cultural practices, enable individuals and groups to define themselves differently from the way others, including the state, defined them. With such concept of "difference" as embedded in the total range of discourses and practices in a society, people are empowered to define themselves, their own subjectivity, on terms that served as basis for everyday resistances. Consequently, people discover and invent new ways through which to describe and understand themselves, in categories that have potential to challenge, disrupt, and redirect dominant power (Foucault, 1978, 1982; Allen, 1993).

Further, Foucault claims that wherever there is power, there is resistance. To this, Webster (2000 as cited by Alsop, Fitzsimons, Lennon and Minsky, 2002) adds the concept of agency (the power to resist) and suggests that resistance alone, is insufficient to undermine or redraw power structures. It must have political direction and strategies for collective action. Here, Alsop, et.al (2002), introduced the notion of reflexive agency. They argue that this is not just an outcome of a coming together based on shared identity or commonality. It is rather, a conscious adoption of a shared grouping to campaign politically for changes to those material, structural, and discursive features which are leading to oppressive social relations.

If participation is the every day activity of knowledge exchange among community members and between local authorities and the community, then organizing and issue advocacy initiatives are, in essence, about challenging the nature of discourses and practices that underlie participation. Foucault (1982, 1988a, 1988b) notes that effective participation is grounded on the self-defined identities of acting subjects rather than on the subjectivities arising from their subjection to the administrative state power. As such, organizing and advocacy work are means to alter the relationship between the local authorities and people or to change the effects of existing relationships.

In the context of community participation, I used the abovementioned concepts, drawn from the ideas of Foucault and others to describe the work of *Teatro Aurora* in defining itself, in organizing poor rural women, and their advocacy efforts through theatre. From passive individualized women, they banded together, redefined themselves into empowered subjects capable of resisting and challenging local authorities, and society as well. These women members of *Teatro Aurora* transformed the performance stage as sites of power and resistance and as a means to find their voices, speak out their "truths," and eventually, redefine themselves and create their own identity.

***The backdrop: life is getting harder every day***

In the worsening economic crises of this era of globalization, the poor women are the hardest hit. Where unemployment is high, the poor women being in charge of the household food security and maintenance, have to take on additional work for the upkeep of the family. To some extent when food is scarce, the women have to experience nutritional deficiencies and deprivation. When social services like health are getting privatized and wanting, the burden of care falls upon their shoulders. When migration is the only option for survival, they opt to explore unknown geographies in search of work and opportunities, or in other cases become female-heads of households to migrant men.

Each woman has her own story to tell, as a mother, as a wife, as a household head, as a worker, and as a member of a community. Despite differences in situations, the poor women in rural communities together with their children, are altogether the most vulnerable. In this collective, the situation of members reflect the general condition of women in various communities of Baler, in the province of Aurora.

Despite the rich natural resources in the province in terms of forest and marine resources, Baler registers a worse condition of poverty: low household income; lack of employment for women; high incidence of malnutrition among children; and, lack of social services especially along health care.

The poverty situation in the area is further aggravated by the series of typhoons that batters the province throughout the year. Since Baler is typhoon-prone, majority of the poorer households rely on planting banana, cassava, and camote for food and cash income. According to the women, these crops save them from hunger when palay production is not good.

Sixty-two percent of the population in Baler is engaged in agriculture, which predominates its economy. Endowed with rich natural resources and minerals, its vast forest has become the target of many logging and mining concessions. This has greatly contributed to the rapid deforestation and degradation of its resources. Aside from agriculture, many people are engaged in cottage industries such as hat and mat weaving, wood carving, basketry, and furniture making. Commercial activities are largely into retailing and sari-sari store operations.

The average household income is registered at Php 3,500 monthly or Php 42,000 annually. In an average household size of 6 members, this is insufficient for securing food, utilities, education and health services. In the absence of gender-disaggregated data on employment and labor force participation, women's work participation is subsumed as unpaid family labor, both in agriculture and the cottage industries (Socio-Economic and Physical Profile of Aurora, n.d.).

In terms of health and well-being, conjunctivitis ranks as the leading cause of morbidity due to the polluted air attributed to dust from rough roads as the road network in Aurora is hardly developed. In addition, the incidence of flu, measles and diarrhea are high. Likewise, malnutrition primarily within ages 1-4, is recorded at 36.43% (Socio-Economic Profile of Aurora, n.d.).

With no one to turn to, some women from different communities in Baler had mobilized themselves to learn the basics of primary health care and provide services to their communities. With the knowledge and skills they learned from non-government organizations as volunteer community health workers, these women assumed the responsibility of taking health care service into their hands.

Starting as volunteer community health workers, they also learned to use theatre as a means to educate others about gender issues, and eventually transform themselves to become advocates of women's rights.

### ***Nine characters in search of home and community***

December 8, 2003 (a journal entry)

*I was invited to facilitate a basic integrated theatre arts workshop for women in a far-flung area somewhere in Aurora Province. The request was immediate, the information too general, and the person at the end of the phone had no further information – just a workshop for rural women who are community health volunteers, and that I was referred to them by a reliable source. Click...end of conversation. Too scary for me, who is used to conducting training needs assessment prior to a workshop.*

*Today, here I am in front of nine women: some release exercises to start the day – "Lulubog and bangka, magsama-sama ang..." and some "getting-to-know" each other activities – "Humanay ayon sa..." and "...nagbalat ang ahas sa pagitan ng..." The women, as I observe, lack vigor and enthusiasm. They hardly move. Then, a formal personal introduction and expectation setting ensue. I come to know these women' and their personal stories:*

Luz is a peasant woman in her early 30s, whose husband was abducted by the military and is still missing up to now. In his absence, she has to fend for the family while nursing grief, pain and desolation over his disappearance. She joins the workshop to be in the company of other women whom she relies on for emotional support.

Fem, a single parent of five children, vends farm produce to make ends meet. While in the hospital delivering her fifth child twelve years ago, her husband left to sell his farm harvests to pay for the hospital bills but he never returned since then. There were stories about him being seen in a nearby town. He even sent messages that he will be coming home but he has not returned until this day. Fem patiently waits for that promise of his return, but such promise remains unfulfilled. She is actually too shy to speak why she is here in the workshop.

Nanay Caridad, a widow in her mid-70s, was jailed for nine years for a crime she allegedly never committed. She is nervous and scared at the sight of a person in police or military uniform. She wants to be in the workshop to re-enact her life in prison, as a way of exorcising the ghost of the past and coming to terms with her life now.

Edith, a married farmer-woman who in her 25<sup>th</sup> year of marriage has discovered that her sexual desire and pleasure is not dependent on her husband but in herself as a woman. She is always eager to join training activities like this, that increases her knowledge and capabilities. It was a reproductive rights training that changed her concept about sexuality and about women.

Nanay Belinda is married for 30 years. All throughout these years, she silently suffered from verbal, as well as, emotional abuse from her

lines, texture, color, movement, rhythm, sounds, and shape. The workshop progressed to more complex activities – there were series of exercises on improvisation for them to learn about spontaneity.

Furthermore, they explored and learned the various elements of a play: character study, conflict study, message, plot, making tableaux and scenarios, etc. Collectively, they experimented on devising a play using the “beginning-middle-end” (B-M-E) process. The five-day workshop was interspersed with mini-showcases. Each learning unit is expected to explore various theater forms and to present mini-showcases: a *dula-tula* (staged poetry), a *kilos-awit* (transposed song), a dance drama, an expressionist play and an allegorical play.

The last day of the workshop was the time for the final showcase. To simulate a real performance, many community members were invited to watch the women’s performance. There, the women, took center stage and were poised to act out their characters.

The group’s performance was borne out of the initial brainstorming during the workshop. The performance explored and tackled a major concern or issue of the community, that is, environmental destruction due to the rampant illegal logging in Aurora. Using dance-drama as the organizing structure, the group was able to come up with a 30-minute performance depicting the worsening effect of illegal logging on communities if unabated.

December 12, 2003 (an excerpt from my journal)

*...then, the time for the final showcase: the opening image is so powerful – dead bodies and huge logs intertwined and sprawled all over the stage. The backdrop is even more haunting and eerie - not a house in sight but water, water, everywhere. Slowly, the women rise and render a beautiful and powerful song-dance performance about the effect of illegal logging in the communities of Aurora.*

After the performance, the group engaged the audience to a discussion on what to do with the issues being presented. A brief, yet lively discussion between the women performers and the audience ensued. The performance did not end here but transformed itself into a theatre group, now known in Baler as *Teatro Aurora*. For the nine women performers, *Teatro Aurora* is not simply a women’s theatre group, but their new home and community.

### **Making theatre, taking center stage**

Like other community theatres, *Teatro Aurora* adopts *devising* as a tool in generating plays for performance. Feminist theatre groups in the UK and the US also rely heavily on devised theatre (Case, 1988; Goodman, 1993). Devising, as defined by Allison Oddey (1998), "is a process of making theatre that enables a group of performers to be physically and practically creative in the sharing and shaping of an original product." Further, Oddey (1998) elaborates the idea of devised theatre as:

*"Devised theatre can start from anything. It is determined and defined by a group of people who set up an initial framework or structure to explore and experiment with ideas, images, concepts, themes or specific stimuli such as music, text, objects, painting or movement. A devised theatrical performance originates with the group while making the performance, rather than starting from a play text written by someone. A devised theatre product is work that has emerged from and been generated by a group of people working in collaboration."*

In devising their performances, *Teatro Aurora* follows these creative processes:

1. Generating ideas or themes for a performance. In order to get started, the group employs various creative brainstorming games and techniques to generate ideas or themes that include the following:
  - Storytelling. Each member tells a strong emotional life experience with a beginning, middle, and end framework. While the person is telling the story, the rest acts it out, each one bringing her personal experience to the rehearsal.
  - Free-writing. It is a process of writing within a predetermined time frame, say, five minutes. Using a trigger line or sentence, each member writes a story within the designated time frame.

- *Dugtungan ng kuwento* or story chain. Gathered in a circle, each member writes a line toward making a story, using the "beginning-middle-end" framework as guide in developing the story.
2. Doing research. When the group has agreed upon an idea or theme to work on, each member is given a task to gather information about the idea or theme. The purpose of this is to "research" on what they do not know about the idea or theme. A study session is set to discuss the information gathered by each one and come up with a collective analysis of the idea or theme. Sometimes, they invite resource persons to provide inputs on the chosen topic or theme.
  3. Devising the play. Faced with a mass of gathered materials, the group organizes the materials to create the shape of the play. Through a brainstorming process, the group develops a storyline, form, structure, sequences of scenes, and characters and eventually develops a tentative draft of a script. This tentative draft is again subjected to discussion and brainstorming to develop further clarity in all aspects of the play material.

To organize ideas and flesh out the material, they use meta-cards scattered on the floor to visualize the whole. Then, they employ some collaborative writing processes to create a text. The text is collectively edited to come up with a play that is feasible or workable. At this time, the text is ready for rehearsal. What follows is the process of mounting the play. This is aided by the use of improvisation exercises and workshops.

It also took some time for the women to master this process. But as they went along, they also gained their confidence in subjecting themselves to creative and collaborative processes. This ultimately helped them overcome their initial fears of not being artistic.

In addition to devising and collective writing processes, *Teatro Aurora* also adopts the "informance" technique in their performances. An informance<sup>2</sup> weaves information, issues and discussions into a play's structure. Although it tackles burning issues, it also gives attention to the artistic quality of the performance, keeping a balance of the two elements. It presents a story

without closure and is not prescriptive. Instead, the performers conduct a debriefing after their performance to discuss the issues presented. The discussion could run for an hour or more.

This process of debriefing is done to enable both the performers and the audience to cultivate a deepened understanding or awareness of the issues at hand; and more towards identifying action points to address the issues. With *Teatro Aurora*, debriefing workshops were conducted in every advocacy performance of the group. Surprisingly, many of these debriefing workshops were well attended. This may be so because the community audiences were able to identify and relate with every issue presented as the stories were based on situations and issues in the communities.

Through *devising*, collaborative writing of text, and informance as working methods, *Teatro Aurora* has developed 17 original plays tackling issues ranging from violence against women (VAW) to globalization. In all these issues, the location and impact on women were central to their analysis. From personal issues of family violence and abuse, they learned to analyze women's issues in relation to issues of national concern. These included globalization and how it affected their lives as women; the destruction of their environment due to rampant logging; and, how the worsening poverty has driven ten of thousands Filipinos to seek work contracts in almost all parts of the globe.

But, it is also interesting to note that though the group subscribed to the conventional elements of making theatre that focused on play structure, genre, linear sequence of storyline, etc., the group ended up with a very distinct body of works. In general, the features of their plays went out of the conventional mode. These plays were non-linear and non-structured, open-ended, had fluid women characters, and were multi-vocal. The form of the plays could not be categorized into a particular genre, but was a confluence of forms and monologues. These women found metaphors in things used in daily life like discussing issues of domestic violence through a ladle and using the kitchen setting as site of violence. They also made body parts talk about reproductive health issues.

The group organized performance tours in neighboring barangays. They made presentations in non-traditional performance spaces that included a school building, a gym, plaza, street, a campaign truck, etc. Alongside these performances, the group facilitated theatre workshops in other com-

after every performance hone their capacities to facilitate the discussions of issues. In this way, their role is not simply as performers, but as advocates of change.

In essence, theatre as experienced by these community women, is about creating and mirroring social realities, where oppression in whatever form – overt or internalized, can be gazed at in full view in an aesthetic space. This space enables the audience, in this case, the community, to view it from different sides. However, the exchange of dialogues in response to the reality seen onstage provides a deepening analysis and understanding of the issues being presented and eventually toward a mutual re-visioning.

In terms of content, aesthetics, and process, *Teatro Aurora* echoes parallel features to Goodman's description of feminist theatres (1993). In her study of contemporary feminist theatre, she notes the following features:

- elements of performance: intervention in political arenas, emphasis on the personal, use of alternative performance space
- methods used: *devising* and performance art (use of alternative form of expressions – body, body language, mime), tour performance with minimal props and casts
- the working process is a product of the *devising* method where the first process is visualization of the idea through the physicality of the movement and then followed by developing the text through a collaborative scriptwriting method
- working relationship: group members take equal share of power, where responsibility for all aspects of production are equally shared among members, rejecting structure and hierarchy in terms of process and organization
- individual skills of each member is used without assigning different worth or status to those skills

- the creative/performance process: begin with an idea and construct the performance by developing improvisations from that idea, getting audience feedback to continue the development of the play, and then interaction with the audience after the performance
- the group devises their own material based on collective experience. Devising allows them to improvise, be spontaneous and creates a personal and non-hierarchical nature of collective work
- themes: women and gender issues where theater is used as a public forum for these issues
- the plays are conceived in a shared space and a shared perspective, these plays are based on improvisational exercises from the group's experiences, loosely structured into a series of visual vignettes

Likewise, Eleavitt (1980) elaborates the features of feminist theatre. According to her, its unique aspects are:

- It presents truthful images of women and negative images of women are deconstructed and are given a new meaning.
- It is a communal experience.
- It mirrors and gives resonance to women's experiences.

Of which Case (1988) further added another dimension: it is an engaged dialogue, rooted in everyday life.

On the other hand, what sets *Teatro Aurora* apart from these Western feminist theatres is that its kind of theatre manifests the type of feminist theatre echoed by Priscelina Patajo-Legasto (1994) in her article, "Women and Contemporary Philippines: Usapang Babae or Women Speaking." She noted that Philippine feminist theatre recognizes the interdependence between women's concerns and national issues as well as aspires for a continued dialogue between men and women.

Moreover, the PhD dissertation of Josephine Barrios, entitled "Mula sa mga Pakpak ng Entablado: Pagyapak at Paglipad ng Kababaihang

Mandudula" (1998), noted salient features of feminist theatre in the Philippines that include:

- tackling many issues in a particular play. For instance, a play tackles education but at the same time talks about divorce or a play on comfort women is about abortion, etc.;
- the stage as space for discourse and the plays are multi-vocal, thus, challenging unity which is an important feature of a good play in the conventional sense;
- plays are open and no closures so as to further explore the issue that need to be discussed and studied and to explore other possibilities;
- women's identity are shown as "work-in-progress" in which the characters kept on changing their identities such that a mother becomes the country or a rape victim becomes a hero;
- exploring non-conventional theatre forms and using mixture of theatre forms to discuss complex issues like the use of monologues as autobiography or epic becomes comedy and ritual, etc.;
- the plays serve as vehicle for conversation between audience as well as with other women where the private issues are transformed into public issues in the course of conversation;
- theatre as space to articulate and resist.

While Western feminist theatre concerns itself with the issue of oppressions and experiences of individual women, the feminist theatre in the Philippines, including *Teatro Aurora*, gave birth to a kind of feminist theatre with its distinct character. It is shaped by the country's colonial experience and location as a poor country in the global market economy. But even if *Teatro Aurora* has features of a feminist theatre, it does not claim to be one. Being steadfast in advocating women's issues and using theatre as platform for action toward social transformation, its members are more comfortable with the term *women's issues* rather than feminist issues or the use of *community theatre* rather than feminist theatre.

Another feature of *Teatro Aurora* as a theatre group is its attempt to use theatre as a strategy for organizing other women. Community theatre as practiced by these women, emphasizes the strengthening of existing organizations or the formation of support structures in the community. After the community debriefing, the performers do not just leave the community, instead, they have the responsibility of facilitating the implementation of the agreed upon "action points." As such, they encourage existing organizations to take up the issue previously discussed or the formation of a support structure that would pursue the continuity of the initiative. To some extent, they train local leaders to sustain the local cultural program.

In sum, *Teatro Aurora's* brand of theatre makes use of women's personal experiences and voices. Out of these women's narratives, performance pieces are developed through collective and non-hierarchical processes, then viewed and heard in non-traditional performance spaces. As they created and produced theatre by themselves, they also transformed themselves into advocates with the aim to effect change in the lives of other women and the community as a whole.

The kind of theatre that *Teatro Aurora* has developed utilizes women processes and is informed by ideas from the personal stories and perspectives of individual women. In doing so, they take into account their differences in status and condition. For women members of *Teatro Aurora*, making theatre is their contribution to effecting social change. From ordinary community women, they were transformed, not only as agents of change, but as artists as well. As Oddey (1998) declared, "women are artists and theatre makers in their own right."

### **Community theatre as a strategy for organizing women**

*April 29, 2005 (an excerpt from my journal)*

*As a child, the sight of water fascinates me. I would secretly slip away to wet my feet with the puddles of water from an afternoon rain. Having lived as a child in an inland locale, the sight of the sea fascinated me no end. And here I am, cradled by the huge waves in Baler and trying to seek comfort from the waves' undulating cadence, I try to remember how Teatro Aurora come into being and my role in it. As this theatre workshop by the sea is perhaps my last time with them, sadness overpowers me. Though I know,*

*this feeling is normal for organizers when phasing out from a community, a sort of having "weaning" pains. I will be missing these moments of riding on high waves, as well as the regular exchange of banter with these women who eventually became my friends. The sea of Baler with its big waves and my women—friends will be etched in my memory forever... Within a few meters distance, I see my women- friends from Teatro Aurora calling me to join them sing and gyrate to the tune of Ricky Martin's "Living la Vida Loca" which we adopted as our "theme song."*

*As I leave Baler, one of my women-friends hands me a banana plant and a few saplings of the San Julian taro variety as tokens - a symbol of friendship among a community of women.*

Barely three years old, *Teatro Aurora* has performed regularly in different communities as part of their advocacy campaigns. From an initial core membership of nine women, the group has expanded to a total of fifteen members. Each member has the capacity to perform various roles, facilitate debriefing sessions and to conduct basic theatre arts workshops in other communities. At present, the women are initiating the organization of women theatre groups in their respective communities.

Although the organization is an offshoot of a basic integrated theatre arts workshop, it has expanded to become a regular organization with its own mission and programs. In the beginning, the group of women wanted only to learn and make theatre but such personal aims expanded to encompass varied issues in the community.

In organizing the theatre group, the women started with a core group of nine women performers. These women were considered the leaders who were primarily in charge of sustaining and managing the theatre group. In its initial operations, the core group functions as a support group to women performers. The core group honed themselves to be actors, writers and directors. One unique feature of the theatre group is the collective honing of their skills, so, anyone, can be assigned as director to a particular performance and an actor in another. The "rotational" process of assigning tasks to each member helped them develop varied skills in theatre work.

They maintain the group to be small in size so women have opportunity to meet each other on a regular basis. In developing their skills as theatre artists and as organizational leaders, the group starts from developing a

member's personal capacity and empowerment that is measured in terms of their ability to analyze personal situations of abuse, and in taking action to address them. Foremost is learning to make decisions and take control of one's life. For all these women, empowerment goes beyond the personal. Through regular education sessions about political issues and theatre skills, they charted their development to becoming advocates of women's rights and change in the community.

Aside from being leaders in running the theatre group, the core group members also concerned themselves in creating a support group within the core group. The purpose of establishing a support group is to create a safe place for every woman member. The support group is their translation of building a community of women. It is within this group formation that the women foster sisterhood, thus, finding mutual support based on a shared situation. It is also within the support group that a member is free to talk about her issues, her pains, passions, and dreams while being surrounded by a group of women who are willing to listen and lend support. It is within the confines of the support group that the women altogether weave their dreams and celebrate small triumphs in life. The support group then becomes a venue for the women to affirm themselves.

The group conducts regular education, particularly small group sharing sessions. A sharing session is usually done prior to or after a rehearsal. The objective of these sharing sessions is for every woman to share personal issues and stories and for them to analyze and understand how the mechanisms of power operate in their everyday lives and how their personal power can be sustained in terms of collective action. These sharing sessions also inform the themes and story materials for future performances.

To sustain and organize the theatre group, the members set guidelines to follow. The guidelines are phrased in positive statements, for instance, instead of the phrase, "Don't be late during rehearsals," it is phrased positively to, "Please come on time during rehearsals." As rationalized by the women, it serves as a constructive reminder to members as well as a means to practice affirmation and optimism.

The guidelines covered a wide range of organizational concerns like responsibilities of members, decision-making, membership, ways of resolving conflict, membership expansion and consolidation, leadership development, etc. These guidelines were drafted during the early stage of the group formation

and then, reviewed regularly for modification and adjustment. Most importantly, the guidelines ensure that everyone is responsible for maintaining safety in the group, since most of them are survivors of various forms of abuse.

Maintaining a small group negates the structured and hierarchical method of organization. Such allowed these women to practice sharing power equitably through rotation of leadership, shared responsibility and decision-making. These processes make it easy for them to run and manage a theatre group and the support group within the theatre group.

A typical meeting of the group consists of the following processes:

- Group check-in: in a circle, each one shares an event that happens to her or her feelings prior to coming to the meeting.
- Warm-ups: these are series of body stretching and vocalization exercises to prime them up for rehearsal and creating a sense of teamwork.
- Check –out: a rehearsal/meeting assessment to discuss what they have done the whole day, identify things that worked and didn't, and discuss recommendations for improvement; and assigned homework for each one. It also serves as venue for airing issues, feelings and observations regarding the content and processes of the rehearsal, and work relationship among the members.
- Homework: research tasks for each one, particular on props, roles, etc.
- Affirmation circle: the end part of the meeting that serves as closure in the form of a group massage, a pat on the shoulder, or a standing ovation for everyone.

The limited funds did not deter the group from pursuing its goals, the members are committed to continue their performances because they saw the effectiveness of theatre as a strategy for issue advocacy, at the same time, the theatre processes enable them to find their voices to

articulate personal experiences and their own ideas on issues concerning their lives. In addition, these performances transform their lives by enabling them to translate personal issues into collective community action.

Just recently, the group trained the women police force of Aurora to create a women's desk. Likewise, the group organized a theatre festival and an art camp for survivors of violence. At present they are planning to establish a healing center for abused women in a piece of land donated by a mayor in one of the municipalities. Aside from these gains, the women, through *Teatro Aurora*, has been effective in molding creative communities as well as help create critical awareness among community members on gender issue and concerns.

With the group's experience in organizing themselves as a theatre group came the understanding that community collective transformation happens alongside personal transformation. The act of using personal experiences as mirrors and materials of their performances serve as catharsis for these women, but at the same time, empowers them. Knowing that their stories resonate a similar chord among the women audience made them resolute in their position to be advocates of women's rights and community artists for change.

For these women, their theatre experience not only empowers them as agents of change but provides them home and community, as well.

Based on the experience and practice of *Teatro Aurora* in organizing community women, the following can be drawn out:

1. Theatre is a way of organizing and mobilizing women to action.

Theatre provides a venue for women to move from a situation of powerlessness to action. In order for theatre to be an effective approach, there is a need to strike a balance between content and aesthetics. Community women, as a group, can be a potent force in their own communities as leaders, artists and actors in their own development.

2. Organizing in small groups is an effective strategy in organizing community women.

A small group serves as a support system for women and provides safe space for them against an outside environment that is oppressive and patriarchal. The intimacy of a small group is an ideal environment for women to explore the social, political, emotional/psychological dimensions of personal issues and concerns and to try out strategies that work toward social change.

3. Consciousness-raising is a crucial element in empowering women.

According to Gutierrez and Lewis (1995), empowerment is a process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power. However, only through the process of recognizing how power relationships affect daily life and through understanding the way people can contribute to social change, that empowerment takes place (Freire, 1970 as cited by Gutierrez, et.al, 1995).

In empowering women, consciousness-raising is an important element. By helping them make the connection between their personal lives and political issues, awareness develops. As a result of heightened awareness, the women learned to examine their lives, identify commonalities of experience and its connection to other issues at the community and national levels. Moreover, an increased in awareness enabled them to an understanding on how they, as individuals and as part of a group, can effect change in the community. And most importantly, they learn the potential of organizing in improving women's condition while empowering them.

4. Organizing encompasses all aspects of women's lives.

Taking off from the assumption that "personal is political," it is important that organizing women starts from issues that personally affect their daily lives. As such practical women's needs like health services, day care support, support groups, etc., become key elements in organizing them.

Since women viewed themselves in a holistic manner, then the personal, social, cultural, spiritual, and political concerns should also be seen as an integrated whole. As these concerns need

to be looked into, theatre and the creative arts can likewise be explored as strategies in organizing women.

5. Linking with others or like-minded groups.

It is important that women link up with other like-minded groups for advocacy work and political mobilizations. Creating a network of support will strengthen advocacy work, share resources as well as support mechanism. *Teatro Aurora* has explored all the possible networks of support ranging from individuals and groups in the locality.

I would like to end this article with this concluding note: the experience of organizing *Teatro Aurora* is a story of friendship among a community of women. As a theatre group it has the markings of a feminist theatre, yet the group shuns this labeling. However, contrary to feminist theatre popularized by the West, *Teatro Aurora* shows the distinct character of Philippine feminist theatre and Third World theatre. Theatre, as practiced and experienced by grassroots women of *Teatro Aurora*, reminds us of the many possibilities of grassroots women's agency and the possibility of change.

June 13, 2006 (a journal entry)

*I received an unexpected package from Aurora, its contents amused me rather than surprised me: my t-shirt and malong (things I left behind during my last travel to Aurora), a sabutan mat (perhaps a gift for me), a project proposal (to be submitted to my husband's office for funding), and a VCD of their latest performance. I watched the videotaped performance. It is a monologue about three women. The play talks about abortion, poverty and militarization. The aesthetics and content distinctly have the markings or "brand" of theatre of Teatro Aurora with its biting satire, crisp humor and local color. I am happy knowing that they can work independently without me. Outside my window, the banana plant that they gave me has fully grown. The next few months will be harvest season in Baler and without any news of typhoon in Aurora in these past few months, again, my women-friends will be busy during this season. Tomorrow will be a good harvest, I know... especially for Teatro Aurora, my body of work.*

## End Notes

1. The real names of the women were changed to maintain their anonymity.
2. Informance is popularized by the Women's Theatre Program of the Philippine Educational Theatre Association (PETA) in its play, "*Tumawag kay Libby Manaoag*."

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