

Thursday, 1 May 2008

The Mountains of Leon

Rural Development and Optimism –

Notes towards Transformative Learning Paradigm

One of the significant issues facing rural Spain is a sense of pessimism and lack of hope encompassing many communities and inhabitants. Massive de-population, a radical increase in the average age of the remaining population, a steady yet incessant widening in the gap between public and private services in rural and urban areas all lead to the sense of helplessness in many rural communities. But I am convinced that theatre and other cultural activities can be used to help rural communities examine the impact of these social trends upon their lives, their families and livelihoods and even help them search for strategies to eradicate these negative and disempowering effects.

On so many occasions rural communities are locked into a cycle between fatalistic optimism and blind optimism. The aim of a typical Spiral project is often to encourage a movement away from this cycle to one which places emphasis transformative optimism.

TRANSFORMATIVE OPTIMISM - looks at social power with emphasis on collective action. It is hopeful about the future.

BLIND OPTIMISM - This shies away from examining balances of power. It indicates “oblivion conditions” that prevent consciousness of self determination.

FATALIST OPTIMISM - Recognises the problem of unequal power yet is without hope of changing it.

RESILIENT OPTIMISM - Transforms at the individual level and gains hope transforming social power imbalances.

In March this year I directed a devised play with a group of local performers from the mountains of Omaña, Leon. The company contained ex-miners, teachers, pensioners, farmers, students, a nurse and house keepers. Over a period of weeks we developed a play about the fictitious “Javier”, a man deciding to return to his village after an absence of some decades in order to begin a business in Ganadería (cattle farming). Over ten scenes the play presented the difficulties encountered by this character. These included:

- Resistance from his aged father, a farmer who still farms in a traditional manner.
- The reaction of local resident to Javier's wife, a city girl from Barcelona
- The resistance of the Alcaldesa to the idea
- The lack of infraestructura professional (associations etc)
- Lack of social and economic solidarity between other farmers
- The complexity of official help from the Junta and EU regulations.

The piece was devised for a specific reason. In the region of Omaña there was to be a weekend meeting of farmers to discuss the extraordinary range of difficult issues facing them at the moment - and specifically the advantages and disadvantages of setting up a cooperative.

The 40 minute performance was followed by a forum joked by Carol from Spiral. A number of memorable and important interventions from the audience of Ganaderos (farmers) occurred. Both these interventions and the play itself seemed to make a considerable impact upon the audience and on the outcome of the weekend meeting. The play and the forum were referred to on a number of occasions the following day both in formal reflection sessions and also in informal (yet equally important) discussions between groups of farmers and between farmers and technical officers from the government.

But due to the complexity of this project the exact nature of the show and its forum its ability to contribute towards social change in this specific context needs, I think, to be assessed through a more structured form of evaluation.

Did the use of forum theatre enable participants to reflect upon the problems associated with Ganaderia (animal farming) and associated environmental issues (forest fires, land management to name but two)? If so how? How did the forum theatre affect the nature of the weekend meeting? Did the forum theatre enable silent or less verbal members of the group a space to participate more actively and openly? Did the forum theatre act as a means by which the oral culture of Ganaderos could be reflected in an informal and more productive environment? Are there longer term outcomes? Can expectations, habits of mind or points of view have been seen to alter as a result of the intervention? Was a request for more such interventions expressed by participants? If so, why? Is there a gender perspective to the forum theatre processes (making the play and the forum event) which needs exploring?

Furthermore an evaluation of the process of making the play would also be valuable.

- a. The way in which the development of the show took place in rehearsal
- b. The forum and the nature of the debate from the actor's point of view
- c. The way the direction and casting affected the way the play was received.

(c) Chris Baldwin