

In 1982 I became the lead worker for the then feminist organisation called Women in Entertainment. Following Paula Brown, who had originated the company, it was a conscious raising, lobbying, connective organisation, originally brokering a whole wave of performance events by, for and with women. At the time I arrived the plan was to organise a London wide series of participatory workshops by and for women. It fell to me to organise and promote these events: one spin off was that I was to organise one of these in Peckham, my home town.

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This was not a project for already arty women who had for example a near miss with a career as a performer. It was just women I knew from the local area. The common thread was that we all had young children, and besides this most had never been able to participate a great deal in anything creative or even recreational. This fact became central to our discussions, so the group finally called itself "Mothertongues."

The women in the group came from very different social locations and were of several ethnicities.

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For me, no previous approaches, within my then already fairly extensive experience in teaching and theatre, came anywhere near meeting the needs of this group. We explored many areas of activity, all of which seemed valuable and valid, as we devised various forms of role-play concerning domestic and working situations, and situations encountered with public services. In all of these our children were inextricably involved.

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There were things we didn't do. We didn't do aerobics or talk about going on slimming diets. We didn't gossip about each other or identify individuals when we were using real-life situations to work around. Everyone brought experiences and situations which had been problematic, frequently the stories had a common thread.

The moment had passed, and the group was left in a sort of void unable to connect back to the previous lines of thought and unable to move on to another topic. The correct answer to this is to provide a good creche worker. We did this.

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The flaw in this arrangement lay in the conflicts the children had in leaving their mothers alone for long, and the mothers had in leaving the children. And

the number of workshop members fluctuated wildly. Fine mornings, and the advent of spring. produced a sudden influx of women who not been seen for weeks. Sick children decimated numbers correspondingly.

In spite of this a hard-core of women continued with the exploration and came up with some clear examples of the situations that they often faced.

For example, techniques of saying “no” to an 11-year-old who wants you to put on his socks for him, can produce a surprising number of related issues; like the management of the continuum of child raising, from the new born who needs you for everything, to the teenager who increasingly doesn’t need you at all – and what it does to you. Discussion of these issues had arose often during our meetings.

Current assumptions are still that women are somehow biologically endowed with the ability to make this difficult series of minute but crucial decisions. Isolated, with no measure for comparison, and no valid social role outside of motherhood, it is not surprising that most women become confused. Having little to offer, they can only look forward to having their children outstrip them, and then grow away from them; - redundancy without pay! In their attempts to create an individual identity, many women experience an underlying threat. My sole valued function is to be a mother. When my child doesn’t need me, what is left?

Correspondingly; if I fail in my attempts to create a new identity, I have failed on both counts.....

This issue worked against the existence of the group as a whole. It was resisted!

Finally, we did want to produce something, if only to confirm that the hours and hours we had spent talking and improvising had led us at least a little way forward, and to try out the results of our processes by communicating them to other women.

The framework for this was The Drum Game. With hindsight it used techniques that were later introduced to this country by Augusto Boal – called Forum Theatre, but this was 1984, years before Forum Theatre arrived in the UK.

The game involves a small group of performers who take up roles in defined situations. A small audience – not more than twenty or thirty but can be much

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less – in a space big enough to provide basic seating for the audience and a small acting area for the performers. The audience is provided with one small hand drum which they pass around. The audience is encouraged to bang the drum if they want to address a point brought up in the dialogue, or challenge the situation that is being portrayed.

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In this version we chose to explore happenings in the doctor's surgery or clinic. The roles were of doctor and patient. One or more "Patients" come to see the "Doctor" with a problem.

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It was much easier for someone to play patient others found themselves or often in the role of doctor. As we experimented roles were deliberately reversed taking up the role of doctor gave insight into another vantage point is involved struggling to find the right register of language and perhaps of evolving better methods of communication with one patient playing patient also meant being open to question have you stated your problem clearly.

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If I fail at my new roles, and my identity as a mother is also undermined. In such a situation the workshop leader is in just as much of a position to learn as any other member. The leader's role, then, is to use whatever experience she has to devise structures through which the group can work and communicate; to provide a framework.

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, which combined elements of role-play game structure and performance. It was designed for small groups of women to watch and perform, and evolved as a solution to some of the situations that had arisen during workshops.