



ACTING TOGETHER ON THE WORLD STAGE

TOOLS FOR CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

types of performance

TYPES OF PERFORMANCE

The **Acting Together** project grew out of conversations about theatre and peacebuilding. We soon realized that the word ‘theatre’ was not broad enough to include adaptations of traditional ceremonies and some of the innovative productions (like multi-media shows in skateboard parks) that emerged in the project. We chose instead to use the word ‘performance’ – a term that includes all embodied expressions that are enacted with the intention of being witnessed.

Because of their distinctive qualities as collective, embodied expressive forms, performances offer unique opportunities for reflection, learning and imagining. This explains, in part, the potential of their power as peacebuilding resources.

The performances featured in the documentary, toolkit and anthology are diverse. Some draw on written texts and others on oral traditions. Some use scripts; others are improvisational. Most use costumes, music, coded and symbolic languages, and objects with functional, representational, or spiritual qualities. They take place on stages, to be sure, but also in buses, in playgrounds and on sacred sites.

We have found it useful to distinguish three broad types of performances: community-based theatre, artist-based theatre and traditional ritual.

Community-based theatre refers to cultural productions in which members of communities, generally with little or no theatrical training, act in fictional space and time (in a character or role) or in real space and time (as themselves). They often work under the direction of professional artists skilled both in performance practices and in community work. In community-based performance, the artistic process is understood as a potential site of relationship-building, learning and transformation, and the focus on creating powerful artistic work is always balanced with

a focus on the aesthetic, ethical and cultural dimensions of the processes of production. Participants in community-based productions bring with them embodied knowledge of local histories, cultures, and sensibilities. Performances that incorporate local knowledge – such as self-deprecating humor, slang, body language, etc. – resonate powerfully with local audiences.

Artist-based theatre refers to cultural productions in which professionally trained artists perform in fictional or real space and time, in assumed characters/roles or as themselves, with their primary focus placed on the intersection of their own self-expressive needs and the experience of the audience. Artist-based performances draw on a full range of formal elements – lighting, sounds, stage designs, etc. – as well as the skills of professional performers, such as their command of language and rhythm. They invite audience members into experiences of beauty that are transcendent, outside of the numbness of the mundane. They reach beneath people’s defenses and open them to feelings, insights and questions. The “meaning” of artist-based performance is understood to reside in the transaction between the viewer and the work so that, to some degree, audience members construct their own meanings. In the examples chosen for the **Acting Together** collection, the artists involved in artist-based theatre are attuned to and engaged with the needs and issues of their communities.



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Traditional rituals are performances in which people with generations-old community bonds perform specific actions, either as themselves or by assuming personas (as opposed to theatrical characters). Trusted and knowledgeable community leaders, often elders, supervise the processes of developing and enacting rituals, with the goal of creating spaces for transformations of various kinds. All community members participate actively, even if at the level of active witnessing; no one is a mere spectator. Traditional rituals take place in the real (as opposed to fictional) here and now; however, the cosmological significance of actions such as lighting candles, drumming, or chanting sacred texts can transport participants to the domain of the sacred. The anthropologist Victor Turner writes that such rituals become sites of “plural reflexivity,” where “a community seeks to portray, understand and then act on itself.”

Many people read judgments into these categories. The terms ‘theatre’ and ‘ritual’ have often been used to make chauvinistic distinctions between the allegedly “sophisticated” (Western European) and “primitive” (Eastern and

Southern) performance practices. Community-based theatre is often dismissed as ‘amateur,’ while artist-based theatre is judged by some to be elitist and socially irrelevant.

We take these judgments to be unfounded. In both aesthetic and socio-political terms, we found both possibilities and limitations in all of the types of performances documented in the **Acting Together** project. All types of performance can be crafted to contribute to the transformation of conflict.

Also, while these categories are useful for purposes of clarity, it is important to note that many of the artists, activists and leaders of ritual featured in the **Acting Together** project are more interested in pushing at and crossing these boundaries, combining forms in their work.

To explore the contributions of different performance types to the creative transformation of conflict, choose the corresponding navigational pathway on the toolkit disc. You will notice that many of the short videos fall into more than one category.

[Note: These comments were adapted from “Introduction: Setting the Stage” in Volume I of the anthology *Acting Together I: Resistance and Reconciliation in Regions of Violence*.]