

Stepping Stones: Engaging with Youth on Sexual Violence

Open Studio June 1, 2019

Untitled Space, Bangalore

The one-day Open Studio was envisaged as a space to showcase performances and works in progress as part of the Zubaan Stepping Stones project supported by IDRC. The overall objective of the project is to take forward discussions with young audiences on sexual violence and impunity through theatre and other performing arts.

Format:

Each presentation was about 15-20 minutes, followed by a feedback session of about 15-20 minutes. Feedback was provided by all participants/performers as well as some content specialists.

Six performances were presented. One was presented at an earlier meeting as the performers (students of Azim Premji University) were not available in June.

Performance 1

Name of participant: Andrea Pereira and students of Azim Premji University



Description of work:

Andrea had worked with eight students from the Azim Premji University (APU). The performance was built around different characters and each addressed some aspect of sex/gender based violence. Notions of societal stigma, gender stereotypes and justice were explored. Each character spoke from an independent time/space set up, but because of how they were placed on the stage and the way the performance was structured, a common line of enquiry was drawn between all the characters and episodes.

Discussion and responses:

It was felt that the students' performance was strong and that some of the characters were very characterised. Some further work needs to be done on developing the narrative and characters beyond the stereotype and getting to more substantive material in terms of the theme of sexual violence. A stronger directorial voice would be helpful and this can also be done through bringing the performers together at some point either to form a chorus or to comment on other characters in some way.

Performance 2

Name of performer: Shabari Rao



Description of work:

This one-woman performance looks at how women in positions of systemic power negotiate multiple, opposing demands. Lakshmi Nagappa, a senior police officer, is giving a talk to young college students. As a senior woman officer, how does she navigate and deploy power around class, religion, caste, gender and her position? How do personal biases and agendas play out? What is the relationship between systemic power and individual discretion when it comes to a police investigation of rape or sexual assault? This piece examines and complicates the idea of justice and explores impunity within the law enforcement system. It is a combination of realistic character work and stylized physical imagery that amplifies the power dynamics in the scene.

Discussion and responses:

The piece brought to light the complexities of the law enforcement system, and managed to touch upon many aspects of impunity within the system. Because the character was not black and white, many questions get raised in the minds of the audience. However, the character of LN is quite unapproachable and that might inhibit open and frank discussion in the later part of the performance. It was suggested that the transition from LN to SR be more obvious and a bit longer, and that the 'planted' questions be revisited outside of the character. Also, use of space can be strengthened and more use of vernacular language can be explored. Another suggestion was to tease out the notion of 'gut instinct' that police relied on, to examine stereotypes and biases that might cloud proper investigation.

Performance 3

Name of Performers: Nisha Gulur and Shreekanth Rao



Description of work:

This performance built on the presentation Nisha had made at the two-day introductory workshop at Visthar which explored her life the people in power around her who shaped her experience of being a trans person. More work had been done on the script to include many other characters all played by Shree. One aspect of Nisha's story that was brought out was that she was able to find a space where she is able to safely inhabit her sexual identity without being oppressed.

Discussion and responses:

It was felt that while the story was personal and very traumatic, it was still somewhat generic, in the sense that it did not go into any specifics of Nisha's life. However many interesting themes were addressed such as the intersection of trans people and the law. It was felt that this stand can be developed further. The idea that all the work that was expected of a trans person like Nisha is already criminalised (sex work and begging) can add to the exploration of the law and trans people.

Performance 4

Name of Performers: Vidya and Chandra Keerthi



Description of work:

Vidya and Keerthi both work with young children and so drew extensively on theater for young audiences. The set up for their show was very inviting and attractive, with many

objects, masks, musical instruments and other colorful objects placed on a low table in front of them. They used devices of folk poetry and stories familiar to children in their show and also had a component of interacting with the audience. The main themes that they wanted to address were the gender binary of boy/girl and how that gets created. They explored this theme through common children's rhymes and stories which normalize gender-based violence. Through an interactive exercise, the performance approached the phenomenon of social impunity and complicity in the perpetration of sexual violence.

Discussion and responses:

It was felt that the form that they had chosen provided a lot of scope of dealing with complex issues from a playful space and that engagement and interaction with the audience was a positive aspect. However, the themes and the way the audience engagement was set up needed more thought and address power imbalances between the performers and audience, especially when the audience was young. Also it would be helpful for them to clarify what age group they would be performing for. Some people in the audience felt that even parents would benefit from watching this performance.

Performance 5

Name of Performer: Padmalatha Ravi



Description of work:

Padma's presentation touched upon ideas of nation and nationalism, statehood and belonging, through personal memories of significant historical events, such as the assassination of Indira Gandhi, the Gujarat riots and the rape and murder of Manorama Devi in Manipur. Her work addressed the nature of memory: how different people might remember the same incident/episode differently; questions about why would people want to hold on to the memory of trauma, and how the memory of other peoples' trauma is used in many forms including putting on a T Shirt, for example. She used simple props in her performance and touched upon genres such as stand-up comedy and personal testimonial.

Discussion and responses:

The idea of nationalism being interpreted through personal experience was a strong point in Padma's work. Questions such as why do people hold on to traumatic memories, and what can one "do" with memories can be effectively addressed through this format. However, more clarity with the form and the through thread will help hold the piece together better.

Performance 6

Name of Performer: Shilok



Description of work:

Shilok's performance was a very powerfully performed personal testimonial of her life as a transwoman and her subsequent gender reassignment surgery. The material and her performance style were unflinching and that added to the strength of the presentation. The themes that she addressed were male and trans rape – personal experiences of being sexually abused as a boy, her struggles with the body that she was born with, her sex reassigning surgery and the implications and experiences of that decision. The tone of her performance particularly stood out as she did dwell too long on victimization, and instead used satire and a certain mischief.

Discussion and responses:

The powerful performance left the audience quite shaken and speechless, both because of the content and style. There was a lot of comment on the quality of her performance, that is, the way she was able to move from one idea to another without too much heaviness, even though the subject matter was so heavy. Her unflinching addressing of sexual violence against men/boys and trans persons was also commented upon as a strength. One aspect that came up was, since the performance was quite improvised, how to retain the lightness that Shilok was able to bring. This will need to be worked upon with scripting and rehearsal. One suggestion was that her passing references to the NALSA judgement, POCSO Act and Transgender Bill can be further built up during the discussion session.

Performance 7

Name of Performers: Anuradha H R and Umesh



Description of work:

Anu worked with a co-performer, Umesh. As she had discussed earlier, she worked with a story from Hindu mythology of three sisters Amba, Ambika and Ambalika. The intention was to view a familiar story from different perspectives and lenses to bring out themes of gender, sexual violence, consent, revenge and justice. The two performers were very strong and the use of the single rope as a prop as also well done.

Discussion and responses:

While the performance itself was very stylistic and effective, many people in the audience were unfamiliar with the myth and felt that it required too much effort to follow all the characters and narrative twists of the story. It was suggested that the idea of a myth can still be used along with the archetype characters and universal themes that it offers, but more discussion can be provoked by Anu and Umesh as present- day performers locating themselves outside of the myth.

Participants besides the performers: Aarti Mundkur, Rakesh Shukla, Shilpa Mudbi, Krithi Bettadh, Lekha Naidu, Supratim Bhattacharya, Bidisha Mahanta, Ishani Butalia, Laxmi Murthy.