

# De-centering Theatrical Heritage: Forum Theater in Contemporary Senegal

BRIAN QUINN

**Abstract:** The current state of Senegalese theater is a source of concern for a number of the country's most prominent directors and performers, many of whom have come to doubt the efficacy of the centralized cultural policies that have led to the construction of two grandiose national theaters just a few kilometers apart from each other in the country's congested capital of Dakar. State-subsidized theatrical productions at the *Théâtre Daniel Sorano* and, more recently, at the *Grand Théâtre National* have struggled to achieve relevance within the national cultural landscape. And yet, independent, so-called popular theater troupes continue to spread if not thrive, largely ignored by both official cultural policy and scholarship on Senegalese theater and performance. This article explores the work of an independent forum theater troupe called *Kaddu Yaraax*, which has managed to establish an international profile and become a de facto role model for countless community-based independent theater troupes throughout Senegal. Much of *Kaddu Yaraax*'s success can be linked to its decision to work exclusively in the form of forum theater, as inspired by the performance philosophy of late Brazilian theater artist and activist Augusto Boal. I will argue that dramaturgical decisions necessary in the process of creating what is called a popular theatrical performance compel companies such as *Kaddu Yaraax* to address questions of Senegalese theatrical heritage and to position themselves vis-à-vis notions of pre-colonial, colonial and contemporary performance. These stakes are made apparent through an exploration of the performative architecture that troupes employ.

## Introduction

Senegalese popular theater is often criticized, dismissed even, as amateurish due in part to its characteristic exclusion of literary writing practices. Shows of this kind are rarely written down, let alone published, and there is no direct authorial relationship between an individual and the final content of what is presented before an audience.<sup>1</sup> An additional critique of popular theater in Africa in general has highlighted the fine line it treads between serving anti-authoritarian populist objectives and installing another mechanism of top-down moralizing characteristic of state-centered discourse. Indeed, the popular works in Senegal, as elsewhere, often veer toward the authoritarian end of this line, finding it difficult to refuse the not-so-disinterested aid proffered by political leaders and foreign NGOs. Yet forms of popular theater continue to thrive throughout the country, especially if one compares them to the small creative output of institutions such as the country's two large national theaters, both of which struggle to attract enough theater-goers to justify a full-blown theatrical production. Surely, imperfect though it may be in carrying out its promise of social

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transformation as inspired by the work of progressive thinkers such as Paulo Freire, by virtue of its imprint on the creative landscape and collective imaginary popular theater must be included in any discussion of contemporary arts in Senegal and their potential to promote a so-called *nouveau type de Sénégalais*.<sup>2</sup>

The term “popular theater” in fact proves too broad in the Senegalese context, where “popular” has often come to indicate any theatrical work created outside the country's state-run theatrical structures.<sup>3</sup> For the sake of clarity, I would like to focus on the specific case of Senegal's primary forum theater company, also described as a leader in the realm of “popular” theater, *Kaddu Yaraax*, whose name means “word,” or “voice” of Yaraax, the neighborhood from which these performers hail, located in Dakar's *Baie de Hann* and inhabited by a poor community of fishermen. I will suggest that such so-called popular companies should not be assessed solely by how they may or may not advance literary practices in theater, or through a discussion of how effectively they execute attempts to form an anti-authoritarian theater for the oppressed. Beyond these otherwise important concerns, it is essential to also consider troupes' modes of innovation and transmission within a theatrical heritage that ranges from pre-colonial times to the present. My argument is intended to address simultaneously calls for a more text-based approach to popular theater, as well as past writing on the practice of theater for development in Africa.<sup>4</sup> The latter have often focused on the failure of popular theater forms to abide by Paulo Freire's conceptual framework without instating the very kind of authoritarian discourse the Brazilian philosopher and educator wished to circumvent. However, aside from trying to remain faithful to theorists such as Freire and, from a theatrical perspective, Brazilian artist and political dissident Augusto Boal, in its work, *Kaddu Yaraax* is also situating itself as an innovator within a broader theatrical landscape, and is wresting the transmission of Senegalese theatrical heritage from the control of top-heavy, state-centered institutions.<sup>5</sup> A fuller appreciation of this heritage component in the work of independent theatrical groups will highlight the symbolic importance of adapting a performative architecture inspired by contemporary notions of pre-colonial African performance, especially as this flexibility in performative architecture is so lacking within the confines of national theatrical structures.

### Theater Within the “Pôle Officiel”

If seen solely from the vantage point of the country's state-funded theatrical institutions, contemporary Senegalese theater would appear to be at a rather disquieting standstill. For years, Léopold Sédar Senghor's *Théâtre Daniel Sorano*—inaugurated in 1965 as the paragon of a nationalist cultural production driven by Négritude ideology—has struggled to attract audiences. The drama department of the *Ecole Nationale des Arts*, which once supplied *Sorano* with its performers, has yet to recover from an enrollment crisis and hopes to receive enough applications from candidates in the 2013-14 academic year to justify funding an incoming class.<sup>6</sup> And as the paint still dries on the *Grand Théâtre National*, one of the truly grandiose *grands projets* pushed forward by former president Abdoulaye Wade, the structure has yet to demonstrate how it will live up to its promise of enhancing Senegal's prominence on the global theatrical stage.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the most commonly cited stormy petrel for the official pole of theater is the lack of up-and-coming, or even aspiring new playwrights hoping to carry on the stage tradition of literary pioneers such as Cheikh Aliou Ndao, Marouba Fall, or Boubacar Boris Diop.

Before we conclude that the place of theater in Senegal has diminished to a state of irrelevance vis-à-vis its national audiences, however, we might first ask just what the term "theater" evokes in the collective national imaginary, not only within official circles, but also on the proverbial street. Because of organizations like the ubiquitous, locally organized *Associations Sportives et Culturelles*, along with nationally coordinated theatrical youth groups such as the *Association des artistes comédiens du théâtre sénégalais* (ARCOTS), and the nightly televised sketches often sold on the street in DVD form and referred to by the Senegalese as being "*du théâtre*," despite never having been performed in front of a live audience, national understandings of theater have expanded beyond the typical Western vision of the crafted theatrical text performed on a proscenium-style stage for an audience of paying theatergoers.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, today in Senegal one finds multiple forms of a non-official theater, often called "popular," which in the past few decades has far outpaced its official, state-funded counterpart in adapting to the tastes and sensibilities of its national audience.

While productions at the *Théâtre Daniel Sorano* are performed to near empty houses, events produced by the *ARCOTS* branches of urban areas such as Pikine are often full beyond capacity and feature performers widely recognized from their work in television or with popular theater festivals. In seeking to explain the ubiquitous phenomenon of popular theater in contemporary Senegalese life, Director of Culture for the City of Dakar, Oumar Ndao, assesses the situation by pointing out: "We have more actors per square meter than any other country in the world. Here everyone is an actor, since everyone has performed with their ASC at one point or another."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, casual observations evince a Senegalese preference for forms of theater outside of the official, nationalist pole of cultural production. "And yet," Ndao continues, "we don't produce good theater." With the lack of training and resources for drama in Senegal, especially on the local level, popular performances can indeed often appear thrown together, or even amateurish, as Ndao suggests, a point which may in part explain the lack of critical interest in these works. Yet, questions of quality notwithstanding, the social implications of this theater come to the fore when considered as a foil to more formalized works of state-driven theater. Given the lack of audiences and scarcity of resources at official state institutions of culture, popular theater groups have today taken on the role of transmitting what they see as an important national theatrical heritage. Of course this transmission does not take place without new interpretations and performative innovations regarding what such a heritage must represent and defend.

A brief look at the *Kaddu Yaraax* company's artistic background, as well as the creative choices made throughout its development, will serve to highlight the historical and artistic stakes involved in this troupe's work, as well as how their performances fit within the broader dynamic of a Senegalese theatrical heritage as performed and produced by so-called popular theater companies.

### **Folklore, Transmission and Theatrical Heritage**

Like countless other Senegalese youths, the founding members of *Kaddu Yaraax* had their first encounter with theater through their local *Association Sportive et Culturelle* in the neighborhood of Tableau Ferraille. Organized locally and operating throughout the country, these *ASCs* enable young Senegalese to form their own troupes in order to take part in theatrical competitions through the *Nawetaan* initiative, a nationwide program providing schoolchildren with a range of activities during the summer vacation. Representing their community in a series of regional contests, the group of friends that would later form the

*Kaddu Yaraax* troupe quickly made a name for itself by taking home numerous awards in the performance form known as *théâtre total*. This form obligatorily includes four separate performance elements: a folkloric scene, a theatrical play, a chorus, and a dance.<sup>10</sup>

Additional points were attributed to groups managing to connect these with some kind of narrative through line. "For us it wasn't a game," explains the company's director Mouhamadou Diol, who insists that from the beginning the group saw its activities as part of a larger artistic vocation. "We used to read plays and wanted to inform ourselves on the theater."<sup>11</sup>

The group developed its technique, its members familiarizing themselves over the course of several years with the modes of African folklore, dance, and music taught and disseminated through the *Nawetaan* initiative. As a performer and artist, Diol does not denounce the role of folklore in African creation. He describes such practices as "What we have naturally. I mean, as Africans, we just know how to dance and play music." This position in relation to folklore has meant that *Kaddu Yaraax*'s theater has not sought to problematize notions of an essentialist African "soul" transmitted through performance, even as the troupe has drawn inspiration from non-African theatrical theories and practices. Diol does not disavow this folkloric aspect of what he considers the national Senegalese character. However, he does problematize its current place in theatrical productions. "It's who we are," he continues, "but I don't think that, on its own, it constitutes a work of art."<sup>12</sup> For Diol, in fact, the first critical response to the theatrical heritage of his country consisted not of criticizing the folkloric content of *Nawetaan* performances, but rather in denouncing the form imposed by these competitions of *théâtre total*. The competitive nature of these events appeared to preclude any artistic innovation and performances were assessed according to their ability to meet pre-established criteria of form.

Diol's greatest objection to these events was that they reinforced colonial historical constructs, acting according to ethnographic notions of authenticity and portraying the African performer as static, in a sense, frozen in time. This objection resonates clearly with the colonial origins of competitions such as those of the *Nawetaan* events, which, in fact, find historical roots in a form of theater that had emerged through the activities of the *centres culturels* of French West Africa.<sup>13</sup> These colonial institutions rose to prominence in the 1950s, when they would replace the prestigious *écoles normales* as the most visible promoters of so-called indigenous performance forms and styles in French West Africa.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, as the French authorities began to sense their waning influence, cultural institutions doubled down in their activities, deploying time and resources to a regional theatrical competition among *centres culturels* throughout then French West Africa (*Afrique occidentale française*, AOF) in an attempt to foment a sense of cultural solidarity not only between each colony and its ruling administration, but also among the colonies themselves, thus instantiating a fabricated notion of a common, French, West African identity. Much as with the *Nawetaan* events today, theatrical competitions among *centres culturels* took place in a series of local and regional rounds, with a final performance/competition held annually at the *Théâtre du Palais* in Dakar, where decisions of the mixed jury of French and African judges would often be hotly contested. In search of the notoriety that would come with being the prevailing *centre* of a given year, companies often threw themselves into the faithful representation of an African theater whose form and contours had in fact been established by an interested colonial authority.

Given their lasting impression on events such as the contemporary *Nawetaan* competitions, the *centres culturels* represent an important historical phase in the fabrication

of today's idea of *théâtre total* in Senegal. This genre of performance, mixing traditional dance, music, and folklore in fact finds its origins further back in the colonial period, with the theater produced at the *écoles normales* of the AOF, most notably the William Ponty school, where young African students were encouraged to use their familiarity with Western dramaturgy to recreate and perform aspects of indigenous culture, history, and mythology. The beginnings of *théâtre total* came about with the students' desire to infuse Western-inspired dramaturgy with notions of traditional or folkloric culture performed so as to highlight the students' potential for assimilation through France's civilizing precepts. Decades later, as the *écoles normales* lost their prominence in indigenous education, this "Africanized" style of theater was seized upon by administrators of the *centres culturels*, which, to create an evaluative system for the purposes of their competitions, assessed and divided the performances into discrete generic categories in order to establish the structure of what juries could consider the ideal work of *théâtre total*, an ideal intended to exert a strong influence on notions of identity and participation among local African audiences. The criteria employed to evaluate troupes' performances at the AOF-wide competition had a sufficiently enduring effect on notions of theater in Senegal to have carried over to evaluative criteria used to judge a *Nawetaan* performance today.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, by denouncing this criteria-driven approach to folklore in performance, *Kaddu Yaraax*'s artistic director was consciously walking away from the disavowed imprint of these competitions on much of what is today called *théâtre populaire*.

Diol is therefore elucidating one of *Kaddu Yaraax*'s most important initial artistic insights as a company when he explains the troupe's early desire to break away from the *Nawetaan* vision of theater. As the *Kaddu Yaraax* members were able to sense at their creative beginnings, and as Diol now explains, "in fact, *théâtre total* really means *théâtre colonisé*."<sup>16</sup> This comparison is not only a comment on *théâtre total*'s roots in the colonial cultural policy of the AOF, but also refers to Diol's objections to this theater's insistence on moralizing to its audience, a prime feature of a theatrical approach whose main goal was once to produce a greater number of *évolués* through Francophone colonial culture. Indeed, once they had become multiple *Nawetaan* awardees, the troupe soon found itself confronted consistently with a formidable artistic dilemma. "With the contests, you could be creative, but only within certain constraints," explains Diol. "And the format was always slightly political. Troupes were expected to use their shows to convey some kind of lesson, saying 'when there's a strike you shouldn't go around demolishing buses,' and so on." It is at this point that Diol and his companions decided to break away from the stylized mores of their *Nawetaan* co-competitors and began seeking out a more politically incisive means of presenting their work. "We realized that we could improve our performances greatly if we cut out the advice."<sup>17</sup> It is a decision which marked a turning point for the company while also presenting a formidable challenge: how to present a theatrical message to an audience without engaging, however so subtly, in what one might call "moralizing"?

In 1998, the group, having become independent of its ASC and taking on its current name of *Kaddu Yaraax*, created a new performance piece called *Yakaar* ("Hope"). In this original creation, the group did away with the mixed, "Africanized" performance modes it had adapted at its beginnings and developed the following message, summarized by Diol as, "If you want to develop something, a project or whatever, you must begin by developing yourself."<sup>18</sup> The main objective of the work was to reveal the ideological faults and practical shortcomings of seeing the country's problems as always coming from abroad, usually from the West. At this point, the company's primary mission was to produce a theater that would

encourage positive change in everyday behavior as a means for developing solutions to larger societal issues. The troupe also decided to remove as much as possible the moralizing component from their work, although it quickly became apparent that a moralizing message was still present implicitly in their performances. In their search to make good on a promise to commit to a form of theater that was not only dialogical but multi-logical, the members of *Kaddu Yaraax* would make their next important artistic discovery with their first encounter with the form of forum theater.

### The Forum-géew

In 2002, Kaddu Yaraax discovered forum theater at a training workshop offered by the *Institut Français* in Dakar and run by Burkinabe performing artist Prosper Kampaoré.<sup>19</sup> Forum theater is a performance method originally developed in the 1960s by Brazilian artist and political dissident Augusto Boal as part of his larger vision of a "Theater of the Oppressed." Since its development, this technique for using theater as a tool for political activism and social dialogue has gained popularity around the globe, and today a broad network of performers and activists works to promote forum theater as a means of empowerment for oppressed populations.<sup>20</sup> Boal's 1979 book *Theater of the Oppressed* elaborates on the structure and phases of forum theater, which, in the vein of Bertolt Brecht's "V-effekt," seeks to countervail Aristotelian processes of dramatic catharsis.<sup>21</sup> Taking Brecht's position of anti-empathetic distance one step further, Boal advocates a theater in which spectators, or as he calls them, "spect-actors," are incited to act immediately on stage to embody the type of social or behavioral changes necessary to address a given problem. To begin, actors present a short scenario in which a person or group is the victim of some form of oppression. Once the actors have performed their scene, a "joker" intervenes to solicit reactions from the audience. When the spectators have affirmed that what has taken place on stage could be improved upon toward a more equitable end, the troupe encourages them to take on the status of "spect-actor," stepping on stage themselves to replace one of the actors and modify the scene's outcome. Additional spect-actors are then asked to join in, and an open-form creative dialogue ensues wherein the stage becomes the facilitator of collaborative problem solving and discussion.

From the moment of this initial contact with forum theater, *Kaddu Yaraax* decided to dedicate their work exclusively to the form. In fact, what they call the suppleness of the forum theater form appealed first to the troupe's desire to use their work to engage with local audiences and address difficulties confronted on a daily basis to further their movement toward a more politically engaged theater. An additional benefit of this shift to forum theater was the adaptation of an architecture of performance that moved away from the folkloric or moralizing theater performed at the group's ASC and toward a form that bore important similarities with the *géew*, or the circle formed by residents of a village or neighborhood for a meeting, ritual or performance, and a performative structure with which Senegalese audiences would be quite familiar. For Diol, the reference point for the use of the *géew* in performance is a study by Alioune Oumy Diop, called *Le théâtre traditionnel au Sénégal*.<sup>22</sup> Diol cites this work as one of the earliest influences in his search for a means of creating theater in an African mode that does not fall into the trap of facile reenactments of African folklore or mythology. Diop's study provided the opportunity for an artistic melding of theatrical approaches, now central to *Kaddu Yaraax*'s work, which draws from pertinent outside theoretical writings and frameworks, while tapping into the collective

Senegalese imaginary for ways of setting the theatrical stage. In effect, it is the architecture of such so-called traditional performance forms that have proven useful to the company more than the folkloric content often associated with it.

Scholar and stage director Diop in his book offers a strong practical undergirding for directors who, like Diol, find the common folkloric approach rife with colonial undertones. Diop argues that, "the content of the performance must not consist of folklore set to music or dance that is simply ready for consumption. It must be an instrument of social transformation through its direct action upon its society."<sup>23</sup> The idea of the social function of theater has been central to discussions of Senegalese theater, beginning with Bakary Traoré's 1958 seminal work, *Le Théâtre Nègro-Africain et ses fonctions sociales*. Much like *Kaddu Yaraax's* president and members, Diop is highly critical of staging folklore for folklore's sake. Like director Diol, however, he by no means dismisses all use of traditionalist or folkloric sources in contemporary Senegalese theater. To the contrary, Diop argues that Senegalese performers have a fruitful though underused architecture of traditional performance at their disposal in Senegalese performative practices that remains underrepresented in official theater to this day. He further argues that, while the exteriors of folkloric theater, checkered with the pitfalls of exoticism, are overused, elements of form from pre-colonial theater remain underused by performers despite their potential for reviving a potent and dynamic theatrical scene in Senegal.

For Diop, the most important of these forms of theatrical architecture is the *géeuw*, wherein communities create an impromptu, circular performance space for a theatrical or ritual performance, where one went "to see and be seen," a connection he makes with the role of the *theatron* in Ancient Greece.<sup>24</sup> This particular performance layout has much in common with the West's theater-in-the-round, but also includes a communitarian aspect, since the *géeuw* is place-specific and ideally conceived for and by the community in which it is formed. In fact, far from constituting a mere practical detail of the performance, the *géeuw* posits an entire theatrical architecture that one does not find, for example, in the stone constructions of Senegal's two opulent national theaters.

While discussions of what is often seen as the current dearth of theatrical production in Senegal often focus on the lack of written works for the theater - an observation which, in effect, opposes the "literary" theater of official national culture and the "merely popular" theater found in community centers - altogether different possibilities emerge when the focus shifts to these questions of "architectures" of performance.<sup>25</sup> Diop, for example, insists that in order for Senegalese theater to thrive, it must do away with the physical and ontological separation imposed by Western drama between audience and performer. Oumar Ndao shares in this sentiment when he relates theater's current state to its architecture in both the literal and figurative sense. "Today, we've put ourselves into all kinds of cornered constructions with right angles. We've cut ourselves off from each other. We've left the circle." Ndao thus joins Diop in suggesting that the national theaters do more to achieve a suppleness of form as they work to attract audiences. Unfortunately, the task is made difficult by the Western conventions of the proscenium adopted by both national theaters, where, as Ndao explains, "everyone consumes his product individually - but for us theater is meant to be a collective consumption!"<sup>26</sup>

While state-funded theatrical organizations continue to struggle to marry Western theatrical conventions with more locally inspired performance forms, independent companies have had greater success employing the principles of the performance circle, or *géeuw*, within the communities where they perform. The case of *Kaddu Yaraax* adds an

additional layer in the performance hybrid by combining the notion of the *géew* with the advantages of the contemporary activist form of forum theater. For Diol, forum theater provides an opportunity to divest popular performances of their often moralizing tone, to perform in accordance with the *géew*, and thereby to promote and transmit a form of Senegalese heritage that can be innovated upon and seeks to address important social issues. The choice of the form was therefore paramount in the company's development. As we shall see in the description of one of its events, however, attempts at realizing each of these visions would prove fraught with their own challenges.

### **The Forum at Work: Case Study of a *Kaddu Yaraax* Performance**

On June 4, 2013, the *Kaddu Yaraax* company was called upon to create a forum piece on the difficulties experienced and posed by Dakar's large number of *marchands ambulants*, the blanket term used in this case for vendors on foot as well as those who set up temporary stalls. For several weeks the city had been grappling with security and safety issues related to the presence of these vendors in its streets and public squares. In the midst of this citywide debate, the municipality of the commune of Sicap-Liberté had just rendered an executive decision to remove the vendors who for decades could be found working each day on the public square of the *Marché Ndiago* in the neighborhood of Liberté 2. The expulsion was rendered down without local consultation and was certain to have a devastating effect on these vendors and their ability to support themselves. However, municipal authorities cited issues of safety and sanitation as deciding factors, a justification which seemed to satisfy many within the local community despite the lack of input from the vendors themselves. It was in the face of this one-way authoritarian decision-making and heightened tension within the community that the neighboring cultural center, *Kër Thiossane*, decided to sponsor a forum theater presentation and debate bringing together vendors, city officials and local residents.

The performance took place on the same public square where the vendors would typically be found at their tables, selling their wares. At the time of the performance, the site had already been cleared out by the town hall. When *Kaddu Yaraax* arrived, its members hung the company banner alongside the façade of a house on the square, demarcating the performance space, which created a circular area quickly surrounded by spectators. Groups of children were seated on large mats on the ground. Chairs were set out for older members of the community. The expelled vendors were present, but remained off to the side, sitting along a building on an adjacent side of the square. The performance began with a warm-up, led by the show's designated "joker," who first engaged the children in a few dancing games and exercises. He then used the microphone placed in the middle of the circle to announce to the neighborhood that a performance and discussion were about to take place on the matter of the street vendors who had just been expelled from the very square where the audience was seated. The announcement attracted more people and by the time the performance began the size of the crowd had doubled within the space of approximately ten minutes, with some straddlers standing in the street and watching from afar.

The troupe began with its usual opener, a short sequence in which the performers are divided into two groups, one yelling *Waaw, waaw*, ("Yes, yes!") the other responding *Dédéét* ("No!") while pulling at a pantomimed rope in an imaginary game of tug-of-war. The joker stopped the group and asked them if there was any way they might turn the yes into a no or the no into a yes. Both groups refused, pulling at their end of the imaginary rope until the

joker stepped in the middle and snapped it, sending both groups flying. The sight gag earned a hearty laugh from the children in the audience. The joker then announced the troupe as the company *Kaddu Yaraax*. They performed a succinct explanation of what forum theater is, telling the audience that the show that was about to take place included three stages. First, the troupe would perform a scene while the audience watched. Then, the audience would be asked to give their opinion on the behavior of each character in the scene, with an open vote to decide which characters displayed good behavior (these were allowed to rest in the shade), which displayed bad behavior (these were made to wait out in the sun), and which had behavior that was somewhere in the middle (these were left in between the shady and sunny spots in the performance space). In the last stage, the audience would be invited to replace the actors on stage to improve whatever behavior they perceived as lacking. The joker then asked the audience members to commit to their active participation, sending the actors to have certain spectators sign a pantomimed pact of participation.

The performance then began, with two actresses portraying female produce vendors tending their respective tables while in the middle of a heated discussion. One was reprimanding the other, clearly her senior, for never properly cleaning up after herself at the end of the day and never sweeping up or collecting her garbage. The elder vendor replied by stating that she often had less energy than her younger colleague who should, above all, be showing respect to those who had played an instrumental role in establishing the vendor community on that particular square. As the discussion continued, an older gentleman in traditional dress entered and scolded the women for always leaving the square such a mess. He stated that years ago people in the neighborhood used to be able to convene on the square, but now the site is too dirty for one to stop and pray. He then stormed off, having said his piece. The next character was one of the public servants known locally as "*les duty*." These are ambulant tax collectors in charge of collecting a daily fee from each of the vendors for the right to set up shop in a public space. After a brief interaction with the audience, the collector approached the two vendors, expecting payment, otherwise, he said, he would give the women a ticket. The vendors, however, were unable to pay the tax, since they had just arrived on the square. They pleaded with the collector to return later in the day when they would have sold something and would thus be able to pay. They also protested fervently at the amount of the tax, which they said represented too substantial a portion of their pay and has not resulted in any of the services the tax revenue is partially intended to fund, such as water sources, local security guards, and public cleaning services. Unwilling to wait until later in the day, the collector handed down a fine and stormed off.

A by-stander, having witnessed the previous scene, then approached the vendors acknowledging the difficulty of their situation, but saying that she could not feel sorry for them. As a resident of the neighborhood she lamented the fact that the square had become so dirty that her children could no longer play there. She also explained that one of her children had recently hurt himself on a throwaway utensil left behind by one of the vendors and had to go to the hospital for treatment. Visibly upset by this, the vendors apologized, explaining that they were unaware of the incident. After effusive apologies, however, they also insisted that the residents should be supporting the vendors who, for decades, have provided a useful service to local families, often delivering goods directly to their clients' homes. Since residents have come to expect the convenience of such a service, they should also be willing to accept the vendors' presence on the square. At this point, a municipal employee abruptly burst on stage, reprimanding the two women for continuing to sell on

the square when they had yet to respond to three consecutive summonses to appear at the town hall. After an additional kerfuffle, he proceeded to expel the women as they pleaded with him to leave them be since they needed to sell in order to provide for their families.

At the end of this short scene, the audience applauded and the joker once again took the stage. He asked for reactions to the behavior of each character, challenging some to explain why they thought certain characters should be left in the shade or the sun. The children initially insisted that the vendors should be placed in the sun, since they had not obtained the necessary authorization and were a nuisance to the neighborhood. However, after some interjections from the elder members of the community as well as from the vendors themselves, seated far off to the side but within earshot, it was generally agreed upon that they might instead find a way to coordinate with the vendors. This shift in the tone of the discussion took place with little direct intervention on the part of the joker. In fact, the forum had openly aired a latent indifference to the vendors' predicament that had facilitated the group's expulsion but, once stated in the open, was fervently opposed by many of the elder audience members. In the end, there was no obvious consensus and so the vendors were left in the middle, between the sun and the shade.

Once verdicts were rendered on each character's behavior, it was time for the audience to interact in a reprisal of sections of the scene. This began with children stepping up to replace the tax collector. Between the ages of twelve and sixteen, the young "spect-actors" began by chastising the vendors for not studying hard in school or acquiring some kind of trade so that they would not find themselves in such a predicament. Objections soon arose from the other community figures, and the children decided to step down when asked by the joker how this remark might offer any kind of solution to the problem. When the joker again asked the audience how the vendors might have changed their behavior, one of the actual vendors, visibly the doyenne, stepped forward and delivered an adamant and emotional objection to being thrown out of a neighborhood where she had been working for over fifty years. Clearly shaken up by the experience of her expulsion from the square, she returned the microphone after a heartfelt testimonial and left both the circle and the performance. At this point a teenager stepped forward to suggest that the vendors take the time to clean up after they have finished their work, since cleanliness was one of the major complaints of local residents as well as the commune's main pretext for throwing them out. The vendors then insisted that they have always cleaned up their areas before leaving the square, but that there are others who consistently neglect to do so, thus giving the whole group a bad image and reputation. At this point the joker asked if some kind of organizational scheme could not be created in order to ensure that each vendor left the public square as clean as it was when he or she arrived that day. This idea was met with general approval from vendors and the audience. After some further discussion on the details of such an idea, the show came to a close on the conclusion that a solution was possible, but that it would take further work and dialogue on the part of the community. The groups present agreed to continue to seek out an agreement in this manner, and *Kaddu Yaraax* offered to return to facilitate a follow-up performance and forum.

*Kaddu Yaraax's* performances nearly always end with a sense of open-endedness whereby no definitive resolution is achieved. This lack of resolution is, in fact, built into the framework of forum theater, for Boal argues that the audience's energy to react politically must not be drained vicariously through the arc of the story on stage.<sup>27</sup> Instead, the conflict at hand must remain unresolved on stage, as it is in life. Forum performers do not attempt to provide audiences with answers to their problems, but rather aspire to serve as a catalyst

for the kind of social dialogue that might lead to a workable solution. In this case, the forum process effectively uncovered at least one important point that had not been addressed in the one-way political discourse leading up to the expulsion, which was that the community could try to implement an organizational scheme to ensure that each vendor clean up his or her section. Aside from this point, written into the play were a number of other latent issues, which could have been taken up by the discussion but were left aside. For example, in the exchange between the vendors and the tax collector, audience members could have asked why the tax could not instead be collected later in the day, after the vendors have sold something and are in a better position to pay. Furthermore, spect-actors might have wondered where this tax revenue winds up if, as the vendors contend, it does not go into the improvement of conditions in public spaces like the *Marché Ndiago*. These potential points of dialogue were worked into the show following an initial research phase, during which the company integrated to the performance feedback from vendors, residents and local authorities. Unlike the moralizing theater from which the troupe is continually distancing itself, however, these performances resist forcing issues that are not willingly adopted by the public and so constitute a more dialogical exchange between actors and audience.

For all of their merits as social theater, these forum works are not without shortcomings, as Diol willingly admits himself. For starters, although this particular performance takes place among the local community, it has been commissioned and funded by *Kër Thiossane*, an internationally supported cultural organization, thus introducing a problematic patron-client relationship between *Kër Thiossane* and *Kaddu Yaraax*, who naturally wish to satisfy their patron in the hopes of receiving future commissions. Furthermore, within the audience, Diol admits that the troupe is not always successful in countering the overbearing effect of certain authority figures in a given community, who may be present at a show and can tend to monopolize a discussion, even bring it to a halt. This indeed nearly happened at the *Kër Thiossane* event, when it seemed that one of the actual tax collectors might intervene forcefully and take over the discussion. Finally, the performances end with the hope that there will be a follow-up, which, by the company's admission, does not always happen for lack of time or funding.

### **The Forum Effect in Contemporary Senegal?**

Even with these criticisms in mind, it remains that *Kaddu Yaraax* has managed to have a visible and lasting impact on the theatrical landscape of the country. On one hand we may consider some of the real political resistance that the company has encountered in recent years in response to its work. The troupe became deeply engaged politically in opposition to the actions and abuses of former president Abdoulaye Wade, most notably in its 2011 performance "*C'est simple comme Mbane*" ("It's as easy as Mbane"), which toured around the country denouncing Wade's anti-democratic decision to install a "*délégation spéciale*" in the locality of Mbane in order to offset the political weight of a region where his party had just lost representatives in local elections. The troupe satirized the president's party, the *Parti Démocratique Sénégalais* (PDS), as the *Parti Djaay Suuf* (*Parti des Vendeurs de Terre*, or Party of Land Sellers), in response to Wade's covert sale of public land throughout the country, especially in the Dakar region. The troupe members also nearly found themselves in prison due to a heavy-handed reaction by authorities to a performance in Casamance of their creation "*Monsieur Casamance*," on the separatist movement in that region.

Beyond its frequent run-ins with political power, however, the troupe has also played a decisive role in transmitting a certain form of Senegalese theatrical heritage among other independent troupes around the country, one that responds innovatively to Senegal's theatrical past as well as to the pressing political issues of the moment. Indeed, there are distinctive echoes of *Kaddu Yaraax*'s most salient themes and images that resound throughout the landscape of local, activist theater in Senegal. Troupes frequently make direct reference to *Kaddu Yaraax*'s work in performance creations. Thus, *Kaddu Yaraax*'s creation entitled *La Baie de Hann n'est pas une poubelle* ("The Bay of Hann is not a Garbage Can") soon inspired another creation called *Kaolack n'est pas une poubelle*, performed in the city of Kaolack. *Kaddu Yaraax* also toured a show addressing the thousands of Senegalese attempting to emigrate to Europe clandestinely by *pirogue*, a phenomenon that had a particularly devastating effect on Yaraax given its location on the Baie de Hann, from which the boats would often embark on the treacherous journey northward. The company's performance was entitled *Partir, ne pas partir* ("To Go, or Not to Go") and inspired a number of variations on the theme, with spin-offs that often even took the same title as the original production and always included a number of direct acknowledgements of the work of *Kaddu Yaraax* and of the impact they have had on Senegalese performance. In fact, within the same neighborhood of Yaraax, such a show was performed in the community's small circular performance area, or *géeew*, by a young company named *Kaddu Askan Bi* (Voice of the People), a clear reference to the presence and success of the group's elder and respected colleagues.

In the absence of an effective official pole in Senegalese theater, companies such as *Kaddu Yaraax* have carried on the torch when it comes to transmitting national theatrical heritage to the next generation of performers. The sheer frequency and long-standing presence of what are often called popular theater shows stand as evidence that an effective transmission is, indeed, taking place, though more so through small, independent companies than through the large state-funded edifices such as the national theaters or the *Ecole Nationale des Arts*. While these forms of popular theater are often dismissed as non-literate, amateurish, and ephemeral, in fact many of these companies, like *Kaddu Yaraax*, are mounting a conscious defense of their own philosophical, historical, and political positions through the way in which they endeavor to set the stage. Although they remove the role of the playwright and greatly reduce the place of written culture in their work, the decisions of these popular theater troupes respond directly to a longer theatrical history in Senegal, where, while the official pole of theatrical creation has ostensibly withered, the non-official continues to expand.

## Notes

- 1 The hierarchy of a high, literary theatrical culture sitting atop the "paratheatrical" devices of an illiterate populist theater was present as early as Mbengue's document on cultural policy in 1973.
- 2 Freire 1970. Freire's critique of what he called the "banking" approach to education was taken on by many theater practitioners in the hopes of subverting authoritarian approaches to interpersonal relations in theater and, more broadly, in society at large.
- 3 Desai 1990. Desai focuses on "popular" as a term of functional discourse that defies any

- rigid definition or categorization.
- 4 Fall 1984, and Kidd and Kumar 1981; Kidd and Byram 1982; Kerr 1995.
  - 5 Boal 1979. Boal's model for a "Theater of the Oppressed" sought to apply Freire's ideas to a performance form that promoted freedom from authoritarian discourse and oppression.
  - 6 Diop, Mamadou. 2012. Director of the drama department at the *Ecole Nationale des Arts*. Personal interview, Dakar, Senegal. 9 December (transcript in author's possession).
  - 7 Mbengue, Mocodou. 2012. Personal interview, *Grand Théâtre*, Dakar, Senegal. 27 June (transcript in author's possession). At the time, Mbengue was the artistic director for the theatrical program of the *Grand Théâtre*, which sought to distinguish itself from the *Théâtre Sorano* through the international scope of its productions.
  - 8 A situation first spurred on by prominent theatrical troupes like *Daaray Kocc*, which produced filmed productions of theatrical works for television. Today this tradition is carried on by the popular sketches performed by troupes such as *Sa Neex*.
  - 9 Ndao, Oumar. 2012. Personal interview, Dakar municipal building, Dakar, Senegal. 3 July (transcript in author's possession). All English translations are my own.
  - 10 Diol, Mouhamadou. 2012. Personal interview, Dakar, Senegal. 3 December (transcript in author's possession).
  - 11 Diol, Mouhamadou. 2013. Personal interview, Dakar, Senegal. 6 June (transcript in author's possession).
  - 12 Ibid.
  - 13 Jézéquel 1996.
  - 14 Mbaye 2006
  - 15 *Archives Nationales de Dakar*, 069(31), documents on the *centres culturels*. These criteria included a focus on comedy, drama and folklore. As with today's *Nawetaan* events, troupes were expected to integrate each of these through discrete sections that would be linked together by a single through line or theme. Sow, 2004 provides an example of the judging criteria implemented today for *théâtre total*.
  - 16 Ndao. 2012 interview, op. cit.
  - 17 Diol. 2012 interview, op cit.
  - 18 Ibid.
  - 19 Founder of the *Atelier Théâtre Burkinabé*.
  - 20 [www.theatreoftheoppressed.org](http://www.theatreoftheoppressed.org) keeps a running directory of troupes throughout the world, and helps promote several international forum theater festivals, including the one organized annually in Dakar by *Kaddu Yaraax*.
  - 21 Boal 1979; Brecht 1964.
  - 22 Diop 1990.
  - 23 Ibid., p. 21.
  - 24 Ibid., p. 26.
  - 25 See Fall 1984. Fall reflects the opinion of many of his fellow creators when he calls for a popular theater, but one that places prime importance on the written text of the play.
  - 26 Diop. 2012 interview, op.cit.
  - 27 Boal 2002, p. 274.

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