Participatory Theatre as a Communication Tool for Development and Social Change in the City

A Case Study: The Johannesburg Literary Site-Specific Theatre Project

Patricia Calvo Garrido
Abstract

This research studies how participatory theatre (PT) as a communication tool can promote development and social change in the city. Using a project developed in Johannesburg (SA) that engages the city’s socio-spatial concerns through performance, the paper analyses the participatory creative process utilised and in which ways it opened a space for debate and critical thinking. The objects of the study are the medium (the theatre), the context (the urban) and the creative stakeholders (the participants) and how they influence each other when creating the fictional space of the performance.

The findings suggest that, after participating in the performance’s making process, stakeholders have enhanced their ability to connect their lived experiences with the social-spatial issues of the city and have a better knowledge of the topics covered in the play. One significant aspect of this project is that the participatory approach has given participants a unique opportunity to exchange personal views of the city and find commonalities, and theatre has provided the medium to represent, negotiate and transform their relationship with the city.

Word count: 13,074
Acknowledgements

Writing this thesis has been a learning experience and a growth journey, both academically and personally. It was not an easy path, but luckily, many people walked along with me.

I want to thank Anders Høg Hansen for his advice and direction during these past months and the support he provides to each of his students. A big thank you also for allowing us to join such a great project, which has been enriching in many ways. Thank you to Micke Rundberg for his teaching and encouragement during our time in Johannesburg. It has been a pleasure learning from your unconventional and inspiring journey. Seeing how both of you care about your teaching and students is heartening.

Thanks also to Alex Halligey for assembling such a unique project and for the passion you have put into it. Thank you for taking such good care of us in Johannesburg, for all the talks, for always being available, and for your invaluable contribution to this thesis.

I want to thank my fellow on-site student researchers Kerstin Tschernigg and Frank Ortiz for sharing with me this fantastic experience, for always being willing to collaborate, for your precious research inputs, and, of course, for all the moments we shared in Johannesburg. Thanks also to everyone we met there for their kindness and generosity. You showed us a city full of creativity, courage, and love.

Thanks to my parents, friends, and co-workers for your support and for allowing me the me-time needed these past two years.

Finally, I thank you, Adriano, for your unconditional support. Thank you for being there when I felt I could not do it. Thank you for always celebrating my achievements joyfully (and with dinner dates). Thank you for never giving up on me and for being my life partner. This one is for you.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Background and Rationale for the Study

Since I have memory, I have experienced theatre as a tool for non-formal education: from the puppets shows in the park, the classic theatre plays we went to as extra-mural activities, to the drama lessons I received during primary school. Growing up, theatre has been an essential part of my life as a spectator and an arts and culture event producer. I have always been curious to understand the possibilities the theatrical space offered as a promoter of social change, considering it a powerful communication tool for its effectiveness in message delivery and audience engagement.

My interest in studying the use of theatre as a tool to communicate development derives from the willing to connect my previous academic and work experience in the arts and culture field with my ComDev studies and my current job in the development sector. If on the one side, theatre can be used to escape reality, as it takes the spectator to imaginary places; on the other, it is a powerful form of art to represent reality and enhance awareness of societal problems. I believe theatre, creating a fictional space, gives the possibility to challenge stereotypes and rethink a reality that otherwise can be perceived as immutable.

Developing this degree project, I wanted to understand what happens when that fictional space is created collectively and in which ways a participated creative process would challenge the participant’s preconceived notions and stereotypes about the city. From Brecht's Epic Theatre\(^1\) to Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (TO)\(^2\)

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\(^1\) In Brecht’s plays the dramatic action was episodic - a disconnected montage of scenes, non-representational staging, and the 'alienation effect'. All elements contribute to Brecht's overall purpose which was to comment on the political, social and economic elements that affected the lives of his characters. See Brecht's Theory and Style. (2012, April 23). Beckfoot School. Retrieved May 2, 2023 from https://t.ly/Rfu_  
to Theatre for Development (TfD), innumerable methodologies can provide a safe space for communities to communicate and promote change.

As Bakari argues, "Effective communication is one of the most important ways in being successful in whatever endeavour [...] people undertake" (1998, p. 115). And, as he defends, TfD – and this could be extended to other forms of participatory theatre because of its shared interactive and community-based methodology – is an effective and appropriate medium to communicate with communities.

In the Johannesburg Literary Site-Specific Theatre Project, I found the opportunity to participate as a field researcher in the performance-making process a unique chance to research the abovementioned topic and collect data that could serve future research in the field. *Breaths of Joburg*, the performance created as a result of a participatory process, represents a good case study to understand in which ways Participatory Theatre (PT) can be a communication tool to promote development in the context of the city.

*Breaths of Joburg* is a performance created for the children in the Hillbrow district to share a representation of Johannesburg's socio-spatial issues. This performance could not be encompassed within TfD as intended by Sydney (see footnote n.3) since it did not have any specific social change outcome. However, interestingly, it uses elements typical to African indigenous forms of theatre, like dances, storytelling and mime, to communicate "undesirable social conditions or anti-social behaviour for possible social remedies" (Bakari, 1998, p. 116). Such as the pre-colonial satirical dramas that exist in different African countries – i.e., *Kote-Tlon* in Mali, *Titi-ikoli* in Cameroon and the various forms existing in Tanzania for almost every ethnic group (Bakari, 1998) –, *Breaths of Joburg* uses humour to show complex issues like racism, poverty or sexual abuse. Like satirical dramas, too, it uses local language to restore its value and reclaim a pre-colonial identity.

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As we will see in the discussion chapter of this paper, although objectives were not stated previously for the performance, participants worked with a vision of what the play should tell and how the message should be delivered to reach the target audience effectively.

**Figure 1**

*Breaths of Joburg promotional poster / UJ Arts & Culture Marketing Department*
1.2. Statement of Purpose

Inspired by Bakari’s view of the importance communication has in people's development and the understanding of theatre as an effective means of communication that stimulates discussion within communities (1998), this research aspires to explore the possibilities of participatory methods to drive social change. My understanding of communication in this paper refers to non-linear and multidirectional communication in which senders and receivers exchange information (Nicotera, 2009). This idea assumes that communication needs to be participatory to be effective; it should be an exchange between parties with the deliberate intention of understanding each other (Mda, 1993).

This understanding of communication is the same as that used in PT. For PT to be the product of a group of people contributing to the creative process, messages must be created, transmitted and understood. This research focuses on analysing the level of involvement of the people participating in the creative process of a performance and how effectively the participatory processes have created a space for debate and promoted critical thinking. The aim is to understand whether the stakeholders taking part in PT can be an agent of social change in the city they live in as a result of participating in the performance and in which ways.

The stakeholders considered for this project are the writers of the three texts that inspired the performance, the director of the performance and the cast, both professional performers and students⁴. The other participants, like the researchers, the video maker, the technicians or the University of Johannesburg Marketing team, have not been considered because of the study’s limits, regarding their participation in the performance-making process being significantly lower than the subjects included in the study.

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⁴ See list of participants (Annex I).
1.3. Research Questions

Based on these premises, the study’s primary research question is:

- In which ways can Participatory Theatre (PT) be a communication tool to address the city's socio-spatial issues and promote development?

To inform this research question, the following secondary questions are investigated:

- What participatory approach has been used in the performance-making process in the Johannesburg Literary Site-Specific Theatre Project?
- Which outcomes is the project intended to achieve, and have those been reached?
- Has the project's participatory approach helped the participants better understand the issues covered in the performance? Has it motivated stakeholders to engage with the socio-spatial issues of Johannesburg? If yes, in which ways?

1.4. Limitations

This study focuses on understanding the relationship between PT as a communication tool, the context where it is developed and the creative stakeholders involved in the performance-making process, investigating these stakeholders' response to the project's participatory approach. The performance-making process of Breaths of Joburg, contrary to TfD, did not involve the affected community – provided we identify the children of Hillbrow as that. The audience was never turned into spect-actors as they were not called to create dramatic meaning and action in the performance. However, the play was developed through a collective story development process among stakeholders, departing from literary writing by local young authors. In this sense, the performance can be encompassed within PT.

The choice of limiting the context of the study to the city was made because two main reasons: the first one is related to the objectives of the Johannesburg project used as a case study. One of the aims of the project is “to explore how theatre might
be used as a tool for communication between different urban publics by returning everyday urban experiences described in a literary work back to the physical site the literary work originates from in a theatrical form and for a public audience\(^5\), which delimitates the project's context to the city. The second reason is linked to the city as a space of social-economic inequality and segregation, in which power, or the lack of it, is shown in the urban forms (Sassen, 1996). The city is, as well, as further discussed in my literature review, the place of public life (Kingwell, 2009) in which people give meaning and transform the space (Halligey, 2018). Therefore, this research considers the city as the space in which positive changes are needed. At the same time, it identifies it as a space open to those changes, where PT can create a place for citizens to participate in its development.

1.5. Chapter Structure

This introductory chapter explains the motivation for my choice of the research subject, provides some context to the project chosen as a case study, and delineates the study aim and research questions.

The next chapter is dedicated to the literature review, which focuses on defining the concepts of participatory art and participation, what participatory theatre is and how it has been used in the development sector as a tool to communicate, discuss and propose solutions to societal, structural and political issues. It also analyses the role of public art and examines contemporary cities' socio-spatial issues.

The following chapter provides an overview of the theoretical framework, the chosen methodology and the research design.

The next chapter analyses the data collected around the Johannesburg Literary Site Specific Theatre Project and the *Breaths of Joburg* performance and discusses the study's key findings. The last chapter presents the study's conclusions and suggestions for further research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review defines participatory art and participatory theatre concepts and how the latter has been used within the development sector as a social change tool. It then analyses the role of public art within the public sphere. Lastly, it examines the city’s current challenges and contextualises Johannesburg's socio-spatial issues.

2.1. Participatory Art and Participation

For this study, we will use Claire Bishop's definition of participatory art because of its focus on theatre and performance. The literature on this field is extensive; therefore, this review will only include introductory concepts relevant to the research.

Claire Bishop sees two different approaches in participatory art; it can be understood as "an authored tradition that seeks to provoke participants, and a de-authored lineage that aims to embrace collective creativity; one is disruptive and interventionist, the other constructive and ameliorative" (Bishop, 2006, p. 11). Concretely, referring to theatre and performance, she defines this type of art as that in which people constitute the central artistic medium and material (Bishop, 2012). She sees the 1920s as the precursor period of participatory art, identifying the Paris Dadaist creative scene and the Soviet mass spectacles as manifestations involving the public and emphasising the collective dimension of social experience (Bishop, 2006). The author notes that these two approaches can still be found in contemporary participatory art. In both cases, Bishop sees the question of participation intrinsic to political commitment and identifies the issues of 'activation', 'authorship' and 'community' as the motivations behind almost all participatory art actions since the 1960s (Bishop, 2006, p. 11).

In his text, The Open Work, Umberto Eco interprets the implications of open-ended art for new forms of communication. According to the semiotician, art gains aesthetic validity "in proportion to the number of different perspectives from which it can be viewed and understood" (Eco, 1962). Eco's reading sees contemporary artwork as an open product that changes and gains value with every perception. For him, every
reception of the artwork is both an 'interpretation' and a 'performance', as the work engages with a new perspective of itself every time. As an act of communication, the artwork creates new communicative situations and establishes a relationship between the 'contemplation' and 'utilisation' of the artwork. For Eco, far from being close and concrete, art is an open situation, "a work in progress" (Bishop, 2006, p. 39).

Participatory art projects, however, require more from the audience than 'contemplate' and 'utilise'. In this discipline, participants can influence the art process by proposing stories of their interest and suggesting diverse points of view (Varhegyi et al., 2016). Matarasso sees participatory art as “a vast, diverse field spanning the sophistication of contemporary art to the politics of social action” in which professional and nonprofessional artists come together to create something (2019, p. 19). For him, the participation of nonprofessional artists in the creative process is a defining element of participatory art projects.

As we will see in the analysis of the Johannesburg project, participation can occur at different levels and be more or less effective depending on many variables such as time, project promoters, communities involved, engagement methods, etc. Reaching the desired level of participation is usually one of the challenges that participatory art projects need to overcome. Acknowledging these limitations can lead to finding ways to work with them in favour of a realistic view of public participation.

'Participation' is one of the Development sector buzzwords, usually related to positive outcomes, depicting a democratic decision-making process where everybody takes part equally (Cornwall & Brock, 2005). Cornwall and Brock advise against an over-simplified and single-meaning view of the term to avoid a rebound effect of removing the decisional power from local communities through undesired intervention. This risk comes with participatory art: it opens the project to other’s uses and perceptions, and, therefore, outcomes become unpredictable. It is also worth noticing that the artist can limit participation, as not all of them are intended to let others intervene in the artistic process (Björgvinsson & Hansen, 2011).
Concretely, participation is at the base of traditional societies in the African context. Chinyowa talks about the ‘African life cycle’, referring to ritual celebrations of childbirth, initiation rites, marriage, death and others, as a ‘drama of life’ (Kennedy cited in Chinyowa, 2009, p. 83) where everything is communally performed. The same vision is shared by Bakari, who, referring to Tanzania’s traditional communities, explains that “social relationships were based on brotherhood, cooperation and collective responsibility in the production process in which each embodied member participated” (1998, p. 118).

This heritage of pre-colonial African societies and their art forms is recognisable in *Breaths of Joburg*, as it uses indigenous forms of theatre such as drawing from recognisable characters in the community, using typical stories and satire, positioning itself far away from the drama in the colonial period, which suppressed traditional forms and introduced English drama to educate colonised populations (Bakari, 1998).

### 2.2. Participatory Theatre and Development

Coghlan and Brydon-Miller (2014) situate Participatory Theatre among the Applied Theatre practices. Through that broader term, the authors define the theatre practices that do not belong to mainstream theatre performance and aim to challenge societal rules and encourage critical thinking through participation.

In the Western world, a first tentative of developing a more participative theatre can be identified in Bertolt Brecht, who abandoned complex plots in favour of a montage of 'situations' interrupted by disruptive elements – e.g., a song – (Benjamin cited Bishop, 2006). The purpose of this format was to create a distance between the audience and the play, to avoid the classical illusion brought by the spectacle and promote critical thinking. Conversely, Antonin Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty was based on physical involvement, reducing the distance between the audience and the actors (Zarrilli et al., 2010). Artaud aimed to tap into the audience's senses, to make feelings emerge and fight the repression society forced on them. For him, "the theatre has
been created to drain abscesses collectively" (Brockett, 2007), and physical involvement was essential to social change.

According to Bishop (2006), Artaud's emphasis on proximity was crucial to developing the avant-garde theatre of the 1960s. Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, and Grotowski's Poor Theatre, are examples of movements that change the relationship between the audience and the actors and explore approaches to performance training, essential to the participatory focus. Thyagarajan (cited in Sloman, 2012, p. 44) argues that in conventional theatre, "the spectator delegates power to the dramatic character so that the latter may act and think for him". Instead, Boal transforms the spectator into a participant, making them take action through conscientisation. The techniques developed by Boal for the use of theatre for this end were utilised by activists in South Africa during the 1970s and 1980s and the early post-apartheid period to support the reconstruction and conciliation processes.

Opposite to Western theatre, as mentioned, African theatrical performance has traditionally been participatory (Bakari, 1998; Chinyowa, 2009). In the small communities of pre-colonial African society, dances, storytelling, representations, and rituals were part of social life. Within that 'communal' societies, performances were also 'communal' (Lihamba cited in Bakari, 1998, p. 118), and everybody had an active role in the performance. These indigenous forms of art, suppressed by colonialism, where slowly revived after the African independence, mainly during the 1960s and 1970s. However, in most cases, that revival came from national or government initiatives, so the performance contents did not address communities’ issues as in the past. The dissatisfaction of some theatre practitioners brought about a series of movements, like the organisation of popular theatre workshops in

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Botswana or the wave of critical theatre that emerged in Tanzania in the late seventies (Shule, 2010), which enabled the shift to a participatory approach involving the communities affected (Bakari, 1998).

Ola Johansson, in his research on Community Theatre and AIDS (2011), argues that community-based theatre is a valid alternative to ritual practices and everyday discourse, as it combines "formal and informal practices through social mobilisation, group consolidation, and certain modes of performative actions" (2011, p. 58). The author thinks that while rituals are a consolidated and sacred practice compared with theatre in the African continent, it is not sure which performative practices are more efficient for social change. He conveys that one single tool cannot resolve complex issues. Instead, multi-sectoral approaches are needed to confront contemporary societal problems.

For Johansson, "Theatre is a forum for popular struggle both in national freedom drives and as a shaper of public opinion in post-colonial circumstances" (2011, p. 66). It is a space where participants can discuss the validity of policies and practices; this is why with the geo-political changes that occurred in the 1970s, the need for community theatre appeared in post-colonial states. Alternative local forums deemed necessary for awareness-raising and call-to-action on policy issues. In the case of HIV/AIDS, Johansson highlights public events such as "drama contests and cultural festivals" have been crucial in raising awareness (2011, p. 71).

Among the benefits of using participatory theatre within the development sector, Sloman (2012) highlights capacity building, community cohesion, the challenge of the power structures, awareness raising and behavioural change, dialogue promotion and the fact that it can be used as a research and M&E tool. The author also identifies some limitations, such as the amount of time this approach requires, as it is essential for the process not to be rushed (Adams & Goldbard, cited in Sloman, 2012). Participants must be put in a position to be confident in delivering their performances and encourage them to question and act; however, in some cases, the absence of relation of the project to the community might cause a lack of interest and discourage actual participation (Sloman, 2012).
In the development field, many of the participative theatre projects generate from institutions which, as Tufte (2017) argues, tend to ignore the context due to an excessively focused approach to predefined goals. Consequently, although these institutions are influenced by events like social movements or the changes in the media landscape, their projects are focused on reaching planned outcomes and are unable to track unexpected results or reactions, like the social change that the project can bring (Tufte, 2017). However, with its limitations, Sloman concludes that Participatory theatre is a vital tool for development that helps "achieve community participation and change in ways that other tools do not" (2012, p. 55), provided participatory processes are an integral part of the project.

2.3. Public Art and the Public Sphere

Public art has no unique definition, primarily because of the complexity of the term 'public', which meaning differs significantly among cultures. The Public Art Research Report (Caminha et al., 2018) highlights how the centrality of the public/private dichotomy in Western cultures – and the imposition of these constructions on others through colonialism – has conditioned and limited the understanding of the term. The delimitation of what is or what is not public art remains unclear; this is why it tends to be defined as broadly as possible. According to the Public Art Dialogue organisation, it includes memorials, object art, murals, urban and landscape design projects, social interventions, performance art, and web-based work.

This research adopts Halligey's reading of public art, defining it as the type of art that is freely available in public spaces - considering public spaces as those that allow free access, such as pavements, streets, parks and roads (Halligey, 2018). Public art can be used for different purposes, such as beautifying public spaces, increasing

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their economic value or promoting a location, an artist or a company (Halligey, 2018). Public art is not necessarily revolutionary; the art that works towards the liberation from its conventional spaces – closed and elitist – is instead called 'social art practice'. According to Jackson (cited in Halligey, 2018), this art has, at the same time, a cohesive intention and a disruptive impulse, as it forges bonds while agitates the social.

Many countries have historically used public art to promote and create nationalist discourses, as in South Africa (Pieterse & Sitas, cited in Halligey, 2018). In this sense, 'public' has been understood by national and local authorities through the classical conception of the 'public sphere' as the space of political activity. Johannesburg’s city council has explicitly employed public art to narrate a positive identity for the city and enhance its public image (Harrison cited in Halligey, 2018, p. 51). Participation seems to be the key ingredient to avoiding such a top-down approach. According to Pieterse and Sitas (cited in Halligey, 2018), participatory public art can do more to develop a space for democratic decision-making than other social change tools.

Habermas’s conception of the 'public sphere' overcame the traditional knowledge that related the private sphere with the home and the activities inside and identified the public sphere as everyday political activity (Hohendahl & Russian, 1974). That public sphere understanding evolved in Habermas’s theory to being conceived as a sphere mediating between the two, becoming the space where private people come together to regulate against the public authorities (Singh, 2012). The public sphere is, therefore, separate from the state power, as it oversees it through a critical debate about political decisions. This concept of the public realm, applicable to the 18th and 19th centuries bourgeois society, has been modified by the same author in his Theory of Communicative Action (1981), in which he redefines the public sphere as a network for communicating information and points of view and stresses the capacity of human communication to promote a "more reasonable society" (Singh, 2012, p. 634).
However, his theory, tightly linked to Western societies, has been criticised for its lack of inclusion; thus, it ignored the discrimination of women within the Bourgeois public scene (Singh, 2012) and excluded the masses (Hohendahl & Russian, 1974). Also, it is worth noting that this conception of public/private has been imposed on non-western cultures through colonialism, ignoring different ways of societal organisation (Caminha et al., 2018). However, Habermas's notion of the public sphere as a social phenomenon can be considered a good starting point for understanding the concept of the public within public art. Underscoring the importance of communication between individuals who otherwise live privately, Habermas's redefined concept gives communicative action a central role in the definition of the public realm.

But to which extent is that public sphere 'public'? According to Kingwell and Turmel (2009), where to find public space is not always obvious. The authors note that public areas like non-private streets and parks are under the constant surveillance of the state – through the action of law enforcement authorities – and even the large cultural public institutions like museums or theatres partly depend on private donors and have obscure concessions processes.

To Kingwell (2009), "There can be no useful recourse to public space unless and until we reverse the polarity of our conception of publicness itself". For the author, the public is not a sum of private interests but its precondition. The public permeates everything; from it, we derive meaning, develop our identities, and configure our interests. Public space is the one that makes democracy possible because it is where the self and the other, the private and the public, encounter. We are nothing without our fellow citizens, the author says.

Therefore, the public sphere is not limited to a symbolic space but is physical too. These two dimensions are needed to understand the concept of public art. Claire Doherty, a public art curator, defines it as "a variety of forms and approaches that engage with the sites and situations of the public realm" (Caminha et al., 2018). In this definition, Doherty includes both the spatial and the social dimension, allowing the term' public art' to encompass different conceptions: from an artistic piece placed
outdoors to one developed as a result of the actions of public bodies or a private-owned work made available to the general public with no viewership restrictions. The current debate on contemporary public art has expanded the meaning of 'public', recognising the role in developing this field not only of state bodies but also of the audiences, communities and non-governmental organisations.

2.4. The City

"Urban life is public life, the courtyard is the city, and proximity inevitably creates the complicated shared gazes of the unprivate private - which is to say, the always already public" (Kingwell, 2009). For Turmel (2009), the city is, by definition, a public space. Madanipour (2003) notices that living in the city, we spend our days going from private to public spaces and vice versa and changing our behaviour accordingly. He also highlights that historically, and as a common feature for almost all cultures, cities are organised around the separation of public and private spaces and that the way those spaces are divided regulates the movement between the spheres.

For Sassen (1996), the city is a space of [economic] power. The urban forms – high-rise luxury offices vs working-class districts – show a hierarchical order that characterised the global city. On one side, there is the highly paid international workforce, which according to the author, "constitutes the essence of an advanced postindustrial economy" (Sassen, 1996, p. 24). On the other, there is the immigrant community – i.e., the informal economy – seen as a category that does not belong to an advanced economy. These two forms are evident in the major cities and show how power, or the lack of it, is present in the urban context. Sassen also notes the narratives associated with each form: while the first is perceived as technological and advanced, the other is deemed underdeveloped.

Since the 1950s, many economies have shifted from an industrial economy based on traditional manufacturing to information-producing industries, causing the deterioration of manufacturing cities (Hanlon, 2007). Consequently, without their primary source of employment, these cities have experienced an increase in poverty
and social segregation, as well as other adverse outcomes like the lack of access to health care or school services. The population suffering more from deindustrialisation, i.e., the working class, concentrated in particular areas of the city, have seen their neighbourhoods turn into ghettos. Ananya Roy (2011) refers to the areas in the megacities of the Global South where the post-colonial elites have relegated the lower classes of the society as "subaltern urbanism".

That unequal structure of the city is very much visible in the so-called informal settlements\textsuperscript{10}, which are characteristic of Johannesburg. These communities are usually the consequence of rapid-growing urbanisation and the lack of ability of institutions to respond to that phenomenon by providing homes and infrastructure. As Halligey notes, these spaces concern not only the people living in them but also "planners, policy-makers, politicians and human rights organisations, socially engaged artists and scholars in urban studies, planning, architecture and a range of social science and humanities fields" (2021, p. 1925). These settlements are usually perceived as a negative feature of the city; however, they can also bring opportunities - provided local authorities understand the specificities of each place and are willing to help solve issues of management and upgrading of the settlements (\textit{Informal Settlements Handbook}, 2005).

These 'dark' places\textsuperscript{11} are seen as complex, precarious and unknown. They are 'dark' because their organisation and what happens inside are 'metaphorically obscured' (Halligey, 2021). They represent yet another characteristic element of the city, those informal spaces and processes that are not regulated by the city institutions and constitute self-organised and autonomous communities within the city space.

\textsuperscript{10} Residential areas that do not comply with local authority requirements for conventional (formal) townships. They are, typically, unauthorised and are invariably located upon land that has not been proclaimed for residential use. See \textit{Informal Settlements Handbook}. (2005). Western Cape Department of Housing. Retrieved from https://www.westerncape.gov.za/general-publication/informal-settlements-handbook

\textsuperscript{11} Halliguey (2021) takes this word from Harold Johnson’s (Hariwe) 2014–2016 research project on ‘Dark City’, an informal vertical settlement in inner-city Johannesburg.
This urban space is a mix of public and private, intimate and distant, where citizens create moments and transform the 'space' into 'place' (Halligey, 2018). Adopting Massey’s geographic ends, Halliguey understands place "as moments in space and time that might be named or sensed, provisionally and with an awareness of all that is excluded in the making of that moment and its naming." (Halligey, 2018, p. 2). Places are, therefore, in Massey’s words, "integrations of space and time" (cited in Halligey, 2018, p. 2). This definition is relevant to this research as places are not considered simple areas on a map but become moments that occur at a certain point in space and time. Therefore, places are not static; they can be shaped and modified through performance, theatre and other actions looking at social change.

Johannesburg, a city of contrasts, is, according to Murray, author of *City of Extremes: The Spatial Politics of Johannesburg*, an "unforgiving place" where expectations and promises are constantly broken and where racial, social and economic equality is an integral feature of urban life (Murray, 2011). Taking Sassen’s concepts (cited in Murray, 2011), Johannesburg’s urban landscape is divided between an "urban glamour zone" – the space of international business and finance – and an "urban danger zone" – the space of degradation –. The older suburbs, close to the city centre, are mini-states surrounded by walls and private security with their own rules and regulations.

South African cities have been designed following a colonial logic: the Europeans designed them as extensions of their cities and "as sites for the scenographic display of the power of colonial empire" (Murray, 2011, p. 6). Therefore, the formal separation between white and non-white is a historical specificity of cities in South Africa. After the apartheid, white elites, unable to rely officially on racial segregation, kept the established order through property ownership, replacing urban public space with private space, intensifying separation and exclusion (Murray, 2011). Although policies for urban development are being implemented and coordination between institutions within the city has improved, social divisions are likely to remain (Harrison et al., 2014), as are the private sector and the capitalist logic, the forces that have
been driving the city’s spatial development on the post-apartheid era (Murray, 2011; Harrison et al. 2014).

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework & Methodology

3.1. Theoretical Framework

This section introduces the theorisation of the critical concepts that provide the framework to analyse the data collected and answer my research questions. It focuses on participation, participatory processes and the social impact of art projects. Due to the study’s limitations, the selection among the vast literature has been narrowed down according to the relevance of the ComDev field and the purpose of the study.

In the literature review, I have outlined the concepts of participatory art and participatory theatre. Still, a further definition of what we understand by participation-oriented projects is needed to develop the theoretical framework.

Tufte & Mefalopulos (2009) claim there is no consensus around the concept of participation and that it varies depending on the perspective adopted. If Bishop, in her definition of participatory art (2006), distinguishes between ‘an authored tradition’, which she defines as disruptive, and a ‘de-authored lineage’, which is constructive, Tufte & Mefalopulos identify two main approaches to participatory communication that are relevant to this research. For the authors, participation is intended as “the involvement of ordinary people in a development process leading to change” (Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009, p.4), and it can be integrated into a project in two different ways:

a) The social movement perspective focuses on mobilising people for social and economic justice. This approach does not have pre-established goals and considers participation a social change tool because of its empowering effect. This perspective recalls Bishop’s ‘de-authored lineage’ since it requires collective thinking and creativity.
b) *The project-based or institutional perspective* consists of projects designed by externals for the community to which the project is intended. In this case, participation is a means to reach the project's pre-established goals. This perspective could be linked to Bishop’s ‘authored tradition’ concept, which follows a top-down logic in which the community participates exclusively as an audience but does not intervene in the creative process.

Bishop’s definition of participatory art and Tufte & Mefalopulos’s perspectives of participatory communication serve as a framework to respond to the first secondary research question regarding the participatory approach used in the Johannesburg project. For a complete analysis of the different types of engagement the project employs, I also use Chinyowa’s (2009), Bakari’s (1998) and Johansson’s (2011) reflections on African indigenous forms of theatre and the discussion around the validity of community-based theatre as a shaper of public opinion.

Tufte & Mefalopulos (2009, pp. 4-5) identify three levels of outcomes of participatory projects that are relevant to answer the secondary research question related to the results of the project:

1. Individual psychosocial level: when participation leads to "increased feelings of ownership" of an issue and a commitment to act.

2. Life skills level: when participation leads to the "improvement of competencies and capacities" needed to engage with the issue.

3. Institutional level or level of community development: when participation has an "influence on institutions that can affect an individual or community".

In the analysis, I avail the three levels to understand which ones the project aimed to achieve and if they were reached.

To answer the third question regarding the project enhancing participant’s knowledge of the issues covered, I apply Matarasso’s classification of the six different areas of the participatory art projects’ social impact: personal development, social cohesion, community empowerment and self-determination, local image and identity, imagination and vision, and health and well-being (1997, pp. 7-9).
Matarasso acknowledges the limits of the list since it lacks some topics and there is an overlap in categories. Still, as the groups relate to areas of public policy, the categorisation becomes valid to measure the impact of the project analysed.

Finally, to understand whether the participation in the project motivated stakeholders to engage with the issues of the city, I avail of Matarasso’s classification in combination with Halligey’s and Massey’s (2018) concept of ‘place’ – understood as the integration of space and time – and Kingwell’s (2009) public space intended as the one that makes democracy possible.

3.2. Research Design

The research has been conducted through a combination of methods to present original qualitative data. A case study, the Johannesburg Literary Site-Specific Theatre Project (SA), has been analysed. The context of the performance has been studied through textual analysis. Participant and nonparticipant observation and interviews with project stakeholders have been used to analyse the participatory method and its outcomes.

3.2.1. Case study

This research uses a theatre project, selected according to the naturalist approach, based on its intrinsic interest and ease of access12 (Blatter, 2008).

By focusing on a single case study, this research aims to study its unique creative process, understand the tactics for participants' engagement and measure the project outcomes in terms of participation against expectations.

3.2.2. Textual analysis

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12 Associate professor Anders Høg Hansen offered ComDev students the opportunity to participate in a public art as a research project from Malmö University and the University of Johannesburg, Arts & Culture, to document and do research on the Johannesburg Literary Site-Specific Theatre Project (SA). I was selected to participate as a field researcher in the performance-making process of the project.
As the study focuses on using PT as a communication for development and social change tool in the city, textual analysis has been used to examine the urban context in which the performance was created and interpreted.

Textual analysis limits the research to the researcher and the text author's interpretations if conducted in isolation. Ignoring external points of view can cause power imbalance and a counterfeit perception of reality. To prevent this, I have combined the method with interviews and observation to bring external perceptions and avoid straitened perspectives (Lockyer, 2008).

3.2.3. Participant and Nonparticipant observation

As explained further in the analysis chapter, I used a mix of participant and nonparticipant observation. Between the 17 and 22 of April 2023, I participated in the rehearsals with the other researchers. I used nonparticipant observation before and after the field visit, watching recordings of the rehearsals and interviews with the project participants. The flexibility of this method allowed me to develop my research both while being present in the performance-making process and when I was not.

3.2.4. Interviewing

This method has been essential in answering my research questions, especially the second and third secondary queries. The three researchers from Malmö University conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with the authors of the three winning texts and conducted two focus groups with the performance director and cast. While the latter happened in person before and after the performance, the interviews with the writers were conducted through Zoom, pre-show, and in person post-show. Zoom was chosen as the most suitable platform as it does not require participants to have an account or download a programme (Brinkmann, 2008) and because researchers already had premium access provided by Malmö University.

Interviews were designed to gather different information from the participants' lived experiences to understand the meaning they derived from the theatre work.
3.3. Research Methodology

**Figure 2**

Research methodology diagram / Patricia Calvo Garrido

**Figure 3**

City–Theatre–Participants relation / Patricia Calvo Garrido

Note. This graphic explains the relationship between the context (the city), the medium (the theatre), and the stakeholders (writers, performance director and performers) and how they influence each other during the participatory process.
Chapter 4: Analysis

4.1. The Case Study: the Johannesburg Literary Site-Specific Theatre Project

The Johannesburg Literary Site-Specific Theatre Project is a public art research project from Malmö University (MAU), the University of Johannesburg (UJ), Arts & Culture and the Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study. The project explores the relationship between the urban everyday and the literature and theatre as a means to explore and understand it. It consists of different stages and entails the production of various artistic and educational materials. Three students from Malmö University, two from the University of Johannesburg and one from the University of Witwatersrand were invited to participate as field researchers in the performance-making process. The three Malmö students, including myself, were in Johannesburg from 17 to 23 April 2023 to observe the rehearsals and performance, conduct interviews and collect data.

The project started in October 2022 with a publicly advertised competition for new, short-form writing of personal experiences of Johannesburg by unpublished authors. Three pieces won the competition. As a next step, the South African theatre-maker and resident artist at UJ Arts and Culture Jade Bowers, together with three professional performers and a group of nonprofessional performers, created a theatre play based on the three texts entitled *Breaths of Joburg*. The piece was performed in a public space in Johannesburg from 20 to 22 April 2023. The on-site rehearsals and the performances were live-streamed to MAU and UJ students. On 4 May 2023, the University of Johannesburg and Malmö University organised a virtual seminar to exchange thinking on creative ways of communicating socio-spatial issues, where the student researchers participated. The performance-making process will be documented in a movie and a series of photographs in an exhibition in August 2023.
In Halligey's words, "the project aims to research through practice how literature might represent everyday city places and moments and how theatre might return these literary expressions to the material sites of their inspiration."\textsuperscript{13}

As this research focuses on PT as a medium for social change, the data collection has been limited to the performance environment. Inputs from the virtual seminar, film, and photographs have been taken when relevant to answer the research questions.

4.2. The Fieldwork Experience

The on-site research occurred from Monday, 17 to Saturday, 23 April 2023, in Johannesburg (SA). During those days, researchers had the opportunity to observe the rehearsals and performances, interview, and do focus groups with stakeholders. Importantly, we also had the chance to interact informally with the project participants, collaborate with researchers and get mutual inspiration. Researchers also engaged in the documentation and material creation of video, voice recordings, notes, reflections, and transcripts.

As specified in the research design and methodology section, for the on-site research, I used a combination of textual analysis to study the site of the performance, observation of rehearsals and performance and interviews.

4.3. The Site of the Performance

The performance took place on Nugget Street in Hillbrow, a public space, in front of the Windybrow Arts Centre, a private space open to the people in the neighbourhood and visitors.

The inner-city suburb of Hillbrow is known as one of the city's most dangerous because of its high unemployment rate, poverty, prostitution and crime. Having a large population of migrants and foreign nationals, Hillbrow is affected by prejudices

\textsuperscript{13} Halligey, 2022 - proposal for ethics approval, Annex IV.
and stereotypes. However, Hillbrow is also known as a “space for social change”, where several political, social and cultural transformations have occurred (Stadler & Dugmore, 2017, p. 8).

The suburb has undergone radical transformations over the 127 years of its existence. Born in 1894 as a residential area and prime location for the city’s health infrastructure, in the late 1960s became a place of high-rise buildings offering solutions for low-cost accommodation for vulnerable communities, i.e., young people, migrants and immigrants (Stadler & Dugmore, 2017). Promulgated as a 'white' area in the 1950s, the departure of the white population for diverse reasons in the late 1970s, e.g., the falling of property prices in the outskirts suburbs due to the Soweto uprising in 1976 or the preference to stay with parents rather than moving out because of the increased cost of living due to the oil crisis; left many flats in Hillbrow empty. More and more ‘Indians’ and ‘Coloured’14 people moved to the area, and by the 1980s, Hillbrow became one of the first urban areas to defy the apartheid state’s residential racist policies (Stadler & Dugmore, 2017). The neighbourhood started its devaluation between the mid and late 1990s; the lack of essential services, the rising crime and poverty, the presence of sex work and drug dealing and usage, and the arrival of refugees and economic migrants led to the decline of the area and also to increasing levels of xenophobia and violence. However, in the past years, efforts to renew the area have been made: rehabilitation of buildings, public health interventions and arts and culture programmes for the youth, among others, are creating possibilities for development and change.

The Windybrow Arts Centre is an active reality in the neighbourhood, operating as an arts centre since the 1980s. The Market Theatre Foundation manages it with a mandate to develop it as a ‘pan-African’ space. It offers different cultural opportunities, such as screenings, symposia, exhibitions and youth programmes, to the people living in the area. The house hosting the cultural institution is a historic

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14 These are the racial categories used in Stadler and Dugmore's paper. The authors acknowledge using them consistently throughout the paper but do not endorse the racial classifications used by the former apartheid government.
building built in 1896 as a family home and was declared a national monument in 1996\textsuperscript{15}.

**Figures 4 & 5**

*Pictures of the site of the performance / Patricia Calvo Garrido*

In the square where the performance took place, we could see people walking, children going from school to their homes, and cars passing by at any time. Right beside the square is the Windybrow, protected by a fence and a barbed wire. The doors to the Windybrow are opened during the day but with private security and the requirement of registration to enter. Surrounding the area, there are three tall buildings. The two in front of the Windybrow are inhabited and not in a bad state, while the one right behind the arts centre looks like an abandoned building but is inhabited. It is an example of inner-city Johannesburg's 'dark' buildings, informal vertical settlements where criminal organisations often manage precarious living conditions (Halligey, 2021).

\textsuperscript{15} See *The Windybrow Arts Centre*. https://markettheatre.co.za/windybrow/
4.4. The Creative Stakeholders

The creative stakeholders' object of the study are the performance director, Jade Bowers; the three professional performers, Lebo Mashile, Tina Redman and Yogin Sullaphen; the UJ Arts Academy Students taking part in the performance, poetry and drama students; and the three authors of the written texts, Lerato Mahlangu, Zandile Dube and Teneal Naidoo. As explained in the methodological discussion, creative stakeholders were interviewed. While the authors of the three texts were interviewed individually, focus groups were used for the director and cast input. Both the interviews and the focus group were done before and after seeing the performance\textsuperscript{16}.

Furthermore, the cast was observed for six days, from Monday, 17th to Saturday, 22 April 2023, during the rehearsals and the performance. The audiences were observed for four days, from Wednesday, 19th to Saturday, 22 April 2023, during the full-dressed rehearsal and the performance. While the observation of the cast was done through the method of nonparticipant observation, researchers were directly involved in some of the activities and had formal and informal interactions with the cast throughout the week. The audience’s observation was done as nonparticipant observation, being those outside the scope of this process paper\textsuperscript{17}.

4.5. Analysis

The stakeholder’s responses and my observations during the fieldwork experience have been analysed through the lenses of participation and social change according to the theoretical framework proposed for the research. Three overarching themes arose: the positive effect of the participatory approach, the divergences between the director and the cast regarding the performance aims and a modified perception of the city as a result of participating in the project.

\textsuperscript{16} See an example of a transcribed interview in Annex III.
\textsuperscript{17} See the observation summary in Annex II.
4.5.1. The Participatory Approach

The Johannesburg Literary Site-Specific Theatre Project adopts many forms of engagement, from literary writing transformed into performance through a collaborative approach to site-specificity, connection to university education, live streamings, exhibition, etc. However, as the data collection for this research was limited to the *Breaths of Joburg* performance on-site investigation, I focus on the participatory approach adopted in the creative process of the performance itself, considering the other forms of engagement as shapers of the performance approach but not analysing them in full.

As proposed in the methodological framework, I am using Tufte & Mefalopulos's (2009) guide to participatory communication, being relevant to this paper that studies participatory theatre as a tool for communication. I am also attaining Bishop's definition of participatory art and Chinyowa's, Bakari's and Johansson's reflections on African indigenous forms of theatre and community-based theatre.

*Breaths of Joburg* falls into the project-based or institutional perspective, as externals have designed it for the community to which the project is intended (Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009, p.4). The director of the play was selected because her belonging to the institution – she is the resident theatre director of the UJ Arts and Culture Institute – and the performers were directly chosen by her, thus, someone belonging to the institution.

However, *Breaths of Joburg'*s performance-making process was conceived as participatory, as it involved the participants in the various artistic processes (drama games, singing, dancing, visual art exercises, writing exercises) and relied on the participant's lived experiences to create the scenes. That situates the project within Bishop's 'de-authored lineage', as the final product is not generated by one artist only but is the result of a collective creative process.

The performance process transformed the participants into active actors. From the writing material, consolidated insights based on the participant's experiences in Johannesburg were put into scenes and presented to an audience in open rehearsals to see possible public reactions to the performance. Although direct
feedback from the audience was not considered, how the public reacted during the rehearsals changed the final cut for the play\textsuperscript{18}. The director and cast agreed upon the final text and plot.

The participants were conscious of their position towards the audience and asked themselves questions about their representation of other people’s space. For example, at the end of the last performance in the focus group, a student mentioned he was a bit anxious about the performance because he did not know if the audience would accept it. “You’re in someone else’s space… But then I saw people coming from their windows, taxi drivers passing by and stopping” and it gave him the confirmation that they were doing a fair representation of the space. “I enjoyed how we portrayed their experiences”, he said.

Although the audience was not directly involved in the creative process, the kids of some project participants viewed the performance during closed rehearsals and actively participated in creating scenes. In this particular case, children were fundamental in creating that dramatic and aesthetic version of the social issue to be represented (Wrentschur, 2021, p. 645), stepping away from a more realistic representation. This element, as expressed by the same participants during the focus groups, was especially needed in this performance to communicate better with the target audience.

Having such a specific target audience as children and youth changed the creative process and writing text adaptation. Mashile, one of the performers, mentioned the importance of the play being engaging and dynamic, “it had to have entertainment,” she said. Not having the same target audience as the written texts, which were not intended for children, also posed the challenge of treating complex themes like violence, sex work and the economic pressure of living in the city and transforming the way those stories were told so kids could understand them. Having children as the target audience gave the project participants a new entry point into a subject –

\textsuperscript{18} In the full-dress rehearsal, the audience enthusiasm significantly decreased during one of the scenes, and the director and the cast decided not to include that scene on the final cut. Also, in the videos of the closed-doors rehearsals we can see that some kids that were present were key in creating some of the scenes, as they made suggestions and give ideas that made it to the final cut.
the socio-spatial issues of Johannesburg – that so many artists have explored before. In Mashile’s words, that gave “uniqueness” to the performance.

The performance director and the cast carefully adapted the play to avoid harming children, taking into consideration that the adult content should not be narrated like the texts. Recognising their audience's vulnerability and looking at preventing outcomes like upsetting or manipulating children, the cast used metaphors, irony and fantasy to transform the scenes\textsuperscript{19}. It is also worth mentioning that some of the children in the audience were used to speaking about complex topics like the use of drugs, catcalling or sexual abuse as they usually participate in the activities organised by the Windybrow Arts Centre, in which specialised facilitators run workshops for young audiences to discuss and understand those issues, that children witness daily in the Hillbrow district.

With a young audience in mind, the cast built a dynamic performance with humorous scenes, depicting popular characters – e.g., the ‘uncle’, the thief, the sex worker – children’s plays, dances and storytelling. The play reminded the satirical dramas used in African pre-colonial societies in which "artists with a great sense of humor skilled enough in techniques of improvisation to enable them to act and react spontaneously during performance according to how the audience react" (Bakari, 1998, p. 118). Because of this flexibility of the performers, the play changed daily, following the audience's responses to the different scenes.

“Emotions [showed in the play] come naturally because we are working with Johannesburg and, for someone who has had that experience around Johannesburg, some emotions come naturally. But at some point, you also have to look at the sitting around you [and understand] how this person feels about this problem and would have to adjust to that.” (UJ Arts Academy Student)

\textsuperscript{19} An example of this is the sex worker transformed into the character "the lady who sold her moon", someone who needs to sell her soul to survive in the city. The story was told humorously, showing her getting on a rocket, going to the moon, collecting rocks, going back to the earth and selling them. And she was doing that all over again. This scene was developed with the help of children.
Another participatory element came after the performance when the project team sat down and discussed the on-site performance experiences with the director and the cast. Among the topics discussed were how performing in front of the audience in their space transformed the play and what they expected from it. Also, researchers addressed the project’s outcomes in person through WhatsApp chats and during the seminar held on 4 May 2023, in which Johannesburg and Malmö researchers participated.

From the interviews and the focus group responses, all creative stakeholders grasped something meaningful for their daily lives from the performance experience.

“[The performance] reignited that other type of love. I know what it [Johannesburg] is. But I love it, and I love it deeply.” (Tina Redman)

There was also some discussion around the scope of the performance that revealed an awareness-raising aim that the director did not intend. Opposite to institutional projects developed within the humanitarian and development sector, this performance, as part of a broader research project, did not have specific, measurable outcomes or targets to reach. While the overall project had predefined objectives 20, the performance itself, in the director’s words, did not have educational or social change aims. For Bowers, the performance was about showing "joy, relationships, humanity” in Johannesburg.

Some performers expressed disagreement with this view, claiming that the play does take a position regarding some moral issues, like sex work or racialised discrimination, as it shows themes considered a tabu for children. As they declared, the performance showed problems that people living in the city are affected by but on which “they don’t reflect on”, and putting them in the spotlight translated into the audience paying attention to those. When interviewed, Mashile, one of the professional performers, highlighted that the play does an important job just by simply reminding spectators that there is nothing wrong with them, by showing them that Johannesburg is a difficult place and that the issues faced by individuals are

20 See Annex IV.
collective because they are attached to the city. Redman highlighted that the play tells all those issues through humour because, in Johannesburg, this is how people talk about problems concerning, by laughing at them.

In the interview, we talked about Malmö researchers' reaction when we saw the entire play in rehearsals for the first time: we were very quiet. We almost didn’t laugh compared to the South African researchers, who laughed and interacted more with the cast. It emerged that the topics were hard to laugh about for Europeans, while for South Africans, it was natural to do it. The performance, therefore, was created for the community using the language of the community, following the tradition of African Indigenous theatre forms (Bakari, 1998; Chinyowa, 2009) and using satire to put people at ease, showing community problems in a relaxing and entertaining way (Chinyowa, 2009).

**Figure 6**

*The UJ APB Studio - site of closed rehearsals / Patricia Calvo Garrido*

*Breaths of Joburg* does that job of promoting awareness and contributing to sensitisation towards the issues portrayed. The performance transforms an individual struggle into a structural issue directly connected with the city the audience lives in. In this sense, it created a space for the community to share an experience and feel together.
4.5.2. The Unintended Social Impact

In her intervention on the Time of the Writer Festival\textsuperscript{21}, Halligey talked about how this project creates a cycle that starts with the writers being inspired by something they see on the street, shaping that creative writing to be interpreted in a theatre form, "taking it back to that embodied moment" and bringing it back to the space that inspired the creative writing through the performance, encouraging a dialogue on the everyday placemaking. I have put her words into a graphic:

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Figure_7}
\caption{Representation of Alex Halligey’s cycle of the creative process / Patricia Calvo Garrido}
\end{figure}

Such dialogue becomes especially meaningful in Halligey's conception of the 'space' as something that is transformed into a 'place' by citizens who modify it by interacting

\footnotetext{21 In the 26th edition of the South African Time of the Writer Festival some of the artists and researchers involved in the project participated in a session to discuss how it uses creative writing and theatre as participatory processes to explore everyday experiences of the city. See Centre-for-Creative-Arts. (2023, March 20). The Joburg Literary Site-specific Theatre Project. Time of the Writer Festival. https://t.ly/d__P}
in and with the space (Halligey, 2018). But has this project been able to create the synergies needed to change a space?

As mentioned, the director was not pursuing social impact through *Breaths of Joburg*; however, during the interviews and focus groups, the authors of the text and cast expressed changes in perception and behaviour after participating in the project. Following the framework outlined in the methodology section, I have used Matarasso's six areas of social impact to classify the different types of performance outcomes:

- **Personal development**

  In Matarasso's words, "participation in the arts can have a significant impact on people's self-confidence, and as a result on their social lives." (1997, p. 8). The three authors of the writing texts declared that participating in the writing competition and seeing their text in theatre form inspired them to continue writing. Two of them said they wanted to start practising theatre. For the students that performed, participating in the project was hectic, as they needed to combine their regular lessons and study with a tight rehearsal schedule. They learned how to manage their time and prioritise tasks.

  After participating in the project, participants feel more confident about their acting and ability to interact with the public through drama.

- **Social cohesion**

  The creative process encouraged partnership and cooperation. The cast of the performance felt that collaborating enriched the group, and their relationship got more robust. They also mentioned their connection with the audience, especially the kids. The possibility of direct engagement with the audience before and after the play was highly valued, and performing within a public space challenged the cast to perform better daily. Redman was amazed at how inclusive the space was. She mentioned that in theatre, you do not get the opportunity to speak with the audience and hear that they want to perform after seeing you, which happened in this play.
• Community empowerment and Self-determination

This variant in Matarasso’s study refers to the impact on local communities (Matarasso, 1997, p. 12). However, being the audience outside the scope of this research, my analysis is based only on the participant's empowerment and self-determination and their perceptions of it in the audience.

The cast felt that children engaged with the play and felt empowered to interact with unknown people – the performers –, dance in the public space, and laugh about serious issues. Bowers mentioned that children are an honest audience because their behaviour is less sensed. The performance was successful for her because it had an audience every day and because her students showed up every day to perform. The performance encouraged them to be active and change their perceptions of the city by representing their everyday experiences and creating awareness through this representation.
In terms of empowerment, the play gave importance to groups otherwise marginalised, like women and children, proving that their participation in public life is meaningful and has the power to change the space. The project participants witnessed how a small variable can change the space of the performance transforming it from dangerous to safe and vice-versa:

"When space is dominated by children and created with children in mind, and people are delivered and intentional about that, the space becomes safe. [...] If (a space) is safe for children and women, it is going to be safe for everyone." (Lebo Mashile)

• Local image and identity

This outcome is especially relevant for this study as it is related to the perception of Johannesburg and how participation in the project modified this. For the three writers, this competition was an opportunity to write about Johannesburg for the first time and reflect on their city.

"As a child, I used to think that Johannesburg was the coolest place in the world. Once you grow up, you see you're exposed to a lot" (Zandile Dube)

Although the three claimed their relationship with the city didn't change after writing, they felt the performance facilitated meaning, understanding and questioning of the issues represented.

On the other side, when asked if the play changed their relationship with the city, the cast expressed different takes: for Bowers, it reminded her how much she loves Johannesburg. For Mashile, it enhanced her awareness of the "choreography of the city", meaning that everybody in Johannesburg is an embodied person "nobody really disappears", and made her start thinking as an artist how what happens in the city is seeing from the children's perspective. For Redman, taking part in the performance and the creative process was a way of seeing her town from a different

22 Mashile mentioned that thinking about it as a mother is part of her everyday life, but it she never thought about it before as an artist.
point of view. Making and representing the city's everyday scenes reminded her how much she loved Johannesburg and could never live elsewhere.

According to the participant's perceptions, the performance enhanced that vision of the city as a public space where the 'self' and the 'other' encounter and where democracy is possible (Kingwell, 2009). Project participants got to know their city better and felt more optimistic about where they lived.

- **Imagination and vision**

This area was not specific to this research; however, according to the answers of the cast and authors, participating in the project has helped develop their creativity and confidence in their artistic skills. The students enjoyed contributing to the script and scene-making with their experiences, two new activities for them. The authors of the texts got the confidence to continue writing after winning the contest and seeing their works transformed into theatre. Plus, two of them said they wanted to start practising drama.

The project participants tried things they had not done before and were willing to engage in other creative projects.

- **Health and well-being**

As well as the latter, this area was not the object of the study. Still, some of the participants' reflections lead me to think that there has been an improvement in their mental health in terms of being more active (physically, socially and mentally) and willing to contribute to society through art. I could see a visible change in the writers of the texts after seeing the performance. While they were more hostile towards the city and its people during the pre-performance interviews, after taking part in the performance's collective experience, the three had positive perceptions about the audience's reactions and the impact the play could have on them.

Interestingly, Redman highlighted an important role of the play in remeasuring the pressure that the city put on its citizens to be productive:

"Every day, Johannesburg tells you that you're not doing enough. […]

This play reminds you that this is Joburg, is fast-paced, it takes, it takes,
and doesn't give full. It gives, but the relationship is not symbiotic. It is a parasitic relationship sometimes. [...] We are allowed to rest. Maybe this play will tell us that we're doing enough”. (Tina Redman)

Analysing the impact on participants through Tufte and Mefalopulos's classification (2009, p. 4), we could say that *Breaths of Joburg* outcomes are at the *individual psychosocial level* as participation has led to "increased feelings of ownership" of the issues represented. Because participants have acquired new skills, i.e., better acting, strategies to engage with the public, or been prompted to learn new skills, i.e., in the case of the writers, who expressed their desire to study drama; it can be said that the outcomes produced by participation have also been at the *life skills level* since there has been an improvement of competencies and capacities to engage with their city. However, we cannot affirm that it has also led to a commitment to act, as none of the participants took further actions or expressed the willingness to confront those issues.

**Figure 9**

*The cast of Breaths of Joburg during on-site rehearsals / Patricia Calvo Garrido*
Chapter 5: Conclusion and Way Forward

5.1. Participatory Theatre for Social Change in the City

“There is conflict, struggle, movement, transformation, not simply the exhibition of states of mind. It is a verb, not an adjective. To act is to produce an action, and every action produces a reaction – conflict.”

(Boal, 1992/2002, p. 39)

This paper has provided an example of participatory theatre as a place for discussion of the city socio-spatial issues of the city and the possibilities it creates to promote development and social change. Boal’s affirmation describes that understanding of theatre as a dynamic and multidirectional form of art. It is precisely in the dialogue/conflict that theatre allows where social change starts.

This study reveals two clear outcomes of the Johannesburg Literary Site-Specific Theatre Project:

The first one is the better ability of participants to connect their personal everyday experiences and perspective with the social-spatial issues of the city. This is due to the “dialogue on the everyday placemaking” expressed by Halligey23 that occurred within the performance-making process. First, in the cast discussions around their living experiences and perceptions of Johannesburg; second, in the rehearsals and performance within a public space and the encounter with the public – the users of the space –; and third, in the post-performance exchange of reflections and feelings between the cast and the project researchers. The play has brought back the messages of the written texts to their original place – the city – and has inspired dialogue with the urban every day from the participants’ side.

The second is a better knowledge of the issues covered thanks to the participatory approach to performance-making. This knowledge has brought, as a result, an

unintended social impact on the play. The analysis proves that outcomes at the individual psychosocial and life skills levels (Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009) have been reached. Not having pre-determined social change objectives, the impact of the performance is difficult to measure; however, as argued in the analysis, the participants have expressed and showed improvements at different levels: personal development, social cohesion, community empowerment and self-determination, local image and identity, imagination and vision, and health and well-being (Matarasso, 1997).

Regarding a different level of social change, i.e., if participation has motivated stakeholders to engage in the socio-spatial issues of Johannesburg, the research results do not provide enough data to confirm such statement. Although participatory processes have created a space for debate and promoted critical thinking, and participants have felt empowered by the knowledge the approach has provided, this research cannot conclude if the critical awareness developed will be transformed into concrete actions towards social change in the city.

Although the participatory approach used in Johannesburg Literary Site-Specific Theatre Project has had an overall positive impact on the participants, it is worth mentioning that one of the elements that dictated the success was an already existing good relationship between the stakeholders analysed in this paper. They all knew each other before this project, had worked together and enjoyed each other’s company. This easy connection avoided conflicts that could have arisen without this camaraderie.

Also noteworthy is that projects like this are fragile because they depend on continuous funding and the availability and, sometimes, the extra time of participants – which in many cases can also be non-paid time. A lack of these two elements can cause the interruption of this kind of project or even stop their initiation. To be successful, participatory projects need to guarantee stakeholders’ ownership and rely on their commitment to ensuring better and more sustainable results (Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009).
However, through the analysis of this case study, it can be concluded that PT offers a unique approach and space to discuss and represent the socio-spatial issues of contemporary cities and can transform a “space” into a “place” of non-violent conflict, where roles and perceptions of self and others can be negotiated and transformed. According to Bakari (1998), the community development process starts with the collective consciousness of its social reality. I would add that a view of the possibilities of transformation can also be a powerful tool to inspire people to become an agent of social change. Knowing that we can shape the space with our actions is critical to see the city as a place of opportunity, not an immutable space.

“For me, [Johannesburg] is never the same. […] our relationship with the city and the city’s relationship with us, because we are the city and the city is us, it is always changing. Three weeks ago, I didn’t expect I will be here, with this diverse group of people, in this area and witnessing what you guys were doing with all the other participants, the kids. […] Today is not the same as yesterday. […] So my relationship with the city has changed a lot. […] The fact that you were there sharing that movement [with the kids] gives me another perspective about the city, and the fact that we are all here for this also makes me think otherwise about the city. There is something happening in this city. The city is always giving.”

(Trevor Mantshoane, student researcher)

This study is limited to the project used as a case study and its understanding of PT. Also, the data gathered is limited to the methods of textual analysis, observations and interviews and the outcomes analysed were not agreed upon beforehand; therefore, measures are limited to what has been observed and heard. However, it serves as an example of what role PT can play within the communication for development field, providing a space for debate and critical thinking, creating a place of conscientisation and, therefore, favouring the reflection and action to help individuals recognise and challenge oppressive social conditions.
5.2. Suggestions for Further Research

David Mann (2023), a South African writer, editor and arts journalist, ends his article about the performance with the following reflection “Ideally, Breaths of Joburg will lay the foundations for far more experiments that merge theatre, architecture, public space and creative writing in order to memorialise and engage with the complexity of urban spaces”. As Halligey explained in the seminar on 4 May 2023, the project has a broader view. The objective is to develop 12 performances by 12 performance makers based on 12 texts set in the city, staged in the sites the writing describes and using casts that combine professional performers and local participants (Halligey et al., 2023). Also, an exhibition, a book of the texts and images from the project, and scholarly and literary writing will be produced. It is also planned that researchers from a range of disciplines do research around the performances. It is also contemplated the possibility of developing versions of the performance in other cities and facilitating student exchanges with the help of African and European programmes.

From the Communication for Development point of view, this project’s future developments represent an opportunity to continue exploring the potential of participatory theatre as a tool for social change. Participatory art projects are not the definite solution to inequality, power imbalances and other socio-economic issues by themselves, but they have demonstrated their effectiveness in awareness raising, communities empowering and building bridges between the participants, the social public and political decision-makers (Matarasso, 1997; Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009; Wrentschur, 2021). For the project to have an impact on community development or influence on institutions, an identification of the structural/collective issues of Johannesburg and proposed solutions should be carried on. This could come from the project’s research component. The degree projects, thesis, and academic

24 Comparative literature, anthropology, sociology, development studies, urban planning/urban studies, architecture, theatre and performance, applied theatre, media and communications, cultural studies, etc.
articles that come as a result could be shared with institutions, find the interest of decision-makers and/or people of influence, and be acted upon.

Rehearsals and performances were documented in research notes, audio recordings, video recordings and live streams. All these materials are currently being used to produce research documents such as this project degree thesis, other MA and PhD papers, articles and artistic productions such as an exhibition and a short film, among others.

This study and the listed materials serve as signposts for how the project can be taken further. It is important to note that this is a pilot project and that future developments, to have a higher impact on the areas they will be developed, would need more robust community engagement, including the involvement in the creative process of community representatives and grassroots organisations, such as local arts centres or schools. The research around these future projects could look into analysing the residents' participation and its outcomes and compare the findings with the participatory process studied in this thesis, which does not include that grassroots perspective. Further research on the social impact of this project and future developments would enrich ComDev's theoretical framework.

Likewise, the materials generated from this project could serve as data for producing guidelines on how to develop and conduct such participatory creative processes. This would provide ComDev practitioners a valuable resource for communicating with communities and promoting dynamic and sustainable change processes.
Figure 10

Breaths of Joburg cast, director and researchers’ team / Alex Halligey
References


The Windybrow Arts Centre. [https://markettheatre.co.za/windybrow/](https://markettheatre.co.za/windybrow/)


Annex I: List of Participants

Stakeholders analysed in the study:

1. Writers
   - Lerato Mahlangu
   - Zandile Dube
   - Teneal Naidoo

2. Performance Director
   - Jade Bowers

3. Professional Performers
   - Lebo Mashile
   - Tina Redman
   - Yogen Sullaphen

4. UJ Arts Academy Students
   - Flowers Masseule (stage manager + performer)

Stakeholders not analysed in the study:

1. Lecturer/Lead Researcher Team
   - Anders Høg Hansen – Associate Professor, School of Arts and Communication, MAU
   - Mikael Rundberg – Lecturer, School of Arts and Communication, MAU
o Alex Halligey – Research Fellow, JIAS, UJ, and Lead Researcher and Project Manager for JLSTP

2. MAU Field Researchers:
   o Patricia Calvo Garrido – MA Communication for Development
   o Frank Ortiz – MA Communication for Development
   o Kerstin Tschernigg – MA Communication for Development

3. UJ/Wits Field Researchers:
   o Rofhatutshedzwa Maswiela – MA Social Development in Africa, UJ
   o Heather van Niekerk – PhD Anthropology, UJ
   o Trevor Mantshoane – MA Centre for Urbanism and Built Environment Studies, School of Architecture and Planning, University of Witwatersrand

4. Independent cinematographer
   o Bonga Nkomo

5. For UJ Arts & Culture
   o Karabo Mtshali – Operations Manager UJ A&C and Producer for UJ A&C of Breaths of Joburg
   o Lakin Morgan-Baaitjies – Head of Marketing UJ A&C
   o Thato Marogo – Production Manager for UJ A&C and Sound Technician for Breaths of Joburg
   o Tebogo Ramatapa – Resident Stage Manager, UJ Arts & Culture and Sound Technician for Breaths of Joburg
Annex II: Summary of Observations

The cast was observed for six days, from Monday, 17th to Saturday, 22 April 2023, during the rehearsals and the performance. Audiences were observed for four days, from Wednesday, 19th to Saturday, 22 April 2023, during the costume rehearsal and the performance. This is a summary of the notes taken during those days.

Monday, 17 April 2023 – Rehearsals at the APB rehearsal studio (University of Johannesburg)

The group rehearsed for three weeks in the APB rehearsal studio at the University of Johannesburg. The researchers from Malmo University attended the rehearsals in person for the first time on Monday, 17 April, at the APB rehearsal studio. This was the last day of rehearsals at the studio.

Researchers participated in the warm-up of the rehearsal. After the warm-up, the researchers went aside, and the cast started the rehearsals. In the beginning, some scenes were rehearsed, not following the order of the play. Later, they were rehearsed following the order. The director intervened to advise the cast but not heavily. Scenes were locked (positions, tone of voice) and prepared for the day after when the rehearsals would have taken place in the site chosen for the performance.

A blackboard with the scenes of Breaths of Joburg
Tuesday 18th and Wednesday 19 April 2023 – Rehearsals on the site of the performance (Nugget Street Hillbrow, in front of the Windybrow Arts Centre)

Tuesday and Wednesday, participants rehearsed on the site of the performance. The rehearsals followed the same structure as the previous day. Wednesday was the day of the full-dress rehearsal, to which groups of the Windybrow Arts Centre youth group, UJ Arts & Culture, and a spontaneous audience (formed chiefly of children) attended. In total, there was an audience of 200 people, approximately.

A majority of the audience stayed for the whole performance. The audience engaged, smiling, laughing, and clapping. Young members of the audience danced to one of the scenes. The audience's attention declined in a particular scene – changing the tire (scene 7). Because of this, the scene was cut from the final performance, as the director explained in an informal conversation with the researchers. Wednesday's rehearsal was filmed by Bonga and streamed by Micke. Malmo University Students assisted Micke with the streaming.

Thursday 20th, Friday 21st to Saturday 22 April 2023 – On-site performance (Nugget Street Hillbrow, in front of the Windybrow Arts Centre)

The next three days, the performance took place at 2:00 pm. The public was unaware of the cut of one of the scenes but responded positively to the shorter length of the play.

The three days, the audience was, once again, formed by groups of the Windybrow Arts Centre youth group, UJ Arts & Culture, and a spontaneous audience (majority of kids). On Thursday, the number of attendants was considerably less than on the full-dress rehearsal day, while on Friday, it increased – we counted around 130 children. On Saturday, fewer children showed up.
Annex III: Excerpt of Interview Transcript

Interviewer: What are you expressing with the text about your experience towards your work as a city?

Author: What I'm expressing in the text is basically what it's like to commute in Joburg via taxi, like being around the taxi rank and then having to find taxis that will take you to the place that you need to go. That's what I wanted. That's what I was writing about in the text. I wanted to express how overwhelming it is if you’re an anxious person to travel in between that crowded place.

Interviewer: Is there any specific social, structural or political issue of Joburg that you wanted to address with the text?

Author: With this text, I think that I wanted to talk a lot about the things that people are always talking about when it comes to Joburg, about how unsafe it is to live in Joburg and how it is not a comfortable place for people. I also wanted to talk about the buildings, the dilapidated buildings, how they need to work on them and also the crime issues as well.

Interviewer: Did you have your perception of the city change after writing about it?

Author: My perception of the city hasn’t really changed much after writing. About it, because I haven’t really seen any difference. I mean, whenever I go back there, it’s still the same as I left it before, so not much has changed. But I am aware that there are probably safer places in Johannesburg, but so far, when it comes to that.

Interviewer: What do you feel about the possibility of your writing inspiring a theatre play?

Author: I think it is an amazing opportunity cause I've always loved plays, but I've never actually seen one before, so it's great to know that at least I contributed to one. You know something that I contributed is going to be changed into a place. So I'm curious to see how they do it, how they change like the takes from a short story into a play. It's definitely something that I am curious to see.
Interviewer: After participating in this writing competition, do you think you will engage differently with the issues in Johannesburg?

Author: The issues that I listed?

Interviewer: The ones that you described or also new ones. Issues, thank you think you will have to take some kind of further action. Or not.

Author: I don't really know about that. Yeah, I'm not really sure.

Interviewer: Perfect.

Interviewer (2): OK, thank you. But that's absolutely fine. I mean, none of the things that we will discuss has to be like completely in-depth. And so, any kind of personal stories that you could tell a little bit would help. But of course, if you say you want to skip the question. That's totally fine as well. I'm just going to take over from here in terms of the questions, and the questions that I'm going to ask it is more towards the audience side and what do you kind of objective you want to achieve when an audience sees the performance. I'm going to read them out the questions just as they are, and they are a couple. Other people wrote them. So I will read them without interpreting much. So the first one would be. Which kind of emotions did you aim to evoke in the audience when you wrote this text?

Author: When I was writing this text, I was hoping to grab the attention of the few audience members who are a little bit like me, who are anxious when they are in crowded spaces and overwhelmed by when they go to Johannesburg, like in the city. So, I wanted them to know that. To feel that they're not alone in how they feel when they have to be around the city and that there's someone else like them, that they are probably even more people and that maybe something they love about their experience or in knowing that they're not alone, you know.
Introduction:

The Johannesburg Literary Site Specific Theatre Project draws together urban studies, literature and theatre to consider the ways in which we experience, imagine and participate in the spaces of Johannesburg. This practice-based research starts with a publically advertised competition for new, short-form writing of personal experiences of Johannesburg by unpublished writers. The winning piece of writing will be used as inspiration for award-winning South African theatre-maker and
resident artist at UJ Arts and Culture, **Jade Bowers**, to create a new theatrical work to be rehearsed and staged in the public space in Johannesburg where the winning text is set. The project will be documented in film and photography (to be exhibited) and concludes with an online virtual exchange between UJ Masters students (Architecture, Anthropology and Development Studies, English and Communications and Media) and Malmö University Masters Communication in Development students.

The gap or area for development that the project seeks to address is threefold. First, it responds to an ongoing urban studies need for detailed information on how cities are functioning, experienced and made through daily life of city dwellers (see Pieterse, 2012; Roy, 2008). Second, it actions and develops the call for using the arts to understand and support greater socio-spatial justice in cities (see for example again Pieterse, 2012, Mboya and Oluoch-Olunya, 2017; Halligey, 2021). Third it works into an underexplored interdisciplinary nexus of the literary, theatre and urban studies. There is considerable discourse on theatre and performance and the city (See for example Hopkins, Orr and Solga, 2009; McKinnie, 2007; Harvie, 2009; Whybrow, 2010, 2011, 2014; Kruger, 2013; Martin, 2014; Hopkins and Solga, 2013; Knowles, 2017); literary urban studies is a sub-field of urban studies in its own right (See for example Lieven, 2022), but there is to my knowledge no scholarly work that links literary writing about cities to the making of theatre/performance in city spaces, in order to better understand and support urban everyday life.

The project’s aim then is to research through practice how literature might represent everyday city places and moments and how theatre might return these literary expressions to the material sites of their inspiration. To this end the project has the following objectives:

a) To explore how literature might be democratised in order for a wide range of Johannesburg dwellers to communicate their urban experiences,

b) To explore how theatre might be used as a tool for communication between different urban publics by returning everyday urban experiences described in a
literary work back to the physical site the literary work originates from in a theatrical form and for a public audience,

c) to further the communicative possibilities of the research project’s literary and theatrical work through an international exchange between students concerned with communication, development, public space and the arts.

**Research Methodology:**

The research project is qualitative, and both exploratory and descriptive. It uses creative writing and performance-based arts as tools to describe city experiences, but it is also exploring what these methods might offer to understanding and supporting city space for the better. The practice as research ‘fieldwork’ of the project will offer empirical (qualitative) data on Johannesburg experiences, as well as building theory on the combined use of literature and theatre in understanding cities. It will also then function as a case study, supporting the theoretical arguments the practice will inform and modelling methods for similar work in other cities or in different areas and at different times in Johannesburg.