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## Street Theatre as Art that Educates

**Uttara Bharath Kumar**

in conversation with Learning Curve

While putting this issue together, we felt that all forms of art that educate must be considered. Street theatre has an immediacy and appeal that is at once universal and profoundly participatory. It follows, then, that its message is powerful enough to change behaviour.

To look at street theatre as a tool for furthering understanding and reinforcing change, Prema Raghunath spoke to Uttara Bharath Kumar Founding Trustee of Nalamdana, in a free-wheeling chat about street theatre, how Nalamdana uses it and how it can be used in schools. The following article gives some excerpts from the interview, but before we go on to the actual conversation, here is a brief overview, taken from their own writings, of Nalamdana:

Nalamdana was conceived and founded in 1993 by Uttara Bharath Kumar, a then-recent graduate of Wellesley College, a few local enthusiasts and three idealistic young graduates from a local university. Fueled by their enthusiasm and a seed grant from the Echoing Green Foundation ([www.echoinggreen.org](http://www.echoinggreen.org)), the organization took root.

Nalamdana's ethos is to deliver better health through entertainment-education. They believe that people need more than just knowledge. They need creative persuasion to motivate and empower them to better, healthier and safer behaviours.

Nalamdana's target audiences are vulnerable (children), low literacy (rural and slum audiences where over half are functionally not functionally literate), and often marginalized (women). To reach them our communications must be relevant, reflect their lives,

be emotionally appealing and not condescending, and yet entertaining.

Nalamdana's strategic communication skills are relevant to any health or social issue. Topics tackled to-date include HIV and AIDS, family planning, adolescent, maternal and child health, tuberculosis, hypertension, diabetes and heart disease, conflict management, child abuse, gender violence, alcoholism, adolescent life skills.

**Learning Curve (LC):** Before we go on to what Nalamdana actually does, we'd like to know why street theatre was chosen as a medium of transmission of your message.

**Uttara Bharat Kumar (UBK):** Since we address a diverse audience of both literate and semi-literate people, the visual faculty seemed to be the most effective to appeal to. We could engage with them in interactive sessions and there were immediate opportunities to react.

**LC:** What kind of messages did you want to talk about?

**UBK:** We wanted a vehicle for health and health-related issues. We were not going to talk about religious or commercial issues.

We were also thinking of a several-level approach. We wanted the link between society's health issues (and the people who are affected by them) and the help that is available (but not known to everyone). One major issue was accessing information, then feeling a personal connection to the issue and then and making informed decisions. We were sometimes



the first to bring certain issues out into the open and give a community a common story and language to discuss it.

LC: Would you call street theater an art form? How?

UBK: It is an art form because in order to be effective, it has to be beautifully done. Also, creating a well-balanced story is an art in itself, because it can't be preachy or just entertainment. We have to have a lead-up before we get right to the point. The community has to be enticed to gather a crowd, there have to be lights, music, sets and props for them to take us seriously.. We have to compete with the latest soap showing on the TV screen at the time.

Then there is the aesthetic of costumes. Our audiences are sophisticated in terms of what they look for in entertainment because TV has placed everything within their reach. When we make the huge effort we do, there is a feeling of being respected.

As for the language we use, it is simple We include local expressions and some slang and accent peculiarities to be credible but are careful not to deliberately speak badly! The point is to be understood as widely as possible.

Finally, the effect we make: behaviour change means statistics. There has to be a takeaway of an intention to practice different behaviour, after considering the outcomes.

LC: Is there audience participation?

UBK: Very much so. There are interactions the next day when we might be challenged. There is also discussion on the characters of the play they watched.

LC: Why was this method (street theatre) chosen?

UBK: It fell in with the concept of scripting ideas entertainingly. I remember the first play we did- we had expected a very small number, but more than a thousand turned up!

LC: So there is a script?

UBK: There could be some ad-libbing, but there is music and a definite plan we follow.

We use role-play. Sections of students act and there is huge interaction. We deal with child abuse, health and hygiene issues. We make use of the top-to-toe approach. There are five flip charts that have been converted into booklets – the concerns being thinking about the future, personal safety, hygiene, reproductive health. We also provide a kit which contains the booklets, flipcharts and a DVD. These can then be developed into discussions.

LC: How do you decide on your themes?

UBK: Some were born of the FAQs in our school programmes. Then, there are key questions asked at our focus group meetings. These are meetings we convene with just the children without their teachers in order to make the responses as honest as possible. Nalamdana out sources the information gathering to experts and the content is pre-tested with a sample from the intended audience.

LC: How and where do you think the street theatre format can be used by teachers in schools?

UBK: I think it can be used very successfully wherever a different behaviour is required. For example, it can be used successfully on issues relating to values, for instance respecting the family, or bullying. Moral judgments can be another area where this format can be employed – encouraging open-minded thinking and tolerance of people who are different from oneself. There is a general lack of credible sources of information and theatre can open avenues. This kind of drama brings things out into the public space where discussion is made possible.

Misconceptions can be erased and detrimental behaviour addressed.



Children can be asked to write stories, create plays, bring issues to the forefront. However, an expert is always required to address these groups. One great advantage is that the language of the issue is learnt so that conversation is fostered.

A story can be the starting point of whatever has to be addressed. I would suggest that any of these contain only two or three points and there must be a definite plan of action, of understanding. For example- if you understand this, this is what you must do next. Thus, barriers and challenges are addressed. The counter arguments can lead to tackling new ground.

So, I'd say that (in schools) the street theatre model can be used as a medium for behavioural, health and attitudinal changes.

Where it fills a niche is the factual approach (it adopts). Of course, more thoughtful, deeper approach won't happen overnight. It does model a certain positive behaviour, gives things a positive spin, without making it sound too easy. Important change often begins with a seed of an idea being planted and a discussion begun.



Uttara Bharath Kumar, a native of Chennai, India, has a BA in English with a minor in Economics (1993) from Wellesley College in Massachusetts, USA and then a Master's in Public Health Science, MHS (1997) from the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health in Baltimore, USA. She has over 17 years of experience in International Public Health and has worked for the last 12 years for the Johns Hopkins University in various countries in Africa, India, and the United States.

In 1993 she founded a health communication NGO in Chennai called Nalamdana (Are You Well?) that still reaches the under-served/ low literate populations of Tamil Nadu State with critical health information and social mobilization messages through creative media (drama, TV and radio).