

Theatre of Transformation

Rama Mani

Time for a Paradigm Change

We aren't here just to make a little noise.

We're here to change the paradigm.

– Neema Namadamu, peacemaker, DR Congo

Today, the world appears to hurtle towards irreversible manmade disaster on all fronts. However, breakdowns are being accompanied by breakthroughs. Since 2000, as crises have multiplied, decision-makers have persisted in buttressing dysfunctional systems and paradigms. Meanwhile, ordinary citizens on all continents have initiated polyphonous, creative movements to reimagine the world and shape new paradigms.

These new paradigms aren't imposed on us; they emerge *through* us. At last, we humans aren't sidelined to the margins of history as spectators at best and victims at worst. Now, we're called to its epicenter to assume our roles as authors, artists, actors, and co-creators of the world taking shape around and through us. The stage is set; the curtains are quivering.



Rama performing at Global Female Leaders Summit, Berlin, April 2015

At this juncture of dissolution and regensis, we are invited to treat this global drama of destruction as a 'Theatre of Transformation.'

Reclaiming the Theatre of our Lives and our World

I realized I first had to free myself from myself.

That was the hardest part.

– Lamia, community leader, Palestine

The word 'theatre' tingles with possibility, yet for many people it rings hollow. It doesn't evoke the participatory or cathartic experiences of Greek comedy or tragedy, despite the spread of engaging theatrical forms like forum, street, and applied theatre. Our association with theatre may be as spectators to pre-scripted performances. It may be the theatre of war or the theatrics of Wall Street, where politicians and investors make decisions thwarting our will and emptying our pockets. It may be the operating theatre, where we undergo surgery under anesthesia. For many, theatre is a place of diversion, subjection, or unconsciousness.

Theatre of Transformation invites us to reclaim the theatre of our lives as a space of agency. It presents the world as it is today: terrible, tragic, and tremendously ripe for transformation. It rekindles the immensity of our human compassion and awakens the farthest

expanses of our imagination. Then it takes us into a pristine realm where nothing is yet scripted; everything is open for redefinition and evolution. Here, there are no rehearsed roles, no stage directors to manage our movements, and no prescribed decor. Now, we are called to express and enact what the present moment demands and what the future calls forth from each one of us.

Jean Houston says we are living in *Kairotic* time, when the portals of probability open and anything can happen or can be brought into happening by us. *Kronos*, chronological time, yields to *Kairos*, loaded time, the moment of fundamental possibility.

Theatre of Transformation conjures *Kairos*, a space unfettered by chronological time, where, as in dreamtime, the clock is suspended and possibilities abound. Here, it summons our inherent creativity to shape the emerging moment. As we reclaim the theatre of life, we endow each moment with artistry. We re-suscitate beauty in everything we experience. We breathe imagination back into being.

Activating Human Artistry to Co-Create a World that Works for All

We have so many creative ideas

To bring life and beauty back to our society.

Art is the way to get into the inner soul.

– Munira, refugee returnee, Afghanistan

Theatre of Transformation might never have emerged without my close collaboration with two exceptional women. Jean Houston, Scilla Elworthy, and I came together to co-found Rising Women Rising World (RWRW) with a shared vision to 'co-create a world that works for all.' With her prescient skill in evoking human potential and shaping social artistry, Jean once exhorted me: "Cease all else and give voice to what's trying to speak through you!" Such apposite advice for humankind today! That push instigated me, a policy wonk with no theatrical training, to launch into an entirely unpremeditated creative form to pursue my lifelong calling for peace and justice. Scilla's astute feedback as a visionary-pragmatic peacemaker was also invaluable. The formative inputs of remarkable women in our circle, like Zahira Kamal from Palestine, Thais Corral from Brazil, Meenakshi Gopinath from India, and my invigorating interactions with their local communities, were foundational.



left. Rama performing with Safi Al Hafez, Syrian refugee musician, at Dialogues for Humanity Festival, Lyon, France, July 2016; right. Transformative Leadership Workshop for Women Leaders, Berlin, Germany, April 2015

Since its spontaneous inception in late 2013, Theatre of Transformation has gained momentum as it responded to major global crises: wars and terrorism; desperate refugees and displaced populations; systemic breakdowns; violence against women; and leadership deficits.

As an art form, Theatre of Transformation blossomed through creative collaborations with humanist artists deeply connected to peaceful transformation: visual artists like William Kelly (Australia) and Tanisha Bhana (South Africa); mesmerizing musicians like Enzo Ikah (DRC), Paul Grant (Switzerland/US), and Safi Al Hafez (Syria); and intrepid filmmakers like Elif Tibet (Turkey) and Tamara Abulaban (Palestine).

The transformative methodology took shape through my association with the University of Oxford, courses at several universities, and seminars for decision-makers at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy and global leadership forums, on the one hand. On the other hand, it was also informed by my peace missions to Palestine, Lebanon, Turkey, and India, as well as through transformative workshops with pioneering organizations like Women's Action Committee (Palestine), IOM (Turkey), White Helmets (Syria/Turkey), CORO (Mumbai), and Vimochana (Bangalore). Constructive conversations and collaboration with distinguished colleagues like Kalypso Nicolaidis (University of Oxford), Meera Sethi (IOM), Alexander Schieffer (Trans4m), Leila Nicolas (Lebanese University), Swami Agnivesh (India), and RWRW members Chipu Chung (Zimbabwe) and Ozioma Egwuonwu (Nigeria/US) have also shaped its evolution.

Between 2014 and 2016, over 60 distinct tailor-made programs of Theatre of Transformation were offered on all continents, hosted by United Nations agencies and global conferences; cultural, academic, humanitarian, and business institutions; and grassroots organizations.

Fired by the transformative power of enacted testimonies, people from diverse contexts are applying the Theatre of Transformation approach in their own lives and adapting the process to their own cultures and crises. As Theatre of Transformation evolves as a

global movement, it aspires to nurture the human artistry of evoking humanity and creativity to co-create 'OURtopia'—a world that works for all.

Transforming History to OURstory

I have two goals in my paintings:

First to show all that happened during the genocide to our people, Second to prevent this from ever happening again.

– Vann Nath, artist and genocide survivor, Cambodia

In his magnificent book, *Mirrors: Stories of Almost Everyone*, Eduardo Galeano retells the entirety of human history through the voices of those erased from the annals. For centuries, historians discarded the stories of the vast majority of humankind as worthless and have documented only the deeds of designated heroes as worthwhile.

Now, selective history has ended. Theatre of Transformation is fuelled by a passion to nurture the emerging OURstory of humankind and cultivate the OURtopia we are co-creating between us on Earth. It testifies to the new mythology of humanity that is being written right now in every part of the world by ordinary-extraordinary humans. It calls us all to harness our inborn power as poets and storytellers to envision and enact the changes we need now in our lives and in our world. Weaving tales in our native tongues, we reclaim language and renew culture. We redeem the value of words and birth new vocabularies to encompass our kaleidoscopic visions.

As we re-story our lives, we realize that today's heroes and heroines are not necessarily those who occupy the limelight, exercise political power, or control fortunes. Rather, they're all around us, in our organizations, communities, and families, accomplishing the apparently impossible with simplicity, compassion, and inclusion. Today's heroes and heroines are waiting in the mirror to be seen, heard, and lived out by each of us.

Voices, Visions, and Wisdom of the Dispossessed

Every darkness contains a point of light.

– Vera Schiller Kohn, Holocaust survivor and psychologist

Four Tipping-Point Themes | Theatre of Transformation

1. Transforming Leadership for the Future

*In crises, a leader must have a wide chest and a big heart
To hear everyone's problems
And get the best out of every member of the team.*

– Raed, leader of Syrian Civil Defence volunteers



2. Championing Women for the World

*When you find your power within yourself and with each other
You have the power to change the world.*

– Women's Federation leaders, Mumbai slums



counterclockwise from top left. White Helmets' or Syria Civil Defence volunteers who rescue civilians from bombings were awarded the 2016 Right Livelihood Award. Rama is on the Jury of the Right Livelihood award; Rama supports Syria Civil Defence and has incarnated the White Helmet volunteers in innumerable performances. Rama supports CORO (empowering the marginalized in India) and the Women's Federation in India and has enacted their powerful stories in several performances worldwide; Grassroots leaders of the Women's Federation in Mumbai's slums;

Theatre of Transformation's starting point is the enactment or incarnation of testimonies and poems of real-life people facing and transcending obstacles. Those of us working with the dispossessed know the inexhaustible ingenuity, generosity, and humanness of people deprived of material means. My experiences since 1989 of working in war-torn, post-authoritarian, and divided countries on peacebuilding and transformative justice as a scholar, policy advisor, and practitioner confirm this ad infinitum. With understandable exceptions, adversity and injustice do not drive people or communities to violence and crime, as conventional theories of conflict and human nature claim. Individuals who experience profound pain are often transformed by it. Overcoming conditioned responses to deny, avoid, or suppress pain, these individuals journey into the source of suffering. They emerge luminous with wisdom and ignited with new visions. Their effulgence infuses their whole communities, which become invigorated to chart pathways from oppression to liberation.

The voices, visions, and wisdom of such individuals and collectives are infinitely varied, but their common lesson is lucid. Transformation is always possible. Transformation always begins with ourselves, and it inevitably affects everyone and impacts everything around us.

These transformed individuals and communities extend their tacit power to reshape events. They convert each crisis into an opportunity to transform foes to friends, redefine power, and shift the *status quo ante*. They don't act in isolation but together.

The members of the Women's Federation that spread across Mumbai's teeming slums gradually mastered self-protection from sexual violence, transformed many abusers into supporters, and formulated policies for their government. Innumerable youth in Syria facing daily bombardment chose pickaxes to save lives while risking their own instead of choosing guns for retaliation. Palestinian women who lost families and livelihoods

3. Transforming Conflict to Co-Existence

After the Second Intifada, I asked myself: Who will accompany these broken people from suffering to strength? I knew I would.

That day, I stopped being a militant and became a peacebuilder.

– Raouda, Palestine



4. Transforming Dystopia to OURtopia

What we enact on stage is what we envision for our society.

Estamos creando una utopia para todos.

We are creating a utopia for everyone.

– Yuyachkani theatre actors, Peru



counterclockwise from top left. Rama's transformative peace missions in countries in crisis. Performance-dialogue on the Poetics of Resistance and Transformation, Ramallah, Palestine, February, 2016; Interactive seminar on justice and peacebuilding for women politicians and scholars at Lebanese University, Beirut, March, 2016; Sharing a meal with women refugees from Iraq, Syria, and Egypt after a 'Voices, Visions and Wisdom' workshop; 'Voices, Visions and Wisdom' workshop with women who fought for freedom from bondage, Bonded Labour Liberation Movement, Haryana, India, February, 2015.

under occupation knitted a new economy of solidarity and sustainability through cooperative micro-businesses. Despite confronting xenophobia, refugees arriving in Europe radiated gratitude for the solidarity that enabled them to support each other and be supported to survive the perils of land and sea. Thousands of heroic individuals and communities like these are creating the new mythology of a world of 'we, us, and ours' to replace the old myth of 'I, me, and mine.'

The Transformative Process:

Witness, Awaken, Envision, Enact!

We can no longer watch and sit still

When our past and our future are burning.

– Somali women peacemakers of Wajir, Kenya

Theatre of Transformation's programs address critical crises affecting the world and impacting our lives, and catalyze creative processes to transform them.

Witness what is. In Theatre of Transformation's programs, real-life stories of people are enacted in brief vignettes. Characters are carefully chosen to reflect diverse perspectives on the topic addressed in that specific program. Testimonies flash past in rapid succession, moving across time, space, and cultures. We witness the harrowing realities of our world *and* the ever-present human capacity for transformation, despite the odds. A witness has a quickened awareness of the present and a new readiness to respond.

Awaken what can be. These testimonies of terror and transmutation kindle our humanity. Within minutes, we know these characters and recognize their circumstances intimately. We empathize with them like kin. We feel their pain and savor their successes. This expanded sense of humanity unlocks valves of imagination. We glimpse avenues for breakthroughs in the crises we face. We recognize ourselves in these characters and fathom ways to transmute our own circumstances. Our creativity is awakened to all that can be.

Now I Know

The pilot shivered as he spoke:

"I flew so low that day
Over the deserts of Tikrit
I don't know why
Except my eyes sought out the eyes
Of those desperate men I was
charged to destroy.

Swathed in black they swaggered
Brandishing weapons
Larger than themselves
Their mouths agape
With slogans of hate.

As I stared down
Their masks fell
And I looked straight
Down the long tunnel
Of their short lives.

Adrift in alien cultures
Shorn of tenderness
Scared of love
They'd chosen this path of death
Over lives not worth living.

I shivered
I could not drop my bombs
On these young men
Who hadn't yet
Begun to live.

If only my bombs
Could open their hearts
Without shattering
Their limbs
I prayed.

I felt the pelting of their shots
Strafe my plane
I heard the shrieks of their war cries
Shred my eardrums
I prayed.

I do not know
How I steered my craft
Through smoke and fire
And brought it safely
Back to base.

Now I know
My task is this:
To find the way
To reach their hearts
And make their lives worth living."

Envision change. We revisit and re-story key individuals influencing change in our lives and in the world pertinent to the crisis addressed in the program. This reveals hidden facets and unseen clues to the change envisioned. We give voice to our own story, articulate our vision, and excavate the wisdom within ourselves to guide this change process. This isn't a mental exercise. We fully embody this wisdom and enliven our vision with full presence. We astonish ourselves by the creativity, clarity, and cogence we exude.

Enact transformation. No vision is enacted alone. We discover new allies in the transformative space we've created together, and identify partners and resources we require or can offer. Through integral dialogue and creative interaction with all participants, we make these vital connections and affirm our commitment to realize what we envisioned. We leave ignited to enact transformation in ourselves, with others, and for the world.

Theatre of Transformation programs range in format from public artistic performances accompanied by musicians; to keynote performances at global conferences; to seminars for leaders, decision-makers, and policy makers; to workshops for grassroots activists and peace-makers; to academic courses for scholar-practitioners. Each program is designed afresh for that specific topic and context, and this process is adapted to each audience and timeframe to generate a beneficial, transformative impact across hours, days, or months.

All the testimonies and poems I enact are based on people and situations I know firsthand to most powerfully confront the burning issue being addressed. These testimonies and poems aren't intended to be replicated by others. Instead of repeating others' narratives, we're invited to write our own script. With new eyes and ears, we identify transformation agents around and within us, and we decode clues to transform crises. Re-storying life, we restore meaning and rediscover purpose.

Redefining the Paradigm of Power

*Even now, in my old age,
I go to warzones around the world
To meet fighters filled with rage, as I once was.
I tell them, 'If I could change, you can!'*

– Ratu, peace senator, Fiji

My first encounters with power was from 1992 to 1995, when I worked for the global leaders of the Commission on Global Governance. Our report, prepared for the UN and World Economic Forum, was poignantly titled *Our Global Neighbourhood*. It predicted and prodded a shift of power towards a more ethical, inclusive, non-violent, equitable, and sustainable world. Twenty-one years and many crises later, governance and financial institutions are still resisting that transition.

A chasm still separates global decision-makers from local transformation agents. The former are blinkered by their faith in the material power of markets and the military power of nations; they are incapable of perceiving the implicit power of the latter. The latter lack the channels to transmit their transformative wisdom to the former. Theatre of Transformation draws on its leadership and grassroots experience to bridge this gulf.

In Theatre of Transformation programs, when decision-makers witness how ordinary people accomplish the extraordinary to transform crises without material resources, they are powerfully affected. They are drawn towards the ineffable innate power these characters wield. They feel an uncanny affinity to these unknown yet familiar characters. Their original impulse to become leaders to empower others is reawakened. They perceive pathways hitherto unseen to transform the crises generated by their previous perceptions. In the process, they recognize the imperative to transform themselves.

Over the past three years, I've seen an acceleration in this subtle alchemy of transformation. The old paradigm of the love for power that drove states and markets to the brink is eroding. The new paradigm of the power of love is emerging to infuse societies and institutions. The purpose of politics and economics is being redefined as serving human and planetary flourishing. Collective leadership and intrinsic power are replacing individualistic leadership and extrinsic power.

Creating Circles of Solidarity

*'Cities of sanctuary' are springing up everywhere.
Nothing is more precious than making a
stranger feel at home.*

– Rev. Inderjit, Cities of Sanctuary,



'Women's Strategies for Peace:' a panel of RWRW and World Future Council at the United Nations in Geneva for International Peace Day, 21 September 2015. *left to right*.Thais Corral (Brazil), Zahira Kamal (Palestine), Scilla Elworthy (UK), Maria Espinosa (Ecuador), Rama Mani (India/France), Anda Filip (Romania).

The philosophy and operating principle of Theatre of Transformation is to create circles of solidarity. Circles of solidarity are created in Theatre of Transformation programs through the empathy generated between 'us' and 'them.' They are extended as we realize that 'they' are 'us.' The characters we meet through enacted testimonies begin to inhabit, inspire, and influence us to enact change.

Circles of solidarity expand as all the proceeds from Theatre of Transformation's performances, seminars, and courses fund the peace and solidarity missions and transformative workshops offered with local partners to support women in their communities and nurture leaders in their countries in crisis. People are encouraged as they hear how their stories travelled afar and inspired change in others. New voices rise to share their visions and

wisdom. They enrich the treasury of first-hand testimonies, which create further circles of inspiration and solidarity in future programs.

Circles of solidarity are magnified as Theatre of Transformation spreads. As people in diverse contexts add their dialects, voices, and accents to the collective OURstory of humanity, as power is redefined, as we create OURtopia together, circles of solidarity embrace all life on earth.

Rama Mani, PhD founded Theatre of Transformation and co-founded Rising Women Rising World. She is a Senior Research Associate of the Centre for International Studies at the University of Oxford and Councillor of the World Future Council. Born and raised in India, she has a PhD from the University of Cambridge and an MA from Johns Hopkins University. She lives in France with her husband, Alexander Schieffer, and son, Arjuna.
www.TheatreofTransformation.org, www.youtube.com/RamaManiNews



OURtopia

This world we envision
 Stirs in our belly
 Itches under our feet
 And bursts with crystalline clarity
 From our lips.
 This is no Utopia or Fairyland:
 We feel, touch, hear, smell it
 We WANT it
 As our children's birthright,
 As the only sensible way forward
 Is to listen to our heartbeat
 To heed the call of Spirit
 The Wisdom of the ancients
 The pulse of the Nascent
 That beats steadily in our veins,
 We are here to co-create OURtopia
 And nothing can stop us.



Children Rama has met and been moved by during her peace missions: *top left*. Jericho, Palestine, February 2016; *Bottom left*. Siem, Cambodia, July 2009; *top right* Northern Peru, December 2009; *bottom right*: Karnataka, India, 2012.