

# Pack 112, Item 12

Type: Broadcaster-how-to

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**BH2 – Using ‘forum theatre’ on air**

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***What is forum theatre?***

Forum theatre encourages direct audience participation in order to empower marginalized groups by rehearsing creative, collaborative, and problem-solving scenes. It is a useful format for highlighting a variety of perspectives on important and engaging issues that can elicit a diversity of opinions. Forum theatre is a unique type of drama created by Brazilian theatre director, playwright, and activist Augusto Boal as part of the “Theatre of the Oppressed” movement.

In a forum theatre performance, a group of actors acts out a scene more than once. During the first performance, the drama director (often called “the joker”) stops the action as it reaches a climax or conflict. Then the director asks the audience for their thoughts, opinions, and solutions for the problem presented. During subsequent performances, the audience can add or replace characters, present alternative actions, and create alternate solutions. The original actors remain in character and improvise their responses to these new ideas. The greater the engagement of the audience members, the greater their ability to affect the outcome, and the more likely it is that there will be a more satisfying solution. Unlike traditional approaches to theatre which deliver one-way messages, the audience plays an important role by offering feedback that shapes the performance.

***How can forum theatre help me serve my listeners better?***

* It is a different approach to radio drama, one that actively involves the audience.
* It is a fun, safe, and open way to share ideas and collaborate on solutions to challenges in rural life, including agriculture, health, and other issues.
* It is a good opportunity for listeners to reflect on issues in their communities, and to experiment with alternative courses of actions and observe the consequences.
* It builds a sense of community by encouraging collective problem-solving for collective action.
* It breaks down the barrier between performers and audience by giving them an equal opportunity to participate.

***How can it help me produce better programs?***

* It is an effective way to convey multiple perspectives on an issue and to collaborate on solutions.
* It is entertaining and interesting radio.

***How do I get started?*** *(Learn more about these and other points in the Details section below)*

1. Pick a topic
2. Develop a script
3. Assign roles and explain terminology
4. Act out the scene
5. Act out the scene again with audience input
6. Edit the audio in studio

**Details**

1. **Pick a topic**

It’s important to pick a topic that is relevant and important to the audience and presents a challenge that can be solved through collaboration and sharing of ideas. The problem must be clear and well-defined in order to produce effective reactions and solutions.

Here are a few possibilities:

* A woman is attending regular meetings to become a member of a village savings and loans association (VSLA). Her husband is angry that the training is taking up so much of her time. In the performance, health workers and other women in the VSLA engage in the scene to help the husband see the importance of his wife’s participation.
* A young farmer is struggling to manage pests on his cocoa farm. His friend suggests using chemical pesticides that are effective in killing the pests, but are expensive and could cause negative health effects. In the scene, the farmer is looking for alternatives to chemical pesticides.
* Farmers are losing half their harvested maize due to aflatoxin—a toxin that can contaminate harvested grain. Local aggregators say they are no longer interested in buying from the community because of the aflatoxin. Farmers want to convince the aggregators that they have adopted effective pre- and post-harvest practices to control aflatoxin.
* A young woman and her partner are sexually active. The woman insists on using contraceptives to avoid pregnancy, but her partner says they are too expensive and hard to access in their rural community. After meeting with a health care professional to seek advice on accessing and using contraceptives, the young woman confronts her partner about her decision to only have sex if her partner uses condoms.

1. **Develop a script**

Whether you are working with a group of professional actors or using community members as actors, you need to develop a script. The script can be written over several rehearsals that include improvisation and reflection.

Farm Radio has developed hundreds of radio scripts on agricultural topics, and many dramas. Our drama scripts can be adapted for forum theatre by choosing a scene that presents a conflict or a challenge, and asking the audience to present solutions. You can then compare the audience’s solutions to the conclusion of the script and explore which solutions are most useful in your community. Remember that the best solutions arise when farmers, extension officers, and other community members collaborate.

For example, in the drama script, “[Maize farmers overcome post-harvest challenges](http://scripts.farmradio.fm/radio-resource-packs/111-farm-radio-resource-pack/maize-farmers-overcome-postharvest-challenges/)” you could choose to act out Episode One up until the point where Musah and Fuseina are seeking advice from Maanan, the best farmer in a nearby town. In the second performance, an audience member could play the role of Maanan and offer post-harvest management tips. Or, other audience members could introduce new characters who share ideas for storing harvested maize.

In another drama script, “[Talking to teens about unsafe sex](http://scripts.farmradio.fm/radio-resource-packs/package-93-healthy-communities/talking-to-teens-about-unsafe-sex/),” you could act out the scene until the point where Stella’s father, Ben, finds her and her boyfriend kissing. In the second performance, an audience could play the role of Ben and suggest alternate reactions—or introduce a new character to intervene. Another option would be to act out the scene until Stella and Kiko (the health worker) start discussing sex. The audience could present alternate scenarios for comfortably approaching the topic of safe sex with teenagers.

To browse all of FRI’s drama scripts, visit [scripts.farmradio.fm](http://scripts.farmradio.fm/radio-resource-packs/) and click on “Drama” from the drop down menu labeled “Type.”

1. **Learn the roles and definitions of forum theatre**

There are several roles in a forum theatre production. These roles are known by different names, depending on the practitioner. The following are the original terms that Augusto Boal developed:

*Actors:* Professional or non-professional actors who have rehearsed a scene and know their lines. They are also comfortable improvising.

*Protagonist:*The actor who is facing oppression.

*Antagonist:*The actor who is oppressing the protagonist.

*Bystanders:*Those actors who witness the oppression and could be in a position to alter it.

*Spectators:*The audience observing the performance.

*Spect-actors:* Audience members who volunteer to transition from spectators to actors in the scenes following the first performance.

*Joker:*The drama director or facilitator. This could be the broadcaster her/himself, or it could be someone in the community with experience in forum theatre. The joker’s role is to ensure that the audience understands the structure of forum theatre, to stop the performance at appropriate points, and to support audience members to transition from spectator to spect-actor. The joker should have experience keeping an audience focused and engaged, and should be able to control discussions that get too noisy or off-track. It might be helpful for the joker to have an assistant to help with these tasks, and any other tasks required to keep the session moving forward successfully.

*Magic:*This refers to a solution that eliminates oppression or conflict in an unrealistic or impossible way. It is the joker’s job to identify magic, explain it, and encourage alternative, realistic solutions and interventions.

For example, the magical appearance of expensive, imported treatments to reduce aflatoxin in harvested maize is not an effective solution. Instead, the joker could encourage solutions such as stopping the practice of using water to help shell groundnuts in order to prevent aflatoxin from spreading.

1. **Act out the scene**

Follow these steps when acting out a forum theatre scene:

1. The joker welcomes the audience and introduces the topic or theme of the play and the characters. The joker can warm up the audience through physical exercises, vocal warm-ups, and icebreaker activities. Meanwhile, a member of the production team records everything so it can be edited and used in the radio program.
2. Actors perform a short scene and the joker stops the action when it reaches a climax or crisis. The scene portrays the act of oppression and its consequences. For example, in the VSLA example, this could be the point where the protagonist (the woman) comes home from the meeting to find that her husband (the antagonist) is very angry.
3. The spectators are given time to reflect on the scene, and for a number of them to share their ideas with the group on how the scene could be changed. The joker may ask questions like: How do you feel after watching this scene? Does this remind you of a situation in your own community? What would you do next? As well as receiving feedback from people who feel comfortable shouting out their ideas, the joker can encourage quieter spectators by asking them individually how they feel about the scene. After the feedback session, the actors on stage will act out the same scene again but incorporate the new ideas.
4. **Act out the scene again with spect-actors’ input.**

After the group discussion, the joker encourages spect-actors to contribute to the performance by asking them “Do you have any solutions to this problem?” During subsequent performances of the same scene, audience members can engage as the protagonist or the antagonist—or they can introduce new characters who change the direction and outcome of the scene. In this way, the audience members relate the scene to their own specific circumstances, and are able to challenge what they see by making alternative interpretations and rehearsing real-life solutions. In response to the spect-actors, the actors accept the change of direction and act out what might happen in the new scenario. Following the performance, the joker can lead another short discussion, asking the audience for their general comments, questions, and concerns.

Remember that someone (either the host or another member of the production team) needs to be recording everything in order to bring it back to the studio for editing.

1. **Edit the recorded material in studio**

After returning from the field, you will have plenty of audio that needs editing. Depending on the length of your farmer program, you might have to cut a lot of this audio. The most important elements to include are:

* The joker’s introduction to the topic and the characters.
* The first scene and the climax.
* Feedback from the audience and a few comments on possible solutions.
* The revised scene(s) with the spect-actors.

You may choose to present the audio over several episodes of your farmer program. For example, in the first week, you could play the joker’s introduction to the topic and the discussions about why it is relevant in the community. You could also play all or part of the scene that presents the initial conflict. In the next episode, you could recap the conflict and include audio recordings of the audience feedback and proposed solutions. In the final episode, you could play the revised scene that features interventions from the spect-actors, as well as the short discussion after the revised scene. It’s a good idea to also incorporate a phone-in segment so that the radio program can gather more feedback from listeners about the forum theatre performance.

Whichever way you choose to present the audio, you will need to do a lot of editing to make sure it is clear, concise, and entertaining. For more information on editing, read our BH2s on [audio editing](http://scripts.farmradio.fm/radio-resource-packs/108-farm-radio-resource-pack/bh2-audio-editing/) and [audio editing software tutorials](http://scripts.farmradio.fm/radio-resource-packs/111-farm-radio-resource-pack/bh2-using-audio-editing-software-recommended-tutorials/).

**Other points about forum theatre**

* The joker should make the audience aware of what is expected of them right at the start of the performance. The audience should understand the significance of the topic and the need to engage. The joker should also explain what magical solutions are, and discourage the audience from proposing magic solutions.
* The audience should be comfortable with the space where the performance is staged and free to approach it. Where possible, host the performance at a familiar community centre or landmark. You could also host a forum theatre performance that is open to the general public, [like this broadcaster did in Ghana](http://wire.farmradio.fm/en/spotlights/2018/12/the-mother-of-north-star-fm-uses-unique-drama-format-to-address-sensitive-issues-17966).
* To give women an equal opportunity to participate, be sure to script an equal number of male and female characters in the first scene. And encourage women and men to play non-traditional roles.
* Notes for the joker:
  + To build trust with the audience, use a neutral tone that is non-judgmental and inclusive of all audience members.
  + Assert yourself but don’t stand above the audience. Always keep them at eye level.
  + Look out for and discourage magic solutions.
* Remember that forum theatre should be fun, engaging, and inclusive. Laughter is important!
* For a different kind of public entertainment and education, see FRI’s Broadcaster how-to guide called [How to run public games](http://scripts.farmradio.fm/radio-resource-packs/105-farm-radio-resource-pack/bh2-public-games-jeu-public/).

**Where else can I learn about forum theatre?**

Durden, E., and Nduhura. D, 2005. Participatory Forum Theatre for Aids Education. *University of Michigan Library Passages,* number 2, June 2005. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/passages/4761530.0010.023/--participatory-forum-theatre-for-aids-education?rgn=main;view=fulltext>

Open Stage Theatre, 2012. *Guide to Forum Theatre*.” PowerPoint presentation. <https://www.slideshare.net/openstagetheater/guide-to-forum-theater>

Taite, John. undated. *Introducing Forum Theatre as a tool to explore issues of equality and discrimination: Workshop Resource Pack*. National Association for Youth Drama*.* <http://www.youththeatre.ie/content/files/Theatre-Forum-Resource-web.pdf>

***Examples of forum theatre in action:***

Viewing Presence, 2011. *Forum Theatre on Maternal and Infant Mortality in Uganda.* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXmrETkgg2I>

Thomson Reuters Foundation, 2016. *Forum theatre: acting out challenges*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qo9o0mq3qEg>

PartecipeArt, 2013. *Researching options through forum theatre.* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gckv_-nuNbA>

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