

# Drama in problem solving: Sistren Theater Collective

by Robert Wallstrom and Elayair McIntosh

Sistren which means sister is the only theater company in the Caribbean that has developed from the initiative of working class women. Drawing on personal ghetto experiences, Sistren writes and performs plays that make audiences more aware of the problem that women face, particularly in this part of the world.

The women of Sistren came together in 1977. Their first theater piece, *Downpression Get a Blow*, dealt with women in a garment factory forming a union and achieving their demands.

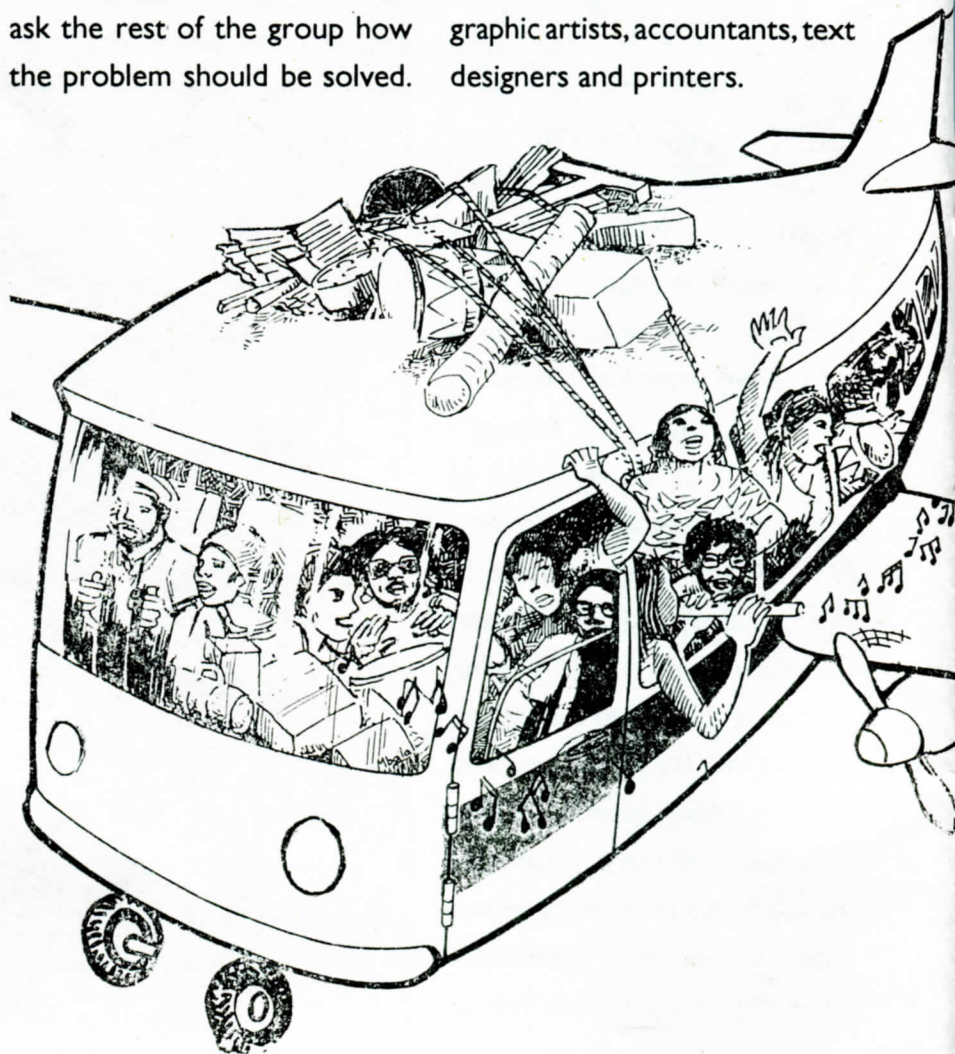
From that performance, Sistren was born. The women decided to stay together and make more theater pieces. Sistren's first major production was *Bellywoman Bangarang* in 1978.

Sistren's informal learning process was reinforced later by various research workshops. Calisthenics were developed based on the alphabet; a dance

was choreographed to spell out words. Writing exercises were linked to problem-solving skits involving conflict resolution, personal awareness, and group development. Some of the women would develop a skit on a particular problem, stop, then ask the rest of the group how the problem should be solved.

After discussion, the solution was acted out. The desire to create theater increased the desire to master skills.

Sistren's members have had to learn to be not only actresses, but also teachers, stage managers, secretaries, graphic artists, accountants, text designers and printers.



A textile project has been started, and members have been trained in stencil-cutting and silk-screening to make bags, aprons, and other objects to sell at crafts fairs and at acting performances. Sistren T-shirts and wall hangings are also printed, depicting themes from the company's major theater productions. This craftwork not only supplements individual income, it helps support the aims of the collective.

Since Sistren has a cooperative structure, each member helps evaluate everyone's work. The group comprises not just actresses and an artistic director. There are also resource people, behind-the-scenes members who help with the administration, fundraising, and publicity. After six years of working together, Sistren has envisioned four main objectives. These are to:

- \* perform drama in working class communities,
- \* create theater and drama

that comment on the position of women,

- \* look at possible solutions to the problems of women in their day-to-day struggle,
- \* provide members of their collective with the chance to participate in a self-reliant cooperative organization.

To accomplish these objectives, Sistren mounts major commercial productions which develop themes that challenge and stimulate questions about the situation of women. The collective also conducts public workshops where drama is used as a problem-solving tool. Although these workshops are often free, they are as important as larger theatrical productions. Performed in prisons, community centers, and remote villages, these skits apply what has been learned in Sistren's research workshops. A sense of community is created so that an audience can be exposed to and deal with hidden or taboo sub-

jects about women. The open-ended skits do not passively reflect life; they try to demystify it by fully exploring its realities. By facing what has been considered indecent or merely irrelevant, the actresses record women's rejection of the forces that thwart their lives.

Although grounded in the experience of their members Sistren tries to explore the experience of all women. The subjects of plays are thoroughly researched, but sometimes community workshops turn up new information and themes -- in meetings with women from factories to schools, from sugar workers to the urban unemployed.

---

**Source:** *Women In The Rebel Tradition: The English-Speaking Caribbean, Women's International Resource Exchange (WIRE) 2700 Broadway, N.Y., N.Y. 10025 USA.*