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pioneers of the radical tradition

Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the oppressed*: democratising art for social transformation

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Augusto Boal (1931–2009) was a Brazilian director, playwright and theorist who created *Theatre of the oppressed*, a methodology for social change that is now practised across the world. This article aims to provide a brief introduction to the key principles underpinning Boal's work and an initial exploration of the potential ways in which *Theatre of the oppressed* can contribute to critical and radical social work practice.

key words applied theatre • arts • activism • social change • oppression

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Introduction

Augusto Boal (1931–2009) was a Brazilian director, playwright and theorist who created *Theatre of the oppressed*, a methodology for social change that is now practised across the world. Based on the fundamental belief that theatre can be a language to transform society, the methodology facilitates a dialogue that enables people to discover new strategies by which they can liberate themselves from social oppressions. *Theatre of the oppressed* contains a series of powerful, theoretically grounded techniques that have clear potential for critical and radical social work practice. This article aims to provide a brief introduction to the key principles underpinning Boal's work and an initial exploration of the potential ways in which *Theatre of the oppressed* can contribute to social work practice, education and research.

Theatre of the oppressed: an applied methodology for social transformation

Theatre of the oppressed is a methodology for transforming everyday realities. Through dialogue mediated by art, it opens reflective space for thinking about strategies for social action that seek to transform everyday oppressions. Created by Augusto

Boal (1931–2009), a Brazilian director, playwright and theorist, the philosophy and methodology of *Theatre of the oppressed* evolved in response to concrete social and political needs. As highlighted by Babbage (2004), to understand Boal's work, it is essential to understand the context in which he developed his practice; therefore, we have chosen to begin this article by providing a brief overview of Boal's principal techniques and the context within which they were initially developed.

Boal was artistic director of the Arena Theatre of São Paulo from 1956 until he was forced into exile in 1971, and it was here that he participated in the Brazilian theatre movement for the nationalisation of theatre. His time at Arena Theatre was a period that included two military coups, and in this context of repression, the building of a Brazilian theatrical culture turned into a fight against censorship. In response to the oppressive political climate, Boal developed various theatrical works including *Newspaper theatre*. This method transformed daily news items into theatrical performances, with pieces being modified on a nearly daily basis to avoid detection by the censors. Using a variety of techniques, from simple reading through to parallel action, improvisation and historical context (Boal, 2000: 143), the performances aimed to decontextualise news stories, facilitating an awareness among audience members of omissions and distortions of daily news within mainstream media.

Boal was imprisoned and tortured in 1971 and lived in exile for the next 15 years, during which he worked with communities in a variety of social, political and economic contexts. When working in a literacy programme in Peru with people who spoke a variety of different languages and dialects, Boal developed *Image theatre*, which facilitated dialogue with people despite linguistic differences. Through the process of sculpting the human body, individuals and groups represent oppressions that they have experienced, establishing 'a relationship between individual, singular problems and the collective problems a group is experiencing' (Boal, 1995: 77). Still in Peru and now working with rural literacy programmes, Boal began to develop *Forum theatre*, possibly the most recognised *Theatre of the oppressed* technique that we will explore in more depth later. This period also saw Boal develop other techniques in response to the political context of a military dictatorship, this time in Argentina, including *Invisible theatre*, which created the possibility of presenting theatrical pieces without appearing to be theatre; performances took place in public spaces where the represented conflicts naturally occurred, interspersing theatrical scenes with daily life and transforming the unknowing spectator into a protagonist in the drama. For Boal, *Invisible theatre* is distinct in that 'the theatrical rituals are abolished; only the theater exists, without its old, worn-out patterns. The theatrical energy is completely liberated, and the impact produced by this free theater is much more powerful and long-lasting' (Boal, 2000: 147).

In the later years of his exile, Boal went to France and began to identify new oppressions in the form of loneliness, fear of emptiness and suicide. In his own words: 'For someone like me, fleeing explicit dictatorships of a cruel and brutal nature, it was natural that these themes should at first seem superficial and scarcely worthy of attention… I was used to working with concrete, visible oppressions' (Boal, 1995: 8). However, his understanding of these oppressions began to change:

> In Latin America, the major killer is hunger; in Europe, it is drug overdose. But, whatever form it comes in, death is still death. And, thinking about the suffering of a person who chooses to take his or her own life in order to put

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> an end to the fear of emptiness or the pangs of loneliness, I decided to work with these new oppressions and to consider them as such. (Boal, 1995: 8)

Boal developed the *Rainbow of desire*, working with groups to identify and discuss the social context for individual internalised oppressions. At this point, it is important to highlight that while it is possible to understand *Theatre of the oppressed* as therapeutic, it is not therapy. Central to Boal's work is the connection of individual experience with social context. As highlighted by Schutzman (1994: 151–2):

> To engage in Boal's 'therapy' is to become situated in a space between the individual and the socialized category of all such individuals – that is, between self as woman and social category of Woman, between self as peasant and the Proletariat, between self as black and Blacks. Both individual, concrete experiences and collective, cultural knowledge are forced to interplay.

On his return to Brazil, Boal was elected to the City Council in Rio de Janeiro and developed *Legislative theatre*, in which theatrical techniques were used to both identify issues facing local people and facilitate dialogue about proposed legislation directly with local communities. It was a pioneering democratisation of politics that enabled Boal and his groups to change 13 city laws and two state laws during his time in office, including introducing a law for witness protection.

It is important to note, however, that *Theatre of the oppressed* is much more than a set of theatrical techniques. Boal's work is a 'complex, interdisciplinary, multifocal body of philosophical knowledge' which demonstrates that he is as much theorist as practitioner; his work bridges the 'false divide between theory and practice that has plagued so many social movements' (Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz, 2006: 1). Therefore, *Theatre of the oppressed* presents an important body of work from which radical social work practice can not only identify new potential practices, but also deepen understanding of power, democracy and social transformation.

Oppressed and oppressor: a methodology for perceiving socialised relations of power

Theatre of the oppressed opens reflective space for thinking about strategies for social action that seek to transform everyday oppressions. Historically and socially constructed, these oppressions are sustained through the practices and discourses of society. For Boal, the concepts of oppressed and oppressor are related not to individual characteristics, but rather to social positions of privilege and disprivilege and relations of power. In this sense, a person is not an oppressor, but a person in relation to another person. For example, a teacher may oppress their students in the classroom while also being oppressed by the structures of the school and educational system. Therefore, more recent scholars have argued that it may be more accurate to think of 'cycles of oppression' (Di Bertolli, 2016) or relations of power. Boal's work transforms our understanding of the oppressed, creating a clear distinction between oppressed and victim. As Julian Boal (2010: 124) highlights: 'to be a victim is not the same as to be oppressed'. While a tsunami creates victims of a natural disaster, to be unemployed is to be a victim of capitalism – an economic, political and social system created by humans. To understand human relations, it is necessary to understand the

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social structures within which they exist. However, central to Boal's understanding is that these socialised relations of power are *experienced individually*. For Boal (2000: 149), 'Sociology becomes psychology. There is not an oppression by the masculine sex in general of the feminine sex in general: what exists is the concrete oppression that men (individuals) direct against women (individuals)'. Framed in this way, while oppression is often experienced individually, the terms 'oppressed' and 'oppressor' are not questions of morality or individual interpersonal conflict, but rather social-historical relations of power.

Boal takes this idea further through his understanding of subjectivity and objectivity. Within his work, we can clearly see that subjectivity becomes a constituent part of social reality – that behind social inequality there is life, suffering, fear, hope and happiness. Within the practice of *Theatre of the oppressed*, the subjective processes of being human are fundamentally integrated into the objective social systems that dominate everyday experience. This means that the experiences of the oppressed must always be understood in relation to power; people are oppressed by the state, by unequal social relations and by the media. Therefore, to avoid simply reproducing these relations of power through 'helping' the oppressed to identify and fight against oppression, those who are usually placed in the position of passive consumers within traditional forms of theatre must become a protagonist in the theatrical action. *Theatre of the oppressed* is heavily influenced by the theoretical work of Paulo Freire. Freire's central belief was that people are the experts in their own lives – that any work towards freedom from oppression must be based on 'trust in the oppressed and their ability to reason' (Freire, 1996a: 48). For Freire (1996a: 65), human beings are 'unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality' and the transformation of that reality requires the oppressed to 'perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform' (Freire, 1996a: 31). The range of techniques within the *Theatre of the oppressed* methodology provides some potential ways in which that perception can begin to emerge.

The most well-known *Theatre of the oppressed* technique is *Forum theatre*, in which a social problem is presented through performance and audience members are invited to improvise – or test out – a potential solution. The other actors in the scene also improvise their responses, and through this collective process of improvisation, the group can begin to build a collective discussion of ideas and practical solutions. In Boal's (2006: 6) own words:

> Forum Theatre: perhaps the most democratic form of Theatre of the Oppressed and certainly the best known and most practised throughout the world, uses or can use all the resources of all known theatrical forms. Those we call spect-actors are invited to come on stage and reveal by means of theatre – rather than by just using words – the thoughts, desires and strategies that can suggest, to the group to which they belong, a palette of possible alternatives of their own invention. This theatre should be a rehearsal for action in real life, rather than an end in itself.

However, the process of performance is not in itself transformational as collective discussion of a solution does not automatically generate critical reflection on the causes of the initial problem. To overcome this, Boal developed the role of the Joker. The

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Joker is the person who mediates the interaction with the audience and guides the direction, flow and tone of the dialogue. For Boal, the role of the Joker is to create a Socratic dialogue, a dialogue in which we begin to question our own understanding of a situation, but then guide us to develop and trust in our own ideas. The skill of the Joker is not to mediate a dialogue that will generate the right answers, but to ask the right questions, and these questions should expect, as answers, new questions (Boal, 1992). The role of the Joker is challenging, not least due to the need to 'continually find the balance between honoring the process of the group and the needs of an effective final product' (Spry, 1994: 179). The democratic nature of the process means that there is an inherent danger of reproducing rather than representing oppressions (Fisher, 1994) and it is primarily the Joker who will need to continually monitor and guide the group process in order to ensure that the approach achieves the aim of raising consciousness of, rather than merely reproducing, oppression.

Theatre of the oppressed is an art form that is committed to society; its explicit purpose is to act as an instrument of freedom. Central to this is working to achieve concrete actions to provoke, advocate and demand social change. As highlighted by Fringe Benefits, an activist theatre company based in the US, and drawing on 25 years' experience in theatre activism, challenging oppression for effective social change requires collaboration across theatre and community organisations, along with methodological expertise (Bowles, 2013). For Boal, the development of a network of practitioners, organisations and policymakers was integral to the overall methodology; without this ethical commitment to extend the work beyond the limits of the artistic process, there would be no potential for concrete social change. Activism is therefore central to *Theatre of the oppressed*. It is this explicit inclusion of concrete social action, network development and activism that distinguishes *Theatre of the oppressed* from other forms of applied theatre; it is a theatre of politics rather than political theatre. This is an important distinction not simply because it redefines the purpose of the art of theatre, but because it also opens the potential for the methodology to be used beyond the arena of arts.

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The aesthetics of *Theatre of the oppressed*: cultural democracy and human solidarity

Theatre of the oppressed is an art form that can be used in a wide variety of areas of practice; however, it is, first and foremost, theatre. It is therefore important to consider the aesthetics of the methodology. The *Theatre of the oppressed* methodology alters the traditional relationship between actor and spectator by placing the spectator as the protagonist of the theatrical action. Traditionally, the aesthetic space of theatre is, irrespective of the format of the space used, divided:

> We simply decide that 'here' is 'the stage' and the rest of the room, or rest of whatever space is being used, is 'the auditorium': a smaller space within a larger space. The interpenetration of these two spaces is the *aesthetic space*. (Boal, 1995: 18, emphasis in original)

Boal transformed understanding of the interpenetration of this aesthetic space through inviting those watching the performance to enter onto the 'stage', to directly influence the performance. This, according to Boal, was a process of humanisation, a process by

which those traditionally positioned as spectators of performance became subjects of their own representation:

> The spectator is less than a man and it is necessary to humanize him, to restore his capacity of action in all its fullness. He too must be subject, an actor on an equal plane with those generally accepted as actors, who must also be spectators. All these experiments of a people's theater have the same objective – the liberation of the spectator, on whom the theater has imposed finished visions of the world. And since those responsible for theatrical performances are in general people who belong directly or indirectly to the ruling classes, obviously their finished images will be reflections of themselves. (Boal, 2000: 155)

In order to fully understand Boal's conceptualisation of aesthetics, it is once again necessary to look at the historical context in which he developed his ideas. As the focus of his final book, the attention to aesthetics can be understood to be in response to a process of globalisation that resulted in art becoming a marketised product of a capitalist society. While art transformed into a source of entertainment and light-hearted amusement, it also became a source of sensationalism and political manipulation. Boal argued that art had become spectacle and that the spectacle was economically and ideologically controlled, effectively dividing art between the 'cultured' elite and the 'uncultured' masses. Through the massification of art, artistic processes and artistic and cultural expression had been devalued and the purpose of art had been obscured. Instead of encouraging people to become producers of their own art, Boal viewed the mass production of art as encouraging people to become simply consumers of a cultural industry that debases and manipulates both artistic content and form.

To counteract this, *Theatre of the oppressed* is underpinned by a democratic aesthetic; in other words, it seeks to rekindle the capacity of all participants to perceive themselves and the world through art. The aesthetic of the oppressed proposes to discover with the oppressed the artist within, and through this process open the way to know oneself in relation to the world. *Theatre of the oppressed* is also therefore an *aesthetic process*, allowing the oppressed to 'exercise themselves in activities that are usually denied them, thus expanding their expressive and perceptive possibilities' (Boal, 2006: 18). For Boal, the techniques within *Theatre of the oppressed* develop the perceptive and creative capacities that are neglected within everyday experience, meaning that while we 'are all artists … few of us exercise our aesthetic capacities' (Boal, 2006: 18). It is the artistic process and the expanding of perception that enables a 'new form of understanding, helping the subject to *feel* and, through the senses and not just intelligence, to *understand* social reality' (Boal, 2006: 36, emphasis in original). This introduces the idea that we think and communicate through the senses. Indeed, Boal argued that beauty itself can only be understood as a process of communication through the senses:

> Beauty is the organisation of an anarchic and random reality in sensory forms that create feeling and, to us, pleasure. Beauty is not only that which pleases and gratifies us, but also what shocks and perturbs us, such as the beauty of a natural disaster, such as a tsunami, or an atomic bomb that explodes in a

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> mushroom cloud.… Beauty is in the object and in the gaze.… Beauty is to reflect the truth through sensory means. (Boal, 2009: 31, our translation)

If, indeed, beauty is to reflect the truth through sensory means, for Boal, this truth was the political and social reality in which we exist. For the oppressed, the ability to reflect this truth is inhibited through the censoring and prohibiting of self-expression for oppressed groups: 'they [the oppressed] do not have the right of their own creativity: a machine does not create. You push the button … and it produces' (Boal, 2009: 18, our translation). The purpose of art is therefore to reveal this truth, to bring a visibility that, in turn, creates the possibility of transformation. The aesthetic of the *Theatre of the oppressed* is therefore not an aesthetic for contemplation, but rather an aesthetic for practice – an aesthetic that brings together ethics of human solidarity (Freire, 1996b) with arts practice to create a praxis for social change.

Adapting to social, political and historical context

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As highlighted by Boal's own experiences while in Europe, oppression is not consistent across time and space. We cannot simply replicate what worked in one context in another as *Theatre of the oppressed* is 'predicated on a vigilant receptivity to difference across time, circumstance, geography, culture, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender' (Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz, 2006: 1). The very language of oppression needs to be reconsidered in relation to context, as raised by Schutzman: 'What does the term "oppression" – galvanizing when used with north Brazilian peasants in a two-class totalitarian regime – signify for middle-class activists in a capitalist democracy?' (Schutzman, 1994: 5). *Theatre of the oppressed* techniques tend to focus on concrete examples of oppression through identifying 'immediate, embodied obstacles' (Schutzman, 1994: 145), relying on a shared sense of oppression to enable people to identify with and support the protagonist (Fisher, 1994). This poses particular challenges in 'late capitalist democratic contexts, [when] oppression is more slippery' (Snyder-Young, 2011: 31) and the distinction between 'oppressor' and 'oppressed' is more obscure.

This is particularly difficult when working with groups that may not have a common, unifying experience or with groups who see themselves as being in positions of privilege (Spry, 1994: 172). Recounting her experiences of facilitating workshops for people who defined themselves as popular educators in Canada, Spry (1994) highlights her decision to adapt the framing of individual experience away from oppression and towards powerlessness, ultimately deciding to frame dialogue by asking participants who has 'power over' them, rather than who oppresses them. Framed in this way, Spry felt that participants could identify and explore power structures in a way that responded to their lived experiences. Similarly, the organisational context affects the dynamic of the group. Using *Forum theatre* in a high-school classroom, Snyder-Young (2011: 35) highlights the tension that this raises for the facilitators: '[we] stand outside student experiences, but we are so deeply embedded in the web of power in which their stories exist we cannot pretend to be neutral commentators'. Their position as Jokers shifts from standing outside of the narratives presented to one of transparency, of acknowledging how they fit into the systems and naming their biases. While working in post-conflict Sri Lanka, Thompson highlighted the need to adapt

Image theatre to allow participants to explore the emotional impact of events without specifically stating what the image is depicting, noting:

> In conflict situations the 'truth' and stories of wrongs and rights are being fought over. A workshop can therefore too easily slip into drawing up similar battle lines and become an exercise that drives participants apart. By not stating the exact nature of the stories that they see, image theatre has permitted a dialogue based on the effect, not the act. (Thompson, 2001: 14)

One of the critiques of *Theatre of the oppressed* is the identification of a specific moment of oppression, usually in the form of a conflict. This results in the focus being on behavioural options at the moment of discrimination (Schutzman, 1994), and in the case of gender violence, the burden of responsibility for preventing the violence laying with potential victim (Mitchell and Freitag, 2011). While the strategic nature of scene construction should place the problem or conflict in the socio-historical context, practitioners using *Theatre of the oppressed* to explore gender-based violence have identified that the replacement of the protagonist (in this case, the potential victim of violence) exacerbated this burden. In response, they developed *Forum theatre for bystanders*, a system in which the spect-actors replace bystanders to the action rather than the protagonist (Mitchell and Freitag, 2011). Feminist *Theatre of the oppressed* practitioners raise further critiques of Boal's techniques, including that the focus on non-verbal exercises raises issues of trust. As women's experiences of oppression often involve the violation of physical boundaries, activities involving touching cannot be viewed as gender-neutral as this may invoke strong emotions among participants. Fisher (1994) highlights how she incorporated this recognition into her practice, altering the physical 'sculpting' exercises to allow women to direct how they wanted to be touched and opting to not ask participants to display their self-sculptures to the whole group.

These experiences of adaptation are not exhaustive. They provide a brief indication of the challenges that *Theatre of the oppressed* practitioners face, but also the adaptability of the techniques to respond sensitively to context. Boal recognised the need for continual 're-experimentation', highlighting that his model responds to the Latin American context, and therefore when applied elsewhere, it 'inevitably entails a reconsideration of all the forms, structures, techniques, methods and processes of this kind of theatre. Everything is once again open to question' (Boal, 2002: 253). *Theatre of the oppressed* therefore presents an interesting opportunity to explore how the methodology could be adapted to facilitate a reconsideration of the traditional boundaries of the profession and create new opportunities for socially engaged, transformative practice.

Theatre of the oppressed and social work

Boal viewed *Theatre of the oppressed* not as an arts practice, but as an interdisciplinary methodology of social change. Rather than requiring a specialist to work indefinitely on a project, Boal realised that it was necessary to teach the method to teachers, psychologists, leaders of social movements, social workers and young people, essentially, anyone who was engaged in direct work with people. In his book *Games for actors and non-actors*, first published in English in 1992, Boal emphasised that while not a

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'recipe book', it was intended for 'professional and amateur actors, by teachers and therapists, in political and social activities and research' (Boal, 2002: 16). His influence has, indeed, extended far beyond the boundaries of the arts and his techniques have been adopted and adapted within children and families social work (Houston et al, 2001), within educational psychology (Hammond, 2013), within environmental justice (Sullivan et al, 2008), within schools (Coletivo Garoa, no date; Snyder-Young, 2011) and universities (McClimens and Scott, 2007), as a model of community development and mobilisation (GTO Maputo, no date), for exploring participatory democracy (Pratt and Johnston, 2007), and for exploring ethics in community-based research (Banks et al, 2014). It has been used with an extraordinarily wide range of communities, including with aboriginal communities (Diamond, 1994), with women as a model of feminist consciousness-raising (Fisher, 1994; Akhter, 2008) and gender violence prevention (Mitchell and Freitag, 2011; Christensen, 2014), with older people (Schweitzer, 1994), with learning-disabled artists (Lawnmowers Theatre Company, no date; Mind The Gap, no date), with marginalised communities in Palestine (Ashtar Theatre, no date), with communities recovering from conflict (Thompson, 2001), in prisons (Centro do Teatro do Oprimido, no date; People's Palace Projects, no date) and all forms of secure accommodation (Geese Theatre Company, no date), with children and the long-term unemployed (Hammond, 2013), with communities affected by HIV/AIDS (GTO Maputo, no date), and with people experiencing homelessness (Cardboard Citizens, no date).

Theatre of the oppressed is inherently interdisciplinary. It is 'a synthesis of what has become divided, packaged, and consumed, mostly in the academy, as separate and discrete bodies of disciplinary knowledge' (Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz, 2006: 2). It is rather surprising, then, that Boal's work remains on the margins of mainstream social work practice. The experiences of the Natya Chetana theatre group based in Orissa, India, highlights the irony of an applied theatre practice committed to social change as their practice is 'often seen either as "too much social work" to be truly appreciated as theatre art, or as "too much theatre" to be regarded as social work proper' (Ranta-Tyrkkö, 2010: 926). The embracing of evidence-based practice as '*the* truth in developing social work' (Uggerhøj, 2008: 49, emphasis in original) has prioritised one form of knowledge, based on the principles of the natural sciences in which there is an assumption of rationality, failing to recognise the complexity of the social world. However, as noted by Uggerhøj (2008: 50), 'social work research must be as complex as social problems themselves' and needs to reflect the myriad ways that it is possible to identify, understand and analyse human experience. *Theatre of the oppressed* provides a body of philosophical knowledge (Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz, 2006) that can inform all aspects of social work, including direct practice, education and research. As a practice approach, *Theatre of the oppressed* requires practitioners to work alongside service users, challenging the dichotmous 'us–them' divide in the same way that it has challenged the traditional aesthetics of theatre, and thereby enabling a genuine dialogue to emerge that is explicitly focused on identifying the discourses that sustain oppression. As a pedagogical approach, it can facilitate the reflective process, enabling social work students and experienced practitioners to reflect on the inherent contradictions within the social work role, alongside identifying with service users and their experiences, moving beyond simply hearing individual experience towards identifying the historically and socially constructed nature of oppression. Finally, as an applied method for action research, it can build knowledge that reflects the complexity

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of social problems and human experience, working collectively with service users to inform and challenge the policies and practices that affect us all.

The relevance of *Theatre of the oppressed* to radical social work is clear. However, its power lies not only in the potential for developing critical consciousness among the people who receive social work provision, but also as a reflective tool for ensuring the development of critical consciousness among social work practitioners and students. As practitioners so deeply embedded in the oppressive structures of society, *Theatre of the oppressed* offers critical social workers a means by which to increase awareness of oppression not only among the people with whom we work, but also among ourselves; it provides a means of engaging in an open, honest dialogue about our own experiences of oppression, not only as practitioners, but also as individual human beings. Radical social work requires us to disrupt power structures, to recognise the systems of oppression and our own role within them. *Theatre of the oppressed* provides a means to investigate our own fears and desires and avoid simply adopting a 'mask of solidarity' (Salverson, 1994) that does little to advance social change. It does not however provide a short cut. As highlighted by Schutzman (1994: 152): 'Boal insists that *Theatre of the Oppressed* does not open any doors. Its techniques are weapons requiring subjects to implement them, to extrapolate them from rehearsal for use in real life'. The philosophy and methodology of *Theatre of the oppressed* therefore presents radical social work with the challenge of implementing and adapting its techniques, using this as a process of learning to uncover new knowledge for social transformation. In Boal's (2002: 16) words: 'Theatre is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theatre can help us build our future, instead of just waiting for it'. We believe that this is a promise worth exploring.

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Note

[1] Also known by her artistic name, Kelly di Bertolli.

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