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The theatre of the oppressed

BY AUGUSTO BOAL

Above, scene from a street theatre show staged by the Luz de la Luna company in Bogotá (Colombia).

Some people do theatre because it's their job, their craft or their calling. But all men and women on Earth are a theatre in themselves. It's second nature to them.

In every one of us there's an actor—someone who acts—and a spectator, who watches the actor acting. We have the ability to watch ourselves doing things. The other animals, even in front of a mirror, don't recognize their own reflection, so don't use it to improve their own appearance. Cats don't look at themselves in a mirror to smooth their whiskers and lions don't comb their manes in front of one. But we humans, even without mirrors, can watch ourselves watching.

But we aren't content, any of us, to be just actors and spectators of ourselves. We also write our own scripts for every scene we are involved in. We are in charge of the wardrobe of costumes to be worn wherever we are (at home, at work, during time off). We are also the directors who stage our own actions.

So every human being is a miniature theatre. The "theatre of the oppressed" is based on this simple notion of elementary theatre, where everyone is involved, whether trained for it or not.

On stage, actors experience passions and emotions just as we do in real life. And we, in real life, express ideas and feelings through dialogue, movements and voice intonations, just like actors. With one difference: the actor on stage is aware of using theatrical language whereas we use language without this awareness (which is why we aren't so good at using it).

Everybody, not just orators, is capable of speaking. If we don't know how to swim in an Olympic swimming pool, we can all splash

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The conviction that there is an actor in each of us is the driving force behind a form of drama that seeks to awaken consciences and change lives

about in the bath. We have all kicked a football around our backyards, even if we haven't played at Wembley or Maracaña.

Some sports engulf entire nations—like football in Brazil, baseball in the United States and table tennis in China—but only some athletes attain excellence. So it is with the theatre. There are professionals, but everyone can, and should, take part.

First steps

The theatre of the oppressed springs from these basic ideas. It was born some years ago in Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America when military dictators first censored plays and shows and then cracked down on theatre companies and actors.

At the time, I was running the Arena Theatre of São Paulo. They began by telling us what plays we should put on. The ones we chose were all either banned or censored. Then we lost the theatre itself when they forced us to make pointless alterations to it which we couldn't afford.

Each time, we responded by devising new kinds of activity. We ended up doing street theatre and staging plays in trade union halls, schools and churches. We had no money, so we had to do without scenery and costumes. We acted in ordinary clothes.

In the end, we lost everything when the police banned us from playing anywhere at all. It was only then, when we had neither theatre, repertoire, scenery, costumes nor stars, that we discovered the essential thing. Face-to-face with our audiences, we realized how like them we were, and also how different.

We had lost the rings on our fingers, but not our fingers; our costumes but not our bodies; our illusions but not our dreams. We were like our audiences because we were human beings like them. But we were also different because we were specialists in a craft. We could help the public make use of our craft.

This is how the first version of the Theatre of the Oppressed was born. We called it "Newspaper Theatre". We invented and developed thirteen ways of turning newspaper articles (or any other apparently non-dramatic material) into plays. Then we went to our audiences to tell them what we'd learned and to help them write and produce their own plays from texts they chose themselves.

For the first time, we were teaching our public the "means of production" instead of presenting them with a finished product. We weren't telling them "what to do" but "how to do it".

After we had set up dozens of popular groups, we had to stop because the dictatorship was becoming harsher and harsher. After many incidents, I had to leave the country myself.



A Salvadorian theatre group in a play about domestic violence (1996).

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Fact or fiction?

The next version of Theatre of the Oppressed surfaced in Argentina in 1971 and was called "invisible theatre." The "El Machete" troupe that I led put together a play about hunger which was to take place, ironically, in a restaurant. The script, a joint effort, was ready and the production seemed OK. At first we wanted to stage it in the street, but Brazilian friends warned us. Argentina was going through a difficult transition to democracy and as a Brazilian, I risked getting deported and handed over to the Brazilian police.

In the end, my actors insisted that I should take part in the show. One of them suggested doing the play in a restaurant and having the actors come in incognito as if they were genuine ▶

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customers and without revealing that it was part of a play. I would go in before the others and sit at a table in a quiet corner to eat my steak. The actors would then come in and the various scenes would follow. There was one problem though. The play involved two waiters and a maître d'hôtel who would have to be played by actors. How would the real waiters and maître d'hôtel react to that?

We began the play while the other customers were eating and chatting. To our surprise and delight, at the very moment the actors were supposed to speak, a real waiter and the maître d'hôtel himself stepped up to say almost exactly the words in our script.

We were fascinated by this experience where fiction mingled with reality and became just as real, at the same time as reality became a kind of fiction. But what worried me was that the audience took part in the action without realising they were in a play which itself was inside a piece of reality. So where exactly were they, in fiction or reality? For them, how far was fiction real and reality fictional?



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***Coup de poing sur la pointe du couteau*, a play written and staged by Augusto Boal in Paris in 1980.**

Spectators on stage

I continued doing this kind of theatre in several countries, always very successfully but always with some anxiety and also regret that it could not be done in an open manner.

We entered a new phase in Chaclacayo, Peru, where we devised "Forum Theatre" as part of the Alfin integrated literacy programme which was based on the ideas of Paulo Freire. I was promoting literacy through the theatre. Others did it through film, silk-screen printing, local languages or Spanish.

It was here that we first came up with a play in which the main character didn't know what he was supposed to do or else made wrong or unsuitable decisions. So I asked the audience what they would have done instead. There was a lot of response. So I suggested doing the play again with the same script, with the addition that if a member of the audience wanted to change something, they could stop the play there and then. The person would then take over from the actor and instead of

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Opposite page, Augusto Boal (centre) directs a workshop. Right, warming up the audience before a performance (1980s).



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just speaking, could explain his or her idea in dramatic form.

So the audience could use the same stage language as the actors to convey what they thought, what they wanted and dreamt about, and what they proposed. Everyone, freely and knowingly, would be "talking theatre".

"Forum Theatre" has become the most popular version of the Theatre of the Oppressed. At the eighth International Festival of the Theatre of the Oppressed, recently organized by the Mixed Co. in Toronto (Canada), as well as at an earlier festival put on in Rio de Janeiro by the Centre for the Theatre of the Oppressed there, more than thirty countries were represented by theatre groups or "professional" users of the Theatre of the Oppressed, such as teachers, psychotherapists and social workers.

Internalized oppression

Later on, in exile in Europe, I came across forms of oppression more insidious than those in Latin America. My European friends told me of the oppression of feeling empty inside, of being unable to communicate, of being afraid of the future. At first I didn't take these kinds of problems seriously. Then I found that the suicide rate in the richest countries was far higher than in Latin America, and understood that if someone chose death rather than loneliness, it was a kind of oppression as real as any other.

At the Centre for the Theatre of the Oppressed in Paris, over two years, Cecilia Thumim and I developed elaborate ways of expressing internalized oppressions, the ones we carry around inside ourselves. As the fifteenth-century Portuguese poet Sá de Miranda put it, "my biggest enemy is the one inside me, the one I carry in the core of my being."

When I got back to Brazil, I was elected a *Vereador* (city councillor) in Rio de Janeiro. I hired all the staff of my Theatre of the Oppressed centre, and throughout my four-year term we worked with needy communities (*favelas*), trade unions, schools, neighbourhood associations and old people's groups, landless peasants, black students, street children, Aids sufferers and others to create a sort of "legislative theatre".

We helped our audiences-cum-playwrights to write and produce their own plays, first in their own communities and then as part of "dialogues" between communities, so that everyone could see the oppression others suffered, and not just their own. Three times a year, we put on an outdoor festival to let the public know about us and give them a chance to take part in our "forum" shows.

For each show, one of us wrote a proposal which was sent to the "city council" where it was studied by our lawyers. Sometimes, the solution they recommended was an approach to the mayor's office or else a street event. Or our ▶

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team would draft a law which I would present to the real city council.

An opportunity for dialogue

In all, we presented about fifty proposed laws, all of which came from the grassroots. They were about protecting old people, children, handicapped people and witnesses to crimes (to put an end to impunity, one of the scourges of Brazilian society), as well as measures against racism and all other forms of discrimination.

Thirteen of them were taken up by the council and became laws. So thirteen times we managed to make wishes come true, in the form of laws now in force all over Rio.

Why is the Theatre of the Oppressed so amazingly successful? First, we don't try to expound a message or a revealed truth. We try to ask the right questions instead of giving what we think are the right answers. Next, we offer a simple system of exercises, games and methods which anyone can handle but which can also be used for very complicated things like psychotherapeutic introspection. Thirdly, we create an opportunity for freedom which produces dialogue. All of us want to talk with people, to know their views and have the chance to express our own.

We know our identity is the result of what we are, but also of what others are and of what we are not. I am a man because there are women, white because there are black people, a father because I have children. Pluralism, differences and diversity are at the core of our existence. Because of them, we know who we are.

So the Theatre of the Oppressed is neither a closed dialogue with itself nor a collection of rules and obligations. It's a language. As such, it involves all areas of human activity, not just politics. It concerns teaching the young, psychotherapy, literacy and even the theatre itself. In 1997, I shall be having a new experience in Stratford-upon-Avon in England. With the Royal Shakespeare Company and using the play *Hamlet*, we are going to see if we can apply the psychotherapeutic methods described in my book *The Rainbow of Desire* to helping the actors get to grips with their roles.

This fascinating experiment has a great symbolic meaning for me. It means official recognition (for Shakespeare, I don't know how much more official you can get than the Royal Shakespeare Company) that the Theatre of the Oppressed is truly theatre. ■

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The International Theatre Institute, an international non-governmental organization (NGO), was founded in 1948 by UNESCO and the international theatre community. It has maintained formal associate relations with UNESCO since 1996.

Structure:

ITI today includes 95 national and associate Centres worldwide. A Centre comprises professionals active in the theatre life of the country and representative of all branches of the performing arts. Its activities are conducted both on a national and international level. The Institute has 7 Committees each with its own board and programme activities: Dance, Music Theatre, Playwrights, Theatre Education, Communication, Cultural Identity & Development and Dramatic Theatre.

The Institute is run by an Executive Committee composed of 14 elected members and 3 members co-opted following its biennial Congress, and by an elected Secretary General. The General Secretariat is based at UNESCO headquarters in Paris. Two regional bodies have been set up, in Africa and Latin America, as well as a Documentation Centre and Archive Centre for Asia (Bangladesh) and an Interregional Liaison Bureau for the national Centres of the Mediterranean region (Tunisia). The Albert Botbol University of the Theatre of Nations has two permanent bases, one in Tunisia and the other in Venezuela.

Objectives:

› To promote international exchange of knowledge and practice in the performing arts.
› To stimulate creation and increase co-operation among theatre people.
› To increase public awareness of the need to take artistic creation into consideration in the domain of development.
› To deepen mutual understanding, thus contributing to the consolidation of peace and friendship between peoples.
› To join in the defence of the ideals and aims of UNESCO.
› To combat all forms of racism or social and political discrimination.

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