

Playing Boal in Northern Ireland

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Augusto Boal's theory and practice of the Theatre of the Oppressed have generally been received with enthusiasm in the United States and in Europe as a model of revolutionary theatre. No doubt, since the first publication of *O Teatro do Oprimido* in 1974 (English translation 1979), the book has come to be seen as a "classic" and has had a major impact on theatrical theory and practice inside and outside the Brazilian post-colonial context. Now that twenty six years have gone by since this seminal work first appeared in print, we can look back to reassess the ways in which theatre practitioners have deployed the book's charged argument for theatre's revolutionary potential and in some cases have transformed Boal's radical techniques.

It seems impossible to address the Theatre of the Oppressed *ex nihilo*, especially given its important connections with pedagogy. To be sure, one area in which post-colonial thought has been fertile is the theory and practice of pedagogy. And foremost in this field, we recall, stands the work of Paulo Freire, mainly his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (English translation 1970), in which Freire aligns political oppression with oppressive pedagogy. Against oppressive models, Freire calls for a dialectical pedagogy in which all subjects are thought capable of active contribution to society. As is known, Freire's pedagogical ideas have been applied to the theatre in Boal's work. Further to understand the poetics of the Theatre of the Oppressed, in its major new forms of radical theatre, i.e., Image Theatre, Invisible Theatre, and Forum Theatre, we must keep in mind its main objective: to change people, i.e., the spectators, from fearful, oppressed, "passive beings" inside (and outside) the theatrical phenomenon into agents, transformers of the dramatic (and non-dramatic) action.¹ This "liberated spectator", as a whole person, freed to think for her or himself, launches into *action*. No matter that such action is fictional; what matters is that it is *action*. For Boal, as for Brecht, the oppressive ideology and passivity of the theatre are highly complicitous. Again, for Boal and Brecht, the manipulative ideology of the status quo prevents the audience from thinking for itself, and the audience's passivity as spectators prevents it from acting for itself (Fortier 140). However, for Boal, Brecht's thoughtful, critical spectator is not enough, because, as such, the barriers between spectator and actor – more than ever – still remain. For Boal, "all must act, all must be protagonists in the necessary transformations of society" (*Theatre of the Oppressed* Foreword).

In fact, the passive spectator must be replaced by the active *spect-actor*. "I believe", says Boal,

that all the truly revolutionary theatrical groups should transfer to the people the means of production in the theatre so that the people themselves may utilise them. The theatre is a weapon, and it is the people who should wield it. (*Theatre of the Oppressed* 122)

Besides, Boal argues that theatre has become a form of ruling-class control and has lost its place as a form of communication and expression for the people. And he proposes to turn theatre from an ideological state apparatus into “a rehearsal of revolution” (qtd. in Fortier 141).

The publication of Boal’s second book in English, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, was welcomed in 1992. This book backs up and comments on *Theatre of the Oppressed*, bringing together a collection of games and exercises, as strategies for the implementation of the theories, all designed to facilitate the development of theatre as a democratic arena. To be sure, Boal’s theories have not exactly been required to stand on their own, as the dramatist has travelled extensively giving workshops, lectures, and demonstrations about the Theatre of the Oppressed and The Rainbow of Desire. Moreover, as is known, Boal’s enthusiastic, highly personal delivery style has greatly influenced the way in which his ideas and techniques have been taken on by other practitioners.²

Surely, the recognition of the appeal and the value of Theatre of the Oppressed is still apparent. Yet, when applying its theories to different theatrical and cultural contexts, it seems advisable to use caution and bear in mind important questions. To this extent it is helpful to consider the queries advanced by Frances Babbage, in her excellent Introduction to *Working Without Boal*:

Have we become over-confident in our use of these techniques? Are we too ready to define ‘the oppressed’ as the *other*, ignoring or blind to the oppressive structures we ourselves operate within and are perhaps complicit in maintaining? Are we so familiar with Theatre of the Oppressed games and exercises that we might overlook the ways in which they impact on different groups? (Introduction)

Cultural approaches to drama have clearly demonstrated that theatre is culturally marked, and materially localised in history and geography. Therefore, it is small wonder that as individuals attempt to use techniques and concepts of the “Brazilian, Rio de Janeiro-generated” Theatre of the Oppressed in their diverse cultural contexts, they have had to test Boal’s theory against their specific problems, in their own cultural contexts. As would be the case, in this process, ideas and exercises from Boal’s poetics are adapted, stretched, questioned, and even rejected. We must realise that the theory will not remain static, but will necessarily be rethought, if it is to remain relevant.

And the creative – I dare say, exciting – rethinking of Augusto Boal has been live and kicking in Northern Ireland. Chrissie Poulter, lecturer at Trinity College, Dublin,

has led a group-devised production from its initial building of an ensemble through to performance and post-performance, integrating techniques learnt from Boal with her own approaches to theatre-making. Two case studies are here singled out. The first pertains to a youth theatre project in Enniskillen, the second involves a Forum Theatre piece created by young people fighting bullying in schools of Belfast. Poulter acknowledges Boal's influence and does resort to games and exercises as a means of building theatre-making skills and group bonding, but she identifies important points of departure. She stresses that care must be taken when "borrowing" from Boal, as, in her view, many of his "warm-up games", for instance, actually replicate oppressive structures. In fact, Poulter submits that unless an ensemble is working explicitly with ideas of oppression and power, the use of some of the games could undermine the development of group bonding. And she stresses the need to contextualise Boal's methods and to prevent them from becoming lost in a "general wash" of workshop processes.

Tom Magill provides two further case studies, in sharp contrast, examining the application of the Theatre of the Oppressed techniques in Belfast. The first project, dated 1991, involved a daring move: introducing theatre skills to a cross-community group of young people, leading to their constructing a production of *The Wishing Well*, which the group proceeded to play locally in both Loyalist and Republican districts. The play's title, of course, expresses a belief in the possibilities for change. Now, if theatre can serve an important function in its ability to stage wishes, i.e., to present the far-fetched, the wishing well was clearly a meaningful image for the Belfast group, a wish-image which peace treaties attempt to turn into a reality. For the second project, Magill worked with a group of single parent Catholic women, using Forum Theatre to address their common concerns, particularly the need to reject the label of "second-class citizen", and also the telling acknowledgement of their collusion in their own oppression. From these contrasting case studies, Magill draws some common 'Boal' themes: finding and using a personal voice through theatre, the importance of expressing needs and desires, and the raising of self-esteem and self-confidence through developing abilities in communication.

Augusto Boal has been grouped with other community-oriented "reformers", such as Stuart Brisley, Joan Littlewood, and Welfare State, in England, and Armand Gatti, in France, whose art merges with daily activity not just for experimentation, but as a means of exploring social situations and of developing leadership and coping skills in the participants/audience (Carlson, *Performance* 120). Whether, as some have argued, social and political concerns have become central to theatrical performance in the 1990s, there is no question that the extent of such interest has vastly grown in recent years. Among Declan Kiberd's brilliant deductions to the complex research question he poses as to who "invented" an identity for Ireland, whether the Irish, as suggested by the words *Sinn Féin* (ourselves), or the English, or even both, one conclusion seems particularly cogent and applicable in the case of this remarkable Irish re-invention of Augusto Boal: "the fact that identity is seldom straightforward and a given, more a

matter of negotiation and exchange" (Introduction). More and more, in a globalised present, intercultural, or culturally confrontational, theatrical experiences become paramount in negotiations of identity.

Notes

- 1 Boal has recently revisited these issues in *Legislative Theatre* (1998), especially section One, chapters 1, 2 and 3 (see bibliography).
- 2 As I myself had the chance to attest, participating in one such workshops, led by Boal with actors and directors of the Royal Shakespeare Company, at The Other Place, in Stratford-upon-Avon, in July 1997.

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