

Creative Alternative
Montreal, QC

Fostering Democracy Through Theatre

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In May of 2004, Creative Alternatives, a non-profit creative arts therapies center in Montreal, invited Dr. Augusto Boal, an internationally renowned author, theatre practitioner and educator, as the special guest for an ongoing series entitled *Fostering Democracy through Theatre*. The objective of this series is to transfer knowledge and skills in the use of participatory theatre in education, activism and therapy to individuals and organizations engaged in social justice efforts. A secondary objective of this program is aimed at building the capacities of individuals and community groups working in Montreal and surrounding areas to collectively explore and critically investigate the use of theatre and our understanding of 'social change' on an ongoing basis. Augusto Boal fell ill three days prior to the training. As a result, his son Julian Boal graciously stepped in to provide three days of intensive training in his father's body of work known as the *Theatre of the Oppressed*.

The Theatre of the Oppressed (TO)

Many scholars and practitioners have dedicated their time and analysis to understanding the potential of theatre to empower and engage citizens to act upon injustice and inequality in their lives (Moreno, 1924, Boal, 1979, Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz, 1994, Fox, 1994, Emunah, 1994, James, 1998, Little, 1999, Selman and Prentki, 2000, Salverson, 2001, Van Erven, 2001). Edward Little, the head of the Theatre and Development program at Concordia University in Montreal, recognizes popular theatre as a means to achieve cultural democracy in an article entitled *Theatre For the People By the People*. "Cultural democracy occurs at the local level and involves the direct participation of individuals and communities in the creation of representations of their particular culture." (1999, 10). Redirecting the power to generate images and speak to the realities of lived experience faced by individuals and communities is central to the practice of *Theatre of the Oppressed*.

The *Theatre of the Oppressed* is comprised of a series of theatre techniques which have as their focus the systematic and intentional use of dramatic processes for progressive change. Augusto Boal developed the Theatre of the Oppressed during a period of political instability in Brazil in the early 1960's. His work had focused on fostering democracy through both theatrical work and political activism as a means of collectively surviving and challenging the harsh conditions under dictatorship. Cohen Cruz and Schutzman (1994), in their anthology entitled *Playing Boal*, provide a detailed historical account of the evolution of Boal's work in Brazil and Europe. Boal's vision was strongly influenced by Paulo Friere's dialogic philosophy of education (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1970), and is embodied in dramatic techniques that activate passive spectators to become spect-actors--engaged participants rehearsing strategies for personal and social change. Although founded in theatrical exploration, the techniques, all based in experiential learning and collective empowerment, are not limited to the stage; educators, political activists, therapists, and social workers devoted to critical thought and action have adapted the work to address issues ranging from racism and sexism,

to loneliness and political impotence. Schutzman and Cohen Cruz advance that “T.O. exposes the insufferability of politics that are artless and dogmatic, the presumptuousness of art that lacks self or collective consciousness and the ultimate futility (if not harmful ethnocentricity) of therapies devoid of playfulness and cultural contextualization.”(1994, 2)

Julian, our host, gave us his understanding of *Theatre of the Oppressed*.

“What structures Theatre of the Oppressed is the idea that we are all doing theatre all the time. We are always adapting ourselves to the situation in which we are. We are not born as a man or as a woman, but learn how to act as a man, as a woman, as a teacher, as a learner, a boss, or as a worker. You are already doing theatre. There is no gap between the stage and common, every day life. There is a continuity of acting and if we are acting all the time, we have many more possibilities than the ones we use, we can explore the possibilities available to transform the relationships we have not only on stage but in our normal everyday life. We can transform the way we perform being a woman, a foreigner, as a worker. This also means that we can influence the Oppressor in any situation, to transform their actions by transforming our own. Through theatre you can transform society, because society is already theatre. Things are not as they have to be, but we act as if they are,... there are many more possibilities than we actually use” (Julian Boal)

This statement reflects Augusto Boal’s belief in the body as one’s most essential tool in transforming physical into a communicable language and altering everyday space into a theatrical arena, or aesthetic space. Julian also underlined the importance and the limitations of Theatre of the Oppressed:

“The theatre is a place where people come to gather and see something. It is the spectators that create the theatre but there is no light on them. In the Theatre of Oppressed, the light is on the spectator, they have the right to enter the stage, to speak and to act. This relationship also exists outside the theatre, where some people are allowed the right to speak and act, whereas other only have the right to watch or applaud. In breaking the monopoly of the stage, we break the monopoly of speech. To liberate the spectator does not mean we just want to liberate the people inside the theatre. Outside, in the society, there is also these structures of oppression that we also need to change. Theatre is a rehearsal for a revolution, a rehearsal for change and transformation, it is not the transformation itself. We will work here (in the theatre) to change things outside these walls but it does not end there.”

In this workshop we sought to create a space in which we, as a group, could investigate the degree to which TO is a useful method of challenging hierarchical structures and values and to gain insight into what the term ‘oppression’ means for us as middle class activists in a capitalist democracy. We sought to create a space to learn the techniques and question how they might be applied in our specific social and political contexts. We sought to foster democracy within the workshop, to invite participants to speak to the ideas, questions and concerns each had brought with them, and outside of the workshop, to encourage the use of applied theatre as a means of challenging the forces which limit and circumscribe the totality of what we can imagine, experience, and produce in our daily lives.

The Workshop

This workshop was divided into two parts: three days of training and a public forum. The first section of the training provided participants with the opportunity to work with the techniques found within the Theatre of the Oppressed and to refine and extend their knowledge and competency in applying these techniques within their own social and political contexts. At the end of the three days of training, participants presented a short play examining themes relating to democracy to the Montreal public.

The Participants

This workshop was open to individuals and groups interested in developing their capacities in socially and politically conscious theatre. It was made available to Anglophone and Francophone communities through collaboration with the Quebec Drama Federation, the Institute in Management and Community Development, Concordia University, and the Centre St. Pierre. 40 individuals attended with backgrounds in education, social services, counselling, and advocacy. Among them were members and staff from several Quebec and Ontario based non-profits: Powercamp National, Project Genesis, Literacy in Action, Portage (Support for Youth at Risk), Development and Peace, the Black Theatre Workshop and the Latin American Canadian Solidarity Association. We also welcomed members from para-public and private sectors: Maimonides Geriatric Hospital, , the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the Canadian Human Rights Foundation, McMaster, Concordia (Drama Therapy and Theatre and Development Programs) and York universities, Evangel Hall and the Episcopal Church.

The Public Forum

Forum Theatre is an interactive theatre form invented (or discovered) in the early 1970s by Augusto Boal and is part of the arsenal of the Theatre of the Oppressed. An audience is shown a short play in which a central character (protagonist) encounters an oppression or obstacle which s/he is unable to overcome; the subject-matter will usually be something of immediate importance to the audience, often based on a shared life experience. Two short plays were selected for the public forum: the play which focused on challenges faced by citizens in a consumer driven political economy, and the play which explored the challenges faced by mothers and their children in public spaces.

After the performance, there is usually brief discussion amongst the audience, mediated by a figure known as 'the Joker' (as in a pack of cards, belonging to no particular suit, on no-one's side). Julian Boal was the Joker for this event. He defined Forum Theatre and explained the rules of engagement. Then the play is restarted, usually from the beginning, and runs as before - but this time, whenever a 'spect-actor' (active audience member) feels the protagonist might usefully have tried a different strategy, s/he can stop the action, take the protagonist's place, and try his or her idea. Through a session of Forum Theatre, many people will take the stage and show many different possibilities. In this way, the event becomes a kind of theatrical debate, in which experiences and ideas are rehearsed and shared, generating both solidarity and a sense of empowerment. "The idea is not to bring a solution but to construct a solution with the people, with the actors and those who have come to see the performance." (Julian Boal)

This public “forum” brought together workshop participants and interested members of the public to witness an example of how we can use theatre to create democratic spaces that encourage the development of creative and critically engaged citizens. After the performance they shared their reflections. Many commented on the calibre of acting, stating that the scenes presented were well designed and gripping to watch. Some attributed this to the relevance each scene had for members of the audience who could relate to the situations presented. Here is a selection of comments made by audience members:

“It was entertaining and enriching as well...get the whole group together and come up with ideas to look at issues in a new way. This is really positive. I would like to come to another one of these performances if the opportunity arises.”

“It is great to make people aware of different solutions. Here you can see whether solutions are workable and then you decide.”

“Today was very moving because it opened up my mind to the possibilities of how may different ways there are for one single person to change their response to a situation that is happening around them...and that has given me hope.”

“I found it really interesting, and sometimes times frustrating, because there are so many solutions that you can handle and we get to see all these ways that we can handle it, but in the end it comes down to what we are going to do with our day to day lives so it really leaves me thinking about what I can do in my day to day life.”

“ I will go home on the bus and talk about these issues until we go to bed!”

Outcome of the Training

This training inspired several initiatives spearheaded by participants of the workshop. A growing online database of practitioners and community members across Quebec and Ontario and surrounding area was developed by one participant and it continues to be well used as a forum where information about upcoming training possibilities as well as references and opportunities to create work together is shared. Each participant also received a copy of the video made during the workshop as a reference and training tool which could aid them in passing on the skills learned during the training.

An ongoing commitment to continued exploration has also emerged through a series of *Montreal Theatre of the Oppressed Laboratories (TOPLAB)*. The first Montreal TOPLAB was held October 20th, 2004 and the second one was held on April 30th, 2005.

Participants of both the initial workshop and the resulting TOPLABs have been busy developing forum theatre pieces to address concerns and challenges in their communities.

Throughout the workshop and at the end of our time together, we reflected on the assumptions and limitations of fostering democracy through theatre. Many participants indicated the varied definitions and expressions of social justice being used during the workshop; notably, not all of them leading to democratic reform. Democracy is also a much contested term, invoking different images for different individuals and groups depending on their history, social position and political context. What was agreed upon, from my perspective, was the necessity for creative and collective accountability and action in inspiring the kind of changes we

wanted to see in our communities. “Theatre can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it.” (Augusto Boal, 1992, xxxi).

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