

**Here to Act:  
Using Theater Games as Rehearsal  
at the Intersection of Youth, Politics, and Social Action**

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ABSTRACT

This paper rises out of the author's own use of theater games with adolescents in a variety of settings, most notably the current setting of a seminary youth program oriented toward active participation in social justice issues. The paper will share conceptual frameworks related to the educative use of theater games with politically aware and socially active adolescents, supplemented by narrative examples of theater games used with youth. Practices described in Augusto Boal's works are presented as contexts for public discourse about social issues.

Theater games as a pedagogical method draw together educational intentions found at the intersection of politically aware and socially active adolescents. Identifying and addressing patterns of social injustice requires some interaction of critical theory and critical social assessment. Moving from assessment to social action is a multi-step process that can be described metaphorically as rehearsal. Similarly, adolescence is a period of rehearsal as critical tools and viewpoints are learned, tested, and applied.

The game-space generated within theater games is a multi-faceted context for heterogeneous discourse. These exercises generate their own context for learning dependant on (and thus intertwined with) the real-life experiential contexts of the "spect-actors." Similarly theater games, while drawing upon and affirming what is already known, demand experiences and contexts be critically re-examined. Like all arts, theater games invites us to consider the importance of perspective in claims of knowing; this can be a significant vehicle for "hearing into listening" voices that have been marginalized. This is enhanced when social-critical tolls, such as those presented in critical theory, are introduced to the game-play.

This use of theater games raises significant core issues of Religious Education: the role and purpose of art in religious expression; the play between public and private theology; linkages between ritual, art, and religious education; the interplay between experience and (assumed) tradition; sustaining joy while engaged in transformative ministries. The malleable nature of theater games permits them to be in diverse settings to address distinctive contextual issues, yet the core praxis of theater games is relatively simple to learn and employ as a teaching-learning strategy.

Consequently, theater games are being used in the contexts of classrooms, communities of faith, and the wider community (all settings in which the writer has personally used theater games). Rather than attempting to specify a particular context for this praxis, the writer suggests that theater games create a context for these different settings to intersect with one another. As a Resourcing Workshop,<sup>1</sup> this presentation will engage participants in some "spect-actor" playing in order to demonstrate the adaptability of these games with distinctive populations.

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<sup>1</sup> Religious Education Association (REA) and Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education (APRRE) describe a resourcing workshop "presentations of scholarly and practical resources or approaches supporting the multiple practices of religious education. These sessions may seek to increase awareness or enhance performance of specific religious education practices. The context for these practices may be settings such as faith communities, higher education, wider public settings, schools, etc." see [http://www.religiouseducation.net/meeting/annual\\_meeting.htm](http://www.religiouseducation.net/meeting/annual_meeting.htm)

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Rarely do educational philosophy and practice intersect with theories and practices of theatre as seamlessly as do Paulo Freire's and Augusto Boal's work. This is no coincidence: the parallels between the lives of educator Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal are the result of conscientious dedication to cultural transformation within a brutally oppressive society. When Boal was exiled from Brazil for his "subversive theatrical activities," Boal relocated in Argentina then Peru with *Operacion Alfabetizacion Integral* (ALFIN) literacy program. The ALFIN methodology was derived from Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Exiled from his native Brazil, Freire produced this work during his work in Chile under the Cortes government to work with the adult education programs. Boal infused the ALFIN method with in order to teach Spanish literacy to indigenous populations. Like educator Paulo Freire, Boal sees the language of theater to be a tool for overcoming political paradigms of social oppression.

**CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF THEATER OF THE OPPRESSED**

**Theater as a cultural language**

Like Freire, Boal claims three qualities as central anthropological (ontological) characteristics: to be human is to communicate, to be in relationship to others, and to actively make decisions. These three are inextricably interwoven.

Boal's perception of theater arts is that they are part of the human language game, akin but not restricted to spoken-written language. That is to say, discursive theater relies on spoken-written language, but theatrical arts as an physical-tactile embodied communication is more than words. As such, the art of language games are always subjective to the context in which they are expressed; evaluating their relevance is related to the coherence within the context.

Borrowing from Frankfurt School critical pedagogy, as did Freire, Boal recognizes that to use language is to be located within a socio-cultural nexus of ***cultural – and therefore political – meaning making***. The syllogism is thus:

- to communicate is to be in relationship.
- to be in relationship is to participate in and shape culture.
- culture is always related to determining value.
- to determine value is influence how decisions are made.
- decision making is the essence of politics.
- ergo, communication is always a political act.

Therefore, theater as an act of communication is immediately thrust into the political realm of determining value that has consequences on how decisions are made. Owing this implicit quality of theater, Boal suggests that those engaged in theatrical presentation need be more conscientious about permitting theater to fulfill this function:

Our mandate's project is to bring theatre back into the centre of political action – the centre of decisions – by making theatre as politics rather than merely making political theatre. In the latter case, the theatre makes comments on politics;

in the former, the theatre is, in itself, one of the ways in which political activity can be conducted.<sup>2</sup>

### **Theater is already a political tool**

Boal distinguishes between theater that engages political process, theater that is used for political propaganda, didactic theater that politicizes, and ideological theater that is disguised as entertainment. These three misguided uses of theater have controlled the art by insisting on “professionals.” The professionalization of theater has permitted it to become a tool of the oppressive classes and an opiate for the petty bourgeoisie. This is a perversion of theater: it should be produced and acted by the people in order for the people to express their perceptions of reality.<sup>3</sup>

*Propaganda Theatre* is characterized by a presentation organized around the problems of greatest urgency and importance to the community at the time. The goal of this form of theater is to present a certain point of view as a truth to be accepted. Stylistically, this genre was found in agit-pop and guerilla theater experiments, characterized by the needs to explain an event that had occurred and a sense of urgency to respond to the event. The qualities combine as a political imperative “such as persuading the spectator to vote for such and such a candidate or to take part in a political strike or confront a particular act of political repression.”<sup>4</sup>

*Didactic Theatre* focuses on more general problems, presenting a particular ethical or social dilemma for discussion in order to mobilize the public to face a looming event. This is done without any theoretical explanation or practical teaching, yet demanded responsive action.

It would choose a theme say, justice. We knew that the dominant classes always seek to impose their ideas, their moral values, on the dominated classes. Thus they try to make everyone believe that their justice is a single universal thing, concealing the fact that it is they, the dominant classes, who are entrusted with the prescription and execution of this justice – which they intend should be the only justice available.

However, if the hypothesis of a God-given justice is done away with, and if it is admitted that men are divided into classes, it becomes evident that there will be as many justices as there are classes into which men are divided, and that the stronger will impose their justice as unique and universal in application.

An abstract explanation such as we have just given will not reach the consciousness of the masses. For this reason, didactic theatre tries to expose it in a concrete and sensory manner.<sup>5</sup>

Didactic theater politicizes by asking the audience to decide between polarized solutions, using all of its persuasive theatrical power to present one alternative as the best of all those available. It has a particular politic that the audience is expected to join while diminishing the validity of alternate perspectives.

The third form of theater to which Boal opposes is the insidious theater of *entertainment*, for the guise of amusement perpetuates assumed social norms by uncritically embedding theater within its conventionality. Here Boal seems to be applying Adorno’s concept of the “culture industry”: music, entertainment, and other forms of media are instruments of repression intended to pacify and ameliorate any radical social inclinations. When all the characters are dressed in bourgeoisie class

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<sup>2</sup> *Legislative Theatre*. Adrian Jackson, trans. New York: Routledge, 1998, 20.

<sup>3</sup> *Legislative Theatre*, 211.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 216

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 216-217.

fashions, eat bourgeoisie class foods in bourgeoisie class restaurants, and strive for bourgeoisie career advancement, the audience is led to believe that the bourgeoisie world is normative – and that there is something wrong if they do not fit into this landscape. This insidiousness of culture theater is that it is not conscientious of the world view it is portraying; thus “when the content of a play is not sufficiently clear or is open to diverse interpretations, the bourgeoisie can and will always manage to come up with the version which coincides with its interests, by means of a particular actors’ performances or particular directors’ readings.”<sup>6</sup>

**The Purpose of Theater: public discourse that benefits the public (the polis)**

In contrast to these misuses of theatrical art, Boal proposes that the true purpose of theater is to provide a public venue for discussing decision-making processes and contemporary issues. The objective of theatre is change those who participate in theater – both actors and audience – into actors within history, people who participate in the history in which they live.

This does not mean that theater has a monolithic viewpoint or a singular point of view; rather, theater serves the culture by providing a space in which multiple views can be expressed, explored, and tested, thereby permitting all to decide for themselves the best course of action. So Boal states

In forum theater no idea is imposed: the audience, the people, have the opportunity to try out all their ideas, to rehearse all the possibilities, and to verify them in practice, that is, in theatrical practice. ... It is not the place of the theater to show the correct path, but only to offer the means by which all possible paths may be examined.<sup>7</sup>

Collectively, these misuses of theater are guilty of making the audience passive. This diminishes the audiences humanity, for they are prevented from making decisions that affect the outcome of the theatrical presentation; the audience is objectified, stripped of its status as subjects in history. Boal seeks to make the audience active subjects, both of the theatrical event and in the larger scope of history.

All these experiments of a people’s theater have the same objective – the liberation of the spectator, on whom 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 there finished images will be reflections of themselves. The spectators in the people’s theater (i.e., the people themselves) cannot go on being the passive victims of those images. [In the practices of Theater of the Oppressed] the spectator no longer delegates power to the characters either to think or act in his place. The spectator frees himself; he thinks and acts for himself! Theater is action!<sup>8</sup>

Boal asserts that in order restore theater to its social role as public discourse, it must be returned to the people. In order for the people to regain control of the theater, they need to learn the language of theater. As the people learn the language of theater, they will use it to express their own social reality and reclaim it as a tool for social discourse about the concerns they identify. This invitation is offered both in teaching the skills of theater in workshops and in opening up the play.

One way to accomplish this is to deliberately change the actor-audience relationship. Boal does not permit actors to forsake their responsibility to prepare and rehearse, to have scripts and

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>7</sup> Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed* Charles A. McBride, Maria-Odilia Leal McBride, and Emily Fryer, trans. London: Pluto Press, 2000 (originally published 1979), 141.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

develop characters: this is the craft of the actor. Indeed, Boal admonishes actors to refine their craft in service to the people. The first step is to recognize that theatrical craft that is not restricted to the specialist; indeed, the theatrical craftsman is one who always offers to teach others the theatrical craft:

Artists are witnesses of their times: they should not impose on their public their own view of society, their own understanding of human beings, or their own way to make decisions, but, after speaking their speech, having their say, giving their testimony, delivering to us the product of their art and craft, they should help others to stimulate inside themselves the artists that lie within, underdeveloped and timid as they may be, shy thoughts still unborn and fragmented, the delicate sensibility that has been blunted.<sup>9</sup>

In Boal's theatrical plays the audience is asked to participate in the staged presentation: they are transformed from being spectators to "spect-actors." This fulfills Boal's vision of the purpose of theater:

to change people – "spectators," passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon – into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action. ... [By focusing on the action] the spectator delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or think in his place; on the contrary, he himself assumes the protagonic role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change – in short, trains himself for real action ... a rehearsal for the revolution.<sup>10</sup>

Presenting a script (and its development through theatrical conventions such as character, sets, blocking) is merely the starting point for theater's mission. Theater as presentation of a predetermined script is meant to control the populace. Theater is intended as an interactive public forum wherein possible solutions to current experiences can be explored. The resultant discourse is expected to be carried beyond the theater-space:

I believe it is more important to achieve a good debate than a good solution because, in my view, the thing which incites the spect-actors into entering into the game is the discussion and not the solution which may not be found.

Even if one does reach a solution, it may be good for the person who has posed it, or good within the confines of the debate, but not necessarily useful or applicable for all the participants in the forum. ... Debate, the conflict of ideas, dialectics, argument and counter-argument – all this stimulates, arouses, enriches, prepares the spectator for action in real life. Thus the model is not urgent, that is to say when it is not about having to act in reality immediately on leaving the show, finding a solution is not of prime importance.<sup>11</sup>

What Boal has in mind is for theater to serve as the coded text in problem-posing pedagogy. Elsa Auerbach<sup>12</sup> has simplified the didactic steps of this Freirian methodology. The teacher presents the learners with a codes (cultural texts) related to problems which originate from the learners' concerns and experiences, which makes them important to the learners and their daily lives. After the learners have studied the code, the teacher begins by asking questions that help students identify and clarify the problem in their own terms. From

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<sup>9</sup> *Games for Actors and Non Actors*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Adrian Jackson, trans. New York: Routledge, 2002 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1992), 17.

<sup>10</sup> *Theater of the Oppressed*, 122.

<sup>11</sup> *Games*, 259.

<sup>12</sup> Elsa Auerbach, *Making Meaning, Making Change: A guide to participatory curriculum development for adult ESL and family literacy*. Boston: University of Massachusetts. 1990.

this, students are engaged in proposing solutions, examining consequences, and ultimately examining alternatives to the problem.<sup>13</sup> Boal present theater as a code to be explored and a tool which helps explore cultural codes.

### **The Joker**

Various forms of Boal's productions 'The different kinds of Forum Theater are directed, referred, facilitated, 'workshopped' by "the Joker". The person in this role interprets what is on stage: the motivations of characters, the transitions between styles, and even comment on the contextual relevance of the play itself. In this way, the Joker provides continuity to the performance. The Joker also acts as the *maestro* who recognizes the basic humanity of all participants:

The Joker must show, by means of examples – preferably solicited from other participants – that no problem is UNIQUE and EXCLUSIVE to one person alone. In one way or another, the problems are pluralized. In the absence of absolute identity, there will be analogy; when there is no analogy, at the very least there will be a resonance, always. The Joker has a duty not to latch onto an individual problem, as if only that individual had that problem – s/he must show how problems are pluralized. But s/he also has a duty not to undervalue the individual, or give the impression that 'it's the same the world over.' It is not: even when alike, the same problem presents itself in different form in each individual. The participant can feel devalued if something he or she valued as their personal problem is subsequently revealed as the possession of all. When all is said and done, we all cherish our own difficulties.<sup>14</sup>

Boal proposes what he names "joker scenography," a minimalistic use of props and scenery from materials that have been recycled, claimed from others have discarded, or that may be returned to their intended purpose after the performance. . This closely resembles the principles of Grotowski's poor theater.<sup>15</sup> Grotowski assessed theater had become too overpowered by mechanical and electronic medias. Dependency on these tools violated the very essence of theater: the relationship between actors and audience. Spectacle and music was restricted to that which the actor could create; makeup was prohibited and costume changes eliminated; aside from the most functional stage props no traditional scenery was used, and then used with multiple purposes. The goal in this minimalistic approach was to open up both audience and actors so that all may confront themselves in something approximating an ecstatic religious experience, a sense of wonder and awe at having engaged something that transcends normative human experience. These thoughts culminated in Grotowski's exploration of rituals from many cultures as ways in which the human spirit, physical body, imagination, the natural world, and human relationships are encountered and affirmed.

Boal's premise for such minimalism is different than Grotowski for its primary concern is for the economic context of the people with whom he works: the theatrical production must not place financial burden on the community which is most likely already economically oppressed. "The function of 'joker scenography' is also to allow the audience to see and not merely look. If they look at an actual telephone on stage, the won't see a telephone; but if they can see an object (larger or smaller, or different colour or texture from a 'genuine' phone) representing the absent phone, then they will see the absent phone. Things which are as they are are not seen; we only see absences. The 'joker scenography' should deliver the spect-actor to a reality which is not present, except

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<sup>13</sup> The appendix presents a more detailed description of the steps in the problem-posing methodology.

<sup>14</sup> *Legislative Theatre*, 75-6.

symbolically.”<sup>16</sup> This commitment inherently establishes a certain production value in Boal’s productions.

The Joker is a poses of problems, one who engages us in understanding riddles, invites us to action, prods us when we are inactive and celebrates with us as we discover new ways. The Joker helps us rehearse the revolution, teaching us that we are subjects in history.

### **TEACHING THE LANGUAGE OF THEATER: REHEARSING THE REVOLUTION**

Boal distinguishes between workshops (where basic skills are learned), rehearsals (preparation for a public presentation) and performance. There is overlap in that all three employ various games to explore the language of theater. For the remainder of this essay I will focus on Boal’s four-stage workshop model which includes Image Theater, which is a tool for workshop, rehearsal, and production.

In some writings Boal describes the workshop stages in a very linear fashion; in other writings these exercises overlap as a collection of ideas for exploring the theatrical possibilities. In order to introduce the main concepts and practices have organized them into the following sequence:

Stage 1: knowing the [somatic] body

Stage 2: conscientious use of the body

Stage 3: learning the language of theatre

first degree: *simultaneous dramaturgy*

second degree: *image theatre*

a. using one’s own body to present a statue

b. sculpting others’ bodies

c. images of reality / images of the ideal

d. images of transition

Stage 4: Multiple points of view

#### **Stages 1 & 2: Using the Body**

The first stage in learning this language is to *know the [somatic] body*. There are three premises at work here. First, although Boal never references this, he is expressing his kinship to French theater where a basic tenant places the body as the first tool of the actor.<sup>17</sup> For example, Boal states “... the first word of the theatrical vocabulary is the human body, the main source of sound and movement. Therefore, to control the means of theatrical production, man must, first of all, control his own body, know his own body, in order to be capable of making it more expressive.”<sup>18</sup> Second, this is the most familiar aspect of theater to those who are unfamiliar with theater. Third, oppressed persons are often alienated from their own bodies; beginning theater with a reclamation of one’s

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<sup>15</sup> Grotowski identifies ten principles of poor theater in his book *Toward a Poor Theatre*, trans. Małgorzata Buszewicz and Judy Barba, 211-218, which can be found at <http://owendaly.com/jeff/grotows2.htm> (last accessed 20 July 2004).

<sup>16</sup> *Legislative Theatre*, 75-76.

<sup>17</sup> This is advocated by two influential French theater visionaries. Etienne Decroux (1898-1991) adapted dancers’ exercises of “isolations” to train the body of the silent actor who would, only if absolutely necessary, supplement action with sound. Decroux is credited with teaching some of the world’s most famous mimes, including Marcel Marceau. Jacques Lecoq (1921-1999) promoted mime as both an ever-emergent art form and the synthesis of artistic expression that borrows from dance, music, architecture, literature, and drama. Both advocated that the actor should observe and emulate the movement of skilled laborers whose constant craftsmanship requires the efficient use of the body, for such efficiency reveals art. In order to emphasize the movement of the body, Lecoq explored the theatrical use of masks.

<sup>18</sup> *Theater of the Oppressed*, 125.

own body is libratory and revolutionary act. Boal expresses these last two in terms of the work of the teacher:

The very fact that the education comes with the educator comes with the mission of eradicating illiteracy (which presupposes a coercive, forceful action) is in itself an alienating factor between the agent and the local people. For this reason the theatrical experience should not begin not with something alien to the people (theatrical techniques that are taught or imposed) but with the *bodies* of those who agree to participate in the experiment.<sup>19</sup>

The exercises of the first stage are intended primarily to increase awareness of the body's expressivity and, secondarily, to condition the body for prolonged expressivity.<sup>20</sup> In achieving these goals, the introductory exercises

are designed to “undo” the muscular structure of the participants. That is, to take them apart, to study and analyze them. Not to weaken or destroy them, but to raise them to the level of consciousness. So that each worker, each peasant understand, sees, and feels to what point his body is governed by his work.<sup>21</sup>

The second stage of games is oriented toward *conscientiously using the body to be expressive of a particular character, attitude, emotion, or social perspective*.<sup>22</sup> Conscious awareness of how labor conditions the body leads to greater awareness of how different life circumstances, say those associated with particular socio-economic class, create different uses of somatic expression. This creates the ability to take on and physically project a theatrical character: new ways of moving provide the social a “mask” of behavior which, in turn, permits the actor to “interpret” a character that is different from themselves.<sup>23</sup>

Boal comments that the games / exercises used in these first two stages must be selected with care for abilities, commitments, and comfort levels of the participants. They are also selected to improve both the stage presence and technical craft of acting by, for instance, combining vocal, physical, and characterization skills in a variety of games that help orient the actor to projector from a stage into an audience.<sup>24</sup>

### **Stage 3: Learning the Language of Theater**

Greater awareness of the technical craft permits the actor to explore the possibilities of presentation, which is the essence of appreciating the language of theater. A key nexus of possibility revolves around the interaction of characters in conflicted situations, requiring the actor to explore the range of human emotions. Sounding like a student of Stanislavsky, Boal states

Theatre is a conflict between or among characters confronting one another, always in the here and now. So memory is important, but only when it is transported to the present – when memory becomes the present, when ‘I have felt’ becomes ‘I am feeling again’. In theatre, to remember is to live again, with the same or even greater intensity, with the same or even broader and deeper knowledge of what has happened, how and why.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 127. Boal's masculine language should be understood to mean any person.

<sup>20</sup> *Games*, 48. “Expressivity” is the word of Boal's translator.

<sup>21</sup> *Theater of the Oppressed*, 128

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 127-128

<sup>24</sup> *Legislative Theatre*, 66.

<sup>25</sup> *Games*, 38.



Moving from the technical aspects of presentation to the ability to locate one's own emotional experiences as a resource for theatrical presentation of character represents the transition into the third stage of *learning the language of theater*. This is a stage of personal and social exploration and discovery. "Actors discover things when they take the risk of experiencing emotions. ... And that is the role of art – not only to show how the world is, but also why it is thus and how it can be transformed. I hope no one can be satisfied with the world as it is – we have to change it."<sup>26</sup> This is also the transition from theater games as teaching to theater games as rehearsal as preparation for public performance. In fact, many of the theater games that Boal uses in his workshops are similar to the games of theater that Boal uses in public performance. For this reason, Boal warns that rehearsals, like performance, is a political act:

It should be understood that rehearsals are already a cultural-political meeting in themselves. Theatre will be the medium of the encounter, theatre will be enacted, but it is very important to be aware that it is the citizens who will be making the theatre, around their own problems, trying their own solutions. In this context, every exercise, every game, every technique is both art and politics.<sup>27</sup>

Boal describes this third stage in three escalating degrees. The first degree is *simultaneous dramaturgy*, which Boal describes thusly:

Having begun the scene, the actors develop it to the point at which the main problem reaches a crisis and needs a solution. Then the actors stop the performance and ask the audience to offer solutions. They [the actors] improvise immediately all the suggested solutions, and the audience has the right to intervene, to correct the actions or words of the actors, who are obligated to comply strictly with these instructions from the audience. Thus, while the audience "writes" the work the actors perform it simultaneously.<sup>28</sup>

Boal promotes this sort of theatricalization as a way to demonstrate to the audience that their interventions do in fact change the outcome of the presentation. Everything is subjected to critique and potential revision; nothing is predetermined by fate. By virtue of being an active participant of the audience, each person is invited and empowered to try out their ideas without censorship.<sup>29</sup>

The second degree of workshop-as-performance is *image theater*. Boal claims this exercise "is without a doubt one of the most stimulating, because it is so easy to practice and because of its extraordinary capacity for making thought *visible*."<sup>30</sup> Similar to the mime exercise of tableau scening, participants are asked to use their bodies to create a statue or image of an idea. This is an entry into trans-linguistic expression:

If I utter the word "revolution," obviously everyone will realize that I am talking about a radical change, but at the same time each person will think of his or her "own" revolution, a personal conception of revolution. But if I have to arrange a group of statues that will signify "my revolution," here there will be no denotation-connotation dichotomy. The image synthesizes the individual connotation and the collective denotation. In my arrangement signifying

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

<sup>27</sup> *Legislative Theatre*, 48.

<sup>28</sup> *Theater of the Oppressed*, 132

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 134.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 137.

revolution, what are the statues doing? Do they have weapons in their hands or do they have ballots? Are the figures of the people united in a fighting posture against the figures representing the common enemies; or are the figures of the people dispersed, or showing disagreement among themselves? My conception of “revolution” will become clear is, instead of speaking, I show with images what I think.<sup>31</sup>

Boal describes four discreet phases of this image work. The first phase is *using one’s own body to present a statue*.

Without talking, they position their bodies in a still pose, to express their opinion or idea or experience of the theme, as it strikes them then and there; having made their image, they need offer no explanation or justification – in itself, it says everything that needs saying, for the moment. When all the volunteers have been into the space and shown their individual images, the Joker asks if anyone in the audience can suggest an image different than to those shown. ... One by one, anyone who wants to comes into the middle and shows their own image of the subject being treated – whatever image occurs to them.<sup>32</sup>

Displaying, seeing, and suggesting change to various statues serves as “the *multiple mirror of the gaze of others* – a number of people looking sat the same image, and offering their feelings, what is evoked for them, what their imaginations throw up around that image.”<sup>33</sup> This is to say that language, even the language of theater, is always nuanced by the one who expresses and the one who receives, and that dialogue between both clarifies the message.

The second phase of image theater is *sculpting using others’ bodies*. Boal describes the exercise taking place in this way:

The participant is asked to express his opinion, but without speaking, using the only the bodies of the other participants and “sculpting” with them a group of statues, in such a way that his opinions and feelings become evident. The participant is to use the bodies of the others as if he were a sculptor and the others were made of clay: he must determine the position of each body down to the most minute details of the facial expressions. He is not allowed to speak under any circumstances. The most that is permitted to him is to show with his own facial expressions what he wants the statue-spectator to do. After organizing this group of statues he is allowed to enter into a discussion with the other participants in order to determine if all agree with his “sculpted” opinion. ... then the spectator-sculptor is asked to show the way he would like the given theme to be; that is, in the first grouping the *actual image* is shown, and in the second the *ideal image*. Finally, he is asked to show a *transitional image*, to show how it would be possible to pass from one reality to the other. In other words, how to carry out the change, the transformation, the revolution, or whatever term one wishes to use.<sup>34</sup>

In a variation, the sculptor-participant may be asked to insert himself into the group that has been created, effectively making the sculptor-participant part of the present, ideal, and revolutionary

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>32</sup> *Games*, 177.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>34</sup> *Theater of the Oppressed*, 135

reality.<sup>35</sup> Either way, possible transitional actions are presented as a proposed solution to the present identified dilemmas and hoped-for ideal.

When the model is finished, the Joker then consults the group, who may well disagree with the image shown (in which case the model is taken to pieces); or they may agree with it (the model is retained as it is); or they may agree with it in part. In this last case, the Joker consults the group and removes from the image those elements the group considers to have no function or to convey no meaning. At every point the group should be consulted, as it is ultimately the ‘constructor’ of a collective image in the proposed subject.<sup>36</sup>

We have begun to enter into the third phase, the exploration of multiple *images of transition*. Instead of having a sculptor shape the transitions, the acting group, who has established the actual and ideal images, determines their own transitions to achieve the ideal. Boal calls this a “practical verification” of the images. At a signal from the Joker, all the characters in the image make a single movement to free themselves from oppression (if representing one who is oppressed) or to increase the oppression (if representing an oppressor). The period between claps becomes longer, slowing down the consecutive movements and allowing the actors to look around and consider the movements of others.<sup>37</sup>

These exercise – knowing one’s own body as a tool for expressivity; awareness how life experience (especially work as designated by socio-economic status) shapes the body and predicates how the body moves; exploring how movement defines character, exploring effective means of theatrical presentation – culminate in achieving the fourth and final stage: the perception of multiple points of view. Actors are required to imagine multiple points of view. Then sculptors enter into the image: “They must replace one of the people participating in the image they have made so that both the overall image and the **sculptor’s point of view** may be better understood.”<sup>38</sup> Second, “all the participants in the image must, in slow motion, effect the real-ideal transition the sculptor desires.”<sup>39</sup> Third, at a signal from the Joker, the figures move, “**not necessarily towards the ideal**: each figure must act in accordance with the character they represent.”<sup>40</sup> The multiple points of view are more realistic: moving from the actual experience of oppression to a hoped-for-ideal is not always linear, but more often encounters movements that are incongruous with the hoped-for-ideal. Allowing for this presence in theater permits the participants to rehearse their responses to that which is not seeking their ideal. “This multiple image of oppression always throws a good deal of light on the thinking of the group. It is one of the most revealing techniques.”<sup>41</sup>

### USING BOAL’S IDEAS WITH YOUTH

What follows are four narrative accounts of how Boal’s concepts and practices have recently been in use with youth. I led two of these accounts, and was a participant in the third.

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>36</sup> *Games*, 181.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

## **Being Homeless**

The first incident is the only one in which I was not part. It comes from Tiffany Trent, who at the time was a second-year M. Div student at Chicago Theological Seminary and lecturer in the Humanities (Theater Arts) Department at the University of Chicago, shared her reflections in a paper submitted for a course I did not teach.<sup>42</sup> In this paper, Tiffany reports on her use of Boal's Image Theatre with homeless teens at the Open Door Shelter, a local homeless shelter. Given that these youth live the reality of homelessness, she realized that this different constituency required a different method was needed to theatricalize their experience of hunger and homelessness: the homeless youth "need tools that they can use to assert themselves and have some agency over their situations; tools that help them bring their instincts and impulses to a conscious awareness in which they can manipulate skills which they already have."<sup>43</sup>

From previous experience, Tiffany started with a name game to help build familiarity with the youth; she reports that this fell flat: "It usually works with people of all ages, but these youth were quick to dismiss it. It's just a name game, to help people learn each other's names. The ones who did know many names didn't see why they needed to do something as inefficient as a game when they could just go around and name everybody."<sup>44</sup> As the Joker, Tiffany assumed the responsibility to learn everyone names as quickly as she could as she moved to a simple trust exercise. Everyone was asked to close their eyes; she then went around the circle and tapped them on the top of the head. After everyone was tapped, they discussed the different responses to being touched: some were still some jumped, others opened their eyes. Why these different responses? How does this relate to the way we (as homeless teens) respond to people we meet on the streets?

Building on this simple introduction, Tiffany explained that the games she would be sharing are all games taught to actors. She also declared that the reason she wanted to share them with this group was to reinforce that they already possess skills that can be used to change the way people interact with one another, skills that others value and look for when they hire people.<sup>45</sup> This pragmatic use of theater convinced the participants to join in a series of common theater games that Tiffany describes tersely:

*Pass the Clap:* a rhythm, listening, and awareness exercise that requires eye contact and a simultaneous clap with the person next to you. It highlights skills of timing, readiness, and awareness.

*Neutral Dialogue:* You always have the power and agency to create story and meaning. The dialogue is a vague "Hi-Bye" conversation with which each pair must establish a relationship, tone, and conflict clear to the rest of us in the workshop. This allowed us to look at particular meaningful relationships in their lives.

*Freezetag:* moving from spectator to spect-actor (Boal). The game doesn't work if nobody yells "Freeze" to contribute their vision. Highlights how we read body language and how we can interpret and re-interpret physical gesture. An imagination game.

*Count to ten:* 6-8 students in a circle close their eyes and count to ten. If two people begin to speak at once, they must start back at one. The idea is that we listen with our whole bodies, that we "feel" the impulses of others and have power to make a choice based on

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<sup>42</sup> Tiffany Trent, unpublished paper, "Hungry and Homeless: An Examination of Identity and Blame;" submitted to Drs. Janet Parker and Timothy Sandoval: June 11, 2004

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

that perception. The ODS kids were great at this game, and any combo that took too long to get it was concerned that they didn't. The kids know they need that kind of anticipatory awareness to live on the street.

*Numbers Conversations:* The kids wanted to make up their own scenes with no rules. I still gave them one: that the conversation use only numbers. Their behavior must be so physically specific and expressive that we will still be able to guess the scenario and character relationship.

These exercises represent the first two stages of Boal's methodology as ways to introduce the potential for theater and demystify the craft to new practitioners.

From these uses of theater games, Tiffany concludes that theatrical methods inherently possess organizational strategies for addressing a variety of social and economic issues. She states that her further experiments with these methods work best with "a primary audience—with those who are already plagued by or vulnerable to particular oppressions. This approach makes me feel part of a community of "actorvists" (a coined word some students of Boal are using) ..."<sup>46</sup>

### **Images of Hunger**

The DEPTH Youth Program at Chicago Theological Seminary<sup>47</sup> provides weekend immersion experiences to youth of a congregation around an identified topic as a way to explore how God calls us to faithfulness through concrete issues in our own neighborhoods. The participants of this particular weekend were from a nearby congregation in a predominantly African-American neighborhood that is undergoing gentrification; the topic the congregation selected to engage was hunger. Friday night the DEPTH team took the youth to The Good News Kitchen,<sup>48</sup> an outreach of a congregation in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood that is also experiencing gentrification Saturday morning included bible study, prayer, and a couple of games that presented information related to hunger. This youth group also had a commitment to a basketball practice in preparation for a tournament they were hosting, so by Saturday afternoon they were physically tired.

Tiffany was invited to use Boal's techniques to help the DEPTH participants express their experiences. Youth and adults (including the DEPTH team members) were led through a series of exercises that utilize the first three stages of Boal's methodology:<sup>49</sup>

*Audibly vocalize as you identify these gestures:*

- the part of your body where you feel hunger
- a counter-gesture which relieves that pain
- the gesture of a character that you saw at the Good News soup kitchen

*Show us your sweetest move on the basketball court.*

Execute it naturally.

Execute it with 12 pancakes and six sausages in your stomach.

Execute it with a bowl of oatmeal, toast, juice, and a banana in your stomach.

Execute it without having had breakfast today.

Execute it without having eaten since Thursday (this was a Saturday workshop).

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>47</sup> DEPTH stands for Discover – Explore – Partner where Transformation Happens. The Depth Youth Program is made possible by a grant from the Lilly Foundation and the Fund for Theological Education. For more information about DEPTH, visit our website at [www.depthyouth.org](http://www.depthyouth.org).

<sup>48</sup> see "Good News Community Church" at <http://www.kuc.org/agency/goodnews.htm>; last accessed 11 September, 2004.

<sup>49</sup> Trent, 4.

### *Image Theatre*

From *Actual Images* to *Ideal Images*: we worked in four groups.

Step 1: Build a human sculpture that embodies how you see the Actual picture of hunger.

Step 2: Build another that sculpture that encapsulates your Ideal picture of hunger.

Step 3: Build the *Transitional Images*: pictures (strategies) to progress from Actual to Ideal.

Tiffany reflects that in this exercise, “The youth created brilliant metaphoric images of what they understood as the root of the problem of hunger, connecting them to impressions they had of the people at the soup kitchen they had visited the night before.”<sup>50</sup>

### **Images of Homelessness**

At another DEPTH event where homelessness was the curricular topic, youth and adult participants were asked to select from among three modes of reflection on Saturday evening, each led by a CTS professor: a bible study, a poetry slam, and theatre games led by myself. I asked the participants in my group to walk silent to our room as though they were without a place to sleep that night. Unbeknownst to me, it had started to rain, so the exercise took on an additional experiential aspect. Upon entering the room, I asked them how their body responded to a short walk of being homeless. I also asked them how walking like this all the time might affect their mental, emotional, and spiritual outlook on life. I was practicing Boal’s idea that labor shapes the body and the body shapes consciousness.

I then divided the group in two. A representative from one group was asked to “sculpt” the people of their group into living statues of a family at worship; standing together, the cluster of statues looked like a fairly typical nuclear family. I asked the sculptor of the second group shape a set of statues of a homeless family; two youth took on this responsibility. Individuals were set in various poses, all of them close to the ground: squatting, kneeling, lying. Immediately, everyone in the room was aware of how much further apart the bodies of the homeless family were from one another, especially when compared to the family at worship.

The third of our exercises asked the three sculptors to work together to create one set of living statues in which there was no homelessness. What evolved was a two-ringed circle in which the inner “family at worship” reached out and touched – in one case embraced – those who were homeless. We now had two disparate images of the actual and one ideal image. I asked our three sculptors to create three intermediary statues, each a step between the current reality of homelessness and the ideal reality where there is no homelessness. Two youth quickly took charge, but they were unable to reconcile their ideas of how to achieve the ideal. Their differences of opinion provided us an opportunity to discuss the dilemmas of trying to overcome such a big issue like homelessness. One of the youth stated, “It’s easy to imagine that one day there will be no homelessness, but it’s hard to make it really work.” They had consciously begin to rehearse the revolution.

### **Walk as if ...**

Alongside my academic career, I have been a semi-professional clown. I was recently invited to lead a weekend long “Introduction to Clown Ministry” retreat for a congregation in an urban area. The weekend began with a Friday evening performance and concluded with Sunday morning worship. The congregation’s expressed purposes for this retreat were: 1) boost a floundering youth ministry program; 2) introduce contemporary worship that was different from “repetitive praise choruses;” 3) function as the first session for a confirmation class; and 4) demonstrate to the community that their church was a fun and engaging place. In preparation, I asked the congregation

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

to identify two difficulties the youth were encountering. I was told that gangs from a nearby city were “infiltrating” the high school and that the community was experiencing a rise in persons that are HIV positive or have AIDS.

After an early morning stretch, I asked individual participants to use their bodies for a character I named; the group then quickly commented on what parts of the statue conveyed that character. Included in the list of characters were a homeless person, a gang leader, and a person with AIDS. As we went into a Bible study of Romans 12, I asked the youth to consider what “not being conformed to the world” might mean to each of these three characters. When we reached verse 13, “extend hospitality to strangers” I asked the youth to imagine what kind of hospitality the homeless person, gang leader, and person with AIDS would receive if they walked in the front door on Sunday morning. This led to a very dynamic conversation in which the youth assessed the congregation’s willingness to accept unfamiliar people, especially those who are different. I then I invited the statues of these three characters to return. The youth were asked to silently think about how hospitality could be shown to each of these visitors, and then asked them to use their own body to add to the statue so that together the two statues could be titled “Hospitality to the Stranger.” What we practiced was Boal’s image theatre: an image of the real and an image of the ideal.

### REFLECTIONS OF PRACTICE

This perspective assumes that art, as an extension of language, is an inherent and essential human quality. As such art, especially interactive performance arts, builds human relationships. Learning the craft of a performance art is empowering. Nevertheless, the craft can be manipulated to suit the uses desires: it can be used to further or critique patterns of cultural dominance; it can be used for libratory education or propagandistic control.

Using Boal’s theatrical methods led me to ask myself, “What is my intent as I teach? What is my commitment to transformation, and what kind of transformation is my teaching capable of evoking?” These questions are a combination of existential musing, social analysis, aesthetic theory, educational philosophy, and theological claims.

These techniques, informed by particular theories of theater and performance art, possess embedded aesthetic values. Can one who holds different performance values employ the techniques? For instance, could a Broadway production (a particular form of theater Boal holds in disdain) successfully present Forum Theatre? Similarly, can religious education methods be transferred from setting to setting without some understanding of the educational concepts and theological commitments embedded in the methodology? Can flexible is Godly Play if one is not committed to the inherent value of liturgy? Can Workshop Rotation Model be effectively used without some awareness of the claims of narrative theology?

The very nature of theatre games and Joker Theatre permit them to be highly malleable: the presentational forms fit the needs of the people and the context in which they are presented. Like the teacher in problem-posing methods, Boal’s sense of theatre relies heavily on the personhood of the Joker. The teacher is one who, while being fully present (incarnate) in the context, discerns ways to wholly engage others in the pursuit of transformation. This is a pragmatic teacher who seeks practical wisdom.

Replacing an established body of knowledge are various interrelated skills: the craft of acting; scenery and property construction; costume design; makeup; directing; producing; light design; sound; and marketing. Since there is no established back on knowledge to be transferred, the teacher is one who organizes community in order to explore possibilities. Given the appropriation of poor theater concepts, the skills of director and producer lie much more in the realm of community

organization rather than in enforcing production values. This is an incarnational theology celebrating Divine immanence in the most familiar objects.

The effectiveness of Theater of the Poor is not measured by the transmission of particular skill sets but rather by the effective contextualization of creating arenas for open discourse. The philosophical foundation at work appears to be an anthropology of communication: the basic human endeavor is to create shared culture, and the basic cultural artifact is meaning-full communication. There appear to be at least three philosophical commitments at work here, as they are in Freire. First is the employment of a Wittgensteinian value on language and the complementary awareness that language and the culture that is built upon it – and, ultimately, the act of knowing – is in constant change. Second is the use of Habermas' discourse ethics: the deliberative effort to join together regarding specific pragmatic concerns while utilizing self-understanding, uncoerced compromises, and the unobstructed exchange of relevant information. Ultimately, though, Boal's theory is one of pragmatism: we use these methods because they work in accomplishing desired goals of transformation. Through all three of these run echoes of Wittgenstein:

A present-day teacher of philosophy doesn't select food for his pupil with the aim of flattering his taste, but with the aim of changing it.<sup>51</sup>

The central aesthetic value at work here is the process of producing art. As creators of culture through language, we are producers of art. This is an innate human capacity, accessible to all. While some possess certain proclivities to the particular skill sets, all have the ability to theatricalize. Claiming this innate aesthetic sensibility can be combined with theological claims of the innate human quality to believe, and the inherent human action to express belief in ritual. The skills of theater present themselves as gateways into various spiritual disciplines that affirm our interconnectedness as God's creation and, consequently, direct us to justice as part of being in God's presence. Like the questions, "When does worship end?" and "When does prayer end?" Boal asks,

**“AND WHEN DOES A SESSION OF THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED END?”**

“Never – since the objective of Theatre of the Oppressed is not to close a cycle, to generate a catharsis or to bring an end to a process in development. On the contrary, its objective is to encourage autonomous activity, to set a process in motion, to stimulate transformative creativity, to change spectators into protagonists.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Culture and Value*, 17e.

<sup>52</sup> *Games*, 275.



## APPENDIX: PROBLEM-POSING METHODS<sup>53</sup>

Problem-posing is more than a technique that teaches critical thinking; it is a philosophy, a way of thinking about learners and their ability to think critically and to reflect analytically on their lives. It is dynamic, participatory, and empowering. Problem-posing delves deeply into any issue to demonstrate the extent of its social and personal connections, focusing “on power relations in the classroom, in the institution, in the formation of standard canons of knowledge, and in society at large.”<sup>54</sup> It challenges the relationship between teacher and learner by offering learners a forum for validating their life experiences, their cultures, and their personal knowledge of how their world works.

The following steps are meant to provide adult learners with a structure in order to build confidence and esteem in their ability to think critically. When introducing this method of teaching-learning, it is important to spend time on each step: each is an essential component in learning how to critically think about one's world.

### **1. Describe the content.**

The teacher presents the learners with a code.

- o Codes must originate from the learners' concerns and experiences, which makes them important to the learners and their daily lives.
- o Codes can be
  - written dialogues,
  - taken from a variety of reading materials, that directly pertain to the problem being posed
  - role-plays adapted from written or oral dialogues
  - stories taken from the participants' lives and experiences
  - texts from newspapers, magazines, community leaflets, signs, phone books, welfare or food stamp forms, housing leases, insurance forms, school bulletins, etc.
  - pictures, slides, photographs, collages, drawings, photo-stories, or cartoons.
- o After the learners have studied the code, the teacher begins by asking questions, such as:
  - What do you see in the picture (photograph, drawing, etc)?
  - What is happening in the picture (photograph, drawing, etc)?
  - What is this dialogue (story, article, message) about?
  - What is happening in the dialogue (story, article, message)?

### **2. Define the problem.**

- o The learners uncover the issue(s) or problem(s) in the code.
- o Teachers may need to repeat the analytical questions (i.e. “What is happening in the picture (photograph, drawing, etc)?”
- o Learners may identify more than one problem.
  - If this occurs, the teacher should ask the learners to focus on just one problem (especially with beginning problem-posers), using the other problem(s) for a future problem-posing idea.

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<sup>53</sup> Adapted from Sarah Nixon-Ponder, “Teacher to Teacher: Using Problem-Posing Dialogue in Adult Literacy Education.” Ohio Literacy Resource Center; Kent State University; PO Box 5190; Kent, Ohio 44242-0001; <http://literacy.kent.edu/Oasis/Pubs/0300-8.htm>; last accessed 11 September, 2004.

<sup>72</sup> Ira Shor, *Empowering education: Critical teaching for social change*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992: 31

- Learners may identify two problems or issues that cannot be separated and must be dealt with together. This, too, is acceptable just as long as it is the learners' decision to work with the two problems together.

### **3. Personalize the problem.**

- At this point, the teacher becomes the facilitator of the discussion, guiding the learners to talk about how this problem makes them feel and what the problem makes them think about, so that they can internalize the problem.
- Through discussion, the learners will relate the issue(s) or problem(s) to their own lives and cultures.
- The facilitator should assure that all learners are given the chance to share their experiences, understanding as well that some may choose not to share. No one should be made to speak if she/he does not feel comfortable doing so.
- Learning that others have been in similar situations is very important; this experience will serve as an affirmation to their experiences, lives, and cultures; as an esteem builder; and as a means for bonding with other learners and the facilitator.

### **4. Discuss the problem.**

- The facilitator guides the learners toward a discussion on the social/economic reasons for the problem by asking them to talk about why there is a problem and how it has affected them.
- During this step, it is critical for the facilitator not to expound upon personal and political beliefs.
  - The temptation may be very, but resistance is absolutely vital to the growth of the learners.
  - Learners' beliefs may differ greatly from those of the facilitator's
  - Learners will be more apt to take risks and openly share their beliefs if they believe that this is their dialogue and they have ownership in its process.

### **5. Discuss alternatives to the problem.**

- The facilitator should coach the learners into suggesting possible solutions to the problem and discuss the consequences of the various courses of action.
- Through discussion, adult learners become aware that they have the answers to their problems, especially when they approach their problems and concerns through a cooperative, group effort.
- Facilitators need to urge the learners to search for several alternatives to the problem or issue at hand; the solutions need to be those that can be achieved.

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