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# Forum Theatre Empowering Students to Speak, Act, and Know

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FORUM THEATRE: EMPOWERING STUDENTS TO SPEAK, ACT, AND KNOW

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Fine Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

Kaitlen M. Osburn

\* \* \* \* \*

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2010

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## ABSTRACT

During the political turmoil of 1960s Brazil, theatre artist Augusto Boal created a new form of theatre to fight back against the oppressive government. Theatre of the Oppressed has now spread to almost every country in the world and has empowered many spect-actors (Boal's term for audience-turned-actors) to resist oppression. Boal's seminal text *Theatre of the Oppressed* opened the door to future expansions of Theatre of the Oppressed that combine drama therapy and politics with an already powerful arsenal of techniques. Combining this innovative methodology with education, I facilitated two Forum Theatre workshops at Warren Central High School and Warren East Middle in Bowling Green, Kentucky. I wanted to see if Boal's Forum Theatre could have a similar effect on middle and high school students as it did with Boal's accounts of villagers in Brazil. While Theatre of the Oppressed is becoming more widely known and being used in many different capacities, future practitioners will soon be forced to re-evaluate Boal's theories for the 21<sup>st</sup> century audience.

Keywords: Forum Theatre, Augusto Boal, Theatre of the Oppressed, Theatre in Education

Dedicated to my family, friends, and mentors. Thank you.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Next, I would like to extend my gratitude to Dr. David Young, who has been professor, mentor, director, and friend over the past 4 years and has constantly pushed me to make the most out of my undergraduate degree. Thank you.

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Lastly, I would be lost without the motivation, inspiration, love, and support of my friends and family. For all the encouragement you gave me when I hit a block, I am pleased to present the finished product. I hope you are as proud of it as I am.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract . . . . .	ii
Dedication . . . . .	iii
Acknowledgments . . . . .	iv
Vita . . . . .	v
List of Figures . . . . .	viii
Introduction . . . . .	1
Foundations of Theatre of the Oppressed . . . . .	4
Augusto Boal . . . . .	4
Principles and Philosophies . . . . .	10
The Text . . . . .	13
The Tree of the Oppressed . . . . .	16
2009 Pedagogy & Theatre of the Oppressed Conference . . . . .	21
Forum Theatre Workshops . . . . .	26
Introduction . . . . .	26
Letter to Schools . . . . .	28
Workshop Handout . . . . .	30
Warren Central High School . . . . .	31



Warren East Middle School.....	41
Conclusions.....	47
The Future of Theatre of the Oppressed and Conclusions . . . . .	49
Works Cited . . . . .	54

## LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figure</u>	<u>Page</u>
1 Augusto Boal.....	4
2 The Tree of the Oppressed.....	16
3 Forum Theatre Workshop Handout.....	30

## INTRODUCTION

The first time I encountered the name Augusto Boal and Theatre of the Oppressed was in Dr. Andy Grapko's Contemporary Performance class in 2008. The class was an introduction to contemporary collaborative theatre with a history of the revolutionary experimental theatre movement that occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I distinctly remember wondering on the day we covered Theatre of the Oppressed how I had not heard of it earlier. Several conversations with Dr. Grapko about her personal experience with Augusto Boal helped me recognize my growing desire to learn more about Boal. Immediately I sought out where I could learn more -- the 2009 Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Conference in Minneapolis -- a chance to learn from Boal himself! However, two and a half weeks before the conference, to the regret of many, Augusto Boal passed away. Playwright, novelist and activist, Ariel Dorfman reflected on Boal's influence:

This is what I will remember: Boal's generosity, that pliant resilience of his heart and limbs, those hands that would not stop moving, his conviction that theatre can liberate ever last man, woman and child on this earth—and, of course, his insistence that we never forget those who are left behind (18).

I read this article after my pilgrimage to Minneapolis and it enforced the importance of Boal's impact. I was saddened by Boal's death especially because I did not have a chance to work with him in person, but his death impassioned me to carry on his work.

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Theatre of the Oppressed harnesses one of the innate functions in theatre – education. By further emphasizing the fact that the foundation of theatre lies in the *questions* raised, Boal’s theatre stresses that “to ask the good questions is better than having the good answer” (Morelos). Theatre of the Oppressed tries to “show the absurdity of the system in which we live” in order to improve it in the future (Gonzalez 3). Augusto Boal said that everyone wears masks in society, but Theatre of the Oppressed allows the spectator to take off that mask and become him/herself. It is not a “Bible,” nor a “recipe book.” Instead, Theatre of the Oppressed is “a method to be used by people, and the people are more important than the method” – yet, so often in our society, the people become submissive to the system (Green 49). By using Theatre of the Oppressed to return the authority and responsibility to the audience, the new “spect-actors” (Boal’s term for the audience-turned-actors) are able to return to society empowered and prepared to deal with the realities of their own oppressions.

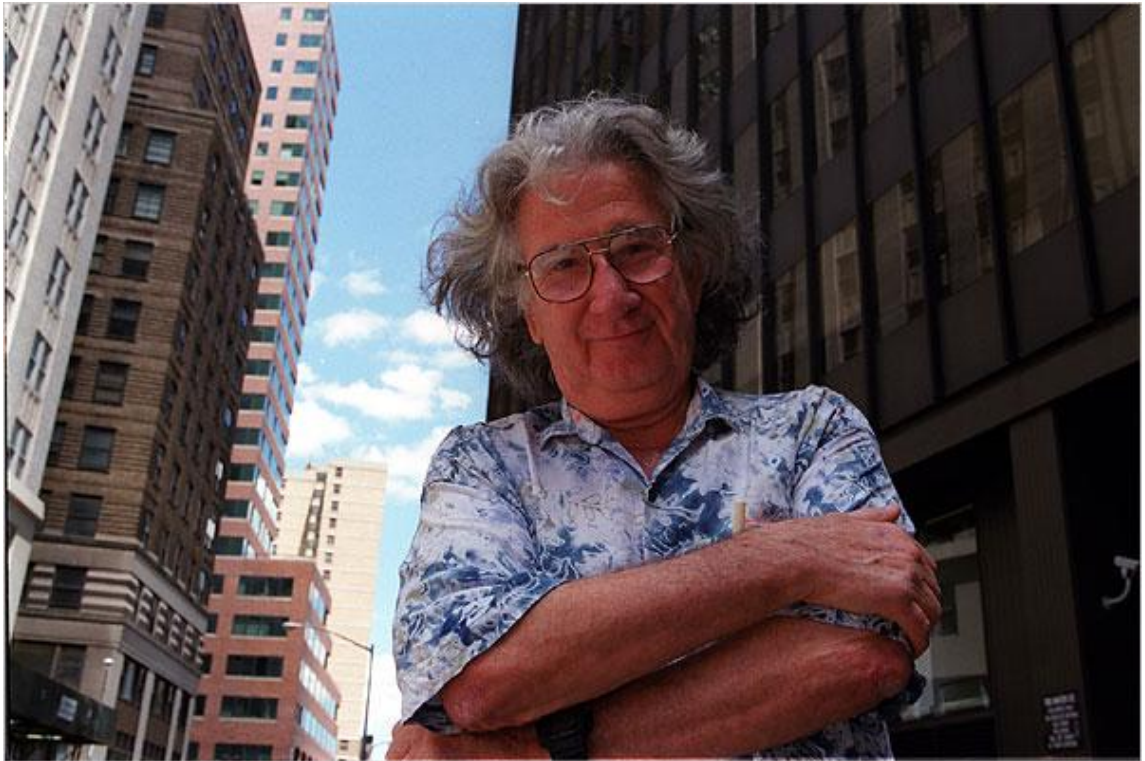
With this in mind, I hoped middle and high school students, when empowered by this method, would have the potential to take their knowledge and incorporate it into their daily lives. For many people, middle and high school are periods of awkward transition as well as a constant struggle to “fit in.” Theatre of the Oppressed is a “mirror of reality” and a “rehearsal for life,” and if students had the opportunity to confront problems in a safe, unobtrusive environment like a Forum Theatre scene, it could only be beneficial in encouraging social interaction with other students. That was exactly the opportunity I wanted to give the students in my workshops at Warren Central High and Warren East Middle: the recognition of their own power as individuals and the tools to overcome their oppression.

My approach to this thesis was to first research Augusto Boal and the history and theory of the Theatre of the Oppressed. Following my initial research I attended the Pedagogy & Theatre of the Oppressed Conference after which, I put the theory into practice through Forum Theatre workshops at Warren Central High School and Warren East Middle School in Bowling Green, Kentucky.

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FOUNDATIONS OF THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED:

AUGUSTO BOAL



**Figure 1** Augusto Boal [is] of medium height and build, with a long torso and short legs, moves with an easy loping gait. His long wavy salt-and-pepper hair frames a face with strongly pronounced features: a large nose and bright, twinkling hazel-brown eyes full of mischief and intelligence. When he talks, his hands touch his face and head, more as nervous tick than as gestural illustration. His soft, lilting voice is Brazilian accented in English or Spanish. He dresses casually in jeans and short-sleeves or sweater over shirt. His manner is direct, opinionated, ideological, thoughtful, analytical. (Gerould 462)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Image courtesy of Julie Lemberger, “Augusto Boal, Stage Director Who Gave a Voice to Audiences, Is Dead at 78.” *New York Times*. 9 May 2009.

Born in Rio de Janeiro in 1931, Augusto Boal began performing on the dining room table with his siblings and cousins at age 10. Interestingly enough, Boal's future theories were present even in his pre-teen performances: "no individual 'owned' their character; whoever was available to take on a role at the critical moment would do so, interpreting it as they saw fit" (Babbage 5). Forum Theatre would adopt the same concept of replacing actors in a performance along with young Boal's tendency to rewrite the endings of stories that he did not enjoy.

The seeds of Theatre of the Oppressed sprouted in the midst of the political turmoil in Brazil in the 1960s while Boal was working at the Arena Theatre in São Paulo. The theatre's founder, José Renato, hired Boal in 1955 after his return from Columbia University in New York where he had been studying Theatre and Chemistry<sup>1</sup>. Boal studied at the Actor's Studio<sup>2</sup> and with playwrights John Gassner and Langston Hughes while in New York and brought his newly acquired knowledge on acting, directing, and writing back to São Paulo to incorporate into his early directing work (Babbage 6-10). Later, Boal had to adapt the Stanislavski-based techniques he learned at Actor's Studio to work in a theatre trying to survive in Brazil's increasingly oppressive political regime.

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<sup>1</sup> Boal graduated from University of Brazil in 1952 with a degree in chemistry but never abandoned theatre during that time. He continued his study of chemistry in New York to please his father, and his study of theatre to please himself. During his time in New York, Boal produced two of his own works (*The Horse and the Saint*, *The House Across the Street*) at the Malin Studio in New York (Babbage 5-6).

<sup>2</sup> The Actor's Studio grew from the earlier Group Theatre that closed in 1941. Notable members of the Group Theatre Lee Strasberg, Sanford Meisner, Stella Adler, Harold Clurman, Robert Lewis, and Elia Kazan (the principle founder of the Actor's Studio) studied with Constantine Stanislavski at the Moscow Art Theatre (although there is controversy on who actually did study with Stanislavski). The Actor's Studio, founded in 1947, focuses on method acting, a technique based on the practices of Constantine Stanislavski.

The Arena Theatre served as Boal's theatrical laboratory while he was experimenting with the foundations of his new theories. One groundbreaking performance, the *Arena Conta Zumbi* (1965), was crucial in the development of the Coringa, or Joker system<sup>1</sup>, which is fundamental in Theatre of the Oppressed (Babbage 14). Boal and Gianfrancesco Guarnieri wrote *Zumbi* that tells the story of a 17<sup>th</sup> Century slave rebellion against the government. Arena Theatre was in the process of creating a "new type of musical, combining Brazilian history, Brechtian distancing<sup>2</sup> and realism" (Babbage 12). Through this style of production, Boal was able to offer his direct opposition to the dictatorship recently established in Brazil. *Zumbi* connected the events of historical Brazil with current events in order to encourage resistance against the oppressive government – a theme that would recur frequently in Boal's future works.

The production was very popular and toured across Europe and the US over the next few years. For Boal, *Zumbi* provided him with the ability to "destroy all the stylistic conventions which were inhibiting theatre's development as an art form and clear a space for a new system to emerge" (Babbage 13). Boal's future theories about Theatre of the Oppressed emerged in the production of *Zumbi* specifically in the "break with actor/character correspondence, achieved by having all the actors play all the characters"

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<sup>1</sup> In a Forum Theatre scene, the Joker acts as the facilitator or mediator between the actors and the spect-actors. Sometimes the Joker will introduce the scene or provide narration. During the forum, a Joker may have to "complicate the thinking of the group in order to touch on the soul of the matter" (Green 58). Boal often refers to the Joker as the "difficultator" since part of the success of a Forum scene relies on a well-trained Joker.

<sup>2</sup> Bertolt Brecht's "distancing effect" helps to distance the audience from the play by having the actors deliver lines directly to the audience or read stage directions aloud.



(Babbage 13). Boal's background in Marxist ideology mixed with Paulo Freire's<sup>1</sup> educational philosophy supported his long-standing belief that theatre was a "pedagogical instrument for social change" (Gerould 462).

Huge political upheaval in Brazil resulted in the creation of a military dictatorship in 1968 and led Boal to search for new ways to resist government corruption and oppression from the government. Early performances of Theatre of the Oppressed reflected the consequences of actual events and political issues. Undetectable performances "[joined] fiction to reality, were presented in cafes, restaurants, markets, metro stations, and [in] trains to spectators, who, unaware they were watching a play, could easily be provoked to discussion or action" (Gerould 462). These early forms of Invisible Theatre allowed Boal to continue producing theatre for socio-political awareness even though theatre had been banned during the dictatorship

The end of the 1960s saw heightened political aggression against the public. Civil liberties were restricted, political parties that opposed the dictatorship were banned, and any form of cultural expression was heavily censored, including The Arena Theatre: "All cultural activities of the radical intelligentsia were targeted by the dictatorship, but the theatre particularly so, since [it was] identified as a dangerous oppositional force (Babbage 15). These military men beat actors at the Arena Theatre and destroyed

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<sup>1</sup> Paulo Freire (1921-1997) was a Brazilian educator whose ideas were based in Marxist theory. He opposed the oppressive "banking" method of education in which students are viewed as empty "banks" where teachers deposited their knowledge. Freire's new form of pedagogy in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) called "conscientization" creates a more well-rounded, more humanistic education in which both teacher and student learn from each other.

scenery. Boal said that while most actors prepare themselves for applause after a show, they prepared for invasion.

In 1971, the Brazilian government was responsible for Boal's kidnapping, imprisonment, and torture for three months. American playwright Arthur Miller wrote a letter urging his release that was supported with hundreds of artists' signatures from around the world – tangible proof of Boal's growing influence. Miller's appeal succeeded in liberating Boal. However, the government exiled Boal from Brazil shortly after (Babbage16). It was in exile where Boal wrote his seminal text *The Theatre of the Oppressed* in 1973. Boal and his family lived in Argentina until 1976 when they moved to Portugal because of rising political tensions. Boal spent much of the next decade developing his theatre in Europe<sup>1</sup> and did not return to Brazil until 1986 when the military junta responsible for his kidnapping and exile was removed from power. Upon returning to Brazil, Boal created the Center for the Theatre of the Oppressed (CTO) and was later elected as the Vereador of Rio de Janeiro (similar to a City Council position) in 1992 (Paterson). While in office, he created the revolutionary Legislative Theatre<sup>2</sup> that led to the creation of official legislation<sup>3</sup>. In 1997, Boal traveled to England to work with the Royal Shakespeare Company on a production of *Hamlet* using his Rainbow of

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<sup>1</sup> Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed developed exponentially during his time in Paris. Boal was offered a lectureship at the Sorbonne in Paris where he created "The Cop in the Head" exercise, which initially used Theatre of the Oppressed techniques to address the oppression that was still present internally within Boal, even though he had physically escaped it. Boal's work in Paris led to the first International Festival of Theatre of the Oppressed in 1981. This popularized the movement even more and ensured its progressing international reputation.

<sup>2</sup> Legislative Theatre is discussed on page 17.

<sup>3</sup> The first few laws passed in Rio de Janeiro using Legislative Theatre dealt with eliminating discrimination in motels and establishing sanitation laws in the city.

Desire<sup>1</sup> techniques and later that year won the Association for Theatre in Higher Education Career Achievement Award.

Between 1997 and his death in 2009, Boal traveled extensively around the US, Brazil and throughout parts of Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australia in the hopes of preparing core groups of people with the knowledge and training necessary to carry out the work of Theatre of the Oppressed. Since Boal's death, his son Julian has continued his work along with thousands of Theatre of the Oppressed practitioners and facilitators around the world.

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<sup>1</sup> The Rainbow of Desire is discussed on page 16.

FOUNDATIONS OF THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED:  
PRINCIPLES AND PHILOSOPHIES

Augusto Boal's introduction on the Theatre of the Oppressed website:

**“Theatre of the Oppressed** is the *Game of Dialogue*: we play and learn together. All kinds of Games must have *Discipline* - clear rules that we must follow. At the same time, Games have absolute need of creativity and *Freedom*. TO is the perfect synthesis between the antithetic *Discipline* and *Freedom*. **Without Discipline, there is no Social Life; without Freedom, there is no Life.**

The *Discipline* of our Game is our belief that we that we must re-establish the right of everyone to exist in dignity. We believe that all of us are more, and much better, than what we think we are. We believe in solidarity.

Our *Freedom* is to invent ways to help to humanize Humanity, freely invading all fields of human activities: social, pedagogical, political, artistic... Theatre is a Language and so it can be used to speak about all human concerns, not to be limited to theatre itself.

We believe in Peace, not in Passivity!” (“Theatre of the Oppressed”)

According to Augusto Boal, “theatre is born when the human discovers that it can observe itself; when it discovers that, in this act of seeing, it can see *itself* – see itself *in situ*: see itself seeing” (Boal, *Rainbow of Desire* 13). As a result of this collective understanding, theatre was unified and free. However, once the ruling class took possession of the theatre, they divided the spectators from the actors and the actors into characters. Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed attempts to reconnect these separate parts into a whole once more where the spectators rejoin the actors onstage (Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* 119). Instead of a theatre in which the spectators experience a catharsis by

watching the characters' act and think *for* them, Boal introduces a theatre in which the spectator – now the spect-*actor* – is free to think and act for himself. Dramatic action substitutes for real action in Aristotle's theatre, whereas in Boal's theatre, theatre *is* action (*Theatre of the Oppressed* 155).

This action has one primary goal according to the Theatre of the Oppressed Declaration of Principles: to humanize Humanity (Boal, "Declaration of Principles"). The International Theatre of the Oppressed Organization's Declaration of Principles provides a concise summary of their main goals and beliefs:

1. The basic aim of the Theatre of the Oppressed is to humanize Humanity.
2. The Theatre of the Oppressed is a system of Exercises, Games and Techniques based on the Essential Theatre, to help men and women to develop what they already have inside themselves: theatre.  
*Essential Theatre*
3. Every human being is theatre!
4. Theatre is defined as the simultaneous existence — in the same space and context — of actors and spectators. Every human being is capable of seeing **the** situation and seeing him/herself **in** the situation....
  
- ...9. The Theatre of the Oppressed offers everyone the aesthetic means to analyze their past, in the context of their present, and subsequently to invent their future, without waiting for it. The Theatre of the Oppressed helps human beings to recover a language they already possess — we learn how to live in society by playing theatre. We learn how to feel by feeling; how to think by thinking; how to act by acting. Theatre of the Oppressed is *rehearsal for reality*.
10. The *oppressed* are those individuals or groups who are socially, culturally, politically, economically, racially, sexually, or in any other way deprived of their right to *Dialogue* or in any way impaired to exercise this right.
11. *Dialogue* is defined as to freely exchange with others, as a person and as a group, to participate in human society as equal, to respect differences and to be respected.
12. The Theatre of the Oppressed is based upon the principle that all human relationships should be of a dialogic nature: among men and women, races, families, groups and nations, dialogue should prevail. In

reality, all dialogues have the tendency to become monologues, which creates the relationship *oppressors - oppressed*. Acknowledging this reality, the main principle of Theatre of the Oppressed is to help restore dialogue among human beings.

*Principles and Objectives*

13. The Theatre of the Oppressed is a worldwide non-violent aesthetic movement which seeks peace, not passivity...

...15. The Theatre of the Oppressed is neither an ideology nor a political party, neither dogmatic nor coercive and is respectful of all cultures. It is a method of analysis and a means to develop happier societies...

("Declaration of Principles")

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## FOUNDATIONS OF THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED:

### THE TEXT

The title of Boal's book is a reference to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a text that proved to be a powerful influence on Boal's work. Freire writes about escaping political oppression by releasing oneself from the oppressive pedagogy that comes with it. Instead of a system where an educator transmits information to a pupil, Freire calls for the students – the oppressed -- to learn on their own by solving their own problems and learning from each other (Fortier 207-208). Boal took Freire's theories and put them into practice in his theatre:

The least a teacher has to learn from his pupil is how his pupil learns... Teaching is transitivity. Democracy. Dialogue. An Argentinean teacher from Cordova relates: 'I taught a peasant how to write the word "plough": and he taught me how to use it.' Conventional theatre is governed by an intransitive relationship, in that everything travels from stage to auditorium... nothing goes the other way... In the Theatre of the Oppressed, by contrast, dialogue is created, transitivity is not merely tolerated, it is actively sought – this theatre asks its audience questions and expects answers. Sincerely. (Boal, *Legislative Theatre* 20).

Both Boal and Freire believed that oppression is sustained by passivity, but can be overcome by action, action that Boal interpreted as *dialogue*. Credited as inventing forms of theatre "designed especially to include people who had never been in or even to a play and who, by reason of their oppression, cried out for dialogue," Boal acted on his belief that dialogue is essential to human life (Rohd, xi). The absence of it is "a violation

of the most profound sort” (Rohd xii). Boal took Freire’s philosophy and his belief in the power of dialogue and turned it into a revolution.

Different from conventional theatre, Boal’s theatre frees the spectators from their seats and breaks the Western theatrical convention of the fourth wall; Boal says that the “fourth wall is not so much abandoned as given an entrance way by which those on the other side may step through” (Morelos; Babbage 32). Boal’s spectators become “dynamized” (Morelos).

Boal begins *Theatre of the Oppressed* by referring back to Bertolt Brecht’s attack of Aristotelian<sup>1</sup> drama by accusing its nature as oppressive. The audience cannot think for itself— it is forced to accept the opinions of the characters onstage because they are not allowed to be active participants in the performance. Boal argues that the spectator must be re-humanized and on an “equal plane with those generally accepted as actors” in order to restore the capacity to create action (Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* 155). In this way, the theatre becomes a vehicle for a proactive struggle against oppression that both actors and non-actors can use.

In a 2005 interview, Boal references this passage from *Hamlet*:

The purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. (III.2.17-24)

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle’s *Poetics* describes the unities of effective tragedy as being Time (action must happen within 24 hours), Place (action must happen in one place), and Action (one plot, no sub plots). Aristotle’s idea of catharsis or, the audience having a “purging” of their own sins while viewing theatre is something that Boal argues against. Instead of spoon-feeding a passive audience the performance, Boal wants his active audience to be a part of and create the action.



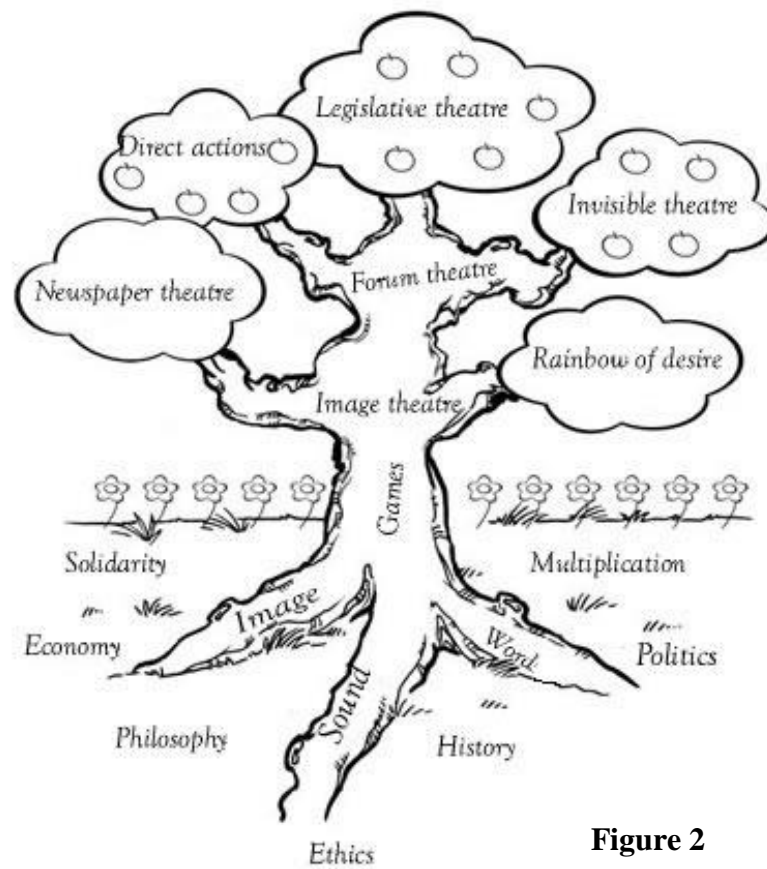
Boal's mirror is different from the one Hamlet describes because his is a *magic* mirror where performers and spectators – now, spect-actors – have the power to reach into the mirror, transform the images and bring that transformation back into reality (Gonzalez 2).

Director Peter Brook suggests in his book *The Empty Space* that “in everyday life ‘if’ is a fiction, in the theatre ‘if’ is an experiment” (140). Brooks’ assertion supports Boal’s philosophy of the theatre as a place for active change, education, and experimentation so that the results can be practiced in reality. Contrary to traditional western theatre, a Theatre of the Oppressed performance never ends “since the objective is not to close a cycle, [or] to generate a catharsis, or to end a development...[but] its objective is to encourage autonomous activity, to set a process in motion, to stimulate transformative creativity, [and] to change spectators into protagonists” (Babbage 138). Instead of focusing on past events, Boal’s theatre projects spect-actors into the future where the mindset is “not what I should have done [but] what should I do” (Morelos).

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FOUNDATIONS OF THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED: THE TREE OF THE  
OPPRESSED

**Tree of the Theatre of the Oppressed**



**Figure 2**

Boal's Tree of Theatre of the Oppressed explains the progression of his theatre. The tree is the perfect metaphor for Theatre of the Oppressed as a representation of growth, fruitfulness, and expansion that happen to those involved. All the parts of the

tree feed off each other to create the powerful structure that is Theatre of the Oppressed. Boal's theory is grounded, quite literally, in a soil of philosophy, ethics, history, and politics. The Tree of the Theatre of the Oppressed is nurtured by ideas and is rooted in images, sounds, and words. When combined, they make the first part of the trunk – games. Games relax and wake up the body and the mind, involve rules as well as creative expression, and serve an important function in the Theatre of the Oppressed.

Once the foundation has been laid, the tree grows into Image Theatre —theatre without words. Boal says that “words are emptinesses that fill the vacuum that exists between one human and another...we know the meaning...but we don't know how that word is going to be heard by each listener” (Boal, “Image Theatre”). Image Theatre allows people to communicate through images and spaces without using words. Humans react to images first since humans experienced them first – most children are able to visually associate with things before they can speak. Branching off from Image Theatre are Newspaper Theatre and Rainbow of Desire. Newspaper Theatre was one of the first steps of Theatre of the Oppressed and is created from an image or piece of news (originally from newspapers). Boal states that the “primary objective of Newspaper Theatre is to devolve theatre to the people” and that because it focuses on making theatre accessible, anyone is capable of creating and performing it (Boal, *Legislative Theatre* 235). Since news can be biased or untruthful (especially under repressive regimes like the Brazilian dictatorship), Boal wanted to develop Newspaper Theatre to teach people how to read newspapers critically by digging beyond the headlines and performing the truth behind the words. Newspaper Theatre has now grown to include scenes created from any written material or image.

Rainbow of Desire is a form of Drama Therapy that provides a type of catharsis for the participants. Rainbow of Desire includes a series of 15 techniques used to help an individual recognize oppression within him/her by using Theatre of the Oppressed techniques. One of the techniques is called the “Rainbow of Desire” and it occurs when the participant and other spect-actors create ideal images of his or her desires. The participant talks through the reasons behind those desires, the reality of their current situation, and discusses ways to achieve those desires that have been prevented by social stereotypes or preconceived notions (Gerould 463).

After Image Theatre comes the core of the tree: Forum Theatre, or a collective rehearsal for reality. A scene involving a situation of oppression is presented to an audience. Afterwards, the Joker (the facilitator) discusses with the audience the real problems within the scene and possible solutions or outcomes. Any idea that an audience member or “spect-actor” has is then acted out onstage: The scene is restarted, and whenever a spect-actor sees something that he wants to change, he cries “Stop!,” replaces the protagonist in the scene, and then acts out his solution to the problem. After each revised scene is finished, the Joker discusses its plausibility in the real world with the audience. This portion of discussion, improvisation, and spect-actor involvement is the “Forum” of Forum Theatre. Boal’s Forum Theatre:

...presents a scene or a play that must necessarily show a situation of oppression that the Protagonist does not know how to fight against, and fails.” The spect-actors are invited to replace this Protagonist [or the Oppressed] and act out – on stage and not from the audience – all possible solutions, ideas, strategies. The other actors improvise the reactions of their characters facing each new intervention, so as to allow a sincere analysis of the real possibilities of using those suggestions in real life. All spect-actors have the same right to intervene and play their ideas. (Boal, “Theatre...Oppressed”)

Forum Theatre is incorporated in Invisible Theatre and Legislative Theatre. Invisible Theatre happens in a public place where none of the spect-actors are informed that a play is going on. With this information withheld, the public is free to interact with the actors without facing any of the consequences of conventional theatre, for example, “Lest the magic of the stage be shattered, silence is required” (*Legislative Theatre* 20). If the spect-actor does not know a performance is happening, he or she is more likely to become involved in a situation about domestic abuse in a public setting. Invisible Theatre, therefore, is the “penetration of fiction into reality and of reality into fiction, which helps us to see how much fiction exists in reality, and how much reality exists in fiction” (Boal, “Theatre...Oppressed”). This form of theatre is a direct intervention in society in order to inspire discussion and debate. Boal is also clear to explain that Invisible Theatre “shall never be violent since its aim is to reveal the violence that exists in society, and not to reproduce it” (Boal, “Theatre of the Oppressed”).

Paired with Invisible Theatre is Direct Action. Boal states that these actions involve the “theatricalisation of protest demonstrations...marches, secular processions, parades, meetings of workers...using all available theatrical elements, such as masks, songs, dances, choreography, etc.” (Boal, *Aesthetics of the Oppressed*). In the context of Theatre of the Oppressed, direct action is an explicit conveyance of an idea to the public.

Boal positions Legislative Theatre at the top of the Tree of the Oppressed because it is the “utilization of all forms of Theatre of the Oppressed with the aim of transforming the citizens’ legitimate desires into laws” (Boal, “Legislative Theatre”). An act of Legislative Theatre is created in the same way as Forum Theatre but in a courtroom setting. Witnesses, played by spect-actors, have the chance to defend or refute laws and

vote on possible legislation. The goal of Legislative Theatre is to turn the topics of the Forum scenes into actual laws. For example, Law 2384/95 states “All municipal hospitals must have doctors specializing in geriatric diseases and problems” and was the first law that was approved using Legislative Theatre in Rio de Janeiro (Boal, *Legislative Theatre* 102). Another law created through Legislative Theatre ensured that all couples would be charged the same price at motels, regardless of their sexual orientation. For Brazil, Legislative Theatre was an important step towards democracy. It brought 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 comments on politics; in the former, the theatre is, in itself, one of the ways in which political activity can be conducted” (Boal, *Legislative Theatre* 20).

With these different forms of Theatre of the Oppressed, dialogue between people is created, oppression faced, and ideally, progress is made. Boal says Theatre of the Oppressed should be used like a key: “The key does not open the door. It is he or she, who, with the help of the key, opens the door” (Babbage 33).

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## 2009 PEDAGOGY & THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED CONFERENCE

As part of my research, I attended the 2009 Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Conference held in late May in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Boal would have appreciated this step outside of my comfort zone – to me, this trip was like a rite of passage to discover where I fit in the world. In the course of three days, I freed myself from the confines of preconceived ideas and stereotypes and reinvigorated my faith in humanity.

The year before I attended this conference, I had become stuck in an apathy all too common in my generation, characterized by the feeling that “my opinion doesn’t count, so why try?” which was draining my passion for life. Boal’s theatre gives back; Boal’s theatre helps people realize their own power; Boal’s theatre was exactly what I needed to escape my own self-induced intellectual oppression. Although short, my time in Minneapolis opened my eyes to the tremendous potential that theatre for social change can have on a group of people. The atmosphere at the conference, although clouded by Boal’s recent passing, still embodied a collective feeling of community, hope, and progression. The opening night of the conference centered on a memorial service held for Boal, while one of the rooms at the conference site (Augsburg College) was dedicated to his memory. I found myself alone in that room one afternoon between workshops looking at the large paper tree that covered one wall. Scores of colored leaves covered

the tree. On them, people had written thank you notes, anecdotes, stories, feelings, and condolences to Boal and his family – Boal’s Tree of the Oppressed (a diagram he uses to explain his theatre) had taken literal form. It was not until that moment that I understood what an incredible impact he had made.

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On the first day of the conference, I had participated in a five-hour intensive workshop with Boal’s son, Julian. The diverse group of about 50 participants included students, professors, theatre practitioners, and newcomers to Theatre of the Oppressed, like myself. Julian spoke in a thick Portuguese-English accent and would look to other bilingual speakers from time to time to help him explain or translate a word. Appearing much like descriptions of his father (commonly dressed in kakhis and Hawaiian shirts), Julian was also relaxed and dressed casually, ready to work. Boal’s recent passing created an atmosphere of tension, anticipation, and sorrow. Julian started by explaining a bit of the history of the Theatre of the Oppressed. Simply put, Boal fought against the Brazilian dictatorship with the only means he had: theatre. In order to be unnoticed by the government, Boal had to create theatre *outside* of the theatre. One of the most famous stories from the birth of Theatre of the Oppressed is about Boal and a small company of actors touring a piece that encouraged villagers to rebel against oppressive landowners. At the end of the show, the actors (dressed as the villagers) sang a song about “their readiness to shed blood for the revolution” (Babbage 17). One of the peasants – Virgílio – was so moved by the performance and the *characters’* passion to fight, that he urged the performers to fight along with the villagers later that day. The actors, “embarrassed



and humbled” by the situation, “offered awkward excuses – their guns were props, they did not fire, they did not know how to fight...” (Babbage 17-18).

This encounter taught Boal several lessons about political theatre. First, it revealed to Boal that his theatre needed to focus on handing all aspects of the production to the oppressed: theatre *of* the oppressed, *about* the oppressed, *by* the oppressed, and *for* the oppressed (“Theatre of the Oppressed”). That meant it could no longer be one group *telling* another what to do – instead, Boal’s theatre would focus on *asking* the people what they would like to do. In the case of Virgilio’s village, the performers and the villagers were not from the same social backgrounds – their values, beliefs, and problems were entirely different from one another: “We taught the peasants how to fight for their lands – we, who lived in the big cities. We taught the blacks how to combat racial prejudice – we, who were almost all very, very white...Why, us?” (Boal, *Rainbow of Desire* 1). It is important in Theatre of the Oppressed that the *oppressed* are performing for the oppressed in order for progress. Julian summed up his comments by emphasizing that the center of gravity in Theatre of the Oppressed is the audience. Theatre of the Oppressed serves as a rehearsal for revolution in order to better prepare the oppressed for reality.

From there, Julian led his participants in exercises dealing with images, sounds, and words designed to break boundaries and create an environment of trust within the group. He led us through Walk/Stop, Handshake Interpretations<sup>1</sup>, and group image work. One of the most interesting exercises we did involved deconstructing male and female

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<sup>1</sup> All of the games and exercises mentioned here are explained in the Forum Theatre Workshops chapter.

stereotypes. In a large circle with everyone facing out, we were given ten seconds to create a stereotypical image of women. Upon viewing everyone's image, it was astonishing that all the images were somewhat similar. Then, we were asked to create a realistic and truthful image of women. Next, we were asked to slowly morph from one image to the other and back in a 30 second time period. The eye-opening part for me was seeing the similarities between the two images and coming to terms with the idea that stereotypes stem from truth.

Julian briefly discussed Newspaper Theatre and Rainbow of Desire before he explored Image Theatre with the Group – we played a games associated with Image Theatre called Professions and “Yes, but.” Lastly, after another discussion of the theory of Theatre of the Oppressed, he closed the workshop by leading some participants in a short forum scene.

I attended several other workshops while I was at the conference, all of which appealed to me in different ways and taught me how to best incorporate Theatre of the Oppressed into my work and community. “The Space In-Between” was an incredibly insightful Joker workshop led by long-time Forum Theatre Jokers.

Katherine Burke<sup>1</sup> taught “Theatre of the Oppressed and the Linear Plot” which focused on creating forum scenes with middle and high school students. Burke shared a step-by-step worksheet which she created to help students create a structured, yet organic, forum scene.

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<sup>1</sup> Katherine Burke teaches in the School of Theatre & Dance at Kent State University and is the Secretary of the Board of Directors for the Pedagogy & Theatre of the Oppressed.

In Burke's opinion, Forum theatre is most successful with middle and high school students in groups of up to 30 participants. She also pointed me towards Michael Rohd's *Theatre for Community Conflict and Dialogue*, Viola Spolin's *Games for the Classroom*, and *Acting Out: The Workbook* by Mario Cossa as additional resources. Chris Vine<sup>1</sup> led a workshop called "The Many Faces of TO" that explored how to use Theatre of the Oppressed with children as young as pre-schoolers by using puppets to create simple scenes. Overall, I feel that the conference prepared me for my project more than any archival research or class could. Working with professionals gave me the skills and knowledge I needed to conduct further research and begin my Forum Theatre workshops.

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Vine teaches at the City University of New York that hold the only MFA program for Applied Theatre in the country.

## FORUM THEATRE WORKSHOPS:

### INTRODUCTION

As part of my Honors Capstone Experience/Thesis, I planned and facilitated a series of Forum Theatre workshops at Warren Central High School and Warren East Middle School. I wanted to learn firsthand the benefits of using Theatre of the Oppressed techniques with students. During the summer of 2009, I sent letters (see page 27-28) to guidance counselors and theatre faculty of all the middle and high schools in Warren county informing them of my project and asking if their school would be interested in participating. I received positive responses from Warren Central High School and Warren East Middle Schools and scheduled workshops with them in October and November, respectively. Next was the planning phase in which I developed a lesson plan and a handout<sup>1</sup> to assist me in my explanation of Theatre of the Oppressed. While I did have a larger visual of the Theatre of the Oppressed tree, I thought a handout would also help the students process complex information in a short period of time. On the handout, I included basic information about Forum scenes as well as the official Theatre of the Oppressed website URL should they want more information.

I based my workshop format on the format that Julian Boal used at the Pedagogy & Theatre of the Oppressed Conference: first, a brief explanation followed by games,

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<sup>1</sup> The handout is located on page 30.

Image Theatre, and finally, Forum Theatre. In this way, the students received a condensed version of Boal's techniques. Aside from length of the workshop and eliminating a few exercises for the sake of time, my workshop format mirrored the Theatre of the Oppressed intensive that I participated in at the Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed conference in Minneapolis.

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## FORUM THEATRE WORKSHOPS: LETTER TO SCHOOLS

My name is Kaitlen Osburn and I'm a senior at Western Kentucky University studying Acting and Directing. I'm currently working on my thesis/capstone project for the Honors College which involves a style of theatre created in the 1960s by Augusto Boal called Theatre of the Oppressed, or, Forum Theatre. In Forum Theatre, the audience members, or "spect-actors," have the opportunity to help create scenes about real problems and explore possible solutions. Forum Theatre is much more than entertainment; it is a form of Theatre that empowers not only those who perform but those who watch as well. Forum Theatre gets its name from the "forum" that occurs between the facilitator and the audience after the performance of the initial scene: after a conflict or problem is presented, the audience gets a chance to discuss the issue as well as possible solutions. When solutions are suggested, the spect-actors have the chance to explore the solution through improvised performance onstage.

In May, I had the opportunity to attend the annual Theatre of the Oppressed Conference where I met many people in the field doing this type of theatre in middle and high schools all across the country. At the conference I learned how to facilitate workshops with students in order to create successful Forum Theatre. I learned that Forum Theatre has worked extremely well with all age groups and especially in schools. By allowing students to become actors and spect-actors, students will work together through collaboration and discussion to create plausible solutions to problems and issues they face on a daily basis, such as bullying, peer pressure, cliques, and tolerance in schools.

I would like to offer your students a free workshop that would give students the opportunity to create and participate in a short Forum Theatre scene. This would enable them to use theatre to actively collaborate in order to explore potential strategies for dealing with important issues they face. The students would create, perform, and participate in the forum while I facilitate.

The workshop begins with theatre games and activities which focus on building basic performance tools such as learning to use the voice, body, and imagination as well as skills such as collaboration, listening, observation, improvisation, and story-telling. These activities also work to break down boundaries in order to create a safe and trusted group dynamic. Once these have been established, the next step is to choose an issue that is important to the group as a whole; after that, the group begins to write and rehearse their Forum scene. Here, students will be able to focus on the literary aspects of theatre and learn how to create a clear beginning, middle, and end to a scene, as well as explore the technical and performance aspects of drama during the scene preparation. After the scene is rehearsed, it would be performed in front of students not directly involved in the creation of the scene in which the forum discussion would follow that performance. The

forum portion of the workshop will give students a chance to analyze the scene, the effectiveness of the elements within the scene, and provide an opportunity for students to discuss other solutions in reference to the central conflict of the performance. The progressive application of theatrical skills as well as continual group work during the entirety of the workshop ensures participation from even the most unlikely groups of students.

I feel very passionately about empowering young people to talk about issues that they face in their daily lives as well as showing them that theatre and visual arts are mediums through which they can express themselves. I also feel that Forum Theatre is something I am obligated to share since I have learned so much from it myself. I truly believe this project would be a great opportunity for your students and everyone involved. I am willing to be very flexible with schedules, times, and which students you would like to involve in the workshop. It is possible to do this workshop either in a shorter, condensed time period or over a longer span of time. As for number of students, this workshop will work great with as little as 12 to as many as a class of 35.

I would love to talk to you about this in more detail if you or someone else at your school are interested in learning more. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you should have any questions about Forum Theatre or other aspects of my proposed workshop. Thank you and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



Kaitlen Osburn  
Kaitlen.osburn6@wku.edu  
615.481.1912

## FORUM THEATRE WORKSHOPS: HANDOUT

Figure 3

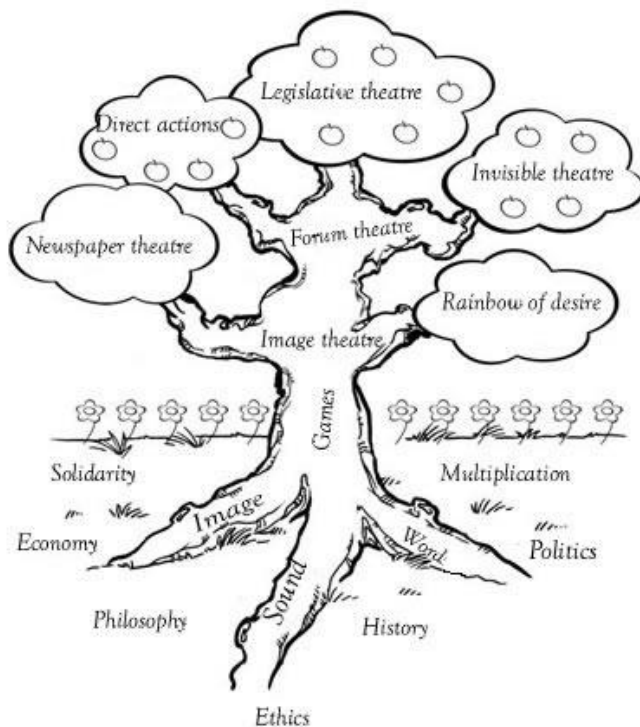
# Theatre of the Oppressed

*"Theatre is a form of knowledge: it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theatre can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it."*

—Augusto Boal

- From the International Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) Declaration of Principles:
  - The basic aim of TO is to humanize humanity
  - The Theatre of the Oppressed is a system of Exercises, Games and Techniques based on the Essential Theatre, to help men and women to develop what they already have inside themselves: theatre.
  - Every human being is theatre!
- Forum Theatre Scenes:
  - The Protagonist MUST fail. At the end, there must be a return to the status quo.
  - The 3 points in a scene are the Conflict, "Chinese Crisis" (a moment of *both* danger and opportunity in the scene, a moment of decision), and the Failure.
  - The Forum allows the spect-actor to join the actors onstage to act out possible solutions to the problem in the scene.

### Tree of the Theatre of the Oppressed



\*\*Forum Theatre is a collective rehearsal for reality\*\*

[www.theatreoftheoppressed.org](http://www.theatreoftheoppressed.org)





## FORUM THEATRE WORKSHOPS:

WARREN CENTRAL HIGH – OCTOBER 12 & 13, 2009

The Warren Central High School workshop was structured as a two-part session due to the restrictions of limited class time. The teacher and I arranged for a Monday/Tuesday workshop, each day from 11:25-12:25. Surprisingly, the one-hour long workshop was the perfect amount of time for each session as I had divided the days: Day 1 – Introduction/Games/Activities; Day 2- Creation of Forum scenes.

The class I worked with was called “Art in Theatre” and had 12 upperclassmen in the class – 4 boys and 8 girls (Bidwell). On Monday, after a short introduction and preview of the next two days, I employed some of Boal’s games that I learned at the 2009 Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed (PTO) Conference. Julian Boal opened his Forum Theatre Master Class with the exercise Walk-Stop. In this exercise, a facilitator gives the group the commands “walk” and “stop” and then reverses the meaning: “walk” now means “stop” and vice versa. More reversed commands can be added such as “name/jump” (say name, jump in air), “hands/knees” (raise hands, touch knees), and “nose/hips” (touch nose, touch hips). “Walk-Stop” is a great introduction game because it not only warms up the body, but it puts everyone in an equally vulnerable position while they are being challenged to rethink basic instructions. This exercise proved to be an excellent tension-breaker and group bonding game. Everyone involved has the chance

to laugh at his own mistakes and confusion, which is an effective way to break down the barriers that high schoolers tend to have.

The focus for the first thirty minutes of this workshop was the challenge of breaking down the students' barriers. Many of the students' attitudes showed interest in the workshop, but I believe that their need to be "cool" and accepted by their peers made them feign disinterest. The games I chose focused specifically on group interaction and creative expression in order to force the students out of their cliques.

As soon as the group was relaxed, I immediately introduced the concept of oppression with the exercise "Yes, but." In pairs, one student acts as the "oppressor," the other the "oppressed." The participants decide who will play each role first and mutually agree on a conflict scenario before beginning the improvisational scene. The oppressor replies "Yes, but..." to a complaint or injustice offered by the oppressed. For example, one situation might be an unsatisfied customer at a pet store. The customer complains that the fish he bought earlier are now dead. The employee replies "Yes, but fish have short life spans" – or something to that effect – and the scene repeats itself from there with different excuses regardless of what the oppressed argues, he is continually rebuffed. Once the students grasped the idea of oppression, I attempted to engage up their imaginations with "Finish the Action." This game also involves working in pairs: using their own body, one person creates a gesture or pose, and the other person (without verbal communication) completes the picture by "finishing" the action with their own gesture or pose inspired from the person who initiated the image. This group of students was not entirely comfortable with improvisation and the vulnerability that comes with it. Some needed to be told a "correct" way to complete the picture while others just copied what

their partner was doing. For instance, one boy lunged forward and raised in his hand palm facing out. His partner gave him a high five and then asked me if that was right. I responded by letting him know there was no right or wrong way and encouraged him to find other ways to complete the action. As the activity progressed, some caught on and were very successful.

For some students, fully committing to these exercises was not a top priority because there was no grade at stake and for others, appearing “cool” seemed more important. One of my challenges as a facilitator was balancing how much time and effort I could spend on keeping these students engaged while being aware of the limited time frame I had to work in.

After introducing the games, I began the discussion section of the workshop with a question for the group: What is the purpose of theatre? The two answers the class offered were “to entertain” and “to spread knowledge.” I compared these answers to the purpose of Theatre of the Oppressed and explained how it is different from conventional Western theatre. The students made a list of groups they considered oppressed and they responded with minorities, illegal immigrants, and “ladies of the night.” With help from the Theatre of the Oppressed handout, I explained all the branches of Theatre of the Oppressed, as well as gave a brief introduction to Boal, and Forum Theatre.

I followed our discussion with an exercise called “Handshake Interpretation” which explores power and relationship dynamics while introducing Image Theatre. The exercise begins with two people shaking hands and freezing the pose. The audience speculates about what sort of relationship the couple may have, who has the power in the relationship, and the possible situation. The Warren Central High students were

immediately interested in this exercise. Although keeping eye-contact with peers proved to be difficult and uncomfortable for the students, this was still one of the most effective exercises from the first workshop because we had finally created that “safe” environment for the students to work in. The previous exercises and games helped to build the foundations needed for success in the Handshake Interpretations. As the game went on, students became more vocal with each new handshake analysis. One pair did not understand the concept of “freezing,” and kept shifting and moving. Frustrated with the couple’s inability to freeze, one boy from the audience said impatiently, “Just freeze!” I was pleased that some students realized the importance of solidifying the image – any movement in the image changes the perception of the relationship.

Interestingly, the students interpreted every handshake as either a romantic relationship or a business relationship. Within those categories, they decided which person seemed to be dominating the handshake by analyzing minute elements of the image such as the position of shoulders and feet, or the observation that placing one foot behind the other indicated fear, lack of comfort, or a lack of power in a situation. Feet in a neutral, parallel position portrayed confidence and power. Others noted the fact that slouched shoulders created a different relationship than straight shoulders. Students interpreted that a person leaning into a handshake as eager and excited while a person leaning out of a handshake seemed to dislike or distrust their partner. This exercise introduced the students to the wide variety of possible interpretations that a single image can suggest and also how no one individual interprets an image exactly the same as another. The students went beyond my expectations with this exercise with their ability to examine each part of the images.

Next I introduced the socio-political aspect of Theatre of the Oppressed. Every student wrote a profession, a label, or a stereotype (e.g. millionaire, hobo) on a slip of paper and taped it on the back of another person so that no student knew what word was on his back. Without any verbal communication, students had to attempt to figure out who he was by the way their classmates reacted to them. They were encouraged to use non-verbal communication and to react as realistically as possible with each other, responding to their classmates as if they were the character written on their back. Students crossed themselves when the nun passed by, avoided the killer and the prostitute, and mimed taking money from the millionaire or taking pictures with the movie star. After ten minutes, I asked the students to line up according to what they believed their rank in society was from the most powerful and influential to the least, based solely on the reactions from other people and their personal interpretations of those reactions. As a result, the label with the most power and influence turned out to be the movie star, followed by the millionaire, the psychologist, the nun, and the artist. The least powerful in this scenario were the thief, the prostitute, the hobo, and finally, the killer. Fame and money proved to be the ruling forces in this situation. The students then had the choice to look at their slips of paper and rearrange the order into what they perceived as an ideal society. The only significant change made was the movement of the psychologist from fourth to first. Even with the freedom to make changes, the students primarily left the order unchanged. The students understood how our present social system works yet saw no need to reform it. As I mentioned in my introduction, it seems that this generation suffers from a sense of apathy, believing that “my voice doesn’t count”; I saw that present in these students as well. Even with the freedom to re-

create a new social order, perhaps the students did not feel they would ever have the power to do this in actuality and chose not to make any changes.

The end of this exercise concluded the first day's workshop session. I quickly went over the format of the Forum scenes which we would create the following day and asked them to think of issues, problems, and oppression in their own lives as material for the next workshop.

Session 2 began with a discussion about the topics, issues, and problems that the students wanted to explore in their scenes. Partially because of the time in-between workshops, again it was difficult to get the students to open up and really discuss important issues – these students found it easier to joke and be unrealistic than sincere and honest. The first few suggestions were either off-topic, unrelated, or joke answers (e.g. “oxygen” and “girls”). From the original list of possible topics, the students suggested careers, friendship, love, family, money, life, and individuality, I tried to get the students to focus on topics that were prevalent in Bowling Green. As a result, the list changed and specified drugs, teen pregnancy, and safety (the joke answer here was traffic). We then narrowed the focus even more to issues that affected Warren Central High Students including grades, peer pressure (cliques), prejudice, racism, and startlingly, rape. I divided the class into two groups: each had 2 boys and 4 girls. It took the groups ten minutes to decide on a topic and get familiar with their group – I did my best to divide any cliques within the class. The first group chose cliques as their topic and the second group chose peer pressure. After watching the scenes, the underlying issue in both seemed to be drug abuse – both scenes included marijuana use. With only

minor suggestions and guidance from me, the groups created their scenes entirely on their own in approximately 20 minutes.

Group one's scene featured a new student's first day of school. It took place in a cafeteria where two feuding cliques – the Preps, viewed as popular and “cool,” and the Jesus-Freaks, seen as unpopular and “bad” – were eating lunch as the new student arrives. The Preps invite the new student to sit with them and then pressure her into smoking pot after lunch. Since the new student wanted to be accepted, she agreed. Two police officers catch and arrest the new student while the Preps escaped without trying to help their new “friend.”

Labels had extreme importance in this scene – every student wore a slip of paper that identified to which clique he belonged. When the forum began, the spect-actors identified the presence of peer-pressure in the scene, specifically within the cliques. The first spect-actor to come onstage took the place of the new student. Instead of sitting with the Preps at lunch, this spect-actor chose to sit with the Jesus-Freaks, despite the negative connotation that came with associating with that group. This change avoided the entire dilemma of smoking marijuana. In the next scene, another student stepped in as a Jesus-Freak. The scene began as it did originally and the new student sat with the Preps once more. The new spect-actor approached the Prep table, invited the new student to sit with her instead, and warned her about the Preps' bad influence, once again avoiding the peer pressure and drug usage. After discussing the practicality of these two interventions, one student wanted to make a change later on in the scene when the new student was about to smoke. The Jesus-Freaks found their way outside and convinced the new student not to take a hit on the joint and to come hang out with them instead. Even though it seemed

like the students had a negative view of the Jesus-Freaks, they still saw them as the “good influence,” while the Preps represented the “bad influence.” The last forum intervention simply had the police arresting the Preps instead of the new student even though all of them had smoked pot – that was the only scene that was not entirely practical.

Group two’s scene told the story of a boy doing poorly in school. His mother sent him to his room to finish his homework and the boy’s younger sister came in to tease him before being locked out. One of the boy’s friends calls to convince him to go to a party later that night where he is pressured by his friends to drink, smoke weed, and have sex. Later at the party, the boy sees his younger sister doing the same things; furious, he drags her back home and asks her where she learned to do such things. The sister replies, “I learned from you.” The scene ended with the boy alone onstage thinking about his decisions.

The forum for this scene was shorter due to time constraints but more intellectually engaged than the first one since the students now understood how the process worked. The first spect-actor called “stop” when the boy in the scene was talking to his friend on the phone. The boy avoided the party by telling his friend that he could not go because he had to finish his homework. I proposed that the students explore what could have happened differently at the party if the boy ended up attending anyway. One spect-actor refused a joint at the party and then took it from the “pot-head” and threw it out the window. This caused an uproar of laughter in the class when the actor playing the pot-head chased after his joint – it was not a plausible solution, but humorous. The most jarring moment for me as a facilitator was noticing that none of the spect-actors called “stop” when the boy was offered an alcoholic drink. I was careful not to jump to



conclusions though – dealing with alcohol may have not been something the students considered a priority. The most important fact is that they were using the Forum scenes to work through difficult situations.

After a brief overview of what had been accomplished, I offered the students a congratulations for being successful Forum Theatre practitioners and concluded the workshop session. The students finally relaxed by the last half of the workshop, which is why I think the forum scenes worked as well as they did. I could see the wheels turning wheels inside some of the students' heads as a result of the Forum scenes and that excited me as an educator.

The topics covered in both of the groups' scenes at Warren Central High School implied that drugs, alcohol, and sex have an enormous influence on the daily challenges faced by teenagers at Warren Central High School. These issues, combined with peer pressure in their social lives ,were topics successfully addressed in the Forum Theatre format. Group two's emphasis on the importance of being a good role model provided valuable insight on how to modify Forum Theatre to fit the needs of teenagers. The students seemed to struggle between the desire to be a good role model and the desire to appear "cool." Especially in a high school setting, students are still searching for their own individuality. The importance of appearing "cool" to their peers was more important than the opportunity to learn and explore possible solutions to real problems – until they became comfortable and relaxed with the information and the environment. Discussions about scenes and serious issues took time to get started because most students conformed to the silence of the group. There seemed to be a fear of saying the "uncool" thing until I encouraged them and assured them that there were no "wrong" answers. With more time,

these students would be able create scenes with more depth, but for the time given, they were very successful.

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## FORUM THEATRE WORKSHOPS:

WARREN EAST MIDDLE – OCTOBER 22, 2009

This workshop consisted of one session an hour and a half long with an extracurricular group that meets once a month after school, Club Pride, which discusses problem-solving techniques and is anti-drug, anti-alcohol, and anti-tobacco. The group of students in this workshop were more interested in what the workshop had to offer since this was a voluntary club that dealt specifically with issues that could be explored through Forum Theatre. Cell phones were the difficult part of managing these 25 students – since this was group met outside of school hours, policies on cell phones could not be enforced.

The first part of the workshop was in the gym. It was challenging to overcome the poor acoustics with restless students until after the excitement of school ending had waned. After offering a brief outline of the workshop, I started with a few simple stretches to wake up their bodies from a long day of sitting in desks. “Walk-stop” began the series of Boal games and exercises and again proved to be an excellent way to engage students and get them moving and thinking. I did not hand out the Theatre of the Oppressed sheets in order to save time, but did give a short definition and explanation of the Tree of the Theatre of the Oppressed. Visuals worked well in the discussion portion of the workshop.

Image Theatre was next with the Handshake Interpretation game. The middle school students were not as capable of discerning relationship nuances as the high school students. It was nearly impossible to get the students to freeze in a position, but that did not change the fact that the audience was very observant. A handful of students spoke up regularly and a few others interjected their opinions over time. They understood how a single image could convey multiple ideas about power and dominance. The students noticed small but important details such as the position of the feet and shoulders like the high school students did. Unlike the Warren Central High students, the Warren East Middle students analyzed the handshakes further by discussing facial expressions and the firmness of the handshake. Once again, the students became more vocal with each interpretation.

Image Theatre worked extremely well with these middle school students. Next, they were asked to create abstract tableaux, or images, in groups of six. Each group had ten seconds to create a tableau of a specific word or concept. The first group created tableaux using the words Fun and Hunger. These were very individualistic images: gestures or poses that literally signified *I am hungry* (e.g. holding one's stomach) or *I am having fun* (e.g. a dance pose). After reiterating that these were to be *group* images, the students created a new tableau for Hunger. The transformation was phenomenal. What was a picture portraying individuals, was now an interactive image that told a multi-layered story. Hunger became a tableau of beggars and people sharing food. The next group portrayed the word Family with a big group hug. Education was a picture of students in a classroom getting commands from a strict looking teacher. The students discussed this image in particular. They described education as being "orders and

commands.” Their responses were extremely interesting to me because Boal and Freire fought against that sort of education. Too much public education is approached through the “banking” method that Freire describes as being so detrimental to students. If anything, this further inspired me to introduce Theatre of the Oppressed to these young people and show them that education does not have to be all about “orders and commands.” I encouraged them to think of education outside of the standard classroom and to create another image. The second time, the image included a wall of thinkers with a tutor helping one student which portrayed the struggle that exists in order to achieve true education versus the hierarchy of power that they showed in the first image.

Guns, physical conflict, and violent contact filled the next image, War, while Peace consisted of the hand symbol for peace, hand shaking, and friendly contact. In order to discuss the differences between the two tableaux, I asked both groups to stand side by side holding their poses. Besides the differences in positive and negative contact with people, the students saw that there was a desperate struggle for dominance and power in the War tableau. Everyone involved in the Peace image seemed to share the same amount of power – in other words, the students recognized the need to oppress in the War image and the absence of oppression in the Peace tableau.

At this point in the workshop, it was clear that these students had a firm grasp on Image theatre. Moving on to Forum theatre, the students began to create a list of topics to explore in their scenes. After dividing them into two groups and assigning topics from their list, they began collaborating on their scenes. Some students did not want to perform in the Forum scenes. While the other groups were rehearsing, I had these students do the exercise with the professions/labels taped on their backs. Their order in

society surprisingly had the killer at the top with the most power and influence followed by the rock star, doctor, millionaire, teacher, chef, nun, veterinarian, construction worker, and the homeless. When asked if they would make any changes to the order in an ideal society the students collectively agreed they would keep it the same. I inquired as to why the killer remained at the top of the line – to these students, a killer has the most influence in society because he has the power to control many people’s worst fears. These kids completely understood that oppression deals with power and fear. Since a killer embodies the extremes of both of those concepts, he remained at the top of their society. I was impressed at the level of insight that the middle school students presented. They covered a broader spectrum of professions and labels than the high school students did but both sets of results revealed that from the students perspective that money and fame hold the most power and influence in American society.

The quality of the forum scenes was not as high as the Warren Central scenes, but the students still understood the concept. What was absent were the fundamentals of theatre – basic acting and script analysis skills that the high school students had studied. The first group’s topic was about drugs and alcohol. Two sisters were in charge of their parents’ house while they were out of town. The younger sister threw a party much to the chagrin of the older sister. The party turned into a barrage of underage drinking, marijuana use, and sexual activity. This particular scene did not have much dialogue; instead, there was a lot of confusion and imitations of wild partying. The forum for this scene was short. One spect-actor took the place of the older sister and threatened to call the cops if the younger sister did have a party. The second spect-actor entered the scene as one of the partygoers. Once she discovered there was illegal activity happening, she

refused to smoke a joint and alcohol and left the party. The middle school students refused the alcohol in their forums where the high school students did not.

The second group presented a scene about honesty and social pressure: a boy cheats on his girlfriend. After the girlfriend discovers he is cheating, she confronts him for an explanation and he refuses to speak to her. Two spect-actors came up to play the girl's friends and support system during the confrontation, which resulted in the boy leaving the situation. Another girl decided she wanted to replace the boy in the scene. She gave the girlfriend the opportunity to speak her mind, but did not speak to her at all. The next spect-actor replaced the girlfriend saying that she deserved an honest answer from the boy (still, the boy did not give her one). The last scene was a modification of the first one: one girl wanted to be the girl that the boy was cheating on his girlfriend with. She asked him if he was dating anyone and he nodded. She stood up and stormed out yelling the phrase "not until you're single!" which received a round of applause from the audience.

After the forum scenes, I concluded the session by reaffirming that theatre can be used for more than just entertainment. They can use Forum Theatre, especially in Club Pride, in order to find plausible options to problems they face on a daily basis. Overall, this workshop was more successful than the Warren Central High one. The students were more involved, they asked more questions, and were eager to work. It was easier to break the middle school students out of their shells than it was the older students at the high school.

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## FORUM THEATRE WORKSHOPS:

### CONCLUSIONS

When talking with Katherine Burke about using Forum Theatre in schools, she told me her workshops were usually 2-3 day intensives. Ideally, I would have loved to have created similar workshops, but I knew the schools I would be working with had strict schedules. Considering the limited time frame I had to work within, I was extremely happy with my results and was able to accomplish everything I had hoped to work on. In the future, with more time, I would like to continue my work with Theatre and the Oppressed in schools.

The biggest hurdle I had to overcome was breaking through the barriers of the students. With a longer time period, I would have focused on more icebreaker games and boundary breaking you exercises, but since I was on a tight schedule, I couldn't focus as much as I would have liked on getting the students to be themselves and not the social mask they put on before school every day. Since the students' teachers' coordinated these workshops, I was also working with some students who did not want to participate. In the future, I will make these workshops voluntary so that the students involved are the ones truly interested in Forum Theatre.

Although the topics covered in my workshops were nothing new to the students, I think the medium of their exploration was key in engaging them. These students hear "Don't do drugs/have sex/drink alcohol/smoke pot..." from their parents and teachers all

the time. These Forum Theatre workshops gave the students a chance to discuss their issues instead of adults discussing it for them. Forum Theatre gave them a chance to work through the consequences of choices and behavior on their own so they might understand, speak out, and be better prepared to act when those situations arise in their own lives.

Although dealing with students who were texting, talking, uninterested, or “playing along” to look cool to their friends was frustrating at times, seeing the true interest in other students’ eyes was rewarding. Some students spoke with me after the workshops and expressed interest in pursuing theatre. In my experience, Theatre of the Oppressed proved to be a successful tool to use in high school and middle school. Part of me felt as if it would not have as much impact in Kentucky as it did amidst the political turmoil of Rio de Janeiro, but the students in my workshops proved otherwise. Boal’s innovative and enduring style of theatre has inspired yet another generation.

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## THE FUTURE OF THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED AND CONCLUSION

Theatre of the Oppressed has grown exponentially over the past forty years. Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* has been translated into over 25 different languages, and in practice it has made its mark in almost every country in the world whether through Boal directly or through one of his hundreds of trained facilitators (Babbage 30). Festivals and conferences held all over the world continue to attract new faces ready to step out of their comfort zone and create change. Theatre of the Oppressed centers, groups, and organizations exist on every continent: Jana Sanskriti in Calcutta, India; Headlines Theatre in Vancouver, Canada; Giolli in Italy; TOPLAB in New York, and the CTO in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to name a few (Babbage 31). The Theatre of the Oppressed Website ([www.theatreoftheoppressed.org](http://www.theatreoftheoppressed.org)) includes up-to-date information, literature, contact information, and a description of all the theatre organizations involved with Boal's work around the world.

Theatre of the Oppressed is a progressive and adaptive form of theatre, but as it becomes more widely used, many of its core practitioners are wondering if its structure is too open for manipulation and extortion by those who are considered responsible for oppression. Sharon Green's essay "Boal and Beyond" discusses a situation that Marc Weinblatt found himself in while working with Seattle youth. During a performance on racism in a high school,

Weinblatt asked the audience to suggest a course of action for the powerless character, [and] a young skinhead raised his hand and asked to replace the racist white character in the scene, the character that the performers had envisioned as the powerful oppressor. Weinblatt asked the student, “You feel this person is oppressed?” in order to affirm the structure of Forum work. Indeed, he was, the student said, because he was denied his “First Amendment right” to express his racist ideas. The skinhead replaced the racist character in the scene and explained that the First Amendment gave him the right to express his ideas and make racial slurs. Weinblatt acknowledges this was a particularly “tricky moment” but insists that giving the skinhead the opportunity to speak was important: “Rather than silencing him, pissing him off, and sending his anger further underground, we made the space for him to plead his case.” (Green 50-51)

Traditionally, in a Forum scene, the spect-actor replaces the Protagonist. In Weinblatt’s case, he loosened this rule to include the skinhead. Weinblatt realized that this “adaptation enabled the school to have ‘a real dialogue’” because it presented a truly equal playing field (Green 51). This also raises fundamental questions about the nature of Forum Theatre. Boal’s declaration of principles says that the oppressed “are those individuals or groups who are socially, culturally, politically, economically, racially, sexually, or in any other way deprived of their right to *Dialogue* or in any way impaired to exercise this right” which *does* mean that the racist skinhead should have been allowed a chance to speak. Is this a manipulation of the intent of Theatre of the Oppressed? If Weinblatt had refused to let the skinhead speak, would that not also have been a form of oppression? Later, Green suggested that without future change, Forum Theatre could be used “to reify and encourage oppression rather than interrogate it” (51). The problem that Boal’s theory runs into is that it strives for a democracy where everyone receives an equal opportunity to express dialogue – even the oppressors. Perhaps the future of this movement relies on the willingness of its practitioners to take the good with the bad.

In my experience with the students at Warren Central and Warren East, students that were uninterested, on their phones, or just in it to look cool were only bearable because of the curiosity I saw in the other students. There was an overwhelming desire to appear “cool” as well as conflicting pressure to be a good role model. I think there is something to be said about the amount of self-awareness in our culture. I have wondered if this is a uniquely American hyper-sensitivity to how we are perceived as others. Would students in other cultures be as concerned about appearances and being perceived as “cool?” Can Theatre of the Oppressed work as well in middle-class America as it does in Brazil or India because of this idea of constantly upholding one’s self-image?

My belief is that, yes, Theatre of the Oppressed can be used in almost any situation if executed with the correct motives, but that does not mean that middle-class American students will not feel distanced from it at first – as the students at Warren East Middle School said, education to them was “orders and commands.” These students wanted to follow the rules of a particular game and do it “correctly” instead of thinking critically or outside of the box. I highly doubt this was because they could not do so; instead, I think the flaw may lie within the American education system that too often falls into the category of the “banking” style of education. While these barriers made my initial approaches to teaching Theatre of the Oppressed difficult, I was still successful. The differences between 21<sup>st</sup> century America and 20<sup>th</sup> century Brazil cannot be ignored when created Forum Theatre, they should be embraced. The potential problematic differences between performing Theatre of the Oppressed in third and first world countries was discussed in 1981 at the first International Festival of Theatre of the Oppressed and continues to be a topic of discussion and debate among practitioners of

Theatre of the Oppressed. I think there is a definite connection with Weinblatt's story, Green's fear that Theatre of the Oppressed may be being used malevolently, and the idea that *true* political oppression is somewhat alien to the average citizen of first world countries.

With the growing popularity of Theatre of the Oppressed, future practitioners must think about the possible consequences of the progressive nature of Boal's theories. I believe that Boal would appreciate a world-wide discussion on changes that have incorporated themselves into the definition of "oppression" since the creation of the principles. Perhaps reworking the declaration of principles after looking back on the past 40 years is something that future leaders of the Theatre of the Oppressed movement should consider.

Francis Babbage, author of *Augusto Boal* also raises some interesting questions about the future of Boal's work. Since Boal's theatre is only a *rehearsal* for revolution, it does not claim to *solve* problems, but only to facilitate dialogue. A theatre organization called Hope is Vital<sup>1</sup> based in Theatre of the Oppressed theory states that "Hope is Vital poses questions. It does *not* offer answers. Audience/ Participants propose answers. Together, everyone looks at options" (xi). Still, Babbage asks what *does* Theatre of the Oppressed attempt to do (33)? How does one judge its success? Alternatively, can it be judged at all? Boal does say that this is "a race without a point of arrival, the point is to run; not to win," but Babbage's questions still hold significant weight for the future practitioners of Theatre of the Oppressed (Morelos).

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<sup>1</sup> Hope is Vital is a theatre and community outreach program started by Michael Rohd in response to the severe lack of HIV/AIDS education in the 1980s. Rohd is well-grounded in Theatre of the Oppressed and worked with Boal on a number of occasions.

Coming from a relatively successful, middle-class, American background, at times it is hard for me to grasp the full potential of Theatre of the Oppressed. “Facilitating dialogue” may not seem like much progress to those of us reading these words right now – but to women in India who have never voiced their opinion, or to peasants living in dictatorial Brazil where freedom is only a dream, dialogue is one step closer to the equality of having a voice. At the Pedagogy & Theatre of the Oppressed conference I attended, Julian Boal said “expression is not emancipation” which is a harsh truth – but in Boal’s theatre expression is something the oppressed have gained that they did not have before.

The final workshop I participated in at the conference began as a discussion about the future of Theatre of the Oppressed and dealt with some of the same topics relating to purpose and function that Baggage raised.

In the midst of the dialogue, a woman across from me in the circle asked, “What do we do without Boal?”

A silence fell over the group, but after a pause, one old man simply replied,

“Come together!”

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