Theatre of the Oppressed: an American[1] Tradition?

Douglas Hundley (University of Exeter)

There is a moment now in which the middle class is disappearing and many people believe that if we are a society, all of us are entitled at a minimum to be part of that society. If we can talk about society, we have to say all the society members are entitled to live. They are entitled to have a place where to live, a place where to work, to have health, to have education, to have transportation, to have a minimum.

(Augusto Boal in an interview with Doug Paterson and Mark Weinberg, 1996)

Politically, economically and socially the US is presently at a crossroads, combating terrorism and promoting democracy abroad while considering increasingly more oppressive legislation at home affecting immigration, right to privacy and gay marriage. Consequently, more and more Americans are feeling less a part of American society. Thus Boal's comment above, originally made in regards to his home country of Brazil, has recently gained credence in the United States. However, my intention is not to compare the current US administration to the strict military dictatorships of 1960s Brazil, but to ask what I consider to be a significant question. Why has the Theatre of the Oppressed not had more prominence in this country? Boal's brand of community-based interaction, a theatre practice synonymous with raising consciousness and propelling action towards individual and social change, while having proven highly effective in South American countries, has never been successfully exported to the United States. As

[1] When using the terms *America* and *Americans* I am referring to the land mass that constitutes the United States and those that are citizens/residents of this specific country. See Oxford English Dictionary.

to the reasons why, critics claim it is a practice that "falls through the cracks of intercontinental translation" and that "North Americans lack both political habits and a political consciousness" (Shutzman 140). In other words, and perhaps more pointedly, theater that places greater emphasis on establishing a dialogue between audience and stage than on aesthetics is generally not considered 'real' theatre in the United States.

It has been a popular sentiment of critics of modern American theatre, but I find it profoundly ironic for in my assessment of the principle components of the Theatre of the Oppressed, I have discovered that it is a methodology steeped in North American theatre traditions. Although the fact is seldom recognized by both scholars and Boal alike, it should not be all that surprising since much of Boal's theatre training took place in New York City, a setting that enabled him to experience directly the American avant-garde theatre movement occurring at the time. Therefore, I offer an alternative genealogy to the Theatre of the Oppressed not in order to lay a national claim to Boal's methods but to emphasize the fact that America has always had the potential to generate political theatre that is by the people for the people as it is currently a country, like Brazil of the 1960s, in need of a performance genre that can provide a voice for the voiceless and a sense of entitlement to all its members of society.

Boal's Off-Broadway Education

In establishing Boal's North American lineage it is appropriate to start at the beginning, with his American drama teachers Norris Houghton and John Gassner. While still a

doctoral candidate in chemical engineering at Columbia University in the 1950s, Boal studied with Houghton and Gassner, two playwrights who experienced first-hand the detriments of the Great Depression. Consequently, they championed the cause of the social drama. Houghton, a leading founder of New York's off-Broadway movement, believed that theatre with social value could only be located outside the big commercial theatres of New York. In his 1941 survey of US amateur theatre he defines a community, "whose life is not irrigated by art and science, day upon day, as a community that exists half alive" (Buxton 1-2). He instilled in Boal the idea that commercial theatre like that found on Broadway at the time, was little interested in such irrigation and that "the non-professional theatre is the ditch through which the arid field might be watered" (ibid). John Gassner was also highly critical of mainstream theatre for alienating the working class and thus supported such companies as Harold Clurman's Group Theatre for attempting to address relevant social causes in their realist productions, but even this company was criticized on occasion for not being experimental enough in its dramaturgy and in addressing the needs of working class audiences (Goldstein 336).

With Gassner's encouragement Boal participated in his first theatre company, The Writer's Group, where he and a small number of others would meet, write and read their plays, in an environment where he admits to feeling "totally loved, totally integrated"(Boal, *Hamlet* 130). Moreover, Boal audited classes at the Actor's Studio where he was introduced to actors who through the Method offered him "the best way to understand the human being…" (129). Gassner's influence was also evident in many of Boal's early productions at the Arena Theatre. Consider his staging of Machiavelli's

classic *Mandragola* an example. It was a nationalized production in which the Machiavellian character was modeled after Dale Carnegie, the wealthy North American steel magnate and quintessential American capitalist. With this work Boal admitted to wanting to provide an outline for the taking of political power by Brazil's socially disenfranchised, power symbolized by the character of Lucrezia, the young wife kept under lock and key, but "identifiable to anyone who wants her and will fight for her" (Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* 163). By nationalizing this classic story, Boal wanted to form a connection with the Brazilian working class audience and empower them at a time when social conditions were less than adequate under the country's military dictatorship.

Adopting the Improvisational Techniques of Viola Spolin

During the late 1940s and 50s Chicagoan Viola Spolin with her groups the Young Actors Company, the Playwright's Theater Club and the Compass was experimenting with improvisational theatre exercises that closely paralleled Boal's later developed participatory theatre techniques. Spolin's exercises were initially created to strengthen stage skills; however, they soon were adopted by Chicago social workers who considered her approaches of value in achieving interpersonal connections with their clients/patients. With Spolin's polishing of the improvisational exercises through practice, they soon became a source of entertainment in which she took to audiences in a variety of cities including New York. In the early 1960s, it was her son, Paul Sills, who saw the marketability of her exercises and created theatre games from them that required audience participation, having spectators both offer suggestions and physically replace actors on stage. This is what Boal identifies in *Theatre of the Oppressed* as "simultaneous

dramaturgy" and the spect-actor respectively, two devices incorporated into his methods while working with the oppressed in Latin America during the late 1960s and early 70s. Spolin and Sills have "acknowledge[d] the value of self-discovery through storytelling, folk dance and dramatics" (Bebb), a sentiment consistently echoed by Boal in his own published works.

The Living Newspapers: the beginning of Forum Theatre

However, what appears as the most direct American influence on Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed was the avant-garde theatre practice of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP). The FTP was established in 1935 by the Roosevelt administration as one of a number of arts projects designed to give unemployed cultural workers the right to paid employment in their particular field of expertise. The Living Newspapers, a form of experimental theatre under the FTP derived in part from previous Soviet models and German documentary theatre, aimed to present the daily news on stage that quickly won the support of the Newspaper Guild. However, their reporting of the news was largely editorial and soon a brand of theatre developed "which was relevant and engaged with the forces of progress in a country where so many of the old certainties seemed open to question" (Cobb 284-285).

The Living Newspapers, inspired by Brecht, were episodic in approach using types rather than psychologically credible characters, and through employing devices such as film, slide projection, music and direct address to the audience; the production maintained an element of disruption consistent with epic theatre. In a time of the Great Depression, The

Living Newspapers offered solutions to problems that were essentially political in nature and had four characteristics vital to the form:

> They were nearly all concerned with topical, significant issues; they all treated these issues as problems requiring solutions thereby following the pattern of reflective thinking; they all involved the common man as protagonist, whether as an individual character or group; and they all took an empirical and slightly deterministic attitude towards the problem and its solution. (McDermott qtd. in Cobb 284)

Attracted to the Living Newspapers' truth telling quality, Boal incorporated these characteristics into his Forum Theatre, so to be better able to encourage his audience to see clearly a problem and its causes, often despite the government and society's preference to keep them hidden. The founder of FTP, Hallie Flanagan, believed theatre should be contemporary and "alive to the problems of today's world," earnestly reflecting the "changing social order" and revealing "the struggle of many different kinds of people" (Kazacoff 17) and by staging such theatre, actors and audience would unite as a result of the mutual understanding of the natural, social, and economic forces that lie at the heart of a time's social issues and ultimately lead to a better way of life for all. Not surprisingly, this would later become the mission statement of the Theatre of the Oppressed.

Moreover Boal's Forum Theatre borrows largely from the structure and content of the Living Newspapers. Both consist of a documentary-style that informs the audience of the size, nature, and origin of a social problem, and then calls for specific action to solve it. The Living Newspapers were written on such varied topics as housing, health,

cooperatives, natural resources, labor unions and racism, the very subjects Boal addressed in his practice of Forum Theatre in Peru, Chile, Argentina and Brazil in the 1960s and 70s.

Consider this comparison of a Living Newspaper production to an early example of Boal's Forum Theatre as further evidence. The 1936 Living Newspaper production *Triple-A Plowed Under* included twenty-six stylized scenes, tracing the history of the agricultural depression from the inflation of the First World War through to the remedies of the 1930s. The work dramatized the need for the farmer and consumer to unite for better incomes and cheaper foods. Projections, masks, spotlights, loudspeakers, ramps, and characters in the audience were used as was an offstage loudspeaker called the Voice of the Living Newspaper. It was a transitional figure who introduced new characters, established time and place, and linked the episodes.

Boal's *Arena Tells about Zumbi* (*Zumbi*) co-directed by Gianfrancesco Gaurnieri, staged at the height of Brazil's 1960s military dictatorship, was a localized story, made up of small fragments from many plays, documents and songs. Stylistically eclectic, each scene was totally independent only relating thematically. It served as a warning against all present and future evils and the text was put together in such a way as to destroy empathy and stimulate the spectator's response. "Not being able to identify itself at any time with any character, the audience often took the position of a cold spectator of consummated events" (Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* 166).

Zumbi was Boal's first attempt at using a Joker, a narrator that talked to the audience directly out of character much like that of the Voice of the Living Newspaper. Boal's *Zumbi* also consisted of actor-character separation, with actors often times alternating roles. This way all the actors were grouped into a single group of narrators and thus were able to reach a level of collective interpretation. Boal states that *Zumbi* was a "search for the most minute and truthful description of Brazilian life in all its external, visible aspects" (Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* 171), which essentially echoes Hallie Flanigan's goals with the Living Newspapers: to "understand the natural, social, and economic forces [for] a better life for more people" (Kazacoff 17).

The Influence of American Guerilla Theatre

In examining Boal's practice of Invisible Theatre, it is interesting how closely it relates to a form of protest theatre taking place in the US during the 1960s. Although Boal will admit to not having invented the technique, he is largely recognized as the first artist to have worked with it extensively in search for means of activating an audience, aiming to transform "the spectator into a protagonist, hoping to enable the spectator to become a protagonist in the political arena as well" (Kohtes 85).

In his claim to not having invented the form, he points out everyday examples of Invisible Theatre such as "shop detectives posing as ordinary shoppers," but he does not make mention of the several American troupes in the late 1960s who implemented Invisible Theatre in their guerilla theatre movement. Practitioners such as Sandra Lowell in Los Angeles, Michael Doliner in Chicago and Marc Estrin in Washington, D.C. had

already adopted this kind of theatrical practice as part of their cultural defensive. Estrin, a member of the American Playground anticipating Boal, wrote in 1969 that doing Invisible Theatre was creating a new world for the audience. "The experiencing of situations which might be true creates the conditions whereby they *become* true. [The audience] are living social change" (Estrin qtd. in Kohtes 86).

An example of an Invisible Theatre piece "performed" by Estrin and his company is entitled *Concert Piece*, an anti-Vietnam war piece especially conceived for the military band concerts of the banks of the Potomac River in Washington, DC, where

> a Vietnamese family (in black pajamas and bamboo hats) was placed among the audience, every time an airplane approached for landing at National Airport the family took cover, whispering instructions in Vietnamese, until it had disappeared. This kind of mild disruption is not enough to bring the police, but *is* enough to make the connection between the military bands and their non-musical consequences. (86)

According to Martin Kohtes, Augusto Boal travelled to the US often during the time period of 1969-70, and that it was on these occasions he was introduced to what he later labelled *Teatro Invisivel*, a method he immediately began implementing upon his relocating to Argentina after exile from Brazil in 1971.

One notorious piece of Invisible Theatre orchestrated by Boal at this time occurred at an opera house in Buenos Aires:

> The foyer [was] filled with the usual gathering of plutocrats, planters, and politicians. Suddenly, amidst this display of wealth and elegance, an emaciated-looking man faint[ed]. Another man, a doctor, [told] the startled crowd that the man had fainted from hunger. Some bystanders [debated] the problem of malnutrition -- a problem ignored by the country's elite. (Kohtes 85)

Although Boal contends that he had no knowledge of troupes like the American Playground and the invisible theatre technique at this time, highlighting an early example of invisible theatre will suggest otherwise. It regards a renowned German film theoretician Bela Belazs who published an account of his personal experiences during the last years of the Weimar Republic, when the Arbeiter-Theater-Bund (Worker's Theatre Alliance) and its agit-prop troupes had already been banned, but continued to perform, appearing invisible on the Berlin streets in 1930. This piece documented by Balazs is remarkably similar to the Invisible Theatre work of Boal.

> A young man fainted just in front of the show window of a gourmet food shop, so that he came to lie in front of a telling scene of hams and sausages, of cheese, caviar, and pineapple. Needless to say, our young man was not dressed elegantly, but rather looked as if he was unemployed... (Balazs qtd. in Kohtes 86)

Belazs explains that the small crowd which gathered outside the gourmet food shop heard from another young man that his friend had fainted from hunger whereupon a passionate discussion about unemployment developed.

This example of Invisible Theatre provides evidence that the concept and even terminology of Invisible Theatre had already been employed several decades before Boal, and given the resemblance of this example to Boal's work with the genre in Argentina, it evidently served as inspiration. But more importantly, it supports the notion that the practice of Invisible Theatre corresponds with certain political conditions: more precisely, such as a sudden loss of formerly enjoyed liberties, and to Boal it is the shock of Invisible Theatre that unites a group of people, whether it is a group of German workers desperately agitating against the rise of fascism, a group of activists expressing their

disillusionment with American democracy in the face of the Vietnam War or a Latin American proletariat suffering under the oppressive practices of an authoritative regime.

America's Need for the Theatre of the Oppressed

In the last two decades the Theatre of the Oppressed has attempted to migrate to the United States in various forms, ranging from psychodrama to university workshops, and theatre companies such as The Mandala Center, Headlines and The Cornerstone Theatre are finding success in implementing Boalian techniques with their respective audiences. However, when relocating to the North, the Theatre of the Oppressed lost its original intent, the potentially subversive edge was gone and replaced with techniques for coping with society rather than changing society; "rehearsals for revolution" were replaced with "rehearsals for healing" because American participants were not interested in fighting against a capitalist system, a seemingly undefeatable oppressor that was far more esoteric (Schutzman 138).

However, I have highlighted the little known American genealogy of the Theatre of the Oppressed to emphasize the fact that the people of the United States do have a political consciousness and the potential to take the Theatre of the Oppressed from the margins to the center of American society. With the present political, social and economic challenges facing the US, it is a timely opportunity to do so. These were the challenges facing Brazil upon Boal's initial development of the Theatre of the Oppressed and if this brand of theatre found success there it should do so in the United States. After all, the practices that assisted in shaping it are American traditions.

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