

# Training Methodologies



## 'To Know and Transform' Theatre of the Oppressed and Youth

*"By visualising and transforming situations of oppression, the group can develop strategies for change".*

*Peter and Gavan raise the curtain on a way of using theatre in international youth work.*

As former drama students, we once agreed that the name Theatre of the Oppressed carries with it some odd connotations; vaguely suggestive of leather, upheaval and dimly lit pre-war Berlin cabaret clubs. Perhaps that's just us. Yet in this context, using the word theatre is a bit misleading for a practice which is based on and derived from the experiences of what is normally called the audience.

These interactive methods were originally developed in South America by director and activist Augusto Boal, for use in communities oppressed by military dictatorships and the delights of the free market. Heavily influenced by Paulo Freire's 'pedagogy of the oppressed', Boal's practice facilitated people in identifying the forces which affected them, and in exploring solutions which they could then try out. Boal himself introduced the forms to Europe, and since then they have been changed and adapted by activists, community workers, therapists and a range of other practitioners in diverse social and cultural fields. That said, a strong common philosophy underpins these variations - that of empowering the individual and group to name, unmask and engage with the problems, issues and obstacles which they encounter. By visualising and transforming these situations, the group can develop strategies for change.

Some of the forms of the Theatre of the Oppressed are well known: Image Theatre, which involves a 'sculptor' representing her story with a

human statue, which can then be worked on by the diversity of experiences brought by the group. Forum Theatre can often be developed from an image process, it involves the presentation of a scene which exposes a problem which is unresolved by the end. The scene is then replayed, but this time spect-actors (who, as opposed to traditional spectators, are able to participate as actors in the drama) can replace the oppressed character and find ways of changing the unwanted results. In this article we want to look at some of the experiences we have had using these methods, the uses they can be put to (with an emphasis on intercultural learning) and issues to bear in mind about their use.

The essence of Theatre of the Oppressed is about making visible the invisible, helping us out of our minds into other senses, in order to perceive our reality more clearly. Then we can more effectively take appropriate action. As such, it can be applied to a wide variety of situations and contexts, and each user should adapt it to their specific needs. The methods can be used in a number of ways - as an evaluation tool for example. A quick Image can help a group assess their perceptions of the current dynamic, and experiment in ways to move forward in their chosen direction. This could be completely open for the members to share their own general perceptions, or to examine a specific issue more deeply. Building on the experience of others, it becomes what Boal has termed "a rehearsal for reality".

by Peter Merry & Gavan Titley





**Picture**  
YEU, Lithuania, August '97  
Intercultural  
communication problems



One example of this was at the Ecotopia camp in Scotland in 1997, run by European Youth (Forest) Action. We were asked to run workshops on gender and power, following concerns based on the group's past experience. The image theatre gave the participants a chance to express how they saw gender relations in certain situations, and to role play different solutions. The week culminated in an intense Forum Theatre session, with about 200 people packed into a poorly-lit marquee, during which someone shared their experience of the after-effects of child abuse in a family. During the three hour session, spect-actors tried all the different roles; abused, abuser, parents, sister/brother, friend. The engagement was total, and the learning tangible. People dared to ask the deepest questions, which may never have been aired otherwise. For most, it will hopefully remain theoretical, but for those for whom it was a 'rehearsal for reality', it can only leave them better prepared.

There are many issues which we have explored with groups in this way, including bullying,

violence in the family, drug/alcohol abuse, the experience of culture shock, leadership and group dynamics. Any situation where there is conflict lends itself to these methods, and as conflict is a part of our everyday lives, the potential is great. It is a process of naming (acknowledging the existence of something), unmasking (revealing what lies behind the surface situation) and engaging. Engaging can't happen effectively without the first two stages.

In terms of conflict, we have used Theatre of the Oppressed techniques to examine common experiences and explore how we can learn from them. One example was with youth leaders from the former Yugoslavia in 1997, at the Sunrise City Camp in Croatia. Using images allowed the participants to share visually their perceptions of what they had lived through, and to explore together how they might defuse such situations if they arise again. While to an extent this is therapeutic, it must move on from looking back to looking at possible solutions for future scenarios.

In all of the examples so far, the Images or Forum pieces have been created from the experiences of the spect-actors in the group. However, we have also used Forum Theatre with pre-prepared plays. This is particularly useful for engaging with a new issue in a participative way. We co-ordinated a group in south-west England touring schools in the region with a piece on the debt crisis in developing countries. We created an allegorical story of the debt crisis (the International Monetary Fund was a fairy godmother!) and we helped the participants to draw the parallels afterwards. The moment you told the pupils that they would be able to replace a character the second time through and that they should watch for things to improve, they were hooked.

Given the nature of many of these groups already mentioned, the intercultural learning dimension to the drama process is always present. More explicitly, Theatre of the Oppressed lends itself to the canon of intercultural learning methodologies in a very dynamic way. Image work is non-verbal, and as such often stimulates participation in groups

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with language issues. While there is a freedom to 'imaging' a situation without verbal language as an intermediary, it also creates new challenges. Images are obviously subjective, and deeply cultural, so the negotiation of solutions within the group is often accompanied by a negotiation of what the image is trying to say. This dual focus can be highlighted in warming up the group by asking pairs to make statues of the same concept, and then giving the statues titles in their heads.

Drama that is based on experience, and on other's interaction with that experience, raises the question of empathy. If a forum is really motoring, spect-actors have the opportunity not just to try out their ideas, but to feel something of the tensions that have led to the need to explore that problem. If people have suggestions, they are not discussed, they are tried. This means stepping into a pair of shoes, knowing how they usually walk, but trying to take them in a different direction, or onto a new route. In a Pax Christi seminar in Antwerp in 1998, we watched people with experience of some of the world's most vicious conflicts diving into the complexities of sectarianism in Northern Ireland. They lived not only the dramatic situation, but also their own, to see what this archive of pain could suggest for the future. This is also where the limits of empathy need recognition - groups try things that stem from common understanding, and then need to see what would work in the specific context.

In dealing with intercultural learning, the experience of the group prior to the workshop often becomes a resource, but this needs to be consensual and handled with care. The line between what groups are happy to call 'cultural' and that which they prefer to see as personal

responsibility is frequently an issue. It can be a passing and humorous incident; such as the presentation of a rose by a boy to a girl, and the utterly opposed connotations involved. Issues which are proving to be an impediment to the group process can be worked on to tease out ways of living together in the immediate future. For example, at a global youth event some participants were disturbed by the habit of some men in continuing to hold the hand after shaking it, sometimes for the length of the entire conversation (it was meant to signify attentiveness and respect). In using images to deal with this, it was not enough to conclude that masculine discourses vary culturally, but rather to explore how a dialogue could be opened within the group on translating the theory of intercultural learning to lived practice. A simple example, yet as a rehearsal for intercultural reality working with drama in this way addresses what Bourricaud has called the 'open ensemble of interlocutors and partners' which we face in a multitude of training situations.

As with all group work, the role of the facilitator is crucial. In Theatre of the Oppressed, the facilitator is called the Joker. Her role is to manage the interaction between the spect-actors and the scene. It must remain a facilitative role: any hint at manipulation and the trust of the group will vanish. It is their stories, their experiences and their initiative that are involved here, and they are sacred as such. Having said that, the Joker has the responsibility for ensuring that the space remains safe. If people start to feel insecure, they will not participate. Creating that safe space is very important, through the use of games and trust activities. Holding that space is the hardest job. The challenge is to know how far to let the »

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**Picture**  
EGTYF, Music & Drama,  
EYC Strasbourg, April '99  
Image Theatre on Kosovo





natural enthusiasm and creativity flow, before it begins to push people's limits too far.

The Joker also has responsibility for ensuring that the spect-actors' interventions remain within the reality of the actual situation. They are not allowed to come up with 'magical' solutions that quite simply could not happen in real life. The Joker is not the only one who can call magic - it is the responsibility of the spect-actors also. It is then up to the Joker to make a decision.

It is clear that working with these kinds of issues can bring up strong emotions. The openness that the methods encourage can lead to people disclosing more than they would normally do, and it is crucial that these situations are dealt with sensitively. Proper space for a structured debrief is essential. If we throw things into the air, we have the duty to provide the opportunity for a safe landing. The methods themselves are relatively simple, yet their application is complex. This is of course what makes them so effective, but it also means that people should certainly look for experience of their use before trying to use them with a group. There is nothing better for discrediting a method than its use in careless hands...

"To know and transform - that is our goal" (Augusto Boal). In our experience his methods do just that, raising awareness of ourselves and our surrounding reality. But not for its own sake - for the sake of action and both personal and social transformation.

### Bibliography

**Paulo Freire**, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Penguin, London, 1972. A seminal book providing the background philosophy for Boal's work. It looks at education for transformation, taking adult education as the example. But also a much wider thesis on life.

**Augusto Boal** (trans. Adrian Jackson), *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Pluto Press, London, 1995. The first text outlining the theoretical background to the methods and some examples of its use.

**Augusto Boal** (trans. Adrian Jackson), *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, Routledge, London, 1992. The Boal "bible". It contains descriptions of all the main methods, with lots of useful exercises and examples of TO in practice.

**Augusto Boal** (trans. Adrian Jackson), *The Rainbow of Desire*, Routledge, London, 1995. Taking the methods more into drama therapy, as a result of Boal's experience in western Europe. Exercises of working with our own internal oppression (the "Cop in the Head").

**Augusto Boal** (trans. Adrian Jackson), *Legislative Theatre*, Routledge, London, 1998. Taking Forum a stage further to turn people's analysis of the problems and desired solutions into real policy. It draws on Boal's experience as an elected local government Councillor in Rio de Janeiro, where he combined policy-making with Forum Theatre.

Beyond the Mask is hoping to set up a training course on the use of Theatre of the Oppressed and similar interactive methods in youth work. If you would be interested in this, or further details, you can contact us at:

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