



by Marija Gajic

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Theatre as Rehearsal for Reality: Homage to Augusto Boal

Theatre of the Oppressed – almost everyone has heard of it. It is theatre that should liberate a person to become the best he/she can be. It’s revolutionary theatre: Theatre for human rights, for dialogue, for dignity, for empowerment. The Theatre of the Oppressed is a worldwide non-violent aesthetic movement which seeks peace, not passivity.

The great man, Augusto Boal, author of The Theatre of the Oppressed (ToO), has died in May 2009. He left behind him thousands of theatre troupes all around the world practicing ToO, many political and social changes, a large number of friends and colleagues, an impressive amount of workshops held and books published and wonderful enthusiasm, inspiration and a deep belief in human nature, equality and art.

Boal (March 16, 1931 - May 2, 2009) was born and raised in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. He was formally trained in chemical engineering and attended Columbia University in the late 1940’s and early 1950’s. Although his interest and participation in theatre began at an early age, it was just after he finished his doctorate at Columbia that he was asked to return to Brazil to work with the Arena Theatre in São Paulo. Since the beginning Boal believed in the Brechtian tradition and that theatre must contain/be activism and carry relevant social messages in itself. Still, it took time to develop widely-recognized techniques and that development never stopped till the end of his life. His work at the Arena Theatre led to his experimentation with new forms of theatre that had an extraordinary impact on traditional practice.

In the 1960’s Boal started to develop a process whereby audience members could stop a performance and suggest different actions for the actors, who would then carry out the audience’s suggestions. But in a now legendary development, a woman in the audience once was so outraged the actor could not understand her suggestion that she came onto the stage

and showed what she meant. For Boal this was the birth of the spect-actor (not spectator) and his theatre was transformed. He began inviting audience members with suggestions for change onto the stage to demonstrate their ideas. In so doing, he discovered that through this participation the audience members became empowered not only to imagine change, but to actually practice that change, reflect collectively on the suggestion, and thereby become empowered to generate social action. Theatre really became a practical vehicle for grass-roots activism.



Because of Boal’s work, he drew attention as a cultural activist. The military coups in Brazil during the 1960’s looked upon such activity as a threat and in 1971 Boal was arrested, tortured, and exiled to Argentina, then self-exiled to Europe. While in Paris, Boal continued for a dozen years to teach his revolutionary approach to theatre, establishing several Centres for the Theatre of the Oppressed.

ToO as a system started around 1960 and consists of interactive theatre workshops and performances based on the assumption that all human beings desire and are capable of dialogue and that when a dialogue becomes monologue oppression ensues. A process in ToO is therapeutic itself when it allows and encourages a man to choose from several alternatives to the situation in which he finds himself, the situation which causes him unwanted suffering or unhappiness.



ToO is comprised of: Theatrical games, Image Theatre, Forum Theatre, Invisible theatre, Legislative theatre, Rainbow of Desire and, in Boal's later years, Aesthetic of the Oppressed. ToO is used in social work, psychotherapy, education, anti-discrimination and human rights movements, conflict management.

Theatrical games are those that serve to heighten our senses and de-mechanize the body, to get us out of habitual behaviour, as a prelude to moving beyond habitual thinking and interacting. **Image theatre** uses the human body as a tool to represent feelings, ideas and relationships. Through sculpturing others or using our own body to demonstrate a body position, participants create anything from one-person to large-group image sculptures that reflect the sculptor's impression of a situation or oppression. Image theatre provides a tool to challenge stereotypes and promote empathy. The most well known technique, **Forum theatre**, is a theatrical game in which the problem is shown in an unsolved form and to which the audience is invited to suggest and enact solutions. The problem is always the symptom of oppression and generally involves visible oppressors and the protagonist who is oppressed. Many different solutions are enacted and the result is a pooling of knowledge, tactics and experience on defeating the oppressor and at the same time a «rehearsal for reality».



bigger change you can provoke – said Boal. In an essay on the Aesthetics of the Oppressed, Augusto Boal said that art is love and art is knowledge and as such, has power to transform reality.

Theatre of the Oppressed has served worldwide as an important instrument for peace and social justice. For its successful, global application, Boal was nominated for the 2008 Nobel Peace Prize and named 2009 UNESCO World Ambassador for Theatre. Unfortunately, this international recognition for Boal's contributions came late in his life.

The «Joker», as leader of the process and performances, had a huge role in Boal's system. The main impact of Boal was the great balance that he kept between art and activism – he believed in art and the power of aesthetics to transform reality. In that sense, for all practitioners of ToO of crucial importance is to keep that balance – not to lose activism, message and impact for the sake of beauty, but also not to lose great theatre for the sake of a message. The better theatre you make, the

In his interview with «Democracy Now», Boal said: *“There is a poet, a Spanish poet, Antonio Machado, who says “The path does not exist. The path, you make by treading on it. By walking, you make the path.” So we don't know where the path leads, but we know*

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- **A Brief Biography of Augusto Boal, by Doug Paterson**
<http://www.ptoweb.org/boal.html> /
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Further reading: ✕

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- Boal, Augusto (2004): *Aesthetics of the Oppressed – The Prometheus Project*. Available at: <http://www.theatreoftheoppressed.org/uploads//library/Aesthetics%20of%20the%20Oppressed.doc>
- Boal, Augusto (2006): *Aesthetics of the Oppressed*. London/New York: Routledge

Important websites:

- www.theatreoftheoppressed.org
- www.cardboardcitizens.org
- www.janasanskriti.org
- www.headlinestheatre.com
- www.formaat.org

the direction of the path that we want to take. That’s what I want, and not to accomplish, but to follow, until I can’t.”

Thank you Mr. Boal, in the name of all of us who have been honoured to learn, experience and use ToO. Our lives and the lives of our beneficiaries have been changed by it. ■

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