

THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED

What is Theatre of the Oppressed?

A brief overview including a summary of Image theatre and Forum theatre prepared for “Beautiful Trouble” by Levana Saxon

“The theatre itself is not revolutionary: it is a rehearsal for the revolution.” ~ Augusto Boal

Theatre of the Oppressed provides tools for people to explore collective struggles, analyze their history and present circumstances, and then experiment with inventing a new future together through theatre.

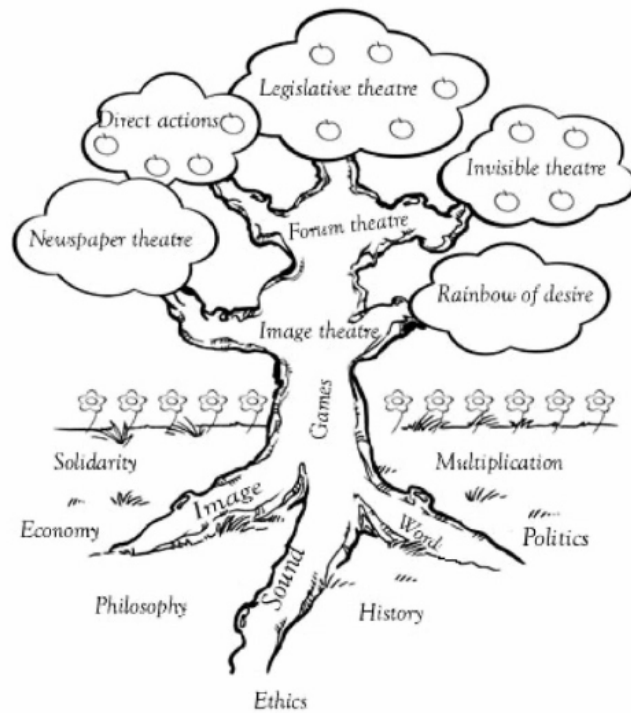
Drawing inspiration from Freire, Brecht, and Stanislavski, Augusto Boal developed the Theatre of the Oppressed in practice throughout his career, starting in the '50s in Brazil and later in Argentina, Peru, Ecuador and France while in exile from the military dictatorship.

Theatre of the Oppressed is an arsenal of theatre techniques and games that seeks to motivate people, restore true dialogue, and create space for participants to rehearse taking action. It begins with the idea that everyone has the capacity to act in the “theatre” of their own lives; everybody is at once an actor and a spectator. We are “spect-actors!” — a term which Boal coined.

Boal points out that when we are simply passive audience members, we transfer our desire to take action onto the characters we identify with, and then find that desire satiated as the conflict resolves itself on stage, in films or in the news. Catharsis substitutes for action.

Boal, following Brecht, calls this bourgeois theatre, which functions to reproduce elite visions of the world and pacify spectators. He says bourgeois theatre is “finished” theatre; the bourgeoisie already know what the world is like and so simply present it onstage. In contrast to bourgeois theatre, “the people” do not yet know what their world will be like Their “authentic” theatre is therefore unfinished, and can provide space to rehearse different possible outcomes. As Boal says: “One knows how these

Tree of the Theatre of the Oppressed



experiments will begin but not how they will end, because the spectator is freed from his chains, finally acts, and becomes a protagonist.”^[1]

Theatre of the Oppressed encompasses many forms, including the following:

- ★ **Image theatre** invites spect-actors to form a tableau of frozen poses to capture a moment in time dramatizing an oppressive situation. The image then becomes a source of critical reflection, facilitated by various kinds of interventions: spect-actors may be asked to depict an ideal image of liberation from that oppression, and then a sequence of transition images required to reach it, or to reshape an image to show different perspectives.
- ★ **Forum theatre** is a short play or scene that dramatizes a situation, with a terribly oppressive ending that spect-actors cannot be satisfied with. After an initial performance, it is shown again, however this time the spectators become spect-actors and can at any point yell “freeze” and step on stage to replace the protagonist(s) and take the situation in different directions. theatre thus becomes rehearsal for real-world action.
- ★ **Legislative theatre** takes forum theatre to the government and asks spect-actors to not only attempt interventions on stage, but to write down the successful interventions into suggestions for legislation and hand them in to the elected officials in the room.
- ★ **Invisible theatre** is a play that masquerades as reality, performed in a public space. The objective is to unsettle passive social relations and spark critical dialogue among the spect-actors, who never learn that they are part of a play. Augusto Boal said of one invisible theatre intervention, “The actor became the spectator of the spectator who had become an actor, so the fiction and reality were overlapping.”

A final point that perhaps can't be stated enough: our movements need to be more strategic and community-led! Theatre of the Oppressed offers arts-based strategy-developing exercises that foster collaboration and community-led engagement. What could be more awesome?

1. ^[1] Augusto Boal, theatre of the Oppressed. London: Pluto Press, 2000. [↩](#)
2. ^[2] Interview, Democracy Now! June 3, 2005 [↩](#)

FORUM THEATRE

Forum theatre is one of the more commonly used tools from Theatre of the Oppressed. It is basically a short play (that mirrors reality) with a bad ending that is performed multiple times. After the first performance, spectators become spect-actors and can at any point yell “freeze”, then replace the protagonist to try to change the bad ending. It is a practice in democracy in which everyone can speak and everyone can act.

One of the first things that spect-actors realize is that, like life, if they don't intervene, nothing will change. Our problems will go on and oppression will continue unless and until people do something. The next thing spect-actors find is that doing “something” is not enough, it must be a strategic something. Not every intervention works out. Forum theatre becomes a laboratory to experiment with different types of actions. The people acting as oppressors on stage will maintain their oppression until they are authentically stopped. It's not easy, just like life.

The protagonist must be a character that everyone (or most) of the people in a room can identify with, so that they are rehearsing their own action. It is not theatre of advice. We do not do this to show what we think other people should do, we do this to discover what we can do.

Forum theatre is facilitated by someone called a **Joker** who engages the entire group – actors and spect-actors in dialogue throughout the process without asserting her or his point of view. After an intervention, the Joker may ask, “Did this work?” “Was this realistic?”, “Can you do this in real life?”.

In South America in the 70's as it was being developed, while Boal was in exile by the Brazilian Military Dictatorship, it was very clear what the oppression was, who was oppressed (workers) and who the oppressors were (bosses, military). Around the world as people have used Forum theatre it has been adapted hundreds of ways to make space for more complicated power relationships and more diverse groups of people. Sometimes it's used with multiple layers of power with multiple characters who are oppressed and potentially are simultaneously oppressing others. People then replace who they identify with.

Currently it is used in at least half of the countries in the world with applications in everything from therapy to movement building. The use that Boal said he most intended is exemplified by Jana Sanskriti, a group that has mobilized hundreds of thousands of people to transform the politics and situations of violence in India using Forum theatre.

Creative interventionists can use it to generate creative interventions! And forum theatre can be a creative intervention in and of itself – at the workplace, in schools, or in the streets.

Common Uses: Forum theatre is used to explore and rehearse possible actions that people can take to transform their world. It's often applied both prior to direct actions and in anti-oppression workshops.

Potential pitfalls: The role of the Joker is a tricky one! It is easy to leave the group with a false idea of what can work, or to get confused in the process, or run out of time before everyone is satisfied with what has been attempted. There are hundreds of small decisions the Joker must make in every moment – like whether or not to allow additional characters, whether or not to add interventions on other interventions. Who to pose questions too when time is running out, how many interventions to allow, when to stop an intervention when it's not going anywhere etc. This author also thinks it's a pitfall to rehearse an action, generate solutions and then not implement them. It's rare that this happens, however.

ROLE OF THE JOKER

The Forum Theatre Joker is the jester, the trickster - filled with questions and no answers. Their job is to:

1. Explain the RULES OF THE GAME so that they are clear for everyone.
2. Encourage courage; prepare, invite, thank and honor the contributions of each spect-actor.
3. Support active discussion; Problematize/Difficultate
4. Ask generative questions ie.
 - a. What did you try? What were your strategies?
 - b. How did that work out for your character?
 - c. Was this realistic?
 - d. What did you notice?
 - e. What can we learn about the problem from this?
 - f. What can we learn about a way to address this problem?
5. Check for Magic
6. Check in with spect-actor, check in with protagonist, check-in with the audience/ spect-actors
7. Watch the time, and ask permission of the group to move on to the next scenes in a timely manner to get through it all.
8. Make some Decisions:
 - a. When or if to freeze an intervention mid scene (if it seems the spect-actor has already attempted their intervention in full, but is stuck in the scene).
 - b. Decide when or if to move into "Speed Jokering".
 - c. Decide when or if to allow multiple interventions to layer upon each other. (Instead of starting each scene over again from what was originally written, starting from where an intervention left off)

NOT THE ROLE OF THE JOKER

Just as important as maintaining the role. The Joker can jeopardize the democratic and dialogic process if they:

1. Interpret for the spect-actors what they saw, what they noticed, what worked or didn't work
2. Make meaning of what is happening and declare that meaning
3. Make conclusions "Well now, we've solved it"
4. Ask leading questions "How were you so successful?"
5. Provide new suggestions for how spect-actors should intervene
6. Ask questions that can put the spect-actor at risk of feeling regret for trying an intervention (and thereby making others afraid to try) - "Audience - did you like what they tried? Was it successful or not?"

IMAGE THEATRE

Image theatre, a social change tool developed by Augusto Boal, is one of the more widely used forms of theatre of the Oppressed, in which activists, students or any group are invited to form statues that represent a moment in time of an oppressive situation. The image can then serve as a springboard for critical group reflection in order to both understand the situation better and to try out possible "solutions." Through the process of creating and working with the image, participants can decode the situation, dissecting each character's personality, motivation and range of possible actions. Insofar as the participants identify with the characters, they can explore possible actions that they themselves can take in their lives.

Image theatre is similar to forum theatre in every way, except that everyone is holding still. This allows for both faster development and use of the process: whereas forum theatre often involves a small team that develops and rehearses a skit for months, image theatre can be created on the spot, collaboratively. In this way, image theatre is an incredibly accessible tool to use in trainings, strategy development and direct actions.

For example, at a 2005 rally to support a disruption of a Chevron shareholder meeting in San Rafael, California, all demonstrators present were invited to form an image to depict the entire oil industry, including the characters who benefit from it, are oppressed by it, or are bystanders of it. Portrayed in the image were drivers, oil tycoons, media, and impacted communities (people from Nigeria and Ecuador were present to represent themselves). Even water and the Earth were included as characters. Once people were satisfied that the image represented reality, they shared their character's thoughts and motivations. The few people left in the rally who were not part of the image were then asked to take ten seconds each to intervene in the image in an attempt to transform the oil industry by reshaping the characters whom they believed were the critical agents of change. Everyone could

see plainly what actions could or could not get us to the “ideal image.” Within twenty-five minutes, the group had arrived at goals, possible tactics and next steps.

While image theatre starts with a frozen image, it quickly moves toward interventions by participants, acting in character, to collaboratively and spontaneously name their oppression and its source, and then explore courses of action. The final stage is to reflect on what happened with participants and, if appropriate, write up the actions that seem most viable.

Potential Pitfalls: When creating an image that involves representing people who are not present, stereotypes of those people commonly surface. This can be problematic when participants begin manipulating the image and the actor tries to imagine what is going on in that person’s head. With oppressor characters, this makes for an unrealistic laboratory in which to experiment with actions. With oppressed characters, it can perpetuate the dehumanizing stereotypes that fuel their oppression in the first place. This pitfall can be avoided by directing the action toward the people in the room, which image theatre is specifically designed to do.