

Review:

Theatre of the Oppressed and its Times: A talk by Julian Boal

3rd May 2024, Moray House, University of Edinburgh

I'm always impressed by someone who can stand up and speak coherently without notes. It's an underrated art form, and one that Julian Boal performs with conviction and authenticity, all the while in a second language. He is promoting his new book, *Theatre of the Oppressed and its Times* (2023), at an event jointly hosted by Active Enquiry Theatre Company and the University of Edinburgh's Moray House. I arrive at Boal's talk intrigued by what it's like to be the son of a revolutionary theatre practitioner, probably the most famous theatre maker ever. Augusto Boal spent his time as an armed activist during Brazil's military occupation, was kidnapped on his way home from directing a production of *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, tortured and imprisoned, then became an exile in Argentina and Chile. After Brazil returned to democracy, Boal devised a theatrical act to run for office as councillor in Rio de Janeiro, and was successful, subsequently developing the legislative theatre approach to encourage popular dialogue in policy decision-making. Along the way, he wrote *Theatre of The Oppressed*, his text on theatre practice which critiques oppressive theatre forms and supports critical consciousness-raising using a range of practices including the concept of 'spect-actor' - the blurring of actor/audience roles - and via image, forum and newspaper theatre. The text was strongly influenced by *Pedagogy of The Oppressed* (1970), whose author, Paulo Freire, was a close friend of Boal's, and which remains a seminal text in Community Education. The Boal connection to community education is also highlighted in the fact that Active Enquiry host our Community Education students on professional placements. As a theatre practitioner and

academic, Julian Boal must feel that his father is a tough act to follow. How has he responded to the life and work of the more famous Boal?

The answer is, it's necessarily complicated. This is just about the best answer that Julian Boal could give, because it's located firmly in his own critique. While *Theatre of the Oppressed* – or *TO*, as he refers to it- has clearly been central to the development of his practice, Julian Boal points to the paradox at the heart of the text's global dissemination. The success of the work, he suggests, lies in part due to its critique of dominant hegemonies but also in part because it 'reproduces significant traits of dominant subjectivity' (2023: 289). For Boal, context is everything, and what was once a radical political approach can no longer be claimed to be so. Is it justifiable, he asks, for theatre to use tactics such as shock or violence, at a time when violence is ubiquitous? Brechtian techniques that drew attention to the means of production, jolting the audience into 'seeing' what was previously naturalised or invisible, have become so commodified in mainstream culture that we're well-versed in the breaking of the 'fourth wall' as a conceit. Think of Truman Burbank surviving the storm and exiting his 'life' through the door on the set in *The Truman Show* (1998), or characters talking direct to camera in *The Big Short* (2015). Mainstream cinema audiences don't only expect story, but special effects, such as in *Avatar* (2009), make up technique in *Planet of The Apes* (1968, 2001) and tricky direct address by countless Disney characters. Brecht's concept of *verfremdungseffekt*, or distancing the audience, has become fetishised in mainstream culture.

Augusto Boal developed the theatre techniques discussed in *TO* during the 1950s, a time of huge upheaval in South America, culminating in the Cuban Revolution in 1959. To reproduce

these techniques in the current, non-revolutionary context will produce the opposite effect, says Boal. Like Truman, we'll be trapped in the false landscape of the dominant hegemony, cut adrift from critique.

What's needed from subversive art is renewal. A reinvention that meets with the political moment, using tools appropriate to the challenge. A response that confronts our failings on ecological catastrophe, that responds to the rise of Fascism. For Boal, theatre offers a vital space to move from the individual to the collective, for activists to educate and organise, to recognise the autonomy of *all* thinkers and contributors in the processes of dialogue and learning. His school, Escola de Teatro Popular, works with activist-actors to intervene in societal injustices. His call to action is this: we are doomed to optimism, but must always remain critical, of ourselves most of all. We always run the risk of becoming the conservative opposite of what we intended to be, just like *TO*. Julian Boal may have inherited a strong political commitment to challenge structural oppression, but he navigates his position with vigilance and humanity, taking nothing for granted.

If you'd like to watch Boal's talk, the video is currently being edited and will be uploaded to Active Enquiry's website: <https://www.activeinquiry.co.uk>. Julian Boal's book is available from bookshops (at great expense) or as he suggests, request it from a public/university library or download it for free once it has been shared online.

[Boal, J. \(2023\). Theatre of the Oppressed and its Times \(1st ed.\). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003325048.](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003325048)

Thanks to Stuart Moir (University of Edinburgh) and Gavin Crichton (Active Enquiry) for hosting and organising this inspiring event.

Sarah Ward