

The Great Game of Power¹: Critical Pedagogy in Conflicted Times

Aileen Ackland, University of Aberdeen

Gavin Crichton, Artistic Director, Active Inquiry

Emily Steedman, Active Inquiry & Alma Theatre Company

'Theatre is a weapon; for that reason it must be fought for' Augusto Boal.

Introduction

This paper is informed by a *systematisation* of *Active Inquiry's Spect-Act project*, which engaged three community organisations in Edinburgh with Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*. A systematic process of reflection and action illuminated a variety of tensions in the work, funded by Creative Scotland and apparently in tune with Government rhetoric relating to socially engaged art, community empowerment and service user involvement. We explore the tensions and consider the challenges of this form of critical pedagogy in a political context very different from the one which stimulated the practice of Freire and Boal.

Active Inquiry is an Edinburgh theatre company, committed to *Theatre of the Oppressed* (TO). This is an umbrella term for a theatrical methodology developed by Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal from the 1970s over a period of 40 years. The '[tree](#)' of the *Theatre of the Oppressed* sprouted several branches, its most famous being Forum Theatre in which an audience can stop a play, take the stage and change the direction of the story. *Theatre of the Oppressed* has its roots in the radical pedagogy of Paulo

¹ The Great Game of Power (Boal, 2002, p.163) an activity that explores representations of power through the construction of a visual image made of everyday objects. Directions: Place a set of four chairs (all the same) in a row, along with a water bottle in front of a seated group. Ask for a volunteer to silently arrange the 4 chairs and a water bottle in such a way that, in their opinion, one chair has more power than all the other chairs. Explain that any of the objects can be moved in any direction or placed on top of each other, but none of the objects can be removed altogether from the space. Wait for a volunteer to arrange the chairs. Ask the group to interpret or "read" the image made by the chairs and water bottle.

Freire and sees the theatre as a space for critical dialogue and rehearsal for action. *Spect-Act*² was a two year project (2015-2017) funded by Creative Scotland. Working with three community organisations - Shakti Women's Aid, The Bethany Christian Trust and The Alma Project - *Active Inquiry* created three theatre companies making and performing work about addiction, domestic violence and mental health.

In order to learn from the work of the project, a *systematisation* was undertaken in the second year. Systematisation - a process also grown from Latin American critical pedagogies - integrates critical reflection and action (praxis) to learn *from practice for practice* transformation (Luger & Massing, 2013). In order to co-construct insights from a project, it engages with all involved, respecting their different perspectives and different knowledges (Bronkema and Flora, 2015, p. 235). In this paper, we draw on the systematisation data to explore the tensions experienced in the project.

Theatre of the Oppressed in changing contexts

Influenced by Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Boal developed theatre as a 'rehearsal for revolution' in the context of a repressive military regime in Brazil. Since the 1970s, Boal's work has spread rhizomatically from Latin America (Ferreira and Devine, 2012), adopted across the world, in many contexts and for various purposes. There are examples of TO in developing countries overtly addressing political issues (Schrowange, 2015) and in the UK challenging the social issues of homelessness and marginalisation (e.g. [Cardboard Citizens](#); [Mind the Gap](#); [Lawnmowers](#)). In some places, TO has emerged in the field of community development, in others, it is embedded in theatrical cultures.

In more general use, TO, and Forum Theatre in particular, has become a slippery concept with many people using it to describe any interactive theatre or roleplay. With this comes accusations of the domestication of the form - abandonment of its purpose as 'rehearsal for revolution' (Schutzman, 1990, p.78). Indeed, in the 40 years in which Boal himself developed the form, it could be said there was a trend from the political

² The project was named after the word Boal used for participants in Forum Theatre - they are not actors or spectators but spectactors.

to the personal; *Rainbow of Desire*, influenced by psychotherapy, appeared more concerned with individual oppressions, described by Boal as ‘cops in the head’ (Boal, 1994).

Boal saw TO as continually changing, always adapting to suit the needs of participants to ‘answer questions from reality’ (Boal, 2006). Defending the evolution of his theatre, Boal highlighted the differences between the ‘realities’ of Brazil in the 1970s and the western contexts he later worked in (Boal, 1995). His later techniques explored how neoliberalism and consumer culture invade our brains with dominant aesthetics, placing us as consumers rather than as producers, which necessarily dulls our ability to make action: ‘the cops are in our heads, but their headquarters and barracks must be on the outside’ (Boal, 1995, p.8). The current neoliberal context may be said to have further extended the techniques of disciplinary governance Boal sought to challenge through *Rainbow of Desire*. Neoliberalism is characterised by hybrid discourses in which terms resonant with critical pedagogies, such as empowerment, are used routinely within policy with economic aims (Shaw, 2017; Tabner, 2018). Within this environment, TO is gaining popularity in Scotland as a means of presenting the perspectives of service users in relation to the social care and inclusion agendas. However, such uses have been criticised as creating merely ‘fishbowls of the oppressed’ in which power relations are not challenged (Cross & Brookes, 2015). Snyder-Young (2011) goes further, to question whether the work participants initiate in Theatre of the Oppressed is always orientated toward social justice - a pertinent question when populist politics encourages factional interests.

Where Theatre of the Oppressed identifies as participatory art, it finds itself now in a favourable environment with funding increasingly directed towards ‘socially engaged art’. Whilst this term appears to encompass the social change agenda of TO, it can also refer to a more instrumental view of art, in which the use art is put to is defined by other than the participants within a ‘doublespeak’ (Belfiore, 2009) which requires arts organisations to engage with communities and show evidence of ‘impact’. Such discourse ‘scripts artists as social workers to fill the vacuum left by funding cuts’ (McLean, 2014, p.2159). Whether perceived as community work or as theatre, TO can

easily speak the language of current policy with its ‘distractingly positive veneer’ which rebrands austerity as empowerment (Tabner, 2018). The risks of co-option to policy’s agendas and the ‘performance of fantasy’ (Shaw, 2017, p 2) to satisfy the requirements for evidence are, however, great. Balfour (2009) eschews big claims for theatre’s social efficacy and argues for a ‘theatre of little changes’; ‘little changes’ may, however, not satisfy government funders in straitened times.

These concerns - about the purity of the form, the uses to which it is put, and the outcomes achieved - are relevant to the *Spect-Act* project, funded by a government agency and working with a range of voluntary sector partners with distinct interest groups.

Systematisation method

Systematisation was chosen as a congruent critical process of *learning* from the project rather than merely *evaluating* it. The process was led by Aileen, external to the *Active Inquiry* team, but included her ongoing participation in the work of one of the community groups. Reflective sessions, with both the team and with participants in the three groups, used image work and drama as well as discussion. Interviews and discussions were transcribed, illustrated with the images and videos, and shared amongst the company for iterative reflection. Data was also gathered at the final event of the project, which brought all three companies and their host organisations together to share their performances with a public audience. The process culminated in a final *Active Inquiry* workshop to analyse the timeline of the project and derive key insights to take forward.

Equal distance: different expectations in tension

A game in the arsenal of the TO called *Equal Distance*³ provides a good analogy for the different partners in a project like *Spect-Act*. In *Spect-Act* the main participants

³ Participants choose two people in the room without letting them know who they are. Moving in the space, each participant has to stay an equal distance from the two people they have chosen - difficult because everyone else has chosen two people as well! The aim of the game is to achieve equilibrium. The group, in silence, has to find ways of negotiating tensions and to finally all stand still. Like all Boal games, this game is designed to explore relationships, hidden power structures, negotiations etc.

were *Active Inquiry*, the organisations (Bethany, Alma and Shakti) and the group members. For the game to work, all need to be aware of each other and find ways to negotiate the tensions and complexities of the relationships. They are not seeking to eradicate these tensions - without tension the game would not work. It is the tensions and the careful management of these that make the game a success.

Spect-Act had to 'play' these tensions. It was, *simultaneously*, theatre, politics, therapy, community work, fun, awareness raising, community development, critical education - various things to various participants. The expectations of the organisations about having a theatre company correlated in many ways with what the participants of these groups wanted from them. Bethany, for example saw the theatre group as contributing to their aims of developing long-term community development and of people being included in finding solutions to problems that affect them. The Bethany group was the most 'political' of the three groups with little trust in authority figures and anger at how the system seemed against them. For them, their theatre was to share with people like them to see how they could 'take on' the system together.

Shakti saw their theatre company as something empowering for the women, but also a chance to have their message presented to those in power in a different way. The group was invited to perform at an exhibition to mark 30 years of Shakti and at events in the Scottish Parliament, including to the First Minister. This aim to 'get these stories heard' was shared by the participants, whose desire to stand up and tell their truth was a strong motivation.

The Alma Project has a much more therapeutic approach to the use of arts with those with mental health difficulties. Participants spoke of drama being a 'good place to let your feelings out'. They shied away from more political reasons for doing the work.

The project had to negotiate around these reasons for participating. We were clear that we were not doing art therapy, but accepted that the work was therapeutic for some; we were not just there to relay a message but accepted that for some this was important;

we did not want to create an 'us and them' mentality but accepted that for some people, their past experiences meant that it was difficult for them to escape from this.

As well as negotiating the reasons that we have for making theatre, it was also important to think about the form and how it relates to the content we wanted to explore. Whilst we, as a Theatre Company, were approaching the work as theatre, many of the participants considered it not 'real theatre'; the aspiration to move on to 'real theatre', assumed to require formal spaces, costumes and props, was frequently expressed. For Boal (following Brecht) traditional realism in theatre encourages empathy with the characters onstage and dulls the critical ability of an audience to step back and ask questions about *why* the characters were in these situations. Therefore, the relationship between form and content in theatre is a political one. Of the three pieces of theatre constructed, only one - that of the Bethany group - conformed to the classic style of Forum Theatre; the Shakti play – Dancing to Freedom – incorporated dance and music to represent the possibilities of more equal gender relations, whereas the Alma play demonstrated the absurdities of mental health services. The different forms emerged from the different groups, related to their distinct motivations. But how faithful is this to Boal's theatrical vision? Forum Theatre deliberately creates the structure for the consideration of action following reflection; the more closed forms of the other two plays perhaps stopped short of provocation at presentation.

To return to the game analogy - what is lost in finding a balance to these tensions? If TO is aimed at shifting power relations, finding weak points and cracks in the armour, does spending so much time and effort negotiating a balance impair the ability to provoke instability?

Columbian hypnosis: leading and following?

Boal envisaged theatre as an empowerment process in which communities themselves analyse the oppression they are subject to and work out ways to challenge it. The theatre process is facilitated by the practitioner, but led by the group and their concerns. With the Alma group in particular, the tension between leading and following, explored so

powerfully in Boal's game *Columbian Hypnosis*⁴ (Boal, 2002, p.51), was problematic for Emily, the group facilitator...

Were we meeting the needs and desires of the participants, as well as fulfilling the aims of Active Inquiry and of the proposed outcomes of the Spect-Act Project? For the participants who came to the weekly workshops these aims were not on their agenda. One participant valued role play as an escape from being himself. Another person had worked using theatre as a therapeutic tool, where the focus of the work is more inwardly reflecting and personal. Another initially struggled with understanding metaphorical concepts. All committed to the group and contributed strong, powerful personal stories in the workshops. But their reasons for participating were social, personal not political. As facilitator, I consciously pushed the lens of oppression and discrimination into the workshops. It was an aim of mine to support them to discover more awareness of how they might fight the discrimination they faced.

When Aileen conducted a workshop to explore how the Alma participants were experiencing the project, it emerged that they were not seeing the group or the work as a wider conversation and that they felt there was too much focus on 'mental health' and difficulties in their lives, which they sought respite from. I had been conscious of maintaining a political and social focus, but was not aware of the resistance to it.

How to deal with the dilemma of working with a group who evidently experience discrimination, but have no strong impetus to look at the cause, or to challenge it? To follow their lead or to lead towards the aims of the project and the outcomes promised to the funders? Initially I felt thrown by this, particularly as we were already working with a piece which specifically delved into the difficulties faced by someone with mental health issues. But whose play was this? I had used popular songs, folklore and fairy tales, as starting points that everyone could easily relate to, to reflect on our collective

⁴ One actor holds her hand palm forward, between 20 and 40 centimetres away from the face of another, who is then as if hypnotised and must keep his face constantly the same distance from the hand of the hypnotiser. The roles are then reversed. In a third stage, both partners hold up their hands and both must follow. (Boal, 2002, p. 51)

current lives. It was informed by the stories from the group, scripted in improvisations in the group. When participants looked to me to provide the finished script, however, the question of authorship was troubling.

I spoke with the group, acknowledged their feedback to Aileen but also asked if they were willing to keep working with the piece we had created. They all agreed and had great ideas for possible directions we could explore. We kept the core of the piece, but we took it apart and threw the ridiculous and funny at it. What emerged was a much richer play, as well as something that was more enjoyable for the cast to perform. The process still had a strong focus towards the aims of Active Inquiry and the Spect-Act Project, but the expressed desires of the participants had become much more present, and explicitly addressed. I hope that we moved from 'political drama by stealth' (transcript of reflective discussion A, G & E, 17/06/17) to a more transparent process of listening and responding. I saw change in the participants, who have continued to enjoy exploring social politics. But was the discomfort they felt previously worth it? I now have a greater awareness of the need to continually ask and respond to how participants are feeling, and to make this an integral part of the making process. Like the final stage of Columbian Hypnosis, leading and following can be in more dynamic relationship.

Some larger issues remain though. The process of moving from the representation of experience, through critical analysis to acting for change, may be a long slow one for participants who do not come with any such motivation. Funding rarely recognises the need for a long period of engagement lacking visible outcomes. Without the analysis of the wider context, experiences of oppression can induce anger, but not necessarily change. For example, in one session, some of the group recreated their experience of a mental health services 'consultation' event. Though they revealed their feelings of disempowerment in powerful embodied images (such as a hand held over the mouth), this was not something they felt they could change, despite the precarious position of the mental health organisation (which is so important to their lives) in the new funding structure. Where a group sees itself primarily as a 'drama group', with a therapeutic or personal transformation agenda, there may be no expectation of the critical pedagogy

which could support the move from representation to analysis to challenge. Without the wider analysis, it may also be difficult to move beyond the concerns of a single interest group, to connect the different experiences of inequality of different groups to the wider political structures. Without such analyses, there is the risk that community theatre becomes a kind of ‘aesthetic evangelism’, that ‘...envisions personal transformation...as the key to amelioration of social problems such as poverty...’ (Kester,1995 in McLean, 2015, p. 2160). Segregated by the focus on their own experiences, groups can perceive others as part of the problem rather than allies in collective action.

The performance of fantasy and the fantasy of performance?

Each *Spec-Act* company created a play. These plays were performed on various occasions at community festivals as well as one-off events, for example at the Scottish Parliament. Early on in their creation, the plays were enthusiastically adopted and programmed by the partner organisations, who saw them as ‘good image work – we’re doing something creative’ (transcript of interview, 09/03/17) and a means of engaging others, particularly those in power, with their cause. Performances by marginalised groups lend the credibility of ‘lived experience’ to policy discussions; the extent to which they shift policy direction is questionable. A powerful performance at the Parliament by the Shakti women was squeezed into a brief lunchtime slot. Though the First Minister attended, the other attendees were mainly junior researchers. Alone after the performance, the women played in this official space, pretending to be delegates at the board table with their microphones - an ironic fantasy of power. Nevertheless, public performances in prestigious contexts provide tangible evidence of a project. In a world where ‘evidence’ matters, such materiality has power.

Facilitators and participants differently experienced tensions in the deadlines imposed by these public performances. For facilitators, having a polished piece ready to perform could limit time for experimentation. The shift into rehearsals meant having to decide what to select to rehearse and a move towards a director/actor relationship. In at least one group, the demand from participants for a ‘script’ so they could ‘learn their lines’ exposed questions of authorship and ownership. Attempts to investigate character

motivations and what they represent often had to be cut short because of the pressure of performance dates. However, there was a recognition that a good, well-rehearsed piece of theatre would often lead to better dialogue with an audience, which in turn would lead to further development of the plays.

For participants, performances made additional demands on their time and very limited resources. Working around the availability of participants, and the complicated challenges of their circumstances, meant that at times the plays were performed with stand-in actors, drawn from the *Active Inquiry* team rather than the participant group. One issue that emerged in final reflections was the extent to which the project relied on gift time and the emotional labour of facilitators. For performances, the facilitators often gave additional hours as well as taking on some of the emotional support which enabled individuals to participate. All of this call into question the relationship between Theatre of the Oppressed as pedagogy or performance.

When group members were involved they appeared to enjoy performing and the plays were always well-received. However, the extent to which the theatre provided a 'rehearsal for action' through the forum process requires close examination.

In later years Boal changed his description of Forum Theatre as a 'rehearsal for the revolution' to a 'rehearsal for reality' (Boal, 2006). This subtle shift could be interpreted as a recognition that the immediacy of Forum Theatre lends itself better to exploring tactics rather than strategies to defeat oppression. *Spect-Act* performances had many interventions from audience members trying out tactics in the scenes we created. The discussions after these helped illuminate the wider societal structures that underpin the problems in the scene. What is missing from this, though, are wider strategic ideas that people can engage with beyond immediate tactics. In one performance from the Shakti Company the audience were asked what could be done to make the world a safer place for women and girls. Many responded with soundbite answers such as 'end capitalism'. Perhaps the problems seem so huge that it is difficult to think about how to meaningfully engage with them. Some of the Forum Theatre sessions we ran throughout the project ended with the audience wanting to make images and scenes onstage about

how society *could be*. This was fun and perhaps empowering but did not answer the question of *how* we get there. The question remains: how do we build wider strategic thinking into Forum Theatre to find useful actions that move us beyond an understanding of the problem and immediate tactics to help mitigate it?

There is a general trend in theatre at the moment to be participative, to involve the audience in some way other than just as passive spectators. In this context, Forum Theatre can feel like an 'old' form - no longer as disorderly and challenging. If Boal were living and working in Scotland in 2018 what 'questions from reality' would he seek to answer and what new theatrical forms and ways of working would emerge to answer these questions? Where 'dialogue' is a co-opted process, perhaps disruption has to take new forms. Alongside *Spect-Act*, *Active Inquiry* uses a laboratory approach ([TOTAL](#)) to continually exploring TO and its forms in relation to contemporary issues.

Conclusions

Working at the nexus of theatre, community work and personal development, there are both opportunities and threats for TO. There is the freedom to work intensively with the concerns of a small group, through the theatre bringing them to a wider social and political dialogue. For TO, performance is not a monologue but extends the inquiry into the problems presented, in dialogue with an audience. Despite the pressures of performance, in *Spect-Act* the groups tried to reflect on audience's reactions and interventions and take these to another cycle of experimentation and creation. The three companies have all expressed an interest to be part of 'changing things' which raises questions about how we engage with the State. So far, we have performed to people in powerful roles within the State but in moving into partnership with State agencies, how can we continue to keep a radical edge?

The current arts funding regime favours work which extends creative opportunities to non-traditional participants, and encourages their voices to be heard. Evidence is required of *participation*; wider social outcomes are assumed to flow from the personal transformation wrought by inclusion in creative activities. Indicative of neoliberal 'responsibilisation', this creates a dilemmatic space in which the emotional work of

personal development - of both practitioners and participants - becomes accountable (Preston, 2013). Santos (2016) speaks about the ideal protagonist in Forum Theatre having both the necessity and desire to change the situation they are in. Too often they have one without the other. This is probably true for participants in TO workshops and groups too. Some (like those in the Alma project here) have the necessity to change things, but not the desire, and some have a desire without being directly affected by the oppression. Maybe this is part of the responsibility of the facilitator – to enable the group to feel like they have the necessity and desire to change things, or at least to recognise where one is more prominent than the other.

The facilitators of each *Spect-Act* group were highly valued by the organisations and the participants – for their understandings of the client group and their relational efforts. However, the complexity of their role as critical educators is not easily articulated and funded within the contemporary preference for outcome-led arts or community projects. For the *Active Inquiry* team, making their own theatre work together was an important way to support one another to manage the tensions and the risk of failure (not least of living up to their own values) and sustain their commitment to critical theatre. This was not easy given the precarity of working lives in the voluntary sector.

Critical pedagogy aims to bring the political to the personal for transformation at the structural level. Whilst *Spect-Act* contained moments of realisation for individual participants, the wider changes looked for were more elusive. At the final reflective session, the team expressed the feeling that they were just then in a position to begin the real work; just as the project funding came to an end. And end it did; a follow-on proposal did not receive funding with the view that it was too political. In the final year of the project, and recognising the danger of segregated interests, attempts were made to bring the three companies together to explore the interrelations of their issues. This emerged as an important dimension of the project as pedagogy, with the intent of building solidarity from the dialogue of individual interest groups. Fortunately, short term local funding supported a successful follow-on project - [Connected Lives](#). This work, of connecting the consequences of power relations for one group to those of others, is essential to critical pedagogy in conflicted times which simultaneously

recognise intersectionality and encourage identity politics. Funding which is directed to specific groups in specific circumstances of deprivation can militate against this work. Participants' individual progress is not insignificant, but what is the point of work with participants if it maintains the status quo and does not support the necessary challenge to change the conditions of their disadvantage?

In a context in which 'politics and public life as pretence seems to be good enough' (Hassan quoted in Shaw, 2018), there is the temptation to present a fantasy of performance, demonstrating outcomes with visual evidence of participation. The continuation of critical work often depends on providing material evidence of short-term success, giving lie to the risks, uncertainties and complexities of ongoing work with communities. It is hard for any of us to talk openly about the amplification of 'little changes' (Balfour, 2009) that we collude in, to secure the funding to continue work that is often 'messy, incomplete, complex and tentative'. Perhaps the recognition, negotiation and critical interrogation of the tensions in this work provides a stable base that can go on to provoke instability?

References

- Balfour, M. (2009) The politics of intention: looking for a theatre of little changes. *Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 14:3 pp.347-359.
- Belfiore, E. (2009) On bullshit in cultural policy practice and research: notes from the British case. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 15:3, pp.343-359.
- Boal, A. (2002) *Games for actors and non-actors*, 2nd Edition. Routledge, London.
- Boal, A. (1994) *Rainbow of desire*. Routledge, London.
- Bronkema, F. D. and Flora, C.B. (2015) Democratizing democracy as community development: insights from popular education in Latin America. *Community Development*, 46:3, pp.227-243.
- Luger, A & Massing, L. (2003) *Learning from our Experience: A guide to participative systematisation* (Adapted English Version). Horizon 3000.
- Ferreira, M.L. and Devine, D. (2012) 'Theatre of the Oppressed as a Rhizome'. *Latin American Perspectives*, Issue 183, Vol. 39 No. 2, March 2012 pp.11-26.
- McLean, H. (2014) Cracks in the Creative City: The Contradictions of Community Arts Practice. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Volume 38.6 November 2014, pp.2156 -2173.
- Preston, S. (2013) Managed hearts? Emotional labour and the applied theatre facilitator in urban settings. *Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* Vol 18, No 3, pp.230-245.
- Schrowange, C. (2015) *Art and Conscientization: Forum theatre in Uganda, Rwanda, DR Congo and South Sudan*. ibidem Press, Stuttgart.
- Shaw, M. (2017) Community Engagement: What's the problem? *Concept*, Vol 8 Winter 2017.
- Snyder-Young, D. (2011) Rehearsals for revolution? Theatre of the Oppressed, dominant discourses, and democratic tensions. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 16:1, pp.29-45.

Tabner, K. (2018) Scottish Community Empowerment: Reconfigured localism or an opportunity for change? *Concept* Vol 9 No.1 Spring 2018.