

## Obituary

### Augusto Boal 1931-2009

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2009 we sadly lost a theatre director, theorist, philosopher, activist, storyteller, Joker, playwright, husband, father, mentor, professor, workshop leader, politician, author and eternal optimist. That all of these words describe one man begins to highlight the impact and influence that Augusto Boal has had and still has throughout the world.

Never in any doubt that engaging in theatre was both a human need and a political process, Boal never wavered in his belief that theatre could help form a more just society. "Perhaps the theatre is not revolutionary in itself", he said "but have no doubts, it is a rehearsal of revolution!"

Born in 1931 and raised in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Boal went to study Chemical Engineering in the US in the late 1940s. He also developed an interest in theatre and in 1955 he wrote and directed his first play *The House across the Street* in New York. Returning to Brazil shortly after this, Boal became the Director of the Arena Theatre in Sao Paulo from 1956-71.

During the 1960s Boal began to stage plays for peasants in the Brazilian countryside. These plays were *agit-prop* plays, intended to make the audience think and act in a certain way. In a now famous story, one play had such an effect on an audience that they announced they were ready to "spill our blood to free our land" as the play had instructed them to do! An embarrassed Boal had to admit that their guns were only props and that the blood to be spilt was that of the peasants

and not the actors. He began to realise that "you cannot teach if you don't learn from those you are teaching".

Moving away from agit-prop, Boal began to experiment with a process he called *simultaneous dramaturgy* where an audience could stop a play at any point and instruct the actors to try a different tactic or approach in order to find ways to beat oppression. This would then be improvised by the actors. On one occasion a woman was so incensed that an actor could not carry out her suggestion properly that she stormed onto the stage and did it herself! This was the beginning of *Forum Theatre* and, heavily influenced by Paulo Freire, Boal developed ways in which an audience could enter into dialogue and a democratic learning process. This was the birth of the *spect-actor* and the belief that an audience should be active co-authors of a piece of drama rather than passive observers. Following this Boal began to develop *Image Theatre*, in which participants use their bodies as a language, and *Invisible Theatre*, in which theatre is enacted in public spaces without the audience knowing it is theatre.

In 1971 Boal was arrested and tortured by the military Junta in Brazil and exiled to Argentina and in 1974 he published his first book *Theatre of the Oppressed* in which he argued that throughout the centuries, theatre has been used as a weapon of the ruling class. He also makes a passionate plea for the democratisation of theatre; "I, Augusto Boal" he writes "want the Spectator to take on the role of Actor and invade the Character and the stage. I want him (sic) to occupy his own Space and offer solutions."

Self-exiled to Europe in 1976, Boal settled in Paris in 1978 and became professor at

the Sorbonne University where he continued to develop his theories and held the first International Festival of the Theatre of the Oppressed in 1981. During this period he developed a body of work known as *The Rainbow of Desire* which was a response to the nature of oppression he found in Europe. As well as external oppressions he realised that there were many “cops in the head” which stopped people from taking action. While this work is often thought of as more therapeutic than political, it is important to note that Boal wished to expose the external realities that were the root of these oppressions: “I discovered the cops in our heads – knowing that the headquarters are outside.” Boal developed these techniques with his psychoanalyst wife, Cecilia, with whom he has two sons, Fabian and Julian.

In 1986 Boal returned to Rio de Janeiro where he established a Centre for the Theatre of the Oppressed (CTO Rio). In 1992 he was elected as a Vereador (councillor) of Rio and began to embark on a project using Forum theatre as a democratic way of passing laws. He called this type of theatre Legislative Theatre and many laws were passed using this approach.

Boal travelled all over the world teaching his unique form of theatre including being invited by the RSC in 1997 to work with them on their production of *Hamlet*. In the same year he was awarded the Career Achievement Award by the Association for Theatre in Higher Education. Major recognition for his work came through his nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2008.

He continued to teach abroad right up until his death as well as develop work with CTO Rio, most notably working with

the Landless People’s Movement, always believing in the power of Human Beings and Theatre to enable change to happen. His legacy is a remarkable one: the Theatre of the Oppressed is now practiced in over 60 countries in the world, there is an annual conference and Festival as well as countless regional festivals, and many techniques from the Theatre of the Oppressed have now entered mainstream theatre and education work. Paradoxically this acceptance by the mainstream has meant that practitioners have needed to make sure they are continually adapting and reinventing the work in order for it to keep its radical edge.

Just over a month before he died Boal was asked to deliver the UNESCO World Theatre Day International Message. In this he reaffirmed his belief that we all need to act together in order to make a better world “We are all *actors*” he said “being a *citizen* is not living in society, it is changing it.”

#### A Boal Bibliography

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