

Book Reviews

Julian Boal. *Theatre of the Oppressed and Its Times*. Routledge, 2023.  
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In *Theatre of the Oppressed and Its Times*, Julian Boal thoughtfully delves into both the theoretical framework and practical application of his father's, Augusto Boal's, iconic method: Theatre of the Oppressed (TO). Rather than simply review TO methods, the book interrogates the effectiveness and implications of Boal's philosophy in today's world while offering a moving generational tribute to the continued revolutionary power of theatre. Julian Boal makes clear in his writing, especially in first section of the book, that TO developed from a distinctly radical, left-leaning tradition of political theatre. The historical backdrop to this tradition was marked by the struggle for independence in countries of the Global South, particularly in the political upheavals of 1970s Brazil. TO, as Julian Boal argues, was not designed to entertain but to rouse social change and revolution.

A key theme in Augusto Boal's work is the shift from established leftist ideologies toward a more immersive and grassroots form of political expression. Extending his father's critique of hierarchal political organizing, Julian Boal lambastes the role of intellectuals and cultural agents in the theatre industry. He suggests that those who claim to represent the so-called people are integral parts of a disciplined society that restricts the masses to positions of dependency or subjugation. Those in such elevated positions operate as intermediaries for oppressive power structures; they are incapable of reflecting the perspectives of different communities or articulating genuine collective truths. Like his father, Julian Boal contends that TO offers an alternative by empowering the oppressed to articulate their struggles directly, without the intervention of academics or intellectual elites.

One of the central elements in Augusto Boal's TO is the concept of the "Spect-Actor" (Boal xxi)—a participant who both observes and performs. Building on Brechtian principles, Augusto Boal further intensifies the audience's subjective status, inviting them to break the "fourth wall" and perform their own stories on stage, thereby eliminating the need for actors. TO methods, especially the technique of Forum Theatre,<sup>1</sup> enable the audience to actively devise resistance strategies and transform the stage into a space of democratic dialogue and subversive action. This is what Augusto Boal calls "rehearsal for the revolution" (Boal 98). But the ideal of "rehearsal for revolution" has its limits. The audience's desire for change can lead to unpredictable,

even undemocratic outcomes. Without organized aims, the spectacle risks devolving into chaos. Moreover, TO's effectiveness hinges on addressing the diverse racial, socioeconomic, gendered, and cultural identities of its participants. How *exactly* can TO adapt to these differences and deepen participants' awareness of the oppressions shaping their lives, equipping them to transform their surroundings through theatre?

Despite these challenges, Julian Boal insists that TO's social function is invaluable because it creates space for civic discourse and critical consciousness in non-violent ways. In Part Two, he writes that the state operates in a realm of theoretical abstraction, which often conceals and obscures the concrete, phenomenological and everyday impacts of power on individuals. His main focus remains on the economic dimension of power, which he views as the ownership of the productive means that define class status. This economic power is seen by Julian Boal as a stepping stone to political dominance, empowering interest groups to propagate ideologies that suppress the general populace. Ideology, in this context, manifests in individuals' lives, revealing the subconscious interactions between individuals and their surroundings. As a result, individuals become docile and submissive to the structure of domination.

At this stage, art becomes a material expression of the ideological state apparatus, reflecting the unconscious constraints imposed on human existence. Crucially, Julian Boal distinguishes between conventional art, which reinforces existing power structures, and leftist art, which has the potential to depict the authentic lifeworld of the oppressed. He believes that leftist theater can empower the oppressed and offer them a means of achieving physical and mental emancipation, and subsequently direct intervention in social and political affairs. When practitioners of TO return to their everyday lives with liberated bodies and minds, they acquire a power capable of challenging the status quo and transforming society. In this sense, the production model of TO functions as a revolutionary battle, and Julian Boal traces this revolution across localized, transnational fronts. As he demonstrates, contemporary TO practices have evolved beyond their socio-political roots in Latin America into a transcultural and transdisciplinary method that intervenes in a wide range of social concerns.

In the concluding section of the book, Boal presents three specific case studies that illustrate the global expansion of TO practices in India, Portugal, and Brazil. For example, the Jana Sanskriti Centre for the Theatre of the Oppressed in India arose from rural struggles; the Centre, which is the first in India to practice TO, engages farmers in consensus-building theatre that focuses on everyday issues. Rural society transfigures into a political space that demonstrates the communal, decision-making power of peasants. In Portugal, Óprima! is an annual event that unites associations and individuals

to blend theater and activism, and fosters social revolution through the transformation of everyday life at the micro-political level. Grounded in TO and political analysis, it creates a space where participants engage as equals and critically question societal norms. By maintaining independence from commercial logic and resisting idolization of any framework, Óprima! is deeply connected to contemporary issues and the shared revolutionary perspectives of its participants. The Popular Theatre School (ETP) in Brazil was founded to train militants in political dramaturgy; it embraces Epic Theatre<sup>2</sup> and Forum Theatre to strengthen cultural collectives within social movements. Initially available exclusive to militants, it later expanded to include marginalized communities and established workshops in favelas and underserved areas. By embracing non-militants and fostering collaborative creation, ETP (like the Jana Sanskriti Centre and Óprima!) translates theatre practice into a radical medium for collective resistance, uniting militants, activists and marginalized groups in a shared struggle against oppression.

These case studies movingly demonstrate innovative forms of social activism around the world and reify Augusto Boal's method of emancipating marginalized groups (such as women and the lower classes) who have been traditionally overlooked by classical Marxist ideas. The demands of these groups are often obscured by the class analysis paradigm of classical Marxism. The traditional theory, which focuses on direct labor relations in the places of production, simplifies social contradictions into a binary opposition between labor and capital, rendering the survival issues of informal economy workers—such as street vendors and domestic workers, along with marginalized populations dependent on social welfare—invisible within its theoretical framework. However, it is all still theatre and such admirable work may have a limited impact on actual political change. Nonetheless, the significance of Julian Boal's book lies in these very case studies, games, and exercises,<sup>3</sup> which illustrate the uncompromising spirit of leftist resistance and the enduring revolutionary potential of theatre, even amidst the decline of the "New Left" and left-wing theatre in so-called Western cultures. His focus on performative practices provides valuable tools for localized resistance and empowering marginalized voices. And yet, even with Julian Boal's more nuanced articulation of TO, his approach still tends to prioritize symbolic and experiential forms of engagement over deeper explorations of the material and structural conditions that underpin systemic power. By not fully addressing the foundational role of oppressive forces or the economic relations that perpetuate oppression in the first place, Boal's framework risks conjuring an incomplete vision of liberation. While it succeeds in fostering awareness and agency at individual and community levels, the absence of a detailed strategy for structural transformation or

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systemic change limits its capacity to confront the broader dynamics of power and inequality. A complementary analysis of modern relations of production and material dependencies is essential to address the roots of oppression holistically and work toward lasting emancipation.

This book will appeal to a wide range of readers, particularly those interested in interdisciplinary approaches to social justice and cultural activism. Scholars and practitioners of theatre studies, politics, sociology, and education will find it immensely beneficial, as it bridges theoretical knowledge and real-world applications. Activists seeking innovative methods for mobilizing communities may also find inspiration in Julian Boal's exercises and case studies, which present adaptable frameworks for tackling local and regional challenges. While *Theatre of the Oppressed and Its Times* may fall short in addressing systemic transformations, its decades-long dedication to participatory practices makes it a vital resource for anyone invested in using art to catalyze social revolution and dismantle oppression.

Rouni Pan

### Notes

- 1 Forum Theatre, part of the Theatre of the Oppressed, is an interactive drama form that combines traditional performance with audience participation. It presents the struggles of an oppressed protagonist and invites the audience to intervene by stepping into the role of the protagonist to propose and act out alternative solutions to the conflict.
- 2 The core technique of Brecht's Epic Theater involves disrupting the emotional connection between the spectators and the characters and fostering a sense of detachment that prompts individuals to critically examine societal contradictions.
- 3 Julian Boal formulated thirteen performance-based games and exercises, as well as ten model exercises, for TO.

### Works Cited

Boal, Augusto. *Theater of the Oppressed*. Translated by Charles A. McBride, Maria-Odilia Leal McBride, and Emily Fryer, Pluto, 2008.