

SPECTA(C)TING

Theatre of the oppressed, orthodoxy
and adaptation

One of the main functions of our art is to make people sensitive to the “spectacles” of daily life in which the actors are their own spectators, performances in which the stage and the stalls coincide. We are all artists. By doing theater, we learn to see what is obvious but what we usually can’t see because we are only used to looking at it. What is familiar to us becomes unseen: doing theater throws light on the stage of daily life.

(Boal 2009)

Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal 1974) is a textbook example of engaged theatre, transforming spectators into spect-actors, be they collaborators in creating work or participants in interactive performances. Boal extends Brecht’s audience members from engaging intellectually to participating *physically*, through techniques for solving problems.¹ Boal’s spect-actors literally intervene in performances and workshops, rehearsing alternatives to apply to their struggles outside theatrical contexts.

Like Nazi Germany for Brecht, the political context of Brazil’s military dictatorship in the 1960s catalyzed Boal to find ways of using theatre for popular resistance. In his first book, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, he applies the language of class struggle to the theatrical context. He begins that seminal text with the idea, reflecting his Marxist ideology, that theatre is “a very efficient weapon ... The ruling classes strive to take permanent hold of the theater and utilize it as a tool for domination” (Boal 1974: ix). He fervently sought, in the Latin America of the early 1970s, “the destruction of the barriers created by the ruling class” (Boal 1974: x). Indeed, the 38-year-old Boal who wrote *Theatre of the Oppressed* was directly aligning theatre with the long-term, utopian goal of creating a classless, equitable society, adapting Marxist precepts to cultural contexts in ideas such as “the conquest of the means of theatrical production” (Boal 1974: x). For the theatre of the oppressed (TO) initially responded to the dire situation of the majority of Brazilians. The oppressed, people who seemingly had nothing, Boal recognized, could still draw on their collective power. He thus

came up with theatrical techniques for rehearsing solutions to shared struggles.²

Boal was equally inspired by his fellow countryman, the great liberatory educator Paulo Freire. Years ago, when I asked Boal the genesis of the name “theatre of the oppressed,” he told me he wanted to call it “theatre of liberation” but the publisher preferred “theatre of the oppressed,” which more transparently tips its hat to the influence of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 1970). In it, Freire propounds an educational philosophy that calls for a shift from a “banking method” of depositing information in passive learners’ heads to problem-solving with them and co-advancing knowledge through dialogue. Like Freire, Boal’s approach offers transitive, two-way learning and collective empowerment; specific to Boal is embodying these practices in dramatic techniques.

In the years since Boal began inventing the set of tools that constitute TO, he expanded its reach to include people of any class with the will to fight both social and personal oppression. At the same time, Boal continued to follow both Freire’s model of joining forces with those having the least power, and Brecht’s principle of activating the spectator, seeking out spect-actors further afield than theatre auditoriums – in community centers, union halls, schools, poor neighborhoods, and other spaces where a broad range of people congregate. Boal left behind a broad and diverse network extending TO around the world when he died in May 2009.

The system of theatre of the oppressed

“Art is the search for truths by means of our sensory equipment.”
(Boal 2006: 5)

Boal emphasizes that TO

is always seeking the transformation of society in the direction of the liberation of the oppressed. It is both action in itself, and a preparation for future actions. ... [I]t is not enough to interpret reality: it is necessary to transform it!

(Boal 1974: 6)

Whereas normally I am skeptical about the claim of theatre’s transformative capacity, Boal invented techniques that do precisely that – theatrical methods through which people with no apparent power achieve some degree of agency.

Boal’s techniques are used most often in the participatory workshop format. TO workshops begin with games, physical structures that follow rules while relying on individual and collective creativity.³ They enhance the senses, break habits, energize, and connect people to themselves

and others. As Boal writes, “Games facilitate and oblige this de-mechanisation, being, as they are, sensory dialogues where, within the necessary discipline, they demand the creativity which is their essence” (Boal 2006: 5). For example, in *The Hand Shake*, a group breaks into pairs who shake hands and freeze. Then one person steps out, looks freshly at the other person’s body language, and completes the image through a new physical configuration, inspired by an alternate reading of their partner’s body language. Then the other steps out, observes the new physical shape of their partner, and once again completes a fresh image. This goes on for a few minutes, building the capacity to see ever-shifting body language in new ways and to recognize multiple interpretations of any one image.

TO is in the Stanislavski aesthetic tradition of knowing the world through the senses. Like Brecht’s goal of providing audiences with a critical perspective on the everyday world, Boal’s goal, through the games, is to

help enable the de-mechanisation of the body and the mind alienated by the repetitive tasks of the day-to-day, particularly those related to work and to the economic, environmental and social conditions of those who take part in them.

(Boal 1974: 5)

But whereas Stanislavski’s exercises prepare actors to live truthfully in the imaginary circumstances of the playwright, Boal very deliberately uses the awakened senses beyond the stage, as tools for interpreting the world for oneself rather than accepting what we’ve been taught.

Boal’s dialogic aesthetics call for face-to-face exchange between actors and specta(c)tors through an ever-expanding set of techniques, which are intended to probe more deeply than games.⁴ As early as 1970, Boal catalogued methods of demystifying news articles in what he dubbed “newspaper theatre,” a body of theatrical strategies for expressing critical perspectives on current events (Boal 2006: 4). One example is the cross-reading of news articles linked not thematically but through juxtaposition, such as a piece about budget cuts to education next to one about increases for a war, through which useful connections are made. Another exercise invites the participant to set the article to music, all the better to hear it. Boal devised a dozen such tools for theatricalizing current events.

Invited to participate in a national literacy campaign in Peru in 1973, Boal developed image theatre, a wordless set of exercises through which participants express their feelings, ideas, and experiences about a particular subject through the body. A group might choose a theme such as the family, say, and silently sculpt three or four colleagues into their image of the oppression they experience in the context of family, entering the picture as where they are in it. Once an image has been created, Boal offers a series of dynamizations to explore it. Other spect-actors, observing the image,

then describe what they literally see, for example, three people standing, one lying down, no eye contact, etc. The next step is projecting their interpretation of that image. (The person who made the image, who Boal calls the protagonist, never says what she had in mind.) In one dynamization, calling this first image the “real,” Boal invites the protagonist to sculpt a second, “ideal” image of the same situation. That, too, is described and interpreted. Then, in a third step, the protagonist sculpts a transitional image, suggesting how to get from the real to the ideal. Note that the ideal is sculpted before the transitional, as it is often easier to move forward when one has a vision of where one wishes to go.

Boal’s best-known technique, forum theatre, developed in response to the limitations he experienced when performing agit prop (agitation propaganda). In such plays, the actors rile up an audience about a particular situation (agitate) and then show what they should do (propagandize). In an early version of forum theatre, Boal directed a company of professional actors who performed scenes, with words, around social issues meaningful to particular audiences – for example, a play about deteriorating schools for an audience of teachers, students, and parents. These short plays always end badly for the “protagonist,” Boal’s term for the person struggling against oppression. Then the spectators would suggest alternatives, which the actors would immediately enact as possible ways to improve the situation. Boal called this follow-up exercise “simultaneous dramaturgy,” and the proposing and performing of alternatives, “interventions.”

This aesthetic shift to spect-actors presenting their own solutions marks a political shift as well. Boal was acknowledging that he and his educated actors did not have the answers for another group of people; more important was posing the problem clearly, and creating a space where people could decide for themselves what to do. He was thus providing a tool for liberation: a physical space literally to act out alternatives before applying them to the real world.

Boal’s moment of revelation leading to *physically* activating spectators to enact interventions, rather than make suggestions that the actors perform, is instructive. One day, during the intervention phase of a forum theatre performance, a spectator protested that the actors did not understand her suggestion. After several tries explaining it and still being unsatisfied with the actors’ interpretation, Boal, exasperated, asked her to step into the scene and show them. She eagerly did. A new phase of forum theatre was born, premised on spect-actors enacting alternatives themselves, which communicated their ideas more fully than just explaining them. The doing was also more instructive for the spect-actor, who encountered insights in simulation that were not evident in observation. Thus, as Boal described TO, while not making revolution, it provides a rehearsal for it (Boal 1974: 155).

Yet another technique, invisible theatre, masquerades as everyday life. It takes place in public venues such as the subway, a restaurant, the beach, the

street, the supermarket, a department store, or waiting in line for a bus. It brings attention to inequities in everyday life by enacting them in the midst of people who do not know it is being staged. So for example, after eating a meal at a restaurant, a diner, not letting on that he is performing, proclaims that he is out of work and unable to pay his bill. This apparently real situation becomes an occasion to involve other patrons in a conversation about social responsibility to the unemployed, especially at times when jobs are tight. Unbeknownst to the regular diners, a number of the people adding comments from other tables are also pre-rehearsed actors. Created in the repressive context of Argentina in the early 1980s, invisible theatre was a way to deliberate publicly and critically about important issues without risking arrest.

Whereas the techniques cited above focus on *social* oppression, Boal's rainbow of desire is a set of exercises that uses words and images to give form to *individual internalized* oppressions (see *The Rainbow of Desire*: Boal 1995). Boal developed it in the 1980s in response to middle-class participants at TO workshops – especially in Europe, the USA, and Canada – seeking relief from loneliness, despair, alienation, and other personal manifestations of social malaise. Individuals prepare and enact such scenes but rather than other people replacing them in interventions, the protagonist engages with the oppression as given physical form by others. For example, after seeing a scene in which a boss takes advantage of a protagonist and while she could protest, she doesn't, the facilitator has spect-actors create physicalizations of what they see psychologically impeding the person – perhaps a moralistic figure imposing a restrictive sense of goodness, or a threatening authority figure, or a coercive parental figure trading love for obedience. The protagonist re-enacts the scene, this time trying to prevail in relationship to the now obvious, externalized versions of the inner “cops,” as Boal dubbed them.

Politically, recognizing internal conflict as another form of oppression, no matter what a person's class, moved Boal further from classical Marxism. The great hope is that unearthing how we stop *ourselves* will naturally lead all of us to acting more justly in the world. Boal also explored the linkage between the therapeutic and the activist. He sometimes combined cop in the head (an early name for rainbow of desire) with forum techniques, demonstrating that the internal is the other side of the coin of external oppression.

In the early 1990s, when a democratic government was back in control in Brazil, Boal returned to Rio de Janeiro. No longer needing to create theatrics resistant to a hostile government, he became interested in what one could do within the context of a supportive government. Active in the Workers Party, he accepted their request to run for office and won a city council seat in Rio de Janeiro from 1992 to 1996, installing his theatre troupe as staff. He then developed legislative theatre, which picks up where

forum theatre leaves off, and collective wisdom cannot solve the problem. For example, teachers, school workers, and students often themselves needed a place to take care of their young children when they were at school. When enacting the problem as forum theatre yielded no solutions, Boal used his position as a city councilman to get a law passed requiring public schools to provide nursery facilities for those employed or attending school there. Following this method, Boal initiated thirteen laws during his term of office (see *Legislative Theatre*: Boal 1998: 102–5).

As Boal writes in *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed* (Boal 2006), “In TO, reality is conjugated in the Subjunctive Mode ... What if I were to do this?” He links the subjunctive to legislative theatre, “so that the knowledge acquired during the theatrical work can be extrapolated into laws and juridical actions, or by invisible theatre, to intervene directly in reality” (Boal 2006: 40–41). Note that the mature Boal of this 2006 text adheres less to Marxism, or any system, for answers to social problems, but rather looks to the people who are experiencing those challenges.

In the Appendix of *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Boal describes one other technique, the Joker System, that pre-dates his systemized TO methodology. He created the Joker System while working with actors at the Arena Stage in São Paulo in the 1960s and early 1970s. In response to the prevailing sense that most great plays came from Europe and the USA, Boal initiated a series of experiments to generate a theatricality of their own, including adaptations of world classics to Brazilian contexts, a playwrights’ lab for the development of new Latin American work, and the Joker System (Boal 1974: 159–72). He also created the Joker, referencing the figure in a deck of cards that can stand in for any other card. The Joker moves freely through workshops and performances in the role of facilitator/interlocutor and/or emcee.

The Joker System is a way of writing and performing a play to present multiple points of view, and alternative ideas and feelings, in contrast to official accounts of historical characters or incidents. The Joker inserts supplementary information about the characters, as commentators do at sporting events, filling in background about the players. The system embraces a range of theatrical genres (melodrama, circus, musical comedy) in order to break the hold of realism that Boal inherited from Western theatre conventions in the 1960s (Boal 1974: 169–70). Actors rotate through the various roles, each bringing their own twist, thus separating them from the characters and giving each an interpretive voice. The cast also develops a collective interpretation.⁵ This principle of both presenting one’s own point of view and collectively communicating what the group sees runs through Boal’s work. In the same spirit, Boal once told me that the collective strength of the Arena was part of a cultural moment in Brazil that also produced a winning soccer team featuring individually superb players working equally well as a team.

The multiplicity of perspectives within plays created through the Joker System means that spectators have to decide what they think for themselves. The Joker System shows Brecht's influence: the activation of the spectator is intellectual. Note the contrast between the Joker System's goal of raising questions and forum theatre's goal of finding solutions. The former invites complexities, while the latter depends on simplification. Both are equally valuable so long as participants know when simplification will best serve a project's goals, and when a more complex performance will be illuminating.

Note that Boal's arsenal of social intervention also draws from other cultural sources. Forum theatre builds on the practice of Latin American audiences calling for forums after plays, occasions to discuss collectively the issues the plays embody. Boal borrowed freely from popular theatre; remnants of circus and carnival abound in his work, notably the three-ring circus nature of the Joker System. And while Boal is best known for TO, he was fascinated by theatre of every sort. Under the auspices of New York University, I brought him to the USA in the late 1980s. Discussing theatre-going options with him, I suggested Pregones, a terrific Puerto Rican theatre company based in the Bronx. He requested rather we go see *Cats*, an Andrew Lloyd Webber extravaganza on Broadway, that while British in origin, seemed to Boal to capture the centrality of spectacle he identified with quintessentially US theatre. This fascination with particularized cultural expression is also evident in Boal's adaptations of classics, for example turning the opera *Carmen* into a Brazilian, samba-driven musical style he called samb-opera. Appreciating theatrics that engage the spectator directly does not mean rejecting other forms of theatre, but rather selecting different forms as dictated by the purpose and context.

Adapting Boal

The embrace of Theatre of the Oppressed is worldwide – Boal's first book, by the same name, has been translated into at least 35 languages. TO is remarkably adaptable to a range of cultures and situations. Encountering scores of TO practitioners over the years, I'm struck by the number of people who read *Theatre of the Oppressed* and use the techniques exactly as Boal describes them, often with great success. But TO sometimes fits awkwardly, feels imposed, and is critiqued for its relentless emphasis on oppression. As TO techniques have circulated around the globe, they are sometimes applied whole cloth, without enough thought to the particulars of the situation. Boal himself has remarked that the techniques, though about oppression, are not meant to be oppressive, recognizing the pall to the spirit such emphasis can produce.

Indeed, I remember a gloom coming over a group of recently-incarcerated women for whom I was facilitating a workshop using Boal techniques.

Spirited and upbeat during warm-ups, which followed the participants' lead and took the form of impromptu singing, dancing, and spoken word at which they excelled, the atmosphere became unbearably pessimistic when we turned to the oppressive issues of their lives. Then we got the idea to set up forum scenes with "girl group" singers and dancers backing up the struggling protagonist, still building to audience intervention as in forum theatre. We were using theatre to problem-solve, but the women's skill, pride, and pleasure in movement and song was equally center stage, and helped solve a different sort of problem – their need for pleasurable release.

In the same spirit, I saw an inventive adaptation of forum theatre at a TO conference some years ago, which incorporated culturally meaningful forms into Boal's problem-solving structure. In a break from orthodox TO, the actors, from Burkina Faso, used drumming as the lead-in to a story with a narrator. When the scene ended badly – the pregnant wife was given all the work as the family undertook a long journey on foot – the actors turned the event into forum theatre, stopping the performance and inviting people to intervene so as to brainstorm how the wife could deal with her husband's (and culture's) inequity around gender roles. The aesthetics remaining in sync with popular forms, not the more pared-down style most typical of TO, accounted for much of its success.

There's something contradictory in taking a system built on critical thinking and applying it without reflection to any situation. Collaborating with Mady Schutzman, with whom I've facilitated workshops and co-edited two volumes on Boal's work, I have come to see the key to meaningful uses of TO as returning to Boal's underlying principles, analyzing the situation, and assessing the available assets. The following three examples evidence in more detail how adapting TO is itself generative of creativity, and thus even truer to Boal than importing his exercises directly. After all, Boal premises his work on everyone's capacity to make theatre – to be the one doing and the one watching herself doing, the spect-actor rather than spectator – not on following him letter and book.

The three experiments that follow evidence "multipliers" who have taken Boal's work in their own directions. They are artists and thinkers in their own right, thereby adding a new generation of invention to what Augusto made. For teaching and facilitating are themselves capable of being elevated to art. There's a place for reproducing TO exactly as Boal made it, and also a great value in exploring new permutations, thereby keeping the body of work alive and growing.

Semi-invisible theatre: magic that mystifies and reveals

I believe it is politically, pedagogically, and psychologically important that teachers/directors/parents not hide the fact that they often exercise power over their class/actors/offspring. Attempts to

pretend that the audience and actors (students and teachers/children and parents?) are on equal footing is a mystification with real, though often hidden, dangers of oppression. And yet, if one is a magician, isn't this mystification necessary for the "trick" to work? Is it possible to, at once, exercise the power of theater and show the exercise?

(Steve Wangh, "Semi-invisible theatre," email, January 14, 2008)

Reminiscent of Tony Kushner's emphasis on magic while letting the wires show (chapter 1), acting teacher Steve Wangh attributes to several sources his attraction to a version of Boal's invisible theatre that reveals itself as theatre. One is the unforgettable experience, at age 14, of seeing the Living Theater's production of *The Connection* (1960), unfolding in real time, about a group of junkies waiting for the person who is bringing their fix. Wangh especially remembers company co-director and lead actor Julian Beck, as the house manager, coming from the back of the audience to stop the performance. Wangh loved being challenged to wonder what aspects of the event were real. Similarly, a William Ball production of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* made Wangh think deeply about the very nature of theatre. In that play, a family of characters from an unfinished play interrupts the rehearsal of another play by Pirandello and begs the director and cast to enact their story. In the same spirit, Wangh recounts that as a child, what drew him to theatre in the first place was something about reality and play. He remembers crying into his pillow as a small child thinking: "Isn't this an interesting sound I'm making?" (Steve Wangh, email, 2008, *op. cit.*).

While drawn to ambiguity between art and life, Wangh and others have voiced some misgivings about invisible theatre. Is it ethically questionable to present a rehearsed action unmarked as theatre as if it were occurring spontaneously? Is that duping people? In the 1960s, Wangh directed a play with his street theatre company in which an actor came out of the audience and drew a gun on another actor. Then they turned to the audience, many of whom thought the gunner was real, and asked them which should die. Wangh later came to distrust representing theatrics as real as a kind of vanguardism, a mistreatment of the audience: "in the name of progressive politics, one was tempted to engage in oppressive activities" (Steve Wangh, email, 2008, *op. cit.*).

Wangh has increasingly been drawn to a theatrics of transparency. In the late 1990s, he and some of his acting students explored *semi-invisible* theatre as a way to explore the line between life and art with the audience's knowledge. While beginning with a spectacle that pretended to be "real life," they would gradually reveal it as theatre to their audience. A number of their experiments took place on the New York City subway, at times when the subway cars had a good number of riders but were not so full that semi-invisible theatre would get lost in the crowd.

In one piece, a number of rider-actors, reading their newspapers, performed a choreography of legs crossing and uncrossing, pages turning, heads peering out and back, side-to-side, that began in a random way and little by little was performed in unison. Riders noticed at different times that what had seemed to be everyday life was in fact a planned performance. The reminder of the beauty of everyday life, with the chorus line of subway newspaper readers a sort of dance, was a joy to behold. It had the effect of tuning spectators in to the quirky, interesting, and artful moments that occur around us every day, often without our noticing. Wanh's subway dance was in effect a piece *about* seeing one's surroundings.

The semi-invisible scenario Wanh liked best was a love affair which began totally invisibly as performance. A young man and a young woman, on opposite sides of a subway car, were struck with love at first sight. Each was with a few friends who mocked and yet encouraged them to approach the other, in the process getting the attention of the unknowing spectators sitting in the subway car. Part of the trick in such veiled performances is to get people's attention without annoying them, a feat accomplished in this case by unfolding the scene with the joy of intense and shy attraction.

As the two moved across the car to each other, a boom box began playing the theme from *Love Story* (1970), the familiar title song of an old romantic movie about two college students who fall in love and then discover that one has a terminal illness. The music let everyone in on the trick. They knew that what was unfolding had been planned, and allowed themselves to enjoy the encounter in a different way. The deliberate intervention into a space of public comings and goings was a way of saying to the spect-actors, imagine the world you want and enact it in everyday life. Wanh describes the pedagogical idea here as, "Yes, we (actors) are so magical that we can fool you into believing in make-believe realities ... but this is how we do it, so you can see that it is not really 'magic,' it is something you could do, too."

Wanh thus calls for a Brechtian invisible theatre, in which the seams show, but not right away. He encourages spect-actors to not just look at, but to really see their surroundings, while eventually revealing the theatrical prompts he inserted into everyday life in order to do so. As such he is true to Boal's core, anti-oppressive values without giving up the fun. Wanh recognizes the role of hidden knowledge in holding onto power. On the extreme end of the spectrum, some regimes forbid their subjects to learn how to read. On the benign side are theatre-makers who stage scenes in public without letting on that the people in those scenes will not be held accountable for their actions in the same way that ordinary mortals would. Wanh also recognizes the pleasure in first experiencing the magic of something extraordinary happening before discovering how it worked. Moreover, by exploring and adapting Boal's methods within the context of an acting course in the New York University Drama Department, Wanh

was also affirming that engaged theatre can be complex, professional, and boundary-pushing.

The Joker System as Pedagogy and Performance

Though TO often unfolds in the spaces of workshops or everyday life, the rehearsal hall and theatre auditorium are the venues of the Joker System. Mady Schutzman, professor at California Institute of the Arts and longtime Boal practitioner, writer, and thinker, explored the Joker System by writing the annual play for the Plaza de la Raza Youth Theatre Program, working with a group of Latino/a teenagers. According to its website, La Plaza is “the only multidisciplinary cultural arts center serving Latinos in Los Angeles ... Through the arts, La Plaza provides a vital human resource service, bridging geographic, social, artistic and cultural boundaries of Los Angeles and beyond.” By basing the play she devised on a rich technique created by the Brazilian Boal, Schutzman both affirmed the richness of Latino/Latin American cultures and engaged the youth with a complex aesthetic enhancing their budding acting and critical thinking skills.

Whereas Boal’s troupe of professional actors developed the Joker System as an experiment in theatrical form geared to an audience, Schutzman used it for performance *and* pedagogy: to provide the young actors with a Freirean model of education, the opportunity to focus their learning on subjects of their choice, and to explore contradictions rather than simply absorb what they were taught – in this case, the story of civil rights. Schutzman asked, “How were these young people processing the murders of so many black people whose acts of resistance constituted the civil rights movement? What connections were they making between these seemingly remote historical characters of the past and their current lives as Latinos in Los Angeles?” (Schutzman 2009: 76) The young people co-devising the piece were at the same time actors and activated learners, previously largely passive in the face of their own education.

In keeping with a Freirean, dialogic approach to learning, Schutzman invited the young actors to choose historical characters they wanted to know more about or celebrate. She taught them about the nominated characters they didn’t all know, and then they voted, with Rodney King and Claudette Colvin gaining the most support (Schutzman 2009: 74). Rodney King was the African American man whose beating by four white Los Angeles Police Department officers in 1991 was captured on a bystander’s videotape. The officers’ acquittal, a year later, set off widespread rioting in Los Angeles. Claudette Colvin was the 15-year-old African American who, in 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama, refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white passenger. Yet she received no recognition for this same act of resistance that catapulted Rosa Parks to fame some months later. Schutzman urged the students to question every aspect of the historical record,

providing them with the facts they needed to do so, such as the laws at the time reserving seats at the front of public buses for whites, at the back for blacks, and in the middle for whites unless they did not require all of them. The students' questions informed the spirit and the content of the play (Schutzman 2009: 74).

The play, directed by BJ Dodge and entitled *Upset!*, has a rough-and-tumble quality, in keeping with both Boal and Schutzman's interest in filling pleasurable popular forms with critical, complex content. (Indeed, Schutzman has also written for the gender-bending circus-theatre company Circus Amok.⁶) In *Upset!*, a spotlight follows the main action, and lots of rowdy cheering punctuates events. The large cast – 37 names appear on the program – are all on stage for most of the show, which runs just over an hour and a half. As represented in the performance, King and Colvin's unfolding stories are at once history lessons; a commentary on how people are represented publicly to fulfill a role, be it shaped by the media or by the movement; and an occasion for the young actors to insert themselves into the history of civil rights by reflecting on its meaning personally and claiming it as their legacy.⁷

The Joker (a Boalian facilitator/master of ceremonies) in *Upset!*, a self-possessed teen wearing a large jester hat, directly addresses the audience. His tone is conversational with a touch of magic; he carries a scepter with which he starts and stops action. Rather than a character in the conventional enclosed world of a play, he closely parallels the ringmaster of a circus in his direct address to the audience, from his very first words: "Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls of all ages" He ambles casually around the stage; indeed, that informality characterizes the entire production. Little by little I see the stage as a space the youth have come to own. What's important is that they see themselves as the next link in a great chain of people of color resisting an oppressive history, a history largely written by others. And that's accomplished by making the stage a kind of club house where they hang out, cheer, step in and out of the spotlight, watch the other scenes, argue, muse, make jokes, and listen to the music and to each other.

The world of this play also communicates a degree of skepticism. The central image is the taped silhouette associated with a crime scene where someone has recently died, dominating the floor at the center of the stage. There's graffiti on a wall – "No Justice, No Peace" – right alongside "Post No Bills," suggesting both are equally unexceptional, everyday sentiments. Across the back of the stage is a ramp of a freeway. "Are there any cars in this show?" one of the kids asks early on. "Of course," the Joker answers. "We're in Los Angeles." The central metaphor of the play is in fact a bus, both the ones we get on and the ones we don't, including the buses on which both Colvin and Parks resisted unjust laws, what Schutzman calls in the play "sitting down to stand up."



Figure 2.1 Gabriel Torres, youth participant in the CalArts Community Arts Partnership (CAP) program with Plaza de la Raza in East Los Angeles, playing the role of the Joker in the play *Upset!* written by CalArts School of Critical Studies faculty member Mady Schutzman with the CAP youth participants in May 2006. (Photo by Rachel Slowinski.)

The forward movement of the narrative opens up now and again through several strategies. One is the kids' personalizing of some of the ideas about the historical characters. For example, the protagonists of the play, Claudette Colvin and Rodney King, introduce themselves and the roles they inadvertently did or did not play in history: Colvin, whose act of resistance preceded Parks's but was not recognized; King, who never meant to be a civil rights symbol. Reflecting on the way we may be unsuccessful in assuming the role we crave, or be cast in roles not of our own making, the young actors all repeat the line "Someone who'd meet me for the first time would think I'm ..." and fill it in for themselves: "Someone meeting me for the first time would think I'm lazy," says one; "outgoing," says another; "white," "so cool," and "crazy," say a third, fourth, and fifth. "Harry Potter," says one more, keeping a dose of irreverence in the mix.

The actors provide an overview of major civil rights cases. We hear about *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1892, in an early challenge to segregation, in that case on a New Orleans street car; Emmet Till, 1955, a black teenager kidnapped, beaten, and killed for whistling at a white girl, his murderers acquitted; Fannie Lou Hamer, 1963, who struggled for the right to register to vote; Medger Evers, 1963, civil rights worker murdered, and the 30 years it took to convict his killers; JFK, 1963, assassinated according to this history for supporting civil rights; Malcolm X, 1965, assassinated; Dr Martin Luther King, Jr, 1968, assassinated. The youth also try on key ideas from the historical figures. After Fanny Lou Hamer is introduced as the person who said, "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired," several of the young actors tell us what makes *them* sick and tired.

In Joker System spirit, we experience a range of performative genres. Two girls in gowns, reminiscent of TV game shows, do game show activities such as spinning a giant wheel. At the trial of the policemen who beat Rodney King, very loud, flowery music turns the scene into melodrama, communicating the sense that the public was manipulated to accept their acquittal. At yet another moment, the gowned girls become back-up singers for a Motown number featuring Claudette Colvin. Is this the acclaim she never got before, or is this, sadly, the most attention a "girl" can hope for – a solo in a pop song?

The first of the two central stories in the play is the 1991 beating of Rodney King, the subsequent Los Angeles riots, and the acquittal of the police who did the beating. It's good to see the kids wrestle with this terrible thing that happened to a person of color. They count off the 56 blows to Rodney King's body, freezing while each says how they, in the character of a police person carrying out the violence, feel about it: "I don't know why I'm doing this but my buddies aren't stopping me so it must be okay;" "I'm so confused;" "I'm sick and tired;" "I don't get paid to do street fighting." King lays in the taped silhouette center stage, communicating that a serious crime has been committed. At another point, the actor playing

Rodney King gets up and takes the baton, imagining himself as one of the perpetrators. This scene leads into personal stories of racial profiling.

The young man playing Rodney King delivers a monologue expressing his desire not to be constantly the person of color receiving other people's gifts. He questions who gets to be in the giving position and why, linking it to white privilege. Later, the cast acknowledges that while Rodney King "wasn't exactly a model citizen," he nevertheless has the right to be protected by the law. It feels as though the youth are asserting basic human rights that they are ready to claim for themselves, and may not have thought through without this play experience.

In the scene of the trial of the four police caught on videotape beating Rodney King, the opinion of the cast is uniform: the trial was unfair. It was held in Simi Valley, which they describe as "police heaven," with no blacks on the jury. The Joker asks if this is an ordinary town or is it bizarre; is it safe or not? The message I get is that what's normal and safe for some is bizarre and dangerous for others, based on one's social position, largely determined by race.

We soon get to the most despairing and powerful scene in the play, in which four white supremacists mock Rodney King's statement from the time "I felt like a crushed can," and rant proudly about crushing cans – "Afro-cans, Jamai-cans, Domini-cans" – as a Ku Klux Klan member dressed in full KKK regalia performs a wild staccato dance, literally crushing aluminum cans scattered across the stage. At the end of the scene, the Joker invites the cast onto the bus, but they do not want to get on. It's as if the often-losing struggle of the just in history makes cowards of us all:

JOKER: How tragic! The bus of the past, the bus of the future, the bus we have been waiting for, is an empty bus, stuck between then and now, between as-always and what-if, a real Could-Have-Been-A-Great bus but instead just sitting here with nowhere to go and no one to get it there.
(*Everyone looks at each other, no one moves.*)

CLAUDETTE: I'll get on the bus!

CHORUS: YEAH!!

Colvin gets on the bus, and her scene is enacted; the young actors wearing black or white masks play the other characters. She sits near the front of the bus. The actor playing the driver tells her to move back. When she refuses, policemen enter and take her off the bus. The actors reflect on the moment for themselves:

CHORUS: If I were on that bus, where would I have to sit?

So Colvin finally gets some public respect, on this stage. She is poor, black, 15 years old, and pregnant. The civil rights movement leadership did not

think they could successfully challenge segregation in public buses with Colvin as the test case, so instead recruited the lighter-skinned, upstanding citizen, seamstress Rosa Parks. Colvin resentfully refers to Parks as the superstar.

Near the end of the play we meet one more group struggling for civil rights: South Central Los Angeles farmers going to court to keep their land. They participate in non-violent civil disobedience, a relief to include as a form of resistance after the violence we have witnessed. The play ends on a note of how mixed the world is, “good and ghastly,” filled with people who are “upbeat” and those who are “upstagers.” We hear what happened to each of the main characters after they left the limelight. The play suggests that people’s real lives are not just different from the public versions, but also a lot more complicated.

Using the Joker System to educate the cast first, and only later the audience, Schutzman’s work echoes Brecht’s *Lehrstücke* (learning plays), developed to engage large numbers of people in a play the process of which is as important as the product. Schutzman is a reminder to pay attention to what draws you into a body of work, even if it is not the component immediately popularized. Indeed, although Schutzman made the request, Boal never facilitated a workshop on the Joker System in the USA, despite the fact that she set up numerous other workshops for him over the years. So she explored it on her own, the only person I have ever known to do so.

The Spirit of Boal in the Bronx

Arts residencies to be developed in Hunts Point. A strong proposal will address issues of importance to the residents and will involve the participation of one or several segments of the community – students, children, seniors, professionals, etc. At the end of the year, all individual projects will be integrated into a community-based pageant.

(Action Lab, public announcement produced jointly by The Point Community Development Corporation and the Bronx Museum, Hunts Point, the Bronx, spring 2004)

Action Lab was a two-year project supporting artists’ work with community residents through workshops, exhibitions, and performances in Hunts Point, a neighborhood in the Bronx. Boal was Action Lab’s theoretical touchstone, particularly the idea of using the arts to both problem-solve and activate segments of the community – groups of residents with some collective identity – who had few material resources. Action Lab asked applicants to articulate how they would incorporate Boal into their work, and what community partnership they would establish. Most interesting to

me about Action Lab was its openness to the ways an artist might adhere to Boal's principles while making very different-looking work.

Initially, eight projects were funded. Only one of the grantees, George Sanchez, carried out an orthodox TO workshop, specifically with local teachers, both to use forum theatre to brainstorm classroom problems, and to re-energize participants through the creative pleasure of the work and contact among peers. Another grantee, Erin Dunleavy, adapted TO with a troupe of teenagers, juxtaposing Shakespearean monologues with interviews of incarcerated youth set against personal images of oppression generated through Boal image-theatre techniques.

One of Dunleavy's pieces, for example, interwove an interview with a young girl raised in foster homes, trying to find her own rules to live by, with Portia's "The quality of mercy is not strained" monologue from *The Merchant of Venice*. The young actors also stretched their horizons through working with interviews with incarcerated youth. Locating Shakespearean texts in relationship to the struggles of both sets of young people demonstrated the profundity of their experience through its resonance with *The Merchant of Venice*. A theatrical event that might have been pigeonholed as merely good for the young participants was, instead, seen as an expression of the human experience to which attention must be paid.

The Action Lab artist who drew most from the spirit rather than the letter of Boal was the choreographer Arthur Aviles, who began the project unclear about what TO brings to political art. He considers his company's frequent partnering of men and men, and women and women, to be political; the delicacy of dance, which he has sometimes explored in public parks in the Bronx to mutterings by passers-by of "faggot," is political. For Aviles, art is political, indeed art is art, whenever it generates heated discussion: "If a piece you do doesn't elicit some kind of discussion outside and inside of what you've presented then you haven't really presented art or made a statement."⁸

Aviles left the acclaimed choreographer Bill T. Jones's company to return to the Bronx,

because I need to be a part of my community. I have an affinity for Latino people so my departure from them had been very scary. At the same time I'm apprehensive because I'm building something that is different. I came back to take a stand. My come-back is very defiant.

(Arthur Aviles, unpublished interview with the author,
the Bronx, New York, September 10, 2005)

He set up a space called BAAD! – Bronx Academy of Art and Dance – especially for gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals, women, and people of color.

Aviles addresses the difficulty of being a minority voice in his community:

Whenever I am surrounded by the Latino culture and homosexuality comes up, it's very difficult to get my point-of-view across in a way that is about taking a stand rather than coming from underneath and saying, "Would you allow me to say this please?" So that's the little bit of positioning that I'd like to take within the really wonderful influence of Boal in Action Lab. Because I find that a lot of the voices of "the community" that get heard are from the status quo. I want to push against that. All voices need to be heard.
(Aviles, interview, 2005, *op. cit.*)

Aviles makes an important case for the element of difference within communities, which are in fact never entirely monolithic.

For his artistic contribution to Action Lab, Aviles responded to Boal by creating *El Yunque is in the Laundromat*, whose central image is the Puerto Rican rain forest (El Yunque). The performance took place in a large laundromat on Hunts Point Avenue, the main street of his Bronx neighborhood, as Aviles wanted to connect the ritual of washing as it takes place in ancestral natural settings with the way he and his neighbors wash their clothes now. His idea was to juxtapose elements of shared Puerto Rican identity like El Yunque, familiar music, and an everyday site, with less-known movement forms. Aviles intended to put *Animal Planet* on a VCR to contrast with the talk shows typically played there. He wanted the whole laundromat engulfed in tropical plants and animal sounds through collaboration with a horticulturalist and a sound designer.

The performance took place on a Saturday afternoon when the laundromat was bustling. Evocatively, the dancers performed in front of a long row of washing machines, some with water splashing away on the clothes inside. Aviles choreographed the piece to the song "Always and Forever," by a group from the 1970s called Heatwave, because it is romantic and well-known in the neighborhood, often played at Latino weddings and *Quinceñeros* (the Latino version of Sweet 16s).

The six dancers were costumed as animals, two of which were rather Disneyesque – a chicken with a plastic mask and a generic fur bunny – and the other four more free-form, featuring cloth scale-like fringes, feathers, wings, and a green unitard, respectively. Aviles chose them because, he said,

forests and animals go well together, and animals ease the tension of performance in an unusual space. I tried to make them familiar benevolent animals. I think the children might remember real animals weaving in and out of each other in harmony.

(Aviles, interview, 2005, *op. cit.*)



Figure 2.2 Arthur Aviles Typical Theatre, *El Yunque is in the Laundromat*, 2005, part of an exploration of Boal in Hunt's Point, the Bronx. (Photo by Charles Rice-Gonzalez.)

Aviles saw the Disneyesque costumes as humorous, valuable to amuse an audience that was not watching a dance piece by choice, but he agreed with me that the other costumes were more aesthetically pleasing. The bottom line was that he needed to use costumes the company had from past pieces, given financial restraints (Arthur Aviles, "Action Lab", email, August 2, 2005).

The performance caused a bit of a stir among the 30 or 40 people, of all ages, there doing their wash. Many paused to see what was happening; kids sat at the edge of the impromptu performance space. But the laundromat, with the addition of only a few plants, had not been transformed into a rain forest due to lack of time and money. Way in the upper corner of the space, a television screen showed a tree in the wind, a far cry from the video of a rain forest with which Aviles wanted to replace the talk shows that usually played there. While Aviles feels the performance achieved his goal of creating "a surreal, quiet, zen-like atmosphere," he also commented that *El Yunque is in the Laundromat* had a pretty rocky birth. I agree that the performance temporarily changed and softened the atmosphere. But overall, audience response seemed to be low-level curiosity and momentary puzzlement. When it ended and the artists danced back into the street, people inside went back to the talk shows and their laundry. It's unlikely that audience members saw a connection between the rain forest and the laundromat.

But Aviles took a long view, knowing the project was huge and multifaceted. In what he sees as the first of several attempts, he chose to focus this time on the relationship with the laundromat owners, to gain access to the space, and to get the dancers comfortable performing there:

It felt like a mini-Christo project.⁹ In the future I imagine all the same elements – plants, a TV, music, and live performance – but ten-fold. Given what I know now, we can take the next step to a more realized transformation of the laundromat into a rainforest, a true and complete space where cleaning one's clothes and the experience of performance could be possible.

(Aviles, interview, 2005, *op. cit.*)

While *El Yunque is in the Laundromat* in no way looked like TO, the everyday setting of the laundromat, and the desire to juxtapose the real and the imagined, reflects a core Boalian principle called metaxis. Boal describes it as the image of reality becoming the reality of the image. That is, instead of performing a dance in a theatre, which is set in the Puerto Rican rain forest, with dancers pretending to wash clothes, Aviles inserted dancers into a venue where contemporary NYC Puerto Ricans really wash clothes. The churning water in the row of activated washing machines is at once a poignant reminder of how far urbanites have come from washing their clothes in a stream, and a pleasurable moment of noticing the beauty of the movement of water, even in a washing machine. Aviles's layering productively complicates expression of how far his Nuyorican¹⁰ neighbors have strayed from their roots without denying the audience aesthetic pleasure. It is a utopian gesture towards the nowhere of a village stream on a noisy Bronx avenue, that Aviles brings into being and then magically makes disappear as the dancers melt back into the crowd.

However, while Aviles was in no way obliged to use Boal's *approach*, he *was* meant to take up Action Lab's mandate to problem-solve and activate segments of the community. Aviles did not clearly address the problem of cultural deracination, and the audience was never given the means to do more than watch the show. On the one hand, to fully take up the challenge Boal represents, *El Yunque is in the Laundromat* would have to be developed with direct engagement of that community. On the other hand, as a Latino living in Hunts Point, Aviles avows that he is part of the community being engaged. But either way, he did not take up the challenge to create a problem-solving situation. Still, the groundwork is in place to explore aspects of Puerto Rican culture that have been lost, others that have been transformed, still others that have been retained, and those that are hanging in the balance and require collective energy if they are to continue to be part of shared Puerto Rican life in Hunts Point. *El Yunque is in the Laundromat* was more an exploration of a blurred line between art and life than a full

exploration of metaxis – the image of reality becoming the reality of the image. That would entail Aviles making real his poignant longing for the elemental beauty of lush plants and a village stream as an everyday venue for people doing their wash. That setting has a special cultural meaning for Puerto Ricans, even living in the Bronx, as part of a collective memory and history.

El Yunque is in the Laundromat most captured the spirit of Boal's commitment to art in everyday life; Aviles connected most with Boal through artistic attentiveness to the senses. As suggested in the opening epigram, Boal's philosophy encourages us to see what we look at, feel what we touch, and hear what we listen to. Using his own artistic language to manifest that vision in a way that the community could have understood, Aviles points the direction to another fruitful building on Boal.

Activating the specta(c)tor

Boal's premise for activating the specta(c)tor represents a meeting of politics and aesthetics: people with the least amount of power, joined together, may find solutions that one could neither imagine nor, in most cases, carry out alone. The results bring rarely seen perspectives into public view, which can be emotionally compelling. While not everyone might choose to get actively involved, Boal's techniques provide the option to do so; hence one can say there are no spectators in TO. There are other theatrical techniques that likewise serve a problem-solving function, and likewise exist in a context without an audience. Role-play is a not uncommon component of preparing a group for a political action, particularly one that might lead to arrest; or, in the context of drama therapy, of working through emotional knots. By practicing for the future or unpacking the past, options for action or interpretation open up.

Invisible theatre was initially invisible not to fool the observer, but because of the danger political manifestations would have caused the actors in 1980s Argentina, when and where Boal was developing it, in exile from Brazil. Given that making a political statement in public is not forbidden in most English-speaking countries, one would have to think long and hard to justify invisible theatre in such contexts. While invisible theatre's appearance of spontaneity has an immediacy that overt theatre often lacks, one can begin a piece as if it's spontaneous and, little by little, reveal the artifice, as in Wanh's semi-invisible theatre. Realizing that the subway skits were planned did not take away from the sense that the assumption of distrust on the train was an over-reaction. These actions were in the spirit of problem-solving: how do we dispel the deep-seated distrust on the subway, a caution that may have been an appropriate response in the more crime-ridden 1970s, but was not a big problem by the mid-1990s, when Wanh's students performed it. Wanh's scenarios were designed to be

recognized as theatre, which made them more conducive, not less, to fulfilling their task as the revealed actors created a ready context for talking with spectators about what happened and why.

With an equal emphasis on the here-and-now, Boal came up with the Joker System as a way to break with the tradition of simply importing the great theatre from the capitals of the Western world (Boal 1974: 174). The Joker System was a playful way to put responsibility on the spectator for interpretation, rather than passively absorb the playwright and director's point of view. In Schutzman's hands, it put equal emphasis on the actors, in rehearsal, to figure out their perspective as well. The pleasure of *Upset!* for an audience is as much watching the youth express themselves as watching a play *per se*. How often does the public get to hear 37 Latino teens respond to the history of civil rights in the USA?

Boal's influence on Aviles is most captured in the quote with which I began this chapter, "doing theater throws light on the stage of daily life," which Aviles did and did not accomplish. In the same spirit as invisible theatre, inserting performance into everyday life seeks to "cleanse the windows of perception" and bring two realities, one imagined and one concretely lived, in proximity to one another. It's in the Artaudian tradition of theatre as experience rather than representation, by making it something of which the spectator is part.¹¹ But if the performance was a call to remember shared cultural roots, it lacked a mechanism for the audience to respond.

While Boal's techniques never force anyone to interact, the danger of activating spectators is that of coercively disturbing someone who does not want to get involved. I once attended a performance set during the Nazi era and, to my chagrin, the actors pointed the spotlight into the audience and asked all the Jews to stand up. I didn't want to set myself up for the unknown ramifications that were bound to follow, nor was I comfortable keeping silent when asked if I were a Jew. While I don't think all theatre has to be comfortable, I do think the audience needs to feel it is in good hands, and in that case I most emphatically did not. Boal's rule of thumb, that activation of the spectator involves making opportunities for engagement which the audience may accept or reject, strikes me as a good base for pursuing such explorations.

Boal died in May 2009. The man was endlessly inventive, with a phenomenal capacity to organize theatrical techniques into what he called the arsenal of TO, and to add to it as he traveled the world. He also had an extraordinary presence. Amy Goodman, host of a daily news/radio program called *Democracy Now*, called him "legendary ... tireless" (May 6, 2009). Bruce Weber of *The New York Times* described him as "an affable intellectual and effervescent teacher" (May 9, 2009). The announcement of his death emailed out by the US-based Center of Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed referred to him as a "giant" and a "visionary" (May 4, 2009).

Canadian TO practitioner David Diamond evoked his “passionately theatrical spirit and his uncompromising commitment to human rights, combined with an infectious sense of play” (David Diamond, email, May 4, 2009).

When Boal ran for city councilman in Rio in the 1990s, his campaign slogan was “the courage to be happy.” At the time I was disappointed; why such a sappy message from such a deep man who knew how so many people suffer? But with his passing, I am reminded of Hamlet’s line, “I could be bounded in a nut shell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams” (*Hamlet*, scene ii). Boal was king of infinite space, able to open up possibilities through the act of collaboration in spaces where seemingly nothing could move forward. I think he was motivated by good dreams, and was himself the quintessence of metaxis – the reality he perceived with all his senses always infused with what he could imagine at the very same time.

Workbook

Boal’s theatre of the oppressed techniques

In order to adapt Boal, one first must know the basics. Ideally, people teaching this material will have participated in a TO workshop at some point; it helps to have done these exercises before facilitating a workshop. The Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed organization in the USA has a website through which one can connect with a network of practitioners. That said, many people have read Boal’s various exercise descriptions and then tried them without formal training first.

Even a 2-hour workshop – two class periods, or one 2-hour slot – is a valuable introduction. But a five-hour workshop, perhaps on a weekend, is even better.

Games for Actors and Non-Actors (Boal 1992) documents many of the games and techniques described here. I recommend spending a bare minimum of 20 minutes for games, 45 minutes for image theatre, and 1 hour for forum theatre. A longer workshop could devote more time to forum and include more games and techniques described earlier in the chapter, specifically rainbow of desire, invisible theatre, the Joker System, or legislative theatre. Ideally what follows would nevertheless be a basis for proceeding with any of the other techniques because they viscerally introduce Boal’s physical vocabulary and principles.

TO workshops generally begin with a few games. They are intended to warm up the participants individually and as a group, as well as to demonstrate the principles of TO. A good energizing exercise is *Afraid of/Protect*. Everyone moves around the room. The facilitator then asks each person subtly to choose someone in the room, other than the facilitator, who they’ll think of as their protector for the duration of the game. Don’t let on

to the person that you have so designated them, but as you continue moving around the room, try to stay close to them. After a minute or two, the facilitator asks everyone additionally to designate someone who, for the duration of the exercise, they fear. Without letting on who that is, try to keep your protector between you and the person you are afraid of, at all times. This exercise provides a palpable experience of the contagiousness of emotion. The “Afraid of” step has a feeling of mass hysteria, as each person’s movements around the room cause the whole group to shift constantly. When the game is over, reflecting on who one chose as one’s threat and protector is also instructive (5–8 minutes).

Move next to image theatre. The experience of the body’s expressivity is fundamental in Boal’s system. While he knows well that some people are more physically expressive than others, image theatre goes a way towards leveling the playing field regarding some people’s greater verbal propensity. While image theatre has many variations, one that allows everyone to fully participate is “Groups of Four.” Working wordlessly, simultaneously, in groups of four or five, everyone gets a chance to sculpt their group into an image of their own oppression, with the last step being to enter the image as oneself. The image might embody an unequal power dynamic in one’s family or workplace, for example. “Sculpting” means either gently putting the people’s bodies into the positions you need in order to communicate the oppression, or working through mimicry, showing them how you want them to pose. Understand that you will never be asked to tell the group anything about your image. Only after each person has composed an image do the group members talk together, not to discuss the content of the images, but to choose one image to share with everyone, based on identification, or at least resonance, with what each person understands it to signify.

Each group gets a turn to remount that one image in the center of the work space. Everyone else stands in a circle around them, first identifying, out loud, what they literally see: two people standing with perfectly straight legs, a fist on one person’s heart, no eye contact, etc. The second level of response is “how do you interpret what you see?” That’s when comments such as “the parents disagree about how to handle what the son is telling them”; “someone is mocking someone else”; are invited. Again, people experience that their interpretation is not the only possibility. This can be especially insightful for the person who first made the image.

The last step is dynamization. The Joker asks each group to dynamize the image by, for example:

- 1 Thinking of this as the “real” image, have the person who created it (known as the protagonist) sculpt the “ideal” image. Discuss it with the group. Then have the protagonist sculpt a transitional image, somewhere between the two.

- 2 The facilitator puts her hand on the shoulder of each person in the image, the protagonist last. The person who is touched speaks streams of consciousness, informed by a sense of who s/he is in the image. Discuss.
- 3 The facilitator claps three times, each time leaving a moment for the people in the image to move towards where it feels their characters are going.

Which brings us to forum theatre. The participants identify issues of oppression (or unequal power dynamics) in their lives that they recognize as social – not only their individual struggles, but part of an unequal *status quo*. Then groups are formed around each. Typical themes are racism, sexism, class inequities, family oppressions. To be in a group, each person must be willing to share a story recounting a concrete manifestation of the oppression they experienced. Each group creates a scene in which a protagonist tries, unsuccessfully, to overcome that oppression in a concrete scenario built out of the shared stories. Each group shows their scene to everyone, then at least one is chosen, based on its resonance for the people in the room, to be brought to forum. The scene is replayed, with a facilitator (the Joker) inviting the spect-actors to replace the protagonist at any point in the scene when they can imagine an alternative action that could lead to a solution. The scene is replayed numerous times with different interventions. This results in a dialogue about the oppression, an examination of alternatives, and what Boal calls a “rehearsal” for real situations.

If you are working with a group that already knows these basic exercises, you may want to break into groups and invent adaptations for particular workshop contexts.