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Rehearsals for Change

“Theatre is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theatre can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it.” – Augusto Boal, *Games For Actors & Non-Actors*, 2002, p.16

Through collective projects, listening investigations, theatre projects and archival interventions I am interested in the possibilities and limits of liberatory practice within and without institutions. Many artists and community organisers alike employ radical pedagogies as tools for bringing people together to learn from each other in their specific struggles at the intersection of racism, migration, housing and health and towards collective change.

How can we centre lived experiences of migration in narratives of social change? What art forms and methodologies can support those who experience systematic discrimination to think critically about inequality and injustice? If museums and arts institutions embody the logic of colonialism and supremacist ideology, how do we repurpose their resources and structures to support processes of struggle, migrant justice and political education? How can theatre create spaces to understand social reality, to then be able to change it?

I began exploring these questions over 20 years ago while working as a filmmaker for a human rights NGO in Bahrain and Cairo, where I came into contact with migrant labour organisers. But it was when I started working with Janna Graham to develop the Centre for Possible Studies (2009-2014) that I was able to test the possibilities of working at the intersection of art and social justice within arts institutions; and I was lucky enough to learn from the political practices of Ultra-red and many incredible artists and movement organisers. Influenced by popular education movements, we developed collaborative projects in the Edgware Road neighbourhood, a microcosm of London, home to tens of thousands of asylum seekers as well as millionaires and despots washing their money in London real estate, like Tony Blair and Pervez Musharraf. After CfPS' doors closed in 2014 and Janna Graham moved on to work elsewhere, I continued to sustain some of these projects and developed new ways of working, focussing more on collaborations with migrant justice organisers, migrant labour unions and other campaign groups.

One such project was Implicated Theatre, a migrant-led theatre project in London that began in 2011 as a series of free experimental workshops in response to an increase in immigration raids on the Edgware Road. We wanted to employ a methodology that could allow people who did not have a shared language to work

together to engage in political analysis and direct action. Exploring the relationships between political speech and action, the self and the collective, the workshops invited people working on Edgware Road that were experiencing increased surveillance and policing, as well as those accessing services at the Migrants Resource Centre (an organisation that was providing free legal advice to migrants in London) to work with theatre director Frances Rifkin and artists Noor Afshan Mirza and Brad Butler. Implicated Theatre's workshops and processes are based on the praxis of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (ToO) and consider the ways that political theatre and action can be used to assemble individuals for the purposes of transformation and resistance.

Initially focusing on personal experiences of migration, Implicated Theatre has since grown into an ongoing research collective, developing relationships and techniques that support investigations into the everyday struggles that shape its participants' lives. As the project continued, the web of immigration controls embedded into every part of our society grew more complex and pervasive. Forming close relationships with migrants' rights groups, migrant labour unions and most recently ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) teachers, Implicated Theatre has created theatrical interventions, toolkits and pedagogical films inspired by the lived experience of people navigating the harsh immigration regime of the UK's Hostile Environment. Through these collaborations, different communities fighting for migrant justice have come together to use theatre to think through problems collectively and articulate their ambitions, challenging the status quo from the perspective of those most affected by immigration. Implicated Theatre have collectively created an ethical stage – a shared space to support each other through struggle, to learn together, to collectively dream and rehearse for change.

Theatre of the Oppressed

ToO offers theatre as a tool for liberation and empowerment, to better understand ourselves, and the world around us, so that we might transform it. It was developed as a means of working popularly in theatre to tackle the overriding problems of the lives of ordinary people living under dictatorship in Latin America. Working with groups of workers and peasants in literacy campaigns initially, and then more widely with unions and other organisations, Boal understood his work as a multiplication of tools available for political struggle. Boal applied the theories of Paulo Freire around education and freedom to his theatrical toolkit. Like Freire, Boal understood society and its structures as oppressive, and the only way for individuals living in oppressed societies to claim their autonomy is through practices of liberation. As in Freire's

Pedagogy of the Oppressed, in Theatre of the Oppressed there is no room for the passive spectator. There is a time to observe and another to act. Boal explicitly challenges the divisions between active and passive states or subjects and argues for a theatre in which we are all spect-actors – spectators and actors who shape and reflect on the world around us. ToO is influenced by Freire’s idea of conscientization, which sets out how awareness develops into critical consciousness. Ultimately, the methodologies developed in ToO are tools for transforming society. Through acting out stories of real life situations of oppression, participants expose the social mechanisms that need to be changed, allowing people to move from being aware of them to becoming critically conscious of them. As Boal puts it in Games for Actors and Non-actors: “These techniques have two main goals: to enhance our ability to know or recognise a given situation, and to help us to rehearse actions which can lead to the breaking of the oppression shown in that situation. To know and to transform—that is our goal.”

ToO has been around for 40 years and is practiced by millions of people in over 70 countries. It takes on various forms, from warm-ups and games to staged plays or Forum Theatre, where the audience has the power to change and intervene in the action. Implicated Theatre workshops have encompassed many of Boal’s ToO toolbox. Workshops range from autobiographical reenactments that blur the line between a play, a union meeting or a therapy session, to wordless dialogues spoken through the body, while some prepare people for confronting their boss, an immigration officer or to take to the streets to engage in direct action. It is about collective organisation and struggle, with people with lived experience of navigating the immigration regime of the UK coming together in weekly workshops seeking change and support, and asserting themselves on the political stage.

Though the project initially began as a mixed group of people that had lived experience of migration and also allies, within three years Implicated Theatre transformed into an exclusively migrant project with the exception of the director Frances Rifkin. This happened through the framework of the project, which involved developing partnerships with community members at migrant rights organisations and responding to ongoing shifts in immigration policy. Throughout the year we would have weekly Saturday workshops that would take place at the CfPS, and when we lost that space we would work in a local theatre space or in community centres. These workshops would be spaces of discussion and solidarity. We would spend all day together, exploring methods from Boal’s “Arsenal of Games”, discussing our lives and eating lunch. As various members shared stories of struggles from their lives and worlds, we would partner with related organisations such as the Anti-Raids

Network, Justice for Cleaners, Voice of Domestic Workers and unions, and develop projects, plays and actions in partnership with the needs and desires of our partners.

As the status of Implicated Theatre's members would change, as some would leave London to be rehoused, new members would join from the groups and organisations we were collaborating with. As many of us became more and more experienced with ToO, Frances Rifkin trained some of us in facilitation, to learn to be a 'Joker' in ToO terms. Some of us who grew in confidence and commitment to the project were able to lead exercises and games and Forum Theatre performances with other groups and partners. Overall, Implicated Theatre had over 70 members, some people working with us for 6 months, others for several years.

Games and Forum Theatre

You don't need to practice ToO for years in order to use it. It is a powerful tool for organising, for starting a discussion around oppression and for rehearsing for change, that you can use in many different organising contexts. I have used games from ToO outside of Implicated Theatre, in classrooms, in other workshops and in my own organising work.

Most ToO workshops, the warm ups and games, lead towards Forum Theatre - devising pieces of theatre derived from the experiences of the participants of which an oppression or a problem is the focus. In Forum Theatre the central character or protagonist encounters a form of oppression or obstacle that they are unable to overcome. These plays are inspired by real-life everyday struggle, with the intention of engaging peers in theatrical problem-solving which can help inspire concrete social action. Implicated Theatre have devised plays based on their challenges confronting racism, immigration officers, access to healthcare and housing and other injustices, and performed them for people who have similar experiences.

After each performance, actors and audiences engage in theatrical brainstorming. The facilitator or 'Joker' invites members of the audience to take to the stage and suggest alternative options for how the protagonist could have acted. In this way, these performances and public workshops can be used to rehearse for real life situations, or to uncover and analyse alternatives in any situation, past, present or future, triggering collective discussions on how to tackle the problem. The actors explore the results of these choices with the audience, like a brainstorm or debate, in which possibilities for action are rehearsed and shared, generating both solidarity and a sense of empowerment as people experiencing similar oppressions engage in problem-solving strategies.

In Forum Theatre, the actors present an original play chronicling an unresolved problem resulting from systemic oppression. Once the play is finished, the audience is invited to step into the play and share possible ways to attack this problem and respond to the antagonists, in what's known as an Intervention. The actors in the play are prepared to respond to the audience member, known now as a Spect-Actor. A Joker facilitates this process of play performance and interventions. The goal is to engage in various problem-solving strategies that the community can use to fight back against the oppressions they face.

Practice: Forum Theatre

With Forum Theatre you can perform a situation, or a specific struggle in your life, and explore ways to change it. Other people in the group take turns to try out different actions and solutions. Without imagination, it is impossible to break the cycle of the social reproduction of injustice. Imagination can transform a conflict into an opportunity to build other relationships between human beings, instead of just leaving it as something to manage.

When to do Forum Theatre?

When collective discussion or dialogue is useful to explore open or underlying oppression and to identify possible actions for transformation.

Who could participate?

Forum Theatre is created with and for specific communities or individuals affected by particular social injustices. You don't need to be an actor in order to take part. When it comes to interventions, the forum welcomes audience members to contribute an honest response to a situation.

Why do a Forum Theatre?

- It gives your group or collective the chance to rehearse for change.
- Forum Theatre has the potential to produce tangible change in behaviour, language and understanding.
- It allows groups and collectives to imagine other possibilities for society and break habitual ritualised behaviours to find options for change.
- It makes a creative space where it is safe to experiment.

How?

Forum Theatre is a way for a group to imagine and embody change and test their strategies in a safe, playful and non-judgemental environment. The role of the facilitator is to create a symbolic 'container' of 'embodied ideas', where every voice is equally heard.

The Forum Theatre facilitator is called the 'Joker' whose role will be to facilitate dialogue between the actors and the audience or 'spect-actors'. The Joker takes on a 'midwife' like role, helping the group birth responses or possibilities for change, using theatre as a dialogical space for exploring what to do when confronting a certain problem.

- Work in small groups: 3 or 4.
- Share stories from your lives that show a problem. For example, a situation when people you're dealing with are rude or unjust. This could be because they do not understand, are blocking you, or are bullying you.
- Choose one story to develop and show it to the whole group as a performance.
- The Joker helps to create an interactive play, facilitating setting, time, location, roles and space by asking the group who are the characters, what is the story? When and where is it happening and why?
- The scene is performed to the wider group who are spect-actors. When the scene is presented, it ends with the defeat of at least one character.
- First, the group of spect-actors watches the performance all the way through.
- Once the group has watched the performance the Joker invites whoever has an idea of what the oppressed character or protagonist should do to come to the stage, replace the character they think is the most oppressed by the situation and try to improvise their idea.
- They show that they are the new protagonist by taking a prop, for example a scarf.
- The replacement tries out a different way of resolving the problem depicted in the scene, altering the action. The scene can keep starting over in 'replay' mode, any Spect-Actor may stop the action. After calling a halt, a Spect-Actor steps into a role and changes the script in any way they choose. Other Spect-Actors must adapt, enacting a different course of action.
- The group processes what happened, and name observed intervention strategies and attempts to change the situation. After observing and participating in the altered scene, the group reflects together on what worked and what didn't; who was assumed to have responsibility and agency to make change; and what alternate interventions might be tried - reflecting on agency, power and privilege are essential to making change. When playing this scenario with social movement

organisers, reflection could also focus on roles, available choices and alternative actions.

- Repeat with newly altered action and with new collaborative processing. As time allows, replay the scenario multiple times with different agents making change and trying alternatives. With each repeat, continue to name and track interventions toward developing a repertoire of tactical and strategic moves.

Tips

- If possible avoid stories that are potentially traumatic or too personal.
- Encourage the group to explore social issues that are shareable and can be useful to a current campaign, or can support a situation where collective resistance can lead to change. If you develop a story further, check that the person who shared the story is comfortable with it.
- People sharing stories and recognising similarities in each of their stories is very powerful.
- Change of ownership means the stories become 'our stories'.
- Sometimes a story is not clear at first so persevere. Give it time, it might take more than one session.
- Groups may have to rework the story more than once before deciding to use it.

Once your group has developed a Forum Theatre scene, it can be performed and workshopped time and time again. It can be a great tool to create discussions with people outside of your group, as part of a campaign to engage more people in your movement organising.

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