Performance, Revolution, Pedagogy: Theatre and its Objects

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[1] Augusto Boal, perhaps best known for his *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1985 [1979]), critiqued Aristotelian aesthetics that left spectators in passive states. He turned to Brechtian proposals that would move spectators to revolutionary action, but also became critical of any straightforward didactic approach to revolutionary theatre. The whole world was indeed a stage and all spectators were also potential actors or "spect-actors." Boal's work was shaped by the politics of his time and place: Brazil, Latin America, the Cold War politics of the 20th Century, the experiences of exile during Brazil's military government, his return from exile, and the economic tyranny of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In memory of Boal's recent passing (1931-2009), this issue of *InTensions* features articles that examine theatre and performance as critical social practices and forms of analysis. Leaving to future scholarship the assessment of his life's work, here we pay

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homage to Boal with articles and works that take as a starting point Boal's central life practice: the braiding of performance and politics.

[2] The radical promise of performance analysis, according to Dwight Conquergood, is found in its "promiscuous traffic between different ways of knowing" and its challenge to the theory-practice binary (2002: 145). Performance thus can challenge political systems and propose participatory alternatives. As a form of analysis, however, it also undisciplines an entire system that has been crucial to the seemingly neutral institutionalization of a Western knowledge system. Diana Taylor has shown how performance studies works productively against any easy disciplining of the arts (2003: 26).[i]

[3] Performance studies draws attention to the blurriness of boundaries when it comes defining what is real and what is "only acting."[ii] In doing so, it makes visible the power of cultural productions—including those from the scholarly realm—and truly breaks new ground. By imagining and performing the "not real" actors engage with the potentials of changing the world. They try new roles, challenge old ones, and permit glimpses of radical transformation. The potentiality of performance as a social practice and as a scholarly framework can only emerge in close consideration of the culturally and socially constructed world of what scholar Diana Taylor (1991) has

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called, "the politics of theatricality," where the past, the present, the future, the "real," and the imagined become common referents for performers and their audiences in particular spaces.

"Law is always someone's Desire. When will it be ours?"

Augusto Boal, *Hamlet and the Baker's Son*, 2001

[4] When Bigenho's students learn about the Zapatistas of Chiapas, Mexico, a movement filled with theatricality, they demand specific shape and form to this movement's demands and aspirations. "What *is* autonomy?" "Are they *really* autonomous?" They ask the ontological questions and they demand the concrete. They are justified in doing so because they have learned of the material conditions in which Chiapanecos live, and of the social structures that have produced these conditions. A privileging of ontology, however, can eclipse the power of imagination, the possibility of *doing* other things, as one's form of *being* still remains encircled. Boal's "forum theatre" called for the spectators-turned-actors to express their desires through *doing* (2001: 309). Nicole Fabricant, in this issue, examines how the landless movement in Bolivia performs food sovereignty, acting out another alternative imagining. Rather than ask the ontological question (what *is* food sovereignty and do they *really* have it?), performance analysis encourages a look at the experience of doing, at what happens in that process of imagining and acting out alternatives, even as one remains aware

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that material conditions and structural relations remain unchanged. Similarly, for Patrick Alcedo's work, in this issue, it is through participants' enactment of a celebratory ritual-festival in the Philippines that alternatives to a racist and classist colonial past are imagined. Performance here is turned into a platform for which the demands of globalization, transnationalism, and modernity are put on display, as "issues of gender politics and class difference" are negotiated (See Alcedo's statement in this issue). We hear the skeptics sharpening their pens, as they should, in the face of material conditions and structural relations that still have not changed for those involved in such imaginings. Case in point, in the early 1990s, Boal briefly ventured into municipal-level legislative politics. As he tells the story (Boal 1998), the Center for the Theatre of the Oppressed (CTO) wanted to put its work towards the broad goal of changing the country. When they offered their theatrical services to the Workers' Party, they were accepted, but with the recommendation that one of their members run for the city legislature. Boal became their at-first-reluctant candidate. He agreed to run because he thought he would never win (Boal 1998: 12). Think again.

[5] As a city politician, Boal developed what became known as "legislative theatre." If previous work in forum theatre was about getting spect-actors to express their desires through doing, legislative theatre was about

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"transforming desire into law" (2001: 335). Boal lists the laws promulgated through legislative theatre while he was in office (1998). Here is a sample from that eclectic list:

> "All municipal hospitals must have doctors specializing in geriatric diseases and problems... All public telephone kiosks must have a raised concrete platform below them so that blind people can detect them with their canes... 7 December is declared Day of Solidarity with the people of East Timor... All motels must charge the same price for all couples, regardless of their sexual orientation." (Boal 1998: 102-105)

Although transforming desire into law is a project that reflects the imagination and political commitment of those involved, it moves at a snail's pace and does not address structural issues. Performance, law, and the state can make for a transformative mix, but it can also entrap. The performance of change cannot always rely on such direct engagements with institutions of power. Boal aptly stated and asked, "Law is always someone's Desire. When will it be ours?" (2001: 325).

[6] Laws can set up structures whereby actors must perform expected roles, even if those laws are meant to benefit precisely those actors. Performativity, as developed through linguistic theories and then interpreted by Judith Butler (1993) in relation to gendered identities, involves the

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iteration of acts, the embodiment of those acts, and the historical processes of exclusion that already shape those embodied acts. Even if iteration can be turned on its head in performance, it can also be drafted and codified in law. Elizabeth Miller's article in this issue points to the problems faced by gay refugees in Toronto who must perform specific essentialized ideas of gayness and victimhood as part of their State circumscribed status as "refugee." Performance can be about both liberation and tyranny. It has been suggested by performance scholar Peggy Phelan that, "the equation of performance with empowerment and visibility with liberation is 'a meeting of profound romance and deep violence'" (in Kruger 2005: 782). At the same time, as has been noted by artists and theorists from a wide range of disciplines, performance represents an important oppositional, revolutionary, and transformative public forum through which people respond to forms of political, economic and social/cultural domination. Performance and politics intersect in the staging and contestation of gendered, sexualized, racialized, colonial, neo-colonial, local, national, and global inequalities.

[7] Alexandra Gelis' video art in this issue speaks to the concept of a border. A border here is a theoretical space where new modes of cultural presentation, representation, and identification are investigated and discussed. Gómez-Peña in his performance art deploys the physical and metaphorical borderland as a state of being in culture while looking at

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culture (2000). He sees the borderland as a political space of freedom, porous and open. In this space the performer is capable of nourishing multiple identities, and of celebrating ambiguities. The protagonists in Gelis' videos redefine social borders through performance in order to make sense of shifting geographical, social, and personal landscapes. They "examine the evidence of physical change and transformation" of bodies, and deal with the many signifiers that transform their culture.

[8] Moreover, performance can be a tool to re-humanize victims of war. Olga Barrios' work in this issue presents the dehumanizing effects of violence in her native Colombia. Echoing Michael Taussig's view that cultures of fear and terror "are based on and nourished by silence and myth... by means of rumour and fantasy woven in a dense web of magic realism"(2004:49), Barrios' choreographies remind us that "theatricalized violence" can be the ideal tool for social control in ongoing civil wars.

"Without memory it is impossible to be."

Augusto Boal, *Hamlet and the Baker's Son*, 2001

[9] The performance of memories can make socially significant what might otherwise be dismissed as personal tragedy, and Latin America's "disappeared" persons have necessarily become a topic of crucial memory and performance work. During Argentina's Dirty War (1970s to 1983)

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mothers of disappeared persons began performing collectively their motherhood, marching regularly around the Plaza de Mayo with photographs of their missing children (Taylor 1997). A bureaucrat's response to a mother in search of her child might emphasize the isolated individual problem. "What kind of mother are you?" "Your son must have been making trouble of some kind." Responsibility and blame fall easily to the individual family. The group march around the plaza, however, forces the issue into a public light and a collective responsibility. Celina Van Dembrouke's piece analyzes a performed memory of this disturbing period, looking at family photographs that were purposely restaged without the disappeared family members. Family photographs indeed may be rooted deeply in private worlds and the photographic still may not seem so related to performance. But an emphasis on the performance aspect of the photographic medium requires a focus on the *process* of producing an image rather than on the disembodied image itself. Shooting these photographs involved the staging of a visible absence; displaying them for a public brought private family loss into collective memory and responsibility.

[10] Susan McNaugton's dance piece also makes public a personal tragedy. In this case, however, the choreographer faced the problems of avoiding essentialized renditions of Indian dance, negotiating between the classical and commodified popular styles and the social boundaries between these,

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and articulating the quandaries of personal displacement between India and Canada. Memory and consciousness pull in multiple directions here, as a dancer searches for a way to challenge collective expectations, as well as shape transnational aesthetic memories.

"... profit is privatised, loss is socialized"

Augusto Boal, *Legislative Theatre*, 1998

Boal wrote about an economic dictatorship replacing military ones. The economic dictatorship is felt directly by many people in Latin America, but is barely visible to others who might see a creeping commodification of the world. Is performance the last refuge in a world in which everything—yes, everything—can be commodified? Eric Ronis' contribution looks at political protests and considers their potential power as performance sites that elude commodification. Something about the feelings, the affect, the desire of performance contexts escapes the totalitarian grid of commodified culture, and provides another reason to reconsider the juncture of performance and politics.

"The word pronounced is never the word heard."

Augusto Boal, *Hamlet and the Baker's Son*, 2001

[11] Boal's "image theatre" used the human body to express feelings, relationships, and oppressed states. In this way, performance takes one beyond spoken language and into a world of communicating through distinct

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worlds of embodied experience. Alejandra Canales, director of a documentary about a woman who was tortured for her political beliefs, had to make directorial decisions about how to convey this world to an audience that was assumed to have no experience of torture, and whose members were more likely to turn away from the sight of torture. How does one convey a world of such experiential difference? How does one convey the sense of these bodies in pain that, *a la* Elaine Scarry (1987), seem to challenge the very limits of language? Canales turns to sensory metaphors, using references to a shared world of the senses that may seem innocuous to the bystander, but that evoke horrible memories for others.

[12] At the intersection of theatricality and politics, this issue features performance as related to the imagination, to the non-commodification of social movements, to legal roles of "refugees" and their strategic alternatives, and to the collectivizing of traumatic memories that otherwise are too easily individualized and depoliticized.

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[i] Elsewhere, Michelle Bigenho discussed how performance studies provides a potentially fruitful alternative to the disciplinary problems between anthropology and ethnomusicology (2008).
[ii] This bias is hardly universal across different cultural contexts (Schieffelin 1998).

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