**Theater for the people: Boal, performance, and community**

How do we make revolutionary tools accessible to the general population? Throughout this class, we've been analyzing how performance functions during times of revolution, and it seems as though it often is most powerful when it falls in the hands of the common people. Why is this? Theater allows people to take on roles they wouldn't normally take on. It allows the farmer to try on the part of the soldier for size, and vice versa. And through this process, it becomes a vital tool for revolution. Here I will explore the connection between theater as a revolutionary tool and its relationship to the commune. Specifically, I will be looking at the form of theater discussed in Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed.

Central to this type of theater is a disruption in the typical form of spectatorship. In fact, there are no longer spectators at all but rather active participants. People are not passively watching a story unfold from the outside, but, rather, are engaged in the action themselves and helping develop the narrative. This lets the process be oriented towards problem solving rather than simply presenting a solution to the audience. This kind of active spectatorship can be traced to other revolutionary theatrical methods. Looking back at the French revolution, we can recall Maslan's writing on the theater of the time being heavily controlled by audience reaction. Though not as directly involved, spectators would comment on the action onstage and were responsible for deciding which types of shows would be allowed to be staged. In the Russian revolution as well, agitprop brigades were designed to discourage passive spectatorship and in fact produce calculated results in the work habits and political leanings of the workers who viewed their shows. It seems as though time after time, people have relied on the theater as a way to bring the revolution to the public.

But the theater which Boal writes of seems to go even further than his international counterparts, by blurring the lines between audience and participant. Boal writes, "I believe that all the truly revolutionary theatrical groups should transfer to the people the methods of production in the theater so the people themselves may utilize them. The theater is a weapon, and it is the people who should wield it" (122). By speaking of it in this way, he characterizes the theater not as some abstract device for entertainment, but as a concrete tool. Some leaders arm people with guns; Boal would rather arm them with performance. And central to this is the notion that there is no hierarchy. This form of theater is free from gatekeeping. Imagine all the theater students in the US who barely allowed to set foot on a stage until they have attained an MFA. Not here. Boal recognizes every person's capacity to engage with the art form. When he lists the stages for transforming a spectator into an actor, they are brief and accessible to all, beginning with 1) knowing the body and 2) making the body expressive.

So it seems that what Boal's theater models is the concept of a commune, a space where people work together to achieve a common goal-- in this case, revolution.

Does community living prepare people for revolution? They create spaces where people have learned how to work together cooperatively, and are united in a common interest or goal. In Venezuela, former president Hugo Chávez "conceived the commune as the “fundamental cell” for the transition towards socialism in Venezuela. [...] these instances integrate communal councils, social movements and other local organizations and can, in turn, be aggregated to form communal cities, federations and confederations" ([https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/15177](https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/15177 (Links%20to%20an%20external%20site))). The commune seems to promote a culture of self-sufficiency. But of course, the self-sufficiency of the common people can be threatening to high-level government and especially foreign powers who thrive on other country's reliance on their exports. Any time a group of people becomes more reliant, they rely less on others and therefore diminish the power others can hold over them. This is why communes can be perceived as a threat in times of revolution.

I believe the theater Boal writes of supports this self-sufficiency because it is branded as a tool. Boal urges us to consider the theater "as language, capable of being utilized by any person, with or without artistic talent" (121). Here I would like to go out on a limb and propose that the more accessible something becomes, like an art form, the more dangerous it will be considered. By this, I mean that no one seems to have an issue with the theater when it refers to silly little plays put on for the entertainment of aristocrats, but once common people get involved and start using theater as a way to engage with and critique the cultural narrative, then the medium comes under fire. So it has always been in the interest of those in power to tell us theater is merely a form of entertainment, and cannot ever effect any real change. Boal's ideas have power because they refuse to accept this narrative, and in doing so unlock new possibilities for performance.

Boal describes theater as a "rehearsal for revolution" (122). It can be a working ground for testing out solutions, telling revolutionary narratives, even staging fictional overthrows. It gives people the space to act out scenarios without having to deal with the consequences. And it shows people that they have the power to take on roles they never imagined they could have. It is a language, a tool for communicating and building a community just like any other language. Because of this, it has revolutionary power to bring people together and change the cultural landscape.