

THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED

AUGUSTO
BOAL

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Augusto Boal

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TRANSLATED BY

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THEATRE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP

NEW YORK 1985

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Originally published in Spanish as *Teatro de Oprimido* in 1974, copyright © by Augusto Boal and in English by Urizen books in 1979.

Theatre of the Oppressed is published by Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 520 Eighth Avenue, 24th Floor, New York, NY 10018-4156.

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This publication is made possible in part with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts, a State Agency.

TCG books are exclusively distributed to the book trade by Consortium Book Sales and Distribution, 1045 Westgate Drive, St. Paul, MN 55114.

Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN-13: 978-0-930452-49-0
ISBN-10: 0-930452-49-6

First TCG Edition, 1985
Eleventh Printing, January 2011

*For my son
Fabian Silbert
and for
Andrea, Karina, and Pablo Galak*

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FOREWORD

This book attempts to show that all theater is necessarily political, because all the activities of man are political and theater is one of them.

Those who try to separate theater from politics try to lead us into error — and this is a political attitude.

In this book I also offer some proof that the theater is a weapon. A very efficient weapon. For this reason one must fight for it. For this reason the ruling classes strive to take permanent hold of the theater and utilize it as a tool for domination. In so doing, they change the very concept of what "theater" is. But the theater can also be a weapon for liberation. For that, it is necessary to create appropriate theatrical forms. Change is imperative.

This work tries to show some of the fundamental changes and how the people have responded to them. "Theater" was the people singing freely in the open air; the theatrical performance was created by and for the people, and could thus be called dithyrambic song. It was a celebration in which all could participate freely. Then came the aristocracy and established divisions: some persons will go to the stage and only they will be able to act; the rest will remain seated, receptive, passive — these will be the spectators, the masses, the people. And in order that the spectacle may efficiently reflect the dominant ideology, the aristocracy established another division: some actors will be protagonists (aristocrats) and the rest will be the chorus — symboliz-

ing, in one way or another, the mass. Aristotle's coercive system of tragedy shows us the workings of this type of theater.

Later came the bourgeoisie and changed these protagonists: they ceased to be objects embodying moral values, superstructural, and became multidimensional subjects, exceptional individuals, equally separated from the people, as new aristocrats — this is the poetics of *virtù* of Machiavelli.

Bertolt Brecht reacts to this poetics by taking the character theorized by Hegel as absolute subject and converting him back into an object. But now he is an object of social forces, not of the values of the superstructures. Social being determines thought, and not vice versa.

What was lacking to complete the cycle was what is happening at present in Latin America — the destruction of the barriers created by the ruling classes. First, the barrier between actors and spectators is destroyed: all must act, all must be protagonists in the necessary transformations of society. This is the process I describe in "Experiments with the People's Theater in Peru." Then the barrier between protagonists and choruses is destroyed: all must be simultaneously chorus and protagonist — this is the "Joker" system. Thus we arrive at the *poetics of the oppressed*, the conquest of the means of theatrical production.

Augusto Boal

Buenos Aires
July, 1974

1

ARISTOTLE'S COERCIVE SYSTEM OF TRAGEDY

[Athens] was governed in the name of the people, but in the spirit of the nobility. . . . The only "progress" consisted in the displacement of the aristocracy of birth by an aristocracy of money, of the clan state by a plutocratic rentier state. . . . She was an imperialistic democracy, carrying on a policy which gave benefits to the free citizens and the capitalists at the cost of the slaves and those sections of the people who had no share in the war profits.

* * * * *

Tragedy is the characteristic creation of Athenian democracy; in no form of art are the inner conflicts of its social structure so directly and clearly to be seen as in this. The externals of its presentation to the masses were democratic, but its content, the heroic sagas with their tragi-heroic outlook on life, was aristocratic. . . . It unquestionably propagates the standards of the great-hearted individual, the uncommon distinguished man . . . it owed its origin to the separation of the choir-leader from the choir, which turned collective performance of songs into dramatic dialogue. . . .

* * * * *

The tragedians are in fact state bursars and state purveyors — the state pays them for the plays that are performed, but naturally does not allow pieces to be performed that would run counter to its policy or the interests of the governing classes. The tragedies are frankly tendentious and do not pretend to be otherwise.

Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*¹

Introduction

The argument about the relations between theater and politics is as old as theater and . . . as politics. Since Aristotle, and in fact since long before, the same themes and arguments that are still brandished were already set forth. On one hand, art is affirmed to be pure contemplation, and on the other hand, it is considered to present always a vision of the world in transformation and therefore is inevitably political insofar as it shows the means of carrying out that transformation or of delaying it.

Should art educate, inform, organize, influence, incite to action, or should it simply be an object of pleasure? The comic poet Aristophanes thought that "the dramatist should not only offer pleasure but should, besides that, be a teacher of morality and a political adviser." Eratosthenes contradicted him, asserting that the "function of the poet is to charm the spirits of his listeners, never to instruct them." Strabo argued: "Poetry is the first lesson that the State must teach the child; poetry is superior to philosophy because the latter is addressed to a minority while the former is addressed to the masses." Plato, on the contrary, thought that the poets should be expelled from a perfect republic because "poetry only makes sense when it exalts the figures and deeds that should serve as examples; theater imitates the things of the world, but the world is no more than a mere imitation of ideas — thus theater comes to be an imitation of an imitation."

As we see, each one has his opinion. Is this possible? Is the

relation of art to the spectator something that can be diversely interpreted, or, on the contrary, does it rigorously obey certain laws that make art either a purely contemplative phenomenon or a deeply political one? Is one justified in accepting the poet's declared intentions as an accurate description of the course followed in his works?

Let us consider the case of Aristotle, for example, for whom poetry and politics are completely different disciplines, which must be studied separately because they each have their own laws and serve different purposes and aims. To arrive at these conclusions, Aristotle utilizes in his *Poetics* certain concepts that are scarcely explained in his other works. Words that we know in their current connotation change their meaning completely if they are understood through the *Nicomachean Ethics* or the *Magna Moralia*.

Aristotle declares the independence of poetry (lyric, epic, and dramatic) in relation to politics. What I propose to do in this work is to show that, in spite of that, Aristotle constructs the first, extremely powerful poetic-political system for intimidation of the spectator, for elimination of the "bad" or illegal tendencies of the audience. This system is, to this day, fully utilized not only in conventional theater, but in the TV soap operas and in Western films as well: movies, theater, and television united, through a common basis in Aristotelian poetics, for repression of the people.

But, obviously, the Aristotelian theater is not the only form of theater.

Art Imitates Nature

The first difficulty that we face in order to understand correctly the workings of tragedy according to Aristotle stems from the very definition which that philosopher gives of art. What is art, any art? For him, it is an imitation of nature. For us, the word "imitate" means to make a more or less perfect copy of an original model. Art would, then, be a copy of nature. And "nature" means the whole of created things. Art would, therefore, be a copy of created things.

But this has nothing to do with Aristotle. For him, to imitate (*mimesis*) has nothing to do with copying an exterior model. "Mimesis" means rather a "re-creation." And nature is not the whole of created things but rather the creative principle itself. Thus when Aristotle says that art imitates nature, we must understand that this statement, which can be found in any modern version of the *Poetics*, is due to a bad translation, which in turn stems from an isolated interpretation of that text. "Art imitates nature" actually means: "Art re-creates the creative principle of created things."

In order to clarify a little more the process and the principle of "re-creation" we must, even if briefly, recall some philosophers who developed their theories before Aristotle.

The School of Miletus.

Between the years 640 and 548 B.C., in the Greek city of

Miletus, lived a very religious oil merchant, who was also a navigator. He had an immovable faith in the gods; at the same time, he had to transport his merchandise by sea. Thus he spent a great deal of his time praying to the gods, begging them for good weather and a calm sea, and devoted the rest of his time to the study of the stars, the winds, the sea, and the relations between geometrical figures. Thales — this was the Greek's name — was the first scientist to predict an eclipse of the sun. A treatise on nautical astronomy is also attributed to him. As we see, Thales believed in the gods but did not fail to study the sciences. He came to the conclusion that the world of appearances — chaotic and many-sided though it was — actually was nothing more than the result of diverse transformations of a single substance, water. For him, water could change into all things, and all things could likewise be transformed into water. How did this transformation take place? Thales believed that things possessed a "soul." Sometimes the soul could become perceptible and its effects immediately visible: the magnet attracts the iron — this attraction is the "soul." Therefore, according to him, the soul of things consists in the movement inherent in things which transforms them into water and that, in turn, transforms the water into things.

Anaximander, who lived not long afterward (610-546 B.C.) held similar beliefs, but for him the fundamental substance was not water, but something indefinable, without predicate, called *apeiron*, which according to him, created things through either condensing or rarifying itself. The *apeiron* was, for him, divine, because it was immortal and indestructible.

Another of the philosophers of the Milesian school, Anaximenes, without varying to any great extent from the conceptions just described, affirmed that air was the element closest to immateriality, thus being the primal substance from which all things originated.

In these three philosophers a common trait can be noted: the search for a single substance whose transformations give birth to all known things. Furthermore, the three argue, each in his own way, for the existence of a transforming force, immanent to the substance — be it air, water, or *apeiron*. Or four elements, as Empedocles asserted (air, water, earth, and fire); or numbers, as Pythagoras believed. Of all of them, very few written texts have come down to us. Much more has remained of Heraclitus, the first dialectician.

Heraclitus and Cratylus.

For Heraclitus, the world and all things in it are in constant flux, and the permanent condition of change is the only unchangeable thing. The appearance of stability is a mere illusion of the senses and must be corrected by reason.

And how does change take place? Well, all things change into fire, and fire into all things, in the same manner that gold is transformed into jewelry which can in turn be transformed into gold again. But of course gold does not transform itself; it is transformed. There is someone (the jeweler), foreign to the matter gold, who makes the transformation possible. For Heraclitus, however, the transforming element would exist within the thing itself, as an opposing force. "War is the mother of all things; opposition unifies, for that which is separated creates the most beautiful harmony; all that happens, only happens because there is struggle." That is to say, each thing carries within itself an antagonism which makes it move from what it is to what it is not.

To show the constantly changing nature of all things, Heraclitus used to offer a concrete example: nobody can step into the same river twice. Why? Because on the second attempt it will not be the same waters that are running, nor will it be exactly the same person who tries it, because he will be older, even if by only a few seconds.

His pupil, Cratylus, even more radical, would say to his teacher that nobody can go into a river even once, because upon going in, the waters of the river are already moving (which waters would he enter?) and the person who would attempt it would already be aging (who would be entering, the older or the younger one?). Only the movement of the waters is eternal, said Cratylus; only aging is eternal; only movement exists: all the rest is appearance.

Parmenides and Zeno.

On the extreme opposite of those two defenders of movement, of transformation, and of the inner conflict which promotes change, was Parmenides, who took as the point of departure for the creation of his philosophy a fundamentally logical premise: being is and non-being is not. Actually it would be absurd to think the opposite and, said Parmenides, absurd thoughts are not real. There is, therefore, an identity between being and thinking, ac-

Pages have been omitted from this book preview.



"Boal and his work are marvelous examples of the post-modern situation—its problems and its opportunities. Twice exiled, Boal is 'at home' now wherever he finds himself to be. He makes a skeptical, comic, inquisitive and finally optimistic theatre involving spectators and performers in the search for community and integrity. This is a good book to be used even more than to be read." —Richard Schechner

"Augusto Boal's achievement is so remarkable, so original and so groundbreaking that I have no hesitation in describing the book as the most important theoretical work in the theatre in modern times—a statement I make without having suffered any memory lapse with respect to Stanislavsky, Artaud or Grotowski." —George E. Wellwarth

Originally basing himself at the Arena Stage in São Paulo, Brazil, Augusto Boal developed a series of imaginative theatre exercises which promote awareness of one's social situation and its limitations, individual attitudes, and even how our bodies are bound by tradition. Boal is currently continuing his explorations in Paris, where he directs Le CEDITADE (Centre d'Etude et de Diffusion des Techniques Actives d'Expression—Méthode Boal), in addition to traveling and lecturing extensively in other countries. *Theatre of the Oppressed* combines analysis and practice, making it indispensable to those interested in dramatic theory as well as performance technique.

ISBN 978-0-930452-49-0



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\$15.95