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Rehearsing a Revolution: The Education of the Oppressed



What does revolutionary artwork look like to you? What about revolutionary theatre? In 2021, many would respond with an example like Lin Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton: An American Musical* or Jeremy O. Harris' *Slave Play*. Works such as these were created with a particular experience, often revolving around race and systemic oppression, in order to reach an audience that often would not experience and/or experience a lived experience such as that being presented to them. For reasons like this, members of the theatre, whether they are involved in the production or in the audience, celebrate the inclusivity and revolutionary nature of theater. However, how true is this assessment? Speaking specifically for the West, as that is my experience, theatre is viewed as a *luxury*, rather than a prominent social and cultural aspect of communication in society. Often, theatre-goers and those taking part are middle-upper class, white, and well-educated. They have the resources and time necessary to not only afford tickets, Epperson 2 but to afford the education and training necessary to make a career in the theatre. Therefore, the boasting of accessible and revolutionary theatre is a fabrication, a mere projection of how white people perceive theatre in the West, without acknowledging the systemic privilege

they have in such a space. So, now we are left wondering how to make theatre as revolutionary and assessable as we wish to the general public? Augusto Boal addresses this dilemma in his work, *Theatre of the Oppressed*. This paper will look into understanding how the combination of Boal's and Guevara's works combat our concepts of conventional Western theatre, specifically Broadway, as a gatekeeper for a prestigious form of art, and how they instead reorient theatre to be both by and for the people to rehearse revolution.

The most essential way in which Boal begins to tear down the barriers of Western theatre is by removing the role of the audience completely. Rather than observing and being mere spectators, members of the what-would-be audience are not "spect-actors." This transformation gives them an active role to be playing throughout the performances, rather than just observing the action. Typically these members would be passive beings in the "phenomenon" of theater, but are not active members who are expected and given the permission to explore, depict, analyze, and ultimately transform their societies. Rather than simplifying the art being created as revolutionary as we established many do, Boal argues that theater is the "rehearsal of revolution." Prior to being enrolled in Theater 126, I took Introduction to Performance Studies with Julia Fawcett where we practiced as a class being members of Theatre of the Oppressed. As a group we were given and selected multiple scenarios to play through in groups and all together, involving real world problems that we would likely encounter and feel needed reform. As a community, we went through the possibilities of outcomes, adapting and giving feedback until we felt as if we came to an agreement on reform. This demonstrates the beneficial ways in which Epperson 3 removing the passive spectator can provide the rehearsal of revolution as Boal claims, giving members of the community the tools to analyze and respond to dilemmas in their societies.

According to Boal's concepts, the inclusion of the audience into the performance would break down barriers not only in the theater, but in society as a whole. By removing the passivity of the spectator, spect-actors would be empowered to physicalize the changes they have discovered they want in their everyday lives. Spect-actors are treated as equals to the actors, therefore giving them a sense of inclusion and empowerment that they may not be receiving within their communities at a larger scale. Ruling classes are not present in the theater, removing the delegative aspect of theater to characters and plot, but inviting the spect-actors to think, act, and feel for themselves, rather than how they are told to. In another article discussing Boal and Che Guerara, Zeca Ligiéro writes that Boal "places the audience as the great social actor," suggesting that it is not the actors and production that produce change and revolution, but the audiences that are playing and thinking as themselves, gaining full access to their "free will to choose his own destiny."

The idea of Theater of the Oppressed can also be found in implementation in Cuba, though Che Guevara may disagree with aspects of the comparison, there is a shared belief between him and Boal. Guevara writes about the interception of art and revolution in his short piece "On Art and Revolution." Similarly to Boal, Guevara says that "solitary individuals... they seek communion with their environment," which encapsulates the concept of interactive theater involving a spect-actor. Individuals are drawn to create and interact together, reacting to their shared oppression by the institutions and politics by creating art via reaction. In Guevara's work he argues that "there are no great artists of great authority who at the same time have great revolutionary authority." The analysis of this is not black and white, however, but to look at this Epperson 4 statement in relation to other ideas. Combining Boal's and Guevara's ideas, this idea is saying that with the utilization and inclusion of everyone as active members of the theater,

there is no singular great artist with authority. In Ligiéro's article, he cites Boal as saying 'we' as a being "are theatre." This is an inherent quality of life, even without our knowledge, humans and their relationships are theatrical, with the combinations of "space, body language, choice of words," and everything in between. This confirms that while there may not be a singular figure as Guevara says, we as a community are theatrical revolutionaries. The primary purpose behind Boal's theater and Guevara's propaganda is to mobilize and empower people to make change.

Furthermore, Guevara discusses how following the acceptance that artists may not be revolutionary figures as we imagine, parties must ultimately be the ones responsible for achieving their main goal, "the education of the people." Analyzing this with the lens of Boal, the similarities are apparent. Boal, too, is concerned with the education and empowerment of his fellow community members. Their key difference is in the ways in which they seek to educate, with Guevara opting for radio and newspapers, and Boal to interactive theater. By directly placing the audience into the scenarios they are wishing to escape from, Boal is empowering them to analyze their lives and societies. Boal says that when the audience is able to look past the surface, people "see oppressors and oppressed people... we see an unfair and cruel world." The collective work being done opens people's eyes to the ways in which their societies are run, rather than living in willful ignorance to the status quo. He is giving them the space in which to develop the necessary tools to critically analyze the world around them as well as work through possible reforms to mediate the systemic issues at hand. This does not suggest that revolution is as simple as analyzation and decision making. Rather, the development of the tools is an insurmountable first step in order for people to actually be equipped to address ignorance Epperson 5 and lack of resources to confront their oppressive societies. As Boal says to Ligiéro, "we are all actors: being a citizen is not living in society, it is changing it."