

Alternating Between Flow and Reflexivity: Transformational Dramaturgy of Boal and Semiotic Autonomy of Spect-actor

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Abstract

In experimental modes of performance and especially Postdramatic theatre, the question of spectatorship has become the core of theatrical aesthetics. In his *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Augusto Boal introduced a transformational dramaturgy derived from Brechtian aesthetics, in which theatre is treated as 'event' and performed through devices of 'interruption', 'dialogism', 'polyvocality', 'detachment' and 'de-representation'. Boal modeled his audience members 'Spect-actors' who when invited on stage oscillate between 'flow and 'reflexivity'; between the character and speaking about the character. This paper explores Boal's theoretical framework in an attempt to reveal how his unique style of performance transforms a spectator into an actor who transports between the 'real world' and 'world of performance'. The paper reveals how the use of interruption as a technique enables the spectator to use/deploy his/her intellectual and semiotic capabilities. The paper explores the significance of 'interruption' as theatrical device in liberating the spectator through restoring his/her semiotic autonomy.

Keywords: Interruption; Spect-actor; Postdramatic; Theatre of the Oppressed; Semiotic

Introduction

The new dramaturgies that have emerged in twentieth century European theatrical tradition have been shaped by turn towards 'performance' which has repudiated the earlier traditional elements of theatre aesthetics. Lehman's term Postdramatic Theatre captures the essence of this paradigm shift in the performance environment of Europe that has witnessed the emergence of a number of alternative and innovative dramaturgies. The 'turn towards performance' has caused a *de-hierarchization* of theatrical means and opened up 'spectatorship' as an important field of inquiry in theatrical aesthetics. Although, the audience–actor relationship was a well known field to the earlier performance traditions in Europe and the world, performance studies has added new dimensions to the dynamics of this relationship. "The theatre that Lehmann identifies as postdramatic often focuses on 'exploring the usually unacknowledged anxieties, pressures, pleasures, paradoxes and perversities that surround the performance situation' and as such.... the turn to performance is at the same time "a turn towards the audience, as well". The complex dynamics of this relationship can be observed at the centre of the new alternative dramaturgies of postdramatic theatre. As Malgorzata Sugiera states:

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Nowadays the basic structural principle of texts written for the theatre increasingly often turns out to be their immanent theatricality, which is, however, no longer understood as a reflection upon theatre as a domain of artistic activity or as an extensive metaphor of human life, but rather as a means of inducing the audience to watch themselves as subjects which perceive, acquire knowledge and partly create the objects of their cognition.²

One of the most radical and revolutionary methods that has attempted to reposition audiences as reflexive subjects was proposed by the Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal. Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed provides opportunities for performance that involves the co-presence of performers and spectators and employs materials and techniques to create theatre as 'event', as a process of emergence rather than representation. The aim of this mode of performance is to transform a spectator into an actor who oscillates between the 'real world' and 'world of performance'. Boal considered his theatre a language, not a spectacle, which was accessible to all.

Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) developed from experiments in participatory and interactive theatre in 1960s at Arena Theatre in Rio de Janeiro. TO was influenced by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) which provided the source for his pedagogical and political principles and his revolutionary education methods. According to Freire, "People are the experts in their own lives; that any work towards freedom from oppression must be based on 'trust in the oppressed and their ability to reason'".³ He developed his dramaturgy around his vision of the transformative power of theatre. In the beginning of his book *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed* (2006), Boal declares: "We must all do theatre – to find out who we are and to discover who we could become."⁴ Boal's TO seeks the transformation of society through the liberation of the oppressed. In this regard, Boal explains: "It is both action in itself, and a preparation for future actions. As we all know, it is not enough to interpret reality: it is necessary to transform it!"⁵ This vision of transformation led him to the idea of a theatre that has its genesis and essence in bodied experience. Consequently, the entire aesthetics of his theatre has been centered on the innumerable possibilities of the embodied communication. He perceived theatre as language and the human body is the first vocabulary of this language. He recognized that humans have a unique ability to take action in the world while simultaneously observing themselves in action. And because we can observe ourselves in action, we can amend, adjust and alter our actions for different impact and for changing our world. He considers human being as a self-contained theatre, an actor and spectator in one. The Preface to the 2008 edition of his book *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1974) states:

...Now, I am more concerned with human beings as theatre. I was a teacher of theatre. Now, I understand that there is no such thing. Those, like myself, who are teachers – and students – of theatre, in reality we are students and teachers of human beings. This book can be read again from that perspective. When we study Shakespeare we must be conscious that we are not studying the history of the theatre, but learning about the history of the humanity. We are discovering ourselves. Above all: we are discovering that we can change ourselves and change the world. Nothing

² Sugiera 2004, 26.

³ Freire 1996, 48.

⁴ Boal 2006, 1.

⁵ Boal 2006, 6



is going to remain the way it is. Let us in the present, study the past, so as to invent the future.⁶

Boal's proposed a dramaturgy that functions through 'spect-actor', a newly coined term to bridge the gap between actor and spectator. The separation between actor and spectator has been one of the defining features of European tradition of performance. Boal envisioned a complete liberation of the individual through the fusion spectator and actor. Consequently, Boal came up with a mode performance that has employed theatre as a potential political weapon of change in socio-political life of people. He stated his conception of theatre as a tool for change:

This book attempts to show that all theatre is necessarily political, because all the activities of man are political and theatre is one of them. Those who try to separate theatre from politics try to lead us into error – and this is a political attitude. In this book I also offer some proof that the theatre is a weapon. A very efficient weapon.... In so doing, they change the very concept of what 'theatre' is. But the theatre can also be a weapon for liberation. For that, it is necessary to create appropriate theatrical forms. Change is imperative.⁷

Theatre of the Oppressed and Freedom of Artist

Boal's entire dramaturgy seems to operate on the dynamics of the relationship between spectator and actor. He declares: "By gradually eliminating whatever proved superfluous, we found that theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc. It cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, "live" communion".⁸ He Boal observes that the roots of actor-spectator relationship go back to the ancient Greek tradition. He located the genesis of the art of theatre in an attitude of a complete freedom from all sorts of restrictions that the societies and cultures impose on us. But historically, in the performance tradition, the artist has been separated from his creative freedom by introducing the choreographer, dramatic poet and all the other necessary preconditions of the performance. He argues, "A necessary contradiction. When it was free, the body could invent the dance, which came from inside; free, the body could dance in space and time. The choreographer turned up and charted the movement, explained the gesture, defined the rhythm, and limited the space. The dramatic poet came and wrote his verses. No more freed thought and creative chaos".⁹ These developments, he believes were forms of corruption that have taken away the creative freedom of the artist.

Boal exemplifies his observation through a reference to Thespis from the Greek tradition, who as a true artist with an independent thought, created the concept of protagonist. But this creative freedom of the artist was not agreed upon and tolerated by Solon, the dictator of that time, as it might infuse people with a sense of free thought and independent consciousness. But Thespis as a true and independent artist developed the character that differs from actor through mask. He had invented the Mask and Costume for theatre. And this was the beginning of the separation between the Actor and character: Man and Mask in Greek theatre.

⁶ Boal 2008, IX.

⁷ Boal 2008, XXIII.

⁸ Grotowski 1968, 19.

⁹ Boal 2008, XI.

Greek theatre in those times was subject to censorship which striped off the creative freedom of the art of theatre thereby making it identical with hypocrisy.

Boal considered this separation as the initial corruption in theatre art which was further aggravated by the Aristotlian concept of *empathia* for incapacitating the spectators of independent thinking. Boal quotes Bertolt Brecht who has made a suggestion in this regard: “This *empathia* was all right for the ruling classes; but it would not suit the workers, for it helps to perpetuate exploitation”.¹⁰ Later, Brecht introduced another method i.e. *verfremdungseffect* meaning ‘distancing’; it refers to the person who observes, thinks and draws his or her own conclusions without emotional identification. With this *V-effect*, Brecht removed the mask of the performer who now replaced the character to be the real protagonist.

However, in Brecht’s dramaturgy the unbridgeable gap between stage and audience remained intact. The theatrical stage with its occupied ‘space’ was the private or personal property, space or territory of the playwright where he or she and the actor speaks the truth for the spectator and determines the dialogue. Boal’s TO is a step forward in the cycle of development in the theatrical aesthetics which set free not only the critical conscience of the spectator but its physical body also to use the stage and participate to change the image that is presented there in the performance.

Theatre of the Oppressed and Aesthetic Process

Boal’s TO constitutes a structure of performance that has made the means of theatre available to common man for performing/expressing in an artistic way. His designed dramaturgy focuses on the aesthetic process that every individual needs to utilize for realizing a sense of truth and meaning of existing reality. And to acquire this aesthetic process, one needs only to be a human being rather than a trained artist. Boal has realized that theatre is instinctual to human being. Therefore, a common man in the street is a potential performer for him. He states:

Though only some people are given the title of Artist, the truth is that each and every human being is, *substantively*, an artist. ... The Artist is, like any of us, who is capable of seeing Sets in which analogies and complementarities unify things which are not the same – for this reason, he or she can live in society. ... The Artist penetrates the unicity of being, as if searching for his or her complement, or searching for him – or herself – for his or her Identity in Alterity.¹¹

One of the primary functions of Boal’s TO was to train and refine this instinctual aesthetic process in every individual so that they may use all the capabilities of their body for theatrical and creative expression. Boal claims:

For the Aesthetics of the Oppressed, the most important thing is the Aesthetic Process which develops the perceptions of the person who practices it, though it may be very desirable that it culminates in an Artistic Product – the finished work of art – for its amplificatory social power. ... The Aesthetic Process allows the subjects to exercise themselves in activities which are usually denied them, thus expanding their expressive and perceptive possibilities. ... We should be clear about the fact that the Aesthetic Process is not the Work of Art. Its importance and its value reside in its

¹⁰ Boal 2008, 24

¹¹ Boal 2006, 17-18.



stimulation and development of perceptive and creative capacities which may be atrophied in the subject – in developing the capacity, however small it may be, that every subject has for metaphorizing reality. We are all artists, but few of us exercise our aesthetic capacities.¹²

Boal's performance aesthetics relies on this aesthetic process for transforming every spectator into 'Spect-actor', who can invade the stage and alter the existing narrative of the reality as per his/her understanding of it.

Theatre of the Oppressed and Possibility of an Alternative Reality

The Theatre of the Oppressed explores and creates the possibility for an alternative reality to be performed by 'Spect-actor'. A change and complete transformation of consciousness of the 'Spect-actor' is expected. This revolutionary function of his theatre has transformed it into a potential political weapon for attempting change in the existing socio-political reality and creating space for autonomy of thinking. Boal declares: "Without an autonomous metaphoric activity – which is what the Aesthetics of the Oppressed seeks to develop – the intelligence is paralyzed and the individual once again approaches the condition of hominid, where his evolution began! A long time back".¹³ As an essential element of his dramaturgy, the autonomous metaphoric activity plays a key role in transferring the freedom of thought to the common man so that they may live as subjects with consciousness. It enables the human beings in developing a sense of true knowledge which ultimately guides them in making right ethical choices. In this regard Boal claims: "The Aesthetics of the Oppressed aims at the liberation and fortification of metaphoric activity, of symbolic languages, of intelligence and sensitivity. It aims at the expansion of the perception that we have of the world".¹⁴ Boal's performance pattern aims to train the participants to have an independent perception of the existing socio-political reality.

Boal's philosophical reflections on the art of theatre have made him to realize the unique instinctual ability of human beings of creating metaphors. And later Boal proposed his TO to train and refine this unique ability. He argues: "Human being is the only animal capable of creating Metaphors. The more it 'metaphorises', the more human it becomes. All the arts are Metaphors and only human beings are artists".¹⁵ Therefore, through this realization, Boal attempts a democratization of theatre art for enabling people to create an alternative world of reality so that they may change/alter it according to their right ethical choices. Further, Boal states: "In the Aesthetics of the Oppressed we concentrate our efforts and focus our attention on the creation of conditions in which the oppressed can develop fully their metaphoric world – their thought, their imagination and their capacity to symbolize, to dream, and to create parables and allegories, which allow them to see, from a certain distance, the reality they want to modify – without diminishing their participation in the social concrete world".¹⁶

Spect-actor and Complete Transformation of the Subject

Boal mapped the entire cycle of evolution and development of theatre art in European tradition before he proclaimed its zenith or end point i.e. Theatre of the Oppressed. He has

¹² Boal 2006, 18.

¹³ Boal 2006, 27.

¹⁴ Boal 2006, 43.

¹⁵ Boal 2006, 26.

¹⁶ Boal 2006, 40.

claimed to restore the theatre art to its natural root i.e. human body and make it a tool of transformation and liberation of human consciousness. The ideology of aristocracy in ancient Greece created the division between protagonist (aristocrats) and chorus (working class) through a system that allows some people to go on stage and act; others remain seated, passive, and receptive – these are the spectators, the masses, the people. This coercive system of drama or tragedy was introduced by Aristotle. Later, Machiavelli's poetics of *virtue* has separated the protagonist from masses by transforming it into a subject, a new aristocrat, with exceptional qualities. In twentieth century, Bertolt Brecht's Marxist poetics has made the dramatic character an object of socio-political and cultural forces, not of moral values of superstructures. Boal's paradigm completed this cycle of evolution and development of theatrical aesthetics in European tradition. Boal's 'spect-actor' has bridged the division or separation between actor and spectator and further between protagonist and chorus. He claims:

Aristotle proposes a poetics in which the spectator delegates power to the dramatic character so that the latter may think and act for him. Brecht proposes a poetics in which the spectator delegates the power to the character who thus acts in his place but the spectator reserves the right to think for himself, often in opposition to the character. In the first case, a 'catharsis' occurs; in the second, an awakening of critical consciousness. But the *poetics of the oppressed* focuses on the action itself: the spectator delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or to think in his place; on the contrary, he himself assumes the protagonic role, change the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change – in short, trains himself for real action. In this case, perhaps the theatre is not revolutionary in itself, but it is surely a rehearsal for the revolution. The liberated spectator, as a whole person, launches into action. No matter that the action is fictional; what matters is that it is action.¹⁷

In Boal's scheme of things, the spectator assumes the role of the actor and pervades the stage and offers solutions. In this process of transformation the spectator became 'spect-actor' who achieves complete liberation and autonomy. The 'spect-actor' who exists simultaneously both in the fictional/theatrical world and the real world, can make necessary changes/modification in fiction on stage and gets transformed himself/herself in the process. This invasion of the stage by the spectator epitomizes the infringement that one attempts to get freedom from his/her state of oppression, and the limits of cultural norms imposed. In this regard Boal states: "To free ourselves is to trespass, and to transform. It is through a creation of the new that which has not yet existed begins to exist. To free yourself is to trespass. To trespass is to exist. To free ourselves is to exist. To free yourself is to exist".¹⁸ Boal's 'spect-actor' transferred theatre to the audience as a tool of liberation of human self.

It was Boal's reaction against the political metaphysics of theatre that led him to christen his mode performance as Theatre of the Oppressed. As an organic structure of performance in the form of a tree, The Theatre of the Oppressed blossomed and grown in the fertile ground of Ethics, Politics, History and Philosophy as branches into diverse autonomous but interconnected forms of theatre i.e. Invisible Theatre, Forum Theatre, Image Theatre, Direct Action, Legislative Theatre etc. It has stopped the practice of making the stage a private property of the characters and replaced it with 'Joker' System of individual actors. The idea

¹⁷ Boal 2008, 98.

¹⁸ Boal 2008, XXII.



of this new theatre is introduced as a part of the experiments carried out in August 1973 in the cities of Lima and Chiclayo within the programme of the Integral Literacy Operation (ALFIN). Boal's model has brought the pedagogical potentialities of theatre to the surface and assigned a new function of liberating people to it. Boal argues: "The basic premise here is that by means of active embodiment, the students not only learn the material but also authorize it or at least share in the authorship of it. Understood as 'critical performative pedagogy,' this learn by-doing method situates the performing body at the center of theory and practice".¹⁹

Boal practiced theatre as a language which every individual can operate or use even without having any specific artistic talent for it. He states: "In conceptual terms, this crafting translates to the understanding that we construct a self and, in turn, we can construct a self in inventive and creative ways".²⁰ He further states: "Perhaps the most paramount of concepts behind Theatre of the Oppressed is the idea that theatre is the most human of all types of expression. Theatre is the human language par excellence. Some of us make theatre all of us are theatre".²¹ Boal has imagined it in the form of a tool of change and social transformation that people can sense and feel inside (in their body) rather than outside it. This theatre has substituted the traditional dichotomies like actor/spectator with a new vocabulary of theatre i.e. 'spect-actor'.

Augusto Boal's general plan of transforming the spectator into actor has been systematized into four seminal stages. These four stages i.e. *Knowing the body*, *Making the body expressive*, *The Theatre as Language*, *The theatre as Discourse*, denote a carefully worked out structure in a logical sequence to develop expressive ability of the body to communicate a reality which is beyond the reach of linguistic expression. Antonin Artaud writes: "I say that this concrete language, intended for the senses and independent of speech, has first to satisfy the senses, that there is a poetry of senses as there is a poetry of language, and that this concrete physical language to which I refer is truly theatrical only to the degree that the thought it expresses are beyond the reach of spoken language".²² He has developed specific *games* and *exercises* pertaining to each stage for the training of 'spect-actor'. "A physical action is more than movement, more than gesturing, more than activity. Physical action is extraordinary. It is exciting and original, and actions contain an actor's desires and wishes".²³ The 'spect-actor' through these four stages rehearses a real act even though in a fictional manner but his experience is a concrete one within its imaginary form. It arouses in him/her a wish to do in actuality the act they have rehearsed in theatre. Thus, Boal called it as *rehearsal-theatre* instead of *spectacle-theatre* which was the bourgeois theatre representing the image of a complete and finished world. *Rehearsal-theatre* permits and motivates the spectator to put questions, to dialogue, to participate.

Boal identified the possible difference of degrees in doing theatre as a form of language. At the first degree of this 'stage' *simultaneous dramaturgy* is possible when the spectators may compose simultaneously with the actors. The second degree denotes *image theatre* in which the intervention of spectators in the dramatic action is possible. The third degree as *forum theatre* corresponds to the direct intervention of spectators into the dramatic action. At this stage, the spectator acquires a creative autonomy and utilizes it to transform himself into 'spect-actor' who performs the action and observes his/her action simultaneously. Through his

¹⁹Pineau 2002, 41.

²⁰Truner 1982, 27.

²¹Boal 2008, 7.

²²Artaud, 1958, 37.

²³Richards 1995,76.

direct intervention into the dramatic action, 'spect-actor' creates a 'spectacle' of alternative reality according to his/her ethical choice. At this stage, theatre functions as discourse and a host of forms like *newspaper theatre*, *invisible theatre*, *photo-romance theatre*, *myth theatre*, *trial theatre* etc. appears.

Discussion

Augusto Boal in the Preface to the 2000 edition – The Unruly Protagonist edition of his book *Theatre of the Oppressed* states:

I, Augusto Boal, want the Spectator to take on the role of Actor and invade the Character and the stage. I want him to occupy his own Space and offer solutions By taking possession of the stage, the Spect-Actor is consciously performing a responsible act. The stage is a representation of the reality, a fiction. But the Spect-Actor is not fictional. He exists in the scene and outside of it, in a dual reality. By taking possession of the stage in the fiction of the theatre he acts: not just in the fiction, but also in his social reality. By transforming fiction, he is transformed into himself.²⁴

In Boal's transformational dramaturgy, the theatrical positioning of the 'spect-actor' and its resultant semiotic autonomy is a crucial juncture in the functioning of his theatre as an 'act of liberation and change'. Situating the 'spect-actor' between the fictional and the real, in a dual reality, Boal's theatre enables him/her to create an autonomous metaphor of the existing social reality. On this duality of actor, Bertolt Brecht states:

One essential element of the street scene lies in the natural attitude of adopted by the demonstrator, which is two-fold; he is always taking two situations into account. He behaves naturally as a demonstrator, and he lets the subject of demonstration behave naturally too. He never forgets, nor does he allow it to be forgotten, that he is not the subject but the demonstrator. That is to say, what the audience sees is not a fusion between demonstrator and subject.... The feelings and opinions of demonstrator and demonstrated are not merged into one.... What is involved here is, briefly, a technique of taking the human social incidents to be portrayed and labeling them as something striking, something that calls for explanation is not to be taken for granted, not just natural.²⁵

Just as the Brechtian actor/performer existing simultaneously in a dual reality and alternate between the two (his/her natural self and character) without merging into one, Boal's 'spect-actor' also operates at the next level where the actor and spectator merged into one even without losing their individual identities. "To engage in Boal's 'therapy' is to become situated in a space between the individual and the socialized category of all such individuals – that is, between self as woman and social category of Woman, between self as peasant and the Proletariat, between self as black and Blacks. Both individual, concrete experiences and collective, cultural knowledge are forced to interplay".²⁶ Hence, Boal's 'spect-actor' that oscillates between two life situations (the fictional and the real) simultaneously, celebrates his/her semiotic autonomy in the 'act'. And his/her existence in dual reality enables him to

²⁴ Boal 2008, XXI.

²⁵ Brecht, 125.

²⁶ Schutzman 1994, 151.



perform as an actor and observer of his/her act simultaneously. Boal's dramaturgy has offered/allowed 'spect-actor' a freedom to make necessary changes/modifications in the script during the act. Participating in the 'dramatic act' and observing himself in that 'act' gives opportunity to the 'spect-actor' for generating/constructing his/her meaning/sense of the existing social reality.

Boal's experiments with theatre and his resultant mode of performance i.e. 'Theatre of the Oppressed' has been a great attempt at reinstituting theatre to its metaphysical root i.e. human body and making it available to the common people as a weapon for liberation and transformation. Through his revolutionary concept of 'spect-actor', a liberated and autonomous artist, Boal has *de-hierarchized* all the conventional means of theatre and located its essence in human body, the source of sound and movement.

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