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## Theater of the Recruits: Boal Techniques in the New York Police Academy

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Joey Lespérance in the  
Headlines Theatre  
production of *Mamu:  
The Currency of Life*,  
Vancouver, 1994.  
Photo: David Cooper.

SHARON GREEN

## BOAL AND BEYOND

### *Strategies for Creating Community Dialogue*

In 1991 I participated in a series of workshops with Augusto Boal in New York City at the Brecht Forum. His understanding and use of theater seemed to me at the time to be the missing piece in my own attempts to meld my activist and artistic spirits. I was immediately entranced by Boal's work and words and knew that this workshop—advertised as “theater for empowerment”—was a singularly important event in my life. Since then, I have remained involved with Boal's work as a student, scholar, educator, activist, and community member, and in the process, I have spoken and worked with many people who use Boal's techniques, or adapted versions of them, in their own work. Their descriptions of their first encounters with Boal echoed my own: many describe his workshops as stunning realizations. There is an extraordinary power in his foundational idea of transforming spectators into “spect-actors” who become active subjects in the theater rather than passive observers, thereby giving power, authority, and responsibility to the audience. Spect-actors are given the opportunity to rehearse active resistance to oppression in the theater, to “try out” different possibilities within the relative safety of the theater and evaluate the success of each. Through this process, spect-actors will be empowered, and better prepared, to deal with reality. The theater, Boal famously says, is a rehearsal for the revolution.

For what revolution, then, are North Americans rehearsing, as theater practitioners, mental health workers, and community activists incorporate his techniques into their work in schools, hospitals, community centers, and more—and especially as his work is taken up in venues of the privileged, such as private universities or less obviously oppressed communities? Boal himself has founded centers for his work in Paris and Rio, and, ever since a 1990 residency at New York University, has been offering workshops regularly in New York City. In addition, several other institutions, such as Doug Paterson's Center for the Theater of the Oppressed—Omaha and TOPLAB (Theater of the Oppressed Laboratory) in New York City, work with various community groups and regularly offer Theater of the Oppressed (T.O.) training workshops. Meanwhile,

theater departments at many colleges and universities teach Boal's techniques. This means that his ideas and their realization in a body of work composed of complex games and exercises are being integrated into work in classrooms, social service agencies, community centers, activist efforts, and more by people who have had varying degrees of training in T.O. techniques. While this proliferation is a thrilling indication of the power of Boal's work and the breadth of its resonance and relevance, it also raises urgent questions. How are practitioners, captivated by Boal's ideas and committed to some form of social change, adapting the techniques of Boal's "arsenal" for use in their own communities and contexts? What are the implications of these adaptations for both the efficacy and function of T.O. as a tool to combat oppression? What has it meant for Boal's practice to be relocated to contexts with very different power structures and divergent understandings of community, oppression, and empowerment?

In a different vein, but equally as important, I wonder why Theater of the Oppressed has become so popular. What is it about Boal's synthesis of theater and politics that appeals to so many? Is this simply a result of the accumulation of a critical mass that knows about or has experienced this work? Critic Baz Kershaw has suggested that the increasing commodification of the "theater estate," which, in line with capitalism, works to turn audiences into consumers, will make radicalism in theater ever more rare. Kershaw suggests that theater has become "the domain of the completely disempowered, where the audience is located at what should be the cutting edge of culture, the perfect place for self-reflexive critique (as Brecht saw it), only to be robbed of such power by their internalization of consumerism's capacity for commodifying the living body."<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this condition explains Boal's popularity, for T.O. offers the opportunity to reclaim the power for self-reflexive critique and to use theatrical tools for radical political practices. And perhaps the desire for a theatrical practice like T.O. reflects a nostalgia for a time when theater and politics were more actively engaged with one another, a time when theater could more readily be a radical and potent act of political intervention. Or perhaps, in a historical moment when locality and the homogeneity of communities are eroding at a rate comparable only to that experienced during the Industrial Revolution, the practice of T.O. allows its participants to imagine themselves more vividly as members of a meaningful community.

Many of these questions are easily addressed when one considers the numerous successful applications of Boal in North American prisons, impoverished neighborhoods, and other places where power imbalances are obvious, extreme, and severe. But when T.O. moves into elite colleges and high-priced workshops, does all this popularity threaten to sap its potency as a tool for cultural and political interventions? Is T.O. vulnerable to the same forces that Kershaw claims have turned much other political theater into commodities void of radical impulses? Does giving *everyone* access to a Theater of the Oppressed so dilute the political meaning of oppression that it becomes a useless concept? Answers to these questions lie in the murky overlap of optimism and critical interrogation.

Substantial support for the optimists can be found in the self-conscious, considered ways in which many artists and activists have selected and shaped Boal's techniques. Rather than viewing T.O. as a totalizing system, they see it as a box of malleable and versatile tools; they choose only those that will be helpful to their project and make adaptations as the context demands. Boal himself encourages this idea and sees the inherent need for specific contextual adaptations: "In each country, people have to adapt the method to their own culture, their own language, their own desires and needs. T. O. is not a Bible, nor a recipe book: it is a method to be used by people, and the people are more important than the method."<sup>2</sup>

Although this very openness can veil the techniques in a false sense of infinite mutability that precludes critique of T.O.'s basic structures, evidence of such productive adaptations can be found in a range of T.O.-influenced projects—for instance, at Headlines Theater in Vancouver and Mixed Company in Toronto—that effectively meld arts and community activism. The most recent international T.O. festival, hosted by Mixed Company in 1997 and billed as the Eighth International Ripple Effect Festival, showcased the work of groups from more than a dozen countries that have been influenced by Boal and have taken to heart his invitation to modify and invent on his themes.

One promising example is Hope Is Vital, originally based in Washington, D.C., where director and founder Michael Rohd has developed a body of theater techniques to stimulate discussion around issues of potential conflict, an approach that bears echoes of T.O. in both form and philosophy. The company began in 1992 as a collaboration between students in Rohd's high school drama class and a group of homeless men and women living with AIDS, with whom Rohd had been conducting drama workshops. Together they created theater centered on issues relating to AIDS and HIV. The success of the project inspired Rohd to refocus his professional energies and begin his own company dedicated to such work. He soon found himself traveling throughout the country, developing his techniques along the way, and discovering his own ability as a director to shape and sharpen the material a group generated into "activating" scenes that could be used as catalysts for community discussion. In the first years of the project, when Rohd was working primarily with youth through schools and community groups, he was asked by these institutions to use the techniques of Hope Is Vital to address an increasing range of issues, such as teen pregnancy, substance abuse, and violence. Rohd describes the techniques he honed through these projects in *Theater for Community, Conflict, and Dialogue: The Hope Is Vital Training Manual*.

Although many of the games described in this training manual owe a debt to T.O. or are adaptations of exercises in Boal's "arsenal," Rohd didn't meet Boal until 1995, when he attended the Pedagogy of the Oppressed conference in Omaha, Nebraska. He had, however, read the anthology of essays *Playing Boal* in 1994 and was inspired and excited to learn more about Boal's work.<sup>3</sup> But Rohd equally credits the improvisation work of Viola Spolin and the images created by directors JoAnne Akalaitis, Robert

Lepage, Ping Chong (of whose company Rohd is now a member), and Pina Bausch as major influences. He cites Oran Sandel (of Living Stage), Chris Vine (of the Creative Arts Team), Dorothy Heathcote, and numerous professors at Northwestern University as influencing his facilitation style—a combination of electric energy and genuine sensitivity that keeps everyone enthusiastically engaged.

At a week-long Hope Is Vital workshop I attended last summer, held on the Amherst College campus, many of the activities in which we participated bore a strong resemblance to elements of T.O.—in particular, many of the warm-up games and several of the improvisation games that incorporated Boal's Image Theater work. Still, Hope Is Vital is definitely not Theater of the Oppressed but rather Rohd's own creation, which has borrowed elements from T.O. and many other places, such as comedy improvisation structures and Cornerstone Theater's community-based work. (Rohd is now an associate artist with Cornerstone.) Nonetheless, the foundational principles of Hope Is Vital echo those of T.O. Rohd says that he works to create discussions in which participants can “practice for real life” and take action, exploring the consequences in a safe space.

#### FORUM THEATER: LIMITATIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

Some of the challenges of using Boal's techniques effectively in a heterogeneous North American context become obvious in the most often used T.O. structure, Forum Theater, which begins with the enactment of a scene in which a protagonist tries to overcome an oppression and spect-actors are invited to replace the protagonist at any point to try out their own solution. As the scene is played out with a range of variations, those assembled engage in a discussion of the oppression and how best to defeat it.

Many T.O. practitioners have noted that Forum Theater is most effective when used with groups that have similar investments in the issues being explored. But how often in North America do T.O. practitioners find themselves working with groups that have the same stake in the issues with which they are dealing? Based in particular on his work with street youth in Seattle, Marc Weinblatt, a longtime T.O. practitioner and now director of the Mandala Center for Awareness, Transformation, and Action in Port Townsend, Washington, cautions against making such presumptions based on identity. Within heterogeneous communities, among people with divergent political views, disagreements can erupt over how to read the power dynamics—in Boal's terms, whom to define as oppressed or oppressor.

Weinblatt describes one such incident that occurred during a Forum Theater performance on racism at a Washington high school. When Weinblatt asked the audience to suggest a course of action for the powerless character, a young skinhead raised his hand and asked to replace the racist white character in the scene, the character that the performers had envisioned as the powerful oppressor. Weinblatt asked the student, “You

feel this person is oppressed?” in order to affirm the structure of Forum work. Indeed, he was, the student said, because he was denied his “First Amendment right” to express his racist ideas. The skinhead replaced the racist character in the scene and explained that the First Amendment gave him the right to express his ideas and make racial slurs. Weinblatt acknowledges this was a particularly “tricky moment” but insists that giving the skinhead the opportunity to speak was important: “Rather than silencing him, pissing him off, and sending his anger further underground, we made the space for him to plead his case. All the cards were laid out on the table. However unpleasantly, he was addressing democracy.”<sup>4</sup> Though Boal traditionally allows spect-actors to replace only the protagonist—the person who has been identified as oppressed—Weinblatt has said that his adaptation enabled the school to have “a real dialogue.”<sup>5</sup>

But this adaptation raises ethical questions regarding the empowering potential of T.O. Did Forum Theater help the skinhead feel empowered to express his racist ideas? Could T.O. be used, in other cases, to reify and encourage oppression rather than interrogate it?<sup>6</sup> Can Forum Theater be adapted to engage such opposing viewpoints without forgetting who is truly oppressed?

The same questions came up at a Forum Theater performance I participated in at the 1998 meeting of the Association for Theater in Higher Education in San Antonio, Texas. Doug Paterson facilitated a workshop the first morning of the conference entitled “San Antonio, Homophobia, and the Arts” as a response to attacks on San Antonio’s Esperanza Center for Peace and Justice, a community education and arts center that had been denied funding from the city council in part because it had presented a gay and lesbian film festival. During that workshop the participants developed a Forum Theater piece that they decided to present at a later event in the conference, a plenary discussion called “Showdown on the Arts.” The scenario, which we presented in the lobby outside the conference room where the plenary would soon take place, depicted the artistic director of the Esperanza Center as the protagonist and members of San Antonio’s City Council, media, and others as the antagonists silencing and distorting the events and words of Esperanza. The artistic director of another local theater company sympathetic to the plight of the Esperanza Center was also featured in the scene. This character was a potential ally, but in the scene, he didn’t have enough strength to help the protagonist fight the oppressors.

Half an hour before the “Showdown,” the Forum actors began calling together the spect-actors in the lobby and hallways, where they performed the scene. When Paterson asked the audience to intervene and suggest other courses of action for the protagonist, a man immediately stepped forward from the crowd complaining, “That’s not the way it is.” Paterson encouraged him to replace the protagonist and enact his own solution. But he refused, telling us that we had all our facts wrong. He said that he wanted to replace the character of the city council member who had cut the Esperanza Center’s funding. There was a moment of confusion as Paterson explained the “rules” of Forum to the

man, and the man became more insistent. After a few minutes we all realized that this man actually *was* one of the members of the San Antonio city council responsible for denying the funding to the arts center: Jack Finger. Paterson reiterated the rules of Forum — that Finger must replace someone he felt was oppressed within the scene — and encouraged him to participate in a “theatricalized” dialogue. Finger refused. As in the case of the high school skinhead, the difficulty here lay in the fact that not everyone agreed on the oppression; Finger felt that the city council’s use of its power was justified, rather than oppressive. Can T.O. engage such diametrically opposed perspectives in a dialogue? Should, and perhaps more urgently, *can* a technique that seeks to give the means of theatrical production back to the people in their struggles against oppression, a technique which strives to interrogate oppressive power structures, also strive to be “democratic” by giving equal space to *all* voices, opinions, and political perspectives?

There are other ways in which the promise of Boal to “transform theater into a democratic arena” runs into obstacles.<sup>7</sup> I have been in T.O. workshops that, as a direct result of the facilitator’s power to direct the way in which issues were addressed, were more manipulative than liberating. Boal may have an extraordinary skill for creating an atmosphere of democracy, but as the techniques of T.O. are practiced by a greater number of people, realization of its radical potential will more and more lie in their hands.

#### TOWARD A CONCLUSION

At a T.O. training at the Mandala Center I attended last summer, director Weinblatt asked the mostly white, mostly middle-class participants to think of a story they could tell about a moment when they felt oppressed, and a long pause followed. While the tension within that pause may on the surface seem to reflect only a semantic issue, it indicates a larger translation problem. Weinblatt has noted that the idea of oppression, and even the word itself, often has little resonance with the audiences that tend to turn out at workshops, whether the workshops are free or cost upward of \$200 to attend. Some T.O. practitioners have chosen to exchange *oppression* for a word that has greater cogency for the audiences with whom they work. They also acknowledge that they are not doing “Boal’s” style of T.O., but their own, adapted version. Seattle Public Theater calls its T.O. work Theater of Liberation. In Vancouver, David Diamond, artistic director of Headlines Theater, calls his work Theater for Living.

While Forum Theater remains a useful tool for generating dialogue among people with similar stakes in issues, the Boal technique that Weinblatt says “embraces the U.S. experience better” is Rainbow of Desire, the name for T.O. techniques that focus on internalized oppressions and explore the conflicting forces that impinge on both our desires and our decisions. Forum Theater’s emphasis on similarity of experience, Weinblatt says, runs counter to the dominant American paradigm of individualism, while Rainbow of Desire techniques allow a deeper exploration of the experiences of privilege

and guilt among those who seek to make the world a more just place but for whom oppression is not part of their daily experience. It moves away from the dynamic of one oppressor and one oppressed to explore the multitude of voices, personae, and forces that act together to create oppressive conditions.

Weinblatt worked with T.O. techniques for almost eight years at the Seattle Public Theater before opening the Mandala Center last year, where Boal-inspired exercises have been combined with New Age philosophies, various sorts of bodywork, and other self-actualization methods to create “a multi-disciplinary educational organization dedicated to community dialogue, social justice and personal transformation” that “invites people to be more awake and alive as well as empowered to take action toward a more just and joyous life for all people.”<sup>8</sup> Weinblatt is also a massage therapist and registered counselor whose repertoire includes Sacred Theater workshops, which combine theater exercises with “meditation and energy work” for “therapy and transformation.” In addition, Weinblatt facilitates such workshops as “anti-racism for white folks,” “youth and police forum,” and “African-Americans and Jews.” The latter two bring together groups between whom there is much tension in an effort to use theatrical tools to generate dialogue.

“Transformation is my goal,” he says, adding that he is not interested in differentiating between personal and political transformation. Weinblatt maintains (as does Boal) that the transformation of self and the world are implicitly and complexly woven together as part of the same story.

Weinblatt’s adaptation may sound less militant than Boal’s famous declaration in *Theater of the Oppressed* that “theater is a weapon, and it is the people who should wield it,” but this rousing principle of transferring the means of production in theater to the people has inspired many who desire to be catalysts for social and political change in a range of circumstances quite different from those of illiterate peasants in Peru. It is a simple yet radical idea that has captivated artists and activists across the globe and offered numerous people opportunities to reclaim the role of protagonist in their own lives, albeit momentarily. Even for those North Americans who struggle to find a story to share about a moment in their lives when they have felt oppressed, T.O. provides structures through which to clarify issues and to explore ways in which they can join struggles against racism, ultraconsumerism, and other problems in which they may be implicated even if they are not directly oppressed. In the face of corporate power and entrenched, systemic racism, sexism, heterosexism, and so on, even those with material comfort and privilege can feel helpless in their efforts to support social change. *Theater of the Oppressed* continues to offer a means through which such feelings of powerlessness can be overcome.

Most of all, in times when we are constantly bombarded with representations of what we should want, be, and do, T.O.’s foundational principle of giving people the power of self-representation remains potent and promising. *Theater of the Oppressed*

also offers everyone the opportunity to participate in the potentially transformative process of making theater. Nowadays, when theater and activism seem less integrally engaged than they may have been twenty-five years ago, T.O. provides a way to use theatrical tools for radical political practices. And perhaps this explains why, despite its limitations or the need for substantive adaptations, the use of T.O. continues to grow exponentially.

The fact that T.O. resonates for so many, is used by so many, has influenced so many, indicates that while not all T.O. structures may be a good fit with systems of power that don't break down easily into oppressor/oppressed models, the body of work still has much to offer, and the foundational philosophy endures. Even in the United States, the techniques of T.O. have given the means of theatrical production—the means of creating representations of themselves, their world, and their dreams—back to the people, to use in their struggles for justice, equality, and understanding.

#### NOTES

1. Baz Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard* (London: Routledge, 1999), 53.
2. Augusto Boal, *Legislative Theater: Using Performance to Make Politics* (London: Routledge, 1998), 120.
3. *Playing Boal: Theater, Therapy, Activism*, ed. Mady Schutzman and Jan Cohen-Cruz (New York: Routledge, 1994), was one of the first collections of essays by people who have used and adapted T.O. techniques in various contexts. The book raised many questions regarding the practice of T.O. that have influenced my thinking here.
4. Marc Weinblatt, personal e-mail message to the author, October 11, 2000.
5. *Seattle Capitol Hill Times*, April 8, 1998, 3.
6. Certainly agitprop theater techniques have been coopted by conservative forces at numerous moments in history to secure power. For one such example, see Diana Taylor's discussion of the military's "performances" of power during Argentina's Dirty War in *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's Dirty War* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997).
7. Augusto Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, trans. Adrian Jackson (London: Routledge, 1992), back cover.
8. Mandala Center Web site: [www.mandalaforchange.com](http://www.mandalaforchange.com).

## THEATER OF THE RECRUITS

*Boal Techniques in the New York Police Academy*

Grace Telesco, Interviewed by Alisa Solomon

Lt. Grace Telesco is head of the behavioral science department at the New York Police Academy, where 1,300 recruits are trained each year in a seven-month program. Telesco uses the work of Augusto Boal and other theater techniques as part of the curriculum at the police academy.

ALISA SOLOMON *How did you come to use Boal and other theater techniques in police training?*

GRACE TELESKO Over the last two years we changed the curriculum tremendously. The Louima incident [Abner Louima, a Haitian immigrant, was tortured by police officers in a Brooklyn station house in 1997] had sparked much outrage—rightfully so—and one recommendation, out of eighty-five of them for the department, was to look at the curriculum and seriously change it. At the time I was in charge of recruitment. The director of training asked if I'd like to come chair the social science department and help rewrite the curriculum.

I looked at the classic three *Ms*: message, messenger, and method. The message was awful: the curriculum hadn't been changed in twenty years. The academy is a seven-month program, and one discipline, called "social science," was a sort of cop version of psychology/sociology. In essence it was anecdotal, stereotypical, life according to the cop on the street. It reeked of offensive, insensitive terminology and was not at all scholarly. Sometimes you can't fix something; you just have to go in and level it and start over, and that's what we did. We built a recruit curriculum with a social-service perspective and with a real emphasis on cultural competence.

*What are the demographics of the recruits? And how do you introduce those cultural-competence issues?*

Of the 1,300 recruits, about 60 percent are white and 40 percent people of color, mostly Latino; 14 percent are women. I'm not sure how many reside

## NOTES FROM INSIDE

*Forum Theater in Maximum Security*

Tim Mitchell

When you step into a prison you immediately notice the obvious constraints—the walls, the gates, the cells, and the regimentation of the lines and of the inmate count. There are also the less visible: the inmates' loss of privacy and control, isolation from friends and family, and the increasingly long sentences. Prisons differ from one another: high-tech centralized surveillance controls harsh new facilities while keys jangling on big rings lock up the cells of old plantation-style prisons; thick concrete and frosted windows demarcate the boundaries of a supermax while the walls of tent cities wobble in the wind. But dehumanization pervades them all. This affects the inmates the most, but it also spreads to guards and their families, administrators, and the communities that host the facilities.

For eight years I have worked in such environments through education programs in theater sponsored by two universities, Georgetown and Cornell. From 1992 to 1997 I worked in the maximum security blocks of Lorton (the Washington, D.C., prison in Virginia, now slated to close); recently, I have been working in the Louis Gossett Jr. Youth Residential Center in upstate New York. I have learned from the men I met, and I hope they have learned from me, as we have together engaged in a process of discovery that has led to some key theoretical and practical insights into theater and social change. Yet for the men inside, for me, and for the

undergraduate volunteers who joined me, a tough question always looms over our endeavors: as Patricia O'Connor, the director and founder of the Friends of Lorton program at Georgetown asked the men in one of my for-credit drama courses there, "What kind of change can you know about in a place like this?"

I'd like to chronicle one change—which seems both modest and monumental—effected through Augusto Boal's Forum Theater techniques at Lorton in the summer of 1997, and through it to point to some tentative conclusions about the promise of such theater practice.

Working with community liaison Elvin Johnson, a former Lorton inmate who helped found the higher education program with Georgetown in the maximum security cellblock there, we planned to explore themes of fatherhood and family that summer by arranging to have family members bussed in from D.C. for a final interactive Forum Theater performance. Unfortunately, a change in city government and a new warden forced us to cancel these plans. Instead, each participant was allowed to bring guests from the block for the final performance, and several administrators attended as well. Here is one of the scenarios, based on actual life experiences, performed in the forum:

A man returns to his wife and his teenage son with a strong desire to reconnect with his family and to be a good husband and father. One way to get off to a good start, he thinks, would be to hold a special family dinner on his first weekend home. He imagines what it will be like—taking his long-empty place at the table and seeing his family around him again. When he returns home he tells his wife about the

in New York City, but my guess is about half. We talk about racism, sexism, homophobia, but we don't really start there. We talk about attitude, foundational stuff around oppression, our personalities and how are they formed, high-octane attitudes like prejudice, institutional prejudices. The basic objective is to raise consciousness. They do a lot of reading—Nancy Foner's book on new immigration in New York, readings on race, class, and gender—plus lots of discussion and some films.

There is also a unit on ethics and mental health, where we talk about police brutality, authority that goes unchecked, mental health of officers as well as of the people we serve. The third track is crisis intervention—domestic violence, child abuse, study of victim behavior, counseling techniques. And fourth is the service role—serving special-needs populations such as the deaf community, the visually impaired, and so on. As for the messenger, our staff had to be diversified, and I did that.

Method is where the theater elements come in. Everybody knows that adults learn best by doing. I find that our most effective sessions are our theater workshops. We do about nine major ones throughout the course, and I encourage instructors to do more in their classes. We use Theater of the Oppressed methods, particularly in the racism, sexism, homophobia sections, to bring up issues, but much of what we do is sociodrama and reflective team exercise.

*For example?*

For example, in a class of thirty or thirty-five recruits, we break them into maybe seven groups and have them tell a story of a time they felt in some way oppressed, put down, or disrespected. Maybe it was in the academy as a recruit—there's a hierarchy and power structure in the academy, and they're at the lowest end of it. Some kind of story of when they felt disrespected and didn't or couldn't stand up for themselves. Each group chooses one story from their group, then the seven stories are shared in general group, and then they choose one of those to reenact. Maybe it's about a recruit who needed a day off because her mother was very sick and went to request it and was mistreated from the

beginning, with people screaming and then denying the request. The recruit is upset and can't answer back. We redo the scene, inviting people to come in and offer alternatives—what they would say to the lieutenant, for example.

*What do you think is achieved through this type of Forum Theater?*

I think the recruit, particularly the white heterosexual male recruit who lives in Long Island with his parents, has an awful lot of privilege and access and hardly feels oppressed in any way, but can identify with the feeling as a recruit, and then begins to make some of the connections to the differentials of power we talk about in class, when we discuss gender, age, class, sexual orientation, race. Sometimes all that can seem like white-male bashing, particularly for young white males who are becoming police officers; right away they feel they're on the defensive. But the Forum Theater exercise lets them see and feel the differentials in power. We debrief through the exercise: how does it feel to answer back the lieutenant? And they say it feels *great*. But in real life they can't really do it. So we use that to draw analogies to institutionalized racism or sexism, for example.

*What other techniques do you use to get at these issues?*

It's a potpourri, really. The exercises like the one I just described are usually in the classroom setting. We do more scripted, role-play stuff with larger groups in the auditorium around themes like domestic violence which go more toward the question of policing. We'll use actor-trainers in a scene we've scripted, and recruits come into the scene as police officers responding to the situation in a kind of structured improv.

*How do these scenes serve your training goals?*

In two ways. First, we're using their behavior instructively to engage audiences. We freeze the scene along the way, rather than playing out the scene to the end and then discussing it. That's so important because if you play it to the end, without discussing bad choices as they come along, then you're reinforcing bad behavior.

plan and she agrees to cook something special. But just before dinner, as he sits on the couch watching TV, his son comes into the room and announces that he is going out. "Where?" asks the man. "To be with my friends," replies the son. The father explains that he cannot go out because they have planned a special family meal. The boy begins to argue: "You've been in prison my whole life and now you want to tell me what to do? You can't tell me what to do. I'm going!" He stomps out of the house to meet his friends. The man yells after him to no avail. It is clear that no one knows who those friends are, where the boy is going, or when he will return home. As originally conceived, the father is the one with the problem here. How can he have a relationship with his son under these conditions? How could this scene end differently?

During our preparation of this forum (not the final performance), one of the men decided to replace the father right away. His intervention dismayed me but received great applause and approbation from the inmates. As soon as the son started to complain, he hit the boy hard with a slap to the face. Many of the men thought that this was a viable solution. As one of them explained, the son was making a move on the other man's power and authority. He saw the young man as the instigator, threatening his father with disrespect. Since nobody wanted to say anything against this position, we tried several other interventions, always replacing the father. One man who did so invited the son's friends in from the street and tried to include them in the family meal, but after begging off with lame excuses, the friends left with the son, laughing at the father on the way

out. Another man tried to bring in the mother to contend with the boy, but after saying “I can’t deal with him any more” and “This is what it’s like all the time,” she made only a feeble attempt to stop him, then let him go. Several others intervened, but the discussion kept returning to the first, violent solution as the best approach.

One of the criticisms commonly made about Theater of the Oppressed (T.O.) is that it often relies upon a sensitive or well-trained moderator, especially since one of the pitfalls and limitations of a forum is the danger of merely reifying the opinions held by the group. Sometimes the Joker (a moderator who can also act as a wild card) has to complicate the thinking of the group in order to touch on the soul of the matter. Perhaps this is why Boal now often refers to the Joker as the “difficultator.” I was acting as the Joker on this occasion and finally felt that I had to “difficultate.” I protested that the father’s aggression immediately put the son in the position of the oppressed protagonist. I thought that his anger at his father and his reasons for wanting to go out had some basis and that it was natural for him to question his father’s authority at this age. (I had the further, unstated concern that the proposed solution came close to child abuse.)

We agreed to play the scene again, this time replacing the young man. At first the interventions that followed made the son obedient and respectful. But this was “magic”—a T.O. term that refers to the solution of a problem by unlikely or unrealistic means. For example, if the problem is poverty and the solution is finding a winning lottery ticket, that’s magic. Magic is a solution that fails to

For example, we have one on mental illness. In the scenario, there’s a person who’s schizophrenic. He’s dangerous, violent. We want the officers to isolate and contain him. We don’t want the officers to rush him or to use deadly physical force. It’s kind of a reenactment of the Gary Gidone Busch incident. [In August 1999, police officers shot and killed Busch in front of his Brooklyn apartment, claiming that he was deranged and dangerous.] The recruits have already been tested on paper on procedures and issues around emotionally disturbed persons, and even many who had done well get up there and forget everything. So the theater exercises bridge the gap between theory and practice. It’s effective because in a sterile environment, if you make a mistake, we freeze the scene and try again. Out there, you make a mistake and someone dies and you get indicted and you lose your job and the entire career of law enforcement suffers because of your mistake. If we can practice that and play it and replay it and hear what’s going on in a character’s head and appreciate what they’re saying, maybe you’ll remember that in the street. Maybe that will help de-escalate a situation, save someone’s life, save your life.

*Do the recruits call out to freeze the scene, or do you do it?*

As I watch the scene begin to unfold, if the officers are escalating rather than de-escalating, I freeze the scene. I don’t want the bad behavior to happen. I don’t want it reinforced for them or for the audience. I want to prevent it from happening and have us reflect as an audience on: What are we not accomplishing here? Let’s point out where the danger lies. Let’s point out how we’re escalating, not de-escalating. What is it about our language, our body language?

If I get a great answer, I say, “Come on up and join the scene.” And each time we freeze, we want to debrief the feelings of the participants. “What’s going on right now for you if you’re the schizophrenic person with all these cops in your house?”—“I don’t know why they’re yelling at me. I don’t know why they’re coming so close to me.” These kinds of things.

*If you use an incident like the Gidone Busch one, which has had a lot of press, are recruits defensive about it from*

*the start? Do they feel identified with the officers who were involved, and are they invested in proving that the cops in that incident did the right thing?*

We don't present it as the actual incident, and we change it somewhat. We don't want to get into the nitty-gritty of various real incidents that have occurred but stay focused on the broader understanding of procedure, rather than say in the Busch incident or, to take another famous one, the Eleanor Bumpurs incident [an infamous 1984 case in which police shot and killed a three-hundred-pound sixty-six-year-old woman in her Bronx apartment, claiming they were in mortal danger because she was brandishing a kitchen knife], this or that should have been done differently. Procedure and training have certainly changed since Eleanor Bumpurs. What may or may not have changed is police culture, police attitudes toward people with mental illness.

The reaction that occurs when one feels threatened hasn't changed. When all else fails and we forget about isolating and containing, we automatically go to a fight-or-flight response. It's easy for civilians to flee, but police don't think they should ever flee. There's cognitive dissonance in some of the procedure: You're asking me to step back, to retreat? And yeah, we are. They practice that in the theater, in a structured improv where it's all sterile, in the hopes that they can call upon that if they're ever really on the scene, instead of reverting to instinct.

*Do the improvs reveal other kinds of reactions recruits might have in different sorts of situations?*

Yes. For example, we have a scenario with a homeless person, and one time a recruit began to say racist statements to the character. In a situation like that, you never know—Is he doing this on purpose? Trying to be funny because he's in front of his peers? Is it a posture? Or is this really him? And if he's doing this when a lieutenant is the facilitator and tons of instructors are around, what does that say about what he'll do on his own?

This is the second way the theater exercises serve our goals. I'm privileged to sit on a recruit performance committee. We bring up incidents that raise questions about whether a particular recruit should get a gun and shield, whether she or

engage the problem at hand, in this case, the anger and expectations of the young man. So we continued to play the scene, and some remarkable results occurred.

As the boy reacted to his father's slap, the men playing him gave real dimension to his pain and anger. The discussion took a new turn. A few in the group started to talk about their own experiences as sons and about the consequences of creating a permanent split between fathers and sons. In the end, all the men agreed that the solution and the whole situation would be entirely different if the scene were about a daughter. Though they didn't explore the sexism or other assumptions underlying this unanimous opinion, inhabiting the character of the son enabled them to investigate how someone could be both oppressed and oppressor simultaneously.

Recognizing this dual role is a serious necessity in a prison. Though a majority of prisoners are in for nonviolent crimes, almost no crimes have neither consequences nor victims. In the theater classes we generally avoid working on anything as personal as victim reconciliation or reparation because we are not in the business of therapy (and in the juvenile facility, it's flatly prohibited). However, the ability to see "the other" within any scene and to develop skills of empathy is a crucial tool for change. Echoing Malcolm X, one participant in a Gossett workshop told me, "I learned that sometimes you have to accuse yourself before you can change."

What followed from the forum scene was a lengthy discussion about how prisons can follow a person out of prison and into the family, a discussion that eventually

included two other key forums from the final performance. In “The Visitation” a man receives a visit from his wife, and she tells him that she has a new man and his son a new father; the two men then negotiate these roles. In “Parents’ Night,” a man is denied access to his son’s school on the orders of his own mother; he confronts her and the school principal, seeking a new way to get back into his son’s life.

Following the final performance of the Fatherhood and Family Forum, one of the participants, a leader of the Lorton fathers’ support group, took me aside. He told me that he and a couple of the Lorton fathers had joined our theater class when they heard about the theme. He enjoyed the discussions about the films and texts we had looked at, but he was really moved by our use of Image and Forum Theater to show fathers facing problems reconnecting with their families before, during, and after release from prison. He told me that he was excited to return to the fathers’ support group and to change what they were doing there. He explained that the men had spoken in the group about becoming anti–role models to their children. As men inside, they were examples of what could happen to their children, and they wanted to warn them not to be like them and land up in a place like Lorton. But this man had had an epiphany: He now wanted his group to focus on strategies that would put the men back in touch with their children before being released, and, more important, to focus on strategies that would help inmates recognize and grapple with larger societal and structural obstacles in the way of their family relationships. He wanted this support group of fathers to reinvent themselves and to do some of the thinking we had begun in our theater class.

he should be monitored. A lot of these incidents occur during the theater workshops. I think it comes out there because they’re so real. The tension gets so high that they really get lost in the scene and themselves. Their guard goes down, and out come the racism and sexism and homophobia. For example, we have a same-sex domestic violence scenario where the recruits in the scene totally ignored both the batterer and the survivor, didn’t take a report, and just left. Others couldn’t stop laughing at the idea of two men as a couple; they found that just too hilarious to do their job.

*Much of Boal’s work is about giving critical voice to oppressed peoples, bringing illiterate people into literacy and also into participatory democracy. A police academy is not an environment of participatory democracy. As you’ve said, it’s a strictly hierarchical environment. Are there contradictions for you using these techniques, ways in which the critical voice and thinking that the techniques at their core are designed to develop might get in the way of a specific lesson you need to teach?*

I run my classes to reflect that I believe not only in the work of Boal but also of Paolo Freire, from whom Boal takes many of his ideas. I believe in dialogue and participatory learning. So even if recruits might not have a voice here I try to engage them as full participants. Full participation serves the lessons—it’s not a conflict. I can’t *make* you understand cultural-competence issues. I’ve got to get you to buy into it. And the only way to do that is by treating you the way I’m asking you to treat others. I can’t treat you with disrespect to get you to treat the public with respect. Is that a contradiction in terms of how they’re treated in the rest of their career? Maybe.

*In some of his later work Boal uses the image “cop-in-the-head” to address internalized oppressions—the cop as an oppressive figure. Do you ever invoke that image when you’re working with actual cops?*

No, I don’t.

*Some people who use these techniques, called, after all, Theater of the Oppressed, might suggest that they be used...*

Only with survivors of oppression.

*Yes, and that their purpose is to free and empower those who have been oppressed. Some might go so far as to say that cops, by virtue of putting on uniforms, are joining the ranks of the oppressors.*

I agree.

*So are you engaged in a cooptation? Are you twisting the material in some way?*

Police by the nature of their work are oppressors, but they don't have to be. Institutions are oppressive; people don't have to be. We make choices. We make decisions. Maybe I'm being naive. If I get called out right now on detail as a lieutenant, I'm going to be asked to give orders to police officers and sergeants to do things that I may disagree with. During the Diallo protests [when thousands of New Yorkers committed civil disobedience to protest the 1999 police shooting of an unarmed African immigrant, Amadou Diallo, on the stoop of his apartment], I was so torn in half by wanting to demonstrate, and yet at the same time I could have been called to the detail. So, yes, I am going to be carrying out oppressive policies. This is an institution of oppression. It's very difficult to swallow the contradiction of just being a part of this agency. But what do we do? Give up on it? Give up on the recruits? Say, "Okay, you're joining a militia, so go ahead, occupy a people-of-color community and have a nice day"? I think we have a commitment, those of us who work inside this agency, to try and help people practice nonoppressive tactics. And I think the best method for doing that is through theater techniques.

That being said—and Freire talks about this all the time—there's a tendency to think you're either the oppressed or the oppressor and there's no in-between. That's not the way it is. Our positionality at any time can change. There are recruits who are people of color, women, queers—and recruits in general are often oppressed because of their status in the institution. Then they graduate and become rookies in precincts and become oppressed in the hierarchy there. If we can understand our positionality, then we understand the point, and then I think these techniques very much apply.

This was a significant moment. It is always difficult to assess the effectiveness and usefulness of these projects for men in a prison, and after a program ends I typically lose touch with the participants. Lorton is closing now, and most of the men have been scattered and shipped out. I'm not even sure who has been released. I like to think that the men take with them something of use from the theater course, and I'm heartened by studies that have shown that adults who participate in higher education programs in prisons have startlingly low recidivism rates—though these studies do not look specifically at theater programs.

Certainly, I've seen forum scenes that were unworkable—because they presented a situation in which no change was imaginable (a trial about a criminal charge with a mandatory sentence, for example) or because they couldn't generate discussion (when, for example, the presence of a prison counselor acts as a silent censor.) Overall, though, I have seen theater bring humanity into a heartless atmosphere, as it enables a sense of collaboration and shared stakes among the participants. It allows individuals to stand apart from their situation and consider alternatives and, as a physical activity, allows men who are often portrayed in mainstream culture as threatening and irredeemably criminal to represent themselves in their own bodies. Through the shared experiences of people in a theatrical space, it is possible to deconstruct the self, to look at the self within a problem situation from multiple points of view, and then to put it all back together into an ability to take action.