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TDPS458E

12 December 2021

“Violence is the destruction of meaning.” - Polly Walker

“We cannot change anything unless we accept it.
Condemnation does not liberate, it oppresses.” - Carl Jung

Live Performance: Ritual Therapy

In today's society, people are completely burnt out after nearing two years of global pandemic and the American expectation to return to work fast and hard. All the people rushing, rushing, rushing ignoring their body's needs because to sit down and spend time in their thoughts is a risk of falling into the lingering unmitigated amassed trauma. People on the go rarely have a moment to think for themselves. Rushing to one place or another without a pause in sight, their minds preoccupied with what needs to happen instead of being able to have time to sit and breathe for a moment about their own needs. What if there was a space created for people to have time built in to delve into these deeper emotional issues? Taking a page from both, the H.I.J.O.S., an Argentinian political organization and Theatre of the Oppressed, a Brazilian theater movement, it has become obvious to me that live performance reveals a multitude of ways the body can expunge trauma. Live performance has the ability to heal audiences of trauma by serving as a medium apt to travel deeper through the human psyche using constructed ritual to abstract a space of healing. This idea is best exemplified by Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed.

Live performance generates its power through the representation of themes and events occurring in real life. It is of course entirely plausible depict an actual scene of violence (i.e. rape, domestic abuse) on stage, however this disregards creative thinking in finding unconventional, surprising methods of depicting difficult themes. It is through creative representation, or new ways of viewing that can inspire a new way of viewing the catharsis of visualizing change via symbolic gestures. Watching a scene of implied abuse through the veil of metaphor is akin to taking a placebo for its curative powers; only in context can the healing be facilitated. Take the positive rhetoric away from a placebo and all that's left is a sugar pill. It is the mindset behind the placebo (metaphor) that grants those in pain the treatment that they need. Taken in stride, believing that it works is half the battle. Seeing a metaphorical representation of abuse on stage isn't the same as achieving justice for abuse victims, yet the fallacy represented on stage does not diminish the healing potential of airing out pain through an artistic lens. Through abstraction, theatre artists start their art with a grounding in reality and begin extrapolating how they want to go about discussing their topics, in the process creating a new artistic realm that is not a direct reflection of reality or pure symbolism, it exists in its own artistic dimension.

The beauty of live performance is that it does not need to explicitly state or represent what issue is being handled to bring real, meaty subject matter to the forefront of audience attention and participation. Representational abstraction is a healthy manner of discussing traumatic topics where through symbols and gestures jointly understood by audience and performers alike can engage in a dialogue where participants on both sides can dig into traumatic topics while maintaining healthy boundaries. Talking about trauma is essential to get buried emotions out but, the conversations can be dangerous if they are not handled properly and worse,

risk further damaging traumatized parties. However, through abstraction a scene depicting violence engages dialogue in a removed manner that still encourages an emotional response in a healthy digestible manner.

Take for example Ana Mendieta's *Rape Scene*. By staging herself at the center of a rape aftermath set in her own apartment, Mendieta boldly demanded audience members to look at her body - bloodied and tied up by the help of a friend, Sheila Kelly - Mendieta wordlessly asked her viewers "What are *you* going to do about this?" Intention aside, her art was unfortunately misunderstood by her predominantly white, male MFA cohort and faculty. This work failed to act as a catalyst for conversations around rape and rape culture. I believe this work ran the risk of being too literal, alienating her audience from her intended impact, casting aside Mendieta's cries for awareness in response to a real rape and murder that occurred on her college campus. Some audience members tried to discuss the piece mid-performance with a corpse-like Mendieta still tied up, and a few even got frustrated when she did not respond.¹ Her audience failed to abstract meaning because they were unable to translate her raw, visceral living art into a form their predominantly white, male viewpoint could digest. It is entirely possible to present one's response to trauma as art to be wildly misconstrued; this can misguide both audience and performer in terms of community acknowledgement and reconciliation.

A more successful form of social reckoning enacted in Argentina by the H.I.J.O.S., the children and grandchildren of La Madres de la Plaza de Mayo. Beginning in the 1970s, la Madres de la Plaza would enact their form of protest by marching around la Plaza de Mayo wearing photographs of their loved ones "disappeared" during Operation Condor, forming their own rituals evoked by the rhythmic, repetitive movement around the Plaza. The next generation of protestors, H.I.J.O.S. - children of the disappeared - took their protest to the next stage by

¹ Clara Escoda, "Other Desires: Ana Mendieta's Abject Imaginings."

throwing *escraches* outside the homes of government figures who participated in the disappearances and remained free to live as they pleased.² These *escraches* were large, repeatable, thoroughly planned events beginning by canvassing the neighborhood of the government official a month before the *escraches* to raise community awareness for people to come out in large, carnival-esque antagonizing uproar outside the official's home bringing attention to their crimes committed against the local community. On the surface a mode of protest, these *escraches* exemplify what protest as performance might look like. Theatrical in scope and prior planning, the H.I.J.O.S. are energized and well-armed to carry on the torch from the Madres, this time fighting for *accountability* (visibility of the disappeared already acknowledged by the Madres marches). These young people are angry and deeply hurt from the loss of their parontage, but the protests and *escraches* have moved past personal loss to overwhelming forces demanding justice for crimes against humanity. Here, healing means exposing wrongdoing in the hopes of accountability and state reconciling with its dark past. The *escraches* have become a release of tension, anger, frustrations, and grief as the H.I.J.O.S. use these events as an opportunity to fight oppressors and be able to emote. "Intense, protracted violence affects the ability of societies and individuals to understand the complex dynamics of conflict, making it even more likely that violent conflict will continue."³ Being immersed in long-term conflict eliminates outside perspectives as the drawn-out trauma colors people's minds solely with the greyscale of damage. Being steeped in conflict changes people's view on the world to the point of inconceivability that there can exist anything but pain. Performance opens a

² Diana Taylor, "'YOU ARE HERE' H.I.J.O.S. and the DNA of Performance," in *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Duke University Press, 2003), 161.

³ Polly Walker, "Acting Together to Disrupt Cycles of Violence: Performance and Social Healing," in *Breaking Intergenerational Cycles of Repetition: A Global Dialogue on Historical Trauma and Memory* (Verlag Barbara Budrich), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvdf03jc.23>.

well of colors, breaking ground underneath the calcified walls of trauma to begin exploring other emotional responses to conflict that have not been permitted the chance to be expressed.

A model widely recognized for its community healing abilities is the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), engaging in social reformation built on live performance techniques. Founded by Augusto Boal based on his time imprisoned and working with poor communities in Peru and Ecuador. TO engages the community in dialogue where audience members become “spect-actors,” taking the stage to resolve problems the actors present to the crowd. Part of what makes TO’s method of community engagement so effective is how it is able to give voice to people in the community, allowing them the power to discuss the problems directly affecting them and how to go about solving those problems. These productions are not performed on unsuspecting audiences without any support; TO utilizes the role of the Joker, a player trained to facilitate dialogue between actors and participants. The Joker is the bridge between worlds - real and dramatized - and assist in curating what topics will be presented on stage for communities to engage with. The Jokers “creat[e] space *for* ritual but they are not *of* that ritual.”⁴ Although the Joker themselves do not have a voice in the content of the performance, they wield power by steering the direction of the production. Playing the role of emotional conduit who’s own perspective is not woven into the narrative, Jokers expand room for dialogue. As clinical psychologist Lori S. Katz summarized “just because you’re not sharing your story doesn’t mean you’re not in the process.” Jokers are essential because they grant people the space to share without taking up volume themselves. They create space for ritual, allowing room for people to sort through their cultural implications and biases picked up as being a member of society,

⁴ Mady Schutzman, Brent Blair, Lori S. Katz, Helene S. Lorenz, and Marc D. Rich, “Social healing and liberatory politics: A round-table discussion,” in *A Boal Companion* ed. Jan Cohen-Cruz and Mady Schutzman (USA: Routledge, 2006), 59.

implicit or explicit. It is vital to give these built-in perceptions a voice to be able to externalize thoughts in order to parse through what is a true reality and what is socially constructed. “What we perceive is often based on our needs, expectations, projections, and, most of all, our culturally learned assumptions and categories of thought.”⁵ People’s interpretations of events are collective of their past lived experiences.

No one moves through life without developing a biased leaning; believing oneself to have escaped trauma unscathed is itself a confirmation bias locking one’s mind away from the damage that has been caused. By glossing over the impact our lives have on our learned reactionary systems, we destine ourselves to repeat historically held patterns which may manifest wildly inappropriately in the wrong situations. A person who escaped an abusive relationship possessing internalized self-hatred as a result of their partner verbally berating their performance will observe a lingering thread of unrealistic standards for themselves despite no longer being in the original scenario. Trauma lives on in the body long after the body has left the trauma causing situation or moment. It may be easier to keep moving forward in life under the guise of putting the past in a lockbox safely hidden away from present awareness, but this only suffices in encouraging willful forgetfulness, potentially dampening life quality. Live performance - as spectator, performer, or spect-actor - creates the space to sit and begin unboxing these difficult feelings in order to lay out all the pieces, engage with the emotions stirred, and take into consideration the way occulting difficult emotions might have become an ingrained human response. Eventually, there comes a point after diving into the emotions where it is necessary to get to the bottom and remove their coloring from the current headspace to levelly observe their impact moving forward. Not being able to deal with trauma stunts growth; while surface

⁵ Edgar H. Schein, “The Process of Dialogue: Creating Effective Communication,” in *Organizational Dynamics* (New York: American Management Association, Autumn 1993).

appearances may present serenely, surface tension pulls people back down towards a place of immobilization preventing self-acceptance and release.

One technique in which TO excels in externalizing antagonists of trauma is through their Cops-in-the-Head technique. In a Cops-in-the-Head exercise, spect-actors are able to remove their ingrained oppressors from their mind and begin a constructive dialogue with them in the realm of theatre. When representationally talking to their oppressor, the spect-actor is empowered in the position of protagonist to take a stand for themselves and begin making actions forward in pushing back against systems of oppression and fear. Cops-in-the-Head excel at allowing space for the spect-actor to expand their thinking model past what they have believed to be their sole reality, potentially helping enlighten them toward a place of self awareness and empowerment. “The artistic creativity of the oppressed-protagonist should not limit itself to a simple reproduction of reality, or to the symbolic illustration of real oppression: *artistic creativity must have its own aesthetic dimension.*”⁶ Here, Boal synthesizes the magic of theatre, making it a tool for social change; TO gets spect-actors to begin thinking *creatively* about their situations and extend their views beyond the contrived societal norms. By actively confronting their oppressors (the “Cops”), the spect-actor is given agency to use their voice speaking out against oppression, in turn recognizing that they grant power to their external oppressors by giving them space internally. Cops-in-the-Head builds distance from the reality of the oppression where the work is drawn in order to build an artistic dimension where the oppressed can design their own and in tandem the protagonist’s victory. This exercise is emblematic of TO’s wrestling with pushing back against the dominant culture ideology. “Those with power tend to shape public memory; those with less power must contest the absence caused by the partial memory of the powerful.”⁷

⁶ Augusto Boal and Susana Epstein, “The Cop in the Head: Three Hypotheses,” in *TDR* Vol. 34, No. 3 (Autumn 1990): <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1146067>

⁷ Palczewski, Fritch, and Ice, “Constraints on Resources for Symbolic Action.”

TO's workshops contest systems of power that strip away the agency of people who do not sit at the top. The "cops" shape public memory by wiggling their dominant culture ideology into the minds of people who see themselves as powerless against oppression; TO challenges public memory in communities of oppression by testing how far their spect-actors can branch away from the dominant ideology in order to construct a new narrative together.

Farthest removed from the internal locus of antagonists is the Joker. Coming into a new community, a Joker may not always have the best grasp on the oppressions of that particular group of people. What is the role of Joker to facilitate discussion when they themselves do not possess a good grasp on the issue's depth? To paraphrase Boal, the Joker is a *lover*. The Joker does not pretend to know all the answers or be the top expert on the room, they invite all the oppressed in the room to speak their minds. Removed from the tight intimacies of extricating from their own personal experiences, the Joker has breadth of dimension to travel closer and farther to the source of oppression trauma, being able to pull back the oppressed to see the larger picture of their own scenes.⁸ The Joker, through performance, cultivates an environment in which people can begin to talk freely and open up about potentially taboo topics. "Creating innovative spaces of meaningful communication in settings of intense and protracted violence involves the creation of safe space for communication between enemies and/or former opponents...The discourse within those spaces would often not be considered "safe" outside the performance space."⁹ In a live performance a space is being created that allows viewers and performers to dive into dangerous topics in an environment where, despite the difficult themes, healthy and

⁸ Brent Blair, "The Complex: Theatre of the Oppressed, Trauma, and the Seventh Shift," in *Counterpoints* Vol. 416 (2011): <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42981326>.

⁹ Polly Walker, "Acting Together to Disrupt Cycles of Violence: Performance and Social Healing," in *Breaking Intergenerational Cycles of Repetition: A Global Dialogue on Historical Trauma and Memory* (Verlag Barbara Budrich), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvdf03jc.23>.

adaptive expression is encouraged. No longer do communities have to suffer in silence, choking down their trauma and risk their conflict bubbling to the surface unprompted. TO Performances grant an outlet for people to verbalize and contend with their emotions, they get to be a part of creating something bigger than themselves and then safely supported to simply observe. This process allows people to branch into terrifying terrain of personal fear responses like anxiety, depression, anger and any other manifestation of untreated trauma stewing in the body. “Where logic cannot dispel the distrust that arises from uncertainty about the future, arguments from character often can. Character judgements, when they focus on evaluating a speaker’s competence at practical reason, are assessments of probability as to whether the proposed policy is likely to achieve success.”¹⁰ In TO workshops and performance contexts, audiences and spect-actors need to be able to trust that the creatives in the room understand and can properly articulate the issue being explored. There cannot be a safe environment built and facilitated when the creative team obviously do not have a solid grasp on the ideas they are grappling with. It would be preposterous to go in for surgery after overhearing the surgeon ask a nurse how to use a scalpel. Healing tools when misused make more room for damage than good. Live theatre such as TO that confronts difficult issues and gives audiences a role in deciding the final outcome of the performance holds space for facing traumatic situations. TO provides and instructs the spect-actors and audience healing tools, and listens to how deeply these people want to probe into their trauma. In sincerity, live performance allows their patrons to explore their boundaries and begin operating on their pain.

Recognizing the wealth of depth of the human emotional well, how deep does it truly go? When people are traumatized, what is the emotional distance downward into the psyche that pain, fear, love, or any other powerful emotion travels? This line of questioning is not new in the

¹⁰ Danielle Allen, “Rhetoric, a Good Thing.”

field of psychology, but how deeply can performance reach into people's souls? Brent Blair, current head of the USC/SDA Theatre & Social Change program who trained with Boal for 13 years, recounts a spectral experience while Jokering a TO workshop, "One woman's son awoke in the hospital from a coma and recounted a dream of dead bodies falling through the air. He was climbing this cascade of bodies and suddenly stopped and spoke with one of the falling bodies. The body gave the dreamer his first name and said, "The cops shot me 15 times in Pasadena." As the mother was telling our group about this dream, another mother in my circle gasped and said, "That's my son!" I didn't know as a TO Joker what to do with these things that I couldn't ignore."¹¹ Blair is discussing the idea of synchronicity, a theory proposed by psychologist Carl Jung. Synchronicity is "to describe circumstances that appear meaningfully related yet lack a causal connection."¹² Although synchronicity can be written off as a pseudoscience impossible to empirically test, there is something to be said about the spirit of a performance. Performers get lost in a trance while performing, reaching the deepest kind of flow state where all else outside the immediate body dissipates away from conscious view. Something under the visible flow of a play production, the sonorous thrum beneath the text moving the audience through deeper and deeper emotional channels. There is something almost supernatural about a completely committed performance that defies the laws of man.

Carl Jung proposed three levels of consciousness: The first level of Ego - consciousness; the second level is Personal Unconscious - dreams, memories, repressed states; the third is the Collective Unconscious - predispositions to universal human reactions, archetypes. Jung's Collective Unconscious encompasses all of humanity as this interconnected web where we are

¹¹ Mady Schutzman, Brent Blair, Lori S. Katz, Helene S. Lorenz, and Marc D. Rich, "Social healing and liberatory politics: A round-table discussion," in *A Boal Companion* ed. Jan Cohen-Cruz and Mady Schutzman (USA: Routledge, 2006), 59.

¹² Kerr, Laura K. (2013). "Synchronicity". In Teo, T. (ed.). *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology*. Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag.

all tied together deep beneath our waking reasoning. Synchronicity is the bridging of the deepest psyche in the Collective Unconscious to the surface level, Ego, branching out into the external world, balanced in harmony. “Things behave as they do not because of cause-effect relationships with other things but because of their intrinsic interdependent relationships with the existential pattern of all life.”¹³ Archetypes are not bound to the psychic realm but manifest in the physical realm, people predisposed to playing the role they must. Humans look for meaning in anything and everything to have a sense of righteousness. Meaning in art, meaning in literature, meaning in big life events occurring for a reason. It is natural for everyone to question any action in an effort to make sense of the chaos of life. There is no true empirical knowing of how deep the soul goes, there is only what the soul feels. Performance is a medium unconcerned with numbers or data, but about connecting with people on that deeper vibration beneath the calamity of daily life.

When done with proper intent, performance can be a beautiful medium that can bridge people with a deeper part of themselves and recognize their own humanity, a living being impacted by life for better or worse. For those who experienced trauma, participating in or witnessing live performance can be a helpful tool of getting to the root of pain and accepting the hurt inside in order to begin the healing process. Performance brings visibility and a wider perspective, granting people access to see new sides of themselves and others than their own worldview could provide. Live performance can connect people to a shared synchronicity; whether enacting art as protest (like H.I.J.O.S) or participating in a space for dialogue (like TO), live performance, most importantly, has the power to connect people to something larger than themselves.

¹³ Harold Coward, “Taoism and Jung: Synchronicity and the Self” in *Philosophy East and West* Vol. 46, No. 4 (Oct. 1996): <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1399493>.

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