

# Why we need a Context Oriented approach to the Theatre of the Oppressed.

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My uncle, who is in his 70's, called me on the phone. He wanted to talk about 9/11. Not the Chilean military coup<sup>1</sup> but the more recent one in the United States. He said, *'I was thinking I know something about explosives and how things fall apart: I worked in the slate quarry. You know, it just occurred to me that those towers couldn't just collapse like that from being hit by airplanes.'* The curious thing is that this happened only the other day, 13 years after the actual event.

History used to be written by the conquerors but now it is deciphered by the disillusioned and those who have nothing left to lose. The conquerors are, at least since 9/11, quite openly writing the fiction that constitutes our consensus reality, knowing we will eat and swallow their narrative. Perhaps this is because the alternative – that the western democracy our 'forefathers' fought, died (and killed) for is a smokescreen for a plutocracy – is just too painful to countenance for the vast majority of the struggling individuals who make up the voting public of our neo-liberal society. But it is not just the message and its meaning which feeds our national myths that manufactures our consent anymore; the medium itself is becoming the instrument of control and the nature of that medium should be of great interest to us theatre makers because it is informed by postmodern theatre.

We now live in a kind of institutionalized metaxis. While the image of reality presented to us, through the ubiquitous machinery of osmosis, is of the state securing ever greater freedom, justice and equality; an image that is burnished by the counter-image of antagonist 'failed states' with whom we are at war. The reality of the image, the power to control our minds, is flaunted with a cynical arrogance. Evident lies are robustly defended with a knowing wink to the wings. *"It's just theatre folks, and we*

*know that deep down you know, but we are writing the script and directing the play and guess what? There is no offstage. We own it all."*

This is not a phenomenon limited to the West, The novelist Eduard Limonov describes how 'Putin's Rasputin' Vladislav Surkov 'turned Russia into a wonderful postmodernist theatre',

*"where the stage is constantly changing: the country is a dictatorship in the morning, a democracy at lunch, an oligarchy by supertime, while, backstage, oil companies are expropriated, journalists killed, billions siphoned away. Surkov is at the centre of the show, sponsoring nationalist skinheads one moment, backing human rights groups the next. It's a strategy of power based on keeping any opposition there may be constantly confused, a ceaseless shape-shifting that is unstoppable because it is indefinable."* Peter Pomerantsev, Vol. 33 No. 20 · 20 October 2011

Boal's choice of the word osmosis to describe how false desires are implanted by society, how we are conditioned to react as consumers not creators, strikes at the heart of this new image of reality. Wikipedia explains "*Osmosis, unlike diffusion, requires a force to work. This force is supplied by the solute's interaction with the membrane. Solute particles move randomly due to Brownian motion. If they move towards pores in the membrane, they are repelled, and in being repelled, acquire momentum directed away from the membrane. The momentum is rapidly transferred to surrounding water molecules, driving them away from the membrane as well.*" If we extrapolate this to the metaphor of the human, the force need not be exerted from the outside, but is drawn in by the kinetic excitation of elements which are repelled by the boundary between the inner and the outer. In other words, if you can keep people in a constant state of fear of the other, of a feeling of something lacking, they will always draw in the most available narrative.

The game of oppression has changed because oppressors have mastered the art of psychological operations and I believe we need to reorient the armoury of the Theatre of the Oppressed so that we don't stumble into simplistic divisions between the outer and inner expressions of oppression. The cops have made their headquarters in our head!<sup>4</sup> Here are just some reasons for this -

1. A pernicious kind of oppression is that we only ask for what we think we can get or that we deserve, and not for what we really want. Our desires are most often

formulated according to cultural expectations and limited by imaginations that have been exercised in 'getting real' on the one hand and fantasy lives on the other. There is absolutely no instruction book or blue print on how we should live.

2. We often hold our oppressions very close. We define ourselves and frame our perceptions according to them. This is a kind learned hopelessness in which we often disable ourselves from overcoming an oppression because without it who would we be? Where would we belong?

3. Buddhists refer to the sanskrit term 'dukkha'. Buddha is thought to have said "*I have taught one thing and one thing only, dukkha and the cessation of dukkha.*" This is often translated as 'suffering' but actually means the sense of something lacking. This is the force of osmosis and with constant reminder of what we should be, what we should have, what we should know and what we should look like, we are turgid with lacking.

My intention, therefore, when I conduct TO workshops is to invite groups to interrogate how we diagnose oppression and in the process start to equalise the osmotic pressure between the inner and outer, between the self and the other, between the individual and society. It seems that this is necessary before we can become creative citizens in a republic of the imagination and not helpless lost souls pushing a shopping trolley around the infinite aisles of the information economy. It is necessary in order to start listening to the intelligence that flows from within out and find ourselves thirsty for this wisdom, what Rumi called, the spring overflowing its springbox at the centre of the heart.

With this in mind I outline below a sequence of exercises that I use instead of the 'Image of my Oppression'<sup>3</sup>, which traditionally brings about the themes which the group explore. Depending on the size of the group it can take about the same amount of time of about three hours. The sequence takes its name from a research term where data is collected from three different sources in order to provide better evidence for any findings. Research borrows the term from navigation, where three different coordinates are used to orient a point in space. The sequence comes from an approach to theatre which I am calling Context Oriented Theatre, so this might be considered an

element of a context oriented approach to the theatre of the oppressed. A working definition of context oriented theatre is that it invites us to take the risk of falling awake to the miracle of being alive. I present this approach in the hope that we can be re-encharmed by the promise held by Boal's contention that theatre is the 'art of looking at ourselves' and that what we find when we look is still worth fighting for.

## **Triangulation**

### *First Co-ordinate: The Image of our Unfolding*

#### 1. Remembering our first unfolding

Artist, dancer and cranial sacral therapist Simon Whitehead first introduced this exercise to me.

When a human (or any vertebrate) egg is fertilized in the womb the cell multiplies into a strip of cells that constitutes the spine. On the top of the spine forms the heart. This strip then bends over so that the heart attaches to the spine in the precise place where we find it in our bodies. Our face and head is then formed inside the heart and detaches as the spine unfolds, lifting the head up. The hands and arms are also formed in the heart before they too unfold and open out. The participants remember and re-enact this movement of the body's creation. In pairs they take turns to be protagonist and witness.

The protagonist sits or kneels on the floor and practices this movement of moving from the enfolded position to the unfolded, slowly raising the head and opening and extending the arms. Pausing a moment in this image of openness before returning slowly to the enfolded position in preparation to unfold again. This opening and closing are practiced for some five to ten minutes. The other partner in the pair serves as a silent and respectful witness to this re-creation. They are silent only for the period of practice. At the end of this they share with their partner what it is that they noticed, perhaps even what they admired or took them by surprise. The protagonist then shares with the witness what it is they noticed as they were doing the movement. The pairs then swap roles and proceed as before.

## 2. Image of our Desire

Jokers familiar with Image Theatre will recognize the format of this next exercise but I will quickly describe the set up. If the group is new to image theatre I illustrate what I mean by demonstrating an image myself and ask them to comment on what they see distinguishing between objective and subjective comments. Jokers can look at each image and dynamise them if time allows, however the aim is to move through each co-ordinate.

The group stands in a circle looking outward and with their eyes closed. They are invited to make an image on a particular theme using their own body. They must think of the image before making it and when they have decided, and have the image in their minds eye, they turn into the circle with their eyes still closed. When the joker sees that all of the group are facing inward he/she asks the group to make their images and to open their eyes.

The themes are –

- Who I most like to be
- Who I least like to be
- Who I really am

## 3. Rehearsing our Unfolding

The participants are then asked to re-join their partner and to practice the movement from the enfolded image – ‘who I least like to be’, to the unfolded – ‘who I most like to be.’ But the movement pass via the image of ‘who I really am.’

This is practiced in the same was as the remembering of the first unfolding, with partners taking turns to be protagonist and silent witness and feeding back to each other what it is they observe.

*Second Co-ordinate: Identifying the block*

This exercise comes from Process Work or Process Oriented Psychology developed by Amy and Arnold Mindell and is in four stages.

#### Stage 1: Witnessing

Staying in the same pairs, again with role of witness and protagonist. This time the protagonist walks around the space as naturally as possible and the witness follows, watching carefully how the protagonist walks. After a few minutes it might become apparent that there are parts of the body that the protagonist does not allow to move, restricting the flow of movement. It is as if that part were wounded, or weighed down. Or it might seem like the opposite, that it is being pulled backward against the direction of movement or being thrust forward as if wanting to move ahead of the rest of the body.

#### Stage 2: Articulating the block

The witness suggests to the protagonist the block that they felt was in their movement. They do this by manifesting the block physically, creating if you like the image of the oppressor in the act of oppressing. It is worth reminding the group when explaining this part that the oppressor could be someone who is lovingly hugging the person, not just leaning heavily on the shoulders. Some relationships that pose as loving can be oppressive. The block can also be a push!

The protagonist responds and can agree or disagree with the block 'offered.' What must happen is a kind of dialogue using just their bodies so that together they can articulate the block so that it best resembles the actual feeling of restriction of movement.

#### Stage 3: Verifying the block

The protagonist must now try and walk 'wearing' the block as embodied by the witness. The witness can exaggerate the block as best they can, so that the protagonist feels the full effect and has something to push against. In this way they can verify the block and become more aware of how this block influences their every day.

#### Stage 4: The Protagonist Embodies their own Block

Now the protagonist embodies his or her own block on the witness, who must walk around the space and show the kind of resistance that the block has to contend with all day!

#### Stage 5: Identifying the Block

Now the protagonist has embodied his/her own block they should be able to identify who it is. Just as in the 'Cop in the Head' exercise, the block should be identified as a real person in the protagonist's past or present. It is worth noting that this block might not be someone other than themselves at a different period of their lives. The protagonist need not reveal to the witness who the person is unless they wish to, it is only important that they recognize who the block is.

The roles in the partnership are now reversed so that the other partner can go through the process.

#### *Third Co-ordinate: Thoughts that Think they are Facts*

The group now say goodbye to their partner for a short while as they find a space on the floor and prepare for the next exercise by lying down.

#### Image of the Hour

This exercise is from the armoury of TO and involves the participants miming whatever it is that they might be doing on a typical day at a designated hour of that day. I usually start at 2am in the morning and proceed through the twenty-four hours of the clock. I instruct the participants to do this by themselves as if in their own little world, as an act of meditation. What I want them to meditate on as they enact their usual behaviours are the thoughts that think they are facts.

Our behaviours have behind them attitudes that reflect our values and our values are based on our beliefs. Beliefs are simply thoughts that think they are facts, and that includes the thought that tells you that this or that thought is a fact! It is not so easy to identify these kind of thoughts because we don't think of them as thoughts, they are what construct the self with which we perceive reality and so we tend to project them outwards as not interpretations but given truths. Nevertheless, the intention in this

exercise is to bring awareness to our typical behaviours, the rituals of our daily life that are often enacted in automatic-pilot mode - that is without awareness. (This is a bit of an abuse of the real meaning of rituals, which in indigenous cultures is enacted with absolute and effortless awareness.)

'Thoughts that think they are facts' are also as wily as a fox, and will hide behind other thoughts which are assumptions built upon the more fundamental thought. These are often revealed by the actions we do not take more than those we do, by our behaviours of inaction. For instance, one finds oneself standing in the metro carriage not making contact with anyone around. The thought arises, *'I need to focus on what I need to do when I get to work.'* Thoughts that think they are facts often start with *'I am'*, *'I should'*, *'I must'*, *'I need.'* Or *'I shouldn't'*, *'I mustn't'*, *'I'm not.'* But what this thought might be hiding is the one that say *'I'm uncomfortable here so must take myself away in my mind.'*

Of course, these thoughts need not be 'negative thoughts' they could be overwhelmingly positive and ones we are glad to have – e.g. *'I am fabulous.'* Unfortunately, one of the problems with this dualistic system of thought by which we measure ourselves and our environment, is that a thought does not arise without its opposite being implicate, even on a subliminal level. That even includes the thought 'I am', which neuroscience apparently discovered the brain says to itself every three seconds!

Once the hours have been announced and the group return to 2am, (I will usually go on until 4am so that even the most zealous partygoers are miming sleep), I ask them to review their day with the question *"What are you doing with this short and precious life?"* I then ask them to identify the top 5 thoughts that think they are facts. Those that have the most influence on their behaviours. And then to crawl over to their partner and share these top five thoughts so that their partner can memorise them.

1<sup>st</sup> Rehearsal

At this point we sum up the process by combining the three co-ordinates established so far. Each partner takes their turn to practice their unfolding movement wearing their block who is whispering in their ear the five thoughts that think they are facts. The block whispers the thoughts in the first person – e.g. *“I am not good enough!”*

#### *Fourth Co-ordinate: The Journey*

I first encountered aspects of this exercise with Augusto Boal in a workshop in Manchester I believe. It is a wonderful way of showing how everything in our environment has a symbolic value. It is an exercise that invites us to turn our working space and the objects it contains into an aesthetic space, and leads to a taste of the possibility that the world of inanimate as well as animate objects is talking to us, if we would only listen.

I say this with one proviso, which would open up another area of discussion if there were space and time – which is that everything is a symbol, but it is only a symbol of itself. The interpretation is an act of imagination, and always is. Meaning is always subjective. The good thing about this is that there is no illusion because there is no objective reality veiled by illusion. Therefore the only illusion is the belief that there is something that is obscured or elsewhere to, or behind or beyond what is. Accepting ‘what is’ does not mean resignation and giving in to circumstances, it means that we stop jousting windmills and start acting efficiently against oppression in the here and now, which is the only place where things can change.

#### A New World

This exercise can benefit from having materials in the space such as cushions, cloth, paints, cardboard or any other arts materials. However, it can also work surprisingly well with found objects in a typical workspace.

The group are given a hypothetical situation within which this exercise will unfold. A kind of thought experiment put into action. They and this space and all it contains are all that remains of the world. The rest has been destroyed in some cataclysmic event. In our shock we have become mute. But as is the way with all animals, we continue

to survive. We must now build a new world with the objects that we have at our disposal. We can work together or alone, but our communication is limited to actions rather than words, through the language of co-creation rather than explanation. I usually give around 30 minutes for this exercise.

Once the new world is completed the participants are asked to find the place in this new world where they most like to be, where they least like to be and where they think they belong. It is useful when the group is settled in each place to ask hypothetical questions such as –

What is it about this place, what does it signify?

How much of your life do you spend in what this place represents for you?

What do you avoid by being here?

What must you sacrifice?

What is your reward?

(And in the final instance) Who told you that you belong here?

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Rehearsal

Once the three locations are mapped out you invite the participants to go on a journey from the place they least like to be to the place where they most like to be, via the place where they feel they belong. Some of the places might be the same. Then you ask them to do the journey but also to combine this movement with a transformation of the body from the unfolding exercise. So they start where they least like to be in the image of who they least like to be, move to the place where they belong and make the image of who they actually are and finally to the place where they most like to be making the image of who they most like to be.

## 3<sup>rd</sup> Rehearsal

Now they return to their partner and they take it in turns to rehearse the same journey with the witness embodying their block and whispering the thoughts that think they are facts in their ear. The witness does not use full force to try and stop the movement. This is just a practical run through so that they can both prepare for the real thing.

## The Great Battle

The pairs start together now combining all the elements or co-ordinates with the witness doing their meutic<sup>5</sup> best to elicit embody the bloc physically and mentally. Strategically using the thoughts that think they are facts to weaken the protagonist, and the block to push them off course or to hold them back. It is important to explain that a happy ending is not essential, but neither is total repression of the protagonist. The witness is giving a fair depiction of the struggle so that the protagonist has the best chance of receiving some insight.

It is best, before the physical struggle begins, that the witness has time to hold the protagonist in the place and position they least like to be in whispering the thoughts that think they are facts. It is also important to mention in the last moment that the protagonist can, if they wish, talk to their blocks. We can often forget that they might just listen.

After the first struggle, the pairs swap and the second commences.

## Metabolising

After giving the pairs time to share their thoughts and feelings about the process with each other, the whole group comes together and everyone is invited to share what they want to share.

This leads to the next stage, which is to name the oppression. These are distinguished as internalised and externalised. But when the internal cops are identified, we match or find their headquarters in the external oppressions. From there the group can explore the oppressions using any of the tools available to us I the wonderful armoury of the Theatre of the Oppressed.

I find using this triangulation process better locates what is the most relevant obstacle for the spect-actors to work with because it respects the complexity and unconscious nature of the forces that inhibit us in mind, body and voice. By pinpointing the ‘tug of

the hook' within us we can trace it back up the line to its common source and notice what weakens us in the struggle. On a meta-level also, when everyone in the whole room is engaged in a deeply personal 'individualised' battle we can recognise the familiarity of how in our atomised society our struggles seem solitary and not in solidarity.

During one triangulation process in Estonia a spect-actor succeeded to wrestle her way against the block to the position in body and space in which she most liked to be. The moment she arrived the block stopped blocking and stopped whispering the weakening thoughts that thought they were facts. In her life she had been waiting for the internal blocks to dissipate before going for what she really wanted, and suddenly she realised that she had it the wrong way around. In the epic battle to wrestle control from the plutocracy we also need to recognize how we weaken ourselves by listening to the cop in the head that says it is hopeless. Perhaps it is, but like Sandra in the Dardenne brothers film - '*Deux jours, une nuit*': who must visit each of her factory co-workers and persuade them to vote for her to keep her job rather than receive their bonuses: by fighting the 'good fight' we re-enchant our existence.

But how do we know what is the good fight?, Especially now that the inherent flaw Plato identified in democracy - that it leads to our being consumed by unnecessary desires,; is leading to the destruction of our habitat and manipulation of truth. This is why orienting towards context; towards the truth as felt in the moment; towards the wisdom that arises from a perception that offers no resistance to what is, is what is most useful. In a climate where our minds have become a theatre of operations that can be implanted with the ridiculous belief that huge buildings can fall down by themselves or that austerity for the poorest is the only way to pay off the huge losses made by rich bankers, perhaps a context oriented theatre can help restore our basic sanity. Perhaps with sanity restored the blocks will find no purchase on our psyche, and we will see clearly once more who we really are.

<sup>1</sup>In Chile on the 11<sup>th</sup> September 1973 a military junta backed up by the American CIA overthrew the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende, the first Marxist president of South America. Under the dictatorship of General Augusto

Pinochet, aggressive neoliberal reforms were implemented under the auspices of influential economist Milton Friedman.

<sup>2</sup>Metaxis is the second of three hypothesis (along with osmosis and analogical induction), which gives the spect-actor in the The Theatre of the Oppressed the capacity to transform himself and extrapolate those transformative actions into society at large. Boal defines it in *The Rainbow of Desires* as '*the state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image.*'

<sup>3</sup> This exercise is where the group is divided into smaller groups of five and each spect-actors moulds the others in their small group to create an image of their oppression. They then place themselves as the protagonist in the image. When all in their group have made their images they rehearse them so that the group can change fluidly between them. This process is made in silence and takes about 15 minutes. Each groups then shows the larger group their images and people are asked to project what they see. Images can be selected democratically on the basis of which in each group the spect-actors most sympathise. These then receive more attention and can be dynamised in several different ways.

<sup>4</sup> Boal explained how while in exile in Europe people would often refer to intangible oppressions, such as fear of the unknown or a crippling inability to communicate with family members rather than the violent oppressions of the police state which gave rise to the armoury of The Theatre of the Oppressed. After a period of disillusion in which he considered such oppressions as bourgeois, Boal became aware while working in Scandinavia that the suicide rate there was higher than the whole of the southern hemisphere. He recognised therefore that while the cops were not likely to knock down your door and drag you to a cell in the middle of the night in these democratic and progressive countries, there were also internalised cops, who could be equally inhibiting - the cops in the head. However he was explicit that the headquarters of these cops were outside in society and had been placed there by people in authority during our childhood or through the social construction of the world in which we are forced to live.

<sup>5</sup> Meutic is the word Boal describes as the action of the midwife – to give birth to new action and which often requires the encouragement to push.