

## Context Oriented Theatre of the Oppressed? By Iwan Brioc

*“Utopia lies at the horizon.  
When I draw nearer by two steps,  
it retreats two steps.  
If I proceed ten steps forward, it  
swiftly slips ten steps ahead.  
No matter how far I go, I can never reach it.  
What, then, is the purpose of utopia?  
It is to cause us to advance.”*  
- Eduardo Hughes Galeano

One of the many wonderful things about the Theatre of the Oppressed is how it is explained through a series of epiphanies – moments of transforming insight that Augusto Boal stumbled upon in his search for a theatre of the people. I think probably all the 'jokers' who have been working in TO for some years will also have had epiphanic moments that inform their practice and deepen their appreciation of this rich and incredibly useful methodology we have been so privileged to learn and share with others.

Characteristic of epiphanic moments is that they occur totally spontaneously, through some kind of serendipity, and from the places you least expect it – when as a joker you feel vulnerable even lost or in which some arrogance you have gained is overcome by a passionate intervention. I'll be honest with you. This is why I do TO...not to change the world but to encounter the world in ways which will change me.

When I do TO well, (which isn't always the case), I feel like I am walking towards utopia and I would like to share with you some of my epiphanies on this never ending pilgrimage. I would like to frame these epiphanies in the context of my changing perception of this changing world at the turn of the century and how this has led me to believe that we need a new approach to TO. An approach which I call Context Oriented Theatre. Context Oriented Theatre is a kind of neuro-pedagogy of the oppressed and how the mind is the theatre of operations where the only real revolution can occur.

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In the early 1990's when I started doing TO I was in a Forum Theatre piece about the oppression of young people not being able to choose their own career paths. It was touring schools in a rural part of Wales which was going through difficult times economically. That was also demonstrated by the fact that with the company only able to afford three actors I was the joker and the oppressor in the three scenes. In one scene I was playing a drunken uncle returning from another failed job interview, and raining pessimism down on the 16-year-old protagonist's head. The sad truth is a lot of what he was saying – 'there's no jobs around here so there's no point in qualifying in anything unless you plan to stay here and be near your family. Best you move to the city right away and get a job.' were to some extent accurate depictions of the situation. No one knew how to deal with this oppressor, and almost every intervention in every school involved punching him or pushing him forcefully out of the door. The audience really didn't want to hear what he had to say.

However there was one school where there was a different reaction and this was the one school where we had very serious doubts about performing the piece at all. It was a school that combined severely disabled young people and young people with mental health problems. As they gathered in the hall or were placed there randomly by the dispirited staff we thought what relevance does this play have to them? What career choices would they have to make in their lives? But since we were there we proceeded. There was a lot of distracting noise and movement in the audience throughout play. Some of the pupils were turned the wrong way in their wheelchairs and couldn't actually see

what was happening, being unable to turn their heads voluntarily in the direction of the stage. However in the front row was a young man with bright ginger hair, a face as white as a sheet but also covered in acne and a huge black eye. And he was quite focused. On the replay the cacophony in the audience that seemed totally unrelated to what we were doing continued. No one stopped anything until it came to this uncle, at which point the young lad in the front said stop and started to get up. As I had often experienced violence at this stage, and violence I assumed was on the mind of this particular spect-actor, I introduced the rule about not making physical contact and moving in slow motion to depict violence rather than enact it on my person!

In the event the young man did something totally unexpected – he gently held the sleeve of my coat and said very softly ‘Please sit down with me uncle.’ And sitting next to me and with great compassion he said ‘Don’t ever give up.’ At that point something remarkable happened for which I have no rational explanation. Confronted with such overwhelming compassion something broke in my character – it could no longer function and I looked up at the audience and there was total stillness, total attention, total intelligence. There was not one disabled person there. In fact there were no persons at all – just an unified field of attention and intelligence. And then as fast as it came it was gone.

Later, on leaving the school I felt like I was abandoning these young people to the projections of the disinterested staff, which were more of a prison for them than their bodies were. I realized that invariably the act of perception is also an act of projection – an imposition of our own matrix of conclusions on what we encounter. An epiphany is that moment when a hole is smashed in that matrix, a hole through which you see a whole new reality and I’ve noticed this happens a lot in the Theatre of the Oppressed. The methods themselves are often explained through the epiphanies Augusto Boal had which led him to the development of this theatre of the people and I know that many Jokers also reconfigure the way they practice TO as a result of various epiphanies.

Of course, after the moment has passed we make a new map of reality to make sense of the often revelatory insight these epiphanies provide. We weave neural networks to fill in the hole in our matrix. Perhaps this new map will fit better – but of course the map is not the terrain and again we can be surprised and our boat of assumptions gets holed under the water. Or at least that’s what you can hope for if you are really curious. Curiosity, I suggest is what keeps us stumbling on towards utopia, even if as Galeano suggest it recedes as we near.

Primo Levi writing about the Holocaust in Moments of Reprieve says, *"that in the Camps one of the most frequent states of mind was curiosity. And yet, besides being frightened, humiliated and desperate, we were curious: hungry for bread and also to understand. The world around us was upside down and so somebody must have turned it upside down ..."*

But this last year this phrase keeps repeating in my mind like a demented mantra - *"The defeated are not curious."* And while I could spend hours with you exploring what basis I have for making such a bold statement I would rather focus on how this manifests in the practice of TO.

I see a lot of Jokers who are not curious in their Joking. They seem to think that TO is a vehicle for articulating and propagating their value system. They big up the comments or interventions from spect-actors that support their viewpoint and shut out or demean any alternative viewpoints. This is always a surprise to me and a disappointment because I do TO precisely for the opposite reason. I’m looking for the spect-actor who will destroy my illusions, who will blow my mind and make me see anew. And I know from experience that can come from anywhere and anyone, often the person whom you least expect. Like the kid with ADHD who watched the forum piece from between peoples legs jumping around under the bleachers, and then during the re-play crawled out and did his very own lightning forum jumping through all the scenes confronting all the characters like a

whirlwind of wisdom incarnate. Or the schizophrenic old man who took the oppressors to space to look at the earth and describe what they saw. Magic? Totally!

When a joker is not curious its also a defeat for TO. Because when a joker is more passionate about their cause than about dialogue the audience knows it, they sense it, and most of them will never want anything to do with TO again. Such Jokers will end up preaching to the converted and nothing will change. It also makes this theatre incredibly boring and is a crime to the creative potential of TO. It's like using a Stradivarius to bang a drum.

One of the effects of this kind of TO is what I call 'soundbite' Forum Theatre, when an intervention is only allowed to run for long enough for the spect-actor to reveal his or her opinion on the social context of the scenario depicted. Then they are bundled off back to the audience with hearty or reserved applause according to how well they embodied Marxism or some such political doctrine.

If TO really is a rehearsal for reality then shouldn't interventions be allowed to run on, to go beyond what is comfortable, to test the steel of all peoples involved and journey to the root of the problem. And lets please not already decide that the problem is political. Let's not decide anything at all but let the aesthetic space, this dynamic platform for transformation which TO can open among us be a source of real dialogue. A dialogue not only in the sense Freire and Boal spoke in which there was respect and equality, but also in the sense that Bohm, Bakhtin and Bauber used it, as a flow 'dia' of meaning 'logos.' And this meaning can't flow when conclusion not curiosity sits at the doors of perception.

I remember a time when I would explain at the beginning of a Forum Theatre performance that the audience would see the play twice and the second time any of them could shout stop come on stage, replace the protagonist and show what they would do in such circumstances, and they didn't hear it. It was like those reports from the colonizing ships off the costs of Australia and South America which stated that their galleons were invisible to the indigenous peoples on the shore. The community could not cognitively process the possibility of intervening in a story and changing it, so they ignored it! When after the first performance I explained again that we would perform the play for the second time and invite them to intervene, they looked open mouthed at each other and laughed. As if to say *'Is this a possibility, that I might change the story presented to me?'* Our oppressors also guard the doors of perception and a compassionate and questioning curiosity must come into play if we are to push past them.

It's with this in mind that I propose an additional three hypothesis to join the three that Boal set at the heart of TO. In describing Boal's three hypothesis I hope to demonstrate why along with an Aesthetics of the Oppressed and a Theatre of the Oppressed we need a Neuro-pedagogy of the oppressed if TO is to be practiced in a way that will continue to be useful in the changing world we live in.

The first hypothesis Boal called **Osmosis** - how conditioning permeates society and the individual. The conditioning flows from outside in to the human through desires implanted by society, and outwardly from the humans innate creativity and curiosity. With the blinding light of an explosion in information technology; the illusion of a global village created by instant connectivity and the terrifying fact that neuroscience is coming to the aid of the marketing industry Osmosis operates now at an incredibly high frequency. We need a neuro-pedagogy of the oppressed to help create a free and independent space within our own psyches where we can resist the continuous onslaught of 'solutions' to imagined problems. To have the space in our work and life for serendipity – where the knowledge already within us can flow outwards.

Boal's second hypothesis is **Metaxis**, which is that truly wonderful capacity that humans have of

being in two places at the same time, the stage and wherever the shared imagination dictates - a moor in ancient Scotland, the Parthenon or the occupy camp. But it is this same capacity which also makes us fragmented. With the capacity now to be virtually anywhere through devices that fit in our pocket, we are very rarely present to the here and now! We can fool ourselves into feeling we are 'with' the protestors without actually being there. But being here and now is the only place we can truly act. Metaxis is a means to an end – and the aim of TO has always been for the two worlds to collide and for the change rehearsed in the theatre to catalyze change in society. But, ironically, this change cannot be 'staged' it has to arise from epiphany – from a breaking through illusion to a more expansive and inclusive view.

Boal's third hypothesis is **Analogical Induction**, which distinguishes TO from Therapy by the action facilitated by the Joker of moving from the particular or personal to the general or social - finding the generic mechanisms of oppression or what Zizek calls implicate laws, or what Chomsky might call the universal grammar of oppression. So, rather than converging on the addictive and distracting narrative of an individual's suffering that seems to pass as prime-time entertainment nowadays, we diverge out from the point of individual instances of oppression to the bigger picture. However what I often see in practice is that this bigger picture quickly becomes the usual suspects which are lined up against the theatre wall to be shot. Naming the oppression is important, I agree, but surely Analogical Induction is also about moving towards the epiphany of our fundamental connectedness. As Naomi Shihab Nye says in her beautiful poem – Kindness *'you must speak till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth.'*

So here are the additional three hypothesis which I propose -

**Multi-Valence** - Boal hints at this when under the hypothesis of Analogical Induction he says that TO is not about interpretation but about offering multiple points of reference, but I think this only scrapes the surface of the underlying hypothesis or paradigm which TO promotes through this pluralistic stance. That is that perception is participative and that we make the world we live in first by the act of perception. By allowing the total theatre language of TO to be a divergent rather than convergent signifier we open up multiple possible interpretations rather than closing them down into something conclusive, and like a quantum state all interpretations are simultaneously true and false. In this way TO is a celebration of subjectivity and inter-subjectivity. The simple action of making it permissible for participants to project creatively with the proviso that everyone is aware that it is only a projection can liberate different ways of perceiving our human condition. It gives rise to a meta-cognition, which provides the mental space to respond rather than react habitually to our world and even to notice that indeed thoughts are not facts. Armored with this insight we can develop a resistance to the ever more sophisticated ways marketing, public relations and propaganda implants desires, ideas and beliefs through osmosis.

**Proprioception** - So again through Metaxis we have this capacity to observe ourselves in action by re-enacting memories from the past and using our imagination to project how we might act in the future. We are doubled, as Artaud said, and exist simultaneously in the image of reality and the reality of the image. This is what makes the aesthetic space a simulation of consciousness (or the psyche) since both are ontologically concomitant: theatre being the first human invention.

But what if we were able to orient the function of this aesthetic space towards context. What I mean by that can best be explained with a simple sentence – “what if all there is is this?”

What if all there ever has been and ever will be is this. This being-ness or aliveness, which includes everything, that is happening right now. This also includes the distinct feeling, the impression which has been around since our first memories of there being someone: someone who has a past

and a future; someone who has strong feelings and great ideas; someone who is oppressed and sometimes oppresses. Someone who, right now, is reading: someone who is trying to understand. But there is nothing to understand, because all there is is this. And if there is nothing to get then this someone no longer has a function. Because if all there is is this then there is nothing lacking; there is nothing to change and nothing to struggle for. Because this is always complete.

I know this sounds heretical in TO which is about changing the world through theatre. But this is precisely what I am doing now through an act of perception. Right now I invite you to witness the full implication of the meaning of Boal's statement that we are theatre, and see how the world changes as we do so.

What you might have sensed if you connected with this last few paragraphs is something called proprioception. While we have physical proprioception, that we know what our body is doing and where it is in space, we do not have psychological proprioception. Psychological proprioception happens when we catch sight of the whole mechanism by which we are perpetuating our suffering and this happens when we observe the observer; that is when we witness the primary mechanism of oppression which is the illusion of the separation between what I observe and what is observing. In this space is all human suffering and longing and without this proprioception all action towards change will prove divisive and have within it the seeds of its undoing. That is why the only real revolution is psychological proprioception.

**Communitas** - This is a term borrowed from anthropology and coined by Victor Turner to describe a property or quality brought about by people sharing an experience of liminality, where the structures of order and function provided by society (by osmosis) are transgressed through ritual and rites of passage. Put simply and in modern terms concepts of having and doing are overwhelmed by just being, the implicate laws which so dictate our actions and behaviors are momentarily in abeyance and we step into another world where such laws are redundant because the unity of presence is encountered. Communitas is the resulting quality of relationship between people experiencing this together, this shared space-less timelessness: and this and not the roles we play is the glue that makes community.

TO can and does create Communitas, and this has an intrinsic value as the only solid basis for solidarity. Solidarity built on shared opinions and principles, as history has repeatedly taught us, quickly falls apart when the wolf is at the door.

An approach to TO that integrates these additional hypotheses, which addresses the need for a Neuro-pedagogy of the Oppressed; I've called Context Oriented Theatre of the Oppressed. Context is like Galeano's Utopia - always receding, because the moment we think we've grasped something it automatically becomes content. But context is not far away on a distant horizon. We can't approach it because it is here already and everywhere always. It is simply this.