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### TEACHING AND LIVE PERFORMANCE: APPLIED THEATRE IN UNIVERSITIES AND SCHOOLS

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#### Abstract

This article compares the classroom process of school teachers and university lecturers to the activity of theatrical performance. In doing so, it probes the potential of live performance as an educational instrument. It concludes by tracing some of the history of applications of theatre to education, from the time of Brecht to the present day.

#### Biography

John Jacobs is an actor, director and lecturer in performing arts at Deakin University. As a film actor, he recently played Father Neville in Annika Glac's feature *Belladonna*, currently screening around Australia and in the United States. His main research interests are Shakespeare and Brecht, and he has had several articles published in the journal *Double Dialogues*. He is currently working (with RMIT University senior lecturer in education Richard Johnson) on employing Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre to create a 'simulated' classroom: a make-believe, unthreatening space in which education students can anticipate and explore the problems they face on teaching rounds and in schools.

## TEACHING AND LIVE PERFORMANCE: APPLIED THEATRE IN UNIVERSITIES AND SCHOOLS

In many ways, a teacher is like a live-theatre actor. A teacher has an audience of students and has to perform in front of and for (and in interaction with) that audience. That even the spaces in which teaching takes place can be quite highly charged theatrically is evident in terms like 'studio' and 'lecture theatre'. The words 'act' and 'perform' are, moreover, similarly ambiguous. They point towards the artifice of the theatre, and to the idea of pretending to be what one is not (mimesis); however, they also mean simply to do, to act, to perform an action. The word 'theatre' comes from an ancient Greek word meaning 'seeing place', and it would be misleading to identify theatrical art purely with mimesis. Perhaps even more fundamental to theatre than mimesis is the notion of embodiment: the sensuality, the actuality (act, action, actor, actuality) of live performance. As Peter Brook (1968) wrote in *The Empty Space*, 'I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.' (1968: 1) Theatre's power as an educational tool derives both from its mimetic capacity and also from this actuality, this sensuality, this immediacy: the idea that the subject explored is not merely discussed, but embodied.

There are many possible definitions of teaching, and we need to consider at least two of these here. A teacher can be a guide, leading students out into the world or into some part of it. From this perspective, a teacher is somewhat like the actor/presenter of a *Lehrstück*, a 'teaching play.' For example, at the opening of Brecht's 1930 play *The Exception and the Rule*, the actors come out and address the audience: 'We are about to tell you the story of a journey/An exploiter and two of the exploited are the travellers/Examine carefully the behaviour of these people/Find it surprising though not unusual/Inexplicable, though normal/Incomprehensible, though it is the rule.' Or a teacher can lead students on an inward journey of self-introduction. Here the teacher is more like the mimetic actor, an actor so immersed in her or his role that the audience, too, becomes immersed. Either way, teachers are frequently revered, even idolised, by their students, much as performers tend to be revered by their audiences. The activity of teaching can, moreover, be even more easily identified with the activity of film or theatre directing than with acting. We can see this in, for example, the relationship between Japan's most famous film director and that country's best-known film actor, Akira Kurosawa and Toshiro Mifune. In the preface to Donald Richie's study of Kurosawa's films, Mifune writes: 'I have worked in almost all of his films, sixteen in all. He taught me practically everything I know, and it was he who first introduced me to myself as an actor.' (Richie 1970: 9)

The teacher as guide, leading students out into the world or into what lies within them, and the interactions between theatrical actors and their audiences can be viewed similarly. It was the great Bertolt Brecht who made this comparison really clear. Brecht frequently spoke and wrote of the double identity of the actor: for him, the actor was not only the character or series of characters portrayed but, first and foremost, the guide/presenter discussed above – a kind of teacher, as in *The Exception and the Rule*, in which, as we have just seen, the actors first appear on stage not in character at all but simply as themselves, as presenters of an investigation.

In this way, the theatre becomes a laboratory, a studio, a classroom, a forum in which the immediacy of live performance is employed in order to explore and analyse human behaviour. Consider, however, that as these words are uttered, not only the lesson but also the play has already begun, with the immediacy of (bodily performed) poetry – poetry quite powerful and provocative, even in translation from the German. Even at the peak of his career as a playwright in the late 1930s and 1940s (*Mother Courage and her Children*, *The Good Person of Setzuan*, *The Life of Galileo*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*), as his plays became less overtly *Lehrstücke*, Brecht never lost interest in placing their narratives within the frame of a forum for ideas of public interest. At the end of *The Good Person of Setzuan*, for example, he has the actors return to the stage, much as they entered at the beginning of *The Exception and the Rule*, and announce:

*You are thinking, aren't you, that this is no right*

*Conclusion to the play you've seen tonight*  
*After a tale, exotic, fabulous*  
*A nasty ending was slipped up on us*  
*We feel deflated too. We too are nettled*  
*to see the curtain down and nothing settled*  
*How could a better ending be arranged?*  
*Could one change people? Can the world be changed?*  
*It is for you to find a way, my friends*  
*To help good men arrive at happy ends*  
*You write the happy ending to the play*  
*There must, there must, there's got to be a way!*

For the remainder of the present study, I will trace some of the historical consequences of Brecht's notion of theatre as a means to educational ends rather than an end in itself, and of his notion of theatre as a forum for ideas, interweaving a discussion of Brecht's major successor, Augusto Boal, with an account of a little of my own experience over the past 30 years as a performer and educator.

Brecht died in 1956. The playwright and theorist to build most memorably on his legacy has been Augusto Boal (1931–2009). In the 1960s and 1970s, Boal developed in his native Brazil what he called Forum Theatre, a workshop-process in which human situations to be discussed by a meeting of interested parties were acted out theatrically by Boal and his colleagues. These interested parties (the audience) were encouraged to stop the performance at any time and suggest different actions for the actors, who would then, in re-staging the scene, seek to embody the audience's suggestions. Indeed, audience members were also encouraged to move into the acting space and embody what they were talking about by taking over from the actors the acting of their roles. Audience members became empowered not only to imagine change, but to generate social action. In 1971, after the publication of his first book, *The Theatre of the Oppressed*, Boal was arrested, tortured, and exiled to Argentina. He went on with his work, establishing companies all around the world. In 1992 he won election to the local government in Rio, and proceeded to turn his Forum Theatre work into what he called Legislative Theatre, the essence of which was the introduction by Boal of new legislation in Rio according to the outcomes/recommendations coming out of the Forum Theatre workshops. In 1997, Boal was awarded the Career Achievement Award by the Association for Theatre in Higher Education during its national conference.

Boal's performances and theoretical writings were founded on the conviction that theatre is the human language *par excellence*, and the importance of role-play, of theatrical embodiment, to the educational goal of his theatre is concisely expressed in the epigraph to his book *Legislative Theatre*, in which he quotes from a poem of Jose Marti: 'Doing is the Best Way of Saying.' In this book, Boal describes his theatre work, in all its various modalities, as 'a constant search for dialogical forms, forms of theatre through which it is possible to converse, both as a part of social activity, pedagogy, psychotherapy, politics' (1998: 4). His main objective is to transform the audience, normally thought of as passive consumers of theatrical art, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action. In John O'Toole's and Kate Donelan's *Drama, Culture and Empowerment* (1996), Boal writes:

There is nothing on the stage that is basically different from what we do in our daily life. The essential difference is that in our daily lives we don't pay attention to the fact that we are using that language. The Theatre of the Oppressed tries to develop this capacity of everyone to use that language: first with the objective of trying to discover what oppressions we are suffering; second, to create a space in which to rehearse ways and means of fighting against those oppressions; third, to extrapolate that into real life, so that we can become free. (Boal 1996: 47)

Boal concludes:

the aesthetic space allows democratic interchange, and allows us to say 'OK, that's the way things are, but not the way things should be, and now I'm going to create an image of how I want the world to be ... We are in rehearsal for the real world when the aesthetic space disappears

and people go home. (1996: 49)

Boal's idea accords with Michel Foucault's notion that power lies in the ability to act, and to act on the action of others – a social intervention which transforms people from objects to subjects of their own history.

Boal travelled extensively, conducting workshops, lecturing and giving demonstrations, and his ideas have been taken up by community theatre companies and other groups all over the world. As Diana Taylor (2009) notes in *The Drama Review*, his system is highly replicable: others can learn it quite easily, use it and go on to teach it anew (2009: 10–11). In South Africa, DramaAide (a drama approach to AIDS education) is a peer education workshop sequence drawing heavily on Boal's participatory theatre techniques. The program has been in operation since 1991 and has been reported to be effective in performing and implementing drama-based AIDS education in the secondary schools. The actors present a play and hold a post-performance discussion, teach life skills by engaging students in participatory Boalian Forum Theatre exercises, train teachers and eventually help students to create their own plays (Boon and Plastow, 2004: 115–16). The Adugna Community Dance Theatre in Ethiopia use similar structures (reported in Boon and Plastow 2004). Indian dramatist Sanjoy Ganguly (2004) writes: 'It was around 1990–1991 that I chanced to come across the work of Augusto Boal. His thinking opened up a new horizon for us.' And: 'Our didactic monologues began to be replaced by a dialogic process in which actors and spectators were collaborators. This was the beginning of Forum Theatre in India' (2004: 236). Ganguly concludes: 'I am thankful to Boal because the workshop methodology he devised can change a non-actor into an actor in a remarkably short time.' (2004: 239) Boal inspired Carole Christensen's work in Denmark, and provided her with workshop exercises (Christensen 2005); likewise, he assisted with the work of Velda Harris in Azerbaijan (Harris 2005). Both of these practitioners are described in detail in Peter Billingham's book *Radical Initiatives in Interventionist and Community Drama* (2005).

In Australia, Forum Theatre first made its way into the non-drama curricula of universities via community theatre. In 1988, Deakin University, at which I have taught performing arts for the last 19 years, housed the first university degree in nursing in Australia. The inaugural head of the School of Nursing, Professor Alan Pearson, had been a keen participant in community theatre in his native England. At this time, Deakin University already had its own six-member community theatre company, the Mill Theatre, founded in 1978 by this university's first performing arts lecturer, James McCaughey, and five professional actors, who worked full-time in the Geelong community and with Deakin students. In the following years, the School of Nursing employed actors and Deakin performing arts students each year to participate in scene-work and improvisation with the student nurses. These actors mostly played the role of patients and the students played themselves (nurses). The purpose of the work was to strengthen and sharpen the 'people skills' brought by the student nurses to their interactions with their patients and colleagues, and to develop the students' confidence in this crucial aspect of their craft. The Mill Theatre's own work included weekly 'Mill Nights'. Every Thursday, Geelong citizens would arrive at the Mill, participate in a warm-up created by the Mill's professional actors, and be offered a variety of workshops – each of which was conducted somewhere in the building by one of the professionals. These workshops would culminate in a brief performance or presentation, which could be given at the end of the night when the entire company would reconvene.

Before becoming a university lecturer, I was for some years an actor. In the 1970s, two other actors – including Barbara Ciszewska (who went on to be one of the six founding members of Deakin's Mill Theatre Company) – and I were approached by a professor from the languages/linguistics strand of a Melbourne teachers' college (Professor Larry Bagg of Victoria College Toorak, later to become part of Deakin University). Professor Bagg was preparing his language students to become interpreters, and he employed us to engage in role-play with these students along lines similar to what was to happen in the Deakin School of Nursing in the 1980s. Professor Bagg wanted to give these young interpreters practice (rehearsal) at executing their craft under the sort of pressure they would face in various situations in the future: the make-believe pressure of a theatrical scenario. Since becoming a lecturer myself, I have on occasions facilitated the employment of both drama students and professional actors to assist academics in a similar way. For several years from 2001, a professor of psychiatry at Monash University engaged actors through me to play patients in scenarios in which the doctors were played by medical students. At present, a group of our final-year Deakin performing arts students is working with Deakin law lecturer Dr Clare Macken and her students; the performing arts students are preparing to play the role of courtroom

witnesses being cross-examined by the student barristers as part of their law examinations. Final-year law students at Deakin, Monash and several other Australian universities are also required to 'perform' (in both of the major senses of the word defined above) as barristers in Moot Courts: here they are assessed not on cross-examination but on their courtroom exchanges with judges. A moot or mock courtroom is perhaps an even more highly charged pseudo-theatrical space than a lecture theatre or classroom – hence the great popularity of courtroom drama on film and television.

In 2007, Dr Richard Johnson, a senior lecturer in education at Deakin University, consulted Dr Glenn D'Cruz, a senior lecturer in performing arts at Deakin, and between them they saw an opportunity to address concerns that they both had about units they taught. Richard Johnson's concern was that his final-year education students were quite nervous about making the transition from being students at the university to being responsible for teaching in their own classrooms. He recalls that the unanimous area of concern was 'classroom management'. They 'felt they had the theory but lacked the practice' (Johnson 2008: 1). They went on to say that they had not encountered some of their 'deepest fears' in their school practicum experiences. When student teachers are in front of their classes in schools, the students' regular teacher is usually present in the classroom as well. This may have been the reason for school practicum not seeming to be a true rehearsal for the fateful moment of facing one's own class alone. The textbook-based scenarios discussed at university did raise the issues, but the element of enactment was lacking. Glenn D'Cruz and I were about to teach a new final-year drama unit called 'Out of the Box: Theatre Practice in Alternative Contexts' and were looking for 'clients' with whom our students could work using drama skills to address real issues they (the clients) were facing. At the end of the semester, the education students and their lecturers attended a forum in which schoolroom, playground and other scenarios were acted out by the drama students. The forum was chaired by Glenn D'Cruz, who invited the 'audience' to suggest changes and re-runs, and even to come down and take over the role of the teacher themselves. The forum was enthusiastically received, and I went on to chair forums for Richard Johnson, his students and colleagues, and other interested parties along similar lines in 2008 and 2009. In 2010, two more forums took place: one at Deakin and one at RMIT University, at which Richard Johnson now lectures.

The effectiveness of these forums clearly resides in their fictional component. In a make-believe classroom or playground, you can rehearse thoroughly and full-bloodedly, lose your cool, make any mistake at all, do something for which, in the world outside this 'virtual' classroom, you would be dismissed the next day (and perhaps be hearing from a solicitor as well) and none of it will matter, because it is not real but truly an (open) rehearsal, a forum in which practice and theory come together. In the forum, moreover, one can 'rewind' and replay the scene, testing a new strategy. The school practicum is an important part of teacher training, but by its nature cannot do these things.

Richard Johnson and I are looking forward to researching this project more thoroughly. From our initial research, which has included the interviewing by Richard of each of the education students involved, we believe that it works – but we need more evidence.

What strikes young performers about the art form that will one day preoccupy them (or which perhaps preoccupies them already) is in most cases simply the joy of encountering it: they see a performance that moves them, or love being on stage themselves, and enjoy the feeling of power that goes with that. The idea of using that capacity to move, or that power to serve a political or an educational purpose is usually far from their minds. However, in a world in which film, television and other even newer media have to a great degree reduced the demand for theatre, performers need to reflect on what is essential about their art form and what is unique to it, in particular the interactivity and the actuality of live performance.

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