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FORUM THEATRE

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Before coming to Europe, I had done a lot of Forum Theatre, in a number of Latin American countries, but always in “workshop” situations, never as a “performance.” Here in Europe, at the time of writing, I have already done several Forum Theatre sessions as performances.¹ In Latin America, the audience was generally small and homogeneous, the spect-actors almost always being the workers from one factory, the residents of a particular neighborhood, the congregation of a church, the students of a university, etc. Here, besides that kind of “workshop” forum, I have also done shows for hundreds of people who did not know each other at all. This is a new type of Forum Theatre, which I began to develop here, with some very positive results.

Also, most of the Forum Theatre pieces I did in Latin America had a “realistic” style. Here in Europe I have also done “symbolist” scenes, as was the case in Portugal for a work about agrarian reform.

THE RULES OF THE GAME

Forum Theatre is a sort of fight or game, and like all forms of game or fight there are rules. They can be modified, but they still exist, to ensure that all the players are involved in the same enterprise, and to facilitate the generation of serious and fruitful discussion.

DRAMATURGY

- 1 The text must clearly delineate the nature of each character, it must identify them precisely, so that the spect-actors can easily recognize each one’s ideology.
- 2 The original solutions proposed by the protagonist must contain at the very least one political or social error, which will be analyzed during the forum session. These errors must be clearly expressed and carefully rehearsed, in well-defined situations. This is because Forum Theatre is not propaganda theatre, it is not the old didactic theatre. It is pedagogical in the sense that we all learn

together, actors and audience. The play – or “model” – must present a mistake, a failure, so that the spect-actors will be spurred into finding solutions and inventing new ways of confronting oppression. We pose good questions, but the audience must supply good answers.

- 3 The piece can be of any genre (realism, symbolism, expressionism, etc.) except “surrealism” or the irrational; the style does not matter, as long as the objective is to discuss concrete situations (through the medium of theatre).

STAGING

- 1 The actors must have physical styles of playing which successfully articulate their characters’ ideology, work, social function, profession, etc. It is important that there is a logic to the characters’ evolution, and that they *do things*, or else the audience will be inclined to take their seats and do the “forum” without the theatre – by speech alone (without action) like a radio forum.
- 2 Every show must find the most suitable means of “expression” for its particular subject-matter; preferably this should be found by common consent with the public, either in the course of the presentation or by prior research.
- 3 Each character must be presented “visually,” in such a way as to be recognizable independently of their spoken script; also the costumes must be easy for the spect-actors to get in and out of, with the minimum of fuss.

THE PERFORMANCE GAME

The performance is an artistic and intellectual game played between actor and spect-actor.

- 1 To start off with, the show is performed as if it were a conventional play. A certain image of the world is presented.
- 2 The spect-actors are asked if they agree with the solutions advanced by the protagonist; they will probably say no. The audience is then told that the play is going to be done a second time, exactly as it was done the first time. The actors will try to bring the piece to the same end as before, and the spect-actors are to try to change it, showing that new solutions are possible and valid. In other words, the actors stand for a particular *vision of the world* and consequently will try to maintain that world as it is and ensure that things go exactly the same way . . . at least until a spect-actor intervenes and changes the vision of the world *as it is* into a world *as it could be*. It is vital to generate a degree of tension among the spect-actors – if no one changes the world it will stay as it is, if no one changes the play it will come to the same end as before.
- 3 The audience is informed that the first step is to take the protagonist’s place whenever he or she is making a mistake, in order to try to bring about a better solution. All they have to do is approach the playing area and shout “Stop!” Then, immediately, the actors must stop where they are without changing position. With the minimum delay, the spect-actor must say where he or she wants the scene taken from, indicating the relevant phrase, moment, or movement (whichever is easiest). The actors then start the scene again from the prescribed point, with the spect-actor as protagonist.

- 4 The actor who has been replaced does not immediately retire from the game; he or she stays on the sidelines as a sort of coach or supporter, to encourage the spect-actors and correct them if they start to go wrong. For example, in Portugal a peasant who was replacing the actor playing the part of the Boss started shouting “Long live socialism!” The replaced actor had to explain to her that, generally speaking, bosses are not great fans of socialism . . .
- 5 From the moment at which the spect-actor replaces the protagonist and begins to put forward a new solution, all the other actors transform themselves into agents of oppression, or, if they already were agents of oppression, they intensify their oppression, to show the spect-actor how difficult it is to change reality. The game is spect-actors – trying to find a new solution, trying to change the world – against actors – trying to hold them back, to force them to accept the world as it is. But of course the aim of the forum is not to win, but to learn and to train. The spectators, by acting out their ideas, train for “real life” action; and actors and audience alike, by playing, learn the possible consequences of their actions. They learn the arsenal of the oppressors and the possible tactics and strategies of the oppressed.
- 6 If the spect-actor gives in, he or she drops out of the game, the actor takes up the role again, and the piece rapidly heads back towards the already known ending. Another spect-actor can then approach the stage, shout “Stop!” and say where he or she wants the play taken from, and the play will start again from that point. A new solution will be tried out.
- 7 At some point the spect-actor may eventually manage to break the oppression imposed by the actors. The actors must give in – one after another or all together. From this moment on, the spect-actors are invited to replace anyone they like, to show new forms of oppression which perhaps the actors are unaware of. This then becomes the game of spect-actor/protagonist against spect-actor/oppressor. Thus the oppression is subjected to the scrutiny of the spect-actors, who discuss (through their actions) ways of fighting it. All the actors, from off stage, carry on their work as coaches and supporters, each actor continuing to help and urge on his or her spect-actor.
- 8 One of the actors must also exercise the auxiliary function of joker, the wild card, leader of the game. It is up to him or her to explain the rules of the game, to correct errors made, and to encourage both parties not to stop playing. Indeed, the effect of the forum is all the more powerful if it is made entirely clear to the audience that if they do not change the world, no one will change it for them, and everything will inevitably turn out exactly the same – which is the last thing we would want to happen.
- 9 The knowledge which results from this investigation will, of necessity, be the best that that particular human social group can attain at that particular moment in time. The joker is not the president of a conference, he or she is not the custodian of the truth; the joker’s job is simply to try to ensure that those who know a little more get the chance to explain it, and that those who dare a little, dare a little more, and show what they are capable of.
- 10 The “forum” over, it is proposed that a “model of action for the future” be constructed, this model first to be played out by the spect-actors.

EXAMPLES OF FORUM THEATRE

1 Agrarian reform seen from a public bench

In Portugal, just after 25 April 1974, the people took agrarian reform into their own hands. They did not wait for a law to be passed, they simply occupied the unproductive land and made it productive. At the time of writing, the government intends to institute an agrarian law which will challenge the popular conquests on that front returning areas of land to their former owners (who made no use of them).

First action

The scene takes place on two benches in a garden. A man, the Landowner, is lying stretched out across both benches, taking his ease. Enter seven men and women singing “Grandula Vila Morena” by José Afonso, the Eurovision Song Contest tune used as the signal for the start of the military action which ousted the 50-year-old fascist Salazar-Caetano dictatorship.

The seven men and women evict the great Landowner from one of the two benches in which he is ensconced; in spite of his removal, they are none the less cramped on their one bench, because there are many of them.

Second action

They get down to work, miming the tasks of cultivation, while singing other popular songs. They start to discuss the need to push their conquest of public benches further. They take exception to the unproductiveness of the Landowner who has stayed put, with one bench all to himself, but opinions are divided: some want to turf him out, while others think that they have done enough already, that enough ground has been gained.

Third action

A Policeman comes along, bearing an order that they vacate 20cm of the collective bench (“the law of return”). They break into factions: some are for giving way, others are not, since to make a concession now would signify a victory for the forces of reaction, which would then gradually try to regain more ground. Eventually they give in.

Fourth action

The Landowner, protected by the Policeman, sits himself down on the vacated end of the bench. The seven others crowd in on the remaining section. The Landowner opens up a big umbrella, obscuring the light from the others. The seven protest. The Policeman declares that the Landowner is entitled to do what he is doing, since though the ground may be taken, the air is not. The seven are divided: some want to fight, others are happy with the little that they have obtained and want peace at any price.

Fifth action

The Policeman insists on the need to erect a wall dividing the collective bench into two parts, this wall to be built on “land” which does not belong to anyone; evidently the intention is that it will be built on the part of the bench occupied by the seven, not on the former owner’s side. More discussions, more divisions, more concessions. One of the seven abandons the struggle, a second also goes, then a third and a fourth.

Sixth action

The Policeman announces that the occupation is pointless since the majority of the occupants have abandoned the occupied land. Consequently, the last three are thrown out and the former owner reassumes his rights over both public benches.

The forum

This scene was performed at Porto and at Vila Nova de Gaia. On the day of the first performance, there were more than a thousand people on the square in the open air. The “model” was performed, then the “forum” began. On the second showing, a number of spect-actors enacted their vision of how to resist the Landowner’s counter-attack. But the best moment was when a woman in the audience protested. On the simple stage, there were some male spect-actors arguing among themselves – in role – about the best tactics to use; finally they decided that they were all of one mind and that the forum had been useful. At this point the woman in the audience said:

There you go, talking about oppression – that’s all very well; the only people on the stage are men from the audience, who don’t seem in the slightest oppressed by the actors, who were their deadly enemies a moment ago. And meanwhile, here in the audience, it’s us women who continue to be oppressed since we are just as inactive as before, sitting here, watching the men act!

One of the male spectators then invited several women to give vent to their feelings in the different roles. They agreed to do so, allowing only one man to remain on stage, the man who played the Policeman. As the woman said:

Since the Policeman is the number one oppressor, that part can certainly be played by a man.

2 The nuclear power station

In Sweden, the controversy over nuclear energy and the construction of power stations was very much a live issue. Some even said that the main reason for the gunning down of Prime Minister Olof Palme was his having affirmed that he would pursue a policy of nuclear gearing-up. His opponents said the opposite – and afterwards, they did it anyway.

First action

Eva is in her office, at work. The scene shows friends, the Boss, day-to-day problems, the process of finding new projects to work on, the daily grind of a hard life.

Second action

Eva is at home; her husband is out of work, their daughters are spendthrifts, they need money. A Female Friend drops round, they go out. They go straight to a demonstration against the construction of atomic power stations.

Third action

Back at the office. The Boss comes in whooping with joy: a new project has been accepted! Everyone celebrates the news! Champagne is consumed! Joy unbounded. . . . till the Boss explains what this new project is about – the development of a refrigeration system for a nuclear power station. Eva is torn; she needs work, she wants to support her fellow workers, but this situation poses a moral problem for her. She gives all the reasons she can for not accepting this new project, and her colleagues give their opposing reasons. Finally Eva gives in and accepts the job!

The forum

In this piece it was clear that the protagonist was going to have to commit an error and not be heroic. The audience almost cried when Eva gave in. And the effect of this was an extraordinary intensification of the fight – the game of actors/oppressors against spect-actors/oppressed – when it came to finding reasons for Eva to say no. Each time a spect-actor gave in and saw that she was beaten, the piece rapidly retraced its path towards Eva’s “Yes.” Passions in the audience ran high again till someone shouted “Stop!”; then the scene stopped and the new spect-actor tried a new solution starting from the first action, or the second, or even the third. Everything was analyzed: the husband’s unemployment, the daughters’ mania for consumption, Eva’s indecision. Sometimes the analysis was purely “psychological,” then another actor would come in and try to show the political side of the problem.

Should we be for or against nuclear power stations? Can one be against scientific progress? Can the word “progress” be applied to science when it leads us to the discovery of nuclear weapons?

And on the question of the disposal of “nuclear waste”: surely it could be satisfactorily disposed of in a social system whose central value was the human being rather than the profit motive?

I have already twice had the opportunity to take part in pieces of this kind. The first time was in the USA, where an analogous piece had been written about the inhabitants of a town which was producing the napalm used in Vietnam. In the end, in the American example, the inhabitants accepted the factory, reaching the conclusion that it would be economically ruinous to close. . . . Ruinous for

whom? The second time was in Lisbon, again with a similar model: there is a refinery there which is causing a noticeable increase in the occurrence of lung cancer . . . but it is important for the economy. Here again, the residents gave way and resigned themselves to living with pollution, rather than living without jobs.

In this example, the function of Forum Theatre is quite clear: it is the other side of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, whose leading character, Stockman, faced with an identical situation, takes an heroic stance.

Who exactly is taking an heroic stance? The character, the fiction. What I want is for the spect-actor to take an heroic stance, not the character. I think it is perfectly clear: if Stockman is a hero and prefers to stand alone, not compromising his moral principles, that can serve as an example. But this is cathartic – Stockman has an heroic attitude and demands of me that I sympathize with his heroic attitude. He drains me of my desire to behave like a hero myself.

In Forum Theatre, the reverse mechanism is at work. The character gives in and I am called upon to correct him, to show him a possible right, to rectify his action. And in so doing within the fiction of the play, I am preparing myself to do it in reality as well. I come face to face with reality (fictitiously). I become acquainted with the difficulties which I will meet later – fear of unemployment, my fellow workers' arguments, etc. – and if I manage to overcome all these things in Forum Theatre, I will be better qualified to overcome them in reality when the situation arises. Forum Theatre does not produce catharsis: it produces a stimulant for our desire to change the world.

These forms of Theatre of the Oppressed have developed in response to concrete and particular political situations. When in 1971 the dictatorship in Brazil made it impossible for the people to present popular theatre, we started to work on Newspaper Theatre techniques,² which were forms of theatre easily realizable by the people, so that they would be able to produce their own theatre. In Argentina before the last elections (1973), when the level of repression eased (without completely disappearing), we started doing Invisible Theatre in trains and restaurants, in queues for shops, in markets. When certain conditions arose in Peru, we began to work on various forms of Forum Theatre so that the spect-actors would fully assume their function of protagonist, which is what they were at the time; we thought that the people would have a role to play in the near future. That was in 1973.

In fact, all of these forms of theatre emerged when we were barred from traditional and institutional theatre. An experiment I would love to try would be doing Forum Theatre in the theatre, in a conventional theatre building, with an advertised starting time for the show, with sets and costumes, with extant scripts, by single writers or written collectively.³

Would it not be wonderful to see a dance piece where the dancers danced in the first act, and in the second showed the audience how to dance? Would it not be wonderful to see a musical where in the first act the actors sang and in the second we all sang together?

What would also be wonderful would be a theatre show where we, the artists, would present our world-view in the first act and where in the second act, they, the audience, could create a new world.

Let them create it first in the theatre, in fiction, to be better prepared to create it outside afterwards, for real.

I think that this is how magicians should be: first they should do their magic to enchant us, then they should teach us their tricks. This is also how artists should be – we should be creators and also teach the public how to be creators, how to make art, so that we may all use that art together.

FORUM THEATRE: DOUBTS AND CERTAINTIES

Forum Theatre is still in its infancy, and much research and experimentation will be required before this new form reaches its full maturity; at present we are still at the stage of exploration, of finding and opening up new ways of working.

This particularly applies to the Forum Theatre "show." In Latin America, I never took part in a "show"; all the Forum Theatre sessions were organized by a core group of people of homogeneous social origin, whose common interest was the resolution of relatively immediate problems. The Latin American experience had led me to construct a model ideal for Latin America, or at least for the particular experiments I had taken part in. The development of Forum Theatre in numerous directions in Europe inevitably entails a reconsideration of all the forms, structures, techniques, methods and processes of this kind of theatre. Everything is once again open to question.

THE FUNCTION OF THE WARM-UP

In all of the forum shows I have taken part in, there has always been an element of "warming-up" of spect-actors. Generally this is done in one of two possible ways.

- 1 Over ten or fifteen minutes, the joker explains Theatre of the Oppressed, recounts some experiences of forum shows or Invisible Theatre, and fixes the rules of the game which is to follow.

Then he proposes some exercises, starting with the simplest, the least off-putting, those that arouse the least resistance. For example, in Egypt, touching exercises provoked a very powerful resistance; which, by contrast, was far from the case with magistrates in Paris! It all depends on the culture, the country, the region, the moment.

After the exercises, we move on to Image Theatre. Here the spect-actors begin to work esthetically, and to suggest subject-matter for images themselves.

Then finally the group presents the anti-model, and from that starting point comes the forum.

- 2 I have in the past used, and seen others use, other less effective processes – starting immediately with exercises, with an explanation a posteriori. In these cases, I have noticed that a portion of the audience feels manipulated and reacts negatively. By contrast, when the explanation comes first, the joker almost always ends up winning over the audience, and gaining their acquiescence and their confidence.

This does not mean that the warm-up is absolutely indispensable. I believe it prepares the spect-actors for action. In any case, the thing which will best prepare them is really the subject-matter and the play itself. The case of *Het Trojaan Paard*, a

Belgian group from Antwerp, is significant; they have performed the same show, about the woman who is “a leader at work, a slave in the home,” in a hundred towns in Belgium and Holland (the group speak Flemish), without ever doing the slightest preliminary warm-up. They just explain what is going to happen. And the show is so evocative and so galvanizing that all the spect-actors always want to take part.

THE FUNCTION OF THE ACTOR

Forum Theatre demands a different style of acting. In certain African countries the people measure the talents of singers by the extent to which they can seduce their audiences into singing along with them. That is what should happen with good Forum Theatre actors. In their performances there must not be the slightest trace of the narcissism so commonly found in *closed* theatre shows, because the presentation of the anti-model should, by contrast, principally express doubt; each action should contain its own negation; each phrase should leave open the possibility of saying the opposite of what is being said; each *yes* allows for an imagined *no*, or a *perhaps*.

During the forum proper, actors must be extremely dialectical. When they take up a counter-stance against a spect-actor/protagonist who wants to break the oppression, they must be honest and show that the oppression is not so easily defeated. They must show the difficulties which will appear, while retaining a manner which encourages the spect-actor to break the oppression. This means that, while still countering every phrase and action, they should awaken in the spect-actor other stances, other approaches. While impeding the attempt to break the oppression, they should rouse the spect-actor to achieve it.

If the actor is too firm, it can discourage or, worse still, frighten the spect-actor. If the actor is too soft and vulnerable, with no counterarguments or counteractions, it can mislead the spect-actor into believing that the problem posed by the play is easier to resolve than he or she thought.

In Berlin, at the Hochschule der Kunst, a forum showed a young man trying to convince his family to give him a certain sum of money per month. In order to achieve this, he had to undergo endless rituals, family conversations and reunions, discussions about the war, about the past, about members of the family who had disappeared, etc. The actors were so enthusiastic that every spect-actor who came forward was subjected to an avalanche of arguments, to such an extent that very soon the whole audience was up in arms and shouted in unison “Stop – that’s magic!”, concluding that no family could be as fearsomely exasperating as that.

I repeat, the actors must be dialectical, must know how to give and take, how to hold back and lead on, how to be creative. They must feel no fear (which is common with professional actors) of losing their place, of standing aside. A great magician is someone who knows not only how to do magic but also how to teach tricks to others. A great footballer loses no status by teaching someone else how to shoot with both feet.

One learns by teaching others. Pedagogy is transitive. Or it is not pedagogy.

[Editor’s note: This brief essay, translated by Adrian Jackson is excerpted from Augusto Boal’s *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (London: Routledge, 1992) and is published by permission of Routledge, the author, and translator.]