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An Interview With Julian Boal: The Role of Theatre of the Oppressed to Promote Social Activism

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On February 7, 2019, Monica and Emily sat down with Julian Boal to talk about his Theatre of the Oppressed work in Brazil and beyond. He had come to Montclair State University to do a 4-day residency with faculty, New Jersey teachers, students, and local community activists, during a 2-week trip to the United States.

We began our conversation discussing the current political context in Brazil, and the recent changes that have occurred since January 1, 2019 when President Bolsonaro came into power. An expelled captain of the army, politician, and member of the conservative Social Liberal party, President Bolsonaro has been engaged in building an increasingly autocratic regime and expressed an alignment with President Trump. He is strongly opposed to left-wing policies, and is pro life, pro gun, and pro a Brazilian military regime. Critics point to his troubling record on human rights; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) and women's rights; immigration; calls for police to use more lethal force; and lack of support for environmental issues. He has stripped the indigenous affairs agency *Fundação Nacional do Índio* [National Indian Foundation] of the responsibility to identify and demarcate indigenous lands; this could force the indigenous people of Brazil to assimilate culturally. These political issues served as the backdrop to our conversation about the role of Theatre of the Oppressed in uniting social groups to promote activism both in schools and within communities.

Julian Boal, son of Augusto Boal, is a teacher, theater researcher, playwright, and internationally renowned practitioner of the Theatre of the Oppressed. He has offered training

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workshops in more than 25 countries in the last 17 years and is a curator and coordinator of several international festivals of Theatre of the Oppressed. He holds a Master's in History from the Sorbonne (Paris IV) and a PhD from the School of Social Work at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro. He has published three books, *Theater of the Oppressed in Actions* (with Howe & Scot, Routledge, 2014), *The Routledge Companion to Theater of the Oppressed* (Howe, Boal, & Soeiro, Routledge, 2019) and *As imagens de um teatro popular* (Boal, 2000).

Julian is also co-founder (with Geo Britto) and pedagogical coordinator of *Escola de Teatro Popular* (The School of Popular Theatre, in Rio de Janeiro), a school run by social movements for social movements, where political unity is practiced at the grassroots level through the practice of theater. The income generated during his residencies in the United States has funded 5 months of work for *Escola de Teatro Popular* in Rio de Janeiro. This could not be more timely, as his students are actively protesting the Bolsonaro regime.

What follows is an abridged version of a conversation that took place over the course of an hour.

Emily: Thank you for sharing some background in terms of the political context in Brazil. Although much more urgent, we do recognize some parallels with the current situation in what we call “Trump America.” Can you tell us now about the kind of work that you do in the Escola de Teatro Popular. We understand that it is not what we would consider a traditional school context.

Julian: The Escola de Teatro Popular is a theatre school for people who are involved in social movements. We are a school run by social movements for social movements. We are involved with two kinds of movements in Brazil. Primarily we work with the Youth Movement, which is made up of youth activists from rua Anti-Capitalist Youth and also the Popular Youth Uprising. We also work with the Occupation Movement, which encompasses the Movimento dos Sem-Teto, or in English the Roofless Movement, where urban people are concerned with the lack of decent housing, and the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra or the Landless Workers' Movement, where rural people are fighting for land reform and against injustices in rural areas (To learn more, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QOmg9rsdulo&feature=youtu.be>).

Monica: How do you work with these movements? What is a typical agenda?

Julian: We don't usually have a specific agenda—what we do is based on the larger political agenda. For instance, right now the agenda is around education. Two weeks ago there was a march and now in two days there is going to be another one. We created the scenes for the people in the march and now we are going to create a new one. So our agenda is always in response to a political agenda that is beyond the school, that is part of the social movements.

When there are struggles in the street, I normally work with members of these groups using Theatre of the Oppressed in response to a specific event or action. I collaborate with

the group members who are directly involved in preparing for a specific event, either organizing a play or a performance. Otherwise our goal is to train the trainers or activists who will return to their movements to try to build the cultural committees in their own organizations.

For example, in response to Marielle Franco being executed on March 14, 2018, one month later, on April 14, we created a play within 4 to 6 hours with people who we gathered. We performed the play during the march and we launched our piece in front of the march, 100 meters in front of the marchers. After we finished, then we went to another place and performed and that is how we started. We created the piece in a workshop and then took it to the streets to perform. Many people participated in the march so we were able to gather with other activists. This enabled us to meet with a large population of people who wanted to become a part of this process. We met four to five people who we thought were worthwhile to have with us, because at that point we were moving from the theatre in the street into another project. Doing theatre in the street is good but it's also important to work on a more continuous basis with people that go to protests or places of social movements, but who are not necessarily activists.

In this next phase of our work, which will be funded by all of the money earned in my U.S. residencies, we will be working with schools run by social movements that prepare students to pass entrance tests for universities. These schools are a service to the community, both individually but also in terms of trying to reach out to the community and engage the more general population. We are going to work with them—to have continuous theatre workshops that will last all year. We know we need to go to social movement gatherings with the performances. We are aware of the task we have to do and we think this is a way to lower the stakes for the students as they become activists. It lowers the stakes between being someone that is a student in the schools run by social movements and becoming an activist oneself, between visiting, observing, and being in the space of the social movement versus being a member of a social movement.

We will bring together four people that came from the school and four others who are not activists but who are involved in theatre at the university and are talented in political activism. They have more of a theatrical background and the other four belong to the movements. They will work with their peers to create groups that are related to political movements.

Monica: Like growing their own.

Julian: Yes. I met the first four people doing previous work and during this opening, we will bring together other actors/actresses that will enter the school. I will work with them and then next year they will go into the school and work with more people. It's a pilot project or a model and we want to show how theatre can be helpful for organizing. We hope that this pilot will show that we are able to keep the students coming even after they have finished their one year of preparation for the test at the schools and passed the test. This way they can remain in the theatre and continue to do actions for the social movement, which is the theatre itself.

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Emily: So can I ask, in terms of thinking of why schools now, why now? Why does it feel more urgent now than two years ago?

Julian: Working with the population is urgent! We want to bridge the gap between the population and social movements and I believe it will be better for people if they join organizations. In terms of school, the government said that the state university was going to lose 50% of the funding. We need to rethink how universities have only been accessible to the elite and strive to increase the popularization of university. Already there are many different kinds of students who are at universities that would not have been able to in my time.

Monica: And the schools that you're going to go into, are those social movement schools? Are the schools guided by social movements? Like how does that work? We don't really have anything like that in the States.

Julian: Yes they are part of the social movement schools. The physical space does not belong to the social movements and they are not very strong movements. They are just beginning. They go to church, they go to universities and ask for a classroom, they organize it with the teachers. It is actually much more massive than I thought though. There were seven units but they are creating an eighth unit. They have class at night so people can work during the day or continue their studies, but mostly working people go at night or on weekends, on Saturdays 8 to 8.

Emily: So interesting.

Monica: It is all kids who are from the slums?

Julian: No, not all of them are from the slums, which I think is interesting. But all of them come from unprivileged backgrounds. Coming from the "slum" would not even be the worst social status. If you come from the "occupation," an occupied building or land, that is the worst social status to have in Brazil. This is obviously going to become a much larger problem in the next five months or even sooner. Those who are occupiers have a fear of getting evicted, or not having a house. So those are the people in the worse situations, worse than those in the slums, and worse than those in other neighborhoods. For instance, only two of the school are in slums, in Complexo do Alemão and Maré. The other schools that we are talking about are not in the slums but are in poor neighborhoods in which the slums are right by. One of the teachers we are working with was from a slum, then went to university, then became an actress, and is now an activist.

Monica: So if you were talking to teachers in the United States or people like us, teacher educators, what would be advice you would give to us in terms of how to create spaces in schools and communities where activism could be nurtured?

Julian: It is very difficult for me because in the United States, I have rarely met groups that are similar to the ones I work with in Brazil. And I am not referring to the size only. In Brazil, the organization is a collective, fighting to achieve something, in the vast majority

of the cases something very concrete and material, that will somehow change the system as it is (for example, the occupation of buildings in order to have a decent house and as a way to put forward the principle that housing cannot be a commodity like others). The people that I have been in contact with in the United States, most of the times, do not think that way. In the United States, it seems that the struggle is to put some individuals in power without questioning the very nature of this power. But, as the foreigner that does not live in your country, it's very likely that I am wrong.

Whatever a person calls oppression, will be considered oppression. And from time to time it is not that easy. The same way that women who are victims of domestic violence can deny it, people that claim to be oppressed might be but there is not an immediate understanding. It is not because you are of an oppressed group that you have an immediate understanding of what oppression is. There is too much valuing of the immediate perception of the oppressed person regarding his/her own oppression. As soon as someone says I am oppressed by this or by that, we say okay there is nothing more to say, there is nothing more to dig. And then what is less visible to the eye comes as non-existent, which I think is a problem. And then what gets more attention will be precisely the thing that ah look this person said something racist, said something sexist, and it is becoming about voicing opinions. Well I think that the most tragic aspects of oppression do not come out of the mouth or through the actions of individuals. They come out of the structure of the very state. Here in the United States as far as I understand there are some states that need to pay off the prison system if they don't provide enough prisoners. And obviously it is going to be the Black people who are going to be mostly likely to go to jail. And it is not an opinion from an individual. It's something much deeper than that and that is something that is not discussed as much as it should in the United States as far as I saw it.

Denying the working class, denying the methodology that tries to understand reality by analyzing their material aspects isn't working. When the shit hits the fan, we need new pedagogy, we need to reinforce the importance of the material aspect and not be focused precisely only on the subjectivity. What an individual says is not as important as the societal structure as a whole. A White South African during Apartheid could subjectively be racist or not, but it is the system in which he lived which made him objectively a racist and therefore the system needs to be changed. A person saying something racist is problematic, of course. And in the United States I see people fighting against this often. But I am not sure if I see as many people mobilized against cutting funding for schools or fighting against the prison industrial complex. There are neighborhoods that don't get other things, and therefore there is no hope because of very concrete reasons, because there is no transportation means and on Saturdays and Sundays they cannot get out of the neighborhood if they don't have a car. And urban segregation and things that do not depend only on the goodwillness of individuals.

Emily: It is interesting. I wonder if it will change, especially when conditions in the United States become materially much more extreme, even within the teaching movement. The strikes are increasing and so is the activism.

Monica: But I feel like, listening to you, I can think of many examples of teachers here in the United States who are beginning to problematize the ways in which they are

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positioned in society. A lot of teachers are barely being paid or cannot live on their salaries, they have to take extra jobs to get by, they lack resources in their classrooms and schools, they are not shown any respect by the parents, their administrators, and the larger community, they are working long hard hours, and they are beginning to realize how unjust their professional lives are as teachers. This is driving them to feel like they have no choice but to be activists and to march and strike.

Julian: I do not live here, but it is going to depend on their having their own need to protest. They have to have a clear intent. At the Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed conference (ptoweb.org), I witnessed organizers from Chicago who are doing this work. They are The Chicago Workers' Collective and they promote the creation of stable, living wage jobs with racial and gender equity for temporary staffing workers in the Chicago area (www.chicagoworkerscollaborative.org).

Monica: And I think what they are doing with TO NYC (www.tonyc.nyc) is really aligned with what you are saying. They seem to work with and for organizations that are serving populations that are marginalized and oppressed. And it seems that many of these organizations are youth focused.

Julian: I heard about that, the coming together of many groups, to have more gatherings of people.

Monica: But they are doing a model more similar to what you describe with the Popular School. For example, they are working with the Ali Forney Center, which provides shelter for homeless LGBTQ youth (<https://www.aliforneycenter.org>). I went to a Forum Theatre session with the Ali Forney Center and they examined how their rights were being violated because each day they had to be out of the building for a particular period of time. I wonder what you think this might look like in a school. We try to imagine what are the things we could take from what you are doing and adapt them for teachers. What are the elements of Theatre of the Oppressed that would resonate for teachers? It sounds like one aspect of your work, which reminds me of Freire and his cultural circles (Freire, 1985, 2000; Souto-Manning, 2010) is working with people and really hearing the issues that they have and that they generate. I mean, there are tons of things going on in schools that are violating students' and families' rights. Racism, for example, is everywhere and institutional racism continues to perpetuate the status quo.

Emily: There is violence too—the ways in which students' bodies are managed and controlled. And of course the school to prison pipeline is another issue.

Julian: Yes. And the lack of possible jobs when students graduate. There is also a lack of perspective. There are in fact tons of things to do. In Brazil, the thing is we understand ourselves, not as an organization that stands alone, but as an organization that is part of many. We are not an organization that has a purpose of its own, not something unique to others. We want to create a theater group that emerges from the social movements we work with. We know that this way there is real meaning to our theatre group because it belongs

to the movement itself. ... An organization with a central core, which is a part of other organizations, of a variety of social movements.

Emily: That is different than the United States. We have an obsession with the individual and no collective mentality. We tend to be very individualistic.

Julian: In Brazil also we are focused on the individual. The truth is that every place has a different reality. Like the United States, there is racism in Brazil but we cannot change that on an individual level. It does not work like that. Institutional racism is a system, not a collection of individuals. This is a problem with political organizations too. It is a challenge when creating political activism through theater. People march in their own individual groups and then often these groups, made up of youth, fight against one another, compete in elections at the university, fight to represent the students, and fight one against another. To create unity among all of them in a school is really difficult.

Emily: It is a very delicate balance.

Julian: Talking about this makes me think of something that I wrote recently when I had insomnia after one of my rehearsals with the Popular Theatre School. (He reads this with tears in his eyes.) I wrote: "If the working class produces everything, everything belongs to it." That means that culture also belongs to us. Belonging here does not mean that we own it, that we can sell it, wholesale or small. That culture belongs to us means that it is we who can make it better. If production really belonged to the working class, it would not be chaotic and destructive as it is today, to the point of not knowing if there will be a tomorrow. If production belonged to the working class, it would be harmonious and capable of making more sense to the world and to each person in it. If culture really were ours, all the problems, all the narrowness that we see in petty bourgeois stages (petty bourgeois politically if not socially) would disappear. We are the ones who can make culture better. All our difficulties, our lack of time, our lack of knowledge accumulation, are, in our best moments, the mirror of the difficulty of the working class to take over the world. We are the weak and magnificent bearers of tomorrow. And so, in spite of all our problems, of all our difficulties, there are no other companions with whom I would like to be, nor other stages where I would like to act. And if we do beautifully, we will be prove that it is possible to overcome these difficulties, that it is possible that something new and beautiful arises "with the sobriety of a dawn."

Monica: Your words are so moving and I really feel like they capture the spirit and possibility of TO. I don't think we can work to fight injustice without some hope, some faith that we can potentially make change if we collectively radically imagine, that it is in the power of the collective that we can re-imagine and re-create our culture and cultures into something beautiful.

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