

Theatre theory in practice

Student A (HL only)

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THEATRE THEORY IN PRACTICE

AUGUSTO BOAL'S NEWSPAPER THEATRE: *The Cave* A SOLO THEATRE PIECE IN TWO PARTS

The theorist, the theory and the context

The theatre practitioner Augusto Boal is the theorist whom I have chosen as a basis for my solo theatre piece *The Cave*. After attending a Forum Theatre workshop and performance by Jennifer Hartley in January 2012, I felt I had been exposed to a completely new realm of theatre: Theatre with a clear, constructive social purpose. For this project, I wanted to explore the work of Boal in more depth and discover more about some of his other theories.

The next stage in this process for me was research. I discovered that Augusto Boal developed his practice of "Theatre of the Oppressed" in Brazil of the 1960s. His country had been held under a repressive dictatorship for a number of years and Boal was creating political plays for which he was tortured and arrested. The main question that Boal asked himself was: "How can theatre talk about problems?"¹ And also what power and responsibility does the actor have on stage? As an activist he had encouraged civilians to revolt against the repressive authorities. When they showed up in front of his house with guns and weapons, ready for revolution, bidding him to join them, Boal didn't want to fight. He realized that he couldn't be telling people to do things that he himself would never do.² This inspired him to find a non-violent alternative: using Theatre he not only made plays more interactive, allowing individuals to tell the actors their stories which would then be performed, even going as far as allowing the audience to go on stage and become actors themselves, all of his theatre engaged with social issues and conflicts. He leant his stage and actors as mirrors to society, politics and conflict. The neutrality of a stage provided the perfect setting for Boal to engage with these issues: everything is allowed, any boundaries can be tested and pushed³. Gradually, *Theatre of the Oppressed* evolved: an umbrella term for various theatre practices which Boal developed for socio-political purposes. One of these branches, which I decided to focus on, is **Newspaper Theatre** in which Boal exploits theatre to transform the news into performance: he provokes the audience to reconsider not only the reliability of the news, but also playing with the content by challenging the stories with improvisation, taking them out of context, or abstracting them. He developed his Newspaper Theatre with the Nucleus Group of the Arena Theatre of Sao Paulo: using a range of techniques for "transforming daily news items, or any non-dramatic material, into theatrical performances."⁴ Out of the 10 techniques by which to engage with the News in Newspaper Theatre, I choose to focus my Theatre Theory in Practice assessment in technique "i) Concretion of the Abstract". The idea behind it is that "which the news often hides in its purely abstract information is made concrete on the stage: torture, hunger, unemployment, etc., are shown concretely, using graphic images, real or symbolic."⁵ The reason I decided on this aspect of Newspaper Theatre was because I felt it provided the opportunity to present

¹ Jennifer Hartley, "Theatre Versus Oppression" workshop January 14, 2012. (Jennifer Hartley worked with Augusto Boal and then started her own company who work world-wide)

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed- New Edition*, 143.

⁵ Ibid.

the News in a fresh, more sensitive way by putting the subjective emotions and feelings of the individuals' story into the foreground, rather than just conveying facts in a cold, detached manner.

Practical explorations and development of the solo theatre piece

In order to create my piece within the practice "Newspaper Theatre" of August Boal, I started by looking at the practice in more detail. To find examples, I looked up some videos in which people were performing Newspaper Theatre. However, I struggled to locate good examples, as all of the videos only appeared to treat the news articles superficially. Most of the time, the actors were representing the news in a very different way than they were given by the original story and the message could not move us. I wanted to use the source I had found, in a very constructive way to represent the news as it was given but more sensitively and connected to the emotions of the people who were involved in the act. As I found the news source I wanted to work with, a video about the current situation in Syria, I found my stimulus, which created the starting point. The video which is 3 minutes long, features families and children who have taken refuge in caves as the violence has escalated, forcing them to leave their homes.

The BBC video clip immediately grabbed me because it focused on one detail of the Syrian conflict. It brought up many different issues surrounding the Syrian Civil War in an oblique manner such as the violence, the fear, the uncertainty of what will happen next and also the idea that many Syrians have become refugees in their own country. It also gave a very personal and moving insight into the despair the conflict has caused amongst locals, providing us with a breadth of visual and sensory stimuli: The cold, darkness, clamminess, discomfort and brutality of life in a cave, waiting to be safe to leave.

In order to brainstorm my solo theatre piece, I started creating a mind map in which I collected all my ideas connected to the stimulus and the emotions that I wanted to represent in the play. I needed to find an abstract idea within the news piece so that I could turn it into a solo theatre piece.

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Using the mind-map, I began to discuss the stimuli with my peer mentor from our class. In trying to explain my ideas I realized that I could group my stimuli together into two overarching themes: Despair linked with darkness, the cold, solitude, being forgotten by the world but also the despair of a journalist having to report on such tragedies without being able to help them. The other themes it contrasted with were the ideas of: searching, linked with light, building fire, drinking water, sustaining oneself, finding hope for a better life but also the journalist's search for stories. Thus I had two contrasting concepts and two characters. The flashlight became the symbol for the transition between the two ideas: the light became a symbol for searching and finding. It also practically became a very important medium because as I experimented with the flashlight I realized it could become my only lighting on stage. The practical experiments with this opened up an entire realm of shadows and projections onto the back wall of the performance space, as well as putting emphasis on certain actions: such as setting down the torch horizontally and creating a strip light when I drank water. Thus I had found a way by which to put the abstract idea of despair versus hope into a practical visual performance. Through my practical experiments I also realized that I could transform the light into a fire when I took a bundle of sticks and turned the torch upwards, creating a more yellow light: mimicking the fire that the people had built in the BBC video that first inspired this work. Water became equally

important to my pieces as it developed. I felt that water was important in the news report because the woman emphasized the difficulty they had getting it into the cave. Therefore it should certainly feature within my solo theatre piece.

Once I had structured the solo theatre piece and become comfortable with how the piece was shaping, I shared my performance with the rest of my theatre class. I asked the class to give me feedback, and as a result of this I decided to end the solo theatre piece by replaying the voice of the journalist once again while I would be standing on the stage mouthing the words. By involving this extract of the stimulus again, I brought my piece closer to the actual practice of August Boal which involves the news as a source. In addition it should make the scenario more clearly for the audience to let them know that I am in the role of the journalist at that moment. To make the shift of roles even clearer (from the role of the refugee to the role of the reporter) I decided to use a simple note book and pen within the solo theatre piece to make notes during the reporter's exploitation of the cave.

With this process I added a very important sequence and notation for my piece, as I wanted to represent the different processes of searches. While the woman is looking for a home and security, the journalist is just looking for a story. To start the presentation I wanted to set the context of the journalist finding the story. I decided to project the BBC video on the back wall of the performance space, intentionally angling the projector from the side of the space rather than from the front-on centre of the stage. I liked the 'skewed' positioning of the screen. For me this had all sorts of subtle connotations about skewed reporting in the news!

During the set up for my performance I had some technical problems with the projector and the sound, which Mike, our stage technician, helped me to solve. Once I had embedded the video file in a PowerPoint presentation, I was able to ask a friend from my theatre class to operate the slides at certain points during my solo theatre piece. This process became much smoother after a couple of run-throughs in the space.

Most of my experiments during the rehearsal process involved working with light and shadows. I used a variety of different torches to be able to find the right kind of light. I wanted very clearly defined shadows, and unfortunately a conventional torch (which would have been more in keeping with the context of the woman in the cave) was too weak to carve the images fully on the back wall. After some more experimentation I found that a mobile phone with a torch app was an idea. While experimenting with this I realized that when I used the torch, I needed to hold it in front of my face at an angle, in order to allow for my facial expressions to be enlarged and my silhouette projected onto the walls. I thus played and experimented with different angles in order to produce different shadows, magnifications and perspectives, abstracting the actions which were very simple but heavily symbolic. I wanted to use light and dark with the flashlight in order to symbolize the struggle between desperation and the search for hope and survival. In the second part of the solo theatre piece, I re-entered the performance space, but this time in the role of the journalist. I wanted to give a second twist to the idea of desperation and searching: How does the reporter cope with the atrocity of what she sees? I felt shocked by the idea of a BBC journalist simply observing the situation without being able to take action. I wanted them to be cold but also struggle with that passive role of being an observer. The reporter walks the same path as the woman, examining exactly the same objects, but for the reporter they have a completely different significance and a detachment that they will never fully perceive.

Analysis and evaluation of the solo theatre piece

In the final solo theatre piece, although the projector and the sounds worked perfectly, I forgot to mouth one line synchronized with the woman in the video, which may have made my transformation into the woman in the cave less apparent. In the scene with the fire, I also did not lay down the light completely horizontally so it did not create the rehearsed effect of orange/red light. In the scene where the journalist crosses the stage to pick up the wood, I also did not hold the light in the right hand which meant that I did not cast a shadow of my silhouette onto the wall. However, apart from these minor slips and technicalities, the solo theatre piece played out very much to my expectations and in watching the video recording back I am happy that there is a good record of my work. I feel that I successfully conveyed the despair of living in a cave, the dark, dank, cold conditions and the hope which is derived from the simplest of objects such as water or wood. This was emphasized by the light and the shadows for example of the twig, magnified on the screen. By setting the performance within a dark space, I emulated the cave-setting which brought the audience and thus the people informed by the news into the “real” setting of the news piece. By shining the light into the audience, multiple times, I tried to engage them and make them feel included in the solo theatre piece.

The audience gave me a very positive feedback as they said that the message was very clear and the play with the shadow was visually very nice and powerful. Personally I think that I transferred the message to the people in a very positive way but I am sure that the fact that I decided to play the video clip again at the end was very important to demonstrate that the piece was not only a performance but an actual story which is happening in the world. This emphasized the link to Augusto Boal’s Newspaper Theatre and the educational and social purpose of it, even though it is quite difficult to make out my lip-synching with the reporter in the film. Through the use of the video, the audience was concerned about the gravity of this situation and received the message I wanted to transmit: that these are real people living in such despair. I wanted to make them empathize with these people, who usually are simply stories which are read and forgotten on the News. I think that the piece was a success in regard to fulfilling the aims that Augusto Boal wanted to achieve: to raise awareness and to inform the people.