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Rhythm of the Machine
Theater, Prison Community, and Social Change

This article reflects upon four years of exploring Augusto Boal's Image and Forum Theatre techniques in prisons for youth in upstate New York with young men aged 14-20. These practices work for prisoners by respecting the "literacy" of survival inside prison and by putting prisoners in control of making meaning with their bodies. Examples show the "embodied knowledge" of prisoners as the basis for collaborative, critical deliberations by prisoner communities who use it to re-envision conflict. The "well-contested" site of the body and the definition of "respect" by prisoners are keynotes to this work.

"They always talking about respect up in this place," complained one young man with frustration. As a member of a group of incarcerated young men aged 14-20 meeting at the Louis Gossett Jr. Youth Residence in upstate New York, he was not alone in his disdain for the topic under discussion. This was true even though the question, "What is respect?" had been chosen by the previous year's workshop group as a particularly compelling question they wanted to pass on to the next cohort. But this offering, exploring respect, seemed tiresome and suspiciously programmatic to the current group gathered together, or so I thought from the slumped bodies, glassy looks, and turned heads in front of me. Only our two Cornell undergraduate volunteers from the linked service learning seminar "Theater Behind Bars" wanted to try. In response, a few of the young men tried the platitudes "do the right thing," "be tolerant of others," "take responsibility for yourself and your actions," but their deadpan, rehearsed deliveries belied their disinterest. Language failed to speak in this case; the word that the earlier group found compelling was overused and empty to the ears of the next group—a broken link. It might have been a pedagogical dead-end without the alternative of theater practices created by Augusto Boal. Instead, at this verbal impasse, I introduced the group to Boal's Image Theater, a technique created to explore making meaning without resorting to spoken words. Using the exercise Image of the Word, we made "The Image of the Word Respect and its Opposite," and a significant transformation of the group took place.

We began the image exercise by standing in a circle. In the center of the circle two of the young men agreed to be our "modeling clay." I invited anyone in the circle to take a turn as sculptor by stepping forward and showing the two

"modeling clay" volunteers the positions he wanted them to hold as sculptures or images of the word "respect." Each sculptor used a mirroring technique to show rather than tell what the image should look like. They created the images in silence. If the image required more bodies, a gesture of the hand invited more people into the center. Another wave of the hands could wipe the slate clean and send everyone back to neutral positions for a new sculpture, or it could add or subtract people from the center to modify an existing image. Without stopping to discuss and observe each image along the way, the young men proceeded to show as many images of the word "respect" as they could. The succession of images was like a dance in which rhythms and patterns emerged through collaborative choreography.

All of the images created by the young men were violent: within the sculptures, imaginary guns were pointed at heads, bodies were curled up on the ground being kicked or beaten, knives slashed throats, people pushed and attacked and ambushed others from behind. These images were so different from the clichés of the earlier discussion that, at first, the group had trouble explaining how the images showed what "respect" looked like. "Its like that, but…" one comment trailed off with a shrug of the shoulders. Considering the group's general air of surprise at this outcome, I suggested we dispense with observations and try a second stage of the exercise: the image of the opposite of respect.

All of the images of "the opposite of respect" were more in keeping with the clichés of the original discussion. Brotherhood dominated the scenes: young men with their arms around each other, "walking the other way," "getting away from trouble," and, in one interesting scene, an image from the previous set of a downed and beaten body was recreated in order to show lifting that person up and helping him. But how did these images show the opposite of respect? In order to think through the two sets of images, I asked the group for specific observations such as "What did you see?" and "What did you show?" The responses reached a quick consensus that the images that showed "respect" through violence were reactions to situations that required "stepping up," "protecting your own," and "having somebody's back." One young man said he saw all the images together as a story of "a retaliation situation." Respect, in these images, was violent because it is a matter of reputation and survival. Everyone in the group agreed that there was a big gap between this kind of respect and the kind of respect we had started talking about originally.

Later, one of the Cornell students—an African American man from Brooklyn where he had more than once seen former Gossett group members after their release back in his neighborhood—offered another explanation for the violent images. Paradoxically, he considered them to be "safe" images. Because they were violent, they made the sculptor look tough to the group and to us,

serving to protect the image-maker. This insight backs up the consensus that the kind of "respect" we revealed was a matter of reputation and survival, not only relevant for the young men out on the street, but also within our group.

However, the full implications of the work we had done did not result until after a visit from a guest speaker with the authority of life experience. Elvin Johnson is a former prisoner who, while he was an inmate, co-founded an educational program in maximum security at the (now closed) Lorton prison with Patricia O'Connor of Georgetown University. Johnson created an epiphany for the young men when he interpreted their images of respect and its opposite in terms of prison values.

First, Johnson asked how many of the young men had fathers, brothers, or older cousins in prison or in jail. All but a few out of our group of fifteen raised their hands. Then he asked them what kind of teaching their prison experienced relatives had offered them. What kind of advice had they received? After listening to a few answers, Johnson said that he could tell from their answers and their images that they had learned prison survival skills. He elaborated:

> It's a thing now, that you have to build this character that calls [out] status and respect. You know? Young men in society will nowadays do it with guns and violence and stuff and that's the sad thing. A lot of these attitudes…extend from prison life, from having an Uncle or cousin or a friend that's been in jail. And [they tell you]… "You don't go for this and you don't go for that; this you just don't do, you just don't do that"…it stems from, them carrying a lot of these uncles and cousins that give them a lot of these *prison* values.

The fortunate addition of Johnson's expert insight was a necessary next step for the deliberations we had begun in the theatrical mode, validating the experiences of the young men and following through on their thinking about the alternative visions of respect they had shown in their images. Johnson pointed out that these values originated from widespread incarceration. Significantly, Johnson used a theatre metaphor, "building a character," to describe the performativity of prison values. The young men immediately agreed and they began to talk about the ways that prison values impacted their thinking and their decision making.

Patricia O'Connor describes the "necessary literacy" of prison in order to explain the vernacular of survival. She writes, "In prison there is a more immediate kind of knowing that a prisoner must face, one more vital than document literacy…I have found that a man, first of all, must master how to stay alive" (O'Connor). This is a literacy that already exists, and therefore one that all prison pedagogy must respect. Theater offers one a means to a pedagogy committed to creating the conditions for prisoners to respect and understand the implications of their own literacy in this manner.

The attraction of experimenting with Boal's Theater of the Oppressed (TO)

techniques in prison, therefore, is that it provides a performance-based pedagogy for sharing the making of meaning within a group and for fostering critical deliberations that are accessible to people living within a problem situation. Performance, in general, is also accessible to prisoners because performance and theatricality are already a powerful literacy of survival in prison from "fronting" by prisoners to the jangling of keys by guards.

However, a current criticism of TO work is that it requires a well-trained, sensitive, politically and morally conscious moderator, known in TO as the Joker. The Joker was a TO technique originally developed by Boal at the Arena Theatre in Brazil. (This was my pedagogical role in relationship to the group). The Joker was the wild card character who made sure that the narrative was broken, that empathy was disrupted, and that the audience became integrated into the performance. In his early writing Boal says, "The Joker will also have a permanent 'structure of performance' for all plays. This structure is divided into seven main parts: dedication, explanation, episode, scene, commentary, interview and exhortation" (TO 184). From this description, it is easy to see just how rigid this system was. Today the Joker is often a "wild card" in name only.

In fact, the name, "Joker," has become a TO insider's term for a moderator, rather than a Brechtian system or a set of structures. If, at first glance, the Joker seems to have been reduced to master of ceremonies and leader of games, it is also still true that the Joker matches the problem, story, or group with the right technique, as I did in the case of the word "respect." The Joker encourages the discussions that follow, picking up on clues that may lead to more performances and bridge to other techniques, particularly important in the detention setting. The better the Joker is at unpacking language and analyzing images, the better he or she will be at creating the conditions for a meaningful use of performance as a medium for critical deliberation inside an institution.

One of the roles of the Joker is "Difficultating": making concerns more difficult or more complex in order to get past simplistic and individual answers. In adding the term "difficultator," to the definition of the Joker, Boal's impulse may have been to recapture some of the Joker's original "wild card" function, since "difficultator" is a reversal of the role of "moderator" or "facilitator." The Joker is heightens the problem or opens up a new way of thinking—a productive pursuit in outreach work inside prisons, jails, and detention centers.

The Setting

The spirituality room at the Louis Gossett Jr. Youth Residential Facility in Lansing, New York looks like a conference hotel room, but without the pitchers of ice water. A flip chart stands in the corner. Sometimes slogans or bullet points remain on the board from conflict resolution classes or counselor meetings. In fact, the word "RESPECT" was left on the board by one of the educa-

tional programs. There is a small electric organ in the corner for church services. Usually two or three undergraduate volunteers from my first year writing seminar at Cornell, Theater Behind Bars, would begin by clearing the tables and stacking the chairs against the walls to create an open space. The young incarcerated men, mainly Latino, Puerto Rican and Black (one or two each year were White) are led into the room single file by their Youth Counselors. They wear uniforms of red polo shirts, khaki pants and sneakers that are so ironically close to Cornell clothing that I once showed up in the same outfit without thinking about it. Shoelace color indicates levels of achievement and privilege or of probation and punishment.

Gossett is a medium-security facility that looks a lot like a high school behind fences and gates. In making arrangements with the education staff we always asked for young men who did not seem to respond to the other programs offered at this medium secure facility. However administrators usually wanted to give us their honor students. On balance, we got a mix. No one was allowed to volunteer for the program, but we offered an "out" after two meetings to anyone who wanted it. Once I was told this was the only program that crossed the lines of the unit divisions.

This spirituality room was the setting of the Manhood and Responsibility Seminar we taught, so named by Latino Studies and English Professor Ben Olguín, then at Cornell, who co-founded the group and participated in its first year. We read prisoner autobiographies, watched films and (taped) performances, hosted guest speakers on prisoner issues, and used theater as the mode of discussion and critique. The Gossett Youth Counselors also acted as internal guards and observers: they always stayed in the room with us and sometimes participated.

The Machine of Rhythms: A Body in Control of Making Meaning

A prisoners' body is a well-contested site. A body's presence or absence, its representations and images, its phenomenal truth and its constructed and interpolated deceits, its power and its vulnerability—these are all intensely realized in prison. Inside a prison the regimes of punishment physically control the body and its movements, even manhandling it; however, the body continues its multitudes of expressive functions in a thousand ways.

When theater puts prisoners' bodies in the center of meaning-making, especially bodies of color that have historically been denied many forms of self representation, a poignant aesthetic language opens up and puts the prisoners in control of making meaning. This elicits insights from them into things that are difficult to say and otherwise difficult to see. Boal's work follows Brecht in seeking to de-fetishize the body, but Image Theater also provides a means for seeing the body as a physical metaphor for identity, a task we took on in our

seminar with the Gossett youth.

One of the most striking of the Theatre of the Oppressed games is "the machine of rhythms," which is intended to project back a reflection of the culture of a place or of an institution. A participant steps into the middle and offers a sound and motion that he repeats over and over. A second person steps in to add a second sound and motion that in some way attaches to the first, as if each person were a part of a machine. Then, in turn, each of the remaining participants steps in to add to the machine. The first run is for practice only and ends up as a nonsense machine. Then all of the participants are asked to start again and make a new machine that captures the lived experience of a particular environment or culture. At Gossett we made "the machine of the Gossett Center." Without discussion, planning or rehearsal, each young man stepped into the machine when he was ready to add something that "showed" the Gossett Center as it was.

In the machine, the young men performed the sights and sounds that connected to their Gossett experience: the line-up, the count, the gate, the loudspeaker announcements, the walkie-talkies of the counselors, the regimentation of the cafeteria and the unit—they showed a machine of constant interruptions and constant regimentation. The individual parts of the machine captured their experience of Gossett with fidelity and insight into the accumulated effects of the sights and sounds. The parody of that experience amounted to a commentary: lampooning something recognizable, but unsaid, about the place and its people, by reducing a motive or a behavior into a revealing sound or gesture.

The rhythm of Gossett was all of the things that it had in common with adult prisons. The "machine" of Gossett highlights those experiences that have their cumulative effect in repetition. Despite the school programs, the counseling, the sessions in conflict resolution, visitations from family, and a hundred other things that go on in a youth facility, year after year, when I've engaged the Gossett youth in this game, they choose to portray what is most overwhelming about being there: the restrictions on their movement and their voices. The machine of rhythms was a canny way to cut through the clutter and get to their core experience. It intensified the aesthetic dimensions of their reality as the young men perceive them individually and collectively.

What The Machine of Rhythms showed so well was an embodied experience of the physical sensations and effects of living at Gossett. In our following discussion several young men said we had captured knowledge they could not have articulated about the place and of themselves in situ. We started with bodies in the space they inhabit, but also performed a critical reframing of that experience, drawing on their embodied knowledge and literacy of survival.

There is not always an instant "ah ha" accompanying a Brechtian estrangement of the environment as in the Machine of Rythms. At Gossett, we also used

Boal's "Great Game of Power" as a helpful example of performing embodied knowledge. The game is played in two stages. In the first stage the Joker presents a group of chairs and invites the participants to arrange them in various positions, but always making it clear that one or more chairs holds the power of position and space over the others. Each arrangement presents a physical metaphor of power using position, height, distance, line of sight, and other matters of expressing and reading power in aesthetic space. One of the arrangements is chosen for the clarity of the power relationship it reveals and because the group "recognizes" the power relationship, and then, in the second stage of the game, the participants place their bodies in the scene one by one—taking the most powerful position they can imagine. New power images emerge with each entry as each previous image is trumped more or less successfully by the next.

When the young men at Gossett played the Great Game of Power, they reached a physical impasse similar to the verbal impasse over the word "respect." In three out of four years at Gossett, we played the game and three different groups of young men created the same image and the same deadlock. They started with a single row of chairs they believed showed the clearest expression of power, a line up. One by one, the young men entered the image and took a seat in the row. Once the row was filled, nobody else would enter the scene and the young men in the chairs sat there waiting until the group gave up. We tried again the following week. This time we observed that each person in the line of chairs had a different facial expression and posture which we characterized in discussion as "angry face," "bored face," "not really here," "hanging back," "glassy eyes," and "can't touch me." These young men were signaling interior attitudes on the surface of their faces in subtle and suggestive ways. These were their choices for the most powerful position they could take: masks—attempts to preserve or obtain power against a force just outside of the image—the one calling for the lineup.

After we retried the game at the beginning of our meetings over the course of two to three weeks, the young men at Gossett finally stepped up on their chairs or turned their backs or took other positions around the room. The first time this happened, it caused raucous laughter and the release of a lot of tension in the room. Following that first change, the young men raced to create all kinds of physically challenging positions, including upside down headstands against the wall. The day-to-day aesthetic experience of the line up impacted and informed the young men's critique of power in a way that would be hard to capture in words. From them, we have learned that groups using this technique may reveal the inner workings of the aesthetics of power within a group. As Boal said, "In theatre we re-live and observe ourselves better" (LT 70). This observation of the self is centered on the body and on the spaces it inhabits, for those who are incarcerated a powerfully inhibiting yet malleable image.

Performing Conflict: Adding Deliberation to Embodied Knowledge

In the TO technique known as Forum Theater, a real life problem is performed in order to disturb intractable problems and try out multiple solutions. Participation in these scenes dramatize conflict, deliberate, and then rehearse potential strategies for engaging or responding to the conflict. Through such performances, conflict becomes a pedagogical tool. The process begins with a story that is "resonant" for the group; since vibrations at the same frequency amplify each other, the metaphor can be extended to suggest a synergy within participants that can lead to a collective empowerment interrogating the problem. In other words, the experience does not stay with individual, but is shared.

The Forum relies upon the active participation of what Boal has termed "spect-actors" rather than spectators: audience members are expected to jump up into a scene and replace the protagonist at any point when they have a theory of how to take action to solve the problem. Instead, the audience members become the actors, thinking by performing. A spect-actor, Boal writes, "…delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or to think in his place; on the contrary, he himself assumes the protagonic role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change— in short trains himself for real action" (TO 122). Spect-actors are invited to make interventions beyond the boundaries of their own identities without anyone forgetting what those boundaries are. Seeing the split between the character and the spect-actor simultaneously, described by Boal as a dichotomy, reveals the negotiation between fictional and lived identities seeking solutions to problems.

Of course, solutions are not the main point of Forum theater; problems faced by the young men of Gossett are too complex and deep-seated for quick fixes. However, by deliberating together on alternative endings to a story, a group may develop a critical outlook. I have seen adult groups at Lorton use this technique effectively. One man from my last group there in 1997, in the Fatherhood and Family theater class, described a transformation. He reported that the fathers' support group spent time thinking of themselves as "bad examples" of "how not to come here." However, through Forum Theater he realized they should be using their time to strategize and imagine ways to reconnect with their families and the problems they would face doing so (see "Notes From Inside" Theater 31.3).

Similarly, a Forum Theater experiment I tried at the Austin J. MacCormack Center, the maximum-security youth facility several towns over from Gossett, showed how conflict is performed in this technique. In the inmate created scene, a "good student" had to pass by drug dealers on the way to and from school every day. He knew these dealers from school and they knew him by name. The scene depicted how they try to give him free drugs as a "friend." In the first intervention, the protagonist just walked the other way.

A white Youth Counselor from upstate New York, who was present in the room during the Forum applauded and cheered the choice to walk the other way. But, the young men playing the dealers seemed dissatisfied with this quick outcome. So I asked the young men what they thought was wrong. "He has to come by here," one said. "We know where he lives," said another. So I suggested that when we replayed the scene they make it more difficult for him. When we did, as soon as the young man started walking the other way, the dealers followed him. He went all around the room faster and faster, over chairs and into corners, but they followed him everywhere. We had just demonstrated a flaw in the "just say no" solution. The next day, I fielded a concerned phone call from an administrator wondering if we were glorifying drug dealing. It took some time to explain the goals of "difficultating," though I was able to reassure him in the end. My perception from the exchanges after the Forum and the discussion with the administrator is that both sides of the conflict from street life, "dealer" and "student," were represented in the room and the discussion demonstrated that teaching can provide no easy solutions.

During another Forum Theater at the Gossett Center the young men faced the tough prospect of engaging their own complicity with violent street life. However, they were able to talk about this conflict together. Though Forum Theater does not usually deal with outright aggression (such interventions are unlikely to succeed), we found ourselves working on the following scene before we realized it was an untenable situation: A man walks into a neighborhood wearing a certain leather jacket. He has no idea that the leather jacket has gang insignia on it. When he runs into a group of gang members they taunt and eventually beat him. The first intervention, replacing the man with the jacket, had him turn and run. Everyone laughed at this solution, because it seemed so obvious. Then, I tried an intervention where I replaced the character and I attempted to hand over the jacket to avoid trouble. This got an even bigger laugh, since it was naïve.

However, when we discussed the scene, one young man pointed out that no change from the man with the jacket would work: all he could do was run. The change had to come from within the gang group, he said. Thus we began a series of scenes in which various members of the gang enacted different types of interventions in the group. None of them worked. Usually the character gave in when the others pressed him on loyalty or toughness. These "failed" scenes depicted something very important. Some young men felt that the gang group was like a family that needed protecting at all costs, since it was a source of their own protection. The way to protect the group was to earn respect for it by becoming feared. Another young man pointed out that even if most people in the group would go along with the idea of not beating the man with the jacket, one person or another might do it anyway to "prove he was tough," thereby

accomplishing an internal political goal unknown to the man with the jacket. A couple of young men found this to be extremely relevant, saying this was the first time they thought critically of their own place within a group before. We certainly did not come to a satisfactory solution that day, but we did dramatize the internal and external conflicts that were shaping the behavior and actions in the scene.

In all of the Forum examples conflict is recast as a chance for deliberation. First, the body is central to performing the scenes and embodies their knowledge of the conflict. Then, the intractable outcome of conflict is critically challenged. Finally, deliberation applies the insights to critical reflections. Conflict is the engine of theater, and it is the structure of prisons. Overall, the performance of conflict is possible because it draws upon the literacy of survival.

The "Thin Line of Respect"

For the young men, more often than not, the conflict of respect is a test for many situations. Elvin Johnson calls this a "thin line of respect" that is dangerous to cross, caused in great measure by the limited space of confinement. He has said, "It's like, in other words if we're so confined in we can't get away from each other. So it's almost going to be this confrontation and where if I'm in society I don't have to deal with you. I can go my way and walk away from that. But by us being closed inside this little confinement, we have to have a certain space…which goes back to that thin line of respect" (talk at Gossett). The institutional conflict becomes a personal conflict this way.

Theatre of the Oppressed techniques are different from other pedagogical models in exposing and reframing such conflicts and in re-imagining space. Boal emphasizes that an individual's stories will be generalized to the group and to the social level as soon as other Spect-actors get up from the audience to enact the scene with the original storyteller. According to Boal, this creates an important dichotomy, through performance of the story by others that allows critical self-reflection by the original storyteller and allows the group to take on the story from within their own understanding and observations of resonant experiences. Boal calls this "Ascesis" or, "moving from the phenomenon to the law" (Rainbow 28). This means that a practice for recasting conflict as institutional instead of personal is in place.

Such practices share an important fundamental progression with other forms of moderated discussion: starting with concrete, experiential stories or representations of the problem or crisis faced; proposing and testing potential responses and consequences; imagining, prioritizing and rehearsing next step strategies. However, to these, theater adds some crucial, additional qualities and functions. In the incarcerated context, it is very important that theater centers attention on the body and on space. The importance of embodied knowl-

edge, the performance of the experience and the story, turns out to be one of the most energizing and empowering aspects of the work. It's an instant critical reframing— the individual story becomes a group story— and in doing so tends to avoid the automatic repetition of power dynamics within the group itself.

The emphasis shifts away from hardened, difficult or impossible words and towards observations of lived experiences. Thus, this is a non-scripted form of theater that respects the vernacular literacy and expertise of the participants in the center: the prisoners do not lose their role as sources of accountability and information. And, it is not all talk—the visual and the visceral count— so that people think with their muscles not just their minds.

I am adapting the term deliberative to describe the ability to make collective meaning in this way. Prisoners can use TO and other deliberative, interactive community based theater models to think, rehearse and imagine difficult problems efficiently, collaboratively and creatively and thus learn tools to decision making.

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