

***Rehearsing for a Better Future  
Revolution on Stage in Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal, and Dario Fo***

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One of the topics I explore in my doctoral dissertation, which focuses on the intersections between performance, foreign language, and cultural education, is my belief that the theatrical experience is closely related to the educational experience through the revolutionary thrust they share. The revolutionary pedagogical ideals of theater practitioners like Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal, rooted in the refusal of the coercive production/consumption economy of bourgeois theater, the elimination of the actor/spectator divide, and the collective creation of embodied knowledge, have deeply influenced my research and the development of my theoretical framework. In this paper, I will briefly discuss the performance practices developed by Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal and Dario Fo; through their analysis, I will explain why I believe the relationship between theater, education and revolution to be particularly significant.

Let me start with an anecdote relating to a live performance I attended last year. In Spring 2015 Harvard University hosted a lecture-performance by Italian actor Fabrizio Gifuni, in which he presented his award-winning show *Gadda Goes to War (L'ingegner Gadda va alla Guerra, 2010 Ubu Prize for Best Actor and Best Show)*, a monologue that draws from Carlo Emilio Gadda's war diaries (1915-1919) and from his essay *Eros e Priapo*, a provocative piece written in 1945 and published in 1967 in which Gadda comments on Italian Fascism and the complex relationship between the Italian people and Mussolini.<sup>1</sup>

When presenting his show at Harvard University, Gifuni only performed selected chunks of the work, and alternated them with lecture-like reflections on his creative process. Since the original

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<sup>1</sup> *Gadda Goes to War* is a one-man marathon, belonging to the Italian lineage of solo performance that has among its ranks the wonderful works of Teatro di Narrazione by Marco Paolini and Marco Baliani.

piece is in Italian, English subtitles were projected on a screen behind him. The effect was exquisitely Brechtian, as it was quite alienating to watch Gifuni's emotionally intense performance in Italian while reading the English captions, and to watch the actor constantly shifting in and out of character. The spectator's experience was highly polarized between intense empathy-driven moments of emotional stimulation, and detached, reflection-driven moments of critical analysis.

When in-character-Gifuni, Gadda-Gifuni, finished performing, he recomposed his twitching body, passed his fingers through his thick black hair, drenched with sweat, and dried his forehead with the back of his hand. The lights turned on for a second and somebody in the audience started clapping their hands; but Gifuni stopped them with a quick gesture. It was not over. His gesture was the powerful gesture of the actor that hails the theatrical into existence. The lights turned off again – and in that moment I could not avoid thinking about how the humanity behind the scenes only becomes visible when at fault: in this case, the poor member of the tech crew who had turned the lights on... Gifuni looked at the audience and provocatively questioned the meaning of what he had just done: why had he just discharged his soul and prostituted his body in front of our eyes? Was it only about enjoyment and consumption or had he produced knowledge for himself and us all?

His comment on the epistemological power of performance deeply resonated with the questions that I am interested in, specifically about the type of knowledge produced by theatrical labor and the revolutionary charge of its ethical implications, which is why his performance earned a special place in my mind as a catalyst of productive thinking. The association of acting with prostitution is an age-old refrain, especially with regard to female performers.<sup>2</sup> Beyond the visual, often erotic consumption of the performer's body operated by the audience's eyes, it is also particularly interesting to consider what Erin Hurley, building on Ridout's work on theatrical labor and on Hochschild's work on the commercialization of human feeling, calls "feeling-labour," whose products also get consumed by the audience. The question of whether theatrical labor challenges or reiterates capitalist economy has been extensively discussed by theater scholars.

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Hurley (64-68).

It was precisely their preoccupation with the bourgeois consumption of their theater that led Dario Fo and his wife Franca Rame<sup>3</sup> to abandon mainstream theater in the late 1960s to establish the New Scene collective and later the Commune. Laura Martell's contribution to this conference provides an outline of Fo's "Revolutionary Period," to quote the title of a section from Tom Behan's biography of Fo. I will not therefore spend too much time describing Fo's theatrical practice in the 1960s and 70s, and just summarize the main aspects of his work that are relevant for my exploration in these pages. In those politically charged years, Fo constantly worked with his theater collective in factories and schools, wrote plays that explicitly attacked specific public figures and addressed contemporary events, and would also perform without following a fixed script, but rather interacting with the audience and talking directly to them, often without any stage set or costumes, breaking the fourth wall in a very direct way and concluding his performances with so called "third acts," which were basically debates between performers and audience. As one can easily imagine, Fo's work, which had the explicit intent of educating the working class and encouraging a revolution, was not well received by the authorities but obtained significant success among the general public.

Fo's theatrical project was undoubtedly educational in its intents, but his implementation was, I believe, ultimately incomplete in that the performance practice he proposed did not engage the audience in a completely participatory experience of liberation. After having clarified what I mean by educationally meaningful participatory theatrical experience, I will come back to this point about Dario Fo in my conclusion.

Since the 1950s and 1960s, research in cognitive psychology has sparked an interest in the developmental aspects of performance.<sup>4</sup> Education researchers have analyzed the manifold pedagogical potentials of dramatic activities, which include, among many others, embodied

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<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to Fo only; the scope of the present exploration does not allow me to discuss and make justice to Rame's very interesting and provocative work, but it is important to note the crucial role she played in shaping much of Fo's work as well.

<sup>4</sup> Among the most cited theories are Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, Piaget's symbolic play, and Gardner's multiple intelligences. For more information see the introduction in Bräuer's volume.

learning, the dissolution of cognitive barriers, the fostering of cooperation among students, and the development of critical thinking. Educational theater often falls under the rubric of “applied theater,” which, as Prentki and Preston explain in their *Reader*, is an umbrella term used to define any kind of theater that intends to facilitate transformation and that is created “for,” “by,” “with,” and “about” communities.<sup>5</sup>

Applied theater is often accused of promoting a utilitarian use of the theatrical, and a strong criticism of this kind has been directed at the use of theater and drama in the foreign language and culture classroom, a practice that has been growing in the recent years<sup>6</sup> and that constitutes the focus of my research. In order to counter this criticism, it is crucial for scholars and teachers that advocate theater in the classroom as an aesthetic enterprise meant to foster critical thinking to show an appropriate understanding of theater and performance theories and to avoid shallow and reductive approaches.

The fundamental, yet underestimated, role played by our bodies in the production of language and culture lies at the heart of the calls for reform in the foreign language curriculum we are witnessing.<sup>7</sup> Performance studies theorists, who argue for the co-constitutive nature of discourse and embodied practice, of semiotics and materiality, can definitely help us strengthen this call. I will mention as examples the work of three thinkers that have particularly influenced my research: Diana Taylor, Victor Turner, and Richard Schechner.

Taylor, in her analysis of the archive and the repertoire, i.e. the discursive documents and the performative traces that shape cultural memory, defines performances as “vital acts of transfer”

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<sup>5</sup> This definition is of course problematic: what theater is not created “for,” “by,” “with,” and “about” communities? Moreover, as Prentki and Preston note in their introduction, speaking about transformative possibilities engenders contentious questions: who is being transformed for what? By whom? Who judges the achievement? They try to unpack these issues through a collection of essays that reflect on the poetics and ethics of representation, and the concepts of participation, intervention, border crossing, and transformation.

<sup>6</sup> See for example the collections of essays edited by Bräuer, Marini-Maio, Ryan, and the online journal *Scenario*.

<sup>7</sup> See the 2007 *MLA Report*: “FL teaching and learning should contribute to fostering dialogue among individuals and social groups from different countries, languages, and sociopolitical backgrounds, and encourage deeper exploration of one’s own and the other’s cultures. The guidelines outlined by the MLA ‘Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages’ established in 2006 reflect this new scenario and aim to produce ‘educated speakers who have deep translingual and transcultural competence.’ ” (Marini Maio, *Re-Creating Antigoni*, 295)

and advocates the function of performance as epistemology. She employs the concept of *transculturation* theorized in Latin America to define “the permanent recycling of cultural materials and processes” (10) between cultures. Her own words perfectly explain why her work bears crucial connections to the teaching of foreign language and culture:

Departments that actually take the teaching of language seriously, for example, have some experience thinking about reiterated, embodied social practice. Students learn a second language by imagining themselves in a different social setting, by staging scenarios where the acquired language takes on meaning, by imitating, repeating, and rehearsing not just words but cultural attitudes. Theorizing these practices, not just as pedagogical strategies but as the transmission of embodied cultural behavior, would enable scholars to branch out into new critical thinking about the repertoire. A performance studies lens would enrich these disciplines, bridging the schism not between literary and oral traditions, but between verbal and nonverbal embodied cultural practice. (26)<sup>8</sup>

Turner’s notion of liminality<sup>9</sup> provides a useful framework to theorize the space of the foreign language classroom, the in-betweenness of the students in the moment of their encounter with the foreign “otherness” they are experiencing. It is particularly effective to play with the boundaries between speaking a foreign language *as* performance, that is, in everyday life, and within the theatrical dimension that *is* performance. On stage, the student can thoroughly explore the experience of being both “not-me” and “not-not-me” (Schechner, “Performers and Spectators,” p.92), a condition that the foreign language learner inherently shares with the actor.

The work of Schechner, the father of performance studies, expanded the concept of play and its importance in human society<sup>10</sup> beyond the scope of early development. A more thorough engagement with performance and theater theories can help language educators strengthen their argument that donning a metaphorical mask productively lowers the stakes for the language

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<sup>8</sup> On this topic, see also Francine A’Ness.

<sup>9</sup> See Schechner 2012, p.66.

<sup>10</sup> And non-human (see Schechner, *Performance Studies*, pp.99-102).

learner.<sup>11</sup> Play creates a safe space that encourages students to take risks and cooperate in a community, increases their motivation, and relaxes their constraints and inhibitions. Yet developmental theories are powerless against the widespread prejudice that educational practices that integrate the performing arts are only appropriate for children. The broader conception of play enabled by performance studies, which subverts “the deep-seated Western bias against play” (Schechner, *Performance Studies*, p. 112), opens up the discussion to adult education, as it moves away from a strictly linear conception of cognitive development that relegates play within age boundaries.<sup>12</sup>

In dialogue with other foreign language and culture educators,<sup>13</sup> I argue for a teaching practice that considers how issues of empathy and detachment in performance relate to the intercultural encounter. The debate on the use of empathy in theater, which relates to fundamentally educational principles of revolutionary liberation, originates with Bertolt Brecht and his technique of estrangement, with which he meant to foster the audience’s critical thinking and fight against empathy as a means of entertainment for the bourgeois class that promoted a passive model of spectatorship.

The political component of Brecht’s work has been historically overlooked, a trend that thankfully has recently been rectified. McCullough points out how “liberal-humanist” culture has often appropriated Brecht’s works, naturalizing them “into the scheme of bourgeois hegemony, and confirm[ing] its own power by claiming to rescue ‘art’ from ‘politics’ ” (121); he correctly denounces the use of “allegedly Brechtian meta-theatrical and self-reflexive techniques” that get “internalized as theatrical devices rather than contextualized as ideological critique” (128). Through his concepts of *Gestus* and *Not...But...*, Brecht understood the theatrical experience as a means to explore how ideology imbues our everyday actions and our bodies. His work has significant

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<sup>11</sup> See for example Hegman-Shier.

<sup>12</sup> On this topic, it is particularly interesting to mention Augusto Boal’s conviction that games bring together two essential characteristics of life in society: they have rules and they require creative freedom (*Aesthetics*, 4).

<sup>13</sup> See for example Marini-Maio.

pedagogical components, as this principle is fundamental in order to explain how performance activities can help develop students' trans-cultural competence: understanding that our own bodies and languages are ideologically shaped is the first essential step to take before approaching the foreign body, language and culture.

Brecht is often misinterpreted on the topic of “Theater for Pleasure or Theater for Instruction,” which McCullough presents as a fundamental dichotomy by quoting Brecht’s passage on the dramatic theater’s spectator versus the epic theater’s spectator:

The dramatic theater’s spectator says: yes, I have felt like that too – just like me – it’s only natural – it’ll never change – the sufferings of this man appall me, because they are inescapable – that’s great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world – I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.

The epic theater’s spectator says: I never have thought it – that’s not the way – that’s extraordinary, hardly believable – it’s got to stop – the sufferings of this man appall me, because they are unnecessary – that’s great art: nothing obvious in it – I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh. (*Brecht on Theater*, 71)

Yet Brecht also wrote that “if there were [no] amusement to be had from learning the theater’s whole structure would unfit it for teaching. Theater remains theater even when it is instructive theater, and in so far as it is good theater it will amuse” (*Brecht on Theater*, 73). It would be wrong to say that there is no place in Brecht’s theater for pleasure or feeling; the point is that feeling for Brecht must operate outside the spectrum of theatrical empathy.

In his seminal work *Theater of the Oppressed*, Augusto Boal defined empathy “the most dangerous weapon in the entire arsenal of the theater and related arts” (*TO*, 113). Boal’s work has been extremely influential in the field of applied theater.<sup>14</sup> From the 1960s onwards, he developed several theatrical practices, among which those known as image theater, invisible theater, legislative theater; the most famous form of Theater of the Oppressed is probably Forum Theater, a highly

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<sup>14</sup> For the sake of brevity, I am using a very reductive term to define an extremely broad field of theatrical theories and practices that I do not have the time to describe in detail here. For an introductory overview, I direct the reader to the works by Nicholson and Prentki & Preston.

political mode of performance in which members of a community are invited to reflect and work on situations of oppression through a theater.

The two predecessors extensively invoked by Boal are Aristotle and Brecht. Aristotle's poetics are identified by Boal as the "poetics of oppression." In Aristotelian catharsis dramatic action substitutes for real action, and spectators are coercively purged of their revolutionary impetus. In his passionate anti-Aristotelian argument, Boal praises Brecht's Marxist poetics, which presents characters not as "absolute subjects" but as "objects of economic or social forces" to which they respond and in virtue of which they act. The real subjects are the economic forces, while character is understood as an object-subject. Boal identifies Brecht's poetics as "the enlightened vanguard":

The world is revealed as subject to change, and the change starts in the theater itself, for the spectator does not delegate power to the characters to think in his place, although he continues to delegate power to them to act in his place. The experience is revealing on the level of consciousness, but not globally on level of action. Dramatic action throws light upon real action. The spectacle is a preparation for action. (*TO*, 155)

Boal defines his own poetics of the oppressed as "essentially the poetics of liberation": "the spectator no longer delegates the power to the characters either to think or to act in his place. The spectator frees himself; he thinks and acts for himself! Theater is action! Perhaps the theater is not revolutionary itself; but have no doubts, it is a rehearsal of revolution!" (*TO*, 155). He advocates the break of the actor/spectator divide through the figure of the "spect-actor": in his theater there are no spectators at the receiving emotional end, but only active spect-actors who take the action into their own hands, get on stage, and experience ideological positions through their own bodies.

The connections between Brecht and Boal have been analyzed by many scholars,<sup>15</sup> yet there is one crucial link between them that has not been sufficiently highlighted. Boal identified Brecht's Epic Theater as the vanguard of his Theater of the Oppressed; but Brecht himself had envisioned a

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<sup>15</sup> See for example Taussig and Schechner, and Auslander.



theater of the future, which he has theorized in his writings on the *Lehrstück*.<sup>16</sup> As we have already seen, the rejection of empathic identification is an important point of connection between Brecht and Boal. Such rejection is particularly strong in Brecht's *Lehrstücke*; the "measures Brecht takes to prevent illusion, empathy, and thereby catharsis" and the ways in which he forces "the audience to think about what is going on instead of simply experiencing it, interrupt[ing] the action for discussion and analysis" have been pointed out, for example, by Nelson in his article on *Die Massnahme* (573).<sup>17</sup> But the affinities between the *Lehrstück* and Boal's have roots that dive much deeper.

Because of their highly politicized content and form the *Lehrstücke* have constituted, as Wright states "a particularly sensitive point in the reception of Brecht":

The problem surface[es] in the very attempt to translate the term. The choice, itself of ideological significance, has in the past been between 'didactic plays' (Esslin, 1959), 'propagandist plays' (Gray, 1976), and 'learning plays' (Speirs, 1982). [...] more recently the term 'teaching plays' has been suggested as suitable for plays that are 'not merely plays that teach, but also plays about teaching (Nägele, 1987, p.115). (Wright, 11-12)

Wright points out, however, the best choice is to retain the German term itself, as the constitutive combination of teaching *and* learning it entails cannot be satisfactorily translated. Drawing from Steinweg's research (*Das Lehrstück*), Wright offers an illuminating description of the *Lehrstück*: it is a theater "for the benefit of the actors" and "requires no audience," for the intended actors are "school students, worker collectives, and groups of all kinds" (12). Among the materials recovered by Steinweg from the Brecht archives, there is a fragment in which Brecht discusses a distinction between 'Major Pedagogy' and 'Minor Pedagogy':

It is the function of Minor Pedagogy to cater for the transitional period and subversively to undermine bourgeois ideology without breaking too radically with bourgeois

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<sup>16</sup> "The documents Steinweg [1972] has published show that **for Brecht the Lehrstück was to be the theater of the future**, but there is little sign that it is being taken account of in Brecht studies." (Wright, 7. Bold emphasis is mine).

<sup>17</sup> See Simons for another interesting analysis of this play as "theater of revolution."

traditions; hence the categories of actor and spectator may be retained while the bourgeois spectator is being encouraged to raise his consciousness. Major Pedagogy, on the other hand, presupposes the existence of a socialist state and is thus a model for a **radically different theater of the future, where the distinction between actor and spectator is entirely wiped out. The actors [...] occupy a double role of observing [...] and acting, working and re-working a communal set text which is perpetually alterable, the object being to turn art into a social practice, an experiment in socially productive behaviour.** Unlike epic theater, which exposes the contradictions while perpetuating the institution which produces them, *Lehrtheater* breaks with the bourgeois theater and provides a **new revolutionary praxis**. It offers a trial text, not only in the sense that it is often organized around the thematics of a trial, but also in that **it allows the text to be tried out in practice and changed by those who are undergoing the learning experience.** To discuss Brecht's *Lehrstücke* purely from the point of view of their content or even their form, without considering and testing out their function, is completely to miss the point. (Wright, 13. Bold emphasis is mine)

One wonders how familiar Boal was with Brecht's theorization of the *Lehrstück*, which has enjoyed a very limited popularity in traditional Brecht criticism. Since Steingweg's groundbreaking study on the *Lehrstück* was published in Germany in 1972, it is most likely that Boal knew very little about the *Lehrstück* when he wrote *Theater of the Oppressed* in 1974, though he might have encountered more information on the topic during his later trips to Europe.<sup>18</sup> It would indeed be extremely interesting to trace this potential genealogy, since as the reader can see Brecht's *Lehrstück* bears stunning connections with Boal's Forum Theater and his concept of spect-actor.

In juxtaposing Brecht's *Lehrstück*, a theater theorized as "of the socialist future," and Boal's Theater of the Oppressed, a theater theorized as "rehearsal for the revolution," it is fascinating to identify a common thread that leads the two Marxist thinkers to theorize an educational theater that rejects empathy, encourages awareness of the alienated body, and ultimately eliminates the

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<sup>18</sup> Boal's experience with first world countries is what prompted the therapeutic evolution of his work, and the amplification of its focus on external forms of oppression to include the so-called "cop in the head" (See *Rainbow of Desire*).

separation between actors and spectators, so that artistic production entails no passive position and liberates itself from a producer versus consumer economy.

As Roswitha Mueller points out, “the Lehrstück cannot be contained as a kind of dogmatic Marxist-Leninist thesis play. It remains a genuinely utopian project” (112). She also discusses the notion of learning through imitation as presented by Brecht; drawing from Bechterelev’s argument on imitation as the basis of social life, she writes:

Imitation is thus understood as the most basic element of learning that includes the possibility of alternative choice. Similarly, Brecht's Lehrstück experiments are centrally concerned with the relation between imitation and learning as well as with the element of choice. The participants are called upon to copy the text and the style of acting until criticism has changed it. This point represents the juncture of Brecht's preoccupation with the subject in his dramatic theory and his emphasis on behaviour [...] Brecht sought to reconstruct the formation of behaviour, gestures and attitudes in the learning process through imitation. By beginning at the point at which certain persistent patterns were formed, Brecht thought it was possible to unravel the patterns originally learned and replace them with new ones, this time consciously chosen. Historically, this utopian project is closely linked to the expectations for a new society which existed in Germany before the rise of fascism. The challenge of the Lehrstück, however, has not diminished, and remains as vital today as it was in Brecht's time. (117)

The link between learning and imitation has been vastly discussed, the name maybe most often mentioned being of course that of Aristotle. Marcel Mauss interestingly defines education in terms of “prestigious imitation”; I find that the problem of the responsibility of the authority figure closely links educators and artists. To what extent are artists morally, ethically, and politically responsible for their work?<sup>19</sup> How can we come to terms with the educational responsibility of art after so much

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<sup>19</sup> A discussion of art’s answerability would bring us too far. I will be content with citing Boal, who wrote that dedicating one’s life to art is ok, but it is better to dedicate one’s art to life (*Aesthetics of the Oppressed*, 107). Bakhtin also wonderfully pronounced himself on the topic: “The individual must become answerable through and through: all of his constituent moments must not only fit next to each other in the temporal sequence of his life, but must also interpenetrate each other in the unity of guilt and answerability. Nor will it do to invoke "inspiration" in order to justify want of answerability. Inspiration that ignores life and is itself ignored by life is not inspiration but a state of possession. The true sense, and not the self-proclaimed sense, of all the old arguments about the interrelationship of art and life, about the purity of art, etc.— that is, the real aspiration behind all such arguments— is nothing more than

work has been done on reception theory and on the role played by the audience in interpreting and shaping the meaning of any given text? These anxieties are closely connected to educators' preoccupations: how can we foster students' critical thinking and political awareness without feeding them what we believe to be the right answer?

These tensions lie at the heart of the intrinsically insolvable problems of institutional education that were touched upon during our conference discussion; they also relate to why I believe Dario Fo's theater ultimately could not be a catalyst of real revolution, as I will explain in my conclusion. In order to start tackling this issue, it might be helpful to mention my working terminology, which distinguishes different connotations for the three words "educational," "pedagogical" and "didactic." I interpret the adjective educational as defining something that influences the development of the individual in ways that can be totally independent from anybody's will. The word educational only entails the presence of a learner; it can describe a completely unconstructed and unscripted learning experience. When I define something as pedagogical the stakes are different; pedagogy involves structured teaching methodologies and choices, it involves a teacher as well as a learner. Finally, didactic adds for me an additionally coercive layer: something didactic aims at teaching a particular content and in a particular way; the focus is on the teacher and the content rather than on the learner.

What concerns – or should concern – us as teachers is how to implement pedagogical tools in the didactic context we are given (the classroom, for example) so that we can give birth to an educational environment. Paulo Freire, whose *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and "dialogic method of teaching" is identified by Mutnick as one of the two main genealogies of critical pedagogy (35),<sup>20</sup> came up with an answer that is extremely complex in its simplicity: in order to avoid depositing

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the mutual striving of both art and life to make their own tasks easier, to relieve themselves of their own answerability. For it is certainly easier to create without answering for life, and easier to live without any consideration for art. Art and life are not one, but they must become united in myself— in the unity of my answerability" (2).

<sup>20</sup> The second genealogy she traces relates to "a wide range of theoretical influences" that span from Marx to Gramsci, the Frankfurt School, Myles Horton, and John Dewey" (36).

knowledge into students, real dialogue has to occur, as for real dialogue to occur the teacher's authority needs to be "on the side of freedom, not against it" (Freire, 67).

Freire's legacy was of course particularly significant for Augusto Boal, whose theatrical method is based on Freire's pedagogy and who shared Freire's fundamental belief in the power of the oppressed: "although both Freire and Boal have been criticized as idealists, ungrounded in historical materialism, [...] their belief in ordinary people's ability to make history synthesizes Marxist theory with a profoundly democratic pedagogy" (Mutnick, 41). Interestingly enough, Freire's supposed lack of grounding in historical materialism has been pointed out by Giroux as a positive trait of his pedagogy:

By recognizing that certain forms of oppression are not reducible to class oppression, Freire steps outside standard Marxist Analyses; he argues that society contains a multiplicity of contradictory social relations, over which social groups can struggle and organize themselves. This is manifest in those social relations in which the ideological and material conditions of gender, racial, and age discrimination are at work. (109)

I strongly disagree with Giroux on the fact that in order to inclusively address discrimination one has to depart from Marxist analyses, as I believe that any form of oppression ultimately derives from control over the means of production, which in fact has historically been distributed unequally in terms of gender, race and age. On this point, I agree with Mutnick's position:

Insofar as the left academic agenda continues to be shaped by perspectives such as multiculturalism and identity politics, which tend to eschew a historical materialist analysis in their focus on ethnicity and gender and fracture coalitions into single issue concerns, we will remain in an idealist cultural sphere that neither explains the structural forces that give rise to oppressive conditions nor has the power to transform them. (37)

Notwithstanding the shortcomings she identifies in their work, Mutnick praises Freire and Boal for "their theoretical articulation of the relationship between teacher and student, actor and spectator":

In this regard, despite individualist and phenomenological tendencies, they pose a humanizing radical alternative to ultra-leftist adventurism and postmodern despair.

Their contribution to pedagogical and political praxis has been to recognize the necessity for, and develop methods of, engaging masses of people – the poor, the illiterate, working and peasant classes – in full social participation as a prerequisite for fundamental social change. As Freire tells us, insofar as critical pedagogy ‘must be forged with, not for, the oppressed,’ the task of the teacher is not to transmit knowledge but to make ‘oppression and its causes objects of reflection...’ ([*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*] 1988:33). (42)

This is by all means no easy task. Indeed, applying Freire’s and Boal’s principles to our everyday classroom practice entails several problems. For example, how can one productively draw from the students’ personal experiences, as Forum Theater is supposed to operate, in a context of privilege like a US college classroom?<sup>21</sup> Another point of contention regarding the pedagogical applications of Theater of the Oppressed is its black-and-white characterization of the “oppressor” and the “oppressed” positions; on this issue, McConachie compares Brecht’s work and Boal’s Forum Theater:

FT works within a less complex understanding of power and history. Boal schematizes characterization in such a way as to make impossible the divided figures of Brecht’s mature plays who struggle against themselves as well as an oppressive power structure. In FT, on the other hand, such characters must be completely split in two; the form can only accommodate villains and victims who struggle to become heroes. [...] Nonetheless, I believe that the melodramatic schematization of FT is also its chief strength in educating college students. (259)

It is ironic that he chooses the adjective “melodramatic” in describing Forum Theater mechanisms, since melodrama is a form that heavily relies on empathic identification, which Boal abhorred; this is a significant instance of the slipperiness of words, for indeed villains-vs-victims characterization does pertain to melodrama, but operates completely differently in Forum Theater, where there are no spectators at the receiving emotional end, but only active spect-actors. However, McConachie does find an educational value in this schematic representational practice:

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<sup>21</sup> See for example Schutzman.

Students need to recognize that the binary of oppressor/oppressed does fit many situations in the real world today—especially situations centering on conflicts over race, class, and gender that involve them in the wider contradictions of our society. The challenge for educators is not to abandon the binary but to guide students toward choosing appropriate FT scenarios in which Boal’s melodramatic Marxism can open up possibilities for insight and action. (259)

Forum Theater scenarios involve a villain-vs-victim characterization because their goal is to isolate single behavioral instances so that participants can collectively work them out; they are not meant to represent a complete picture of the complex structures of world oppression. Indeed, in his writings Boal did acknowledge that oppressed and oppressors never exist in pure state, which however does not exclude individual answerability (*Aesthetics*, 104). Boal presented his opinions on the matter in his chapter on Theater in Prisons (*Aesthetics*, 103-129);<sup>22</sup> while his argument is problematically weak when it tries to explain that some oppressors can be pardoned and worked with while others can’t, as it is unclear how one gets to distinguish between the two, the chapter does paint a vivid picture of prison as an oppression system whose layers are inhabited by both guards and prisoners. Boal’s text compellingly argues that incarceration should be an educational experience and not a period of counterproductive hibernation, and that theater can help prisoners rehearse their future lives and rectify their ethical values. Here we come again to the pedagogical dilemma we have already mentioned: how to achieve this without recurring to coercive didacticism? If prisoners persevere rehearsing the same options that brought them to prison – Boal wrote – it is the facilitator’s task to maieutically ask questions about possible alternatives (116): “We have to work in such a way that each prisoner may discover truths for himself, with our help” (117).

This principle of maieutic and participatory theatrical pedagogy, which includes a constant preoccupation with the responsibility of the educator, not only derives directly from Freire’s legacy,

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<sup>22</sup> A thorough discussion of Theater in Prisons would bring us too far; for more information on the topic see Balfour and Thompson. For information about Theater in Prisons in Italy see Coordinamento nazionale teatro in carcere (<http://www.teatrocarcere.it/>).

but also fascinatingly connects Boal to Brecht's Major Pedagogy.<sup>23</sup> How does empathy versus alienation function epistemologically? What are the implications of applying either type of theatricality pedagogically? The thesis supported by the work of Boal and Brecht is that empathy can lead to coercive didacticism/indoctrination, while techniques that highlight the alienation of the performer's body lead to an abolition of the actor/spectator divide that constitutes the basis of a freedom-inspired educational project, an intrinsically revolutionary pedagogy that is inherently aesthetic and that aims at embodied knowledge through a removal of the production/consumption economy of the bourgeois theatrical experience. In their pedagogical exploration of the theater arts, these artists crucially engage with the notion of learning through imitation; while trying to get rid of what they see as the inherently coercive mechanisms of the actor-spectator relationship built on theatrical empathy, they productively challenge the authority burden of the educator/facilitator.

This is what significantly distinguishes Fo's work from Brecht/Boal-inspired participatory theater, and why the revolutionary thrust of the former is structurally inferior to that of the latter: while Fo's performances often did resist mechanisms of empathic identification, they never really interrogated Fo's own authoritative role. He always remained the lead performer, a position that his theatrical work never questioned, thus perpetrating a charisma-driven phenomenon that Italy is too well familiar with.<sup>24</sup> Tom Behan has written that "Fo's life and plays are a **celebration of the oppressed**, of those fighting against an unjust world" (141, bold emphasis is mine). Yet celebration is not liberation, as it implies delegation and representation. A revolutionary theater that practiced and rehearsed a more thorough questioning of representation, both aesthetically and institutionally speaking, would have had a different and possibly more politically significant impact in 1970s Italy.

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<sup>23</sup> The link has been pointed out by Otty, who stresses the similarities between Brecht's, Boal's, and Freire's pedagogical application of dialectical materialism and proposes to follow their steps in order to purge higher education from "the destructive divide between academic study in the humanities and the lived experience of students and teachers. This divide between the mind and the body leaves us talking about love, jealousy, and sexuality (for example), as concepts, thus reifying them and removing them from the realm of personal and social reality" (99).

<sup>24</sup> It would definitely be worth exploring the connections and implications of this argument in relation to the role of Franca Rame and the feminist movement, a discussion that unfortunately I do not have the space to carry out efficiently here.



To conclude, I return to my opening anecdote: what was happening exactly while we spectators consumed through our senses and affective responses Gifuni's twitching, sweating, aching, sensual body on stage? It is undeniable that knowledge was indeed produced through the body of the actor, and that the alienating strategies he implemented helped us to critically participate in that knowledge production; yet our experience would only have been truly educational if it had been completely participatory, if we had been on the stage with him, if we had explored Gadda's character and its ideological construction with our own bodies.

The educational potential of theater stems from its revolutionary nature; it rests in the liberation of thinking that artistic endeavors encourage not when merely witnessed, but when personally experienced. This is what thinking through theater and performance has to offer to teachers and learners: the means to not only productively problematize everyday life through our minds, but to also explore ideological and cultural structures through our own bodies.

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