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WORKSHOPS

The modularization of TO pedagogy

An interview with Sruti Bala

Sruti, in the article “Workshopping the Revolution,”¹ you talk about how the primary mode of circulating TO is through workshops.² What is truly remarkable in your reflection is its de-naturalization of something that is all too rarely de-naturalized: the workshop format, the effects of the workshop format on the very content of the workshop, and how those effects play out specifically when the content is TO. What, according to you, are the main positive aspects of the workshop format, and what are the limitations and impositions created by this very form of multiplication?

Thank you for your observations and kind words. The motivation for the article, which I co-wrote with Aristita Albacan, was an interest in addressing the political economy and infrastructure of TO as a practice today. What are the systemic conditions that shape the practice and inform its artistic-political visions and perspectives? What is the material basis of TO as practice? In a sense, that is a classic Hegelian–Marxist historical materialist question, and interestingly, a question that I learned to ask through the very practice of TO. For in the process of delving into a social issue using the TO “arsenal,” we regularly ask: What are the structural conditions and mechanisms of oppression? How does a certain life situation come to be regarded as a crisis without a solution or a way out? How does it emerge as a seemingly natural or purely individual state of affairs, such that binaries of oppressor/oppressed and the powerful/powerless come to be generally accepted and unquestioned? It seemed important to ask those very same questions of our own practice in TO, to study and become aware of the ways in which what we were calling TO might well be shaped and challenged by the conditions which make TO possible. In the research process, we thus started by observing how and where TO is done, how it is embedded in social movements or struggles, what are its structures of patronage and support, what kinds of institutions does it embed itself into? This is how we immediately became aware of the predominance of the workshop format, as well as the institutional circuits that favor this format: the so-called creative industries, (international) non-governmental organizations, development aid work, and educational, rehabilitative, and therapeutic settings. Our own institutional position as employees of European public universities made us aware of the increasing demand on humanities education to provide skills for the creative industries as a specific case in point. The article sought to inquire into the ways in which the workshop format and these

institutional circuits influenced and impacted upon our own practice of TO. This inquiry obviously needs to be expanded with research from other sites and realities, so what I outline in the following as positive and negative aspects must be viewed in that specific context, and is by no means a comprehensive claim.

The term “workshop” is often just an umbrella concept that can include a wide variety of activities. I am not sure when exactly the term started to gain currency in the context of the arts as a name for a format of dissemination of a certain practice or technique. Its etymology lies in the arena of craft and artisanship, and refers not to an activity, but a physical place where things are produced, often by hand, in a co-operative set-up involving a group of people, with masters and trainees in apprenticeship.³ Workshops today tend to refer to a kind of activity or event for the imparting of a skill or collective discussion of an idea. They are often facilitated and conceptualized by someone with a qualification or knowledge of the subject. Sometimes they serve as a platform for presenting work in progress, a laboratory setting, and a process of trial and error in free experimentation—a learning format without the necessity of a final product or of acquiring a full professional qualification. They are usually short, intense, offering a condensed exposure to a certain practice that one may not be able to otherwise study in-depth and over a long time period. It is not difficult to see why these features are attractive for the practices of TO. The gathering of a focused group of people—interested and motivated to engage with TO methods, techniques, and principles, usually without the pressure of having to create a performance, and thus without the presence of an audience—is potentially liberating and allows for a space for creative exploration. The emphasis in workshop formats on learning, reflection, and inquiry is another feature that resonates with TO, bringing it closer to Freire’s pedagogical practices. The workshop setting in TO thus highlights the parallels between the spectator–actor relationship and the learner–teacher relationship. Just as Freire argued that it is not the task of the teacher to spoonfeed the student, we learn in TO that it is not the task of the actor or facilitator to spoonfeed spectators, but rather to enter into a dialogical process of inquiry.

Historically, TO workshops could be regarded as influenced by theatre practices rooted in Leftist legacies, such as Bertolt Brecht’s learning plays—a pedagogical system of theatre without audiences, often performed at workers’ sites, or in schools, involving numerous feedback loops, whereby suggestions from school pupils or workers were incorporated into newer versions of the play.⁴ Other innovators and radical thinkers in the theatre of the early twentieth century like Asja Lacis also employed what would today be called workshop formats of theatre making and devising that were suited to young audiences from working class backgrounds and adaptable to the needs of workers’ struggles.⁵ The perception of doing theatre as work—as labor involving intellect, spirit, and body, as part of a social struggle for the emancipation from servitude, not just for entertainment or what Brecht liked to term “culinary” purposes—which TO practitioner would not pledge allegiance to such ideals?

For me personally, having attended a number of TO workshops over the years, and having been involved in organizing workshops with many experienced facilitators from all over the world, many things I came across in a workshop only began to make sense and “click” into my own understanding of TO when I witnessed them being repeated with slight changes in another workshop, or indeed in the process of repeating and trying out exercises on my own and in groups that regularly worked with TO in order to address concrete issues. This cumulative learning process was extremely beneficial. Simple group exercises in trust building or in the de-mechanization of the senses start to reveal their complexity and relation to the bigger questions of oppression over an extended time and through variation, repetition, and collective processes of reflection. I began to wonder, however, what the status of the workshop is on its

own, if it doesn't lead to a sustained longer-term involvement. The problem for me was less in the workshop format itself, but in the phenomenon that workshops so often became the *only* way to experience and practice TO. There are a few notable exceptions in different parts of the world, no doubt. Yet if you ask a person with a general interest in theatre if they know something about TO, the answer, if affirmative, is likely to be: "I have once attended a workshop." And even the handful of professional practitioners of TO, who work with this methodology full-time, are often only able to make a living doing what they love because of workshop-based employment opportunities, offering train-the-trainer sessions, weekend introductory workshops, or workshops in specific aspects of TO, such as Rainbow of Desire or Legislative Theatre.

Why is this a problem? In the article "Workshopping the Revolution," Aristita Albacan and I point to a range of issues, which I summarize here. First, the workshop format suggests that it will result in some form of skill acquisition and training in TO. This suggestion is misleading in different ways. Besides the obvious point that it takes more than a week or weekend to understand and learn to use TO, this notion also might, however, inadvertently suggest that without attending a number of workshops, one cannot be "qualified" to practice TO. A curious logic of professionalization and gatekeeping characterizes the structures of TO, whereby it might seem like one needs to attend the workshops in order to be trained as a TO practitioner. Since there are very few other modes of multiplication and dissemination and practice of TO other than workshops (once again, not to deny that there are exceptions!), a vicious circle happens in which workshops become "naturalized" as the self-evident framework of TO. Beyond this pragmatic issue, however, there is a more pressing philosophical-ethical dilemma. If we all agree that the training in TO involves more than a technical preparation or skill-acquisition, then where is the space for what Paulo Freire called "the ethical formation both of selves and of history"?⁶ The time limits of a workshop imply that there is barely ever enough time to research in-depth into an issue. Facilitators fly in and out of workshops organized by NGOs and educational institutions, focusing on providing participants with tools, which they presume will be put to use later. The emphasis on know-how and a generalized understanding of the methods also means that working on problems in their social realities is deferred to the future and to others. The facilitators are often detached from these realities. Those who learn the methods of TO may continue to use TO, but ironically often to teach others what they learned, or in the framework of "projects"—but not necessarily using it to tackle burning social or political issues.

You seem to be describing a process where commodification, professionalization, and depoliticization walk hand in hand. Could you say more about the articulation of those three layers? Also, do you have an explanation for why relatively little attention is paid by TO practitioners to this very paradoxical success of TO—a success that seems to be bound in the scooping out of what gave it an anti-systemic potentiality, to leave behind just a set of techniques that can work in any environment precisely because of their abstract nature?

In her study *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (2015), political philosopher Wendy Brown argues that neoliberalism no longer simply refers to a set of economic principles but is moreover "a governing rationality that disseminates market values and metrics to every sphere of life."⁷ The classic liberal subject is now increasingly framed in terms of human capital, under pressure to improve its market value, and thus constrained to make choices governed by an economic rationale of growth, profit, or at least minimization of loss. Brown emphasizes how education, knowledge, training, and learning become desirable precisely because of their value in terms of capital enhancement. Many TO practitioners would certainly vehemently

oppose the idea of viewing the human as *homo oeconomicus* and insist that what happens within our own circuits and practice environments is carefully guarded from being affected by a neoliberal rationale, and that the spaces of practicing TO are, by virtue of the methodology and its underlying principles, democratic and in turn produce democratic attitudes. Of course we have to believe in this to some degree in order to not become cynical and to fight for opportunities to practice TO. Yet perhaps we need to examine our own contradictions and the shifting ideological grounds of beliefs such as those that claim that TO is under all conditions progressive, democratic, grassroots-oriented, or anti-capitalist. The conditions under which TO is practiced, disseminated, and nurtured today are profoundly shaped by the stealthy rationale of neoliberalism. Contradictions abound. To that extent I would say that professionalization, commodification, and de-politicization go hand in hand, sometimes grudgingly, and sometimes in full-blown denial of each other. The creation of structural conditions for the professionalization of TO (training jokers and facilitators, garnering institutional support, and enabling exchange and knowledge-sharing internationally) bears the danger of commodifying the practice, i.e. turning it into a skill or an application that offers the illusion of value enhancement. It doesn't mean that there shouldn't be any professionalization, but it does ask for us to be circumspect about our claims. The buzzwords of the anti-capitalist philosophy of TO—drawn from the writings of Augusto Boal and his references to Brecht, Hegel, and Marx—can at times feel completely out of sync with the heavily NGO-ized fuzzwords such as outreach, participation, capacity building, impact, and sustainable development. It doesn't mean we can no longer find inspiration in Boal's heady and witty readings of Brecht, Marx, and Macchiavelli or gain insights from them. Yet it means we have to recognize the ways in which we are caught in the neoliberal logics of NGO funding and the constraints of project work, often playing them in order to make space for our cherished anti-neoliberal artistic social practices. The fact that many TO practitioners are trained in democratic attitudes and in resolving conflicts creatively and non-violently does not imply that sexism, racism, homophobia, structural violence, and classism cannot possibly exist within our folds.⁸ TO does not by self-definition enable a post-capitalist empty aesthetic space, even if overcoming the binaries of rulers and the ruled will always remain core to its vision. To politicize TO in the current world would mean to subject it to a fundamental self-critical examination of the category of oppression under the regime of neoliberalism. Such an interrogation would need to be extremely context-specific, quite unlike the methodology of TO, which, as you rightly point out, is abstract and strives to be universally applicable. What I mean is that a reflection on TO requires not only re-interpretations of Augusto Boal's writings and proposals and an unorthodox play with exercises, but also a careful questioning of the specific material conditions of TO practice. What are the problems in the relationships between facilitators and "lay people"? What happens to TO when facilitators tend to be predominantly male, heterosexual, privileged, and upper-class? How do economic and institutional policies influence the theatre practice? What remains unsayable and unspeakable even in the safest rehearsal spaces?

I am aware that these remarks may come across as unduly harsh and condemning to many, who work hard in difficult circumstances and have demonstrated a great level of success. TO works, they may say: it *does* bring about transformations in people's inner and social lives; we have witnessed them again and again, and decades of scholarly literature have been dedicated to demonstrating these positive features. The critique is not targeted at discrediting what good work has been done, or at an evidence-based identification of rules and exceptions.⁹ It does, however, ask us not to fall in unconditional and ahistorical love with TO. The neoliberal rationale has seeped into the grammar of our emotions and thought in ways we have yet to fully fathom. Even as we defend TO's anti-neoliberal potentials, do we realize how we resort to the

categories of “success stories” and human capital enhancement? The mantras of neoliberalism are overcoming failures and growth for growth’s sake. Success is of course dialectically tied to failure. Perhaps the time has come to pay far more attention to the failures and oppressions of our own practice, not in order to turn them into future successes, but in order to de-mechanize our hard-wired sensibilities and patterns of response.

Notes

- 1 Sruti Bala and Aristita I. Albacan, “Workshopping the Revolution? On the Phenomenon of Joker Training in the Theatre of the Oppressed.” *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 18: 4 (2013), 388–402.
- 2 This interview was conducted in writing by Julian Boal on behalf of this volume’s editorial team.
- 3 Richard Sennett draws an interesting link between the arts and crafts and the differing ethics of work in each of these in his study of craftsmanship, see Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London, New York: Penguin, 2009).
- 4 See Reiner Steinweg, *Lehrstück Und Episches Theater: Brechts Theorie Und Die Theaterpädagogische Praxis* (Frankfurt am Main: Brandes & Apsel, 1995).
- 5 Asja Lacis, *Revolutionär Im Beruf: Berichte Über Proletarisches Theater*, ed. Hildegard Brenner (München: Rogner & Bernhard, 1971).
- 6 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy and Civic Courage* (Oxford and Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 23.
- 7 Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 176.
- 8 This has been critiqued in the study by Dani Snyder-Young, *Theatre of Good Intentions: Challenges and Hopes for Theatre and Social Change* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
- 9 The idea of neoliberalism as exception, yoked to the evocation of exceptions to neoliberalism is interrogated in Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).