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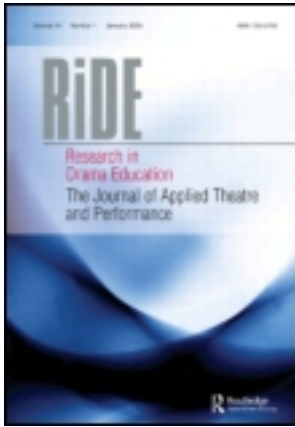
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## Workshopping the revolution? On the phenomenon of joker training in the Theatre of the Oppressed

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The article brings together observations and insights on the emerging phenomenon of training the trainers, also known as joker training in the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO). The concerns raised in this article are twofold: first, how does the modularised, workshop format of joker training affect the core principles of TO? Second, what are the implications of professionalising the work of the joker? These questions relate to the critique of ‘creative industries’ and debates around precarisation that profoundly impact arts and humanities education in contemporary Europe. They also serve as a call to interrogate concepts central to TO, such as participation, empowerment and community, in terms of how these concepts are appropriated and made docile in the increasingly neoliberal environment of European cultural and educational policies. The article proposes that a training in TO must view the dissemination of techniques and methods of joker practice as inseparable from a deep commitment to a ‘conscientised’ understanding of the complex social problems that the theatre seeks to address. The focus on a technical training alone bears the danger of reinforcing Freire’s ‘banking method’ of pedagogy, which is counterproductive to the political objectives of TO. The article observes that professional jokers work in precarious conditions far removed from the promises of the economic rewards of creative enterprise. The proliferation of project-based freelance work creates a situation where jokers tend to become de-territorialised and alienated from actual problems, thus propagating biographic and short-term approaches to systemic contradictions. The study aims to problematise these issues and contribute to a debate that might lead to politically and professionally viable paths for the future of TO.

### The figure of the joker in the theory of the Theatre of the Oppressed

One of Augusto Boal’s favourite statements echoed Joseph Beuys: ‘Everyone is an actor, even the professional actor!’ (2008). No practitioner or theorist of the Theatre of the Oppressed (henceforth, TO) would disagree that the pursuit of equality is a central aesthetic and political concern of the methodology of TO. Yet, could the same be said of the joker,<sup>1</sup> the facilitator in TO? Can everyone be a joker? Further, what does it imply for the joker to become a professional? How does the growing prevalence of opportunities for joker training impact upon the practice of TO on the one side and the status of the joker as professional in TO theory on the other? The article grapples with questions related to the phenomenon of joker training in TO and offers a self-critical interrogation of the political economy of joker training in TO

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in contemporary Europe. Our six-year-long collaboration as university teachers of a module on applied theatre at the University of Hull in Scarborough, UK, which includes an intensive training in TO facilitation, provides us with ample material for reflecting on this question. The joker training programme that we conceived and implemented in Scarborough provides the main empirical ground for our observations. Simultaneously, our involvement with TO in other contexts, combined with ongoing conversations with established practitioners with experience in conducting joker training elicits a broader critical analysis of the phenomenon of joker training.

The article takes up the challenge posed by Paul Dwyer in his article 'Making Bodies Talk in Forum Theatre' (2004), wherein he rightly points out that much academic work on TO is marked by the 'lack of critical analysis of actual practice. In fact, many scholars seem content to take Boal's discussions of his own work as transparent descriptions of practice when these are clearly also motivated by Boal's desire to fashion a theory for TO' (201). Community theatre scholarship is only gradually beginning to appraise practices such as TO in terms of how they are enmeshed in the logic and imperatives of the emergent economic sector known as the 'creative industries'. So far the thrust of what is known as impact assessment is often perceived as a question of how applied theatre and performance affect social systems or respond to policy and rarely the other way around.<sup>2</sup> Exceptions are to be found in studies relating to theatre for development (TfD) that address how international aid, developmental policy and the non-governmental organisation of civil society impact theatre practice (Anheier and Isar 2007, 119–98; Prentki 2007; Nogueira 2002), but such connections are less evident in European or Western settings. The following article reflects on how cultural policy shifts at national and European levels, downstream from larger economic trends, affect the core of TO practice and facilitation. It argues for taking into account the political economy of TO in its current modes of circulation. It calls upon practitioners to be circumspect towards the hypes around creativity, cultural entrepreneurship and participatory governance, rather than refer to Boalian concepts as self-explanatory and seemingly timeless answers to the question of how to do theatre politically. It argues that these very concepts, such as participation, empowerment and community, tend to be appropriated and made docile in current European cultural and educational policies. We maintain that a training in TO must view the dissemination of techniques and methods in joker practice as inseparable from a deep commitment to addressing the complex social problems that the theatre strives to address. The focus on a technical training alone bears the danger of reinforcing Freire's 'banking method' of pedagogy, which is counterproductive to the political objectives of TO.

### **The debate between equality and quality in joker training**

Can everyone be a joker or a facilitator? This question can be answered in two ways. The first, *processual* dimension of the question assumes by virtue of the principle of equality that everyone can be a joker. It is more concerned with what it would take for everyone to become a joker: what are the qualities of a facilitator in TO, how are they inculcated and how can they be acquired and disseminated? It implies understanding the qualities of the joker as being similar to that of the actor in Boalian theory, i.e. they are somehow already there, sedimented through

biographical and sociocultural experience, they merely need to be unfolded and articulated, and the question is how best to teach and learn this.<sup>3</sup>

The question ‘Can everyone be a joker?’ also bears a second, *normative* dimension, which is concerned with whether the task of a joker *should* be accessible to everyone. Viewed from this angle, facilitation is a skill that needs to be acquired and trained; it demands mastery and professionalism, where standards need to be maintained in the interest of guarding the practice. Setting high aesthetic and professional standards would thus ultimately better serve the political aims of the theatre practice.

The processual and normative dimensions highlight what art historian Claire Bishop terms as ‘the tension between equality and quality’ (2012, 3), wherein the demand for accessibility and outreach seem at odds with aesthetic and professional criteria. In the specific case of the status of the joker in contemporary TO, the tension between equality and quality is heightened by the fact that the process of professionalisation is relatively recent. Being a facilitator is not an established profession with all the institutional anchoring and disciplinary formation that is usually assumed when entering a profession. Rather, it is characterised by a high degree of individual flexibility, self-branding and precarity, often combined with other forms of income generation.

Email and personal conversations with five TO facilitators with different levels of experience in conducting joker training programmes revealed to us that the tension between the processual and normative dimensions remains unresolved. All facilitators were in agreement that the deep learning of the underlying political and ethical principles – and not skill dissemination per se – are paramount to the enterprise. Two expressed the belief that anyone can be a joker in principle but that the demands of the task, apart from economic pressures, restrict the accessibility or desirability of ‘joking’. Three others explicitly argued that the task of being a joker can only be undertaken when a certain attitude is internalised, when ‘joking is learnt as a way of life’.<sup>4</sup>

The tension between quality and equality raises a further question, namely, is the joker an artist-subject, comparable to the actor? The theory of TO in the writings of Boal does not provide a clear answer to this question. The work of the joker is arguably more defined and specialised than the work of the actor. Whereas the actor, in the conception of TO, is meant to be as close as possible to the reality of his/her own individual experience, the joker has a clearly intermediary, facilitative and analytical function, which demands rigour, practice and experience, although there are bound to be numerous styles of facilitation. The joker thus acts as a mediator between actors and spectators, as a facilitator and a coordinator of the rehearsal process, as a community member or as an engaged outsider committed to the community’s problems (Howard 2004). The praxis of the joker requires qualities such as a meta-level of self-reflexive response to a given situation, the capacity of being in between the actors and audiences and ‘multi-partiality’ towards different stakeholders. Thus, on the one hand, it is marked by professional skill, leadership, community organising and managerial qualities, which seem far removed from the classic European conception of artist subjectivity, characterised by an individual, irreproducible and autonomous creativity. On the other hand, the choice of the term ‘joker’ is not accidental, as Tim Prentki points out: ‘The joker is the wild card in the pack; the one who knows the rules of the game but who has licence to breach them

in the interests of improving the quality, the excitement of play' (2007, 201). In Boal's conception, it is, therefore, anything but a rigid set of rules. The joker is a function, not a character, like the protagonist or antagonist. Prentki also argues that the joker 'functions both inside the fiction and outside, as an audience member's "neighbour"' (2011, 203). This implies that the function of the joker requires both practiced skills as well as the ability to break rules. In a collective process, people share and experience all the different roles, from being onstage to working behind the scenes.

In Boal's initial experiments in the 1960s, the system of the joker (*coringa* in Portuguese) was a way of 'combining play and analysis', of introducing a figure 'who is a contemporary and neighbour of the spectator' (1998, 174–5), rather than merely playing the part of a narrator or chorus, which he criticised and rejected as being closer to the fable of the play text rather than to the society in which the play was staged. In the Arena Theatre of São Paulo, where these early formal experiments were conducted on the basis of staging canonical European plays, Boal adapted the joker from Brechtian epic theatre as a master of ceremonies, who adhered to a structure of performance, which included several fixed sections such as dedication, explanation, commentary, interview and exhortation, each of which served as an analytical and reflective accompaniment to a section of the play (1998, 184). This structured format of joker performance that provided an external frame to a play has been heavily criticised as rigid, tedious and 'an awkward attempt to turn the spontaneity of performance into the inflexibility of edict' (George 1995, 42). Nevertheless, the idea of a joker as a figure of analysis and reflection, bridging the gap between actors and audiences, as well as a facilitator of the rehearsal process, became crucial to the evolution of TO worldwide.

Boal's quip about everyone, including professionals, being capable of becoming actors, is insightful. The presupposition of a professionally qualified actor being a better actor is profoundly questioned in Boal's demand that everyone become 'the protagonist of their own lives' (1998). Many people, who would otherwise never have been acquainted with the theatre, have thus become actors in the system of TO, to the extent that there are hardly any professional actors in TO in the sense of those earning a livelihood as an actor. Yet interestingly, an increasing number of practitioners around the world are developing careers as freelance, professional jokers, mostly under precarious working conditions, but grounded in the conviction of being able to work in a sustained and autonomous manner using the methods of TO. These jokers offer their skills and knowledge of the techniques and 'TO arsenal of exercises' to various interest groups, primarily by way of compact workshops. Workshop and project-based settings have thus become one of the most widespread modes of practicing TO.<sup>5</sup> They vary in duration from weekend-long introductory sessions to week-long or month-long TO interventions. TO is most commonly found in modularised forms in developmental, social work and educational contexts often offered by non-governmental organisations and charities, who view it as a supplementary tool in most cases, and as the main methodology of public intervention in others.

### **Joker training in Scarborough: an entrepreneurial model of self-organised innovation in the arts?**

The idea of an applied theatre module for undergraduate university students was closely related to the location of the School of Arts and New Media, University of Hull

in Scarborough. The seaside town of Scarborough is a popular tourist destination in the UK, and since 2002, part of the Yorkshire Forward Urban Renaissance programme, seeking to design a new identity for the former Victorian seaside resort through the expansion of the creative arts sector, with great emphasis on policies promoting cultural entrepreneurship. The borough council prides itself for the national and European awards it has received for its creative industries initiatives (Scarborough Borough Council 2008). It is also a town with high unemployment rates, poor housing, infrastructural isolation in rural areas and all the associated symptoms of social inequality and deprivation, such as high rates of teenage pregnancy, alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence and racism. The promotion of creative industries features prominently in the social inclusion strategy of the town, advertising the pursuit of social goals with strategic business partnerships (Scarborough Borough Council 2004, 13ff.). Several reputed educational and cultural institutions and trusts in the town received funding for 'outreach programmes' such as applied theatre projects to provide access to marginalised sections of the population, which ironically form a numerical majority according to municipal statistics (Scarborough Borough Council 2004, 29–32). The town thus adopted the British New Labour Government policy promoting 'an entrepreneurial model of self-organised innovation in the arts and knowledge sectors of the economy' (Ross 2009, 18).

Based on an awareness of the particular configuration of the population and social issues in the wider area of Scarborough, the module aimed to provide facilitation and project development training and skills, as well as an understanding of the particular ethos of applied theatre work, towards the development of student-led projects within various community settings. Students were offered a theoretical and practical introduction and training into TO principles and ethical dimensions, including an intensive three-day joker training workshop, during which they familiarised themselves with well-known TO exercises and techniques, with a specific focus on learning how to be a facilitator or a joker. Subsequently, students worked in small groups over a period of 8 to 14 weeks, to build connections with community groups and research social problems, ultimately leading to community-based interventions using the TO methods learnt in the module. The graded assignments combined written reflections, group presentations and evaluation sessions. The module served to expose students to a range of social issues that undergraduates of theatre and performance may not have otherwise dealt with at close quarters. The topics tackled in the applied theatre projects included bullying, alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, racism and xenophobia. It also provided students the opportunity to meet people from different class backgrounds in the context of their lives.

As tutors and guest trainers of the module over the course of six years, we strove to make sense of the sociopolitical realities of the town, whose designated cultural hubs and creative headquarters were being pushed as solutions to developmental and social problems (Ross 2009, 26). The applied theatre module and the evaluations of experiences of undergraduate students served as a lens to observe this phenomenon. We found no answers in Boalian theory to some of the issues we faced, given its focus on the micro-dimensions of the rehearsal and working process as a means of understanding the macro-realities. This pushed us to reflect on the macro-political, national and European dimensions within which our small-scale venture of applied theatre pedagogy was located. The following sections address two aspects of this macro-political dimension: first, the relation between skill

development and political conscientisation in joker training and second, the emergent vocationalisation or professionalisation of the joker.

### **Joker training: privileging technique over substance**

In his seminal text *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire elaborates on the concept of conscientisation in dialogical education. He advises educators working in a particular community to conduct several rounds of investigation and analysis, to operate in a team, spending sufficient time observing and understanding the living conditions of the people they are meant to educate in the complexity of their surroundings, and with an attitude of humility and respect (1970, 81–84). According to Freire, conscientisation is the process of gaining awareness of the ‘limit-situations’<sup>6</sup> and structural dimensions of individual problems and finding ways to generate themes and tasks that are called forth from these limit-situations. He also posits the relation between the educator and the pupil as a non-antagonistic relation, not one of equivalence but of equality, which does not exclude being directive or taking responsibility.<sup>7</sup> ‘Respecting the pupil does not mean leaving him ingenuous. It means assuming his ingenuousness together with him in order to overcome it’ (Freire cited in Gadotti 1994, 57).

The teacher–pupil relation as proposed by Freire is translated into TO as the relation between actors and spectators, and the task of conscientisation becomes the task of making spectators aware of their limit-situations through embodying the position of the ‘spect-actor’.<sup>8</sup> The joker and his/her relation to the group of actors, to the audience of the forum, as well as to the community at large, retains the pedagogical function in the way that Freire envisaged it, therefore, closely tied to class struggles and to questions of social justice and equality. Freire eloquently argues in *Pedagogy of Freedom*, that ‘teacher preparation should never be reduced to a form of training. Rather, teacher preparation should go beyond the technical preparation of teachers and be rooted in the ethical formation both of selves and of history’ (1998, 23). Based on our experience of joker training in a university setting in Scarborough, we observed that the majority of students were anxious to acquire a qualification that enhanced their employability and expand their toolbox with more skills and techniques of facilitation. This gained precedence over the arduous task of interrogating societal values, structural inequalities and painstakingly studying how oppression is embodied and became deeply etched into the collective psyche. Answering Freire’s call for a conscientisation of limit-situations thus tended to be deferred to the future, something to be undertaken after the successful completion of the joker training in a setting where financial anxieties and instabilities would ideally be laid aside.

If there would be widespread opportunities to witness and experience TO, this would not pose such a problem. A workshop is, after all, a laboratory setting, and trainers would certainly not claim to impart the wide range of experiences that would allow for the facilitator’s ethical formation of self. Yet for most people, the workshop format constitutes the main, if not, only space for exposure to the principles of TO. The joker training workshop in Scarborough was conceived along the lines of workshops in TO we have attended ourselves in the course of the last 10 years, offering a condensed, abbreviated experience of what is potentially meant to unfold as a longer process, given sustained engagement with a group of people. Broadly, it

consists of an introduction to exercises and games popularised by Boal, image theatre, group reflections and sharing individual stories of oppression and injustice, dramatisation and rehearsal techniques, as well as trial forum sessions. In all these steps, the focus is on the work of facilitation. This ‘model’ of TO joker training, which we adapted and modified to the specific needs of the undergraduate students, but which we have also observed as being used with modifications by several TO trainers in Europe, implicitly, almost unwittingly privileges form over content, know-how over know-what and technique over substance to the extent that training in the methods and exercises becomes equivalent to the ‘incubator policy’ in corporate welfarism, whereby educational, cultural or artistic activities are subsidised in their initial phase and, later, expected to sustain themselves on an entrepreneurial basis.<sup>9</sup> The call for social justice, empowerment and participation continue to be emphasised but more as postulations for the future, than as urgencies of the moment. Based on our experience in the UK university context as well as our conversations with facilitators from other European countries, we found that the format of short introductory workshops makes it difficult for trainers and participants to engage in any social issues at a deeper level. The result is what Bruce McConachie identifies as a form of ‘melodramatic Marxism’ (2002, 259). A complex situation is simplified into easily recognisable roles and ethical positions. This form of devising scenes based on real-life experiences is very useful for the purpose of demonstrating how a forum theatre intervention works in its basic elements. However, as an incubator experience of TO, which is supposed to provide future jokers with the ability to apply their technical knowledge to practice in a real, future setting and complement it with the dialogic learning of limit situations, it is not without its inherent problems. We observed that the emphasis on the dissemination of skills of facilitation can result in a schematic and prescriptive exploration of the chosen social-political issues. While the games and exercises remain useful tools that can be applied in a range of environments, we realised that the preparation of a potentially professional joker is conducted in a basically de-territorialised setting, where the joker bears the risk of becoming detached from or never attached to the ethical and dialogical engagement with issues of oppression in the community. As trainers, we partly resorted to what James Thompson calls ‘the epistemic approach’, largely leaving aside the ‘ontic’ aspects: we focused on providing students with techniques, tools and the skeleton principles of TO, which we presumed they could later put to use. We possibly failed to recognise that the training also required some kind of an ontic participation, i.e. where participants would ‘do, react and experience, rather than receive, study and reflect upon the stories told’ (2005, 35).

The recourse to short-term, biographic solutions in place of laying bare larger systemic contradictions, is another side-effect of the current TO joker training phenomenon. In one forum theatre example, developed in a joker training workshop in Scarborough, students enacted a scene depicting a typical situation of bullying<sup>10</sup> in a schoolyard, which was performed to an invited audience and facilitated by trainee jokers, all of whom were student participants of the workshop. The solutions proposed by the audience as well as the approach taken by the student-jokers indicated a preference for interventions that would momentarily bring the bullying to a halt or make it invisible, without having to deal with the roots of the problem. One spect-actor assuming the role of a school caretaker walked up to the bully and threatened to report on her, indicating she should not be seen breaking the code of

conduct in public, implicitly implying he objected more to the visibility of the bullying, rather than to the act itself. Another intervention ends with a spect-actor playing a co-pupil, complaining to the headmaster without directly speaking to the bully or the victim, thus handing over the responsibility to persons in positions of authority, rather than entering the messy work of personal communication.

It is not our aim to point out inadequacies and drawbacks in the attempts of young students trying out the method for the first time. The presentations were meant to provide the opportunity to experience and try out the method. Joker training workshops aim to distill an approachable and do-it-yourself understanding of the basic principles and characteristics of TO (Davis and O'Sullivan 2001). The forum scene and interventions cannot, therefore, be judged outside of this context. Nonetheless, the emphasis on technique and the deferral of a complex understanding of the many facets surrounding the issue of bullying implied that the problem was perceived along procedural lines. The jokers were concentrated on 'getting it right' with audience interventions, when to stop and when to probe further, how to spot magical solutions, how to choose the most interesting warm-up exercises. The students who devised the scene were invested in finding a topic that would fit the requirements of Forum Theatre, to 'make the scene work'. As Prentki argues, the joker, 'far from fulfilling an epic function, is reduced to a glorified master of ceremonies and keeper of the rules' (2011, 209). How the problem was represented, what the actual solutions could be, how these related to transformations in the system of schooling become important but secondary objectives in the context of the joker training. Issues that were not immediately translatable to the melodramatic model of antagonist-protagonist-bystander that much of Forum Theatre follows were left aside, for reasons of convenience and time. As trainers, we were conscious that the format of an intensive three-day workshop would not allow for a radical overhaul of the concepts of the protagonist and the antagonist, yet it left us unsatisfied to realise that 'know how' was prioritised at the cost of 'know what' in the framework of the workshop.

The topic of bullying recurred several times, both in the course of the Applied Theatre module, as well as in the school-based community projects that students later conducted. This means that bullying is a widely prevalent experience that many students related to, irrespective of their backgrounds, from the vintage point of being a victim, a bully or a witness. To speak with Freire, this indicated that there was scope for dialogic learning and conscientisation of the limit situations for both students and the communities in which they facilitated TO projects. Yet our experience from the evaluations and the reports of six years of graduates present a more prosaic picture of how far this conscientisation was achieved.

A public school in Scarborough hosted a group of five students of the Applied and Interactive Theatre module, who had completed the course work and joker training workshop. At the school, they conducted a series of TO sessions for higher secondary school pupils. The topic of bullying significantly featured in all the devised scenes. Except for one of the groups, school pupils themselves undertook the task of being jokers. The undergraduate students who had attended a joker training workshop at the university had thus effectively trained other jokers in the schools to facilitate a forum involving their peers. When asked in their module assessment why one group did not appoint a pupil to facilitate the forum, but was instead 'steered' by one of the university students, students responded that they were

introduced to this particular group of pupils by the class teacher as being ‘rough’ and ‘problematic’ pupils and, therefore, thought it better to facilitate the scene themselves, in order to be more ‘in control’. Whilst they initially attempted to find a facilitator from within the group, it was possibly the lack of time that steered them to accept the teacher’s word, rather than resist it and attempt a change. The de facto unquestioned acceptance of the class teacher’s labelling of the students and their effective segregation in a separate group, resulted in a classic instance of what Freire would have called the ‘banking method’ of pedagogy. It was perceived as more judicious to fill the ‘problematic’ but, nevertheless, ‘empty’ heads of the students with the outside knowledge that jokers brought with them, than to allow them to try it out themselves. Conversely, it could also be argued that the students’ decision to enrol school pupils as jokers, rather than conduct a forum theatre presentation and take on the role of joking themselves, was an attempt to repeat the format of the module they attended at the university. So did our intensive joker training workshop unintentionally present itself as a banking method rather than invite a problem-solving attitude?

In hindsight, we observed that both the preparatory workshops and other TO-related sessions for university students, as well as the projects implemented by the students themselves, in the school setting did not respond to the problem of bullying in a systemic way. While that was not the primary objective of the training, the postponement of the ontic process of conscientisation to an undefined future moment affected how the methodology of TO was imbibed. In the university forum presentation, the interventions indicated a relegation or deferral of responsibility to solve the bullying problem to the authorities concerned, be it the caretaker or the headmaster. In the school-based forum session, solutions were proposed that were biographical and fatalistic, if not ‘magical’ in Boalian terms, in proposing that the presence of bullies should be accepted or ignored in some way, as a result of social isolation and family violence, which tended to be perceived as too big to be solved. The forum presentations did not come close to perceiving bullying as a symptom of what Ivan Illich, in his critique of the hegemonic apparatus of the school, called the ‘social polarisation [...] and psychological impotence’ that is a result of ‘the institutionalisation of value education’ (1971, chap. 1). They focused on containing the violence of the bully and protecting the victim, rather than eradicating the root causes, which restrict lives and create the phenomenon of bullying in the first place. They also indicated that it is the task of those ‘in charge’ to deal with the problems, and citizen participation was represented as being akin to lodging complaints at the right places.

Carmel O’Sullivan offers a critique of Boal’s interpretation of individual and social transformation, arguing that Boal adopts an individualist and revisionist version of Marxist politics in actual practice, especially in later experiments with the ‘Rainbow of Desires’ and ‘Legislative Theatre’ (2001). Whereas O’Sullivan attributes this to what she presents as Boal’s misreading and misapplication of Marxist thought and thus to a disparity between lofty theory and inadequate practice, we argue that the problem is not entirely resolved by placing the onus on Boal’s interpretation of Marxism in either his writings or his theatrical experiments. Rather, a critical appraisal of TO without a rigid division between practice and theory demands a fuller account of the specific material conditions and contexts in which it is embedded.

### The emergence of the professional joker

Since the late 1990s, with the launch of what was called the new economy or the knowledge society, governments and private bodies in the industrialised world have been striving to bring cultural and creative sectors into the orbit of a growth-based, financially driven economy. The full impact and relevance of these paradigm shifts in policy-making to the practice of applied theatre and performance are a subject that is only recently beginning to be addressed. Theoretical discussions in response to the deployment of ideas such as creativity, participation and community in the context of entrepreneurial governance – ideas traditionally associated with left cultural politics – have been offered by political philosophers from the autonomous Marxist tradition in Italy (Hardt and Negri 2000; Lazzarato 1996; Virno 2004), by cultural sociologists (McRobbie 2004; Lorey 2012; Lovink and Rossiter 2007; Ross 2009), by cultural policy researchers (Belfiore and Bennett 2008; Merli 2002; Milohnić et al. 2005), by scholars of international development (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Hickey and Mohan 2004; Rahnama and Bowtree 1997) and, further expanded, by art critics and cultural theorists (Bishop 2012; Pang 2012; Raunig et al. 2011; Sholette 2011). Theatre scholars are also beginning to take stock of what the policy transformations targeted at the creative industries imply for the field, not so much in economic terms, but in terms of the materiality of practices, i.e. its aesthetic, organisational, production-related, processual and human aspects (Nicholson 2009; Nielson and Ybarra 2012). These existing bodies of research serve as inspirational to the interrogation of TO practice in twenty-first-century Europe, which have not been adequately examined in relation to current cultural policies under increasingly neoliberal models of governance. The articulations and implications of these trends in the European context deserve closer examination and need to be placed in a continuum with developments in other parts of the world.

European national cultural policies since the last decade of the twentieth century reflect that nation states are increasingly embracing what Claire Bishop sharply observes as being a *laissez-faire* model of government (2012, 15), where the devolution of public responsibility is disguised in the vocabulary of ‘a culture of voluntarism, philanthropy and social action’ (Cameron 2010). In the case of arts and humanities education, this has translated into an aggressive promotion of collaboration between educational institutions, voluntary agencies and private bodies under the label of fostering ‘creative industries’. For TO this means that the dissemination of the methods of TO in educational contexts has emerged as one of the predominant areas of the practice of TO. The demands of educational institutions and community groups, subject to the pressures of privatisation and reduced public support, have in turn profoundly impacted the way in which TO is packaged. The non-formal educational sector offers a large number of opportunities for general exposure to TO, yet sustained involvement in one issue or group is difficult, as organisations are under pressure to reduce time and costs and offer vocational prospects.

In her critical engagement with Boal’s legacy, Jan Cohen Cruz views joker training workshops as a ground for generating innovation, arguing that the adaptation and exploration of permutations of TO keeps the body of work alive and growing (2010, 49). We agree with this and share the belief in the possibility of multiplier training to chart new avenues of practice, where the body of TO is enriched by individual jokers’

experiences and circumstances. Yet we observe that without an accompanying ethical formation of self, and in an incubator policy environment, the trainings revert to importing and imparting primarily the formal aspects of TO, notwithstanding the belief in the importance of engaging at a deep level with the political issues. The idea of rehearsal in Boal's canonical statement 'theatre is a rehearsal of revolution' (1998, 155) implies an involvement in something that takes time, that needs to be repeated and refined, it demands collective effort and commitment, all of which are greatly restricted in the workshop format and project-based pedagogy, that is currently the basis of TO practice. Non-academic workshops on TO, which abound in several European countries, often reiterate the promise that joker training workshops are opportunities to gain a qualification that might enhance employability, contribute to social cohesion, and address exclusion and discrimination.<sup>11</sup> At first glance, this seems to be in line with the demands of the 1960s, to replace social control and elitism with genuine civic participation, to value the arts in the gamut of their impact. However, they increasingly also echo the rhetoric of an increasing trend towards *instrumentality* in European cultural policy, which Eleanora Belfiore argues as foregrounding the arts with a primarily economic rationale (2002, 95). It becomes difficult to determine to what extent train-the-trainer workshops lead to a diversity and an expansion of emancipatory practice and to what extent they serve to create a pool of freelance pedagogues, who can be easily inserted into and removed from the volatile cultural sector as and when the logic of the market demands. The phenomenon of joker training creates a situation where jokers enter into communities as 'experts', they need to present themselves as such, in order to make a living as a TO practitioner in a competitive environment, where it is necessary to be aggressively entrepreneurial, self-exploiting, risk-taking and self-promoting. It is nice work, if one can get it (Ross 2009). Their expertise tends to develop not from their in-depth involvement in one specific community or knowledge of one local issue, but from the quantity of workshops they have conducted, and from their elastic approach to facilitation, catering to diverse target groups. As freelancers, they find themselves competing with colleagues for projects, and their affiliation to TO becomes strangely individualised, a matter of personal networks. Project-based collaboration takes the place of collective struggle. Although facilitators actively resist this mechanism by investing immense personal and voluntary efforts in the people and communities they work with, forging long-term involvement, they, nevertheless, dwell in a precarious situation, like many professional artists and cultural workers. They inhabit the shadowy alley in between the institutionalised art world and the institutionalised world of formal education. Their vulnerable position increasingly stands in the way between their personal and political visions and an analysis of their own creative labour.

### Reclaiming concepts and practices

The above assessment of our experiences as scholar-practitioners of TO will hopefully generate a broader debate on the political and economic underpinnings of applied theatre practice. We offer no straight solutions but would like to reiterate the importance of Freire's idea of teacher training being rooted in 'the ethical formation of selves and of history' (1998, 23), a slow, messy and not necessarily high-impact process. We also stress that this process of conscientisation in joker training needs to

be accompanied by a careful reflection on how public and non-governmental discourses on participatory governance and creative entrepreneurship can impact on radical, humanist and emancipatory cultural practices, diluting, stultifying and thus re-territorialising them, not so much by means of censorship, violence or repression, but by deploying their vocabulary and making the question of social justice and emancipation into a management issue. Maurizio Lazzarato recognised this in his text on immaterial labour, wherein he claims:

Capital wants a situation where command resides within the subject him- or herself, and within the communicative process. The worker is to be responsible for his or her own control and motivation within the work group without a foreman needing to intervene, and the foreman's role is redefined into that of a facilitator. (Lazzarato 1996, 135)

Facilitators in TO in the present European context, striving for a makeshift living through modest freelance activities, occupy a rather different position in this regard, since they neither have the security of employment nor the influence over community members that the Fordist foremen would take for granted. As creative, cultural entrepreneurs, they do not see any of the proclaimed material benefits of the creative industries policy-making, yet they are subject to its day-to-day disciplinary mechanisms, under pressure to demonstrate impact, to adjust to the whims of its unending organisational changes, all of which lead to an often unacknowledged alienation from the core principles of their practice. We observed in our six-year-long experience of conducting joker training workshops in Scarborough that the proliferation of project-based freelance work creates a situation where jokers tend to become de-territorialised and alienated from actual problems, thus propagating biographic solutions and short-term approaches to systemic contradictions. The painstaking task of Boal's radical call for rehearsing the revolution thus becomes a luxury indefinitely postponed.

**Keywords:** Theatre of the Oppressed; joker training; facilitation; creative industries; precarity

## Notes

1. The terms 'joker' ('coringa' in Portuguese) and 'joking' in this essay refer to the facilitator and the practice of facilitation, respectively. This is distinct from the 'system of the joker' in Boalian theory, which refers to a specific process of play and analysis, involving one or more jokers ('coringas') as intermediary figures (Boal 1998, 174–5). Boal preferred the term joker over facilitator, quipping that the task of the joker was to be more of a 'difficultator' than a facilitator, 'undermining easy judgments, reinforcing our grasp of the complexity of a situation, but not letting that complexity get in the way of action' (Jackson 1994, xix). The term 'joker training' is also a generic term we use in the article, referring to what does not have a unified terminology in practice, and is variously called multiplier training, training of trainers or advanced TO training.
2. Recent studies in English that specifically address the question of impact and assessment in applied theatre are Eisner (2007), Koppers (2007), Prendergast and Saxton (2009) and Anheier and Isar (2007, 281–332). While these studies recognise that the demands of efficacy and impact that outside agencies place on applied theatre and performance may not necessarily be consonant with or able to capture the aesthetics of these practices, they do not specifically offer an analysis of how applied theatre is impacted by cultural

policies in terms of changes in its aesthetics, beyond a general acknowledgement of issues such as funding cuts.

3. Boal characterises this in his drawing 'What is an Actor?', which shows the image of a person in the form of a pot boiling on the fire of theatre, releasing a number of uncontrolled and wild dramatic personae, very different from the angelic personalities that emerge from the nozzle of the pressure cooker, symbolising fear and morality (1995, 33).
4. We express our gratitude to Hjalmar Jorge Joffre-Eichhorn from Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization for detailed feedback on the article. Thanks also to Roberto Mazzini from Giolli Cooperativa Sociale in Italy; Petia Tzanova from Cardboard Citizens, UK; Dr Radha Ramaswamy and P.S. Ramaswamy from Centre for Community Dialogue and Change, India; and Luc Opdebeek from *Formaat*, Netherlands, for responding to our questions and sharing with us their insights on their experiences with TO joker training. Although their expertise is not specific to Europe in all cases, their experiences allow for testing and contesting the claims of this study.
5. This was confirmed by all TO facilitators we contacted.
6. The term limit-situation in Freire's (1970, 83) usage refers to boundaries that serve as obstacles but are not insurmountable. The process of recognition is the step towards overcoming them.
7. This directive role of the educator is eloquently articulated in an interview with Freire, cited in Gadotti (1994, 56).
8. For a fuller elaboration of the parallel between teaching/learning and acting/spectatorship (see Bala 2012).
9. The incubator policy was first promoted in the late 1990s by the World Bank and other national financial agencies. The name refers to incubators for baby chickens initially kept under protection and then let out to fend for themselves. In business terms, it seeks to provide start-up support and resources to those enterprises who demonstrate financially promising potentials (Lovink and Rossiter 2007, 169ff.).
10. The term bullying is known in other parts of the world as mobbing, ragging or teasing. We use the term with reference to the UK educational context.
11. We mention four examples here, indicating the TO training options currently available in Europe: Cardboard Citizens, a London-based group, with a long-standing engagement with TO and Boal, offers workshops for young people facing homelessness or at-risk, under a scheme for youth and employability. It offers the prospect of gaining 'work placements with a wide range of exciting organisations whatever your interests are, and access support to find work' (Cardboard Citizens 2013). The Dutch TO group *Formaat* offers what they call 'prevention workshops', using Rainbow of Desire methods, whereby problems related to 'undesirable social behaviour' are enacted and potential solutions proposed by workshop participants (*Formaat* 2013). Giolli Cooperativa Sociale runs an EU-funded Grundtvig programme with TO, aiming to provide opportunities to gain a qualification that will allow for work in informal and formal educational sectors (Giolli Cooperativa Sociale 2013). Kuringa, a Berlin-based initiative for research, production and qualification in TO, offers several qualification modules for people interested in teaching or employing TO in diverse contexts (Kuringa) (2013).

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