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Enlightened Empathy: Applied Theatre Transforming Society and Self

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Introduction

The Power of Theatre

In the fall of 2019, I attended my university's production of *W;t* by Margaret Edson. The lead role was played by a dear friend, and I settled comfortably into the familiar seats, ready to support my friend and enjoy a cozy night of theatre. It was anything but cozy.

W;t tells the story of a middle-aged English professor, Vivian, who is dying of ovarian cancer. It is a heartbreaking play about losing dignity and strength, and realizing the power of compassion. After the show, the cast hosted a talk-back session, along with several of Messiah University's nursing professors and other local nurses. We processed as a community, with nurses sharing their own harrowing experiences in hospitals, with audience members remembering loved ones who had died of cancer, with actors explaining how they interpreted their complicated characters.

It is usual for me to remain living within the world of a play or musical a few days after seeing it, but *W;t* was different, because the world it was depicting was not the fantastical, fictional world often depicted in theatre, but the real and raw reality of the world as it is. I was in absolute awe of the power of theatre, and knew I needed to pursue this kind of deep, transformative theatre style in some way. Seeing *W;t* and attending the talk-back session led me to the question: should theatre be a reprieve from reality, or should it cause positive change in its reality?

I believe that the answer to that question is, to put it in terms anyone who has done improv would recognize, "yes, and...". Theatre can be simple entertainment. One does not go into a production of *Mamma Mia!* or *Cats* expecting to experience a personal, therapeutic breakthrough or be motivated to take down the government. While there are certainly deep and

important themes that can be taken out of popular musicals and plays, for the most part, they are created for the joy of the audience. This does not cheapen them — things that bring joy should never be belittled. On the other hand, it is important to recognize that theatre has the capacity and power to bring about personal and social transformation.

As a body of artists working within an art that has the power to educate, theatre practitioners are deeply invested in the idea of creating positive change. Synder-Young, a theatre practitioner specifically working with the theories of Augusto Boal, states:

I, like many Theatre of the Oppressed practitioners, believe we live in a broken world and want to help heal it. My definition of ‘heal’ orients towards a particular set of progressive political philosophies, and as I look around, I recognise that others, standing in different places and committed to different political philosophies, also want to heal a broken world. Our visions of this healing may look quite different, and from our places of disagreement, we have a hard time engaging in genuine dialogue. Within this messy landscape, popular participatory theatre might provide a platform through which we can learn to listen to each other (2011, p. 42).

Many scholars and artists, however, believe that even if theatre succeeds in creating some kind of healing, genuine dialogue, or personal development in the audience, the motivation to create change will not last beyond the high of the drive home from the theater after a good show. Gallagher, Freeman, & Wessel mourn that in theatre: “What is ‘captured’ is partial, halting, interrupted; and what is shared, a mere shadow of what was imagined or experienced” (2010, p. 6). If they are right, then all the best efforts in theatre will be for nothing. However, I choose to believe with hope that theatre can indeed create change, both in broader society and in the personal soul.

Thesis and Roadmap

While working on this project, I struggled with what to actually call this category of theatre. Augusto Boal uses the term “theatre of the oppressed” to describe his model of theatre.

Other theatre artists use terms like social justice theatre, grassroots theatre, political theatre, or popular participatory theatre. I decided that the best-fitting term was *applied theatre*, which is described by Prendergast & Saxton as a type of theatre that “works overtly either to reassert or to undermine socio-political norms, as its intent is to reveal more clearly the way the world is working” (Prendergast & Saxton, 2009, p. 8). Applied theatre, specifically applied theatre that takes its cues from Boal’s work, allows for both the development of knowledge and the experience of empathy. The combination of those two can create multiple levels of change. Applied theatre creates enlightened empathy by encouraging transformation, both internally/personally and externally/socially.

This paper seeks to answer the questions addressed in the introduction through the lens of Augusto Boal’s work on applied theatre. Boal was a Brazilian drama theorist and theatre practitioner in the mid to late 1900s who created a new method of theatre called “theatre of the oppressed”, which served as the basis for much of future applied theatre globally. I will explore the foundations of Boal’s work, specifically Greek tragic theatre and the works of Bertolt Brecht. I will also examine Boal’s two main theories of applied theatre. One focuses on external action while the other focuses on internal development. The paper will investigate case studies of the application of Boal’s theories and technique as well as domains where applied theatre is commonly used.

To honor Boal’s belief that theatre must be active and participatory, the paper requires action and participation on the behalf of the reader. At the end of each section is a connection to an applied theatre piece that I have written, entitled *Reclamation x 5*. *Reclamation x 5* portrays the process of healing from mental illness by showing the experiences of young women at a mental health summer camp. I will ask the reader questions in the hopes of directly applying

these theories and ideas to a real theatre piece. For a *Reclamation x 5* plot summary and character list, please see the Appendix at the end of the paper.

Emotional Orgy vs. Enlightenment

The foundations of Boal's work came from his strong belief that due to the intrinsic nature of humanity, all theatre was "necessarily political", a weapon typically wielded by the ruling classes as a way to indoctrinate the lower classes in what they believed to be proper beliefs (1985, p. ix). Greek tragic theatre did this through the process of catharsis, correcting a person's actions through a "system of intimidation", making audience members afraid that if they did not amend their own internal moral faults, they would end up stabbing out their own eyes like poor Oedipus (Boal, 1985, p. 46). The classicist and philosopher Paul Woodruff states that Greek theatre creates a feeling of community belonging through this catharsis (2016, p. 147). Ancient Greek tradition focuses mainly on the sharing of emotion — compare the Greek Oedipus to Shakespeare's King Lear. King Lear delivers only seven lines where he grieves for his deceased daughter. Oedipus, on the other hand, is given enormous monologues to express his grief, aided by the chorus (Woodruff, 2016, p. 146). The Greek chorus members act much like modern day cheerleaders at a football game — directing the audience in what emotions they are supposed to be feeling (Woodruff, 2016, p. 147). Greek theatre was a system of community indoctrination and propaganda that sought to create and develop morally formed individuals who could then go out and create a moral society. This idea continued long past Greek theatre into the Middle Ages, as medieval morality theatre delivered its own agenda by urging audience members towards repentance and salvation by comparing them to an Everyman character and his journey towards heaven (Wertz, 1969, p. 438).

Boal desired for his work, like Greek theatre, to create a moral metamorphosis in audience members, but he wanted this to happen through enlightenment rather than catharsis. Art, Boal says, presents “a vision of the world in transformation”, and those creating theatre are inevitably either pushing forward towards that transformation or trying to delay it (1985, p. xiii). Boal was profoundly inspired by the works and beliefs of Bertolt Brecht, a German theatre practitioner and playwright who developed a new system of theatre. Whereas Greek theatre was intended to invoke such passionate and sloppy empathy that it became an “emotional orgy”, Brecht intended the emotional response to his plays to come from knowledge and enlightenment (Boal, 1985, p. 103). Neither Brecht nor Boal concentrated their focus on the artistic or design elements of theatre, but rather on enlightenment and action-oriented empathy. Speaking of Brecht’s famous play *Mother Courage and Her Children*, in which a woman loses each of her children to war, Boal says, “Let no one weep over the ‘fate’ that took Mother Courage’s sons from her! Let one cry rather with anger against war and against the commerce of war, because it is this commerce that takes away the sons of Mother Courage” (1985, p. 103). Boal did not want his plays to end in equilibrium or quiet reflection, rather, he wanted his plays to be the beginning of action. “The equilibrium,” Boal says, “should be sought by transforming society, and not by purging the individual of his just demands and needs” (1985, p. 106). This desire for social transformation became the driving force behind Boal’s future work.

In the following monologue, Castellet reflects on her experience as a dancer. What emotions or physical reactions could be stirred in audience members during this monologue? What knowledge and enlightenment could be gained? Is there a balance of emotion and enlightenment?

CASTELLET: I started dancing when I was three, did you know that? Every single one of my baby pictures has me in a damn tutu. I was a dancer. It’s who I was. And it’s fun and great when you’re little, but then people start to say, “If you ever want to get anywhere professional, you have to work harder,” and “If you ever want to get hired, you should lose a few pounds”

and then you're bleeding through your pointe shoes and skipping meals and modeling for freaking athlete's foot commercials on the weekends to make money for dance classes. And then you're a mess, so you go on anxiety medication so no one notices, because you have to be perfect, you have to be on your A-game all the time. And the medicine helps, but it makes you gain weight, so you flush it. And your friend says, "Hey, amphetamines helped me perform better, and you don't gain weight."

Boal's Externally Focused *Theatre of the Oppressed*

Standing on Brecht's shoulders, Boal set off to create a new form of theatre that would train people in political activism and social reform. "Now the oppressed are liberated themselves," Boal cried victoriously in his book, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, written after his escape from being tortured by the Brazilian military regime, "and, once more, are making the theater their own" (1985, p. 119). Boal believed strongly that two major changes needed to happen to create this liberated theater: first, that audience members needed to become "spect-actors", and second, that there needed to be an actor called the "Joker" serving as a facilitator of the dramatic process (1985, p. 119). The first change was getting the audience to be involved in the process of the play. Boal was not comfortable with actors speaking on behalf of the community, but wanted the community to speak for themselves, becoming directly involved with the play and trying out solutions and changes — sort of a training process for actual political action. "In this case," Boal explained, "perhaps the theater is not revolutionary in itself, but it is surely a rehearsal for the revolution...No matter that the action is fictional; what matters is that it is action!" (1985, p. 122).

Boal began calling audience members "spect-actors," implying that they were not simply passive viewers of content, but able to engage and participate in the performance. He encouraged audience members to come up and take the place of the actors, giving them the opportunity to stand up against the characters representing their oppressors or an oppressive system and to make

their own choices to create a new ending for the story. Boal also believed that in order for this collaboration between actors and spect-actors to occur, there needed to be a figure who could bridge the divide between the fictional world of the play and the real world, someone who could aid the dramatic process along and prevent participants from being satisfied with easy solutions (Prendergast & Saxton, 2009, p. 70). “Just as the Joker in a deck of cards belongs to no suit and holds no numeric value,” says Snyder-Young, “the Joker is central to the performance while standing outside of the narratives represented onstage” (2011, p. 35). The creation of both spect-actors and the Joker figure allowed Boal to redirect theatre towards a social justice orientation.

A major critique of Boal is that by permitting the spect-actors to change only the behavior of the protagonist characters and not the antagonist characters, he promotes the idea that oppressive systems are immovable and it is up to the oppressed to find solutions. Wynne, who wrote an article looking at Boal’s original theatre of the oppressed theories from a Foucauldian perspective, believes this way of seeking change is problematic and potentially toxic to the very people it is trying to help. “Theatre and other creative, participatory methods may well provide tools to help citizens identify strategies of resistance to powerful actors,” Wynne comments, “however, these tools must recognise that we cannot place the burden for change upon those most marginalised in our society” (2019, p. 347). This type of critique, as well as other factors, motivated Boal to shift his gaze inward and jump-started his process of creating a new theatre of the oppressed focused on personal development.

In this scene, Ivy is explaining her experience of sexual abuse as the triggering incident for her mental illness. Is it up to Ivy to find redemption, as Boal suggests, or should the broader system be changed, as Wynne suggests?

ANDY: How old was your stepbrother when he abused you? There is no statute of limitations for crimes against children in Connecticut, where you live. You could still get justice.

IVY: He was a minor. He can't be charged. Believe me, I've done my research. There's no justice to be had.

Boal's Internally Focused *Rainbow of Desire*

During the course of his artistic mission to create lasting social change, Boal soon found that “rehearsals for revolution” were not enough, but that some form of personal development had to occur. Boal's belief in external social transformation was irrevocably changed by an experience with an audience member after one of his shows in Brazil. A man named Virgilio was delighted by Boal's performance, and invited him and his actors to come with his rebel group and go threaten an oppressive landowner with guns. Boal, uncomfortable and awkward, had to confess to Virgilio that they were artists, not rebels, and would not be willing to participate in his rebellion (1995, p. 2). After this experience, Boal realized that he was not practicing what he preached — he wanted people to rehearse for revolution, but was frightened and intimidated by the idea of actual revolution. He made the decision he could no longer perform plays that delivered a radical political message unless he was willing to run the same risks as his characters.

Around this time of transition for Boal, he met a woman who asked him the following question: “I know that you do political theatre, and my problem is not political, but it is a very big problem and it's mine. Perhaps you could help me with your theatre?” (Boal, 1995, p. 4). The woman was struggling with a cheating husband who had control over her finances. Boal performed a play in the same style of theatre of the oppressed — having actors portray the woman and her husband and then having different spect-actors sub in as the woman character, making different choices about how to address the situation with her husband. Boal realized that

his techniques of theatre of the oppressed could be used not only for concrete types of oppression, but for emotional oppression (1995, p. 8).

This discovery led to Boal's book *Rainbow of Desire*, which explores how to use theatre of the oppressed techniques in a more internally focused way, similar to drama therapy. Therapy involves figuring out alternatives to a situation that has caused suffering or unhappiness, and so the process of recounting the experience artistically in front of "witnesses in solidarity" is itself an alternative (Boal, 1995, p. 25). Boal believed that humans see themselves as the center of the universe, and that by performing onstage, humans are able to see themselves as others see them, which is infinitely valuable when it comes to personal growth and healing. "To our own point of view we add others," Boal says, "as if we were able to look at the earth from the earth, where we live, and also from the moon, the sun, a satellite or the stars" (1995, p. 26).

The transition in Boal's work can be explained as a shift from the ideals of developing nations to those of developed nations, moving from the "third world aesthetic of resistance" to a "first world aesthetic of self-help", from "rehearsals for the revolution" to "rehearsals for healing" (Schutzman, 1990, p. 78). Schutzman believed part of Boal's transition towards a "healing" mindset had to do with the difficulty in actually causing change to a broader system, the same roadblock Wynne observed in the previous section. In North America and other first world countries, there tends to be a pervasive belief in an "absent or inaccessible power center" (Schutzman, 1990, p. 79). There is a belief that nothing can actually change, that theatre can talk back to power all it wants, but power will never hear. Therefore, one should focus on what can actually be changed — one own's emotion and moral behavior.

In the following scene, Tay and Nina are trying to get Castellet to open up about her mental health experiences. How could this scene be a "rehearsal for healing" both for actors and audience members?

TAY: Then explain to me. Explain how it's different.

CASTELLET: I can't take off masks. It's not that easy for me.

TAY: It's not easy for any of us! Vulnerability sucks! But we have to do it!

CASTELLET: (*Explodes.*) I'm so tired of talking about my feelings. I'm so tired of *feeling* things, all the time, and to be here, in this camp, where all those feelings just get dredged up over and over. I don't want to be here.

(*CASTELLET starts to exit.*)

NINA: Maybe if you told us your feelings they wouldn't weigh on you so much.

CASTELLET: Thanks, Nina, but I think I can handle the weight. I've been doing it for years.

Creating Enlightened Empathy

Ultimately, Boal desired his theatre, whether externally or internally focused, to create some kind of change through multi-directional empathy. Boal would describe empathy not simply as feeling and understanding the emotions of another, but desiring to change the circumstances of that person's life as a result of that feeling and understanding. He considered conventional theatre, the theatre seen on Broadway and other large stages, to be a place where empathy goes in a one-way direction from the stage to the audience. The actors portray a sad scene, and the audience feels sad, but there is no true communication between the two, as conventional theatre expects the actors and creators to communicate and the audience to be silent. Theatre of the oppressed, however, both its internal and external manifestations, is what Boal considered a multi-directional empathy because it includes the "reciprocal possibility of communion, of dialogue" (1995, p. 27). Boal constantly encouraged the blurring of lines between actor and audience, as he believed everyone participates in theatre equally. He believed multi-directional empathy to be more powerful than one-directional empathy because it opens the door for engagement and change, whether that change is a social revolution or a personal emotional development. Theatre holds a mirror to our image, but theatre of the oppressed is a

mirror that can be stepped through to get to a place where the image can be modified (Boal, 1995, p. 29).

Multi-directional empathy can also be considered enlightened empathy, returning to Brecht's views on knowledge as the precursor for social action. If Boal desires the image in the mirror to be modified, then theatre has to communicate what that modification looks like. As Fisher says, "[Theatre of the Oppressed] assumes that someone — the group using the technique or the person introducing it — has a fairly developed consciousness. Without such consciousness, [Theatre of the Oppressed] runs the risk of reproducing rather than representing oppression" (1994, p. 190).

From One-Sided Thinking to One-Sided Thinking?

But what if the audience has a different view of social justice than the director or actors? Trusting the audience has long been a question for those who make media, from theatre to movies to magazine articles. Is it better to treat the audience as unintelligent and explain things clearly, but risk insulting them, or to view the audience as intelligent but risk confusion and misinterpretation? And in something as subjective as art, who gets to decide what interpretation is correct?

Snyder-Young came face to face with this issue during a twelve-week study in which she helped conduct a theatre of the oppressed class at an urban charter school. She discovered that "...while Theatre of the Oppressed is usually utilised in support of politically progressive agendas, the work participants initiate and the choices they make do not automatically orient towards social justice" (2011, p. 30). In encouraging participation from the class, Snyder-Young soon found that they did not tend to behave the way she expected or desired. For instance, in a

scene about gossip and bullying, a student Monáy insisted that the character of the boyfriend should be saving his girlfriend from bullies rather than the girlfriend dealing with the problem herself, a solution Snyder-Young found problematic and sexist. Snyder-Young struggled with how to respond, saying that: “Inherent in this decision is that tension between balancing my mandate to challenge hegemonic thinking with my need to give Monáy agency in the classroom” (2011, p. 41). She chose to allow Monáy to have her own opinion rather than forcing her own politically progressive agenda. Monáy was deeply moved by this, and Snyder-Young says that perhaps this was one of the only times in Monáy’s life that an authority had validated Monáy’s right to her own opinion (2011, p. 41). Snyder-Young observes that:

The rehearsal can be a space of exploration, of creativity, and of risktaking. It can also be a space in which repetition of forms sets them in place, locking them in actor’s bodies. The tension between the ‘rehearsal for revolution’ and the reinforcing of hegemonic norms through rehearsal’s repetition remains a challenge of popular theatre work, and there is a need for further study of it (2011, p. 42).

In Snyder-Young’s choice to validate Monáy’s opinion, she is treating Monáy with respect and dignity as an intelligent individual. But she is also losing the chance to influence the modification of Monáy’s image in the theatre of the oppressed mirror so Monáy can go into society with the kind of enlightenment that pushes towards social transformation. Monáy has gained agency and grown personally, taking steps away from the emotional oppression that *Rainbow of Desire* describes, but she has not developed the social consciousness necessary for the external social transformation described by *Theatre of the Oppressed*.

At the same time, the kind of social transformation desired by Snyder-Young and by Boal tends towards, as Snyder-Young herself says, a “politically progressive agenda”. Monáy’s agenda is different, but it does not mean she is encouraging the continuation of oppression. In fact, Snyder-Young’s insistence on challenging one-sided thinking may simply encourage a new kind

of one-sided thinking, a kind that Snyder-Young sees as oriented towards social justice. It is important to keep in mind that enlightened empathy needs to be enlightened completely, taking into account multiple perspectives.

In the following monologue, Miriam, a counselor, explains guilt and shame as related to her sister Ruth's suicide. How might audiences react to this monologue differently? Develop several different responses an audience member might have and what personal experiences may have led them to those responses.

MIRIAM: Even if, God forbid, Castellet had died, it would not have been anyone's fault here, not you, Tay, not Andy, not anyone. If Zack had killed himself, Nina, it would not have been your fault. Suicide is a individual choice, and living like we're the ones who pulled the trigger is destructive. I realized that if I wanted to honor Ruth's life I had to cherish my own.

Enlightened Empathy in Action

The following two case studies, each using Boal's theories, are perfect examples of the audience's development of empathy for others and the actors' development of empathy for self, respectively. A case study conducted by Shapiro & Hunt shows the impact of empathy on the audience and how art can influence the way in which people consider their careers. The other study by Howard shows that the kind of internal personal growth that occurs through recognizing faults but loving oneself anyway is indeed enough to create the kind of enlightenment and empathy Boal desires. They do not see the need for a full theatre of the oppressed, "rehearsal for revolution" model.

Shapiro, the director of a UCI program combining medicine with humanities and the arts, and Hunt, a history professor, led a version of theatre of the oppressed at a local hospital. While they did not include spect-actors in the performance, they did provide a forum afterwards for questions and discussion. Their goal was to enhance medical professionals' empathy towards patients. Shapiro & Hunt invited medical students, doctors, caregivers, patients, and family

members to watch two one-person productions, one about HIV/AIDS performed by an actor with AIDS, one about ovarian cancer performed by an ovarian cancer survivor. “The presence of live actors means that theatre has a uniquely compelling emotional quality, making it difficult to avoid or intellectualise the struggles and suffering portrayed,” Shapiro & Hunt observe. “In a live performance, the audience experiences emotional engagement in a visceral way...” (2003, p. 923). After the conclusion of their performance, Shapiro & Hunt determined that particularly among medical students, their experiment had been “highly successful” (2003, p. 927).

Howard, chair of communications at the University of Southern Indiana, led a group of six women to create a show about body image and eating disorders using Boal’s techniques, specifically his *Rainbow of Desire* techniques. They created nine scenes, eight of which dealt with more internal issues, and the ninth being an external conflict requiring participation from the audience to solve it. While not many audience members actually came up to act onstage, many were willing and eager to discuss what had happened both during the show and after its conclusion (Howard, 2004, p. 227). After the show, performers were also able to engage in this conversation. “This performance project was a space for the performers to declare what had not been heard — or in many cases what they could not say in any other way” (Howard, 2004, p. 222). Howard explained that many performers were able to speak to parents and partners about their eating habits and body image, because the production had created a “safe frame” for them to do so (Howard, 2004, p. 222). The show did not produce the desired theatre of the oppressed result of a revolutionary change in society, but it did create powerful change in the lives of the performers and in their relationships with others. Howard observes the following:

While the experience did not generate a new community agency to address body oppression, the experience did enable the performers to share and resolve what Boal would call internal oppressors. By enacting — and declaring publicly — their fears, observations, and insights, the performers learned that they could promote change by

starting with their own behaviors and by communicating their understandings to others. Moreover, performers learned to incorporate the actions rehearsed/learned via the performance project into their social behaviors. (2004, p. 227).

The case studies of Shapiro & Hunt and of Howard show that theatre of the oppressed techniques can create change without a social revolution. The change is personal and private, but it defines the way that person lives in society from then on. Medical students gained increased empathy for their patients. People struggling with eating disorders finally expressed their pain to their friends and family to get help. Monáy, in the previous section, gained agency that may in the future encourage the pursuit of social transformation. It appears that enlightened empathy can be gained through a *Rainbow of Desire* model of theatre.

There is a part of me, and probably a part of Boal as well, that is slightly frustrated with these results. The internal focus of *Rainbow of Desire* works in creating enlightened empathy, but on a small scale. It can be hard to settle for the changed hearts of a few people in a classroom or a hospital when we dream of more radical social change.

But I think we need to re-interpret what we view as meaningful change. These case studies show meaningful change — not large-scale social revolution, but meaningful nonetheless. Maybe there is a med student who watched Shapiro & Hunt's plays and will go on to create huge positive change in the medical field. But even if that does not happen, theatre has affected that person in the way they interact with patients, the way they view their profession. Social change is happening slowly, in a web of interactions and relationships. It harkens back to the idea of Greek theatre: creating a network of morally formed individuals who can go out and create a morally formed society. Though Boal's ideas of theatre causing enormous social transformation may not have been realistic, theatre still causes transformation, slowly, subtly, and meaningfully.

In the following scene, Nina is experiencing a panic attack brought on by OCD. If you were allowed to select one social group or one profession to watch this scene, what group do you think could benefit the most? What kind of subtle transformation might this scene encourage in that group?

NINA: I can only see four lights.

MIRIAM: What?

NINA: I can only see four lights.

MIRIAM: Yeah, those are four of the other cabins. I think it's Blue Spruce, Noble Fir...

NINA: There need to be five lights.

MIRIAM: Nina, it's okay. Breathe.

NINA: No, it's wrong, it's all wrong. I need to find another cabin. I need to see a fifth cabin.

(She starts walking and MIRIAM puts a hand on her shoulder.)

MIRIAM: Nina, stop. Close your eyes and breathe.

NINA: No. No, no, no, no.

MIRIAM: Nina, breathe. It's okay. Our cabin is the fifth cabin, okay? Turn around. You can see our light. That's five, okay?

NINA: Okay. Okay. Okay, okay, okay.

MIRIAM: It's all right. The numbers don't control you, okay? They feel so important, but they're not. They don't mean anything. Even if you didn't count five, you would be okay.

NINA: I know. *(Breathes and mutters under her breath:)* I know, I know, I know, I know.

Hope and Practical Application

Applied theatre is powerful, holding the incredible ability to transform individuals and society through enlightened empathy. But ultimately, there are things in applied theatre that cannot be controlled, as Freedbody & Finneran observe. "...Whilst we control something of the aesthetic of transmission...the beauty, wonder, awe, admiration, understanding, empathy, anger and impact that our audience and participants may feel is beyond our control, but deeply valid nonetheless" (2016, p. 26). Boal learned this in interactions with people like the revolutionary Virgilio, and Snyder-Young learned it with Monáy. While social and personal transformation can be encouraged, it cannot and should not be enforced. The goal of applied theatre should be to show opportunity and possibility rather than to create mandates.

Through the production of my play next semester, I hope to create an enlightened empathy in both the actors (through personal growth) and the audience (through motivation towards social transformation). I want the actors to experience personal growth and healing through the rehearsal process, and I want the audience to leave the theatre with the desire to pursue some kind of social transformation regarding mental illness. Similarly to Howard, I want to encourage the actors to have open discussions about their own mental health issues and how it may impact their interpretation of the play. Similarly to Shapiro & Hunt, I want to give actors opportunities to speak and process with audience members. Similarly to Snyder-Young's experience with Monáy, I want to give actors the agency to make decisions about their characters.

I intend to accomplish this through several methods:

- Emotional security interviews: Having anyone auditioning fill out emotional security questionnaires prior to auditions to gain a better understanding of their mental wellbeing and whether or not they feel emotionally and mentally equipped to handle a show about mental illness
- Space for personal testimony: incorporating into the rehearsal process a time and space for actors and other crew members to reflect upon and share their own experiences of mental illness and how that influences their interpretation of both their character and the script
- Mental health check-ins: throughout the run of the show, having one-on-one conversations between actors and either the director or stage manager about how actors are caring for their own well-being

- Openness in script: while keeping the overall arc of the script the same, allowing opportunities for actors to create character or plot changes they feel are more authentic
- Talk-back sessions: having a guided discussion after each show where audience and actors can experience multi-directional empathy
- Information in programs: distributing information to audience members about mental illness, both in helping to understand the characters and giving audience members resources for themselves or friends who may be struggling

Conclusion

In another of Boal's books, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, he declares, with a kind of breathtakingly beautiful hope, that "Theatre is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theatre can help us build our future, instead of just waiting for it" (1992, p. 16).

Let's build.

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Appendix

Reclamation x 5 Plot Summary: Nina is a seventeen year old whose life is run by five numbers. Her obsessive-compulsive disorder urges her to count everything in five — from cars on the street to flicks of light switches. Her own mental disorder has taken a backseat to her boyfriend, Zack, however, whose volatile family life and experiences of depression constantly end up on Nina's shoulders. When Zack's mother encourages him to go to a therapy rehabilitation summer

program at Camp Kinderhook, Zack urges Nina to attend with him. Nina is put into a group with a counselor and three other young women struggling with various mental health issues, and the five of them begin an intense therapy program. As Nina develops relationships with the other young women in her cabin, she gains new confidence in herself. But as the therapy program becomes strewn with pain, anger, and devastating setbacks, Nina and her fellow campers must learn that healing is not instantaneous, but rather a process of reclaiming their lives piece by piece.

Character List

- Nina Gardner: 17 years old; compassionate, reserved, dedicated; struggles with OCD (checking)
- Zack Hewitt: 17 years old; depressed, emotionally manipulative boyfriend to Nina
- Tay Sung: 20 years old; sarcastic and fiery, attempts to hide her depression and self harm
- Sarah Ivy Mercer: 16 years old; quiet and fiercely loyal; suffers from severe social anxiety and selective mutism
- Castellet Dupont: 19 years old; entitled and bratty, hides her panic disorder and self-harm behind a mask of perfection
- Miriam Beckman: 30 years old; competent and caring counselor at Camp Kinderhook motivated to action by her sister's suicide
- Andy Hayden: early forties; Miriam's supervisor; can be portrayed as male, female, or nonbinary
- Suzanne Gardner: mid forties; Nina's mom, overly excitable and anxious for her daughter's wellbeing; can be doublecast with Castellet or Andy