

5-2018

Theater as a Civic Practice

Charlie Santos

University of Rhode Island, cgsantos789@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/srhonorsprog>



Part of the Aesthetics Commons, Applied Ethics Commons, Civic and Community Engagement Commons, Dramatic Literature, Criticism and Theory Commons, Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons, Performance Studies Commons, and the Politics and Social Change Commons

Recommended Citation

Santos, Charlie, "Theater as a Civic Practice" (2018). *Senior Honors Projects*. Paper 680.
<https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/srhonorsprog/680>

This Article is brought to you by the University of Rhode Island. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons-group@uri.edu. For permission to reuse copyrighted content, contact the author directly.

Theater as a Civic Practice

Charlie Santos

Introduction

At URI, students are currently engaging with a cultural moment where many and political and social ideologies are being hotly debated across campus. In my experience, there is an urge among students within the theater community, including myself, toward engaging in these conversations through their art. My project is a response to that urge. Through this project, I wanted to map out some of the potentials and ethical/aesthetic hazards of creating art toward political ends. The methods through which I began inquiry can be divided into three subsections: *Academic Study*, *Experiential Practice*, and *Creation*.

Academic Study

The *Academic Study* portion of this project focused on the writing and creative work of several key writers, activist, and artists in this field. One of the most significant of these individuals was Bertolt Brecht, a German writer and director working in early to mid 20th century. The brain child of Brecht's highly political artistry was 'Epic Theater'-- a radically innovative approach to writing, acting, directing, and design that repurposed theater as a tool for civic disruption and education¹. This approach is antithetical to the Aristotelian notion of theater as a place of cathartic release, wherein citizens could purge harmful emotions that would otherwise disrupt the stability of the state. Growing up in impoverished Munich, Brecht sought to utilize theater to disrupt the complacency of citizens in the face of injustice. He thereby founded an aesthetic that aimed to interrupt the cathartic experience. Brecht's goal was not to have his audience feel, but to have them think. He wanted to create a theater where citizens could be exposed to dire instances of oppression, while maintaining such a distance to remain intellectually critical and effective at conceptualizing strategies to counteract injustice.

Another key figure who expanded on the work of Brecht was Augusto Boal, a Brazilian activist and theater maker working from the mid to late 20th century. Similar to Brecht, Boal saw the theater as a space to conceptualize and engage with revolutionary ideologies in order to prepare for their actualization in the world outside the theater. He iconically dubbed his theater, "rehearsal for the revolution."² Unlike Brecht, however, Boal did not conceive the revolution coming from cultural elites who had previous

¹ Brecht, Bertolt, and John Willett. *Brecht on Theatre: the Development of an Aesthetic*. Bloomsbury, 2015.

² Boal, Augusto. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Theatre Communications Group, 1985.

access to the theater, but rather oppressed populations who were theatrically illiterate. Therefore, Boal founded an artistry-- which has become known as Theatre of the Oppressed (TO)-- based on working within oppressed populations to reinvent theatrical forms as tools for brainstorming and expressing revolutionary politics. Additionally, he pioneered techniques to frame the spectator as complicit in depictions of oppression, and consequently lead them to view themselves as active agents in either the perpetuation or the subversion of oppressive systems. His writing leaves us with several specific 'forms' of TO, as well as a wide array of theater exercises designed for fostering theatrical literacy as an approach to political communication, physicalization, and innovation³.

The final subject central to this portion of my project was the iconic 1997 *August Wilson v. Robert Brustein Debate*⁴. This highly publicized debate was the culmination of a series of public correspondence between the famous playwright and director/cultural critic. This debate pitted Wilson's argument to conceptualize theater as a politicized institution against Brewstein's devotion to preserving theater as a non-ideological practice. This is still a highly contentious issue in theater today. The intricacies of this debate reveal instances where ethical and aesthetic values come into stark conflict. The debate ends where it begins, with the interlocutors in contention, and it is left to the individual artist to resolve the tension between the political implications of his art and its imperative to transcend reductive political frameworks.

Experiential Practice

The *Experiential Practice* portion of this project focused on learning through direct engagement with work and scholarship of current practitioners in the field of political theater. This process included participating Trinity Rep.'s "Theatre as a Civic Practice" course-- a class devoted to exploring community activism through creative direct action (and from which this project derives its name). I also attended the 2017 Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed conference and studied Forum Theatre (a style of TO) with Julian Boal-- the son of Augusto Boal. I participated in summer intensive programs at both the Pig Iron School for Advanced Performance Training, as well as Dell'Arte International School of Physical Theatre, both of which offered opportunities to study under artists at the forefront of experimental theater. Finally, I took on an organizational role in Strange Attractor Theatre Company's theater project *The Sea*

³ Boal, Augusto. *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*. Routledge, 1992.

⁴ "A Broadcast of the Debate between Playwright AUGUST WILSON and Critic ROBERT BRUSTEIN over Mul..." *NPR*, NPR, 5 Feb. 1997, www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1109529.

Pageant-- a 100-person choral performance on First Beach in Newport during the solar eclipse. These events span a great deal of the spectrum of what can be considered 'political art'. Experiences such as the Trinity class or the PTO conference were highly political in their aim. The summer programs, on the other hand, were aimed more at flexing the limits of theatrical forms. *The Sea Pageant* sat somewhere in between. It was a project that, in principle (see *Appendix One*) and practice, employed innovative approaches to creation in order to cultivate community between a diverse group of people while simultaneously facilitating a process of collective reflection and re-definition of 'ocean spaces' and our relationship to them. The leadership role I took within this project further exposed me to the logistical experiences of communication and organization associated with these kinds of large community engagement projects.

Creation

The final portion of my project, *Creation*, involved the infusion of the previously covered theory and experience into my own original work and projects. This portion was springboarded by my participation in URI's THE 338G, *Ethics and Theatre*. For the final project in this class, I worked alongside two classmates, Jaimy Escobedo and Lorraine Guerra, to create an original piece of Forum Theatre. As alluded to earlier, Forum Theatre is a style of TO that involves performing a short scenes that capture the mechanics of an oppressive system, followed by physicalized brainstorming of pragmatic strategies for navigating that systems. Although the piece we created, loosely titled 'How Do We Draw a Line?' (see *Appendix Two*), borrowed heavily from the mechanics and principles behind Forum Theatre, there were also a number of principles and mechanics we disregard based on the limited circumstances within the classroom. We eventually performed the piece, which explored issues of racial microaggression between students at URI, both for our THE 338G class at URI and later at the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival's Fringe with the help of URI Theatre majors, Catia Ramos and Daria Montaquila.

This process undoubtedly present a unique and precarious set of challenges. Having previous academic and experiential experience with Boal's work left me considerably more fluent in his ideas than most of my collaborators. Furthermore, we creating a project exploring racial microaggressions, an occurrence I have no first-hand experience in, added another significant asymmetry into the nature of the collaboration. What resulted was a collaborative process constantly in flux between asymmetrical power dynamics, and given my identity as a white male guiding a creative process exploring the experience of women of color,

the process required a constant sensitivity to the various dynamics at play. I believe this turbulence, in part, can be attributed to the ways we varied from Boal's own approach to creating Forum Theatre (e.g., working to subvert an oppressive system you don't experience directly, adopting a very democratic approach to first exploring TO techniques). On the other hand, as evident from my experience at the PTO conference, navigating the dynamics of collaboration makes up a huge percentage of the work and compared to much of the work I experienced there, the process was relatively fluid.

A final, and not insignificant, take-away this creation has left me with is a deep appreciation for the grind (i.e., high input with variable output) involved with this work. Each performance of our piece left me with complex and conflicting feelings toward the nature of the performance. Often I found that elements of our performance-- sometimes in its mechanics and sometimes in its content--- inhibited certain discussions or movements that I had hoped we'd be able to explore. All in all, we were left with only a handful of 'successful' moments in which to worked seemed to gesture toward thoughts and movement that might have otherwise remained unexplored. Reflecting back, the experience mirrored another I shared with a handful of collaborators at the PTO Conference. There, we had spent many hours creating a Forum Theatre piece exploring the systemic roadblocks that inhibit the wellbeing of college students struggling with mental illness. During the performance, however, the majority of the participants' energy was focused on discussing the proper procedures of helping someone through an anxiety attack and very little attention was directed toward navigating the oppressive system. Although this result was disappointing, Julian directed our next course of action: you shake it off, rest up (the process is exhausting), recognize the value that did emerge from your collaboration, and learn from it.

Conclusion

I conclude, with little surprise, that there is no simple path to simultaneously satisfying the ethical and aesthetic demands that affect many young artists. Effectively navigating the synthesis of these spheres demands a deep understanding of social and political engagement, as well as a solid background in experimental theater and aesthetics.

Therefore, the young artist looking to engage in social and political dialectics through his artistry ought to exercise caution. Without a comprehensive understanding, the 'well intentioned' activist consistently risks appropriating a political moment for personal artistic recognition. Likewise, one can easily fall into traps of a reductive politicized artistry that reduce theater to a mere tool of political and social ideologies.

This is not, however, to direct the artist toward a complete disavowal of the political nature of his art. Following down that path, there looms a solipsistic artistry wherein the artist can trap herself in the echo chambers of his own culture and milieu. Furthermore, when aesthetic values conflict with moralizing ideologies, the artist risks prioritizing his aesthetics at the expense of the politically and socially vulnerable.

The conclusion of this project gestures toward an ethically and aesthetically conscious artistry-- one that does not conflate art with activism nor fails to recognize the political implications of art. Unfortunately, such a description is vague and elusive. I do, however, feel confident in concluding that artists like Boal and projects like *The Sea Pageant* reaffirm the value of theater as a potential catalyst for connection, communication, creativity, and creation. When skillfully crafted, these values can bring invigoration, innovation, and health into our civic lives.

Appendix One:

SEA PAGEANT 2017 GUIDING PRINCIPLES

1. OUR "THANK YOU'S" SHOULD BE THE LONGEST PART OF OUR "SHOW." (MAYBE OUR "THANK YOU'S" ARE THE "SHOW.")
2. TIE NO (PHYSICAL) KNOTS WHICH CANNOT BE UNTIED.
3. DON'T WALK WITH A ROCK IN YOUR SHOE.
4. "WE" AND "YOU TOO" ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE "SHOW" BECAUSE THE "SHOW" DOESN'T EXIST WITHOUT "WE" AND "YOU TOO".
5. WE ARE HERE FOR MANY REASONS, SOME OF WHICH WE KNOW AND SOME OF WHICH WE'LL NEVER KNOW, BUT WE ARE HERE. LET US TOGETHER ADMIT OUR HERENESS TO THIS PLACE WITH EACH OTHER. LET US ANNOUNCE OUR FULL ARRIVAL TO THE SAND, THE WIND AND THE SEA.
6. THE OCEAN IS CALM, GLASSY, PEACEFUL, AND SERENE. THE OCEAN IS TURBULENT, DEEP, UNCOMPROMISING, AND DANGEROUS. THE OCEAN IS VAST AND SO IS OUR RELATIONSHIP TO IT. IT CHANGES AND SO DO WE. IT IS COMPLEX AND SO ARE WE. LET OUR WORK NOT SHY AWAY FROM THE COMPLEX, CONTROVERSIAL, AND SPECIFIC; NOR THE FOAMY, FROTHY OR JOYFUL.

Appendix Two:

How Do We Draw a Line?

Characters:

Jaimy: Latino student

Lorraine : Black student

Charlie: White student

Gavin: White bystander

Setting:

Lounge doing homework, working on a homework, watching that 70's show

Time:

Now

Script

That 70's show guitar riff is playing. We're digging the show!

Jaimy: Omg guys, have you guys heard about the actor who plays Hyde?

Lorraine: Whos that? what did he do?

Charlie: Wait you don't know what he did?

Lorraine: No

Jaimy: Danny Masterson has a ton of rape allegations

Lorraine: Are you serious? I can't believe it. he's nasty

Charlie: Yeah, it's pretty messed up.

Lorraine: I feel like this has been happening a lot in the news

Jaimy: Yeah, white men are the scum of the earth. No offense, no offense

Charlie: Yeah, but like.... ok, so here's a question though. Like, I'm a good person, I think. I mean I'm not a rapist. I feel pretty socially aware, you know, I'm woke.

(Jaimy is screaming and gasping and being dramatic)

Lorraine: your..WOKE?

Charlie: No I just mean, like I'm well read. I'm a friendly person. I don't discriminate. And sure technically I'm a "white man", but I'm not like those white men. Sure, we have pretty gross track record, but you know (*tries to make joke*) it's not like I'm owning slaves!

Lorraine and jaimy stare a long confused glare

Jaimy: Ok...

Charlie: No, I mean, but you know what I mean. I'm not that kind of person.

Lorraine: Ok, maybe you're not owning slaves, but your ancestors did.

Charlie: No. My ancestors were messed up. I get it. But they're not me! I can't be blamed for something I didn't do.

Lorraine: No ones blaming you

Lorraine and jaimy stare a long confused glare

Charlie: Yeah, but kinda right. Like you hear it all the time. White men this, white men that. But like, it's not fair that I hold the burden of what other people did almost 200 years ago. And I know there are still a ton of white racist guys out there, but that's not me. Anyways, I just wanted to get that off chest.

(Charlie's phone buzzes. Checks text.)

Charlie: Crap, I got to go. My group's meeting in the library tonight, and I totally forgot. Have a good one guys, I'll see you later!

(He leaves. Jaimy and Lorraine sit there.)

Jaimy: Yo what just happened

Lorraine: That was crazy. I didn't even know what to say

Jaimy: White people got some balls