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## Strategic Uses of Essentialism in Boal's Forum Theatre

Cameron N. Coulter<sup>1</sup>

*Although Forum Theatre (FT) welcomes diverse perspectives to the stage, practitioners have often remarked that FT performances work best in communities that are in some way "homogeneous." In this essay, I suggest that homogeneity is a recurrent theme in FT discussions because the structure of FT relies on consensus, and I propose that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's paradigm of strategic uses of essentialism is a productive tool for understanding and evaluating moments of consensus in FT. Although Spivak eventually critiqued the term, I propose that strategic essentialism can nonetheless provide a useful model for understanding how consensus ideally operates within FT performances. Finally, I offer three provisional criteria with which to evaluate a community's readiness to inclusively reach moments of genuine consensus in FT.*

While creating Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), Augusto Boal coined the term *spect-actor* (a portmanteau of *spectator* and *actor*) to describe the role he wanted the community to play within a performance. That is, Boal hoped to engage communities as co-creators, allowing them to exercise their agency and to view the performance (and society by extension) as dynamic and open to change. In

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*Theatre of the Oppressed*, Boal writes that he hopes “to change the people—‘spectators,’ passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon—into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action” (122). Boal also desired TO performances to prepare spect-actors for broader social change. As he writes in *The Rainbow of Desire*, “The Theatre of the Oppressed has two fundamental linked principles: it aims (a) to help the spect-actor transform himself into a protagonist of the dramatic action and rehearse alternatives for his situation, so that he may then be able (b) to extrapolate into his real life the actions he has rehearsed in the practice of theatre” (40). Within the TO umbrella, Boal designed several performance methods, including image theatre (in which spect-actors craft bodily tableaux), forum theatre (in which spect-actors rehearse possibilities for resistance and change in the face of a staged oppression), and rainbow of desire techniques (in which spect-actors interrogate interior oppressors).

Before a forum theatre (FT) performance, a TO practitioner will typically be invited to a community and, with the help of community members, plan a skit that depicts a local or relatable problem. In his introduction to Boal's *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, translator and TO practitioner Adrian Jackson outlines the general structure of a FT performance:

Forum Theatre is a theatrical game in which a problem is shown in an unsolved form, to which the audience, again spect-actors, is invited to suggest and enact solutions. The problem is always the symptom of an oppression, and generally involves visible oppressors and a protagonist who is oppressed. In its purest form, both actors and spect-actors will be people who are victims of the oppression under consideration; that is why they are able to offer alternative solutions, because they themselves are personally acquainted with the oppression. After one showing of the scene, which is known as “the model” (it can be a full-length play), it is shown again slightly speeded up, and follows exactly the same course until a member of the audience shouts “Stop!”, takes the place of

the protagonist and tries to defeat the oppressors. (xxiv)

As Jackson mentions, in the original skit, the protagonist fails to resolve the problem, so the FT facilitator (also known as the Joker) then invites community members to replace the protagonist and try out different strategies that may result in better outcomes (*Games* 242-245). Jackson writes, “The game is a form of contest between spect-actors trying to bring the play to a different end (in which the cycle of oppression is broken) and actors ostensibly making every possible effort to bring it to its original end (in which the oppressed is beaten and the oppressors are triumphant)” (xxiv). This “contest” dynamic challenges spect-actors to try out a broad range of tactics and allows participants to practice overcoming the pushback they will inevitably encounter when they take their activism outside the theatre. Additionally, the Joker plays an important role in challenging spect-actors in critical and constructive ways, mediating the onstage action, and encouraging spect-actors to participate. Jackson writes, “The Joker figure is, in various different contexts and combinations, the director, referee, facilitator and workshop leader; in the context of Forum Theatre, the Joker is the person who acts as intermediary between audience and performers, and is attached to no party—just as the Joker in a pack of cards belongs to no one suit but floats between them” (xxvi).

As theatre scholar Ann Elizabeth Armstrong notes in “Negotiating Feminist Identities and Theatre of the Oppressed,” TO allows “for collective authorship so that multiple experiences can be represented” (178). This is especially true in FT, where the community of spect-actors and their unique subjectivities direct and advance the performance. In *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Boal writes, “In the forum theatre no idea is imposed: the audience, the people, have the opportunity to try out all their ideas, to rehearse all the possibilities, and to verify them in practice, that is, in theatrical practice” (141). By opening up the performance possibilities to the community of spect-actors (indeed, by *creating* a community of spect-actors) FT welcomes diverse perspectives into the narrative, which can enrich a FT performance and help

generate inventive solutions.

However, despite TO's tolerance for multiplicity, "homogeneity" is a recurrent theme in FT discussions. In this essay, I suggest that this is because the structure of FT relies on consensus, and I propose that post-colonial scholar and critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's paradigm of strategic uses of essentialism is a productive tool for understanding and evaluating moments of consensus in FT.<sup>2</sup> By consensus, I mean moments in which spect-actors are asked whether they all agree and only if they do, the performance then progresses in some way. By strategic essentialism, I mean a political tactic in which a group of persons (which may be quite diverse across several axes) self-consciously and temporarily mobilizes around a unified identity. Although Spivak eventually critiqued the term, I propose that strategic essentialism can nonetheless provide a useful model for understanding how consensus ideally operates within FT performances. I will then offer three provisional criteria with which to evaluate a community's readiness to inclusively reach moments of consensus in FT. Before I proceed, I would like to note that my own engagement with TO thus far has primarily been as a student and as a scholar, so this paper will mainly draw for support on essays by TO practitioners and scholars as well as Boal's own writings.

### **Homogeneity and Consensus**

Although FT welcomes diverse perspectives, TO practitioners have often remarked that FT performances work best in communities that are in some way homogeneous. In an interview with Jan Cohen-Cruz and Mady Schutzman, Boal notes that TO participants generally belong to the same category, like teachers, students, or workers (Cohen-Cruz and Schutzman 73). In *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*,

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<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that most scholars may be more familiar with the term "strategic essentialism," it is important to note that in Spivak's own writings, she most often uses the phrase "strategic uses of essentialism." Accordingly, throughout this essay, I've tried to use the phrase "strategic uses of essentialism" when I'm referring to either Spivak's original ideas or to specific, strategic uses of essentialism, and I've used the term "strategic essentialism" to denote an overarching theory.

Boal writes that when doing FT “In Latin America, the audiences were generally small and homogeneous, the spect-actors almost always being the workers from a single factory, the residents of a particular neighbourhood, the congregation of a church, the students of the university, etc.” (241–242). In Latin America, “all the Forum Theatre sessions were organised by a core group of people of homogeneous social origin, whose common interest was the resolution of relatively immediate problems” (253). In “Boal and Beyond,” Sharon Green remarks that FT is a “useful tool for generating dialogue among people with *similar stakes in issues*” (52; emphasis added). And in “Feminist Acts,” Berenice Fisher observes something similar: “Boal’s theater forum assumes a fairly high degree of homogeneity among the people using it—a common sense of oppression that supports the individual in going up on stage and promotes an identification with the person who replaces the protagonist” (190). Why is homogeneity a recurrent theme in FT, given that the structure of FT welcomes diverse perspectives?

One reason it is important or useful that spect-actors are homogeneous with respect to the staged oppression relates to the process of ascesis, which Boal writes about in *The Rainbow of Desire*. Ascesis is the process through which spect-actors understand that the staged model is only one instance of a larger problem. Boal writes:

In the Theatre of the Oppressed, ascesis means moving from the phenomenon to the law that regulates all phenomena of the same kind, so as to explain other phenomena that may occur. For instance, an act of aggression against a particular black person is a phenomenon—something which happens only once in a given period of time, even if it is frequently repeated—so, by ascesis, we seek to understand *racism*, which is the law that explains these phenomena; we try to understand the purposes it serves, and relate this back to all other forms of intolerance. To give an example from the realm of physics: all objects fall to the ground (a phenomenon) so, by ascesis, we understand the law of

gravity. (26-27; emphasis in original)

When spect-actors are homogeneous with respect to the staged oppression, the process of ascesis will often happen automatically and individually for each spect-actor. That is to say, each spect-actor will be able to see how the staged model represents a larger oppression. As Boal writes,

In a Theatre of the Oppressed session where the participants belong to the same social group (students at the same school, residents of the same district, workers at the same factory) and suffer the same oppressions (*vis-à-vis* the school, the district or the factory), the individual account of a single person will immediately be pluralised: so the oppression of one is the oppression of all. The particularity of each individual case is negligible in relation to its similarity with all the others. (45)

However, if spect-actors aren't homogeneous with respect to the staged oppression, then the individual account may not immediately be pluralised—the process of ascesis may not naturally occur. In such a case, it becomes the role of the Joker to help facilitate this process. As Boal writes, “This process of ascesis is one of the tasks of the Joker in a Forum Theatre session and our own task throughout our lives” (27).

In order to help facilitate ascesis, Boal proposed the concept of analogical induction. Boal writes, “*It is absolutely vital to begin with an individual account, but if it does not pluralise of its own accord we must go beyond it by means of analogical induction, so that it may be studied by all the participants*” (45; emphasis in original). Through analogical induction, spect-actors “create other images (or scenes) [...] around their own similar individual oppressions” and study those images and scenes with the goal of producing a new model that is “disengaged from” the specifics of any one case yet still contains “the general mechanisms by means of which the oppression is produced” (45). By studying experiences similar to the original model, spect-actors are hopefully able to produce a new model that more clearly portrays the

staged oppression. Therefore, through ascesis and analogical induction, spect-actors can come to understand how their instance of FT relates to the larger world. Returning to the subject of homogeneity, ascesis and analogical induction are important parts of FT, and Boal himself was aware that they are typically easier when communities are homogeneous with respect to the staged oppression. This partially accounts for why homogeneity is a recurrent theme in FT discussions.

I propose, however, that another important reason why homogeneity is a common theme is because the structure of FT relies on consensus. In a FT performance, the Joker seeks consensus twice. First, after the scene is initially presented—an oppression staged and the protagonist defeated—the Joker asks, “Can this happen?” She confirms the staged oppression is relevant and realistic for the community (Paterson 111–112). Second, once a spect-actor replaces the protagonist and tries out a new strategy, the Joker asks the community if they agree with the solution. If a spect-actor disagrees, he is invited to once again replace the protagonist, and the performance then continues until a consensus is achieved (Boal, *Games* 244). If the community is homogeneous in some significant way, then participants are more likely to easily and honestly reach consensus.

But why might consensus be important for FT anyway? If the structure of TO breaks with theatrical tradition and instead welcomes multiple perspectives to the stage, why do FT performances repeatedly seek consensus? Perhaps, by welcoming the community's perspectives into the performance, FT surrenders a stable subject position around which to organize action. Ann Elizabeth Armstrong notes that the “lack of a stable subject” results in a “fluidity between categories that has been a strength of postmodernism, leading to a more complex notion of identity and multifaceted strategies of activism” (175). However, she also notes that: “Lack of a stable subject makes it difficult to define the problem and imagine an appropriate solution for collective action” (175). So, does TO's destabilization of narrative and subject threaten to interrupt the possibilities for FT to effectively generate political action? Given that FT



performances aim to theorize and rehearse action, the indeterminacy present in TO praxis ultimately creates a need for the stability of consensus. I suggest that, by asking a community to agree on a common understanding of a problem and a mutually agreeable response, consensus allows a community to sustain the focus necessary to successfully theorize, rehearse, and organize political action.

These moments of consensus, however, present certain challenges. In their paper “‘We Cry On the Inside’: Image Theatre and Rwanda’s Culture of Silence,” Brent Blair and Angus Fletcher argue that TO exhibits a tendency for dialectical synthesis—moments in which a plurality of perspectives is narrowed into a consensus. Blair and Fletcher argue that although TO allows many voices and unique subjectivities to be expressed, the goal is often to reach some sort of harmony between those perspectives. For example, they write that in image theatre, Boal aimed to “eliminate binaries by synthesizing them into a single bodily tableau that is ‘the most acceptable to all’” (26). They developed this critique after facilitating TO performances in post-genocide Rwanda, where they met a reluctance to discuss the genocide as well as contradictory memories of the genocide. In that context, TO’s moments of consensus became difficult challenges, and TO’s moments of dialectical synthesis became apparent. Blair and Fletcher write that the emphasis on the synthesis of binaries “takes root in Boal’s distinction between oppressor and oppressed, a distinction that makes more sense in the context of the political environment of Boal’s native Brazil than in the context of post-genocide Rwanda” (25). Blair and Fletcher warn their readers that TO techniques as originally developed (and especially TO’s moments of dialectical synthesis and consensus) may not transfer neatly into other cultures and contexts. Therefore, outside of the context in which FT initially developed, in communities which are not similarly homogeneous, there may be a higher likelihood that moments of consensus are dangerous or problematic, times in which important differences are erased or disregarded.

After all, during moments of consensus in FT, the Joker asks the community to speak with a unified

voice on a social or political issue. This can be read as an essentializing moment; consensus makes the community temporarily univocal and may thereby conceal social or political divisions between spect-actors, alienating those who disagree or only agree ambivalently. Although moments of consensus provide stable ground from which to organize, consensus in FT can also essentialize a community under a singular identity or worldview that obscures key differences between spect-actors. Do these moments of consensus (and possible essentialism) fundamentally undermine Boal's goal to respect and empower marginalized communities? The answer largely depends on how consensus is reached and on who essentializes. Do community members individually arrive at consensus, or do they instead passively follow someone else's lead, be it another spect-actor or the TO practitioner, who is potentially an outsider from the community?

Of course, a good Joker will not let her own personal biases affect the performance and instead will be mindful of spect-actors who aren't participating or who are dominating the forum. When describing FT in *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, Boal clearly states that "The Joker is not the president of a conference, he or she is not the custodian of the truth" (245). The Joker is there to facilitate the spect-actors' forum, not to direct her own forum. As such, Boal writes, "Jokers must avoid all actions which could manipulate or influence the audience. They must not draw conclusions which are not self-evident. They must always open the possible conclusions to debate, stating them in an interrogative rather than in an affirmative form" (261). Good Jokers will strive to not influence the performance themselves and will instead encourage each spect-actor to influence the forum. And if there are dissent or important differences within a community, it's the Joker's role to help bring that out. As Boal writes when describing image theatre, "The Joker must encourage people with different ideas of happiness to create their own images in order to avoid the repeated production of the same type of image, the same type of happiness (unless it is a particular characteristic of the group)" (189). Although consensus can be an essentializing moment in which important differences are erased, this isn't the goal, and in fact it's the Joker's role to work against it.

### **Strategic Uses of Essentialism in FT**

Since consensus is an important and potentially dangerous moment, Jokers should be mindful of how exactly consensus is reached, and I suggest that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's paradigm of strategic uses of essentialism is a useful tool for understanding and evaluating consensus in FT. Strategic essentialism is a political tactic in which a diverse, heterogeneous group puts forward a unified identity (which is in some sense a fiction) in order to organize efficiently around a common cause. Ann Elizabeth Armstrong writes that strategic essentialism "allows a group to admit certain 'truths' *circumstantially*—when strategically beneficial to do so—while staying open *ideologically* to differences and changing truths" (175). In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak argues that since the colonized subaltern subject is "irretrievably heterogeneous," we "must confront the impossibility" of recovering a singular voice from an oppressed community (26–28). Spivak notes that, nonetheless, we (scholars, artists, activists, citizens) inevitably essentialize heterogeneous populations. In "Feminist Activist Art: A Roundtable Forum," she says, "It is not possible to continue to live and think without the founding error of essences" (17). However, if activists are conscious about these moments of essentialism and encounter them strategically and mindfully, they can use moments of essentialism to help organize diverse groups around a common cause. That is, essentialism does not necessarily have to be reductionist and problematic; strategic uses of essentialism can effectively and justly enable coalitional politics. Sometimes it can be productive to assume "an essentialist identity within particular circumstances" (Armstrong 175). I propose that this is what happens in successful FT performances. Although spect-actors may possess serious differences, they are able to reach a genuine consensus—one that does not divide, silence, or exclude—by forming a coalition in regard to the staged oppression. Again, the Joker has an important role to play here, making sure all voices are heard, challenging and problematizing possible solutions, and ensuring moments of consensus are earned

and not artificial. As Armstrong writes, “Aware of the flows of power and working against them, I see the Joker sharing much in common with feminist theorists who are creating liminal spaces in which essentialism and constructionism are negotiated to build new coalitions” (182). When spect-actors reach consensus strategically, they are able to coalesce around a common problem and stand united around a mutually agreeable response.

But what specifically constitutes a “strategic” use of essentialism? Spivak writes, “Strategy’ is an embattled concept-metaphor and unlike ‘theory,’ its antecedents are not disinterested and universal” (“In a Word” 3). That is, strategic uses of essentialism must be situation-specific, and uses of essentialism are less likely to be strategic where they are applied in broader circumstances. Spivak also believes that strategic uses of essentialism must be self-conscious. She writes, “The strategic use of an essence as a mobilizing slogan or masterword like *woman* or *worker* or the name of a nation is, ideally, self-conscious for all mobilized” (3; emphasis in original). When the essentialist mobilizing slogan is used as part of a “lasting strategy,” however, there is a serious risk that it will cease to be self-conscious, that the slogan will become naturalized (3). At this point, Spivak writes, “the strategy freezes into something like what you call an essentialist position” (4). Therefore, strategic uses of essentialism should be ephemeral, situation-specific, and self-conscious for all those mobilized.

Before I expand upon the application of strategic uses of essentialism to FT, however, I must address Spivak’s own disavowal of the term. In 1993, Spivak herself first critiqued strategic essentialism in “In a Word: Interview.” In her critique, Spivak is largely concerned with how narrow strategic uses of essentialism are and how easy it is for essentialism to be deployed and perpetuated unreflectively. Spivak argues that essentialism is “something [that] one cannot not use” and calls for her readers to acknowledge its dangerousness and to carefully approach its use in each case (5). Tellingly, Spivak herself most often uses the phrase “strategic uses of essentialism,” rather than “strategic essentialism.” It’s almost as if the

shorter phrasing more strongly suggests an overarching theory—something quite the opposite of a *strategy*. In fact, Spivak first introduces the idea in “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography” (Morton 126). In this essay, she describes the work of the Subaltern Studies collective as “a *strategic* use of a positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (205; emphasis in original). In that essay, Spivak isn’t introducing a new theory called “strategic essentialism.” Instead, she is merely admiring one specific use of essentialism. However, Spivak’s idea hasn’t always been used as judiciously as she would like. In “Feminist Activist Art: A Roundtable Forum,” Spivak says that her “point was to be careful about how essentialism was used [...] And looking at the way in which this phrase was used, I found that the word ‘strategy’ was not seriously taken up” (17). She elaborates: “Strategy is something that is situation-specific. Most of the so-called ‘strategic uses of essentialism’ seemed to want to take this up as a lasting practice, rather than something that was called forth by some situation or other. It therefore seemed to me to be a way of engaging an unexamined essentialism and insisting that it was theoretically correct, since it was only a strategy” (17). Spivak’s critique of strategic essentialism is therefore mostly concerned with how the idea has been taken up and used, rather than with the heart of the idea itself. Spivak reminds her readers that when the term “strategic essentialism” is used to give unreflective, long-lasting practices a veneer of respectability, the idea does harmful work.

Despite Spivak’s critique of the term, I propose that it can be productive to think about strategic uses of essentialism in FT’s moments of consensus. FT performances are ephemeral, so by their nature, they resist being used for the sort of “lasting practice[s]” that Spivak critiques (Spivak et al. 17). As Adrian Jackson writes in his introduction to Boal’s *The Rainbow of Desire*, “Forum [Theatre] is always about what a roomful of people believe at a particular moment in time, and what one roomful of people believe is not necessarily the same as what the next roomful of people will believe” (xix). Moreover, spect-actors don’t essentialize around something long-lasting like an identity moniker. Instead, in FT, spect-actors strive for

consensus around a *tactic*, a specific method of resisting a lived oppression. So while FT as a technique may exist on the level of theory, a FT performance allows for situation-specific strategy. Admittedly, I would be misguided if I argued that FT in general, as a technique, strategically uses essentialism; however, I think TO practitioners can point to *specific* FT performances and say, "In this performance, this community of spect-actors strategically used essentialism to theorize and rehearse political action." Indeed, this is a hope for a FT performance and a metric by which to gauge success. In such a case, spect-actors may be said to genuinely reach consensus by temporarily setting aside their differences and forming a coalition around the staged oppression.

### **Achieving Strategic Uses of Essentialism in Praxis**

Spivak's notion of strategic uses of essentialism can provide a useful model for understanding how consensus ideally operates within FT performances. While spect-actors may possess significant differences and may be unable to unite around other issues, they are able to mutually recognize the staged oppression as legitimate and important to resolve, and they practice uniting around a specific tactic of resistance. Their coalition is ephemeral and situation-specific, and each spect-actor individually arrives at consensus through his or her own volition. When moments of consensus can be described like so, Jokers can be relatively confident that the consensus does not silence or marginalize spect-actors.

However, what all is needed or expected from a community in order to strategically reach consensus as I have outlined? What characteristics make a community of spect-actors more likely to be able to strategically use essentialism? I will now offer three criteria with which to evaluate a community's readiness to inclusively reach moments of genuine consensus in FT. I consider these criteria provisional rather than definitive, and hopefully they can provoke future debate on how to reach inclusive, genuine consensus in FT.

First, there must exist within the spect-actor community a common recognition that the staged

oppression “can happen.” After a FT scene is initially presented, the Joker asks the audience if the staged oppression is generally representative of reality or if it is a fantastical invention. If the community lacks a common recognition that the staged oppression can happen, there are few possibilities for further development of or engagement in the scene. In such a case, the Joker will typically skip to the next prepared scene or activity, ending the opportunity to engage the staged oppression and rehearse possibilities that may result in better outcomes for the protagonist.

In a particularly fascinating instance, TO practitioner and scholar Doug Paterson attempted to stage interventions after the community insisted the staged oppression could not happen. Just after September 11, 2001, Paterson facilitated a FT performance in Israel. The spect-actors were predominately Jewish, although some Arab spect-actors were present as well. The staged scene depicted a young Arab man taken away by police because he lacked his state ID. When asked if the staged scene could happen, the (mostly Jewish) spect-actors insisted that it could not. Paterson writes, “they thought the oppression offered by our group was patently untrue and not even possible” (112). Paterson thanked the spect-actors for their thoughts and started to move to another scene. However, two company members then began to insist the staged oppression was legitimate. An Arab actor in the ensemble *just that day* was almost taken away by Israeli police because, while wearing his costume pants, he lacked his state ID. Given this, the spect-actors reluctantly conceded that apparently the staged oppression could happen, so the performers proceeded to repeat the scene and invite interventions in which spect-actors were encouraged to replace the Arab man who lacked his state ID.

Typically, if spect-actors do not agree the staged oppression can happen, the scene is abandoned. This case is particularly insightful because, given the unique coincidence which illustrated the reality of the staged oppression, interventions were staged despite the spect-actors’ reluctance. Paterson remarked that the subsequent interventions were not particularly insightful or enthusiastic (113). It seems then that

underlying disagreement can limit spect-actors' engagement or creativity in the scene, thereby undermining the goals of FT. Common recognition of the oppression is a key part of a successful FT performance.

Without this common recognition, either the scene goes nowhere or the theorized action lacks substance.

Second, the community should have a shared sense of values or justice; otherwise, they may not be able to reach consensus at all. There can of course be disagreements—and some disagreements can indeed help foster valuable dialogue—but if spect-actors are working toward different ends, then the community will find that its ability to generate real solutions is interrupted. In “Boal and Beyond,” Sharon Green shows how partisanship over the central issue can stop a FT performance when she describes an incident which arose while TO practitioner Marc Weinblatt led a FT performance addressing racism at a Washington high school:

When Weinblatt asked the audience to suggest a course of action for the powerless character, a young skinhead raised his hand and asked to replace the racist white character in the scene, the character that the performers had envisioned as the powerful oppressor. Weinblatt asked the student, “You feel this person is oppressed?” in order to affirm the structure of Forum work. Indeed, he was, the student said, because he was denied his “First Amendment right” to express his racist ideas. The skinhead replaced the racist character in the scene and explained that the First Amendment gave him the right to express his ideas and make racial slurs. (50–51)

In this case, the “skinhead” obviously held a substantially different conception of justice than the other performers. The two parties perceived different situations as unjust. For the “skinhead,” the staged oppression was a denial of First Amendment rights. For the other performers, the staged oppression was racism. These divergent conceptions of justice locate agency in different characters on stage and envision disparate ideal worlds. That is, spect-actors with conflicting visions of justice desire to replace different



characters in the scene and wish to resolve the scene in different—and in this case seemingly contradictory—ways. The potential to theorize action around a particular goal thereby becomes stifled. As Fisher phrases it, “The assumption of homogeneity in the audience also makes T.O. problematic for dealing with political splits” (“Feminist Acts” 190). If a community does not have some common political grounding, then the community will not be able to use FT effectively to rehearse possible strategies of resistance and change.

By a “shared sense of justice,” I do not mean that the community must have identical understandings of justice and injustice. Some divergence is likely to help generate more innovative approaches. However, when spect-actors’ understandings of justice differ enough, as the above example indicates, the fundamental binary between oppressor and oppressed breaks down and with it the focus necessary to theorize and rehearse meaningful action. Beyond pausing the scene to enter into dialogue, FT lacks formal performance protocols for responding to such paradigmatic differences (Boal, *Games* 242–245). FT is therefore not particularly well-suited for bridging fundamental disagreements. When a heterogeneous community has sufficiently divergent conceptions of justice, FT is unable to simultaneously dialogue about those differences and meaningfully rehearse action.

Third, consensus is more likely to be reached strategically when there exists a sense of belonging between spect-actors. Whether the community members are close friends or colleagues or whether they are strangers brought together by a common cause, FT performances tend to proceed more effectively when spect-actors have a sense of community or belonging. If some spect-actors lack a sense of camaraderie with their fellow participants, they may be disinclined to participate in the performance, thereby jeopardizing its efficacy. Fisher has noted that when doing FT “in audiences where some [...] lack a sense of belonging or feel especially isolated and powerless, the potential for participation may not fully develop” (“Learning to Act” 15). Boal has noted that traditionally, TO performances do not include both oppressed

persons and their oppressors; rather, the performances cater primarily to oppressed groups of persons (Cohen-Cruz and Schutzman 73). The inclusion of oppressors in the performances, with whom oppressed spect-actors likely feel more animosity than kinship, can significantly inhibit participation in the performance. If spect-actors lack common ties or if there are significant power differences within the community, spect-actors may not feel safe to take the risks necessary for a successful performance, and if spect-actors don't speak up when they disagree, they can be excluded or silenced during moments of consensus. For example, Marc Weinblatt sometimes divides participants along the lines of race when doing TO. He has remarked, "The few times I have seen significant resistance to this idea, it is almost always, for example, white people who take issue with the division and people of color who breathe a sigh of relief" (26). He has observed that "some things can happen in separate caucus groups that would rarely, if ever, happen when the group is together. Or it would take an inordinate amount of time to create the trust necessary for full disclosure to happen within a mixed group" (26). When spect-actors are comfortable with one another, they are more comfortable taking the stage, trying out their ideas, and voicing their dissent. This means, however, that if a community of spect-actors lacks a sense of belonging or camaraderie with one another, genuine consensus is less likely to be achieved.

A common recognition of the oppression is necessary to begin staging interventions, a shared sense of justice is necessary to reach mutually agreeable solutions, and a sense of belonging helps ensure moments of consensus do not exclude or silence dissenting individuals. When these criteria are met within a community, spect-actors in FT are more likely to be able to strategically use essentialism to reach authentic moments of consensus and rehearse possibilities for resistance and change.

### **Conclusion**

I hope that the provisional criteria I have outlined can be a useful instrument for TO practitioners and Jokers, and that with it, FT facilitators can better evaluate whether a particular community is well-suited

to strategically achieving a genuine consensus and forming an inclusive political coalition. If a community lacks the proposed criteria, however, then perhaps another TO performance method would be more appropriate and beneficial. For example, if a community does not agree that the staged oppression can happen, perhaps the Joker can transition into image theatre techniques rather than FT. Image theatre, which asks spect-actors to create an image of oppression acceptable to all, negotiates the boundaries and nature of the staged oppression in a way that FT does not (Boal, *Games* 181–182). Alternatively, if the Joker observes that spect-actors lack a sense of camaraderie, it might be prudent to facilitate some short community-building exercises before progressing into FT. Boal provides many such exercises to draw from in *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*. These games can lower inhibitions, build camaraderie, and help make spect-actors more comfortable voicing their ideas and possible dissent.

Although Spivak critiqued the term, I argue that her notion of strategic uses of essentialism provides a useful framework with which to better understand and work toward consensus in FT. Spivak does have an important critique of how her idea has been used, but I believe her idea can still fruitfully be applied in the context of FT. Finally, I would like to suggest that, since applied theatre practices in general are often ephemeral and community-situated like FT, perhaps other applied theatre techniques may also be worthwhile sites in which to consider how strategic uses of essentialism can help internally-diverse communities practice forming inclusive coalitions committed to resisting specific issues.

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