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Review of *The Theatre of the Oppressed for Beginners* by Valeria Appel

Ola Kraszpuska¹

A review of Valeria Appel's self-published book The Theatre of the Oppressed for Beginners.

Valeria Appel's book "The Theatre of the Oppressed for Beginners" was independently published in the USA in March of 2019, San Bernardino, CA. The text consists of five brief chapters and a conclusion, with a total length of 51 pages. The book retails for \$8.10.

While the book is intended for beginners, it is loaded with content without providing much context. A theatre practitioner with a good understanding of theatre practices and history would find this useful as a brief overview of TO (Theatre of the Oppressed). A novice to both TO and theatre may find this text too challenging to follow.

The introduction lays out the structure of the book, brings up Augusto Boal's theatre, and calls it a "universal language." It then further breaks down the topic describing what is covered in each of the text's five chapters.

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The first chapter presents theatre elements that are utilized by Theatre of the Oppressed. The reader needs to come to the text with a prior understanding of these conventions, as they are mentioned and analyzed throughout, but not explained. The chapter starts by bringing up the dividing line originating in Greek theatre, dividing the performers and the audience. "There is a subcategory of actors, the protagonists and the chorus. The audience or mass is confronted to [sic] their reality while they play role [sic] by never being able to change the action on stage (9-10)." The author then further describes the limited relationship between audience and actors, achieved through *Empathia* and *Catharsis*. Appel then moves on to discuss Bertold Brecht and the effect of Epic theatre on changing this established dynamic, with actors directly addressing the audience. Brecht's techniques of defamiliarisation work by breaking the established conventions and therefore encouraging the spectators to think critically about what is presented to them. While this chapter establishes context from which Boal drew inspiration, it is not crucial to the author's focus on theatre's semiotic aspect.

Unlike other forms of theatre, TO promotes dialogue instead of the traditional relationship between actor and audience, as discussed in chapter two. "Boal puts forth an arena of real action rather than a fiction of action (16)." The dialogue is designed to establish relationships with communities and societies and rehearse a real life transformation. Time and context on Augusto Boal is provided to better understand how TO originated. It identifies "The Oppressor" and ties the ideas in with the work of Paulo Freire. Boal's early work with poor communities, and the use of photographs as the first step of creating a symbolic language is explored. The concept of the "spect-actor" is defined. Forum Theatre and its stages are also summarized. "Forum theatre triggers the need for carrying out in reality the actions that are rehearsed in the workshop. In a way, it leaves the spectator dissatisfied, incomplete and subsequently h/she seeks to complete that gap by performing a change in reality (22)." The chapter also discourses the idea of Boal as an institution as well as geography affecting the context of TO performance. This offers a nice overview for a reader new to TO practices.

This leads to a third chapter dedicated TO practices in the UK context, in light of the country's organizations and policy. TO falls under alternative theatre in the UK and the author takes some time to analyze what that means and how it is defined. The term "fringe" is related. "The term 'fringe' first appeared in the 1960s at Edinburgh Theatre Festival. [...] 'Fringe' applied to all the theatre groups that were showing something alternative to conventional and recognized theatre (26-27)." However, as any alternative form becomes more popular, it tends to lose its original oppositional aspect. "Consequently, in a number of cases the so-called 'political theatre' is de-politicised. When looking at the organizations that implement the TO it is important to consider whether they de-politicise it when it is used as 'the norm' (28)." The chapter mentions two organizations in the UK that specifically revolve around TO and Forum Theatre: *Cardboard Citizens* and *Pan Intercultural Arts*, whose members are interviewed later on. It seems that the number of organizations interested in these practices is growing, but this could be related to changes in policy. "It is difficult to assess whether organizations are a consequence of the institutions' idiosyncrasy or the path that original art forms are currently following (35)."

The methodology used to study TO, discussed in chapter 4, varies from other means of theatre research and relies on interrogation strategies as the main technique. "The interviewer uses 'fishing' techniques and asks open ended questions. This type of interrogation can lead the interviewee to digress in which case; he/she has to be brought back to the original topic of conversation. In some cases, digression can lead to other topics that are equally important (36)." Appel also offers a breakdown of what she refers to as the ethnographic interview.

The final chapter investigates how varying theatre practitioners utilize TO techniques using information gathered via the methodology listed above. She asserts that "The current arts policy supports the ideas of inclusion, diversity and empowerment of the youth. As a result, a number of theatre companies and organizations adopt the mask of TO (38)." Nevertheless, she claims that there are many reasons for the growing popularity of the movement, including its suitability as a vehicle for communication. "It is a

language that listens to its audience and adapts to its needs. This flexibility is not only an intrinsic characteristic of the techniques but a requirement to make it work (40).” The physicality of the method is also noted as important and versatile. The criticism is given however, that “the adoption of the TO idiosyncrasy might work as an argument to get funding (43).” Boal’s perception as an “institution” or “celebrity” is likewise condemned.

The book concludes with several questions. “The multiple and postmodern identity that the tool of theatre allows is now reduced to a post-colonial binary opposition that reminds that of master/slave. Who is watching the oppressed? Whose gaze constructs the sentence “Theatre of the Oppressed”? The oppressed or the oppressor? Or is there still room for third parties (47)?”

With these and other questions unanswered, the book is not what one might expect from an introductory text. With a brevity of form and chock-full of content, the text lacks a clear purpose. It is uncertain as to who is the intended audience.

Overall, the text reads like a collage of quotes, chosen well, but not original to the author. However, the brief introduction to all of these ideas makes the bibliography a valuable resource for further reading. That said, the overall effect is choppy and hard to follow, lacking a linear progression needed for an introductory text. Appel’s book may be intended for a novice to the method, but it would not be a good fit for anyone without a prior theatre background.