



Volume 4

2019

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Recommended Citation

Armstrong, Ann Elizabeth PhD (2019) "Book Review of Radical Doubt: The Joker System, After Boal," *Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Journal*: Vol. 4 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/ptoj/vol4/iss1/6>

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Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Journal
Vol. 4, Issue 1 (Fall 2019)

Review of *Radical Doubt: The Joker System, After Boal* by Mady Schutzman. (London and New York: Routledge, 2019).

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A review of Radical Doubt: The Joker System, After Boal by Mady Schutzman. (London and New York: Routledge, 2019).

Radical Doubt is a significant contribution to scholarship on Boal, TO and critical pedagogy. Author Mady Schutzman integrates the complexities of performance studies with concrete and evocative examples that make this book relevant to scholars, activists, educators, and artists alike. The book offers practitioners of social change work, particularly those who devise theatre with youth in community-based contexts, opportunities to engage with praxis in reflective case studies. For critical educators, *Radical Doubt* makes a powerful case for performance and humor as liberatory pedagogy in and of themselves.

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Schutzman, a self-proclaimed “unfaithful disciple” of Boal, weaves together jokes, autobiography, creative case studies, and interdisciplinary scholarship to elucidate the complex work of social change. Honoring the depth and resonance of Boal’s life-long work, Schutzman takes the Joker System as a point of departure for a journey that resists the typical linear trajectory of an academic book. Instead, she encourages dialogue, engagement and non-linear reading, as well as plenty of laughter. Schutzman’s writing closely reflects the values of the Joker System, engaging provocative gestures, inexplicable juxtapositions, stylistic tangents, impossible riddles, and a utopian desire to build community. In short, she practices “radical doubt” in the style and structure of this text, including chapters in various formats like a play script, an encyclopedia, an article on praxis, personal stories, and theoretical articles grounded in anthropology, psychoanalysis, and performance studies. In this review, I follow the book’s outline that explains the Joker System, provides a case study of its application, and reflects on its significance through various theoretical lenses as well as autobiographical storytelling.

The Joker System is an often-overlooked set of techniques that Boal created at the Arena Theatre in the 1960s. A mere 34 of 197 pages are devoted to it in *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal 156-190), and a few articles have documented productions like *Arena conta Zumbi* (1965). Not to be confused with the joker of Forum Theatre, the *Joker System* is a playwriting/devising method for ensembles who want to interrogate and reimagine historical or cultural myths. The “joker” of the Joker System is more of an emcee, a trickster who blurs the lines between fact and fiction. A chorus portrays multiple characters in a Joker System performance that is characterized by chaos and carnival, a “healthy disorder of liminal space” (Schutzman *Radical Doubt* 30). Many have considered the Joker System a transitional stage in the development of later more “mature” concepts and techniques (well before the spect-actor was born). But Schutzman rejects this proposition, instead engaging the Joker System as a microcosm of all of Boal’s techniques as well as a model for the complex ethics and values underpinning them. “The Joker System is itself a stage, an environment for civic cross examination, active witnessing, journalistic unearthing, and

courageous exercises into the relationship between ‘what is’ and ‘what if’” (Schutzman *Radical Doubt* 13). The book unfolds this relationship between “what is” and “what if,” looking at what it means to create art, community, and political resistance while suspended in that liminal space.

In Part I: “The Joker System on Stage,” Schutzman reflects upon her own experiment with the Joker System in 2006 (co-written with BJ Dodge). As the playwright of a performance devised with youth at LA’s Plaza de la Raza Youth Theatre Program, Schutzman puts her own creative work in a critical context. With much doubt and skepticism, she reconstructs the creative journey and its final destination, providing the script of *Upset!*. Schutzman doesn’t provide a “how to” manual for using the Joker System, though she does provide very detailed and pragmatic information that can be used in the reader’s own transfer of the techniques. In her discussion, Schutzman practices “radical doubt” by questioning the process and providing openings that help us understand the context and the mechanics of this powerful pedagogy for the youth involved. Schutzman resists any attempt to interpret *for* the youth. She doesn’t insert her interpretation of the crises that erupt in the creative process. Instead, she lets the youth’s voices speak through the play text. In *Upset!*, she marks the lines written by students, the moments where they comment on the action and reveal their own personal position in relation to the play. Indeed, this is an important intrinsic value of the Joker System. Building upon a Brechtian strategy, the Joker System promotes personal agency by dramatizing the youth’s reactions to historical events. In this way, the creative work resists the impulse towards authentic representation and, instead, plays with the representation to find multiple perspectives.

The play, *Upset!*, re-enacts the 1992 beating and trial of Rodney King and compares his story to Claudette Colvin’s, the fifteen-year old predecessor to Rosa Park in the 1955 Montgomery Bus protest. As civil rights icons, Rodney King and Claudette Colvin embody personal failures, providing a complex contradiction that invites inquiry from the youth who are studying the civil rights movement through their own representation of it. The performance incorporates popular songs, slapstick and clowning, as well as

“The Wheel of Fortune” and “The Twilight Zone.” Readers fluent in TO techniques will recognize many moments that resemble *Rainbow of Desire*, and others that echo techniques of rehearsing for Forum theatre. The play unflinchingly engages violence and systems of oppression, while also providing spaces of joy, inquiry and discovery. Several moments of wisdom from the youth continue to resonate throughout the next section of the book. When Claudette Colvin asks the Judge of Rodney’s trial, “You promised you would rewrite history! Why didn’t you change the outcome?,” the Judge/Joker replies, “I tried. But I can’t do it alone. Maybe the desire to change is not strong enough. Maybe what is outrageous doesn’t outrage long enough. It’s not easy to change the world!” (65). In a later chapter, Schutzman unpacks the importance of ritual participation and witnessing, noting how “ritual makes us want to do what we have to do” (101). In the play script, we see how the youth are working within the space of the “what is” and “what if” in order to build a community that might enable future action. The youth embody and enact their own tacit knowledge resonating their wisdom unearthed in the creative process.

Part II: “The Joker System off the stage” takes a radically different form. Each of these 4 chapters can be read independently as a unique meditation on the ethics and values of the Joker System and arts for social change more broadly. Schutzman provides mini-introductions to each essay, explicitly positioning each chapter in relationship to the book’s themes. Chapter 3, “Being approximate: the Ganser syndrome and beyond,” builds upon Boal’s notion of “resonance,” and how resonance, rather than identification and recognition, allows one to speak metaphorically and approach a problem on a “slant,” productively opening up new sites of inquiry. Using the Ganser syndrome² as a case study, she explains how healing from trauma involves exploring the terrain between sense and nonsense. Celebrating the potential of chaos, she doesn’t romanticize Boal’s anarchist leanings. In Chapter 4, “What we talk about when we talk about

² Ganser syndrome is a condition in which a person deliberately and consciously acts as if they have a physical or mental illness when they are not really sick.

community,” Schutzman approaches the theme of community on a slant, using ‘pataphysics, the structure of jokes, and ritual theory to engage the paradoxes of community-based work. How do we know whether or not community-based work actually accentuates hierarchies and exclusion rather than resists them? When does playing with ritual create a productive liminal space that is rife with the potential for change?

Schutzman offers the Joker System as one way to negotiate the boundaries of a community while staying open to its indeterminate state and resisting homogeneity. “The Joker System is a structure that fosters alliance building while, at once, offers up the very tools needed to take the structure apart, lest it become too predictable, too safe. (Schutzman 110)” In addition to the Joker System, jokes become sophisticated tools of both community building and destabilizing community. Schutzman engages with scholars of comedy and examples of socialist utopian communities to theorize an ethical praxis.

Chapter 5: “Encyclopedia of Radical Doubt” enacts an interdisciplinary community that riffs on terminology and themes emanating from Boal’s work, as well as other themes from systems theory. Schutzman explains, “I became increasingly interested in studying the infrastructural dynamics of different ‘systems’ across multiple disciplines toward detecting otherwise unnoticed correspondences” (129). Interdisciplinary scholars will delight in the fascinating juxtaposition of TO terms with quantum physics, game theory, and digital media, as well as terms from critical pedagogy. Though the relationship to TO may be opaque at times, the encyclopedia resonates Boal’s work to show how TO must engage dynamic relationships in systematic ways. The format and writing of the encyclopedia invites cross-referencing and reflection through entries such as “Flow,” “Intentional Error,” “Distanciation,” “Fractal,” and “Mirror Neuron” written by scholars from diverse fields such as mathematics, digital media, technical theatre, systems biology, popular culture and physics.

In the final chapter, “The joker never dies or the world ‘as if,’” Schutzman assumes the role of joker as she tells the story of attending an international conference on humor and during the same trip touring Auschwitz. The juxtaposition of the site of unimaginable trauma with scholars attempting to theorize the

ineffable mechanics of comedy offers a productive contradiction for Schutzman to explore the Boal's famous call to have the "courage to be happy." Here she critiques the straight jacket of identity while also tracing the challenges of finding community across difference. Family stories and jokes punctuate the entire book, and these interruptions bring home how happiness and struggle are bound together. Indeed, the joker runs wild. Deploying classic gags, Schutzman explores the productive intersection of philosophy and joking to deflate her own academic point of view, creating a lively and grounded writing style. She demonstrates how humor builds the skill of paradoxical literacy and non-dualistic thinking that keep one open to social change.

Schutzman's *Radical Doubt* is a significant contribution to our scholarship after Boal. Embracing the complexities of current political realities, Schutzman demonstrates how TO helps us navigate the contradictions of our time. She resists formulas, prescriptions and absolutes, and instead instills a deep appreciation for humor, community, and indeterminacy. Schutzman has put the joker within the larger tradition of clowning and tricksters (her 2006 essay, "Jok(er)ing: The Joker Runs Wild," is the seed that clearly germinated *Radical Doubt*), and this book builds on that trajectory by engaging performance studies and humor studies to embrace the expansive project of generating social change through performance. While *Radical Doubt* is not a "how to" manual, this book will stimulate one's own creative thinking to innovate Boal's techniques guided by its core values.

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