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Virtual Newspaper Theatre: Zoom as a Theatrical Playing Space

Nabra Nelson

This article presents findings from a virtual Newspaper Theatre workshop that took place via Zoom on May 5, 2020 through Seattle Rep. Nelson reflects on the way that the constraints of the Zoom format can add meaning to Theatre of the Oppressed performance techniques in the era of quarantine and social distancing due to COVID-19. The article describes elements of the one-minute performances created during the one-and-a-half-hour workshop, and how the virtual sphere interacted with them and even enhanced them in meaningful ways. Nelson also describes “production” elements unique to Zoom, and the nature of the virtual “spect-actor.”

Theatre of the Oppressed is, by necessity, a flexible practice. Oppression takes different forms in each community and in each new decade. As a practice that examines injustice, Theatre of the Oppressed must be able to adapt to new forms of oppression. In this article, I present my experience leading an original Newspaper Theatre workshop via Zoom and make the case for Newspaper Theatre as an effective and enriching virtual practice.

COVID-19 has heavily affected theater practice by forcing us to redefine what community connection looks like. We cannot touch each other or meet in person. We cannot talk intimately. When we see others in person, our faces are covered, and when we meet virtually our bodies are obscured. Many Theatre of the Oppressed exercises require physical touch, as a method of ensemble building or de-mechanization. But the breadth of the practice allows practitioners to reexamine the core goals of these exercises and rethink them for the virtual sphere. We can still build ensemble and de-mechanize our bodies and minds virtually, and in fact we must.

Newspaper Theatre is a Theatre of the Oppressed practice in which a newspaper article (or articles) is dramatized into a theatrical performance. Even the simple act of reading a newspaper article out loud in a group already

transforms the text into a public event (Noy Meir 2019). There are a variety of techniques that Boal outlines in his book *Theatre of the Oppressed* that are meant to assist an ensemble in the transformation of the news into a performance. Examples of techniques include improvising movement on top of the text of the article, and adding supplementary information like images, sounds, historical context, and personal stories. In this transformation, myriad goals may be accomplished by the ensemble: a subtext may be revealed; additional context – whether societal or personal – may be added; or a socio-political commentary may be infused. Ultimately, the audience is invited to interpret the news article(s) in a more complex or nuanced way than they would from reading the article on their own.

I was drawn to Newspaper Theatre recently because it is a practice that facilitates reflection on current events through theater. I found myself checking the news more often than usual once the pandemic started and felt a need to discuss and digest how the news was affecting me. I realized how helpful casual daily interactions were in creating space to process current events. The daily news was directly and actively affecting every person on the planet, so the need to process collectively felt especially crucial. My goals for the workshop were to experiment with Theatre of the Oppressed techniques virtually with an intent to continue offering similar workshops via Seattle Rep, and to create a space for interactive reflection on current events for the public due to an anecdotal public desire for more participatory virtual offerings, personal reflection, or escapism in the wake of a global pandemic and social uprising.

The workshop I led was organized through Seattle Rep for the public and took place on May 5, 2020. It was one hour and a half long and was geared toward adult participants, but was open to ages 15 and up. Seven adults attended. Because it was free and open to the public, the participants who registered were somewhat random. Not surprisingly, however, the group consisted mostly of theater educators, other theater practitioners, and Seattle Rep patrons, since the workshop was advertised through Seattle Rep and through my personal network.

I pre-selected two recent news articles that participants could choose from: “Trump admin monitoring coronavirus conditions in Latin America, weighing next steps” (Alvarez and Sands 2020) from CNN and “One of the Largest Native American Tribes Has Just Voted to End Their 100-Year Dependency on Coal” (Good News Network 2019). Participants could choose which article they wanted to focus on during the workshop. I chose the two articles carefully – to allow for participants to choose escapism through the Good News Network article, or for reflection through the COVID-19 focused article. In addition, I wanted them both to be quite recent, in keeping with the responsive nature of Newspaper Theater, and from relatively un-biased news sources (excluding stations like Fox News or MSNBC). Finally, I wanted the articles to focus on stories of communities of color since I approach all of my work through a racial justice and Native-first lens. That is why one of the articles focused on an indigenous tribe and one of them focused on the Latinx experience. In addition, the websites themselves provided plenty of auxiliary text (especially from advertisements) that could be used to demonstrate the technique of Complementary Reading. Thankfully, the group was evenly split between the articles, creating two groups of four (I joined the “good news” group).

We started with introductions, of each of the participants and of Theatre of the Oppressed as a practice. Then, the bulk of the workshop focused on the techniques of Simple Reading, Complementary Reading, and Parallel Action (Boal 1985, 143). For each of these techniques, the groups split into breakout rooms, assigning an order amongst themselves to read each paragraph either for context or as a Complementary Reading – integrating additional information (usually from ads and suggested articles) that they saw on the webpage. The first two techniques facilitated deep comprehension of the articles and introduced participants to theatrical interpretation.

For the third technique, Parallel Action, I asked each participant to come up with a very brief movement “to show either the context in which the reported event really occurred, or to complement the spoken story” (Noy Meir 2019).

Since they had already read through the articles twice as a group in the previous exercises, they were each familiar enough with the content to create individual movements. Then, in their breakout rooms, they were tasked with identifying a portion of the article that best complemented their movement, reading that portion (as either a Simple Reading or Complementary Reading) alongside their movement or assigning a reader from their group, and finding a presentation order for each individual's piece so as to create a group piece. Within fifteen minutes, each group had created a one-minute ensemble Newspaper Theatre performance.

The groups rejoined the main room and presented their pieces to each other. The presentation portion revealed a great deal about how the virtual, and specifically Zoom, format interacts with Newspaper Theatre performance practice. Most notably, perhaps, was the way in which the format broke down barriers between performer and audience. Since the sounds and movements were not always coming from the same person, everyone had to be in "gallery view" so that they could see everybody on screen at the same time. The audience and actors were mixed together on each person's screen, effectively necessitating that all audience members become "spect-actors." Listening became a performance, since we were all within the playing space. We knew that at any moment anyone on screen could become part of the performance. Our eyes merged the actors and the audience into one cohesive performance troupe.

One of the pieces began with an actor coughing repeatedly for a few seconds before another actor began reading the portion of the article that complemented the coughing (as their selected movement). A participant later commented that he was unsure if the coughing was part of the performance and had become worried about the health of the actor. Considering that the piece was about COVID-19, whose symptoms include dry coughing, this moment of unintentional Invisible Theatre enhanced the Newspaper Theatre commentary in a way that we did not anticipate and that may not have happened in an in-person setting. The fact that there was no clear distinction

between the actors and audience, and that the performance space was not designated, as it would have been in-person, made for a unique and powerful experience.

The specific technology we used functioned almost as a production element, similar to stage lighting or scenery. When a person makes a sound on Zoom, a bright outline appears around their video square. This draws focus to any person making a sound, intentional or unintentional. In one piece, several actors performed the same movement while another actor spoke lines from the article. The “lighting,” in the form of the highlighted box, gave the effect of a spotlight on the speaker, while the movement ensemble seemed simultaneously “upstage” and intermingling with the audience.

Participants also experimented with distance from the camera to enhance their performances. One movement involved the actor’s body receding away from the camera as her hand moved closer. Within a video call, we get very used to the stagnant placement of each person relative to their camera. Any break from this unspoken norm is amplified. How one interacts with the constricted playing space of their Zoom “box” creates an extra layer of potential meaning within their movements.

The final portion of the workshop was an overview, with examples, of the remaining techniques of Newspaper Theatre outlined by Boal in “Theatre of the Oppressed” – Crossed Reading, Rhythmical Reading, Improvisation, Historical, Reinforcement, Concretion of the Abstract, and Text Out of Context (Boal 1985, 143). Through our conversation about these elements, the group identified possibilities that could *only* be achieved in the virtual format. For example, having actors in two distinctly different locations simultaneously. The example they came up with was having one actor in the Navajo Nation and another actor in a coal mine for a theatrical piece about the article “One of the Largest Native American Tribes Has Just Voted to End Their 100-Year Dependency on Coal.” We also discussed how virtual backgrounds could be used to create setting in a unique way. The virtual format

expands access in a way that, in a more involved Newspaper Theatre process, could be used to amplify key perspectives and create unique theatrical commentaries which enhance one's understanding of current events.

While the workshop met its goals – successfully translating Newspaper Theatre techniques into the virtual sphere and facilitating deep reflection on current events – the virtual experience of Theatre of the Oppressed does not fully replace the in-person experience. Ensemble-building and even physical touch and proximity are so integral to many aspects of the practice. One potentially overlooked barrier is technological fatigue. There is only so much screen time that most people want to consume in a day, which limits the time we have to build ensemble and dive deeply into any one theatrical analysis.

The Zoom space creates a new type of spatial relationship which adds a fascinating analytical dimension, especially to Newspaper Theatre (which is a practice that is meant to comment on current events and their effect on society). But I simultaneously feel somewhat limited regarding which aspects of the practice we could try virtually. Though all ten Newspaper Theatre techniques outlined by Boal could theoretically be adapted to Zoom, Rhythmic Reading and Reinforcement would prove difficult because they necessitate integrating music or images, which do not function as smoothly in a virtual format. Sounds do not overlap well in Zoom, and visuals can obscure the actors by taking over the playing space in screen-share mode.

It is also important to mention that, while the virtual sphere allows for increased accessibility in some ways – geographically, and for many people with disabilities – it also decreases accessibility for others, namely those without access to the required technology (consistent and relatively high-speed internet, a webcam, and a microphone). Also, the way that COVID-19 has affected many individuals socio-economically heavily affects the amount of time people have to participate in activities that are considered “non-essential.” Newspaper Theatre, however, can be impactful. It can create positive change through action-oriented self-reflection and provide a method of coping with current events.

Overall, I was amazed at how naturally Newspaper Theatre translated into the online sphere. The one-minute pieces that each group ultimately created were insightful and well-crafted, all devised within an hour of being together. Beyond simply *working*, the techniques were enhanced by the Zoom format. The format itself is a visual manifestation of the effect of current events on the lives of the participants. Commenting on the oppressive elements of the news while in a constrained format brings a new layer of analysis to the performance of Newspaper Theatre when on Zoom. Actors' interactions with their Zoom boxes, the "lighting" inherent in the software, and the versatility in choosing space, add production elements that can additionally enhance the practice. And the necessary transformation of all participants into spect-actors creates an immersive atmosphere. While I intend to continue to experiment with Newspaper Theatre on Zoom, I am also curious as to how the virtual environment might interact with Image Theater practice, or even Forum Theater. And, once we can gather, I am sure that six-foot apart Theatre of the Oppressed workshops will demonstrate new ways in which the constraints of the times lead to fascinating and unexpected revelations.

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