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Joker's Log 2020: An Odyssey

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Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Journal

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Joker's Log 2020: An Odyssey

Julian Pimiento¹

Join our passengers as we embark on a voyage of Theatre of the Oppressed discovery during the destabilization of 2020. Experience one Joker's facilitating choices and how those decisions led to unexpected pedagogical destinations.

Dedicated to mis amigas y amigos de ESCUCHA.

And to my co-Joker co-conspirator and partner in chaos Maddox Guerilla. Without your wisdom and harmony this journey would not have been possible.

To support the praxis of being a Joker I kept a journal of my facilitating with a Theatre of the Oppressed acting troupe at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in New York City during the spring of 2020.

This is the final entry of that journal.

We boarded with 11 passengers and 10 two-hour sessions on Zoom and WhatsApp. The travelers were Latina and Latino older adult immigrants. They were elders. Wise. Stubbornly beautiful and young at heart. The passengers arrived from working class neighborhoods throughout New York City and we communicated exclusively in Spanish. They gathered for a creative journey they have taken for several years.

¹ **Julian Pimiento**, Theatre of the Oppressed New York City, holds an MA in Applied Theatre from The City University of New York. Julian was born in Bucaramanga, Colombia and nurtured his passion for immigrant and human rights growing up undocumented in white-centric working class Greenpoint, Brooklyn. He explores the complexities and injustices of cultural and structural assimilation through Jokering, playwriting and directing.

During boarding we learned the passengers were struggling to survive racial inequalities magnified by the pandemic. Some had trouble finding housing because of gentrification and access to health care due to loss of employment. There were disposable essential workers who risked death to feed their families. Others were recovering from COVID-19 or from being unable to comfort loved ones as they drew their final breath in quarantined hospital rooms far from their homeland.

As a conductor of this expedition I enthusiastically envisioned artistically ambitious destinations. As we departed I was tempted to take the fast track to propel us towards a product. Best product ever! I was settling into a pattern I have experienced as a spectator and a Joker. The Theatre of the Oppressed field can be guilty of rushing to quench its thirst for hip remixing of games and theatre ripped from the headlines. I agree good theatre makes powerful statements. However, during these destabilizing times we've been offered the opportunity to pause and assess how to reconnect with the essence of our work. Theatre? Theatre seemed distant when you are alone, sick, grieving and fucking broke!

I hit the brakes and switched tracks.

I aimed to please my palate for creating participant-driven theatre by exploring listening as a tool for community building. By actively listening, I applied Friere's use of dialogue to "discover generative themes" and "the thought-language with which men and women refer to reality" (97). To investigate these themes I resisted the urge to facilitate. Instead I secured my headphones, raised the volume and experienced what was shared. The reality I heard was the need for employment, health related resources, and an understanding friend to lend an ear.

Because of the pandemic we were uncertain if our journey would take place or be shorten. Theatre of the Oppressed New York City accessed grants which afforded the actors economic compensation for the 10 sessions. After ensuring stipends, as an organization we gathered and shared information about the coronavirus response and other resources to support the community's needs. I also individually held space for each passenger to unpack what we didn't have time to address collectively.

This community was established before my arrival. I replaced an admired Joker therefore needed to earn their respect and trust. These are community organizers with years of activism and lived experience. It was in the intimate moments that I built the trust needed to ask them to be vulnerable. Our conversations also allowed me to be vulnerable and heard. What they heard was not a director or facilitator, but a fellow Latino neighbor asking to join THEIR community and learn from their wisdom.

By being patient and listening I also learned that while the participants had experience doing Theatre of the Oppressed, filtering their knowledge through electronic devices and unstable internet connections suppressed their self-expression. This new world of Zoom became yet another oppression. The Zoom oppression was difficult for me to identify because it was already normalized for anyone facilitating online as part of our new existence. Everyone was having trouble adjusting to Zoom so don't worry about it. This mindset led me to use Zoom and WhatsApp simultaneously during the initial stages of our journey.

Synthesizing and analyzing each session, I realized those on WhatsApp were being marginalized because their audio and video were inferior to those on Zoom. Also, they could only interact with each other, which limited community engagement and development. Through journaling and reflection I learned my responsibility was to get all participants on the same platform to face the Zoom oppressor.

Once they figured out the steps to download and log-in, their voice grew louder, the community felt whole and

the obstacle was cleared. These elder passengers joining the digital new world during a pandemic WAS the revolutionary theatrical piece! As a result of growing comfortable and confident on this new platform we also created a play. By listening to the actors needs, I created the circumstances in which a play could emerge; instead of focusing solely on making a play as our only goal. Our organic process cultivated a hybrid of forum theatre and storytelling drama which embodied themes beyond the coronavirus. Actors highlighted oppressions such as domestic abuse, police brutality, and immigrant rights that predate the pandemic and for which there is no vaccine in development. The adventure culminated with a live Zoom performance before the Theatre of the Oppressed New York City administration and other Jokers.

Allowing listening to guide me instead of a predetermined agenda offered the participants an equal partnership in the creative and relationship building process. Together we created a reciprocal learning journey which transformed and healed me along with the passengers. Learning to navigate the technology of the twenty-first century empowered the travelers to become engineers of their own locomotives and the destinations available for exploration are boundless!

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum, 2000.