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## Editorial Comment: Liberatory Theatre in Institutional Contexts

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*Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Journal*

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## **Editorial Comment: Liberatory Theatre in Institutional Contexts**

Joschka Köck and Mark Weinberg<sup>1</sup>

*Two reports in this issue of PTOJ document theatre projects in non-theatre institutions. “Abbreviating Boal at the Louisiana Old State Capitol Museum: Using Image Theatre,” documents and evaluates a series of workshops with young people after they had seen an exhibit about ‘the power of children.’ “Theatre of the Beat’s Restorative Justice Theatre Program” evaluates a project in which incarcerated women were afforded the opportunity to explore through theatre ways to exist within the prison system that will diminish punishment and interpersonal conflict, but not necessarily raise questions about the system itself. This editorial comment raises concerns about how TO functions in institutional contexts, especially since the work may unintentionally support the goals of an institution in which it is undertaken, with reference to these two reports.*

As editors of this journal, we believe it is important to point out that liberatory theatre work must always be examined in context, especially since the work may unintentionally support the goals of an institution in which it is undertaken.

Two reports in this issue raise concerns about how TO functions in an institutional context. “Abbreviating Boal at the Louisiana Old State Capitol Museum: Using Image Theatre,” documents and evaluates a series of workshops with young people after they had seen an exhibit about ‘the power of children.’ In this case, even though the institutional agenda was nominally similar to the theatre’s (although one may problematize

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<sup>1</sup> I’d like to thank Joschka Köck for agreeing to be guest editor for this comment and for his extensive work in support of the PTO Journal and critical examination of TO practice.

the exhibit's goal of "educating the public 'on Louisiana's rich history and the democratic process"), restrictions on time and privacy placed by the museum greatly modified the process, increased the emotional risk for participants, and limited the potential for youth agency and liberatory pedagogy.

The example of Applied Theatre in prisons, such as the one documented in "Theatre of the Beat's Restorative Justice Theatre Program," also raises questions about the purpose of our work. Are we doing TO for empowerment of the oppressed or unintentionally upholding oppressive systems and the institutions that serve them? One might ask this question about a project in which incarcerated women were afforded the opportunity to examine ways to exist within the prison system that will diminish punishment and interpersonal conflict, but not necessarily raise questions about the system itself. What might be the obligation of restorative justice exploration in terms of raising questions about the very nature of a punitive prison system, especially because prisons are always part of the Prison Industrial Complex which supports economic exploitation and structural racism.<sup>2</sup>

As a TO joker one has to be critically conscious of contradictions when working in oppressive institutions in order to ensure that we are not simply being entertainers or helping to discipline inmates or students to conform to the behaviors demanded by the institution. TO in a museum must allow participants to question the presentation of history and their own place in it and not be constrained by the gaze of authority figures and the "need" to have the group visit the gift shop. To do TO fully in prisons is only possible if the specific

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<sup>2</sup> The authors of this article noted in an email to the editors that the discussion does not take into account "all the critical work we did behind the scenes of the project. As an Institute that is committed to practicing critical community engaged scholarship (informed by critical theory, anti-racist and other anti-oppressive theories), it is important to us that readers of our article are not left with the impression that we do not understand the oppressive systems in which this work took place and misrepresent who we are and the kind of work we do. Our work with TOTB was designed specifically to honour the request of our partner – which was an evaluation of the program as it stands, as it was requested by the prison.

prison allows (surprising) spaces for change and working a bit outside institutional contradictions (Santos in Fritz 2013: 263).

TO is not simply a method, nor is it an entertaining way to make more comfortable the status of the oppressed – it is a worldview and political call to action. Although evaluations of the experience in both articles find that on the whole the workshops were of value, and while we support efforts to bring TO and other liberatory methodologies to people in oppressive institutions, we feel that a further examination, particularly of “Theatre of the Beat’s Restorative Justice Theatre Program” can provide us with an opportunity to ask broader questions about TO in context.<sup>3</sup>

The authors of this article make the claim that in their theatre project the focus was on a positive experience in prison and not in challenging power structures that enforced and enabled certain inmate behaviors and inhibited others. Does this present a challenge to us as TO practitioners? Is anti-oppressive work and fun a contradiction? Does serious intent and ideological focus create political tunnel vision? Can we allow ourselves to do something just for fun, even in oppressive contexts? Is the joy of community creation in the face of oppression itself subversive? Similarly, in “Abbreviating Boal...” the authors note that the centering of youth voices was a significant element of their workshops. But the structuring of the students’ time in the museum, and the lack of opportunity to examine the presentation of history in the exhibit itself, replicate the authoritarian process of a what Freire calls “banking” education.

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<sup>3</sup> While we understand that it is necessary to be very circumspect to work at all in many institutions (Mark risked being declared *persona non grata* on more than one occasion while teaching in prisons), and while institutional oppression may not have been the focus of these workshops with the inmates or the youth, we assume that many of the questions in this editorial comment were undoubtedly in the minds of the program facilitators.

The report on Theatre of the Beat points to positive project outcomes. “Participants expressed that the program gave them the opportunity to develop and utilize conflict resolution and anger management skills. One participant notes: ‘...I have a voice and I don't need to avoid conflict. I need to figure out the best possible way to express my anger and conflict.’ Similarly, another participant explained that they benefitted from the program learning, ‘...emotions controlling; stress managing; and relationship reinforcing and establishing [sic].” But questions about who is served by conflict avoidance seem not to have been asked, and the difference between interpersonal difficulties and institutional oppression does not seem to have been discussed.

It also does not seem like the evaluators considered the oppressive nature of the context, nor did they note that the behavioral changes support the management of the institution without addressing the causes of or decreasing the severity of inmate oppression. Are the same oppressive structures that one has to deal with as a theatre facilitator also at work during project evaluation? How can we do appropriate evaluation work if publications are reviewed by prison authorities? How do you represent facilitators and inmates in an evaluation when the program you are looking at assumes that inmates need the colonizing benevolent help of non-inmates?

Is such a clear distinction between opposing positions and goals made when creating data in the first place? Is there a clear separation of positive and negative outcomes? The authors note that “the results presented in this report may not reflect the opinions of all program participants, audience members, TOTB staff and facilitators and GVI staff. ... However, this evaluation provides valuable evidence that restorative justice prison theatre programs have the potential to create positive impacts on incarcerated people.” Are there subsequent investigations to see how potential manifests itself in change? Does such an evaluation

sidestep having to think about how we might reproduce hegemonic power structures in our own work and in our best humanizing efforts?

But then, as an evaluator and being connected to a theater project, one is always also enmeshed with capitalism: As an outside evaluator, do I write a report that could discontinue all the work happening, causing a sudden loss of income to facilitators? How far can self-critique in a report be a reason to alienate donors to whom we have to legitimize our work? And if evaluators believe in the potential of benefit for those incarcerated, or for the expansion of critical learning for those in traditional schools, can they risk removing that opportunity from those already so oppressed?

So we ask you, our readers – Do you think the risk of an honest dialogue with authorities about the oppressive nature of an institutional context (and thus the contradictions of our own work) might help build a continued working relationship? Even if opportunities are lost and some programs cancelled should such a dialogue be a prerequisite for further work, both for facilitator and evaluators, in this kind of context?

What do you as a reader think? The PTO Journal is an annual publication, but *Raising Revolutionary Voices*, the new PTO newsletter, provides a monthly opportunity for your input. We invite you to submit responses to these articles (or any article in the Journal) as well as to our editorial comment at any point. Help us make the articles in the Journal just one moment in an on-going dialogue.