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Cover Page Footnote

Amy Phillips, Grand Valley State University, B.A. Amy Phillips is currently pursuing a master's degree in social innovation at Grand Valley State University. A freelance writer with a B.A. in Theatre Arts from the University of Pittsburgh, Amy led theatre programs with former prisoners and homeless populations in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where she lives with her husband and two sons. Amy traveled to New York for workshops at TOPLAB in 2007-2009 after reading *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* for the first time, knowing only that this genuine man—who would refuse her handshake and instead take her face in his hands, and smile—had created something extraordinary. Currently, she seeks to make connections between TO and social innovation to contribute to the academic discourse.



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Review of *The Routledge Companion to Theatre of the Oppressed*¹

Amy Phillips²

In my review of *The Routledge Companion to Theatre of the Oppressed* by Boal, J., Howe, K., and Soerio, J., eds. (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), I compare the book's call for Theatre of the Oppressed to embrace a nuanced investigation of social problems with its response: the international movements detailed in its chapters. While demonstrating that the first-hand accounts provide a measured answer to contradictions inherent in a system which Augusto Boal developed in response to a specific political climate, I emphasize the beauty of theory and practice sitting side by side, in paradox, and encourage scholar and practitioner alike to revel in the multiplication and trajectory of the thirteen years marked since the last Companion. The Routledge Companion is an intensely personal, rigorous investigation of the history and complex dimensions of a changing system born of struggle and Boal's deep concern for people; above all, as my review suggests, the book is a worthy reminder of the dialogue that must stay center stage during this rehearsal for the revolution.

The Routledge Companion to Theatre of the Oppressed (2019) is an intensely personal, comprehensive investigation of the history and complex dimensions of a theatre system born of struggle. Contradictions inherent in the forty-plus years of popularity enjoyed by Augusto Boal's revolutionary tool find respectful dialogue between chapters, with some of the loudest arguments on depoliticization and commodification answered by depictions of earnest movements multiplying throughout the world. The authors demonstrate scholarly rigor, a life in dedication to Boal's system, or both; all editors agree that

¹ Boal, J., Howe, K., and Soerio, J., eds. (2019.) *The Routledge Companion to Theatre of the Oppressed*. London and New York: Routledge.

² Amy Phillips, Grand Valley State University, B.A. Amy Phillips is currently pursuing a master's degree in social innovation at Grand Valley State University. A freelance writer with a B.A. in Theatre Arts from the University of Pittsburgh, Amy led theatre programs with former prisoners and homeless populations in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where she lives with her husband and two sons. Amy traveled to New York for workshops at TOPLAB in 2007-2009 after reading *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* for the first time, knowing only that this genuine man—who would refuse her handshake and instead take her face in his hands, and smile—had created something extraordinary. Currently, she seeks to make connections between TO and social innovation to contribute to the academic discourse.

Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) should not be “defanged” (p. 1) - but as TONYC’s Katy Rubin writes in the last chapter, the struggle lies in “constantly weighing the opportunities for structural change with the challenges of working in an imperfect world” (p. 419). Like a good TO forum, the book is nuanced, messy, and – at 436 pages – cannot fully be grasped in one sitting. Readers familiar with the enduring image of Boal – preserved in photographs with arms outstretched, as if to embrace his audience – will find that the book widens the frame to include those activists working to maintain the theorist’s deep love for humanity, devotion to liberatory practice, and commitment to social change within the constraints of a neoliberalist society.

The Routledge Companion gathers critique and experiences representing the multiplication of TO on the international stage (and, to the chagrin of many of the writers, within human resource departments across America) in the thirteen years since the publication of *A Boal Companion* (2006), also by Routledge. *Part I: Roots* depicts Boal’s early theatre experience and influences, excelling in its critique of the frames by which TO can be understood; a cursory discussion of systems of oppression is followed by chapters on the branches of the TO tree. *Part II: Ground shifts* looks at the systems that continue to shape the practice of TO, as categorized into two sections: “Changing landscapes in late capitalism” and “Critical reflections on the early multiplication of Theatre of the Oppressed.” *Part III: Contemporary practice* asks how spaces such as gatherings, workshops, and schools relate to one another in means and ends; chapters on practices in context wrap up Part III (and the book), with reports from France, Barcelona, Uruguay, Egypt, New York City among them.

Some chapters on capitalism do not mention TO at all, or squeeze in a mention of art at their conclusion, but readers get the point, and offerings such as “Neoliberalism and the alternative of the common,” by Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, are among the best expositions of the topic a reader could find. Marildo Menegat’s “Art and the Wreckage” discusses Beckett and Brecht more than Boal; his thorough

look at the idea of art reflecting life in the absence of a capitalist system, as in Beckett's plays, is exhilarating.

It is Julian Boal's writing that blows up any sentimentality towards his father's system, leaving the general enthusiast's practice all but paralyzed were it not for a few disclaimers (a stated effort on his part to avoid "policing") at the end of these impressive treatises. In "Theatre of the Oppressed in neoliberal times; from Che Guevara to the Uber driver," Julian examines TO's popularity, asking whether its expansion is due to mere replication of the dominant system it was designed to destroy. Calling Boal's optimism a "strategic bet on individual heroism" (p. 294), Julian questions whether this emphasis on personal choices, as found in Forum Theatre, conversely puts some of the responsibility for violence and oppression on its victims. Interventions become mere "demonstrations of the aptitudes of each intervener in solving the problem on their own" (p. 300). Forum, therefore, denies the strength of systemic oppression by emphasizing an individual response.

Workshops and academic settings are not spared, with the commodification of TO as a value-based skill for the privileged derided by many authors. Chapter 34, however, describes a two-year training program hosted by The School of Political Theater, in Argentina, which requires deep immersion in theories and traditions as a prerequisite to using TO. Readers infer that this approach, full-bodied in its commitment and specific to its cultural context, is what turns TO from a collection of techniques into a "certain kind of attention to reality, a specific frame for political analysis and expression" (1). Understanding where that juncture lies could be said to be the theme of this *Companion*.

Doug Paterson takes a further look at situating Boal's revolutionary call within incongruent settings, specifically the institutions of U.S. higher education. He writes:

If the organization Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed, Inc. (PTO) is one of the reasons Augusto Boal's work has been distributed across the United States, then that

*“multiplication” – as Boal called it – is partly rooted in the US academy of higher education.
(p. 277)*

At Paterson's invitation, Boal traveled to Atlanta's ATHE (Association for Theatre in Higher Education) conference in August of 1992, where his keynote address and three five-hour workshops on Image, Forum, and Rainbow of Desire “carved out a new channel of theatre practice in the US” (p. 277). Paterson continued to organize Boal conferences and tours in the U.S. for this audience, and the U.S. academy became, he writes, the site of most of Boal's workshops from 2000-2008 and onward. Recognizing the paradoxical history of TO's multiplication among elite academics, Paterson also speaks to the effects of the academy's stagnancy on his own liberatory leanings. But the academic context was able to provide the fees necessary to further the work of TO (and PTO), and Boal relied on this income, Paterson says, to fund a need in his later years for the comforts of first-class air travel on the long international flights. This detail feels unnecessarily intimate until placed within the context of the book (and Paterson's main theme): TO remains a theatre system that depends upon bodies to step into scenes of oppression, grow older, and pay bills, because its work is not yet done.

Rounding out the theories of current practice are lovely first-hand accounts that will delight the dedicated practitioner. Cecilia Thumim Boal speaks to Boal's difficult exile in Argentina and the gestation period it provided him to write *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1974), revealing that his publisher added “oppressed” to his company's titles (including Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) with the mind to start a series that never grew after Boal's book. When she states that “at no time did he doubt the victory of the people” (p. 253), the reader can imagine that this is not mere sentiment, but is born of late-night conversations, hastily- packed suitcases, and the anguish of Boal's two-month disappearance.

The tone of *The Routledge Companion* shifts from staunchly militant to the profoundly personal, with essays by practitioners wrestling with the particulars of their given sociopolitical context. India's Jana

Sanskriti understands their long-term, non-replicable (as of yet) success in very succinct terms: because of “the kind of life we accepted” (p. 273). Founder Sanjoy Ganguly makes the striking statement that the group had no money the previous 18 months, but survived due to their modest, collective living arrangements. More than that, this fragile existence birthed risks, from the safety of a togetherness going on more than thirty years: “we don’t think that techniques can make a joker,” he clarifies. “It is actually understanding the relationship with my comrades, my friends in the audience, that matters” (p. 274). Understanding Jana Sanskriti’s start and current discipline is revelatory for the casual reader and crucial for the practitioner; their regular habits – recommending interventions to the local governments, functioning as a watchdog in hamlets when offstage – may very well illustrate Boal’s early vision of TO more closely than any other theatre.

Poised as another answer to the depoliticization of TO is a panel on therapeutic practice, bringing together the minds of those who have jumped from the more outcome-based branches of TO to Rainbow of Desire, Image Theatre and other adaptations. Mady Schutzman, an editor of *The Boal Companion*, has come to prefer this approach for its malleability in addressing deep levels of bias. Brent Blair discusses his work both inside and outside prison walls and how it informed a desire to counteract the idea that a political approach to TO is separate from a therapeutic one. If collective trauma is not addressed, Blair contends, “TO banishes many fragile voices not yet ‘resilient’ enough for Forum” (p. 338). Schutzman takes this further by speaking of different personalities drawn to activism. While acknowledging that there are no generalized types, she emphasizes a distinction between the skill sets and interests of those who are urged on to immediate action and those who study patterns and think in terms of philosophical discourse. Blair summarizes this thoughtful chapter – and perhaps offers a solution to Julian’s call to action—when he defends the therapeutic approach in political terms:

I think Forum/TO practitioners around the world have settled on the notion that there are concrete problems that need concrete political solutions, yet in the current geopolitical crisis of fascism, nationalism, and “fake news,” I believe the political work is to dig into the psychology of the populace. (p. 344)

If praxis is indeed central to TO, the chapter on therapy is one of the few to offer concrete, practical examples of ways to achieve the call for political purity. Some beautiful anecdotes are told throughout, such as Nora Amin's story of the young man in Egypt who put down his knife to volunteer for a forum, signaling his search for non-violent solutions even before stepping onto the stage. Some chapters, however, leave the practitioner asking how to work out these rigorous theories in practical terms. If NGOs are guilty of showing off one young person's transformation for funding, what is the alternative? By contrast, MSTB (Roofless Movement of Bahia) takes an honest look at their Forum and Legislative efforts and critique them—too much dialogue in the script, bad jokering, small spaces – realizing that the act of creating a play together, by means of their shared experiences and oppressions, produces the most educational aspect of their work.

Many chapters were originally written in Portuguese, Spanish and French, with the editors purposely recruiting voices not typically represented in TO scholarship (and acknowledging the irony that this mission was facilitated by the linguistic oppression of colonialism). No less than eight of the 47 chapters are in an interview or panelist format; while the breadth of experience coming together in each panel cannot be denied, some of the wealth lies untapped where there is little to no interaction (which perhaps was a necessity with multiple languages represented). Too many interviews assume that readers have a reference point on the work of the participants beyond their brief bios at the start of the book; some background at the start of each interview could set a context for their commentary, especially as the editors' stated intention is to welcome readers with varying levels of familiarity with TO (p. 2).

Julian Boal points out that Boal, in *The Rainbow of Desire* (1994), relies on examples of failed attempts to demonstrate his techniques; the meaning “remains to be discovered by the one who uses it” (p. 293). If *The Routledge Companion* teaches us anything, it is that the trajectory of TO has been shaped by intelligence, passion, genuine concern, and possibility. Informed by this body of work, practitioners will surely continue to wrestle with the inherent contradictions of TO and changes in the political climate, developing critical muscle that allow them, like TONYC, to reject any partnerships that undermine the core of their mission.

The Routledge Companion ends with the message Boal gave on World Theatre Day for UNESCO in 2009, the last year of his life. Boal bid his listeners to build a better world “with our hands, and by acting on the stage and in our own lives” (p. 420).

The revolution demands the organic, passionate action spelled out by Boal at the beginning of his theatre career, and at the end. As never before, this book makes clear that TO's rehearsal for the revolution must place nuance, contradictions, and deep investigations directly center stage.