



Volume 6

2021

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Recommended Citation

Aleepayam, Hamze (2021) "Augusto Boal's joker and pedagogy of freedom," *Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Journal*: Vol. 6 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/ptoj/vol6/iss1/3>

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Augusto Boal's joker and pedagogy of freedom

Cover Page Footnote

Hamze Aleepayam is an Iranian TO Joker. He studied Cinema at Payam-e-Moaser Art School and Theatre at Soore University. In 2012, Bina Farok and Hamze Aleepayam formed The Forum Theatre Group to work, study, practice, and train TO throughout Iran. From that day until now The Forum Theatre Group has created more than 55 performances with working children, immigrant women, and others performing in places as varied as Youth Detention Centers, schools and universities, public parks and streets, factories, businesses, and even metros.



Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Journal

Vol. 6, Issue 1 (Fall 2021)

Pedagogic experiences of a Joker in Tehran

Hamze Aleelayam¹

This text is a report on the Pedagogic project to apply the techniques of Boal's Joker to teach basic Farsi reading and writing to war-torn labor children who are frequently deprived of the right to education. They learned to read and write well and wrote about their experiences of war, labor, childhood, fears, happiness, etc..., and their impact on their lives.

In early 2017, after about a year of practicing Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) in one of the slums of southern Tehran with six- to eighteen-year-old labor children, Mehran, the pedagogy project manager of the NGO for which I was working, asked me to be part of the project teaching children in the classroom as well as doing TO on the stage.

We discussed the prospect in our Forum theater group. For the past few years, we had used only the practical techniques of TO focusing on issues related to working children. Should I be entitled as a teacher? This question was the first obstacle for me since I believed I was a Joker trying to do Theatre and not teaching in the classroom. Jokers act ridiculously; they behave foolishly and keep asking questions as if they know nothing. After consultations in the Forum group, it became clear that the Joker techniques could be applied in the classroom too. Boal theorized the joker system for theater and was influenced by Freire's pedagogic ideas. Therefore, the Forum Theater Group associates surmised this work was not going to be any different or more arduous. The Joker does the same thing whether on

¹Hamze Aleelayam is an Iranian TO Joker. He studied Cinema at Payam-e-Moaser Art School and Theatre at Soore University. In 2012, Bina Farok and Hamze Aleelayam formed The Forum Theatre Group to work, study, practice, and train TO throughout Iran. From that day until now The Forum Theatre Group has created more than 55 performances with working children, immigrant women, and others performing in places as varied as Youth Detention Centers, schools and universities, public parks and streets, factories, businesses, and even metros.

stage or in a classroom. But that does not mean what I did in the classroom was literally theatre. I just tried to stimulate students' curiosity by asking some questions so they could search and discover more passionately. Sometimes some children grew tired of me not teaching anything and complained: "So when are we going to study?" or wanted me to propose a theme for writing. Or would say: "What kind of teacher are you?" I used the theatrical techniques in the classroom whenever necessary.

After some visits Bina (a Forum Theater Group member) and I made to Mehran's first grade reading and writing class the Group decided that until the end of that semester, for more than three months as an experimental test, we would involve a Joker in the classroom as the children were learning mathematics, reading, and basic writing. According to the plan I coordinated with Mehran for two hours a week. (Figure 1)



Fig.1: First Grade Elementary School Reading and Writing Class

The results were extraordinarily good. Bina and I always presented ourselves in the character of a mere questioner rather than schoolmaster. In every moment the pedagogic notions of Augusto Boal, Paulo Freire, Anton Makarenko, Joseph Jacotot, and Jacques Rancière provided guidance along the way.

Mehran, astonished and surprised by those results, provided a situation for other teachers, tutors, and social workers to learn about the pedagogy of freedom² and work with Joker's techniques in the

² Freire's critical ideas inspired us to take this concept for our work.

classroom. We planned a three-day workshop in the Forum Theater Group to practice the Pedagogy of Freedom and Joker techniques with the teachers and social workers who were working for the NGO. After this workshop the teachers and tutors together with Mehran proposed that I manage a one-year Pedagogy of Freedom project.

After that, we – the teachers and social workers of the pedagogic project – made a Forum every week for two months, and every time we discussed our ideas and practical issues on the Pedagogy of Freedom for three hours. We studied Freire, Boal, Makarenko, Vygotsky, Illich and Rancière texts, my colleagues talked about dead-ends in their line of work, and we searched for answers together for those issues.

We all were school students once and now we work as teachers and aim to be liberatory pedagogues. So, we simply rejected the withered system, rather to do the right thing sometimes wrong than to do the wrong thing right. We were not worried about making mistakes; we make them all the time. We were actually worried about ourselves – that we would act like wise people and do wrong actions out of blind faith. The formal school and educational system aims at mixing content and process, knowledge and a scoring system, skill and degree, dynamic activity and exhausting competition. Our own lived experience in that system let us observe its disadvantages. Therefore, we did not give students information and force them to repeat like purebred parrots.

All infants learn their mother-tongue alone, and none of them needs a teacher to learn speaking. People talk to each-other. Children observe lip movements and listen. They listen and remember. In time, most of them discover the relationships between those sounds, words, and different signs. They practice, make mistakes, repeat, and correct themselves. It is not the lack of education which makes the people's minds dull, but the system of values and anti-values which makes the system of the superiors and the inferiors, the master and the slave, the oppressor and the oppressed. It makes both the superiors and the inferiors unintelligent and dull simultaneously. That is why liberatory pedagogues approach learning as questioners. They bring the stolen will of the dominated people, taken by those

schoolmasters, back to themselves. The liberatory pedagogue, by asking questions over and over, is careful that the owner of the will is aware of their natural force.

We do not regard ourselves as holders, transmitters, or presenters of knowledge. We aim at providing a situation, like a playground in which students can have more space for intellectual activities with games they can practice, repeat, make errors and corrections, etc., and have opportunities to remember and develop their natural skills. For us, knowledge is located on an uncharted island. We have to sit on a boat together and move toward that island. On the way, we notice signs and different sights; we make analogies and discover the hidden ties. Everyone knows as much as they have experienced. We only aim to release those labor children from confusion and false judgment so they can be more dynamic and creative. This way, they may discover the ties between what they know and what they don't so that their minds and their skills develop in their own natural direction.

Nine members of pedagogy forum were not inclined to be liberatory pedagogues and preferred working with the old system. I cannot recall any specific reason for their decision; they might have been afraid of new experiences or maybe they believed the expression “old habits die hard.” But in our discussions they asserted that they tried, in their own way, to make equal relations with the students. They succeeded at times, but also made big mistakes. For example, one day, one of these teachers read a story about underage marriages – child marriage³ is an ever spreading problem for families living under the subsistence level⁴ - and made a speech about its abnormalities. Afterwards, she asked students to write about that issue. No one was surprised that they all wrote a similar mixture of the story and the teachers' sayings. Sometimes, these nine teachers tried to practice Pedagogy of Freedom techniques and questioning. I was very happy for those times. Some people like to give advice to others. Saadi Shirazi – Persian poet writer in 1210-1291 – said: “Comrade, don't give an advice which I will not use, if you don't know what is going on in the meantime.” I always whispered this poem to myself and others to remember it.

³ <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/ptoj/vol5/iss1/8>

⁴ <https://iranhumanrights.org/2020/12/easy-state-loans-prompting-surge-in-child-marriages-in-iran/>

Six other members of our pedagogy forum were fundamentally opposed to the Pedagogy of Freedom idea. They also preferred to work as before with the old system. They always tried to destroy the project and show the inefficiency of Pedagogy of Freedom practices. Otherwise, their objections would be meaningless.

The other twenty-three members of the pedagogy forum wanted to use Pedagogy of Freedom techniques. We made four-hour forums every week and discussed our issues, challenges, dead ends, and accomplishments. The members of our pedagogic forum could work with any method they wished, but everyone knew they must always remain faithful to the Pedagogy of Freedom principles that we had set and approved unanimously:

1. We, as people, are equal in intelligence. So, we must be equal in will.
2. We do not want to rule over incapacity.
3. We cannot know everything, so ignorance has no hierarchy.
4. The basis of our work is praxis, cooperation, and dynamic communication in the community, not cultivation and improvement of memory and exhausting competitions.
5. We are aware of the deficiencies in the old system of education. To us, doing the right thing wrong is better than doing the wrong thing right.
6. We are not in a hurry and we know we have a long way to go. So we use whatever is around to discover new things and move forward with them and continue on the path.
7. We only compete with ourselves, and we will try to be better than ourselves every moment.
8. We should be companions and fellow travelers to others because happiness cannot be achieved alone.
9. We work and live this way because we believe in liberation and equality.

We provided weekly plans that included several games for each session. Usually, the first game was a prelude or warm up. For example: I usually began the first grade reading and writing class by writing one letter on the whiteboard – for example A – and asking students to say names which start with that letter – for example Amir. After a few minutes I add a second letter and then a third one. Other games included activities based on the lesson: I write five letters and they make new words with at least two of the letters and say them loudly. Everyone then must write the spoken words on the whiteboard with

each other's help. The difficult part was to adjust ourselves to the NGO's curriculum and the children's needs. Therefore, we made games related to the topic or we chose to work on understanding the subject of the lesson through playing and collective participation.

As well as being a project manager In this pedagogic forum, I practiced TO for two hours per week with the children, one hour a week with their mothers, and I was a liberatory pedagogue for reading, writing, and math with the first, second and third grade students.

There were twenty students in the second grade class. Six of the girls and twelve of the boys were the children of Afghan refugees, twelve of them had been born in Iran and eight had immigrated. Although the students were between eight and eleven years old, fourteen of them worked from after class until the end of the night doing things like sewing, waste separating, motorcycle repair, shoemaking, and peddling. Most of them were familiar with basic math due to their presence in the market.

I used to begin our reading and writing sessions with free discussions. Then I asked them to write our conversation on the whiteboard. In the early sessions, they told me that they couldn't write. It is just a fundamental lie.

There are two fundamental lies: the one that proclaims, "I am telling the truth," and the one that states "I cannot say." The reasonable being who reflects on himself knows the emptiness of these two propositions. The first fact is the impossibility of not knowing oneself. The individual cannot lie to himself; he can only forget himself" (Rancière, 1991p.57).

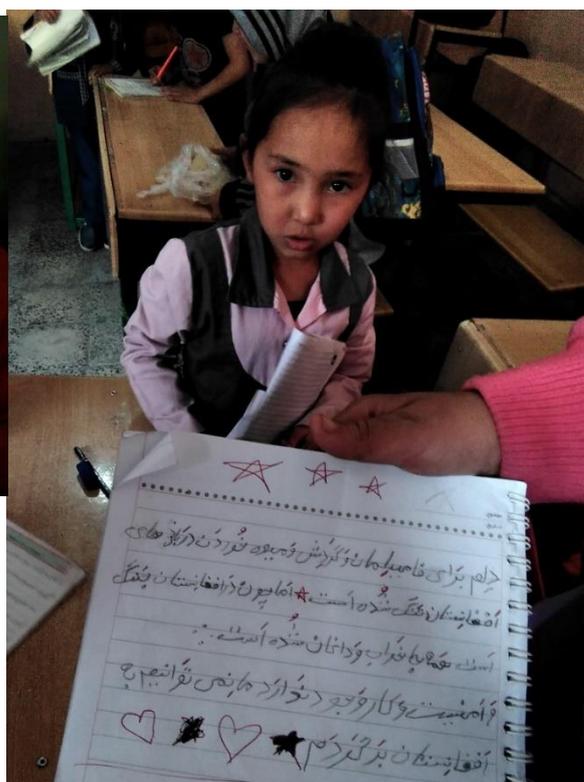
Just two of them knew the alphabet. I asked them to write the first word on the board together. Working in this way was really challenging and seemed to have little value at first. This is normal because they tend to forget themselves. They haven't mastered their abilities yet. They are confused by schoolmasters and are full of illusions and skeptical about their learning abilities. They need to have time and more confidence. Step by step they realize there is no judgment or punishment, and they have

enough time. We could help them write the first word for starters. The Alphabet is our tool and we learn to use it easily. Idea turns into matter and that matter turns into an idea.

In less than three months, all students in the class could read and write. They could write their imaginations and opinions very well. Two of them preferred to write about their own issues, separately. They did it beautifully. In fact, they were no longer afraid. One of them, Amir H, a nine-year-old boy, wrote about fear:

Do you know what fear is? "I don't know." Mohammad said. Shall I say what fear is? "Say it, Amir H." Fear is like an old house with broken lamps. May I go on, uncle Hamze? "Sure". I'm afraid of God because he creates us. The End.

Day after day, their self-confidence increased, and so did the number of those who did the writings on their own. I had a participatory conversation on the whiteboard with other children; after a few minutes of talking I wrote some titles which I had taken from their conversation on the board and they were invited to add to the list. Then we selected a topic for our conversation and the dialogue began. We wrote all the sentences from that conversation in order on the board, together. At the end of the session we had already written a collective article which all the classmates transcribed to their notebooks.



Figs. 2 & 3: The Second Grade Basic Skills Class

An Example of a class

One day, as usual, I asked them what they had been thinking about most during the past week. Whatever they answered I wrote on the whiteboard and then we picked a common subject. The chosen topic of this day was Afghanistan: I asked: What do you recall first when you hear the name Afghanistan?

- ~ "Bathing and swimming under the Malan Bridge," Amir H said.
- ~ Nazanin volunteered to write this sentence on the whiteboard and the others wrote the same sentence in their notebooks. Other kids would usually help her to write the sentence on the board, but she wrote the sentence alone with a little contemplation: "In Afghanistan I bathed and swam under the Malan Bridge."
- ~ Where is the Malan Bridge? I asked,
- ~ "Herat, near our village". Said Mohammad.
- ~ What is the name of your village?
- ~ "Deh Zaq."
- ~ Moktar writes the new sentence on the board following the previous sentence, with others helping him: "In Afghanistan I bathed and swam under the Malan Bridge. The Malan Bridge is in the city of Herat near the Deh Zaq village".
- ~ Others write that sentence in their notebooks too. I look at everyone's notebook to make sure everything is going well in the meantime.
- ~ What does the Malan Bridge look like? I asked.
- ~ "It is huge", Edris said, "Many people go and swim under the Malan Bridge. It is very beautiful."
- ~ Fatima adds this sentence on the board. Hamed quietly whispers a song which contained the name of Malan Bridge. I asked him to sing it louder for all the classmates: "Beautiful and pretty fair, I saw at Malan Bridge a lovely girl, my heart is with her."⁵
- ~ Who is the singer, I asked.
- ~ "Ahmad Zaher".
- ~ "No, Ashkan is the singer" Mohammad said.
- ~ Edris added the poem to the previous sentences. We added more about schools and studies in Afghanistan until Nazanin said "Afghanistan has nothing. Only ruins after ruins."
- ~ Irritated, Edris replied "Afghanistan has everything and is very beautiful!"

⁵ <https://youtu.be/HYuP77rEgnE>

The class was divided into two groups. Some said Afghanistan is beautiful and has many beautiful places. Others shouted that Afghanistan is ruined and there is always war. Edris shouted louder: "Why keep talking about Afghanistan? We don't want to hear about that!" Everyone made suggestions for a new topic and I wrote them on the board: Iran, Afghanistan, Germany, United States, Football, Swimming pool. One of students quietly whispered with anger, "down with Iran." Then everyone shouted, "down with Iran, down with Iran, down with Iran." I tried hard to calm them down. We added down with Iran to the list. When we voted, down with Iran was the unanimous choice.

The children jumped to the ground and punched the table and cried: down with Iran, down with Iran. I tried for a few minutes to calm them down so we could start talking about it. Finally, I asked: Why down with Iran? Everyone had a reason. Everyone's reason reflected their own experience of their labors and living in Iran. As always we wrote them on the board.

- ~ "I say, down with Iran because Iran's currency is of little value. Four Afghan Lak is equal to a hundred million Iranian Rials⁶.
- ~ Because the Iranians are harassing Afghans and induce them to leave Iran while the Afghans work hard and are honorable people.
- ~ One day I was going home from school eating snacks when a fat Iranian boy crossed my way and started beating me after he took my snacks.
- ~ Not all the Iranians are like that. I bought meat one day. The bag of meat was torn and it fell into the brook and then I was upset. An Old Iranian man who saw what happened gave me money so I could buy meat again.
- ~ I say down with Iran because I am tired of working so hard and hear so much insult from them, and because I miss my country, for my family and relatives, for walking and tasting fruits through the gardens of Afghanistan. But because war is upon my homeland we cannot go back there."

But when the time was up, the conversation remained half over.

The following week I asked the children to continue last week's composition. We read what we wrote until suddenly Zeinab started reading from his notebook: "I miss our family, our walking together and eating fruits in the gardens of Afghanistan. But there is a war in Afghanistan. There are ruins everywhere with no security, job or income." The argument began again immediately.

- ~ "There is war only in Kabul and Herat, not everywhere in Afghanistan". Edris angrily shouted

⁶ 1 Afghan Lak is equal to 100.000 Afghan Afghani and 1 Afghan Afghani is equal to 3.480 Iranian Rials. 1 Afghan Lak is equal to 348.000.000 Iranian Rials.

- ~ "There is war more than anywhere else."
- ~ "She is lying".
- ~ "I was there. They were fighting each other with guns when we came here".
- ~ "One day, I was in my grandparents' house in Afghanistan when war started, and they came with guns. They broke the windows and we were frightened to leave there."

I asked some students who were whispering to each other in the corner to help us in writing. Edris left the classroom. When he returned he pushed Sadat, a weak child who was losing his eyesight, off the bench. When I asked Edris to write he said:

- ~ "I don't like writing; it's always about a bomb explosion in Afghanistan. I want to read. I don't like to write about Afghanistan."
- ~ "Then write with us so you can learn to write whatever you like," I said.
- ~ "I just want to study. What kind of class is this?" Edris said.
- ~ "It is the reading and writing class and we are learning to write what goes in our minds." I said.
- ~ "I don't want this lesson" Edris said.
- ~ "Ok, so you can go out and do whatever you wish and let us do our work."

Edris hurried out.

The liberatory pedagogue's fundamental act is interrogating; he demands speech, careful that the owner of the will is aware of his deeds by asking questions over and over. The liberatory pedagogue must verify that the work of the intelligence is being done with critical attention.

I asked, "what do we mean when we say down with Iran or death to Iran; how can you kill something like that?" Many students answered:

- ~ "The United States must've done something also that the only thing Iran say is down with the USA."
- ~ "The United States has built a missile and is telling Iran if they don't do what they like they will throw a missile on Iran"
- ~ "We should step on Iran and crush it with our feet"
- ~ "We stab it with a knife" "We bomb everywhere when they are asleep in bed"
- ~ "Why are we doing this? We say down with Iran's money, not death to its people,"

One of the assistants entered the classroom with Edris who said: "I want to write". The comments continued:

- ~ "At night, we must go inside the fortress of the Iranians, drop a bomb and escape quickly, so that we do not get killed ourselves".
- ~ "He does not understand what he is talking about; we do not have money, so we cannot have a bomb".
- ~ I asked help to find a real solution.
- ~ "We force all of them to speak in Afghan tongue".
- ~ "A whirlwind must come and everyone be dead".
- ~ Nazanin said "don't make mistakes. That is not the way. We should go to the government and complain and tell them make prices cheaper"
- ~ "What's a government like? That's not possible." Amir said.

Most of the children agreed that Nazanin's statement should be written on the whiteboard before we asked Amir to tell us why it is not possible. While children were writing a student asked me if I was an Afghan or an Iranian. I told him I am Iranian. He surprised and said, "I'm sorry, I said down with Iran, I thought you were Afghan." I assured him it was all right.

- ~ "The government will not listen to its own people, why should they care about what Nazanin has to say?" Said Amir.
- ~ "We have no better choice, what Nazanin said is our only option," Zahra said.

Time was up!



Fig. 4- 1st grade elementary school reading and writing class

As time went on, a delightful sense of learning showed in their faces. Direct answers were never provided for their questions: when they ask me how they can write the word comrade, for instance, instead of writing that word and its letters on the board for them to watch and learn its proper form, I draw their attention to my voice, repeating until they discover all of the letters and write them down in

their notebooks. As soon as they find out how a word is written properly, they exclaim: "I got it." It is as glorious as Archimedes' "Eureka!" The students that study in formal elementary schools will easily ignore new words until they appear in the course-plan and say: we haven't studied that yet and don't know how to write that word. They ignore and pass by the words. But, in the Pedagogy of Freedom system, there are no barriers or alibies for the students. They can write almost any words, after some thinking and concentration. They just have to let go of the confusion and recall their forgotten abilities.

Among the NGO's assistants, there were those who not only used every opportunity to destroy the project and show the inefficiency of the Pedagogy of freedom idea in education, but sometimes also created opportunities. Among them, an elderly man and woman who, in the middle of the second month of the project, went to the second-grade classroom without coordination, and gave a dictation exam. Then they triumphantly brought the dictation the children had written to the project forum to show that, contrary to my claim and that of the Pedagogy of Freedom idea, the children could not read or write.

The dictation was about fifty words and most of the students made less than ten errors. I told those two: "There is no art in what you do. Imagine I give you a violin and laugh at you after you start playing. Here, my art is teaching the art of playing violin. You also wasted an hour of children's lives in the classroom to prove that they are not good at writing. Naturally they wouldn't come to this classroom if they already knew how to read and write."

The traders and high placed "owners" of science and knowledge never gave up doing that. To me, their behavior reflects the image of government education policies. As I write this, our elitist deputy minister of primary education says: 210,000 children have been deprived of primary education in the school year 2020-2021. Immigrant children and many Iranians who are out of school do not have birth certificates and ID, so they are not included in the statistics. In fact, this news could be stated as follows: According to Article thirty-three of the Constitutional Law of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Article twenty-six of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the rights of more than 210,000 children have been taken away by the government. In addition, education in Iran, under the shadow of

the privatization system, is becoming more and more a luxury and expensive commodity that many groups cannot afford to pay for.

The owners and traders of science and knowledge need to prove the inability and ignorance of others to hold on to their positions. Otherwise, their domination would be meaningless. They rebelled against the ignorant and we against domination. "All must be simultaneously chorus and protagonist – this is the 'Joker' system" (Boal, 1993 p. xxiii). The imaginary distance between the teacher and the student, between the wise and the ignorant, between the master and the slave is the real evil. Nor should our principles be absolute. It is necessary to create appropriate pedagogical forms for liberatory education.

Change is imperative.



Fig. 5: 3rd grade elementary school reading and writing class

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