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Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Journal

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Review of *Theatre of the Oppressed – Roots & Wings: A Theory of Praxis*¹

Uri Yitzchak Noy Meir²

Theatre of the Oppressed – Roots & Wings: A Theory of Praxis by Barbara Santos is a necessary, previously unwritten, ontology of Theatre of the Oppressed with a feminist twist. It is a gift and a fantastic resource. Links to podcast interviews with Santos are attached to the end of the review.

Introduction

Barbara Santos is an influential director, facilitator, and leader of Theater of the Oppressed. She worked closely with Augusto Boal in the years he was back in Brazil. As the coordinator of the Theater of the Oppressed Center in Rio de Janeiro (CTO Rio), her work and effort were often in the time and place where the newest of Boal's work (Legislative Theatre and Aesthetics of the Oppressed) came to be.

Already in the book's dedication to Santos's mother, Evani Pedreira, which precedes the first chapter, one can feel Santos's particular attention to the female power and the matrilinear roots of her work. In every chapter in the entire book, Santos amplifies the impactful contribution of a feminist and critical approach to Theatre of the Oppressed.

The first chapter, "Acknowledgment," recognizes the many groups and individuals that have influenced and supported her work. The chapter identifies four crucial female role models, mentors, and guides – Eva dos Santos Pereira, Geraldine Ling, Tatiana Roque, and Alejandra Maass Cruzat – and ends thanking Augusto

¹ Santos, Barbara. *Theatre of the Oppressed - Roots & Wings: A Theory of Praxis*. Marshall, Jennifer and Nikolova, Olga, translators. (KURINGA, in conjunction with the UCLA Art & Global Health Center and UCLA Prison Education Program, 2019).

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Boal for 28 years of working together and the Universe of artists and activists with whom she has worked and from whom she has learned.

The second chapter, "First words," is the personal story of the first encounter between Santos and Boal. Santos recounts with a clear and resonant voice how her first TO workshop led to the founding of Turning the Table, a theatre comprised only of women in education, and the creation of her first Forum Theatre piece. The following chapters are organized around the tree metaphor, which was often (and fondly) used by Boal to describe the Theatre of the Oppressed.

From The Seed To The Tree presents an overview of the development and historical and geopolitical influences on Theatre of the Oppressed techniques from the early political theatre work Boal did with the Arena Theatre of Sao Paulo in the late 1960s, through the development of Legislative Theatre with CTO-Rio in the mid-90s. This historical overview and testimony shows the evolution of Boal's work and TO's adaption to an ever-changing socio-political context. Santos provides complete and sympathetic storytelling about the development of Boal's work and TO, which is a treasure for current and future researchers.

The next section of the book, ***Roots***, is divided into ***Founding Principles*** and ***Dramaturgy***. In these chapters, Santos describes what she sees as the foundation on which TO work is standing – creative and engaged social movement-building focused on revealing the social context and the revolutionary praxis it comes from. Santos covers the fundamental concepts and premises of Theatre of the Oppressed as an aesthetic space in which community dialogue on social oppressions can occur and transform reality through rehearsal and development of concrete and continuous social action. In the Dramaturgy chapter, she stresses the importance of making the social context visible.

The ***Sap*** section includes chapters about aesthetics, creativity and structure. In these chapters Santos shares what she feels is the essence of TO, a creative aesthetics of expression about what humanity can be in the future. These chapters echo and overlap with Boal's final book, *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed*, and his creative and practical legacy. Santos adds her own account of working with diverse groups which can help the reader implement the practices. Santos had herself a central role in developing the Aesthetics of the Oppressed with Boal at CTO-Rio. Furthermore, in the last decade, she and Till Bauman have worked

with diverse groups around the world offering sound and rhythm Aesthetics of the Oppressed labs and workshops.

The final sections using the tree metaphor actually go beyond the tree itself. **Fruits, Birds, and Wings** are all looking from the treetop. In these chapters, Santos shares ethical considerations for future Kuringas, “Joker” facilitators of Theatre of the Oppressed work. She asserts the pedagogical (rather than didactic) character of TO and shares experiences and lessons learned from her “multiplication work” in Brazil (with CTO Rio) and worldwide (with Kuringa Berlin). As much as Augusto Boal’s work might be influential and necessary, he was born a white and educated middle-class man and came from a privileged position in the Brazilian social context. Barbara Santos, an Afro Brazilian woman, provides a voice that is vital for the coherence and expansion of Theatre of the Oppressed as an anti-oppression global movement.

To Augusto Boal – The final chapters include words Santos has written to and about Boal, often on the second of May, the anniversary of his death, in the eleven years between his passing and the time the book was published. Connecting across time and space, these letters and poems express Santos’s love, strength, and the depth of her relationship with Augusto Boal and the Theatre of the Oppressed movement.

They are, like the rest of this book, a gift and a fantastic resource for Theater of the Oppressed practitioners and enthusiasts worldwide. As the title suggests, it offers both Roots and Wings to those who wish to learn and create theatre that is transforming and creating solidarity and social justice. As Santos wrote on 2 May 2014, five years after Boal’s passing:

reinventing the known
rediscovering the invented
investigating the unknown
questioning the established

reflecting, creating, acting
sharing, learning
coming together in struggle
appreciating life³

³ Santos, 279.

In Conversation with Barbara Santos

I never met with Augusto Boal in person, and still, his books profoundly impacted and transformed my life. I feel fortunate to have met and trained with Barbara Santos and to have learned about this work through these encounters. I recently interviewed Santos together with fellow facilitator Ruth Cross for the ImaginAction podcast. In this interview, Barbara shares her story of meeting Boal and insights from decades of work with and without him. In Part 1, you can hear her sharing her views of Theatre and TO online and some beautiful insights from her life path with TO, which echoes and expands on what she shares in the book. In Part 2 she responds and shares the importance of writing as a part of the practitioner reflection process, and why writing this book was so important.

I hope you will find this interview and this review helpful! Deep gratitude to Nico Ndlovu for the audio editing and vocal introduction for the podcast episodes below. Please leave a voice message in response to the interview on Anchor with your reflections.



ImaginAction's Podcast

By ImaginAction

In these times of incertitude and disruption, we have a choice, we can collapse into old patterns, or we can see in the crisis an opportunity to start over. More than ever, we need in these times to gather across borders, open our minds, hearts, listen to the wisdom of the body and the Earth. In ImaginAction Podcast where we converse with Social Artists and Facilitators supporting the regeneration of our world.

LINKS

PODCAST INTERVIEW PART 1 -

<https://anchor.fm/imaginaction/episodes/IN-CONVERSATION-WITH-BARBARA-SANTOS-PART-1---IMAGINATION-PODCAST-with-Nico-e15ep54>

PODCAST INTERVIEW PART 2 - <https://anchor.fm/imaginaction/episodes/IN-CONVERSATION-WITH-BARBARA-SANTOS-PART-2---IMAGINATION-PODCAST-with-Nico-e15epp5>