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The Wildcard Workbook: A Practical Guide to Jokering Forum Theatre – An Introduction and Background

Katy Rubin

Independent Legislative Theatre Practitioner, katy@katyrubin.com

Liz Morgan

Theatre of the Oppressed NYC, elizabeth@tonyc.nyc

Sulu LeoNimm

Theatre of the Oppressed NYC, nimm@tonyc.nyc

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Cover Page Footnote

Liz Morgan (she/her) is a facilitator and the Director of Training & Pedagogy at Theatre of the Oppressed NYC (TONYC). She has presented on TO at Yale, Princeton, Brown, NYU, Fairfield University and CUNY. She holds both a BA and MFA from Brown University, where she has also been a faculty member. Additionally, Liz has studied with Jana Sanskriti CTO in India, and the Yeredon Center in Mali, where she co-facilitated the Communal Bowl Conference on malnutrition and the arts. Sulu LeoNimm (they/them) has worked with TONYC since 2011 as a Joker facilitating Forum Theatre Troupes, Joker Trainings, and workshops, and is currently Executive Director. Sulu has been a Brooklyn-based theater artist and physical theater performer since 2003, enthralled with making ensemble-devised work. They created and toured work as co-founder of Pack of Others, and performed with various ensembles in NYC, Denver, and Seattle. Katy Rubin (she/her) is a Theatre of the Oppressed practitioner based in the UK. She is currently working with community groups and city councils using Legislative Theatre to co-create equitable policy and practice, with a focus on housing justice, the climate crisis, and cultural policy. She is also a former executive director of TONYC. Katy trained at Center for Theatre of the Oppressed - Rio with Augusto Boal, and has facilitated projects with artists and activists internationally since 2010.

*The Wildcard Workbook: A Practical Guide to Joking Forum Theatre
An Introduction and Background*

By Liz Morgan, Sulu LeoNimm, and Katy Rubin

“Learning to Joker with Theatre of the Oppressed NYC (TONYC) was like learning to operate a car in an open parking lot...I still have a lot that I want to learn, and I expect some bumps in the road, but training has prepared me to take my joker skills for a test drive into the sunset.”
TONYC-trained Joker Apprentice, Amorearey Sandoz.

As jokers and co-authors of *The Wildcard Workbook: A Practical Guide to Joking Forum Theatre*, each of us - Liz, Katy, Sulu - has experienced plenty of bumps in the road. We see the work of Theatre of the Oppressed, and indeed political and social resistance, as an ongoing “test drive.” It is a cycle of learning, action and reflection that never ends.

TONYC has been building and supporting a community of Forum Theatre troupes around New York City for over ten years. This year, TONYC is celebrating its tenth anniversary. Throughout that decade, TONYC’s troupes have welcomed over 17,000 spect-actors to 350 Forum shows and counting.

The Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) principle of *multiplication* has been our touchstone, our community organizing model. In order to bring the “bird of multiplication” from Augusto Boal’s Tree of Theatre of the Oppressed¹ to life, in our understanding, facilitation skills must be open and accessible to as many people as possible, and shared leadership is vital. It became clear at the beginning of our journey that in a truly ethical TO movement, there cannot be just one or two facilitators who crowd out all other leadership, and there is more than one way to be a joker. We need to tell stories from new perspectives to get to the truth of the problem. We need to gather many different ideas and interventions in a forum to fight the problem. So, it follows that we need facilitators from many backgrounds, perspectives, styles, and energies to move from words, images and sounds to concrete and ethical social actions: the top of the TO Tree and objective of all the processes in the branches below. Monthly joker “workouts;” joker apprenticeships; and co-jokers practicing and modeling collaborative planning and feedback are just some of the ways that TONYC jokers dedicate significant energy and resources to supporting each other’s learning along the way. We wanted to ensure that our work wouldn’t center on one “expert” facilitator, nor create barriers to access in the form of expensive texts or trainings.

The idea for *The Wildcard Workbook* came from years of looking for materials that could support jokers at key points in their learning journey: after participating in a training workshop, while observing seasoned jokers in rehearsal, before showing up at their own rehearsals for the first time and beyond. There are beautiful books out there that provide a theoretical and historical background for TO, including Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* and *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, and Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, among many others. There are resources that reflect on projects all over the world and others that evaluate the real-world impacts of TO efforts, including the new *Routledge Companion to Theatre of the Oppressed* (Howe, K., Boal, J., and Soeiro, J.). However, we struggled to find practical literature

¹ Many examples of the Tree of TO exist online; one is via [Kuringa](#) in Berlin, from the book *Theatre of the Oppressed Roots and Wings: A Theory of Praxis*, Santos, Bárbara, 2019.

to help us debrief activities for consciousness-raising; plan rehearsals or handle challenging debates during a Forum.

Three years ago, that hunt led jokers at TONYC to envision a visual, colorful, interactive, and accessible workbook for Forum Theatre facilitators. A local community foundation gave an initial grant to support the project, so that the book could be available free of charge or by donation all over the world. We're glad to have avoided the barriers of publishers, book sales and shipping costs, although we know that's not always possible.

The Wildcard Workbook was born out of hundreds of hours of work during the COVID pandemic. We met over countless zoom calls from 2020 through 2022, on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, writing different sections of text individually and then coming together to question, critique, edit, and rewrite. With sections on understanding the story arc of a Forum Theatre play; evaluating one's own style and strengths as a facilitator; flashcards for leading public events; bridging the gap to Legislative Theatre; and a full index of games and exercises, we aimed to address as many elements of jokering as we could fit into 200 pages.

We – Sulu, Liz and Katy – have worked together for 7 years or more. Co-authoring as facilitators who have a strong trust in each other's practice was a joy and a learning opportunity. Articulating in writing, in sentences and paragraphs, the things we'd previously only known in our bodies and with groups, however, was sometimes incredibly difficult. Because we believe that there are multiple ways to facilitate TO, and that prescribing a singular practice would be antithetical to Theatre of the Oppressed, we aimed to write the workbook in a way that engaged the reader in questioning and critical thinking, without being dogmatic.

Another challenge was the illustration of the workbook. TONYC had never collaborated so closely with visual artists before this process – to help the artists understand the intention of our work and to make sure the words were clear and concise enough to guide the graphics. We partnered with Center for Urban Pedagogy to help us find and work alongside *Same Same But Different*, a team of visual artists who have illustrated and designed many other graphic resources geared towards popular education with activist groups. Neither of the aforementioned had taken a TO workshop before this collaboration, and so we kicked off this three-way partnership with a Zoom teach-in to give them a taste of the methodology. Answering their questions along the way helped clarify our explanations in the book, and we hope their vivid illustrations illuminate rehearsal and forum processes for readers.

TONYC's internal community of jokers and actors was our primary audience. Shaping the book to be useful and fun, first and foremost, for our own friends, was a useful grounding tool and kept us focused, even through lockdowns. Now, we are eager to share the workbook with our larger community of TO practitioners around the world, and to use these pages as a conversation-starter.

The Wildcard Workbook is TONYC's attempt at posing questions towards a more ethical, joyful, and radical practice of Theatre of the Oppressed. The book is meant to accompany in-person Theatre of the Oppressed trainings. We hope this book supports readers in developing a Joker practice that works for them and the communities they collaborate with, and encourages the reader to bring their own experiences, styles, and flair to the practice. It is available for download at www.tonyc.nyc, free or by donation.

The Wildcard Workbook: A Practical Guide for Joking Forum Theatre was created in collaboration with Center for Urban Pedagogy, a nonprofit organization that uses the power of design and art to increase meaningful civic engagement, and artist/design team Shreyas R. Krishnan and Kruttika Susarla, who have illustrated and designed a collection of graphic novels and popular education resources in both the US and India. The book's development was supported by funding from the New York Community Trust.