




Volume 7

2022

Relationships Between Theatre and Politics in Boal's Post-1964 Theatrical Work: The Collectivization of Artmaking as a Self-Conscious Expression of Aesthetic Production

Patricia Freitas
pfreitasantos@yahoo.com.br

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/ptoj>

 Part of the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Copyright

Recommended Citation

Freitas, Patricia (2022) "Relationships Between Theatre and Politics in Boal's Post-1964 Theatrical Work: The Collectivization of Artmaking as a Self-Conscious Expression of Aesthetic Production," *Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Journal*: Vol. 7, Article 15.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/ptoj/vol7/iss1/15>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the CHAS Journals at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Journal by an authorized editor of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.

Offensive Materials Statement: Materials located in UNI ScholarWorks come from a broad range of sources and time periods. Some of these materials may contain offensive stereotypes, ideas, visuals, or language.

Relationships Between Theatre and Politics in Boal's Post-1964 Theatrical Work: The Collectivization of Artmaking as a Self-Conscious Expression of Aesthetic Production

Cover Page Footnote

Patricia Freitas dos Santos is a Doctoral Candidate in the College of Philosophy, Letters, and Human Sciences of the University of São Paulo, Brazil, with research focused on the Fairs of Opinion directed by Augusto Boal (1968-1977). Contact email: pfreitassantos@yahoo.com.br



Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Journal

Vol. 7, Issue 1 (2023)

Relationships Between Theatre and Politics in Boal's Post-1964 Theatrical Work: The Collectivization of Artmaking as a Self-Conscious Expression of Aesthetic Production¹

Patricia Freitas dos Santos²

Translated by Kelly Howe³

This essay aims to bring a historical perspective to the theatrical work carried out by Augusto Boal after the establishment of the military dictatorship in Brazil in 1964. The historical trauma generated by the coup re-dimensioned the socially engaged theatrical practice in the country. In Boal's case, it created important contradictions between his theory and practice. Along these lines, this study verified that the reflection proposed by Boal on the Brazilian scene had a broader background and was embedded in a movement of cultural criticism, with the aim of creating an aesthetic and political program of action.

The Brazilian reality today cannot be captured in a critical, transformative, stimulating way by conventional dramaturgy. The present moment needs to be analyzed deeply from a concrete historical vantage point [...]. The theoretical and practical postulates of dramaturgy and staging need to undergo a violent and ruthless process of criticism and self-criticism, to be rethought in terms of a new activity, capable of contributing something solid to the country's socio-cultural process. [...] If you do not think in terms of aesthetics and the relations of production, about the dialectical interdependence between infrastructure and superstructure, those who do theatre in Brazil will not find a way out of this crisis.

Fernando Peixoto, 1989

¹ An abridged version of this article will be published in Spanish in the Argentinian magazine *Teatro Situado: Revista de Artes Escénicas con Ojos Latinoamericanos (Situating Theatre: A Magazine of Scenic Arts from a Latin American Perspective)*.

² Patricia Freitas dos Santos is a Doctoral Candidate in the College of Philosophy, Letters, and Human Sciences of the University of São Paulo, Brazil, with research focused on the Fairs of Opinion directed by Augusto Boal (1968-1977). Contact email: pfreitassantos@yahoo.com.br

³ Kelly Howe teaches at Loyola University Chicago. A PTO board member and past president, she has co-organized four PTO conferences. She co-edited (with Julian Boal and José Soeiro) *The Routledge Companion to Theatre of the Oppressed* and (with Julian Boal and Scot McElvany) *Theatre of the Oppressed in Actions*. She translates for PTO and 48th Ward Neighbors for Justice. She has also co-translated (with Fabiana Comparato) *Theatre of the Oppressed and its Times* by Julian Boal and translated two documentaries about Theatre of the Oppressed in Argentina. She co-organizes/facilitates Theatre of the Oppressed in Chicago and beyond.

This long epigraph, excerpted from the essay “How to Transmit Signals from Within the Flames” by Fernando Peixoto (p. 337), seems to distill essential questions for Brazilian artists, the majority of whom were committed to the social reality of the country and evidently still shaken by the fatal impacts and consequences of the civil-military coup of 1964.

Written in São Paulo in October of 1972, Peixoto’s considerations of the narrow and still-unclear paths toward a “critical and transformative” national theatre are in conversation with other writings by artists and theatre critics of that epoch, even if such dialogue is not explicit (1989, p. 336). One example can be found in the editorial introduction of the arts journal *aParte*, published a few months before Institutional Act Number 5 (AI-5) in 1968.⁴ In it, members of the University Theatre at the University of São Paulo (TUSP) pointed out that a certain “responsible” artistic performance against censorship and dictatorial restrictions involved the perception of the very same cultural, political, and ideological “state of war” in which Brazil had found itself since 1964: “What can we do with the written word? Perhaps it is fundamental to admit the situation: we are at war. Moreover, we live in an occupied nation [. . .]. All sciences, all arts, and all theory are social products, and, as such, forged from a class perspective” (1968b, p. 3).

In these text-manifestos, the importance of awareness of the very function of art inside capitalist logic goes beyond thinking about base and superstructure; that is, the mode of production of material life that determines the ideology, culture, and social mentality of an epoch. Both Peixoto and the other members of the TUSP underscore culture as a participatory social phenomenon in struggles for hegemony – and as embedded in a whole web of social practices, visions of the world, and class questions. Incorporated into the social process, art is seen not as a field *mechanically determined* by the base of society, but rather as a field that is dialectically determined *and*

⁴ Institutional Act Number 5 (also known as AI-5) was one of the most striking decrees in the history of the Brazilian dictatorship precisely because of its arbitrary scope and scale, and its extremely violent attack on civil liberties. Over the course of the 10 years that the decree was in effect, Institutional Act Number 5 conferred on the president of the Republic the power to shut down Congress, to declare martial law, and to pardon public functionaries.

determinative of social relations, whose potential for transforming and contesting the dominant norms and rules should be emphasized.⁵

There cannot be, in that sense, artistic production exempt from the perspective of class. The fight against dictatorial authoritarianism on the artistic front would therefore inevitably involve an eye attentive to the ideological meaning of aesthetic forms and artistic modes of production. The focus of the members of the TUSP was much more directed to the process of producing plays, gesturing toward a *cultural project*, rather than to the materialization of an isolated work as an end in itself.

In 1968, theatre-maker Augusto Boal also published his accounts of the political theatre of the period in the same magazine, *aParte*, and followed the same line as TUSP. When asked about the downfall of the Left in the military coup and, with it, the failure of “the action program” of political theatre defended by the Arena Theatre, Boal reiterated that it is not the responsibility of artists alone to stop counterrevolutionary processes, much less struggle heroically against tanks in the streets. Boal goes on to state that

the most advanced theatre of the era was staged by the Popular Culture Centers [CPCs, or *Centros Populares de Cultura*] and by some theatre companies that proposed the popularization of the theatrical arts. Dozens of CPCs responded almost immediately to changes in national and international policy. I am sure that never in any part of the world has the theatre been so guerilla-esque. At that time, professional companies toured Brazil, especially the Northeast, bringing shows to the streets, amphitheaters, and churches. When the chosen play demanded special conditions, the actors got together and edited the text themselves [. . .]. All of this activity was annihilated. (1968a, p. 17)

This was unprecedented praise. Boal had worked intensely with the CPCs, above all with the CPC of the National Union of Students (UNE) in Rio de Janeiro (1962-1964), traveling through various states in the country to give classes, participate in debates, and write plays. Despite his previous work with them, I cannot find a complimentary account by Boal of the theatrical work of the CPCs

⁵ It is worth raising here Raymond Williams' thought-provoking analysis of the relationship between art and society: “What are the relationships between art and society, or between literature and society? [. . .] We have to say, in the first place, that there are no relations between literature and society in this abstract way. Literature presents itself, from the beginning, as a practice in society. In fact, until it and all other practices are present, the society cannot be seen as fully formed. The society is not totally available to be analyzed until each of its practices is included” (2011, p. 61).

prior to this interview in 1968. Before that moment, Boal's texts, as a rule, focused on justifying and systematizing the works of the Arena Theatre, works most likely fueled by debates and exchanges Boal had with various groups, including the CPCs. Notable examples among the pre-coup writings by the theatre maker are debates around the so-called popular theatre, about the "box office trap" of having to rely on ticket sales, and about the entrepreneurial and alienating nature of certain theatre companies that focused solely on awakening a contemplativeness in their audience.

Boal's theoretical texts about popular theatre seem to have reached a turning point in 1968. With the resurgence of the politics of censorship and of compulsory distance between artists and everyday people belonging to the popular classes, Augusto Boal's focus turned more and more toward the reconstruction of a non-institutional, collective, and popular-reaching theatre, capable of dissolving the rigid structures of the theatre space and the division between the stage and the audience. His praise of the CPCs, therefore, seems to signal the loss of that rich, pre-1964 culture, from which had emerged extremely relevant contributions for left-wing artists of all kinds.

This, however, is not to say that Boal's theatrical work in the period before the coup was not committed to changing the relations of artistic production. In truth, from his first years as artistic director of Arena Theatre in the late 1950s, Boal coordinated an Interpretation Laboratory for the members of the group, and, a bit later, also started a Dramaturgy Seminar, in which the group and some guests got together periodically with the intent that everyone read, analyze, and write plays.⁶ That was the first time in Brazil that playwriting emerged as a *shared systematic exercise*, breaking away from the specialization of members and the division of roles.⁷

Boal's arrival at the Arena Theatre in 1956 catalyzed the group's goals of forming national artists and of constructing a theatre committed to the local reality and the representation of class

⁶ This practice was strongly influenced by Boal's experience from 1954 to 1955 as a participant in The Writers' Group, an experimental North American group composed of playwrights and aspiring playwrights. In the meetings, all the members were encouraged to write theatrical works and to take part in reading circles where the texts were analyzed collectively.

⁷ For more about this topic, see: RIBEIRO, 2015.

conflicts, based on a dramaturgy and interpretation specific to the group. This development, according to the dominant historiography, occasioned an “openness of Brazilian Theatre to national playwrights” (COSTA, 2016, p. 19) and the use of proletarian characters as protagonists.⁸

The Arena Theatre's commitment to a national theatrical repertoire—which involved a consciousness of the political dimension of art—went through a profound process of research and experimentation with new forms and modes of theatrical production, primarily those promoted by the Laboratory and the Seminar. From the end of the 1950s on, therefore, Augusto Boal's defense of a politicized theatre was not reduced to the sphere of the representation of class struggle alone; it also reflected an awareness of the function of art in the society of the time. In 1959, he affirmed: “To make theatre defines nothing. To make good theatre is a little more specific. But to make good theatre for whom? And why? [. . .] In other words, this new theatre will penetrate the economically lower classes, who in turn will claim their own theatre, their own dramaturgy, their own form” (1981, p. 10).

Though the research undertaken in the 1950s connects to the 1968 testimonial-manifesto for the defense of a self-conscious theatre, the two are distanced precisely by their contexts of production. While the proposal for politicized work in 1959 targeted economic challenges, in 1968—in the middle of the military dictatorship—the challenges were nothing short of suffocating. That is why, when Boal points out the nefarious consequences of the annihilation of the revolutionary theatrical practice of the CPCs, he also proposes strategies as to how to continue the legacy of those groups and escape the gag rules imposed by the military regime. Faced with the crushing dictatorship, the path – according to the playwright – should involve an “awareness of the adversity” of that social context and a systematization of *methods* capable of disseminating theatre as a collective and non-specialized social production.

⁸ Iná Camargo Costa situates the staging of *They Don't Wear Black Tie* in 1958 at the Arena Theatre as a landmark moment in terms of theatre committed to the representation of workers and class struggle. See COSTA, 2016, p. 19.

Interspersed with theatrical productions whose gravitational axes sprang from an almost dystopian perspective – as was the case with the adaptation of Kafka's text *The Trial* (1967), and with *Uncle Scrooge and the Pill* (1968) – the trajectory of the Arena Theatre under Boal's direction in the post-coup period was sustained by a vision of art as a symbolic battlefield, subject to the control, surveillance, and mystification typical of a social logic that worships goods and reifies the notion of the individual. At the same time, these shows posed questions about the social mechanisms that act in the construction of meaning – and analyzed the class interests behind such mechanisms. The fundamental questions posed by these shows anticipated questions that would later intersect with the methodology of Theatre of the Oppressed in the mid-1970s, namely: Why do only some people confront the brutal mechanization of their work? Why is cultural work constantly separated from manual labor? Why is artistic creation an opportunity bestowed upon only a few, making it an instrument in the perpetuation of symbolic power? Why is it not transformative enough for the artist to simply fight for accessibility in the arts?

The echoes of these questions are not only at the core of the theatrical productions mentioned; they are also found in the formal innovations achieved by those plays, as was the case with the "Arena tells" musicals (*Arena Tells of Zumbi*, *Arena Tells of Tiradentes*, *Arena Tells of Bahia*, *Arena Tells of Bolívar*), with the "truth shows"⁹ (*Opinion Show*, *The Questioning of Sérgio Ricardo*, *Song of Exile*), and with the "opinion fairs" (*The First São Paulo Fair of Opinion*, *Latin*

⁹ The "Truth show" was a form created by Augusto Boal in 1964, after the coup in Brazil. He himself explains how the idea came up: "After that solid silence [the night of the coup], we were afraid of telephones. Even whispered conversations in the bar across from the Arena – all bugged. (...) Anyone who had once said anything which might appear similar to left-wing thinking ... was imprisoned and taken to specially adapted prison ships, barracks, common jails or neighbourhood police stations. Where there was a door and padlock, prisoners were locked up. (...) During the democracy, we had our adversaries: now we had enemies. (...) I had an idea that I thought ingenious. Before 1964, movie directors had created a style: *cinema-verdade* (truth-cinema); characters were played by the very people who inspired the story. In other words, true documentaries with the appearance of fiction. If you could have truth-cinema, why not truth-theatre? The first idea came easily: Kafka's *The Trial* revealed what was happening in Brazil. K. wakes in the morning – as we did on 1 April 1964 – to find his room full of policemen: he is being accused by someone (you do not know who), of something (you do not know what), and will be tried (you do not know when), by a judge (you do not know which), in a court (you do not know where). K. ends up being sentenced to death and is executed. Nothing seemed more like Brazil in those dark days. I thought of inviting to make up the actual cast people who, like K., were persecuted without knowing why. (...) I wanted all my friends and all the people I admired, I wanted all the victims of persecution on Earth!" See: BOAL, 2001, pp. 231-233.

American Fair of Opinion, and *What's this come to?: Portuguese Fair of Opinion*). One can see in the musicals an important friction between title and authorship; the Arena group is who "tells," but the author's name is the one that signs the text. The "truth-show" musical *The Questioning of Sérgio Ricardo* challenges the centrality of script writer Augusto Boal in staging the testimony of the then-controversial singer, Sérgio Ricardo. The Opinion Fairs featured the collectivization of authorship as their primary compositional resource, combining several contributions into one action: fine and visual art, films, poems, and songs by various authors. The tone of collectivization was present not only in the political content of these performances – which focused on social matters rather than individual problems – but also in terms of how authorship itself worked. In other words, these plays were structured by a collective of authors whose main idea was to spread and democratize access and the right to authorship, operating with a global perspective.

It is no wonder that Boal would travel through countries like Mexico, Peru, Argentina, the U.S.A, Uruguay, and France to share knowledge about the Joker System, a politically engaged theatre methodology capable of being practiced and disseminated by anyone interested in doing so. In the text where Boal outlines the Joker System, he affirms: "[t]he system is permanent only within the transitoriness of theatrical techniques. It does not pretend to provide definitive solutions for aesthetic problems. What it does pretend to do is to make theatre possible again in our country. And with it goes the intention to go on thinking that theatre is worthwhile" (2008, p. 164).¹⁰

Furthermore, we should note Boal's publication of the theory of the Joker System and of Newspaper Theatre in international magazines, where he shed light on the didactic aspect of those methods, the expressed goals of which were to expand and decentralize engaged theatrical activity, mocking the politics of censorship and ideological restriction and giving access to the means of artistic production for all people.

¹⁰ On this topic, the researcher Paulo Vinícius Bio Toledo develops an important analysis of the Joker System and its proposal of multiplication. See: TOLEDO, 2018.

Perhaps the most ambitious project of those mentioned here would be that of the Opinion Fairs. Boal proposed the fair of opinion method as a way of generating productive dialogue between playwrights, poets, fine and visual artists, and musicians who opposed the regime but encountered very few opportunities to work together. Therefore, Boal put out calls – sometimes to those within his friend circles, sometimes in play programs or in newspapers – inviting people to send him short texts (poems, one-act plays, and songs) in response to the question: “What do you think of today’s Brazil?” After undergoing a selection process, the Arena Theatre gathered the texts and staged them in a polyvocal show capable of giving a sense of the scope of the various aesthetic aspects of the art of the Left in Brazil in 1968, without hierarchizing them.

Some elements of this new method of theatre-making should be highlighted. First, one can see in it a certain radicalization of the collective exercise of dramatic writing brought to fruition in the Arena’s Dramaturgy Seminar. This process is radical in the sense that it not only fulfills a formative function for the group members but also plays a structural role in the composition of the show, reverberating in a way that is guided by collective authorship.

Additionally, the Opinion Fairs contain other important legacies of Boal’s theoretical and practical work. Examples include: the use of testimony as a dramaturgical element to analyze social reality, which hearkens back to the “truth shows” of the time; the incorporation of varied artistic expressions in order to build a comprehensive perspective on culture, as in the CPCs; and the use of what Boal called a “Dramaturgy Joker,” a kind of extension of the Joker System, but one focused on the rotation of authors.¹¹

In a text included in the program for the *First São Paulo Fair of Opinion*, Boal explains the prismatic character of the show in the following way:

¹¹ Undated leaflet that accompanies 47 slides in Portuguese, English, and Spanish. The leaflet probably was written between 1970 and 1971, during which time Boal made various trips with the Arena Theatre to Latin American countries and to the United States. The document was found when the Augusto Boal Archive was still in the process of cataloging undertaken by the Augusto Boal Institute, and, as a result, cannot be properly referenced. All the slides are available on the website of the Augusto Boal Institute, via this link: <http://acervoaugustoboal.com.br/sistema-coringa-41?pag=4>. Last accessed on 08/05/2023.

The different trends of our art today will be better understood through comparing their goals and processes. This is necessary, especially at this moment when all Left-wing art faces the necessity of relocating its processes and methods. The clash between the differing trends should not mean the ultimate predominance of any, as all of them must be overcome, because the political circumstances that determine them were also overcome, each in its own moment. (BOAL, 2016, p. 23)

The performance – in which playwrights like Lauro César Muniz, Bráulio Pedrosa, Guarnieri, Jorge Andrade, Plínio Marcos, and Boal himself participated – incorporated three principal theatrical aesthetics, positioning them against the so-called “bourgeois theatre”:

- 1) Neo-Realism, represented by the plays written by Plínio Marcos, Jorge Andrade, and Guarnieri. Its limitations collided with the portrayal of characters who had very little awareness of the process of exploitation that victimized them;
- 2) The so-called “always standing up,”¹² which was linked to the exhortative “Arena tells” musicals, and which demanded productive contact with the popular layers of society, a contact shut down by the regime; and
- 3) Tropicalism, which dealt with aesthetic impasses in a nihilistic and uncritical way, according to Boal.

In light of the limited possibilities to do political theatre in 1968, which would become even more limited after the enactment of AI-5, Boal ends his text about the *First Paulista Fair of Opinion* by arguing for the necessity of art being committed to the task of social transformation:

It is necessary to show the need to transform the current society; it is necessary to show the possibility of this change and the means of effecting it. And this must be shown to those who can do it. Enough criticism of the Saturday audiences—one must now seek out the people. It is necessary to investigate our reality from diverse angles and perspectives: there will be your movement. We playwrights, composers, poets, caricature artists, and photographers must be both witnesses to – and an integral part of – this reality. We will be witnesses as we observe reality, and an integral part of it insofar as we are observed. This is the idea of the First Fair. (2016, p; 35)

It was up to left-wing artists – demystified and inserted into a context in which their work was governed in a compulsory way by the laws of capital – to criticize the state of things from within, as witnesses to the horror of the State. The impetus for a transformative and combative art occurred

¹² The concept is first developed by Boal in Portuguese and published in the text-manifesto “Que pensa você da arte de esquerda?” (What do you think about left-wing art?). This is an effort to translate some of the ideas presented by Boal to the English readers, since the manifesto has not yet been translated into English.

precisely in defense of a didactic, multipliable, and collective theatre, in which all were invited to contribute.

We know that, in 1968, the Fair of Opinion was conceived as a working method. Boal planned to do three subsequent shows using this method: the Rio de Janeiro Fair, the Latin American Fair, and the Global Fair (BOAL, 1968).¹³ Therefore, it is not a stretch to say that, from the turbulent, ideological-political context in which it was inserted, the Fair method sought to combine aesthetic commitment with material perspectives of struggle. In this sense, it was configured as a strategy for socio-political renovation, one that echoes in the very systematization of Theatre of the Oppressed.

These various propositions that Boal put forward in the years following the coup—if seen as part of a cultural project of renewal—underscore the collective effort of a portion of the artistic class who resisted institutional policies that violently dominated minds and bodies. The records of Boal's trajectory give an account of intense activities undertaken by socially committed Brazilian artists, even in those dark times. Many are still active, some are exiles, and some were murdered by the dictatorship. To reclaim the memory of this moment in Brazilian theatre is to recognize our responsibility today—as artists, critics, and academics—in the construction of dialogue and collective actions in the sphere of the arts.

Works cited

BOAL, A. et al. *Primeira Feira Paulista de Opinião*. São Paulo: Expressão Popular, 2016.

_____. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. London: Pluto Press, 2008.

_____. “Depoimentos sobre o teatro brasileiro hoje”. *Revista aParte*, nº 1, São Paulo, março/abril

¹³ These plans, however, were made before Boal's arrest (or kidnapping) by the Brazilian dictatorship, in February 1971. After spending a few months at DOPS and Tiradentes Prison in São Paulo, he was forced to leave Brazil and had to spend fifteen years abroad with his family. During his exile, he was able to organize and direct a second Fair of Opinion, *Latin American Fair of Opinion*, which was performed in Saint Clement's Church in New York City in March 1972. After a few years, in 1977, he directed a third and last Fair of Opinion, staged in Portugal, called *Ao Qu'isto Chegou: Feira Portuguesa de Opinião (How far have we come? Portuguese Fair of Opinion)*.

- 1968a.
- _____. *Sistema Coringa: uma experiência de Augusto Boal no Teatro de Arena de São Paulo*, s/d, s/p.
- _____. "Tentativa de análise do desenvolvimento do teatro brasileiro" *Arte em Revista*, nº 6, São Paulo, 1981.
- _____. *Hamlet and the Baker's Son. My Life in Theatre and Politics*. New York: Routledge, 2001.
- COSTA, Iná Camargo. *A hora do teatro épico no Brasil*, São Paulo: Expressão Popular, 2016.
- PEIXOTO, Fernando. In: *Teatro em Pedacos (Theatre in Pieces)*. 2ª. ed. São Paulo: Hucitec, 1989.
- RIBEIRO, Paula Chagas Autran. Teoria e prática do seminário de dramaturgia do Teatro de Arena. 2012. Dissertação (Mestrado em Teoria e Prática do Teatro) - Escola de Comunicações e Artes, Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, 2012. doi:10.11606/D.27.2012.tde-31082015-152343. Acesso em: 2022-06-28.
- TOLEDO, Paulo Vinicius Bio. *Debates sobre teatro e sociedade após o golpe de 1964: reflexão e trabalho teatral de José Celso Martinez Corrêa e Augusto Boal*. Escola de Comunicações e Artes, Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, 2018.
- TUSP. "Apresentação editorial (Editorial introduction)." *Revista aParte*, nº 2, São Paulo, 1968b.
- WILLIAMS, Raymond. *Cultura e Materialismo*. São Paulo: Editora Unesp, 2011.