



Theatre of the Oppressed: Empowering Homeless Women

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ABSTRACT

This article recounts the efficacy of Theatre of the Oppressed techniques in helping homeless women deal with the emotional wounds and chronic oppression they have experienced. The method empowered these women by highlighting their innate abilities. Based on more than one hundred sessions at the largest homeless shelter in New Haven, Connecticut, the author analyzes the usefulness of the various games and activities, with commentary on the alterations needed for the particular participants. Finally, the successes and the challenges faced in applications of Theatre of the Oppressed to this population are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Theatre of the Oppressed, founded by the Brazilian playwright and philosopher Augusto Boal, is a form of therapy where participants reenact situations of oppression that they have experienced and then experiment with realistic solutions to the dilemma. These solutions may be used the next time the person faces this oppression.

This article chronicles the conception and execution of a program using Theatre of the Oppressed as a tool to help homeless women deal with their present emotional and mental health challenges and change their future: to provide these women with "free time to preoccupy themselves with themselves" as observed by Boal in his interview with Michael Taussig and Richard Schechner (1990, p. 60). I have found Theatre of the Oppressed to work because it gives people a safe environment in which to rehearse options for solving their problems.

In more than one hundred sessions at the largest homeless shelter in New Haven, Connecticut, I experimented with activities, games and skits to counter the effects of structural oppression. Despite frequent changes in the composition of the participant group, and the challenges of addiction and mental illness that some of them faced, the sessions provided fun, enlightenment, community, and hope.

As Boal so eloquently wrote, "The Theatre of the Oppressed creates spaces of liberty where people can free their memories, emotions, imaginations, thinking of their past, in the present, and where they can invent their future, instead of waiting for it." (Boal, 1992, p. 5)

HISTORY OF THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED

Augusto Boal (1931-2009) developed a systematic, non-aggressive approach to countering oppression using a theatre technique, which he called Theatre of the Oppressed. This method is practiced in over fifty-seven countries (Boal, 2011). It is an accessible kind of theatre that does not require line memorization. It breaks down the invisible wall between the audience and the actors. Boal began this movement after being arrested and tortured for protesting against the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil in the 1960s (Cohen-Cruz and Schutzman, 2006, p. 3).

There are several forms of Theatre of the Oppressed. One form, Image Theatre, was developed by Boal in Peru as part of a national literacy campaign. It involves the use of games and silent formations of participants into sculptures that "... express ideas and experiences that are then dynamized to further explore their ramifications." (Cohen-Cruz and Schutzman, 2006, p. 3) A second style, Forum Theatre, is the enactment of a scene of oppression between a protagonist and an antagonist. The scene is then reenacted during which time anyone may yell, "FREEZE!" and enter the action with a realistic solution. The antagonist may not give in readily, making each solution that works in the scene practical and realistic. At any time, a spectator (spect-actor) can "freeze" the scene, replace the protagonist, and resolve the problem. There is no traditional "audience" that merely passively observes. According to Boal,

“Forum Theatre is a reflection on reality and a rehearsal for future action. In the present, we re-live the past to create the future.” (Boal, 1998, p. 9)

Theatre of the Oppressed has spread around the globe to help thousands of people suffering from many different types of oppression. Theatre troupes, social workers, even middle class American students have adapted the techniques. Sometimes it is used to help those suffering, such as the Indian organization Jana Sanskriti that utilizes Forum Theatre with peasants (Boal, 2011). Boal’s method of Invisible Theatre¹ can be adapted and used purely for experimentation, as in Jonathan M. Gray’s *Mallfinger*, an exploration of popular culture (Gray, 1993, pp. 128-142).

Theatre of the Oppressed is constantly being adapted to cater to the needs of different participant groups, based on socio-economic status, race, age, and physicality. While Theatre of the Oppressed addresses problems of self-identity that are universal, the process needs to be modified to reflect the characteristics of the local population and the type of oppression that is being investigated. Theatre of the Oppressed practitioners have therefore found it necessary to adapt Boal’s work to fit their needs. For example, Barbara Santos adapted the concept of Theatre of the Oppressed from a political focus to concentrate on the therapeutic effect of applause on women in prison (Santos, 2006. p. 2).

THE WORKSHOPS

After reading Boal’s books in the summer of 2008, I realized I wanted to use theatre, not to entertain, but as a vehicle for social change. I contacted over thirty possible venues where I could facilitate Theatre of the Oppressed sessions in the Connecticut area. One homeless shelter in New Haven agreed to allow me to lead a weekly women’s group.

The women ranged in age from about 16 to 60 years old and were from different backgrounds. At first the group met every Wednesday afternoon at five o’clock. This was an awkward time slot. The session was sandwiched between the two main events of the day – smoke-break and dinner. This meant the women were late coming in from their break, and then hungry and restless to get in the dinner line as fast as possible. One participant, Josephine,² made these priorities quite clear by remarking that at the shelter, “You don’t mess with dinner”.

THE GAMES

While theatre exercises outlined in Boal’s book, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (Boal, 1992), served as the basis for the group’s activities, Theatre of the Oppressed is a basic outline, something to be appreciated, learned from, and added to, based on the participants, settings, and problems. As Boal said, “In each country, people have to adapt the method to their own culture, their own language, their own desires and needs. Theatre of the Oppressed is not a Bible, not a recipe book: it is a method to be

¹Invisible Theatre is a form of Theatre of the Oppressed in which a group of actors produce a planned scene in public to observe the reactions of the surrounding citizens.

²All names of the people associated with this shelter have been changed for confidentiality, excluding that of Jinnellys LaViera, the program coordinator.

used by people, and people are more important than the method" (Boal, 1998, p. 120). Adding additional games is therefore not a departure from Boal. Adaptation to the local culture is part of Boal's philosophy.

The physical needs of the women made it necessary to invent and bring in other games. Since many of Boal's games require active movement, the games needed to be reworked. These women spend their days standing, pacing the streets. The refrain, "I'm tired, I don't want to stand up!" was understandable and familiar. Consequently, games were devised that could be done sitting in a circle.

MAKING INTRODUCTIONS

Easy games were selected to "break the ice". Every week different participants showed up, ranging in number from three to fifteen. A game using tennis balls turned out to be a fun way to introduce ourselves. Standing or sitting in a circle, we passed a tennis ball around and each person had to say her name before passing it on to the next person. The women were always looking for fun, whether it meant saying their names in a funny voice, or just throwing the ball in a different way. Next, we passed the ball in silence. This forced everyone to be aware of where the ball was and to be alert for when it might come her way. Every time someone dropped the ball, the others laughed to make that person feel less uncomfortable. Somehow, the laughter seemed to bring us together. To add some excitement, a second ball was added. This became interesting when one person received both balls simultaneously. The women thought it was hysterical when I dropped the ball. Finally, I added a third ball, which was challenging, but they obviously enjoyed the game because they reminded me to bring the balls back for the next meeting.

Reflecting on this session, I realized that this simple exercise provided the women with a way to connect and to form a cohesive group in which they felt safe and comfortable, a rarity in the world of homelessness.

One week, everyone was frowning and sitting in different corners of the room. There was not a smile to be seen. I assembled everyone in a circle around one woman in a chair whose knees were aching as a result of hypothermia. We played the tennis ball game. One woman, who looked like she had been through even more than the rest, said without hesitation when she caught the ball, "I'm Sylvia and I'm an alcoholic." Everyone clapped, and then she smiled. As the game progressed, everyone cheered up. Another ball was added. Everyone got more excited and happier and, for the briefest of moments, these women experienced the simple "joy" of living.

JOE EGG

To gain the trust of these women, I used one of Boal's games called *Joe Egg* (Boal, 1992, p. 62). In this activity, the group stands in a circle with one person in the middle who, at any time, may fall to one side. The others must gently catch the person, pushing her back to the center.

This posed the problem of standing up. Many of the women did not want to stand up, or could not stand up easily. I therefore adapted the game to be a one-on-one exercise. I asked for a volunteer and explained how to stand with bent knees. Then I fell into her arms. She was astounded that I trusted her. She could have easily dropped me. After my demonstration, I asked for more volunteers. They were still a little anxious, so I demonstrated with a participant who was a little heavy. Seeing me catch her with no problem gave them more confidence. Before anyone fell into someone else's arms, I asked them to say, "Do you trust me?" and wait for the response, "Yes, I trust you." They loved the exercise, and everyone ended up participating. One girl, Sheila, was quite negative and very self-conscious about her weight. After finally convincing her that I could catch her, Sheila fell into my arms. She suddenly smiled. Silently, I wondered when the world had last seen Sheila smile.

PUSHING AGAINST EACH OTHER

In Boal's game entitled *Pushing Against Each Other* (Boal, 1992, p. 58), two people put a tennis ball in between their bodies, their hands, their foreheads, etc. Boal explained that this game, "...is about using all one's strength and still not winning." (Boal, 1992, p. 58) Two women of different heights volunteered. This difference forced them to adapt. While balancing the ball between their hands first, and then their foreheads, the others asked them to do different things, like move one step back, or three steps to the right, etc. Then, I did the same exercise with one of the women. Balancing a ball between our foreheads brought us close together. My partner acted surprised that someone would even come near her. This confused me until the program coordinator later explained to me, "These women are used to walking down the street and having people treat them like they are invisible, like they don't even exist."

HEADLINES

One workshop met on January 21st, 2009, the day after Barack Obama's presidential inauguration. I thought everyone would be very excited about it, so I bought a lot of newspapers and cut out the headlines containing inspirational phrases to read out loud. They included phrases such as, "Change", "All this we will do", "We have chosen hope over fear", and "We must pick ourselves up". At the shelter, I placed the headlines facedown on a table. When the women got there, I asked if they had watched the inauguration. Surprisingly to me, they had not. They blamed it on the television room being closed. Naively, I had forgotten that they did not enjoy the privilege of owning a house, let alone a television. We did the activity anyway. The first woman was reluctant to start, so I picked up a small headline for her. She read the title in a very dead, monotonous voice. I asked her to re-read the sentence three times, but each time differently. At first it was not at all different, but with some encouragement and applause, she did this well, growing louder each time and using a different emphasis. She laughed! Then we all laughed. The next woman walked in circles while saying her line. She developed a mesmerizing rhythm that helped her accentuate her phrase. The next woman had "Change". She mumbled and grumbled about having the least important headline because it was just one word. I told her

how it was a very important word. When said in the right way, the word could really influence people. I told her to think about it, to picture it in her head, to hear what she wanted it to sound like. Then she stood up, straightened her back, and said in a huge booming voice, “CHANGE!” She started laughing. We all applauded, and laughed with her. She was asked to do it again in a different voice. This time, after changing her stance, she said the word in a very high-pitched voice. This exercise gave everyone more confidence in themselves and brought them together as a group.

SOUNDS

In this game, which the women particularly enjoyed, the participants sit in a circle, one person making up a sound and then passing it to the person on her right. That person copies the sound and passes it on. One could change direction, or change the sound to add variety.

Normally, the women would make animal noises, or nonsensical sounds. However, during one session, as I was explaining the game, they did not seem very interested. One woman coughed, so I decided to pass it on to the next person, who passed it on. What fascinated me was that no one made a kind of noise that I was used to hearing in this game when done in theatre classes (for example a “whiz”, or a “pop”). Instead, it all revolved around a grunt that would change based on the person’s inflection, facial expression, tone, or body movement. Without using any words, they conveyed “What?”, “No you didn’t!”, a mournful “Oh”, a warm greeting “Hello”, a sassy “Who do you think you are?”, and countless other similar expressions of disdain, fear, aggression, and joy.

TELL ME A STORY

In another “icebreaker” game, a woman, picked at random, begins a story that she continues until another woman is selected to continue the tale.

The stories they devised were interesting because they usually touched on a serious topic such as alcoholism or homelessness. The story that stood out the most to me involved a purple, green, and “punch pink” dinosaur and his blue frog friend that had green wings. One woman, when I pointed to her, said they were homeless and everyone started laughing.³ The dinosaur and his frog friend eventually found the shelter and checked in for the night. The next day, they decided to look for a real home, and came to a river. Then Dinorah, a small, stout woman with short, salt-and-pepper hair pointed to herself and continued by saying that they had found a beautiful castle, “the color of the clouds”. When they knocked on the door, no one answered. So, they went in and everything was a beautiful color, “all happy and clean”. They decided to live in it because no one else seemed to be using the beautiful castle. One woman finished the story by saying that one day, all shelters went out of business because everyone had found their castle. There was nothing I could say. A cloud castle. I looked at their worn, tired faces and saw that many eyes were

³At first, laughing at the idea of homelessness surprised me, but I came to attribute this to Relief Therapy as described in Sigmund Freud’s article on humor published in the International Journal of Psychoanalysis, 1928.

unfocused, as if the women were envisioning a refuge that floated far above them. It showed me their dream, and helped me to understand these women a little better.

OTHER GAMES THAT WORKED

Occasionally, we would invent a game as a group. During one session, the women got interested in rhyming and rhythm. We invented our own game called “Rhyme Battles”. While everyone pats a steady beat, one woman says a word that rhymes with the word the person before has just said. If anyone hesitates, repeats a word, or makes up a word, they are eliminated.

The women were good at this game, even though keeping the beat was hard. Sometimes it was difficult to understand them, and it sounded like they were either making up words, or I had never heard of them. Since no one else said anything, I just went along. There was, perhaps, a competitive component to this made-up game, which they loved but which Boal might have questioned.⁴ Despite Boal's injunction against competition in Theatre of the Oppressed games, they never showed any personal animosity toward each other. Rather, this aspect of competition, which emerged as a positive pattern, added to the group's energy and encouraged participation.

The games, outlined by Boal as a part of Theatre of the Oppressed, are successful in creating an environment where the participants may have fun and create practical solutions. While conducting a Theatre of the Oppressed workshop in Iraq two months before the US invasion, Doug Paterson explained this point in his article, *Three Stories from the Trenches* (Paterson, 2008). “The games worked well as they almost always do. Participants were having fun. Perhaps that is as much as we could expect.” (Paterson, 2008, p. 117) At first, having fun was sufficient because it gave the women an incentive to come to the group and allowed them to become comfortable in that environment. Having fun acts as the precursor to the discussions, creations, and eventual solutions found with Forum Theatre.

However, Boal would not be satisfied to learn that his techniques were being used merely as activities to generate laughter, allowing the real issues to sink beneath the surface and remain unaddressed. My experiences in New Haven have made clear the importance of fun as a first, but not a final, step.

Theatre of the Oppressed requires participants. These women, my 'clients', want to have fun, which is not a common occurrence in their lives. They will come to the group and participate if they know that desire will be fulfilled. Many times, while walking around the main room trying to get a group together, I have heard a woman say to her neighbor, “You should come to this group, it's a lot of fun.” This kind of statement can be an important factor in a woman's decision to attend. Once they are physically in the room, laughing and enjoying themselves, the foundation has been

⁴Note that Boal said, “None of the exercises or games should be done with violence, nor should any cause pain: all should be done with pleasure and understanding. Nothing should ever be done in a competitive manner – we try to be better than ourselves, not better than others” (Boal 1992, p. 16).

laid for the next layer, where painful stories can be relived and solutions can be created.

It does not take much. After participating in one icebreaker activity or Image Theatre exercise, after making the group laugh, or laughing with them a few times, the individual feels acknowledged and comfortable. They are no longer sitting in a room of strangers, but within a group of comrades who will support them when they choose to offer up a personal experience for a scene.

For example, once a woman came to the group for the first time and did not participate at all, until the end. Observing a scene concerning the low quality of the food at the shelter, she suddenly yelled, "Freeze" and took the place of the protagonist. She was very dramatic and comedic, even getting down on her knees at one point and pleading with the staff member to do something to improve the quality of the food. Everyone in the room was in hysterics. Smiling grandly, she sat down again. She was comfortable, and ready for her boundaries to be pushed. Now, I could ask her to do the scene once more, but this time, truly imagine that the 'staff member' she was speaking to was not her new friend Christie, but Donna, a notoriously grumpy staff member. She changed her whole manner and approached the scene not as an opportunity to make the other women laugh, but as a true rehearsal for reality. It became clear that this was an issue very important to her because she was diabetic and often could not eat the shelter food. Because of her efforts, several viable suggestions were made to solve this problem, such as forming a group of women and one staff member to write up a list of foods that are harmful to diabetics and giving it to the kitchen to take into consideration. Without that initial laughter and fun, however, that scene would not have happened and she would have continued to sit in the chair, not participating.

THE IRREGULARITIES

The lives of these women are unpredictable. There is no way of guessing what will happen to them from one week to the next. As a result, I rarely had the same group of women. Sometimes there were fifteen women, sometimes there were only three. This made it difficult because I had to start from the beginning each week. I began to expect the unexpected, and to be happy if one woman came. The program director at the shelter said, "Not even they know where their next meal is coming from, or where they will sleep that night, so there is no way we could ever know. You can't expect anyone to show up, just be pleasantly surprised if they do."

Sometimes you would see a woman for two weeks, she would disappear for a month, and then she would reappear at the weekly workshops. There was only one woman, Dinorah, who came to every gathering. At first, I took these absences personally, thinking they did not like the program so they stopped coming. But after every meeting, the women would say how much fun they had had, and how they did not want to stop, which confused me. Jinnellys reassured me that their absences had nothing to do with the activity, or with me. It was the irregularity of their lives. It is

impossible to imagine what they go through everyday. I just had to keep going and work with whomever did come.

FORUM THEATRE

One of Boal's most intriguing activities is Forum Theatre, in which actors and audience enact a scene of oppression between a protagonist and an antagonist. Over time, the women's enthusiasm for the meetings increased. The workshops were extended to an hour and a half every Wednesday evening beginning at seven o'clock. "This is the best activity I have ever seen!" exclaimed the program coordinator one evening.

By seven o'clock, the women had eaten dinner, finished their smoke break, and settled down. Because they were more relaxed and able to focus on the task at hand, the program grew to include more Forum Theatre and fewer games. The gradual process from short, game-centered workshops, to longer, scene-oriented meetings demonstrated the importance of slowly implementing Forum Theatre in stages.

Since I could only work with these women once a week, I had to start from the beginning each time. But slowly, they caught on, showing me when they were ready for new challenges. Now, when I walked in and started explaining Forum Theatre, they would interrupt me and say, "Yeah, we know. Let's get started!" They began automatically to keep their faces to the audience when acting out a scene, instead of having to be reminded not to turn their backs on the audience. We would do Forum Theatre focusing on two areas. The first focus was on practical, everyday problems such as shower complications, private property, "mirror time", and smoke breaks. The other problems the Forum Theatre scenes would address were their personal, long-term problems.

After warming up with a few of the introductory games, I would ask the women if they had an idea for a Forum Theatre scene. Most of the time, they would bring up practical, everyday problems they faced and then put on a scene describing them. For these scenes, the women preferred just acting out the scene, making it up as they went along instead of talking about it and choreographing it first. For instance, one scene we did concerned the issue of smoke breaks. The smokers in the room favored longer, more frequent chances to go outside and smoke, whereas the non-smokers did not care about this issue.

Another important topic we discussed was the "shower issue". Apparently, some women would go in to take a shower, turn on the hot water, then would leave to take a ten-minute phone call, and get mad if anyone was in "their" shower when they returned. This scene ended, as they usually did, in a verbal battle between two of the actors. In this case, it was between the cell phone user and the woman who had used "her" shower. The solution the women came up with to this scene was that you should not be allowed to enter the shower area if you had a cell phone with you. A few minutes before, the women had not been confident they could solve the issue. By acting it out and then discussing it, the women had come up with a practical

solution. The women are now trying to implement their solutions through discussion with members of the shelter's board.

This particular "shower issue" only arose once, which is a tribute to the effectiveness of Boal's technique. It is the norm, and not the exception, that a problematic situation will be discussed once and dealt with in a single session, acting as a form of conflict mediation for the participants. This is not to say that the same kind of oppression is never addressed on more than one occasion.

The key here was discovering that it was not the shelter that was the "oppressor" in this situation, but instead the woman who was abusing her shower privileges. In Paulo Freire's book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he identifies this type of revelation saying, "It is only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organized struggle for their liberation that they begin to believe in themselves." (Freire, 1970, p. 65)

Boal also argues that acting something out can truly enable people to change their real lives. Boal states, "If the oppressed himself performs an action, the performance of that action in theatrical fiction will enable him to activate himself to perform it well." (Boal, 1995, p. 46)

A similar problem was the "mirror time" dilemma. There was only one long mirror for 35 women to use every morning. Needless to say, this process of getting ready for the world each morning was a crucial ritual for each of the women staying at the shelter. As Boal notes, "Very often the ritual contains elements which are actual causes of the oppression being treated, and, frequently, liberation from the oppression of necessity involves rupture of its rituals." (Boal, 1992, p. 200)

In every meeting, after one woman came up with a problem she wanted to discuss, the whole group got very involved, with everyone adding their ideas or personal experiences to the situation. With the mirror issue, one woman remarked, "Some women get up at four in the morning to make sure they have enough time to get ready in front of the mirror. I never get enough time to prepare for the day, but I'm certainly never going to get up at four in the morning for that!"

The problem was that a few women would dominate the mirror, so no one else could use it. "We only have half an hour of mirror time, and that's for over thirty women!" one woman exclaimed. There were two oppressors in this situation: the other women at the shelter who monopolized the mirrors, and the shelter itself which failed to give the women enough mirrors or the time they needed to get ready.

Before they began this scene, I reminded the women to face the audience. I set out an imaginary stage and then said, "ACTION!" They went right into the play, improvising the whole thing. In the scene, one woman (the antagonist) took up all the imaginary mirror space and mirror time by meticulously curling her hair very slowly. Consequently, no one else (the various protagonists) got a chance to look in the mirror or get ready. When the protagonists confronted the antagonist about her unfair activity, she first denied it, and then she said the others could have gotten up

earlier if they wanted to look in the mirror. She pointed out that she had gotten there first.

The solution they devised for this problem was that the mirror should be divided by tape into different sections. Additionally, the women should be divided into two groups with allotted time slots to ensure everyone would get enough mirror time and space. Focusing on real everyday events is an integral part of Theatre of the Oppressed. Just as Howard Pflanzler's work with the elderly in New York City delved into the everyday routines of older people (Pflanzler, 1992, pp. 115-123), my weekly visits taught me about the everyday wants of the homeless in New Haven.

With each meeting, the scenes got longer and more intense. Personal experiences became woven into the scenes and discussions. In the longest scene we enacted (about twenty minutes) Toni,⁵ a large, shorthaired, spirited woman proposed the theme. A 15-year-old girl named Daisy needed to find a way to tell her mother that she was pregnant. Gina, a slim woman, acted as the mother.

When Toni told her mother about the pregnancy, Gina was very forgiving and accommodating. She told her daughter that when the baby was born, the daughter could go to school and become a doctor. The mother would take care of the child during the day, but the daughter had to take responsibility for the baby when she came home at night. They mentioned abortion, but the daughter said she was too young and scared to get one.

Dinorah said, "Freeze!" and she took the part of the mother. She was very harsh to the daughter, yelling at her, gesturing with her arms, and using her body to convey her emotional anger.

Then Laurie, a short, neat, red-haired woman entered the scene as the mother and continued in a mean, angry manner. She pretended to slap the daughter, which brought a lot of laughter from the audience. Laurie then sat down. Next, Dinorah was the daughter and Toni became the mother. Toni started nervously pacing and worrying about how her husband was going to beat her when he found out that their daughter was pregnant. In reaction to this, Dinorah started crying with real tears. It was amazing. Everyone in the room became very serious and sad, which gave way to general awe at Dinorah's great acting skills.

Dinorah got so involved that she turned her back to the audience. I did not say anything because I did not want to interrupt them. I wanted to see what would happen without my input. After a minute or so, the woman with the aching knees said, "Wait! Dinorah, your back is to the audience!" Dinorah shifted slightly without breaking the scene. I smiled at the woman, and her whole face lit up as if she was saying, "Look, I did something right. I did something right!"

⁵Toni revealed later that she often used the fictitious character of "Daisy" to escape her problems. Previously, many in the room had seen her impersonating this young girl. Toni had been doing theatre naturally even though she did not realize it.

Then it was time to tell the father what had happened. It was decided he would be abusive. In every scene we have done, the male character, if he even exists, is an abuser, an alcoholic, or both. Gina became the father, and went into the scene. She was excellent at portraying anger. She actually looked scary. Her eyes bulged out. Her eyebrows arched. She grunted. She pointed her long, bony index finger at Dinorah in a threatening and disapproving manner. The scene ended with a trip to the emergency room and the birth of the child, complete with crying sounds courtesy of Laurie, who was not in the scene at the time. When the play was over, everyone clapped and the actors bowed.

Afterwards, we discussed the scene. I asked if the scenario was realistic. All the women vehemently agreed that it happened all the time, a response I was expecting. Toni then told us that the same thing had happened to her when she was date-raped at the age of fifteen. Her son, Brendan, was the result. When she was in labor, her boyfriend, who was a fisherman, returned home from sea and went to the hospital. He ordered Toni's mother to leave the room, even though he had not been with Toni at all during the pregnancy.

Toni then stood up and acted the whole thing out, showing the boyfriend yelling at her mother, "You get out of this room, you old bitch. This is my son being born." Her mother responded as she left the room, "You good for nothing mongrel." Toni explained that she was basing the male character on a real life, abusive alcoholic who later abandoned Toni after fathering her six children. Toni talked about how one bad decision had changed her life forever.

Gina, who had commented at the beginning of the meeting that she did not want to miss her shower because it was unpleasant washing her hair in the bathroom sink at McDonald's, said she had also gotten pregnant at age fifteen. Her mother threw her against the wall repeatedly and beat her when she found out.

In commenting on sociologist Ann Pelzer's successful use of Theatre of the Oppressed in her work in Amsterdam with battered women, Bernice Fisher wrote "Pelzer found Theatre of the Oppressed especially effective with battered women. It might take battered women more than a year to gain enough distance from their experiences to use them as dramatic material, Pelzer remarked, but the process of transforming their lives into theatre made them 'very strong' " (Fischer, 1994, p. 187).

OBSERVATIONS

It is important to repeat that the one element the women always wanted to experience during these workshops was humor. They wanted to laugh. They wanted to entertain. They wanted to have fun. At first, I thought this was great. They were relaxing. Then I realized they were not just joking around. They were *using* humor to cope with their pain. They could not face hardship and seriousness, probably because they were constantly being bombarded with it in their everyday lives.

When doing Forum Theatre, the women always ended the scene in a “fight” in which they loudly voiced their opinions in a very active way. This always got a lot of laughs from the audience, which really boosted the confidence levels of the women involved, and made them want to do more. Our Forum Theatre scenes helped the women in two ways. Firstly, it allowed them to speak up for themselves and say whatever they wanted to without penalties. This enabled them to be the ones yelling instead of the ones being yelled at. This may have been one of the reasons that almost every scene involved a loud argument between two characters.

The second way that Forum Theatre helped the women was through humor. Making people laugh automatically made them feel good about themselves. They realized that they were intelligent, charismatic women. I encouraged this as much as possible by always laughing with them, even if I did not get their jokes, which happened frequently. The ironic element concerning their humor was that it usually was not something that the average person would think is funny. They made jokes about abuse, sex, rape, drugs, homelessness, and poverty, all subjects that I had been taught to regard as serious, almost unspeakable.

This experience has helped me unlock my personal “cop in the head”.⁶ The society in which I was brought up taught me to consider rape, abuse, and addiction as dangerous subjects, anything but humorous. Such things were to be discussed in whispers, if at all.

These women felt comfortable joking about such trauma. They also found that it was necessary for coping with and healing emotional wounds. At this point in their lives, instead of crying about how they were raped when they were fifteen, they would rather make a joke about it. As William Fry noted in an address given to the annual convention of the American Orthopsychiatric Association, “At times of tragedy, humans turn instinctively to comedy for its depression-lifting effects. We seek to laugh, rather than cry.”(Fry, 1979) When Gina told her mother she was pregnant, she was repeatedly thrown against the wall and beaten. This came up while we were discussing the previously described scene. After telling us her story, Gina said, "I was like, Mom, be careful not to throw my back out!" and everyone in the room laughed long and loud at this comment. These women use humour as a therapeutic way of coping with their problems.

A PLAY OF HER OWN

After one of the sessions in January of 2009, Dinorah, who had attended every workshop, asked me to stay after everyone else had left to go to dinner. She said she had an idea for a scene. I was surprised and thrilled that she was staying overtime. Usually everyone hurried off to the dinner line as fast as possible. Dinorah values her meals highly, so I knew it must be important. She asked me if we could act out prepared scenes at the next session. I said, “Of course, we can!”

⁶“Cop in the Head” is a concept within Theatre of the Oppressed that deals with the internalized oppressions of individuals.

Dinorah proceeded to tell me her idea for a two-person scene. It was very long and detailed, but the basic plot was that a mother and daughter had an argument. The mother told the daughter to leave the house if she did not want to follow its rules. The daughter left, thinking she could live with her friends, but when she called them for help, they abandoned her. She ended up homeless with no money. After hours of sitting on a wall by herself, she decided to go to a supermarket to get warm, even though she could not buy anything. As she was walking down the aisles, she saw her mother. They did not speak as they walked past each other, and this made the girl sad. She saw her mother leave, and decided to run after her. "Mom, Mom please wait for me!" she called, "Can I talk to you?" The mother said, "About what?" The girl goes on to say that she is sorry and would like to return home if the mother will take her back. The mother agrees, and they go home together.

There was something in the way Dinorah told the story. It was too real. I asked her if it was a true story. She hesitated and said, "I am speaking from real life experience." It was actually her life story, but she changed the ending to be happy instead of devastating. I left the shelter that night with a whole new sense of the reality of hardship, of survival, and was again reminded of how one bad decision can ruin a life.

Later that night, Jinnellys told me the story of Dinorah and her transformation since she had started attending the workshops. Before participating in Theatre of the Oppressed, Dinorah was shy and miserable, and would not speak to anyone. She would just sit in the corner with her head facing the wall and would not utter a word to anybody, ever. After a few months of Theatre of the Oppressed workshops, Dinorah had come out of her shell.

I realized how much this play meant to Dinorah when one day I came in and saw her with cleaning materials and a garbage bag outside the bathroom. Usually when she saw me, she smiled and came to say hello. That day, she hardly looked up. So I went over to her and asked her what was wrong. She said, "Everyone is mean to me. I'm not worth nothin'. I'm not even smart enough to clean the bathrooms." I was shocked at how low her confidence had sunk since our last meeting. I said, "How can you say you are not worth anything when you have written a play." At the mention of her play, she brightened up a little. I said, "How about we start writing it down now?" "Well I don't know," she said. I replied, "Come on, you have to get your ideas down on paper." Ten minutes later, she was dictating character descriptions and outlining the play to me faster than I could transcribe them. The transformation that had come over her was amazing.

I started going to the shelter early to help Dinorah write out what eventually became her fifteen-page play. It includes a mother, father, daughter (protagonist), sister, brother, three friends of the daughter, a minister, and a member of the church choir. We rehearsed the play every Sunday afternoon at a church in nearby Bridgeport, Connecticut.

On April 10th, 2011, Dinorah's play was presented to a standing-room-only audience of over sixty at a fundraising event for homeless in Fairfield County, Connecticut. Nine high school students, as well as two professional actors, read the parts as Dinorah followed along with her script, observing from the front row. The event raised over \$2,000 and acknowledged Dinorah as the respected playwright and director that she has become. After receiving compliments at the reception following the event, Dinorah excitedly talked of her second play, which she has already begun to write. It is entitled, "Lean Not to the Left".

At the next group meeting, the women stated their "dream job" as a simple icebreaker. When it was Dinorah's turn, she proudly said, "I would want to be a playwright, except I already am that. I've written a play you know, second one in the making." Dinorah's transformation, from a sullen figure facing the wall of the main room who refused to speak, to a playwright and director who has produced her work to combat homelessness is a testament to the power of Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed technique to encourage people to action. Dinorah did not wait for it to happen. She invented her own future.

Dinorah's next goal is to take the play into the public school systems of Bridgeport and have students act it out. This is Dinorah's attempt to prevent the next generation from making the same mistakes that lead her to homelessness.



Dinorah and the article's author, directly following the reading of Dinorah's original play, *Now / See The Light*, April 10th, 2011

CONCLUSION

Theatre of the Oppressed activities might not be able to eradicate memories of rape, addiction, and abuse. An hour and a half of theatre games once a week is not going to end homelessness. But if Theatre of the Oppressed can bring these women an excuse to laugh while simultaneously solving their problems, it is a success. Boal commented, “Words are a means of transport... in the same way that... words transport our ideas, desires, and emotions” (Boal, 2006, p. 15). These women have used words to transport themselves away from the negative in their lives and to strive for the positive. Through Boal’s games and skits, many of these women have found new hope in their futures and in themselves. As Bertholt Brecht noted in *Brecht on Theatre*, “Only the dead are beyond being altered by their fellow-men. Think this over and you will realize how important the theatre is for forming character” (Brecht, 1964, p. 152).

These women have started the process of accomplishing one immediate goal, which is to produce a few scenes concerning changes they would like to see made at the shelter, such as “more mirror time”, an alternative to being awakened in the morning by angry shouts from the supervisor, and more blankets in the winter months. Because the schedules of the women do not coincide, a meeting between the women and the board is not feasible. Therefore, these scenes will be recorded by video camera and then presented to the board members. After each Forum Theatre scene, there will be an on-tape discussion of the problem and why the women feel it needs to be addressed. This is an alternate approach to introducing change. The women themselves invent solutions to problems through theatre, rather than complain to a staff member who is not in a position to make change. It is hoped that the board will implement these solutions. If successful, this process could be repeated every few months. The women have created a stable mechanism for change over which they have control.

It is difficult to determine the extent to which a weekly session of Theatre of the Oppressed has created real change in the lives of these women. Frequently, a woman will come in and share news of progress she has made. One woman said that she thought of our group the last time she almost got into a fight and it stopped her from proceeding. Another woman told of how she was able to use a solution we created in our group during a recent job interview when answering the question, “Where do you live?”

Christie, for example, was very shy when she first started coming to the groups. She did not want to participate and just watched. Gradually, her confidence grew and she began participating until she was regularly the first to introduce an idea for a scene. One week she came in wearing a new outfit and excitedly announced that she had left her long-term boyfriend, who abused her, and that she wanted to act out the scene to celebrate. Was this because of the weekly sessions? Hopefully to some degree, but one cannot know for sure.

Most importantly, the group will not end when I leave Connecticut to attend college in California. I trained two more students, as well as a professional social worker within the shelter, to continue running the weekly groups. According to Boal, Theatre of the Oppressed is not work that ends, "...since the objective is not to close a cycle, to generate a catharsis, or to end a development. On the contrary, its objective is to encourage autonomous activity, to set a process in motion, to stimulate transformative creativity, to change spectators into protagonists." (Boal, 1992, p. 245)

When I began writing this paper in 2009, I was at the start of my Theatre of the Oppressed journey. Since then, I have practiced Boal's techniques with other populations in various international settings. These experiences have reaffirmed many of my original findings as described here, but also have introduced complexities and new questions that require further investigation. My perceptions and beliefs continue to evolve. I look forward to a future paper exploring this progression.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Woodson is an undergraduate student at Stanford University. Since first discovering Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed methodology in 2008, Ms. Woodson has used the technique locally in New Haven, and internationally in India, Brazil, and Senegal. She trained with Boal's son, Julian, in Minneapolis, and with the movement's current leaders in Rio de Janeiro. While in Brazil, the author worked in a prison for the insane. At an orphanage in Coimbatore, India, she used the technique to counter teenaged boys' disrespect and discrimination towards girls. Ms. Woodson has presented papers at the 15th Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Conference in Minnesota (May 2009) and at the 7th International Congress for Arts and Education in Belem, Brazil (July 2010). In July 2011, she facilitated two workshops at the 7th Theatre of the Oppressed Conference in Dakar, Senegal. After graduating from high school in June 2011, she began studying International Relations at Stanford University, where she has created a Theatre of the Oppressed student group, facilitates workshops, and has begun to explore the realm of Invisible Theatre. She can be contacted at ewoodsonTO@gmail.com.