

MOBILIZING LANGUAGE AND ARTS IN POLITICS: THEATER OF THE OPPRESSED

ISSUE BRIEF

INTRODUCTION

Though we might often think of language and the arts being a form of power for governments or oppressors more generally, language and the **arts can also be a tool for democratic and revolutionary positive change.**

Yes, governments may use the imposition of language, regulations on education, or the creation or suppression of certain media, to name a few, as ways of exercising power over their citizens.

However, it works the other way around, too. One really interesting way that it works is through a movement called **Theatre of the Oppressed (TO)**. We will focus in particular on two groups, one, Jana Sanskriti, is the largest TO network in the world, and another, Theater of the Oppressed NYC, is a group working right here in New York.



TO AT A GLANCE

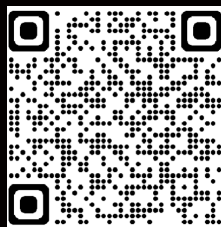
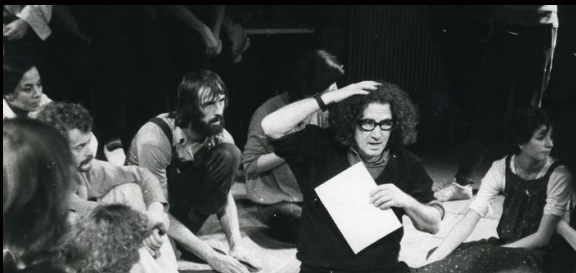
Historical Context [1][2][3]

- **Conceptualized:** 1970s (by Brazilian theater practitioner Augusto Boal)
- **Initially,** actor-driven, educational dramaturgy that sought to sensitize people to social problems, inequalities
- **Evolution:** an agit-prop with an externalized, professional control of the community narrative → community- & spontaneous-dramaturgy
- **Women's participation:** Strongly linked with grassroots women's rights activism + women were active spect-actors since TO's early development in Brazil, France, & Italy

Methodology [4]

- **3 participants in TO:** actors, spect-actors, and facilitators
- **Spatial organizing strategies** ensure inclusive spaces & situational sensitivity among spect-actors.
- **Improvisation, Performativity, and Expressivity** as cornerstones of TO.

THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED NYC



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PxQ6SsfhCw&ab_channel=Jess

GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM AND TO IN INDIA (JANA SANSKRITI)

About Jana Sanskriti (Brief History): [5]

- First Established in 1985 in a small village in the Sunderbans, West Bengal, India + currently has a network of theater teams across various states in India + many of which are all-women teams – 9 in just 1 state (WB).
- Through TO, theater groups address issues including domestic violence, child marriage, girl child trafficking, child abuse, maternal & child health, primary education & health care, use of illicit/contaminated liquor, etc.

Augusto Boal (founder of TO) on Jana Sanskriti: “Jana Sanskriti is the largest and the longest lasting forum theater operation in the world.” – why does he use the term “theater operation”? (targetted, incisive, an effect-oriented project,...) [6]

The pathologies of TO and its use as a socially incisive discursive tool (Theatre of the Oppressed as a “theater operation”): What is Image Theater? what makes TO manifesto-like/ideological? What is the difference between the Real Image and Ideal Image [7]

The Nexus between Transnational and Local: Adaptations of international plays into local rhetorical traditions → not just translation, but also repurposing (examples: “Nora” (a Bengali adaptation of Ibsen’s “A Doll’s House”) and Jana Sanskriti’s Bengali adaptation of Bertolt Brecht’s “The Good Person of Szechwan” named Bhalo Manush. [8]

Spect-Acting and Community-Building: As Jana Sanskriti typically functions in rural areas, not only does it depend on network-building directly with people who live there (and would have to participate as spect-actors), BUT ALSO have to liaise with international theater practitioners, local artists, theater activists, and women’s rights organizations to ensure that the balance they need to strike between the local and the transnational most effectively enables spect-actor participation. [9]

LEGISLATIVE THEATER AND THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS IN NYC

Theater of the Oppressed NYC is an organization that works specifically with community organizations and members to put on plays concerning real-life problems they face living in New York. The group practices forum theater, a method of TOO that focuses on “theatrical brainstorming” which happens after the initial performance and has “the aim of catalyzing creative change on the individual, community, and political levels.” For more information about the NYC group and how to get involved, you can visit their website via the QR code below. [10]

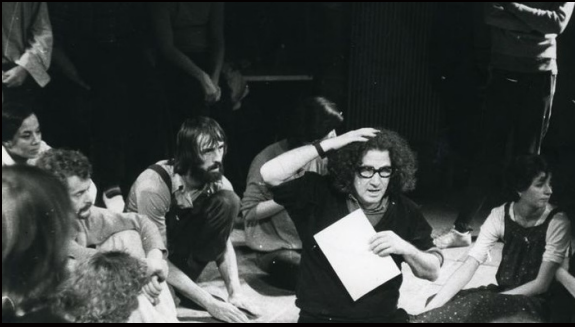
In particular they practice legislative theater, and even have an annual legislative theater festival: this involves combining forum theater with policy brainstorming and the inclusion of public officials and experts to help draft policy at the end of a performance, vote on it, and commit to attempting to implement it. It is the ultimate realization of the TO goal, combining an interactive and transformational theater practice with real political change.

In NYC and elsewhere, legislative theater has resulted not only in increased community awareness and engagement but also in real policy changes. Though in its first iterations TO was set up in an ideal manner for legislative theater because the founder of TO, Augusto Boal, was an elected official and able to directly implement the results of legislative theater events, later iterations of legislative theater face the challenge of including elected officials or others who can commit to implementing policy proposals from legislative theater events. [11]

TO NYC WEBSITE:



WORKSHOP OVERVIEW



Key Topics to Discuss:

- History
- Methodology
 - Limitations?
 - Possibilities?
 - Legislative Theater?
- Jana Sanskriti
- NYC TO
- Workshop: TO at Columbia?

In the workshop, participants are introduced to the history and methodology of TO in general and especially in the context of these two groups and Legislative Theatre. Fundamentally, it involves the portrayal by real actors of a given conflict situation, which the audience then intervenes to help solve creatively – surrounded by a process of proposing and amending ideas for new legislation. Throughout, we will consider the specific ways in which TO makes use of the power of language and the arts to empower people politically. In what ways can work done by organizations like those we will explore be expanded to have an even larger impact on local, regional, national, and international politics?

Finally, participants will have the chance to consider what a TO initiative at Columbia might look like. What problems would be addressed/could be addressed? Who would be the actors, and who the spect-actors? Who might eventually help new ideas be made into new University policies?

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