



**An intervention from  
the audience in a Forum  
Theater presentation  
by prisoners in Presidente  
Prudente, State of São  
Paulo, Brazil.**

**Bárbara Santos** is project coordinator at the Center of the Theatre of the Oppressed (CTO-Rio) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. As her essay describes, she came to this work through her job as a public-school teacher, finding Augusto Boal's theatrical approaches to dialogue more effective than the meetings and other conventional methods she'd experienced before.

As noted in the first chapter of "Community, Culture and Globalization," Theater of the Oppressed (T.O.) and related practices inspired by Augusto Boal constitute the most robust sector of the worldwide community cultural development movement. This essay is especially pivotal to the anthology because it explains the core concepts of T.O. and related practices, touched on in many of the essays that follow.

The essay is suffused with a sense of power and possibility that inspires the reader. In contributing to the online dialogue that preceded our meeting at Bellagio, Bárbara described one of the sources of her own inspiration:

*Until last January I couldn't see possibilities to change reality together with the international community. After the Fórum Social Mundial— World Social Forum—I changed my view of this. In Porto Alegre (capital of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, in Brasil), I took part in an international movement for change. ... Everyone there believed that it is possible to build another world. More than 5,000 people gathered to discuss several issues related to the fight against globalization and the building of other possibilities to live in this world. For me it was a wonderful experience ...*

*Porto Alegre showed me that when we are together we have power. And that when we open our eyes and ears to partners from other fields of work, it is possible to dialogue; maybe not in the exact same language but using a kind of language that includes all of us with our differences, diversities and specificities: the language of good will. When*

*we can understand that each one of us has specific and necessary tools to build a common project, we can stop our stupid war and identify the real enemy and put our energy to work together against it.*

Bárbara's essay is dedicated to Augusto Boal:

*... who, as Artistic Director of CTO-Rio, is the one who sets our course. He is both our guide and our supporter on the paths we choose to follow. Boal is our fountain of inspiration and our intellectual challenge. He is the most youthful, the most energetic, creative and dynamic member of CTO-Rio. My humble contribution to this publication is a simple homage to my friend, a great man of the theater, Augusto Boal.*

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# Theater of the Oppressed and Community Cultural Development

by Bárbara Santos

**T**he purpose of this essay is to present ideas based on my practical experience as a Joker (facilitator/participant) in Theater of the Oppressed. It expresses a personal point of view born of the collective experiences of the CTO-Rio (Centro de Teatro do Oprimido, Center of the Theatre of the Oppressed<sup>1</sup>), of which I am a coordinator.

<sup>1</sup>Augusto Boal's seminal book is *Theater of the Oppressed* (New York: Urizen Books, 1979).

These conclusions were generated through workshops, rehearsals, study groups, theater seminars, administrative meetings, community visits, public presentations and many other activities led by the Jokers of CTO-Rio—Geo Britto, Helen Sarapect, Olivar Bendelak, Claudete Felix and myself. Whenever I speak about the Theater of the Oppressed, I also speak with their voices. Through them, the voices of the members of grassroots groups, partners in various projects and those of all the people who have provoked and stimulated me with questions and suggestions, helping me learn what I know about this subject, are also represented. One voice, especially, has inspired me, that of Augusto Boal—as a director, as the inventor of various techniques and systems, as a thinker, as a politician and above all as a friend and colleague.

## **CTO-RIO, FORUM THEATER AND THE JOKER**

Since its creation in 1986, CTO-Rio has maintained the same main objectives: democratizing the means of cultural production through the training and diffusion of popular drama groups replicating Theater of the Oppressed (T.O.) methodology throughout Brazil. It is our wish that more and more people use theater as a language, facilitating communication and stimulating ever more varied discussion.

Theater of the Oppressed combines exercises, games and theater techniques that seek to de-mechanize the physical and intellectual practice of drama. Forum Theater is one of the T.O. techniques in which a real-life problem is dramatized: both oppressed and oppressor fight for their respective wishes and interests; but the oppressed, lacking knowledge, are unable to accomplish their desire. The Joker then invites the “spect-actors” (Boal’s hybrid term for spectator-actors, those audience members who are willing to participate) to get up on the stage, replace actors playing oppressed characters and, through improvisation, try to modify their original situation.

CTO-Rio’s main project is “Legislative Theater,” an organization of community groups performing Forum Theater that dramatizes problems they experience, followed by public discussion of these problems. Jokers from CTO-Rio write down the interventions and contributions of audience members. Besides participating as actors onstage, the public can present suggestions in writing. These recorded ideas are analyzed by a team of legal experts who transform them into legal actions and policy initiatives which are then presented to legislators who defend popular causes.

At CTO-Rio we are currently developing several projects aside from Legislative Theater: training of Jokers for the MST (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, the Landless Workers Movement); popular participation programs in partnership with progressive government agencies; and theater in prisons, where our partner is People’s Palace Projects, directed by Paul Heritage (whose own essay also appears in this volume).

Like the Joker in a card game, the Joker in T.O. has multiple functions. The Joker should be able to participate as a performer, rehearse and stage Forum Theater, facilitate workshops and courses in T.O., write and/or coordinate the collective production of theatrical texts, conceive a play’s aesthetics and serve as master of ceremonies at a Forum session, stimulating dialogue between spect-actors and the audience.

The Joker in T.O. is an artist with pedagogic and political functions who helps people to understand themselves better, express their ideas and emotions, analyze their problems and seek their own alternatives to change or solve them. The Joker doesn’t need to have answers but should be able to formulate questions that stimulate the suggestion of alternatives to each question presented during a Forum Theater play.

The Joker should be an expert in diversity, with a multidisciplinary background and attitude, possessing knowledge of theater, popular culture, pedagogy, psychology, politics and as much else as possible. Beyond that, a Joker must have sensitivity, the ability to communicate with and coordinate groups, heightened perception, common sense, energy and the ability to synthesize. Part of this knowledge can be learned from books; another part can be

developed through practical experience. Still other characteristics depend on the personality of each Joker.

Currently, many people fulfill this function throughout the world. They build their own styles from their local cultures, knowledge and personalities. Jokers may have different styles, but they must never forget the humanistic, pedagogic and democratic essence of Theater of the Oppressed.

### **MY ENCOUNTER WITH THEATER OF THE OPPRESSED**

In the late 1980s, I joined a multidisciplinary team whose job was to stimulate and encourage education professionals to experiment with alternative practices. Then and now, these professionals were confronted with uninspiring conditions such as humiliating salaries, disillusionment with the possibility of creating change, organizational apathy and conformity to whatever had already been established. Our team visited schools and classrooms, organized study groups, led support meetings in the schools, participated in class council meetings and put together annual seminars at the beginning of each school year aimed at presenting the educational programs and proposals to be developed over the school year. There were many difficulties, especially with the organization of these seminars.

At the end of 1990, we had no idea how we were going to organize the opening seminar for the 1991 school year, where our main tasks were to organize school–community councils with participation of those responsible for the students within the decision-making bodies of the school; electing directors; and establishing class councils, bimonthly meetings where teachers would discuss students' performance and decide which strategies to adopt for the following semester.

We were aware that these were tough subjects to present to our peers. In fact, we were afraid to tackle them until one of our colleagues came up with the unusual suggestion of using theater to get the message across. Professor Venâncio said that he had participated in a play at a CIEP (Centro Integrado de Educação Pública, Center of Public Education) where director Augusto Boal was coordinating a Forum Theater presentation.

His description was both fascinating and unbelievable. Venâncio's idea was radical; he suggested we organize a play in place of the opening session. He said it would be much more dynamic and effective in introducing difficult themes, whereas we had already encountered resistance at the mere mention of them.

We contacted CTO-Rio, which supported us by sending us a Joker to lead a workshop with our team. She convinced us that the oppressed parties must act out Forum Theater themselves, so that they become the protagonists in their own story.

We produced a Forum Theater play about a young boy who was a failure in school but who, outside of school, had been awarded a prize for the best young percussionist in his samba school. Through the story of this boy, we traced a parallel with the experience of our students within and outside the school system, thus introducing the idea of a school–community council and all the other subjects that were of interest to us.

As in previous years, the teachers were invited to attend the seminar. As they arrived, they were amazed to see a colorful theater set on the stage instead of the usual table with its pompous tablecloth and boringly arranged chairs. The image that greeted them surprised and intrigued them.

Someone made a welcoming speech, announcing that there would be a play by the theater troupe “Virando a Mesa” (“Turning the Table”). To everybody’s surprise, the actors who took to the stage were none other than people they were all used to seeing in meetings, study groups, supervisors’ visits or at podiums. Yet the cast members had something magical about them. The teachers, surprised by the unusual presentation, were gradually transported by the language of the theater.

The event was a success. Even the more traditional, conservative teachers who usually preferred not to expose their ideas during debates were moved to participate. The theatrical expression magnified our means of communication, allowing us to introduce heavy subjects in a light and dynamic manner. The theater enveloped the audience members, who developed such a rapport with the characters that, before they knew it, they were already onstage defending their ideas. The teachers’ participation was intense and controversial. The clash of opposing opinions was facilitated by the use of theater. The teachers all said that they had never participated in such a delightful meeting.

After this event, our group became known as a theater troupe. We promoted a season of shows throughout our school district.

Through Forum Theater, we managed to bring together teachers, public workers, students and the community to generate a dialogue. Until then, we had had no luck in creating events that would unite the different groups involved in the school system. It was not easy to convince education professionals to have discussions with students, workers and the community. In these theater events, the students, the school janitors, the schedule coordinators, the teachers and the principal found a common forum to communicate their ideas. These sessions made the school environment more democratic, symbolizing the content of proposals aimed at democratizing the public-school system. We didn’t merely talk about what we believed would make the school a better place: we demonstrated hands–on how a democracy of teachers, students and community members would work.

For me, this was a defining experience: I met Augusto Boal and was enchanted. I started attending all the workshops offered at CTO-Rio, and I accompanied the Jokers to as many external workshops as possible. I did these things in my spare time, of which I had very little; at that time I taught an average of eight hours of classes each day. In 1992, I joined the CTO-Rio team while continuing to teach. In 1993, I left school to become an educator outside the boundaries of the classroom, something I had always wanted to do.

### **THEATER OF THE OPPRESSED AND COMMUNITY CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT**

In all my work as a Joker in many different communities over the past 10 years, I often hear people saying, “I can’t,” “I don’t know how,” “I can’t succeed” and “This is not for me.” Such beliefs are formed from the time kids begin school, where many, especially the poor, are persuaded that they know nothing and that learning is too difficult. They are taught that the practical knowledge they have gained from life and from their family histories is not knowledge at all. They are taught that their customs and traditions are not culture.

For a community to build its own history, it must exist as a collective community. For a collective community to exist, its members must see themselves as people. The development of a “we” depends on the existence and the strengthening of the individual “I.” If each member of a community is seen only as a number, the community will be little more than a dormitory of people who happen to inhabit the same physical space. It will possess a merely geographical identity.

What distinguishes a *number* from a *person*? For me, it is the ability to see oneself as part of a whole, to be able to imagine, dream, envision the possibility of doing things differently.

Theater stimulates and fulfills our need for self-discovery; it enables us to see ourselves as we are and to understand our own potential. Through the language of the theater, individuals learn that their bodies can express much more than they ever thought possible. When people realize that they can get up on stage, that they can sing a song, recite a verse or write down an idea, they discover that their potential is unlimited, that they can change both themselves and the world around them.

In 1993, I worked with a group of street kids aged 14 to 17. Many of them were doing drugs, especially sniffing glue. At first, the partner institution had invited my colleague Olivar Bendelak and myself to use alternative spaces—the street, for example—to conduct the workshops. We decided to make it even more of a challenge by having the workshops at the CTO-Rio headquarters, located in a public building housing a government-funded theater.

Within the first few days of the project, we realized how important it was for the group to work in a formal setting. It was obvious that they were very proud to be invited into a *proper* space for this activity.

The strategy was to alternate warm-up exercises with visualization and improvisation techniques. After a few weeks, we had done several skits based on their problems and the group started asking what play we were going to put on. We answered that we were already doing it. They laughed and asked what we were talking about. They felt that their stories were not interesting enough to become the subject of a play. They had expected to produce a play using someone else's text, to stage a work that already existed. They said that the play would never materialize because they would never know how to create a *real* story.

It wasn't easy to convince them to be patient, or even to rehearse the same skit over and over again to get it right. We improvised several skits, amalgamated similar ones and then placed the skits into a sequence that told the story of a young boy who ran away from home and became involved in the world of street kids.

Next we told them that we would write down the text of the play. Again, they laughed. The group was full of half-illiterate kids; some of them barely knew how to write their own names. No one believed they could actually write the text of a play. They kept insisting that it wasn't necessary to have a text at all: they already knew how to improvise.

We wrote down the characters' lines, then typed and copied them. The more we worked on the text, the prouder the kids became of their production, becoming aware that they were actually producing something that was truly their own. Even those who were completely illiterate started contributing, suggesting lines for some of the characters. After a while, we had the printed text of a play, entirely created by street kids, most of whom had failed in the public-education system and who were not at all used to reading or writing.

This was one of the most difficult groups I ever worked with; but with them I understood how the reigning ideology, through the public-education system, can destroy a person's self-confidence and how the theater can restore it, by helping people to see, discover and re-create themselves, rather than simply accepting the judgments and labels that society has placed on them. By working in theater, people learn that they are capable of producing a play, something they would never have thought possible. With this experience comes the realization that before saying, "I don't know how," they need to give themselves a chance to try, to investigate their potential and to do what it would take to one day know how.



When people speak about themselves, when they improvise scenes from their own lives, they discover who they are and where they are from. The simple fact of understanding themselves better and discovering that they can do more than they had ever imagined is fundamental for them to start transforming their own lives.

Theater stimulates individuals to discover the “I” at the same time as they discover their power to act, to transform. Theater helps show individuals the vastness of their potential.

Theater of the Oppressed—and more specifically Forum Theater—aside from promoting the discovery of the self, aside from reinforcing an individual’s self-esteem and self-confidence, also contributes to the establishment of the collective “we.” By “we” I mean not only the specific “we” of the group in which they are working and with whom they share common goals. I also refer to the “we” that comes from becoming a citizen who understands the world as a collective in which events are interdependent, both cause and consequence of social, political, economic and religious occurrences.

In all the groups I have worked with, I have seen significant changes in the participants and in our Jokers who have worked with them. I have seen people return to school, change jobs, join neighborhood and professional associations, divorce and/or remarry, create plays. In sum, I have seen them change their lives.

I have seen changes being initiated and developed collectively as well as individually. In three *favelas* (slums) without basic sewage systems and poor participation in organized community activities located in the neighborhoods of Jacarepaguá and Santa Teresa, across town from each other, theater groups have achieved great influence on electoral processes within their communities’ tenants’ associations. I’ve seen a group of black university students organize themselves to participate in a theater festival in Africa. I’ve seen Forum Theater groups formed under such rubrics as “Ghota” (homosexuals), “Renascer” (senior citizens), “Portadores de Deficiência Física” (people with physical disabilities), “Galera da Levy” (first-grade students) or “Casa das Palmeiras” (mental-health patients) who managed to introduce proposed legislation to City Hall via Augusto Boal, then a town councilor. As I write, “ARTEMANHA” (AIDS-prevention activists) are creating their own social projects.

Every time a citizens’ action group presents its play to a new audience, its members gain a better understanding of the problem depicted, discovering new ways of dealing with it through the outsiders’ viewpoints of audience members who come onstage to improvise an alternative.

Every new audience that participates in a Forum Theater performance learns through the presentation and goes away with the energy and emotion generated

by the event. People do not leave Forum Theater the same as they came in, even if they did not go onstage. The newly learned power to take action stays with everyone present.

Boal often says that “the act of transforming is in itself transforming.” For him, the fact that people climb out of their comfort zone, get up on the stage, replace a character and try, through improvisation, to transform the original course of events sets off a process of transformation within those individuals. To take the stage to change something that has been portrayed creates the reality of change.

All kinds of audiences, even those that at first seem resistant, participate actively in Forum Theater sessions, as I have seen in dozens of cities throughout Brazil and in a few other countries.

For these and other reasons, no project intended to promote the development of a community culture should neglect the use of theatrical expression, even if they do not form theatrical troupes or put on plays. In fact, I am convinced that Forum Theater is an essential technique that can make an invaluable contribution to any sociocultural or pedagogic project. Forum Theater generates constant dialogue, brings people together, strengthens them and demystifies their plight.

### **THE PROCESS OF TRAINING COMMUNITY GROUPS IN FORUM THEATER**

Theater of the Oppressed as a whole and Forum Theater in particular have been applied in various forms and with different objectives in hundreds of sociocultural and educational projects in over 70 countries across five continents. Below, I describe the process of training community groups in Forum Theater as used by CTO-Rio. It could be useful to everyone who works in community cultural development. Those interested in learning more about other aspects of Forum Theater can contact me at the address in this volume.

#### **Local Partner**

CTO-Rio’s work in communities is based on the establishment of local partnerships with groups that have gathered experience in the development of projects in their area. Theater cannot develop in isolation from other community initiatives. For this reason, our initial contact is always mediated by local community associations, church groups, community-based organizations or any partner who can offer us some sort of support in setting up and developing the project.

In some communities, even with local partners, it has not been possible to continue the work due to security reasons. For instance, in 1993, when we worked in Vigário Geral—a community where 21 inhabitants were massacred

by the police in revenge for drug-dealers' actions—our van was stolen and the costumes returned with a threatening message.

In Morro da Saudade—another poor community, where a group of women had prepared a lively Forum Theater performance about the situation of local women who live alone and have to confront both police violence and the authoritarian actions of drug dealers—the work was made unsustainable by a curfew decreed by the drug barons.

In Morro do Borel, another *favela*, Jokers had to interrupt rehearsals on several occasions to wait out the end of a gunfight between police and criminals. When the problem is safety, there is little that can be done other than retreat, even when we have partners who are insiders in the community.

To connect the formation of a theater group to other community actions is pivotal in strengthening the initiative and guaranteeing practical results.

### **Demonstration Workshop**

In order to begin a new project, it is necessary to investigate the cultural habits of the community, because theater is not always the chosen option of the group. We have had very good experiences in communities in which we didn't manage to form a theater group, because we discovered that their talents and interests were in music, sport or in some other form of expression to which theater could certainly be associated, but for which it couldn't be substituted. People might be interested in taking part in a few workshops rather than forming a theater group. Sensitivity is a must, as this kind of work should never be an imposition.

In order to have some time for investigation, we use “demonstration workshops,” an experimental period in which members of the community and Jokers from CTO-Rio get to know each other. For the group, it is an opportunity to learn techniques and find out if they want to form a theater troupe or only take part in some theater workshops. For the Jokers, it is a time to evaluate if there are appropriate conditions to create a theater group in the neighborhood.

The community of Vigário Geral is an example. We tried several times, before and after the massacre, to form a group there. We never succeeded despite running excellent youth workshops. Today this community boasts one of the most successful music projects in the city: Afro-Reggae, a band that has recorded a CD and is beginning to be successful on the radio.

As a center of theater, however, we are interested in developing projects in this specific language. We use demonstration workshops to identify those communities best suited to develop theater groups.

### **Definition of the Theme**

The first step in the formation of a Forum Theater group is to discover the theme of greatest significance to the group. Not everything that at first emerges in a group is substantial. Frequently, the most important issues are obscured beneath the surfaces of everyday life. The process must allow the emergence, rather than the choice, of a theme.

It's fundamental to the work that the theme should be relevant to the collective expression of the group and that there is a reasonable number of stories about it. If a group insists on a theme that doesn't seem relevant to the Joker, what must prevail is the desire of the group. In the process of improvisation and analysis of the stories, an apparently superficial idea may turn out to be significant and provocative.

When the group's nature is thematic—when people have come together around a specific interest rather than because they live in the same community—the theme is obvious. They work on specific aspects of it, using the theatrical language to develop it further.

If the theme disturbs the Joker's moral principles or political ideas, then Forum Theater work is clearly not possible.

### **Choice of the Story**

In a community group, choosing the story to be presented is part of the strengthening process of the group, so it is best to avoid reaching a decision by voting. The Joker must facilitate an atmosphere of consensus in which the choice of the story can proceed naturally from the stories of group members' lives. For this reason it is essential that the theme expresses the group's reality, as this will allow for the greatest diversity in the improvisations, which will probably have common elements that complement each other. Care must be taken that the story should not be an incoherent collage. The story must express the theme chosen by the group, its lived reality.

### **A Case Study**

In 1998, together with Geo Britto, I began working with a group called *Panela de Opressão* (Oppressure Cooker), made up of people living in the poor communities of Jacarepaguá, a neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro. Group members said that they wanted to discuss women's health; but in the improvisations, they created scenes about adolescent pregnancy, conflicts between parents and children and racial prejudice.

We did some improvisations and made some Forums from the scenes to help them understand the theatrical method that was being proposed. After some weeks, they admitted that they had wanted the theme of women's health because of the influence of a friendly female doctor who worked in the community.

At that point, part of the group decided to tell us how City Hall was beginning to demolish houses and remove families, negotiating individual offers and deals—and how there had been no community reaction. Group members talked about the problem as if it had nothing to do with themselves, as if these things were not happening to their neighbors, just 300 meters away from their own houses. Why were they so distanced from their problem?

For us as Jokers it was clear that the theme was powerful and that it would be important for them and for hundreds of other people in other communities to deal with this issue. But we couldn't impose the theme on them. We asked them to improvise the story so that we could understand the problem better. As we expected, the scene was very strong and perfect for Forum Theater. What seemed obvious to us had not been so for the group.

The fact that group members did not recognize this problem as something close to them was symptomatic to me of how they had protected themselves from something terrible in their lives. It's as if by not admitting the problem they made it nonexistent. We couldn't force them to face their own lives, but we had a duty to help them notice what was happening. We stimulated more discussion about the subject, suggesting that they should try to gather more information. Two group members offered to go to a community meeting. At the next rehearsal, they told how the community was divided, reporting that residents were fighting for individual benefits, with everyone trying to save their own skin.

In our group's internal discussions, some members began to see that the biggest problem was not with the municipal authorities, but with the lack of unity and cooperation within the neighborhood. Some group members began to attend community meetings on a regular basis; they proposed that the group should put on a play about the subject.

As we were not part of the community, we could not interfere in the discussion about the best option in that situation. But in the improvisations, we showed that it was possible to use Forum Theater to discuss a problem and look for alternatives as part of the solution or the way forward. The group decided to put on a play about the subject. It was a long road to the choice of theme and story, but it was an effective route because group members made the decision fully understanding why they should make it.

The play was very powerful and was presented in dozens of poor communities, schools, public squares and theaters. Through these performances, group members realized the importance of the subject and its relevance to several areas of the city. For group members, as well as for the audiences to whom the play was shown, it was an opportunity to see that their problem was not just local, that in some way it affected the life of a large part of the city's population. It was a rich process of politicization.

The group's process in choosing the subject of their first play is emblematic of work with community groups in Theater of the Oppressed. Frequently the oppressed do not see themselves as oppressed because they are not aware of their real situation. A Joker of T.O. doesn't have the right to tell the group what its theme should be. The Joker must understand how to promote a democratic process that will stimulate group members to formulate the question they will ask their play's audience.

## **CREATING A FORUM THEATER PERFORMANCE**

### **Improvising the Scenes**

Group members begin to discuss their themes and stories long before they start selecting them. From the first exercises, games and techniques, it's already possible to discern what interests and concerns the group. The Joker must be attentive and sensitive to notice what is being shown but not necessarily said: what is being selected and what is being rejected.

In a community theater group there must be time to improvise scenes before choosing the story. In addition to revealing areas of interest, this process is useful to building up an understanding of techniques, because the group will also have to practice Forum Theater in the improvised scenes.

If there is enough time to develop exercises, games, improvised scenes and a diverse range of characters, the definition of the subject matter and of the story to be theatricalized will naturally result from the creative process. The story must have resonance for the group and for the community, as well as provide objectivity and clarity in the chosen conflicts.

Forum Theater performance is a representation rather than a reproduction of reality, and therefore it isn't necessary that all the realistic details of a story should be shown. An excess of scenes should be avoided as should overloading detail so as to transform a story into a saga. It's the Joker's responsibility to help participants understand that images are at once language and message, and that many things can be conveyed without being spoken.

In *Panela de Opressão's* current performance, a young woman is sexually assaulted by a gang of drug dealers. It was a challenge to find a metaphorical way to show this reality. First we had to discuss what a metaphor is.

We began to research images that represent violence. Everyone showed ideas: a scene with animals during a hunt; another scene with a group of boys pretending they were using knives and forks to eat a girl; another that just waved different pieces of fabric around in a colorful, symbolic choreography. We chose the following: the boys circled round the girl, breaking away at a signal from the boss, one by one lassoing the girl with an imaginary rope as if she were a horse being captured by herdsmen. She matched them with her

movements to the sounds of instruments played by other group members. There was no reference to sexual moves, and the girl was never touched.

### **Scripting the Chosen Scenes**

The group's story could come from a variety of scenes that refer to the same type of conflict. To script is to organize the performance into a sequence of scenes with a coherent logic. Once the script is ready, it's necessary to reimprovise and adapt the scenes.

Once a script is created, the group has its story ready, with a beginning, a middle and an end. A story can also be told in an improvised way, without text. Many groups don't have time to elaborate a text for performance and therefore define only certain phrases and cues, so that the cast knows how to organize the dialogue from improvised lines based on the logic of each character. If there is no time to write a script, a well-structured narrative is enough to organize the performance so that actors will not get lost during the presentation.

This process allows people to discover that they can create a story, open their mouths and sing, be on stage and act, and change the reality of an image.

If there's time, the group should write a text. It's fundamental for community-based groups to discover that they are able to write, create texts and master written language, to be dramatists of their own life stories as well as their protagonists.

### **The Collective Text**

Having the script as a base, each scene is reimprovised using rehearsal techniques. Those group members who are not performing in a scene write down the dialogues. I prefer each person to be responsible for the notation of only one character. When there are more people outside the scene than characters onstage, I ask more than one person to write down the speeches of each character, especially for the protagonists and those who have the most speeches. As a Joker, I remain attentive to see that the most interesting phrases don't get lost. This is what I call the elaboration of a "hot text": we note down what is said in the heat of the action. This text comes without much thought to the right word or concerns of dramaturgy: therein lies its richness.

I collect this mountain of paper from each rehearsal and type it all up in time for the next rehearsal. In addition, the people who are in the scenes are responsible for rewriting them at home, trying in the cold light of day to rewrite the dialogue from their own scene, choosing the phrases that have the most impact, getting rid of the waste material and introducing new ideas. With this work we create various versions of each scene, with each person writing the script for their own scenes.

When working with a community group made up of poor people with limited formal education, you have to stimulate the participants to write and make sure that no one feels unable to do the job. That's why the Joker should never behave like a writing teacher. The idea is that people should express their vision of the world and their ideas about the story through written language. It doesn't matter if the text has spelling mistakes. I never scrawl things on people's writings, correcting words or phrases. Instead, I correct while I am typing. When people receive the typed text, they can see where there are changes without feeling humiliated or exposed. Everyone else has the same typed and corrected script.

The written texts from the rehearsal improvisations and from each member's solitary work at home are typed up and handed out. All must then read, cut and edit according to what they think most appropriate. Each person becomes a playwright, with total freedom of creation.

I prefer that everyone experience doing this job individually, but this doesn't stop people from helping each other, especially those who appear together in the same scene. At this stage, all are free to produce texts for all the scenes without limiting themselves to the ones in which they appear.

At the end of 2000, together with the Joker Geo Britto, I had one of my best experiences in producing a text, with *Panela de Opressão*. The group is made up of 11 people between the ages of 12 and 40. They all participated: jotting down improvisations, rewriting them at home, reading and editing the typed material and writing dialogue for scenes in which they would not take part. Even the youngest members who didn't enjoy writing at school brought several contributions, including musical ones. The play had six musical interventions, all played live by the cast. Only one song wasn't original; all the rest were composed by the cast or CTO-Rio's musical director Richard Coelho. We had 11 versions of each scene. We prioritized what was most frequently chosen and used, systematized the different compositions and produced one version of the show. As far as possible, we tried to maintain the group's style while creating a dramatic text that was strong and interesting.

The text was reworked by the Jokers and Boal in CTO-Rio's Dramaturgy Seminar, leaving its essential features intact. The text was then reanalyzed by the group. Sometimes we thought it better that a character said this and not that; but if the group defended an opposite position, we sought a solution that reflected the group's wishes while preserving the dramatic qualities of the text.

At CTO-Rio we set out to make THEATER, to produce ART, with capital letters. When we pass the means of theatrical production on to community groups, we stimulate them to create shows that have heart and soul, that speak of human passion, that put conflicts on stage. We do not want plays that are



only intellectual debates: we want people to see, feel and understand things beyond spoken words. We want the silence also to carry a message. All the things we put onstage and all the images we create must say something. We want audience members to come onstage because of what they hear, what they see and especially what they feel.

This happened in the city of Presidente Prudente (in São Paulo, August 2001), where I accompanied a group of inmates from the city's semiopen prison in presenting their play in the town square. They were participating in the project Staging Human Rights, an examination of human rights in the penal system through Forum Theater. CTO-Rio is in charge of training the 52 Jokers who implement theater workshops in 37 prisons in the state of São Paulo.

The play was performed in a square full of people who had stopped to watch and ended up discussing injustices within the system, especially those that persist when a former prisoner tries to reintegrate himself into society. The people who participated in the Forum session seemed perplexed by the theme. Many admitted that they had never stopped to think about the subject before.

Would those people have gone to a debate about human rights in the prison system if it were not for theater? Would they have participated with the open and willing disposition they showed if it had been a conventional debate? Would there even be a debate in the town square about such a subject?

One of the interventions came from a young woman who acted opposite a prisoner in the plain light of day, under the attentive gaze and with the approval of all those sections of society represented in that square. If it were not for theater, how would this meeting and dialogue be played out? Would the black, poor prisoner be able to talk to the young, white, middle-class woman in a public square?

The young woman was very moved by the story. She came onstage to show what she thought. She didn't need to say anything, because her action was more revealing than any word: she left her role as spectator, took her place onstage to stand side-by-side with the prisoner, spoke with him without fear and touched the man as if he were a normal person. In shock, he accepted her action. This meeting in a public square—in a sunlit theater in the round, witnessed by all present—was not a theatrical meeting, but a real human encounter.

On their return to prison, the 15 men who made up the cast spoke of how surprised they had been that people participated. They expected fear rather than participation. Through theater, through an aesthetic language, we touched people and stimulated them to react. The action was theatrical, but it was also real and caused real reactions and emotions. The theater interfered with the reality of the public space. This happened because it was theater, rather than merely a debate.

### **Learning the Text**

The process of producing a collective text is both pedagogic and political. In making theater we explore our working theme and learn more about theater and dramaturgy. In addition, it helps to clarify the question we want to ask the audience.

When community-based Forum Theater players produce a written text of their play, they reappropriate their own stories. I love promoting read-throughs of the text as in conventional theater as a means of valorizing the production of the play. Also, read-throughs help the group memorize the text.

### **Casting the Play**

Although the Joker is the artistic director of the group—and the person with the most experience on which to base artistic decisions guaranteeing the best performance from each one—the Joker doesn't have the autocratic power to determine casting. A community group is not a professional group, and the Joker must be open and transparent throughout the process. Directing nonactors, it is important to avoid negative feelings that could hinder the development of the work and inhibit the bonds of friendship and fellowship which must be fostered in the group.

In staging *Panela de Opressão's* latest show, we first did improvisations with volunteers. Then all the actors experimented with all the roles, male and female. We used a rehearsal technique that rotated the characters, so that actors could see each role's possibilities and discover their preferences, capabilities and limitations. We listed all the characters, and each group member said who they thought most appropriate to play which parts. Then everyone revealed who they would like to play. The casting was thus a combination of the group's suggestions, individual wishes and the Jokers' opinions.

As we had been engaged in a process of experimentation since beginning improvisations, and we had encouraged people to take on the roles for which they were most appropriate, we had few problems in defining the cast. The only disagreement was with a young woman whom we had chosen for a character that she didn't think herself capable of playing. We managed to overcome this through discussion and encouragement.

Despite having defined the cast, we encouraged exchanges of roles within the play's season. In *Panela de Opressão* there are three young women who can play the protagonist; also, several characters are played by more than one actor. This is good for the training of the cast and enables substitutions, as we cannot always be certain that everyone will be available for all presentations. Flexibility of cast, scenery and staging is one of our work's essential features.

**Rehearsal Techniques**

In the improvisations, rehearsal techniques help with the creation of characters, the discovery of their traits, the stimulation of dialogues, experimentation with styles and the reworking of the story.

With a written text, rehearsal techniques must be used after the text has been memorized, as there is no more interest in creating new improvisations at this stage. The objective here is to strengthen understanding of the text and the depth of the characters.

There will probably be changes in the text during rehearsals, as T.O. techniques are always revelatory and creative. But the text shouldn't be altered too much, so as not to make the cast insecure. The text must be an instrument to facilitate the work. It should ensure that the cast knows what is going to happen, guaranteeing that everything the group wants to say is said.

Rehearsal techniques help cast members de-mechanize the memorized text, making it possible for them to reappropriate the text. In the beginning, the improvised text belonged to the group: coming from the soul of each actor, it was alive. When it was systematized and structured as a written text, it acquired a reality of its own, just as children are born and have their own lives. Rehearsal techniques are instrumental in helping the group reinternalize the text.

**Scenery and Costumes**

We want to involve the public with the magical language of the theater, so we dedicate the same attention to the look of the play as we do to the creation of the text. The image is the message. Everything that goes onstage has a meaning and a reason for being there. The image of a play must also be the collective creation of the group and the Joker.

From the first improvisations, when characters and locations begin to be defined, up until rehearsals with the text, the group must be stimulated to imagine and create the elements that make up the context lived by the characters. At CTO-Rio, visual artists help our groups put their ideas into practice. In this process, we prioritize the use of recyclable material. The same is done for the costumes.

### **Open Rehearsals**

Final rehearsals should always be open to partners and friends. At this stage of the work, we are no longer capable of seeing what is obvious and of criticizing ourselves. The presence of people who understand what we are trying to do and who have an artistic sensibility is essential in helping us to make final adjustments and alerting us to anything that might be missing.

At CTO-Rio, Jokers come frequently to each other's final rehearsals to give support and help with the theatricality of the play and its suitability for Forum Theater. Before a group has its first performance for the community, we do a preview at CTO-Rio for Boal, the other Jokers and other T.O. community groups. Open rehearsals also provide practice for the Forum sessions.

### **First Community Performance, Dialogues Between Groups and Touring the Play**

Open rehearsals give the group strength to begin its series of performances. Usually after a few performances, contact with different audiences reveals new possibilities and options so that the group can include new speeches and change certain scenes.

The opening performance of a group must be on their own territory in order to strengthen links to the community, ensure support for the work and make the cast feel more secure about beginning to tour.

We are used to promoting "Dialogues" between community Forum Theater groups. This happens when one group invites another to perform and do a Forum session in their community. Afterward, there is a meeting to exchange ideas about the themes and shows.

### **Final Considerations**

If there were more space, I would have liked to talk about the process of training the Joker and about how to hold a good Forum Theater session. There was also no space to discuss CTO-Rio's exciting projects in progress. But anyone who is interested can write to us at [ctorio@domain.com.br](mailto:ctorio@domain.com.br) or to me, Bárbara Santos, at [beta@domain.com.br](mailto:beta@domain.com.br). On December 3, 2001, we launched both *METAXIS*, an international magazine about Theater of the Oppressed, and CTO-Rio's Web site, at [www.ctorio.com.br](http://www.ctorio.com.br).

Do keep in touch!