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Theatre for Social Change: Histories & Applications

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Summer Fellows

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Using Theatre to Promote Social Change

Theatre is not only an art form, but also a method of communication and community-building. I have investigated the history of theatre for social change, examples of theatre for social change including plays and performance pieces, and ways of both creating and teaching theatre for social change. The terms social justice and social change are oftentimes used interchangeably. I chose to use the term 'change' rather than 'justice' because my goal is to inspire and incite changes in our society, and the first sounds more active than the latter. Yes, of course we want justice, but to have justice, we must make changes. Theatre can be used to exemplify the possibilities of and inspire people to pursue social change. I have interpreted how to approach social change by using theatre and inferred how theatre can be used as a tool in order to communicate diverse perspectives with a wide variety of people.

In Robert J. Landy and David T. Montgomery's *Theatre for Change: Education, Social Action and Therapy*, the authors explore how theatre can be used to promote social action and educate. An interesting method explained in their book is known as the Mantle of the Expert approach to education in which students' needs are addressed when they are compelled to participate in their curriculum and create a culture of their own. Students are divided into groups by a facilitator, usually a professor, to find at least one solution to a given issue, and as the groups present their ideas, the facilitator gives the group constructive criticism regarding their solutions (70). This method permits students to take ownership of their education by taking on

roles and using their own knowledge and skills to solve problems relating to their assigned task in which they are hopefully interested because the issue involved affects them. In this way, students become 'experts' on an issue that is important to them (63-4). This distribution of power provides students with the opportunity to reflect on issues as they become participants rather than just observers, as they would be in a lecture (68). As evident from this method, theatre is not only an art form, but can also be used as a tool for education.

Not only is theatre useful for educational purposes, but it also provide opportunities outside of education for students to grow as individuals. Landy and Montgomery argue:

Drama can help underachieving students internalize and understand affective skills, for example empathy, which are related to cognitive skills such as making inferences, and are required on standardized tests. For students who test well, drama provides opportunities to learn other valuable skills, including appreciation of nuance and dramatic irony, qualities which are critical to many life and learning situations. (5)

Theatre is useful for disciplines outside of the arts, as drama can provide different benefits for all levels of learners. Students involved in all kinds of academics can explore theatre as an avenue for expressing themselves. For instance, theatre provides students with skills that can be applied outside of the discipline. In *Theatre of Good Intentions* by Dani Snyder-Young, an assistant professor of Theatre Arts at Illinois Wesleyan University who researches applied theatre, she explains:

Performances are not the only kind of projects requiring collaboration, but their organic focus on creating a performance event gives collaborators a clear, shared goal. For this reason, theatre helps teach a set of collaboration and project

management skills that can be useful to participants in other settings, and participation in dramatic activities can help groups of people learn to work a little better with each other. (12)

Collaboration is not unique to theatre, however, the common goal of creating a performance can enhance skills that can be used in ways outside of the theatre, like building a coalition to make social change.

Bertolt Brecht, a German poet, playwright, director, and theatre theorist of the twentieth century, conceived of epic theatre as a social and ideological arts forum for making change. Despite the usefulness of dramatic theatre within the classroom, epic theatre is one of the most useful means of inciting social action due to its aim to approach the audience through reason rather than feeling. In Brecht's essay, "The Epic Theatre and its Difficulties," he explains that "[t]he essential point of the epic theatre is perhaps that it appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator's reason. Instead of sharing an experience the spectator must come to grips with things" (23). According to Brecht's theory, the main purpose of theatre is not to entertain and evoke emotions, but to make audience members reflect on their experience in a way that encourages theatregoers to take action. Epic theatre is perhaps the best form of modern theatre to effectively incite social change due to the fact that it does not focus on appealing to the emotions of the audience, but on how to relay the intended message from the script and coax the audience to recognize the issue and take action.

In one of Brecht's essays, "The Street Scene: A Basic Model for an Epic Theatre," he explains how theatre can be used as a means of sharing information and perspectives on events by using an example of a witness explaining the details of a car crash. Without thinking about it, when people, as characterized by the witness, share stories, they are acting and emphasizing the

points that help others see the event from the storytellers' points of view. In the theatre, experiences are only partially communicated to the spectator based on how they see the actor portray her/his character, as well as how the spectator perceives that character (121-9).

In Brecht's treatise, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*; a conversation between a philosopher, a dramaturg, an actor, an actress, and an electrician; Brecht explains his theories of theatre. Over a period of four nights, the philosopher argues that since theatre already aims to imitate life and often holds meaning beyond the world of a play, it would not be difficult to incorporate a more specific aim to teach people how to act in order to benefit society. The philosopher explains that "[k]nowledge is as much a part of humanity as art is, even if the decrepitude of our social life means that it often has to get along without either for long periods. Nobody is entirely without knowledge, so nobody is entirely without art" (Brecht 44). The philosopher is saying that art is a part of our society despite the fact that not everyone studies it, therefore, it is easy to relate to and understand for all people.

The philosopher shares his idea of using theatre in order to present accurate imitations of scenarios in which audience members get the chance to make a choice regarding what they believe is right. He explains:

The main reason why the actor has to be clearly detached from his character is this: if the audience is to be shown how to handle the character, or if people who resemble it or are in similar situations are to be shown the secret of their problems, then he must adopt a standpoint which is not only outside the character's radius but also at a more advanced stage of evolution. The [Marxist] classics say that apes are best understood from the point of view of their successor in the evolutionary process, man. (Brecht 76)

Brecht is using the philosopher to explain why theatre cannot use emotion to manipulate the spectator's decisions. This is because using emotions makes the spectator's choice biased when s/he should be making decisions more objectively. The alienation effect, more commonly known as the A-effect, refers to acting and production techniques that make it difficult for audience members to identify themselves with characters in a given play (Brecht 91). Brecht argues that this effect creates distance between the spectator and the action on stage, allowing the spectator to critically evaluate the action.

The arts are often viewed as frivolous when in reality they should be praised for their versatility. Beyond their academic purposes, the performing arts should be used to demonstrate how people should treat each other in order for society to be a safe place for all kinds of diverse people. In *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, the philosopher states "It's also important that the actor should show that he knows what it's like to be observed, because that can teach the spectator to behave in everyday life like a man under observation. This is where the actor is a model to be imitated. The individual gets immense advantages from being aware of being observed, and society too can only profit from it" (Brecht 47). He is proposing that theatre be used as a model for human behavior. The actors are being viewed as role models, and should know that how the audience perceives them will affect how the audience members absorb the theme of the play. Similar to the actors when they are on the stage, people are constantly observing and scrutinizing each other, so we should be consistently mindful of our social responsibilities. Brecht was a frontrunner in theatre as it evolved in pursuit of social change.

Augusto Boal, a Brazilian theatre director, politician, and writer, adapted Brecht's theories and founded the Theatre of the Oppressed. He developed theatre exercises to promote social justice based on dramatic theory. In his adaptation, Boal explains how "[a] good empathy

does not prevent understanding and, on the contrary, needs understanding precisely in order to avoid the spectacle's turning into an emotional orgy and the spectator's purging of his social sin" (103). Boal agrees with Brecht that theatre for social change should not hinder someone's understanding of the issue being presented, therefore, no piece should be overly emotional. Some empathy is okay in theatre; however, too much is bad if you want spectators to learn and act.

Recounting his experiments to eradicate illiteracy using Theatre of the Oppressed techniques in Peru, Boal claims:

What I propose to do here is to relate my personal experience as a participant in the theatrical sector and to outline the various experiments we made in considering the theater as a language, capable of being utilized by any person, with or without artistic talent. We tried to show in practice how the theater can be placed at the service of the oppressed, so that they can express themselves and so that, by using this new language, they can also discover new concepts. (121)

Boal supports the idea that the theatre should be used as a tool for oppressed groups in order not only to express themselves, but to be able to understand one another through the universal language of theatre. Boal's achievements in theatre are indispensable in regards to theatre for social change.

Another key figure in the history of theatre for social change is Hallie Flanagan, the director of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP). The FTP was significant in that the government funded theatre during the Great Depression as part of a relief effort to employ professional actors. Revolutionary for its time, the FTP promoted social change, was directed by a woman, and employed an African American ensemble ("Hallie Flanagan"). Projects were adapted according to a specific area's needs and used local talent that both experienced and understood

what their community needed to be able to reshape and redefine identity and values. In a memoir about the history of the FTP, called *Arena*, Flanagan recalls creating a series of epic theatre productions presenting social issues to large audiences known as the Living Newspaper. Of the particular production of *Triple-A Plowed Under*, which recounts the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) and the hard life of farmers, Flanagan reports:

During the rehearsals of *Triple-A Plowed Under*, some of the actors complained that there was no plot, no story, no chance to build up a character, no public interest in the theme, ‘Who in New York cares about the farmer, about wheat, about the price of bread and milk?’[...]We felt we should experiment with new forms, particularly because we wished to supplement rather than compete with commercial productions[...]From the time the reviews came out saying that in spite of faults *Triple-A* undoubtedly represented a new theatre technique, the actors, like most converts to anything, became apostolic in their zeal. (71-2)

Due to the fact that New York is not a traditional farm region, actors believed that the show would not succeed in the area since the play portrayed an issue that they thought New York residents would not relate to. In the end, the show ended up succeeding because the audience appreciated the efforts of the company and their mission to pursue social change. Flanagan used the Living Newspaper in conjunction with the FTP to unify the nation by providing jobs and accessible entertainment. By trying new methods and approaches without guaranteed success, the FTP found ways to effectively communicate messages to society.

In one of the Living Newspaper plays, *Power*, the advantages of electricity are explained, such as revolutionizing surgery by providing electric instruments, in order to encourage the public to use it. The play also describes what life is like after a variety of people lose power and

the problems that they run into without the convenience of electricity, like a house losing its heat when a baby has the flu. It addresses the issue of the price of electricity and advances the idea that electricity is a necessity rather than a commodity, calling for a more fair public utility system. The inventor of the first instrument to generate electricity, Michael Faraday, is portrayed and says “If it will help humanity, it is good” (Arent). The play is criticizing private utility companies who were charging too much when electricity should have been treated as a basic human right and a way to take advantage of vulnerable populations. Private companies treated electricity as a luxury rather than a necessity that offered benefits that everyone had the right to take advantage of.

In an effort to transform long-term elder care by improving the experience of residents as well as their family members, community members of Milwaukee’s Luther Manor, theatre students of the University of Wisconsin, and members of the Sojourn Theatre Company helped change residents’ experiences by engaging with them to create a show based on *The Odyssey* for an experiment known as The Penelope Project. Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, shares her perspective of the story while she is at home. Initially, the students of the university resented the change in curriculum and even resisted the task presented to them, but once they were given the chance to conceptualize the potential outcome of their work, they were ready for the challenge and uncertainty that came with the project (72). Each segment of the project had assigned artists, a medium through which they would be able to accomplish a goal, and a common goal in order to engage the different types of people that were involved (98-100). This organized the project so that everyone had an assigned task to which they could contribute to the best of their ability.

The residents exceeded their limits of old age other disabilities, proving that even older individuals can use their time to grow and learn. Shannon Scrofano, the lead project designer of the Penelope Project, clarifies that

art-making within an existing community ‘invites’ members to embark on adventure. It inspires continuous learning and exploration of the unknown. It ignites curiosity, expands possibility, and embraces what it means to be present. These are universal and ageless desires[...]I learned that replacing expectation with invitations to contribute to a communal goal opened endless doors of creative possibility. (96-7)

By eradicating expectation and replacing it with invitation, members of the project were more inclined to contribute to the the *Finding Penelope* performance. The invitation made individuals feel like they were essential to the success of the task rather than required to contribute to the task. Because members of different communities were able to collaborate using their invaluable skills, this project was successful.

To achieve the progressiveness like that of the FTP and the Penelope Project, there are techniques that help individuals write theatre works for social justice for different issues from a myriad of perspectives. In *Staging Social Justice: Collaborating to Create Activist Theatre*, the Fringe Benefits theatre company explains their methodology for theatre for social change. Their methods include collaboration and techniques for script-writing to promote social change. For example, by using tools such as interactive educational workshops to address LGBT issues, institutions have reported positive change in attitudes and behaviors toward LGBT populations and a decrease in homophobia on college campuses (Bowles 67). Changes to successful efforts such as the interactive workshops should be made unique for a specific institution so that the

topic resonates with its target audience in a way that engages audience members.

In interactive theatre, plays where the audience can intervene and offer suggestions on what can be changed to have the situation end differently, engaging the audience shows them that they can be the initiators of change in society. The collaboration that theatre requires makes it easier to approach tough themes and confront groups that need education. By collaborating with organizations and university officials, people can share their views and create ways to approach audiences as well as supplying a common theme for an audience to derive from a performance. This could be useful when collaborative techniques are applied to programs and other events on college campuses so that the community can potentially become a haven for civic debate and social change (Bowles 108-35). For instance, college campuses can have a show and workshop as part of first-year orientation that explains sexual misconduct, and because each institution is different, the show should be designed based on the needs of the particular institution.

In my original monologue featuring a first-year college woman's experience of her first night out in college with alcohol, the young woman chronicles an evening that could have ended in her assault. She reviews the decisions that lead to the dangers of her situation. Similar to Brecht's plays exemplifying epic theatre, audience members are supposed to see where she could have made different choices and engage in conversation that further investigates the dilemmas and misconceptions depicted in the play.

She narrates her perspective on their night out at a college party where the room is dark, full of loud music, and there is alcohol. In an article that investigates gender dynamics and sexual double standards at a college party, Shelly Ronen of Stanford University states "The highly sexualized movements that characterize grinding, and the connection to hooking up both publicly

and privately, make grinding socially meaningful, especially for women risking harsh judgments when violating sexual standards. Grinding provides insight into implicit gendered inequalities within scripts that govern sexual interaction” (364). In most heterosexual situations, men initiate grinding while women are limited in their ability to respond due to society’s oppression of women’s sexuality. After initiating contact, men assume that women who grind with them want sex, but might not women be enjoying the opportunity to express themselves with no intention of hooking up with their dance partners?

This is similar to our first-year student when she is approached at the party. Max mistakenly assumes that she wants to have sex with him when really she has no intentions of doing so. She tries to leave his side, but ends up being followed by him to the bar as she is looking for her roommate, Theresa. When she fails to find Theresa, she goes back to the dance floor with Max because she does not know anyone else at the party. After grinding again, the two end up in Max’s room. Her language indicates that she was becoming increasingly more intoxicated, as she recalls that she was dizzy and beginning to experience memory loss. Momentarily coming to her senses, she panics when Max doesn’t respect her rejection and she screams. The young woman tells the audience that she knows, in retrospect, that she wasn’t hanging out with people who actually cared about her and that she should not need to be completely wasted to have a good time. Her evening could have ended very differently if simple luck had not been on her side.

If we were to use my original play at Ursinus, more students would be able to see what they are doing and how they are being perceived. It might even motivate them to moderate their behavior. Theatre can be used as a mirror to show individuals their own behaviors in hopes that they will change their ways. Not only that, individuals should want to help change the injustices

that are prevalent in society, especially when they are displayed in front of them and shown to more people. Students who continue to attend this institution until they graduate are privileged to be able to pursue their education, and should be open to learning about new and different perspectives from their own, and theatre may be able to expose these privileged students to ideas other than their own. In this way, theatre is a useful tool that uses entertainment in order to get the public's attention by easing tension and offering new perspectives.

Students at Ursinus will eventually venture outside of this community to be a part of something greater and our liberal arts education will hopefully have prepared us for such an endeavor. If we appreciate the arts more and take advantage of their beauty and usefulness, we will be able to cultivate students with better communication skills as well as a better understanding of social issues. Using theatre as a model to show how we can make a difference in society, we can shape individuals who are socially aware. We need to teach people how to better communicate different ideas, as well as how to interpret information and events.

Using theatre, I want to encourage students to be active members of the their college community. As community members, there are obligations to improve our community by participating in events, not because it is a class requirement, but because they want to contribute to an always-evolving society. Theatre for social justice is an art form that is an ideal vehicle for educating college students about social responsibility, not only for first-year students at orientation, but for all college students.

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