

The Unmasking of the Mask of Solidarity¹

A retrospective is not unlike the mysterious gift that would occasionally arrive in the mail. As a child, I would turn this parcel carefully over and over before opening it and only then half remember my mother's rule about saving the wrapping for future use.

This feeling of reluctance to open the gift of the past also brings with it a kind of exhaustion. For six years in late 1980s and early 1990's I had found myself creating Forum Theatre on issues that ranged from HIV prevention, violence and racism in the schools, domestic violence, the seeking of sanctuary for refugees, and child prostitution. Working along side other people who were unstinting in their courageous exploration of their lived experiences in order to bring conditions that they or others were suffering to the theatre.²

Although Augusto Boal was by the early 1990s already in the process of developing a body of work that addressed the social and psychological conditions that he was witnessing in Europe and North America; titled *Cops in the Head* and the *Rainbow of Desire*, of which I was introduced to in London in the late 1980s. He theorized and developed practice techniques that were intended to reveal the conditions of oppression experienced as internal psychological states. His work had established itself across the country and many practitioners like Lib Spry and Julie Salverson were using his work in Ontario while David Diamond was working in this theatre here in Vancouver and throughout British Columbia with Headlines Theatre.

¹ Salverson, J. (1994). The Mask of Solidarity. In Eds., Mady Schutzman and Jan Cohen-Cruz, *Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy, Activism*, London: Routledge.

² The theatre was conceived by the theatre master Augusto Boal and fueled by ideology expressed in Friere's Pedagogy of the Oppressed. The early work of the theatre of the oppressed contended that people themselves were the experts in their own lives and that everything in the theatre as in life could be viewed from the arena of the political.

The workshops and forum theatre events that we were explored in Headlines Theatre with David Diamond in the late 1980's and early 1990's were based on Boal's earlier Theatre of the Oppressed work.³ The basis of this theatrical investigation was to create forum theatre events where people from the audience were invited into the theatre in order to problem solve ways to change the actions and the sufferings of the characters on stage. It was a theatre was constructed within the unequivocable confines of characters who represented the oppressed and the oppressor.

These Theatre of the Oppressed Forum Events as they were called were based on an exploration within a workshop of the lived experiences the participants. Over the course of many days the participants shared through games and exercises what they viewed as significant moments of oppression in their lives. Collectively, a short play was produced that attempted to portray the elements of what the participants shared. These short vignettes were performed to audiences as short vignettes created and enacted by workshop participants. They represented moments of oppression they saw as deeply affecting the communities from which they came. These publicly theatricalized events invited the audience, conceived as the 'spec-actor,' onto the stage and into the scene to try to improvise theatrically a solution to the problem they were witnessing. The 'joker' was the facilitator of the event and directed the movement of action and helped to interpret what kinds of interventions took place on stage. These events were exciting, provocative, and active events, and often made good theatre. Intended to activate audiences into taking risks to change their experience of reality. Often these were deeply moving and powerful events for the participants and audiences alike.

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³ David Diamond one of Canada's best known practitioner's of TO in Canada, developed work that draws heavily from TO into a system of facilitated encounters that are now framed as Theatre for Living, as opposed to Theatre of the Oppressed. His book Theatre For Living: The Art and Science of Community-Based Dialogue (2007) outlines his recent thinking around this work, in which the dichotomy of the oppressed and oppressor is problematized. See David Diamond interview.

However, after a number of years of doing this work I was no longer confident that the dichotomy inherently presented in the form of Theatre of the Oppressed in which characters who represented ‘oppressor’ and ‘oppressed’ was nuanced enough to express what I had witnessed and heard in the stories of the people with whom I’d had the opportunity to work.⁴

In addition to the challenges of creating theatre through forum theatre techniques some of our thinking about the disadvantages of coming as artists into communities to unveil tensions, gross injustices, and other traumatic experiences and then having to leave after these issues had been surfaced. To be fair we had evolved a method of working that did not ask for the evocation of the participant’s most traumatic experiences yet the work often spiraled into places that painful and traumatic. In the early 1990’s, rarely were there organizational or institutional support that saw value in providing sustainable models to address the outcomes unveiled in these investigations. Often we as the artists had to have lengthy meetings to advocate with host organizations the need for outside supports set up for these forum encounters. People did not know or understand the power of the theatre to unlock and reveal hidden trauma in people and communities. With this came a tremendous amount of freedom to explore with people situations and issues that had never had the light shone on them. It was an exciting and risky theatre. Theatre that told the stories, for example, of what it was like to be held at the border fleeing from a country with no protection or family or friends or citizenship status able to help? What was it like to experience the moment of awakening to the real possibility of having been infected by HIV? To face the bullies, to have a drug addiction, to be sexually abused, to be homeless? To be a teenage mother? To experience racism in ways that no one else saw or acknowledged? The Theatre of the Oppressed was one of the first avenues of expression used in the twentieth century that invited people who were living these questions to take center stage. And unlike theatre that allowed the audience to be entertained by these stories...this theatre demanded that audience act in them. And the forum events I participated in and witnessed did provoke larger conversations with more of the public and in some cases real change. It was brutal on the participants

⁴ See P. Fraser Curriculum Vitae

and the theatre makers... but 1991 the future with its concerns around what was safe was just arriving.⁵

In the best case scenarios the workshops and theatre events organized during my tenure with Headlines Theatre engaged counselors and mental health care professionals to participate in the project. While I remain not entirely convinced that professional therapists and counselors are necessarily any guarantee of safety. Or, conversely that the people and the communities are not in many cases best able to care for themselves in suitable and appropriate ways. Nevertheless the contentious issue of “safety” surrounding these and other socially engaged art practices was just surfacing. Judith Marcuse’s interview in <https://icasc.ca/artists-speak> is worth of checking out in regards to these concerns.

As I travelled throughout the province of British Columbia and the other parts of the country finding myself in as such diverse settings as Kittamat village in Northern British Columbia to youth drop-in centres on the corner of Main and Hastings in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, meeting in community centres, high school gymnasiums, in church basements and town hall there was little opportunity process or resolve where we stood as artists and concerned individuals in relation to what we had witnessed.

But this was all about to change.

It happened in 1991 with a workshop hosted by Headlines Theatre for educators and theatre artists across the country to explore issues relating to racism and violence. It was intended to be a train the trainer workshop and is described in Julie Salverson’s essay, *The Mask of Solidarity*.⁶

⁵ And from my perspective the common and currently held assertions around what ‘safety’ means in this field and how the lens of the professional is interpreting ‘safety’ deserves considerable more unpacking before it is handed over to their managerial care.

⁶ Salverson, J. (1994). *The Mask of Solidarity*. In Eds., Mady Schutzman and Jan Cohen-Cruz, *Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy, Activism*, London: Routledge.

Julie describes the dynamics and tensions that arose in this workshop as it became increasingly painful and uncomfortable. As Julie (1994) writes “ as we hit the third day the people of colour became more and more uncomfortable and expressed difficulty exploring their own oppression a group they barely knew...when the two groups divided the problem eased for the people of colour ...but it was different for the white group. They stood aimlessly at the other end of the room looking lost and uncertain....many expressed feelings of hurt, rejection, and confusion...these feelings persisted... (1994, p. 163).

Julie goes on to use this workshop to unpack the internal and external complexities experienced in the psychological and sociological states of the activists who seek to create solidarity with those who are experiencing oppression. She writes that unexamined and unresolved issues within the inner lives of activists or artists who work in activist settings can easily morph into the actions of the “enabler.” In the article Julie describes “enablers” are those who act out or fight their own oppression unconsciously through others’ struggle and their oppression.⁷ She sees the need for those of who see themselves as activists/artists to become conscious of how the outer situations of conflict and abuse of power echo within. She further challenges activists by insisting one understands one’s identity in relation to those with whom one is working.

She goes on to assert that if we see ourselves as helpers with no historical or inter-dependent relationship to those with whom we encounter as facilitators, activists, or artists then we are merely wearing a mask that seeks to identify with the other. But it is a mask (p.166). Authentic solidarity with others arrives through our knowledge about how we are complicit as perpetrators and recipients of violence. Coming to terms with our own experiences and narratives of violation and our own unwitting collaboration in abuse of power creates the capacity to witness pain without attempting to fix it. And this in turn leads to a capacity to acknowledge pain, which may not necessarily be resolved. In contemporary thinking this acknowledgement of known and unknown pain dwelling

⁷ Mask of Solidarity, p. 166

within each encounter could allow for an understanding of the ethics of incommensurability.⁸

Along side Julie's insights into this workshop I began to view the exploration within the confines of these workshops as confined to specific techniques and exercises. The role we played, as facilitators did not provide us with opportunities to act intuitively or creatively to the tensions found in the inquiry. The work was not able to contain the paradox or ambiguities of the actions of characters as they were theatricalized. Neither could the work of TO accommodate the use of metaphor. The work always sought resolution. The frame of inquiry could not accommodate complexity, the not-known, the unresolvable. In other words the architecture of the forum theatre event could not contain the vastness of experience of what I had heard and witnessed in the people's stories and within their experiences as we engaged in the making of this genre of theatre.

In the mask of Solidarity Julie Salverson aptly describes the difficulties of our particularly confusing workshop on antiracism. What isn't recorded is the outcome of this workshop and how it acted as an agent of change for all of us involved. The workshop signaled a period of growth and tension in the popular theatre movement here in Canada. Troubled by a new generation of activists who beginning to claim that antiracist work should be done by those who directly experienced it, this generation of activist artists viewed identity as a key component to participation and collaboration. It is a discourse that continues to greatly influence cultural work throughout Canada.⁹

This workshop changed of us who facilitated this workshop. Julie began a deeper investigation into the meaning of witnessing and trauma which culminated in the recently published book *Lines of Flight: An Atomic Memoir*. David Diamond¹⁰ continued his work as the Artistic Director of Headlines Theatre. He developed his own responses to

⁸ Decolonization is not a metaphor

⁹ see interviews with mia amir and Natalie Tin Yin Gan <https://icasc.ca/artists-speak>

¹⁰ see interview with David Diamond <https://icasc.ca/artists-speak>

the Theatre of the Oppressed through the evolution and development of Theatre for the Living.

And I left Headlines Theatre unsure of what was going to happen next only knowing it was time to go.

And now decades later I'm turning this recollection again to see what it might reveal or uncover. Amazed in a way that what that workshop uncovered has remained one of the central discourses in cultural practice in Canada. That of identity. And a wish that it wasn't so. And a question that fueled the research associated with this website. What needs to be preserved? Or held as a responsibility?

Perhaps it is the memory of the fearlessness and energy of the theatre artist Augusto Boal whose work inspired us all. Of Augusto Boal inserting his vision of theatre into the twentieth century fearlessly asserting everyone is entitled to play. And that "all theatre is political because all the activities of man are political and theatre is one of them."¹¹

¹¹ Boal, A. (1979). *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. C.A. and M.L. McBride. New York: Uzien Books.