

Forum Theatre

The first Theatre of the Oppressed Forum Theatre of which I was now acting as a facilitator with Headlines Theatre formed a pivotal moment in my life and in the course of my early professional work. Forum theatre developed by Augusto Boal in essence asks the participants to investigate through games and exercises moments of oppression. This investigation begins with the individual but accumulates into experiences or images that resonate with the entire room.

Out of this investigation the community of individuals chose moments they wanted to share to make their theatre about. The theatre is not just the short play about the oppression they are experiencing, it is also about the invitation to step into the theatre as a 'spec-actor' and try to bring about a change in the original outcome. At the time the techniques of 'forum' theatre as conceived of by Boal, asked the audience to 'solve' the problem they saw on stage. They were asked to solve the problem by acting it out, through action and not by speaking to what they saw. Augusto claimed it was a rehearsal for the revolution. What we experimented with in these settings were witnessed and then eventually used in the 'reality' that existed outside the theatre.

In my first experience with Forum Theatre was with a group of men who were dying from AIDS. It was created in and performed in the westend of Vancouver in the late 1980's. At that time little was known about the disease or how it was being spread. It was viewed as a plague that was primarily affecting gay male communities. There was a tremendous amount of fear of this disease which caused enormous suffering and intense homophobic outbreaks throughout the country. The community itself was forced to organize and care for the infected members with support from small numbers of enlightened healthcare providers.

This group chose to create a simple scene about a moment they had all shared. It was a scene where they were ushered into an office to await the results of their HIV test at moment when the outcome of these tests are revealed to them. The scene is about being given a positive diagnosis at a time where there was no cure and no treatment. In those days a positive diagnosis was a death sentence.

The creators of this scene were all men who were suffering varying degrees illness from having contracted HIV. Many of them had AIDS and were not going to live long.

Although members of this group of individuals were experiencing every possible crises in their personal lives including the threats of homelessness¹, the loss of family², poverty, fear of dying and the isolation of illness.

Despite these enormous challenges in their personal lives what this group chose to make their theatre ended up being about a simple universal human need. The scene they chose was set in the waiting room and office of their doctor's. It showed an individual receiving the news that he was HIV positive. Everyone in the group associated with this moment in this office as the pinnacle of their 'oppression'. It centered on the lack of human touch. None of the men who had been given their tests results as HIV positive, which at the time was essentially a death sentence, were not touched. The scene this

¹ Many lost homes do to being unable to work.

² Contracting the disease had 'outed' them to family and friends

group of dying men chose to make their theatre about was about the condition of 'untouchableness' they experienced in the most critical moment of their lives.

This scene encapsulated all the fear and ignorance fueling the lack of a response by local and national public health agencies, and most levels of government. This scene asked for people to act, to step in from the audience to reach out and connect with those who had become 'untouchable'. It demanded courage on the part of those who made this theatre and it asked for courage from those who took upon themselves to act. Those who stepped up out of the audience and became as 'spect-actor' by touching those who were in the scene. In the first performance of this forum event a few people made this choice. The effect on the cast and the room was profound. It felt as if someone or some condition was being born. It was momentarily a new world.

For me this forum theatre event changed forever the path I walked on and whom I walked with.