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Democratic and participatory theatre for social justice There has never been a famine in a democracy. But there will be.

Neelands, J. (2015) 'Democratic and participatory theatre for social justice' in Finneran, M. and Freebody, K. (2015) *How Drama Teaches: Transforming communities, learners and pedagogy* London; Bloomsbury

The values of togetherness

At the heart of any theatre practice that is committed to social justice is a commitment to the values and practices of social justice in its making and expressions. These values of inclusion, equitable distribution, rules freely accepted, the right of argument and choice are also the core values of an authentic democracy (Castoriadis 1983). When groups of people come together to make and share theatre that both models and exposes social justice they engage within a temporary culture often spatially symbolised by a circle. The circle challenges hierarchical relationships of power, encourages participation and dialogue and does not artificially separate participants into actors and spectators of action. In this chapter I want to argue that a democratic and participatory theatre for social justice shares both the values and the characteristics of participatory democratic politics and social forms of play in childhood.

The right of argument

Amartya Sen makes the argument that historically, there has never been a famine in a democracy. Famines are the consequence of social injustice in the sense that some people are left to starve even when there is sufficient food elsewhere to feed them. Famines happen, in part, because it is in the interests of the powerful to resist the necessary redistribution of resources to alleviate the famine and because there is a failure of public imagination to empathise with those who are suffering.

In a fully functioning democracy there will be freedom of the press to report on famine, a concerned and humane citizenry who will demand that resources are redistributed to help those in need and a responsive government that will act according to the desire of the electorate to eliminate hunger. There has never been a famine in a democracy but elections are easy to fix, as we know. So, democracy is more than turning up to vote every four years. Social justice, which is the goal of authentic democracy, depends on free speech, the right to argument, collective empathy for minorities and the disadvantaged, and government in the interests of all not just in the interests of a powerful economic, ethnic or cultural elite.

Sen (2009) and others have argued that one reason why the Western model of democracy is rejected in countries that have minorities, is the fear that democracy will lead to discrimination and their continuing oppression – it will accentuate rather than diminish social injustice. Without the guarantee of voice, without compassion, without disinterested laws and the distribution of resources according to need, the idea of 'democracy' becomes a hollow misnomer (Rancierre 2006, Mouffe 2000) for what Oxfam has called 'owned politics', whereby in the name of 'democracy' the rich and the self-interested rule on our behalf (Oxfam 2014 p.3).

In an authentic model of democracy there are two essential rights: the right of argument, based in the right to freedom of speech and action. In *The Argumentative*

Indian, Sen (2006) demonstrates that the centrality of public argument is key to non-western as well as western constructs of democracy. The right to argue in public with and against powerful interests, to voice different versions of the future, to criticise and be criticised is a basic democratic value (Arendt 1958, 1990. Habermas 1995). The right to freedom of speech allows all to be heard without coercion, threat or censorship. And theatre in a democracy essentially dramatizes public argument and in so doing becomes part of the social discussion and circulation of ideas and choices in the wider society. That is why it has been more often banned and censored than allowed to flourish. It viscerally presents arguments the powerful would rather stifle. In Edward Bond's words *Drama is the text of democracy* (Bond 2010).

The first invention of democracy

Theatre was the first invention of the Athenian polis. The people of Athens were determined to find a new way of living together freer from tribal, family and dynastic authority and self-interest and the omnipotence of the gods. They were forging a 'polis' which whilst imperfect, gave greater voice, choice and the right to self-determine and self-regulate laws than had ever been experienced in Europe at least. Emerging from the determinism of nature and the gods, the Athenians discovered that the fire Prometheus stole from the gods also brought the democratic inventions of critique (*crinien*) and choice (*epillegia*) the powers to both question how we live and the freedom to choose and change the laws by which we live. And these gifts of self-determination, critique and choice are the hallmarks of a lively, inclusive and participatory society. They are the foundations of social justice.

The Athenians didn't then invent theatre as an after-thought, as an entertaining escape from the struggle to democratise. They invented it because it was a necessary core to their political life. Theatre made the irresolvable arguments of the polis visible in human form and aroused both intellectual and emotional engagement. Archaeological evidence now shows that every neighbourhood (*Deme*) in Attica had its own theatral space used both for theatre and as a civic centre for collective deliberation and discussion (Paga 2010). Often these *Deme* theatres were built in the boundaries between *Demes* to encourage dialogue with other communities and neighbourhoods. The first democratic theatre was community theatre tied to community action.

Tragedy presented the consequences of conflicts of loyalties, ideas, identity, interests, beliefs and the dangers of 'hubris' – failing to listen and respond to argument. In times of War, *The Trojan Women* and *The Persians* forcefully reminded the Athenians of the consequences of the failed argument with their 'enemies'. It reminded them that they were at war with other humans – souls rather than barbarians. From a pedagogical perspective, tragedy did not offer solutions, it further complicated an already complicated world. That is the purpose of a democratic theatre – to confuse and to confound, to ask questions without the need to answer them. To feed and mirror arguments in the public sphere about how best to live together.

The extreme obscenities of the *Satyr Plays* made public ridicule of the over-proud, the corrupt, the bullies, the powerful elites. It kept these enemies of the 'polis' in check. Together with tragedy, satire had a political rather than an entertaining function. The invention of theatre allowed us to see, understand and feel the world from multiple perspectives; to feel and think with, for, and against both the tyrant/uncle *Creon* and his citizen/niece *Antigone*. Martha Nussbaum (2010) reminds us that:

It is all too easy to see another person as just a body – which we might then think we can use for our own ends, bad or good. It is an achievement to see a soul in that body, and this achievement is supported by poetry and the arts, which ask us to wonder about the inner world of that shape we see – and, too, to wonder about ourselves and our own depths (p.7)

Boal has traced the aesthetic/political journey from a fully participatory theatre in Athens to a theatre and public life that separated – artistically and politically – actors from spectators. In which the ideals of a participatory democracy gradually eroded as the people became represented by actors rather than being directly active in their politics as well as in their theatre. Now, a participatory theatre for social justice reclaims a theatre for, by and with the people themselves (Boal 1979, 2006).

The responsibility of restraint

For argument to be essential to a democratic life and a democratic theatre it has to struggle within its own paradox. Freedom of speech and action has to find balance with restraint of speech and action. For meaningful argument to happen there needs to be freedom for others to speak, to be critical, to be heard, to participate without fear of being threatened, coerced, silenced and physically abused. There have to be rules that determine this balance and ensure what Nancy Fraser calls *Parity of participation* (1995); rules that are freely accepted rather than fearfully followed. This was *Creon's* failing; his tragic flaw. He discovered that he could not impose his will by crushing *Antigone's* and in so doing he destroyed himself and returned temporary order to chaos once again. Necessary freedom requires necessary restraint. And we have seen this paradox played out in the social theatre of our times.

The massacre of the satirists at *Charlie Hebdo* was an inhuman abomination. But it highlighted how the paradox of freedom and restraint can become a contradiction that turns argument into conflict. The satirists' democratic right to freedom of speech and action conflicted with France's legal restraints imposed on the freedom of the Islamic under-class to freely express their religion and its practices in public. In Saudi Arabia, Raif Badawi is sentenced to ten years and a thousand lashes for his lack of restraint of public speech and action in creating a digital platform for argument; not against but about the role of faith in determining the limits of free speech. In 1599, Giles Allen, the leaseholder of 'The Theatre' in London refused to extend the lease to the Burbages because of his Puritan distaste for 'playes' and players. By an exquisite irony, this event provoked the building of The Globe outside the city walls. The fundamentalist Puritans created that which they feared most – a theatre that would be remembered for all time.

Empathy – the willingness to listen to, understand and work with points of view that may be radically different from one's own position – is key to finding the balance between freedom and restraint in public argument. Empathy requires imagination and disinterested attention to the needs, values and desires of the other. Putting one's own interests to one side in order to carefully attend to the values, position and perspectives of strangers. Being willing to imagine the world from other points of view. Empathy breeds togetherness in argument rather than conflict between strangers who cannot imagine each other. Empathy rather than sympathy for the oppressed, empathy rather than despair for the motives of the oppressor define a theatre for social justice that is determined to also be a theatre for imagining and initiating action.

A lack of empathy dehumanises the other and prevents the possibility of dialogue and argument between 'equals'. In the *Long Walk To Freedom*, Nelson Mandela (1995) in remembering the meetings in his home village, described how an equality of sorts can be achieved even in situations where power is not equally distributed – as long as all have a right to speak, to be listened to and power is not used coercively:

Everyone who wanted to speak did so. It was democracy in its purest form. There may have been a hierarchy of importance among the speakers, but everyone was heard, chief and subject, warrior and medicine man, shopkeeper and farmer, landowner and laborer... The foundation of self-government was that all men were free to voice their opinions and equal in their value as citizens.

But we live in times where the pursuit of naked greed combined with the erosion of empathy for those who have the least in economic terms make any possibility of a dialogue amongst equals seem impossible. On what terms can there be empathetic dialogue between the 80 billionaires who now own more than the 3.5 billion people on the planet who have the least? There has never been a famine in a democracy but if we no longer empathise with those less fortunate, if we continue to concentrate the world's wealth in the hands of a few and rule in the interests of the few - there will be. The extraordinary concentration of the world's wealth in so few hands is a failure of the imagination. You cannot gorge whilst others starve unless you have lost the empathetic imagination to live in comfort with this contradiction. We would not tolerate the excesses of the few, if we empathised more forcefully with the oppressed majority of the world's peoples.

Social play as proto-democratic behaviour

If the historical origins of political theatre – dramatised arguments staged as conversations with the public – are in the Athenian polis, culturally they are in social play. I'm using the term play here, as Bruner (1983) does, to describe an attitude to tasks and social interactions rather than as an activity. Huizinga (1970) claimed that this attitude both precedes culture and is cultural: *Play is older than culture and all culture is play* (P.19). As a species, we are social animals. We depend for the survival of our species on necessary cooperation with others built on mutual respect rather than fear and upon rules freely accepted rather than fearfully followed.

Despite a history that is filled with the oppressive alternatives of tyranny, aristocracy and theocracy as a means of securing the 'cooperation' of others, Alex De Toqueville (1835) was right to suggest that: *Democracy is the most continuous, ancient and permanent tendency known to man* (in De Toqueville 1990, p.1). As I have argued, democracy requires a culture that manifests the values of equality, freedom, the right to criticize and choose. There are many forms of play of course, some of which are as oppressive and terrifying as the real world tyrannies they imitate. But pro-social forms of play can, because of the human need to co-exist, begin to establish a democratic culture and an induction into the behaviours required for social justice (Callois 1958, Sutton-Smith 1997).

The social bonds and rule bound temporary culture of play serve the human need to be together with strangers without threat (Sennett 1986, 2012). Play is the principle means that children have for negotiating the public space and their encounters with strangers. Play brings order to children's encounters with the otherwise chaotic and dangerous world of strangers. Away from the watchful gaze of adults, children learn

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that the conditions of play provide a safe meeting ground and the possibility of a social contract for being together.

There is both contest and argument in play but the social contract is that both should be pleasurable and necessary to the outcomes of play. Players are free to act but within the restraints of the freely accepted rules that make the game both frustrating and pleasurable. There has to be a willingness to play based in the acceptance of a play culture that recognises differences and inequalities. An agreed culture that replaces fear and anxiety with curiosity and social risk-taking (Nussbaum 2010, Winnicot, 2005). It is through play that the young learn to find the balance between freedom and restraint of speech and action and to develop dis-interested involvement with others.

As Eriksson (1964) and others have argued, the social bonds necessary for social play teach cooperation. Social play is not natural – it is cultural. The space between self and other becomes a 'space of potential' rather than a zone of threat and fear. The presence of the other, becomes in play, a shared encounter that breeds empathy and reciprocity – the foundations of a democratic life. As Winnicot (2005) puts it:

The place where cultural experience is located is in the 'potential space' between the individual and the environment. The same can be said of playing. Cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested in play. (p.135)

The culture of play is made possible by children (and adults of course) entering into a social contract which is bound by rules freely accepted and negotiated by all. The more complex the rules, the more satisfying the playing is – rules delay the end of play and preserve the *illusion of the fiction of equality* (Sennett 1986, p.319) that allow players of different ages and abilities to compete on equal terms. Fairness is essential to the intrinsic pleasure and possibility of play. Rules provide the balancing mechanism between freedom and restraint in play. And the desire to establish *parity of participation* teaches children to be self-distanced; to put on hold their own interests in the interest of the play collective. Decisions and rule making are based in deliberative arguments about what is fair for the collective interest of the players. In play we learn how to live with others without the need to control them or pursue our individual interests.

To play requires a freedom from the self, but this freedom can be created only by rules which will establish the fiction of initial equality in power between the players (Ibid.)

In these respects, children discover in play the principles of democratic citizenship, based in active and equal participation in deliberating the rules by which they live. Through the intrinsic pleasures and sociability of play they learn the possibility of becoming self-legislating, self-judging and self-governing (*autnomia, autodikos, autoteles*). Crucially, they learn the rewards of dis-interested speech and action in their playing and deliberations – it's more fun not to be selfish. Together with the rights to criticise and choose and change the laws that govern their play, these are the foundational principles, or legacy, of the Athenian ideal of democracy (Castroriadis 1997 p.275).

The shared conditions of theatre, play and democracy

In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga (1970) provided a classic definition of the temporary culture of play that clearly positions it as a proto-democratic practice.

An activity which proceeds: within certain limits of time and space, in a visible order, according to rules freely accepted, and outside the sphere of necessity or material utility. The play mood is one of rapture and enthusiasm, and is sacred or festive in accordance with the occasion. A feeling of exaltation and tension accompanies the action, mirth and relaxation [follow] (P.47).

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Huizinga's conditions of play also apply to theatre and democracy. In all three, a temporary culture is created that is bound by space and time. Play, political meetings and theatre are voluntary events that take place at agreed times and in agreed public spaces, which are separated from the routines of everyday living and self-interested activity. The play episode, the political meeting and the theatre performance all have an end and we return to daily life. In these special times and spaces, we act according to rules freely accepted, there is necessary restraint of speech and action and we act in the collective interests of all present. And all present agree to act on the decisions made – there are consequences and outcomes. All three require empathy and encourage critique, choice and the exercise of public reason. All three require active participation and interaction with strangers as citizens. The essential qualities of active citizenship are first developed in play and then practised in politics and the theatre.

Participation, dialogue and interaction

Whilst all forms of theatre in a democracy are critical to the development of social imagination and the possibility of empathy, participatory forms of theatre have the greatest democratising potential. Sen identifies participation, dialogue and interaction as the three key 'problems' of democracy (2009). 'Owned politics' disincentivise participation, limit the voices of the powerless and encourage us to hibernate from rather than interact with those who are radically different. However, participatory theatre depends on and develops all three. Active participation through dialogue and interaction is necessary in both the making and the experiencing of theatre – a participatory theatre then pre-supposes the engagement of social actors who have the possibility of also being artistic actors.

Both modes of engagement require social imagination. How do we exist together in order to deliberate and make theatre which will be experienced as a [coexistent reality – a metaxis?](#) How will we create a temporary culture of dialogue and interaction that ensures *parity of participation*, critique, argument, choice that leads to an artistic outcome? The recent discourses around the ideal of ensemble wrestle with this problem of purposefully engaging the social imagination required (Neelands, 2011, 2009a, 2009b Boyd 2009, Sennett 2012). As Boyd suggests, a democratic ensemble is built on the values and behaviours of co-operation, altruism, trust, empathy and tolerance that are also necessary to dialogue and interaction in public life.

But in a participatory theatre, the social imagination is also embodied in playing 'others'. We experience the drama as ourselves but also from within the embodied experience of characters who maybe significantly 'different'. We experience the argument of *Antigone*, for instance, from inside the perspectives of Creon, Antigone, Ismene and others. We argue from within their different perspectives and in so doing we achieve a visceral empathy with the conflict of 'goods' within the play.

We walk, talk, feel and respond to the argument of the drama through the lens of difference. We are ourselves but also not ourselves. We seek out the differences and the connections between humanity in all its diversity through embodying the life worlds of others. We speak as they do, we hear as they do, we feel as they do and we act as they do. And though this process our own sense of righteousness is challenged and confused. We further complicate an already complicated world.

This lived process of role-taking without position taking, argument without resolution may be of particular importance to young people who are in constant argument with the world about who they might become and how they might relate to others. . Participatory theatre allows them to see the world in all of its complexity from multiple perspectives; to be at rest with the idea that there are only questions; to be vulnerable in the presence of others; to learn to freely express and freely restrain themselves.

The Empathy Triad exercise; practising argument

The *Empathy Triad* convention is one example of the techniques participatory theatre practitioners have developed to encourage argument from within both the social and artistic domains of theatre (Neelands & Goode 2015 p.??). During the Summer of 2014, students and workers in Hong Kong protested their right to freely choose their political representatives.

A group of secondary students in the city are exploring the arguments at the heart of this democratic crisis through an exploration of *Antigone* that focussed on what kind of leadership is needed in a time of crisis. Through dance and depiction they bring the horrors of plague ridden Thebes, recovering from civil war, alive. They argue about what kind of leadership is required to bring order and settle on a depiction of an authoritarian, charismatic and visionary leader. Then they meet Creon who emphasises that his desire is to rule on behalf of the city rather than allow family and self-interest to deflect him from his purpose of establishing order out of chaos. They witness and analyse the public argument between Antigone and Ismene.

Finally, three actors form a triangle representing Creon, Antigone and Ismene. The group are asked to stand behind whichever of the three they have the most empathy for. Not who they sympathise with but who do they understand even if they don't agree with their position. Creon, willing to sacrifice family in the interests of the city? Antigone, prepared to put Thebes back into chaos because of her religious beliefs and family loyalty? Ismene, determined to follow the tyrant in order to avoid further bloodshed and civil strife?

The students then distribute themselves between the three characters according to who they choose to empathise with. The groups behind each actor are unevenly distributed of course, with a minority behind Ismene. Their next task is first to discuss their position taking with others who have made the same choice and then make an image using only the three actors to represent their understanding of their chosen character's argument. The actors have to be physically linked in some way. Each group then silently moulds the actors into their chosen image and speak to the rest of the group about how the image materialises their empathy. When all three images are shown the group are given the opportunity to change their original positions if anything in the image work or another groups explanation has changed their mind. The leader claps and several students move to stand behind a different character.

This is the power of art in a democracy, when used as argument it can change the hearts and minds of people.

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