

Athens , 6th - 10th of May 2010

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## THEATRE OF OPPRESSED

### INTRODUCTION

The Theatre of the Oppressed was developed by the Brazilian theatre director, social and political activist, Augusto Boal during the 1950's and 1960's.

The work of Boal start from the reflection on the social use of art and its political function and is based on the idea that while some people make theatre, **we all are theatre**, all human beings are able to use the language of theatre to know and transform the world.

Theatre of Oppressed (TO) is a **METHOD**, composed of different techniques, that aims at developing, in the oppressed citizens, the language of the theatre, which is the essential human language.

From the point of view of this form of theatre there is an oppression whenever a dialogical relation become a mono-logical one: when s/he who has lost the right to express his/her wills and needs, and is reduced to the condition of obedient listener of a monologue.

The practice of the TO has the purpose of transforming situations of the real life that are oppressive from a personal and/or social point of view. TO aims at being an instrument to transform the society that engenders those oppressions.

The basic idea of TO is that we often use **social mask**, that is the whole of different types of mechanisations (stereotypes, movement's habits, relational habits), derivate from our social roles, that produce a **limitation of our capacity of expression**. TO, in this sense, aims to foster a process of **de-mechanisation**.

The theatrical action can be considerate the rehearsal of the real action.

The essential idea is that with the experience of forms and actions of social transformation trough the theatrical fiction, we can **stimulate the extrapolation** of that experience in the daily and real life. The rehearsal of the **theatrical action can help to clarify ( at rational and emotional level) the problems and stimulates to act in the daily life.**<sup>1</sup>

Boal explains the structure of Theatre of the Oppressed as a tree with an ethical root and that develops in a direct and concrete action.

At the bottom we find images, sounds and words, that are elements that compose the Aesthetics of oppressed technique (see below for description of the techniques), the trunk is made up of TO's main techniques of Image Theatre and Forum Theatre, Games and exercises, the branches represent variations on these techniques.

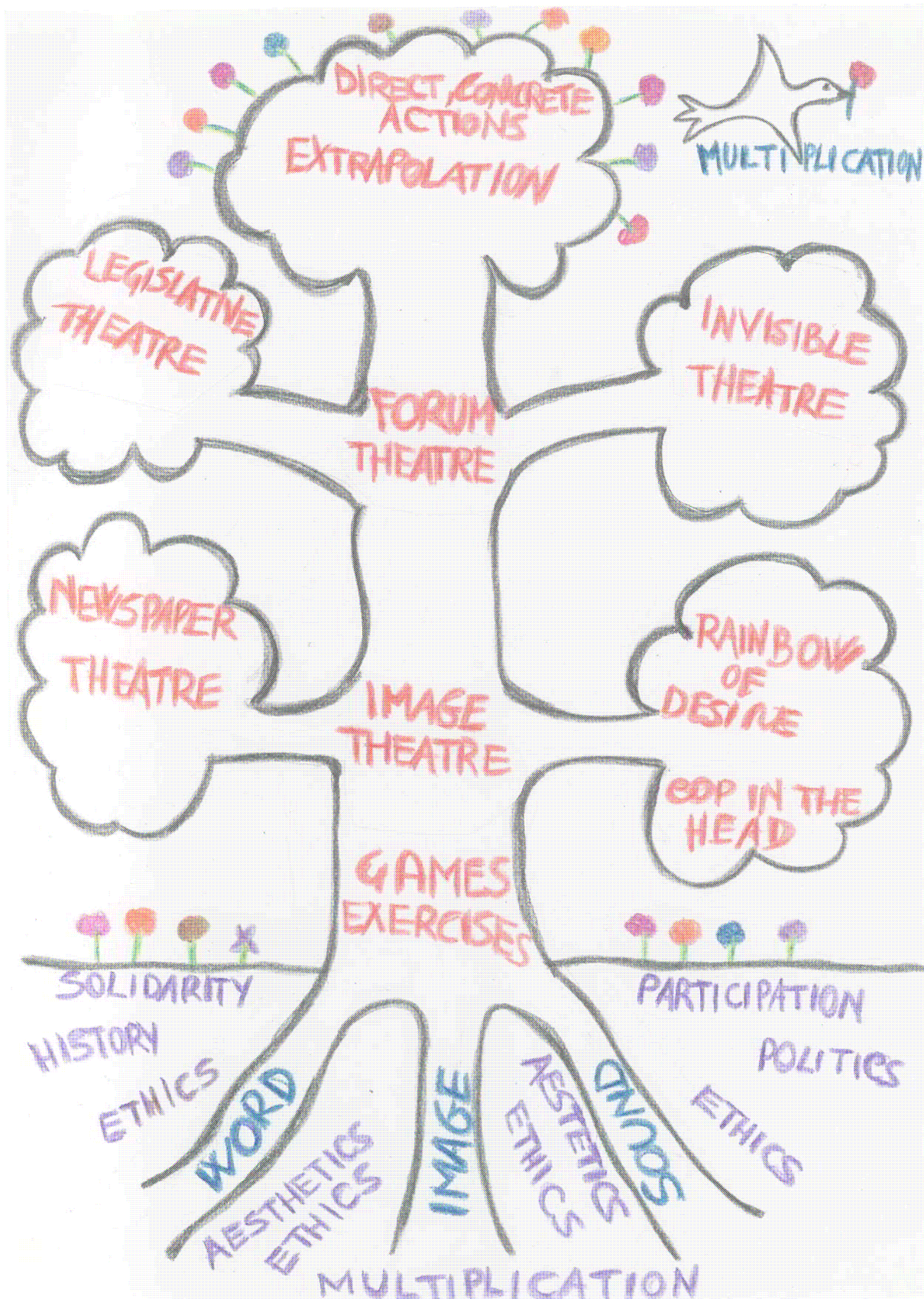
Boal chose the caju (cashew) tree because it can spread from its roots so that new caju trees spring up from other parts of the ground, still connected and yet independent of

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<sup>1</sup> To a major explanation of the theory of TO: Alessandra Gigli, Alessandro Tolomelli, Alessandro Zanchettin, *Il teatro dell'oppresso in educazione*, Roma, Carocci, 2008;

the mother tree. Boal has encouraged this multiplication of Theatre of the Oppressed by its millions of practitioners around the world.

### THE CAJOU TREE OF THE THEATRE OF OPPRESSED



## TECHNIQUES

- **GAMES and EXERCISES**

“The games deal with the expressivity of the body as emitter and receiver of messages. The games are a dialogue, they require an interlocutor. They are extroversion. The games aim to the creation of a space where there’s no judgement, where everybody can express him/her self and can experiment a change and explore relational dynamics. The exercises designate all physical, muscular movement, which help the doer to a better knowledge or recognition of his/her body, its relationship with other bodies, to gravity, to objects, space, its dimensions, volumes, speed, weights, the interrelationship of these different forces, and so on. The goal of the exercises is a better awareness of the body and its mechanisms. Each exercise is a “physical reflection” on oneself. A monologue, an introversion.”<sup>2</sup>

All our senses, our perception of reality, and our capacity of feeling and reasoning, tend to become mechanical by every day repetition. We tend to become less creative, accepting reality as it is, instead of transforming it.”

There are 5 categories of games and exercises, each one works on different aspects<sup>3</sup>:

- 1) feel what we touch : restructuring muscular relation
- 2) to listen to what we hear: creation of individual rhythm and of the group, working on the integration of different rhythms
- 3) to see what we look at: to pass from an inattentive “looking at” to seeing with attention to particulars, with a deeper and wider comprehension of the reality.
- 4) to stimulate all senses: with the elimination of the sight, we need to use all the other senses, exploring and expanding the potentialities.
- 5) The memory of senses: to work on the connection of emotion-memory-imagination

- **IMAGE-THEATRE**

Image Theatre is a series of Techniques that allow people to communicate through the use of body to create individual images and images of group. This kind of technique can be very useful to explore e promote awareness of exiting points of views, stereotypes, social and cultural frames. The language of images is analogical , not rational-analytical as that of the words. An image can have a lot of different meanings for different persons.

Passing from a single and individual image to a collective image can emerge a social vision about a problem, a critical question on a precise theme.

- **FORUM-THEATRE –**

The Forum Theatre presents a play that shows a situation of oppression. The forum doesn’t present a solution and ends with the defeat of the oppressed protagonist. The *spect-actors* are invited to replace this Protagonist, and act out - on stage and not from the audience - all possible solutions, ideas, strategies. The other actors improvise the reactions of their characters facing each new intervention, so as to allow an analysis of the possibilities of using those suggestions in real life. Forum Theatre is a collective rehearsal for reality.

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<sup>2</sup> Augusto Boal, Games for actors and non- actors, London, New York, Routledge, 2002, p.48

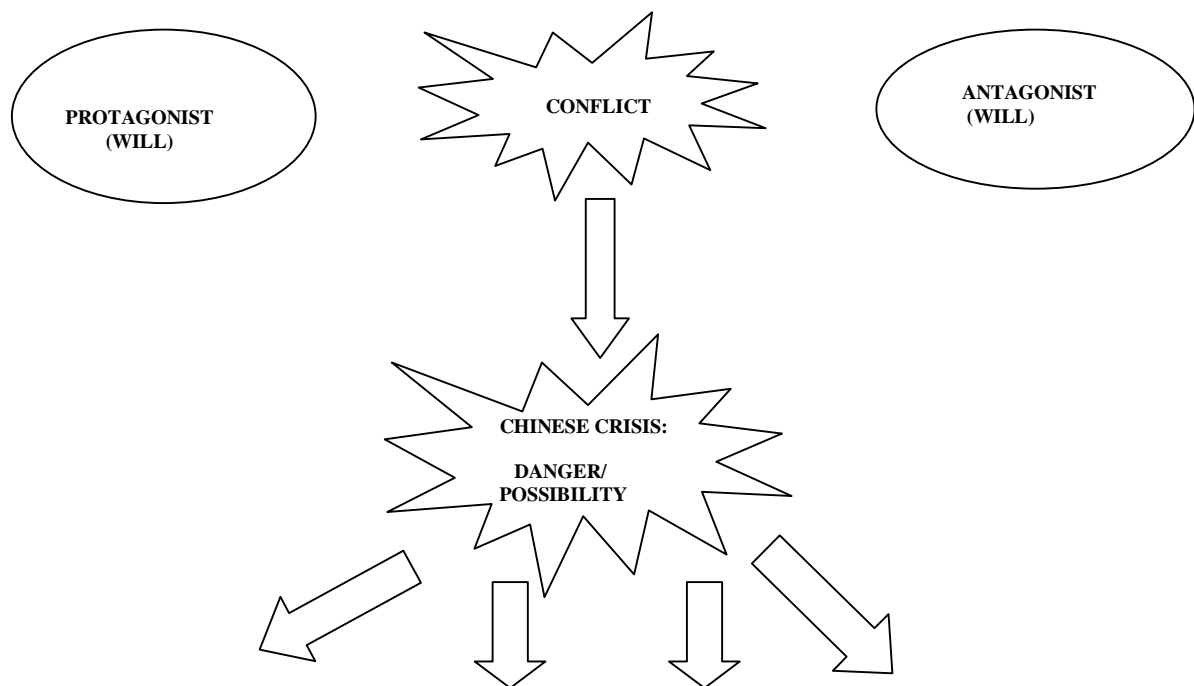
<sup>3</sup> To an exhaustive explanation of the games and exercise: Augusto Boal, Il poliziotto e la Maschera, Molfetta, La Meridiana, 1996; Augusto Boal, Games for actors and non-actors, London, New York, Routledge, 2002

The Forum Theatre structure is composed by: the conflict between the will, the desire, of the protagonist and antagonist, an escalation of the conflict, a crisis that in the Chinese ideogram means at the same time danger and opportunity, because the crisis opens the opportunity to the change and to different solutions of the conflict.

The conflict and the relation between the oppressor(s) and oppressed has to focus on and presents a socio-political error and the characters have to be created in a way that their ideology, vision of the world, of the reality, is clear and comprehensible for the spect-actors.

The Forum theatre is conducted by a Jolly, a person that guarantees the rules of the game. The Jolly is like a mediator between the actors/the scene and the spect-actors, doesn't give solutions, own interpretations of the replaces that the spect-actors propose.

#### STRUCTURE OF FORUM THEATRE'S MODEL<sup>4</sup>



DEFEAT of  
 The PROTAGONIST      ATLETRANITIVE 1    ALTERNATIVE 2      ALTTERNATIVE 3

The forum theatre breaks with a traditional form of theatre where there is a strong division of roles and spaces: the space occupied by the actors and the audience.

The audience usually can only identify in a character, in a passive way, in the forum theatre people has the chance to became active in the search of possibilities of social transformation.

The entire system of TO, and the Forum Theatre technique in particular, permits 3 process: the osmosis, in the sense of a transitive dialogue between the actors and spect-

<sup>4</sup> Alessandra Gigli, Alessandro Tolomelli, Alessandro Zanchettin, Il teatro dell'oppresso in educazione, Roma, Carocci, 2008, p. 66

actors; the metaxis, in the sense of belonging at the same time to two worlds, that of the reality (presented by the actors) and the image of the reality created by her/his theatrical intervention; the analogical induction, in the sense of the transformation of an individual story, vision, in a plural one, that all the participants can comprehend and analyse giving to the oppressed different points of views.

### **NEWSPAPER THEATRE -**

Is a system of different techniques aiming to create a theatrical scene using a piece of news from a newspaper, or from any other written material, like reports of a political meeting, from the Constitution of a country, etc. to reveal the manipulation of the media, to foster a critical thinking about how the media presents news, facts.

### **INVISIBLE THEATRE -**

Is a direct intervention in society, on a precise theme of general interest, to provoke debate and to clarify the problem.

Is a play (not a mere improvisation) that is played in a public space without reveal anyone that it is a piece of theatre, previously rehearsed. The spect-actors become a part of the theatrical action without knowing that is a theatrical action.

**LEGISLATIVE THEATRE** - The Legislative Theatre was created and developed by Augusto Boal, as councilman in the city of the Rio de Janeiro, and the Centre of Theatre of The Oppressed between 1993 and 1996.

This technique aims at transforming the citizens legitimate desires into Laws.

Usually a Legislative Theatre action consist of different phases: creation of laboratories of TO in different popular areas of the city to foster the emersion of existing oppressions in the population; creation and presentation of sessions of Forum Theatre to stimulate in the citizens the search of solutions for those problems; elaboration of a project of law to be present in the Parliament; creation of a simulation of the legislative assembly where the project of law created trough the forum has been presented and discussed. In this simulation the spect - actors can intervене defending, or refusing, voting etc.

### **RAINBOW OF DESIRE**

This technique was developed by Boal when he came in Europe, where he discovered an other kind of oppression: individual, psychological. To describe this kind of oppression he use the expression: Cop in the head.

Te Rainbow of Desire technique uses different Techniques (image and forum theatre, but also games and exercises more focused on this purpose) which help to visualize theatrically the oppressions, and deal with them more clearly: there isn't an interpretation, but a multiplication of the visions offered by the participants.

### **AESTHETIC EDUCATION OF THE OPPRESSED**

Boal says that "It is not necessary to be a Poet to write a poem, but whoever writes a poem becomes a Poet. S/he who transforms reality is transformed by the very action of transforming."

This technique aims at developing all aesthetic capabilities of citizens, expanding the possibilities of expression in painting, sculpture, music and poetry that have been limited by the authoritarian societies in which we live.

The objective is not teach how to do it, but rather try to help the oppressed to discover or invent how s/he wants to do it, with her/his own ways and purposes.

It is composed of: WORD (Poem, Stories); IMAGE (Sculpture, using clean garbage; painting); SOUND (Creation of music with objects related to the lives of the participants).

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