

Forum Kritika: Performance and Domination

## A DOG'S OBEYED IN OFFICE: BEYOND THE BOALIAN BINARY

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### Abstract

This essay explores some of the contradictions and paradoxes in the relation between performance and domination. In particular, it offers a consideration of some ways in which Applied Theatre succumbs to the dominant, despite its rhetoric of resistance, and how it might be co-opted afresh into the service of social and political transformation. The essay follows Paulo Freire's dialectical method of "denouncing" and "announcing" in order to pursue its own utopia of performance strategies that might take us beyond the neoliberal impasse. The conceptual framework for these explorations is the classical Marxist analysis of dialectical materialism, revisited in order to supply a critique of current practices of domination. The core of the essay invites a reconsideration of Augusto Boal's binary of "oppressed" and "oppressor" in order that an adaptation of Forum Theatre can be used to invite office-holders, traditionally where the oppressors are located, to examine their relationship to the bankrupt system they serve. To assist this process, the author argues that facilitators of theatre workshops need to reinvent the ancient arts of the fool so that their working space becomes a place where truth can be told to power without resort to the unreal separation of self from other. Instead, a dialogical relationship between self and other is proposed as a means of taking us beyond the bourgeois binaries of good and bad people into an analysis of our own roles within the systems we purport to excoriate. Whilst the essay constitutes a plea for applied theatre to apply itself to those who have made the world and who might be in a position to change it, it recognizes simultaneously the requirement incumbent upon each one of us to enter into a dialectical relationship with our foolish other.

### Keywords

Applied Theatre, dialectical materialism, domination, fool, Forum Theatre, neoliberalism, resistance, social and political transformation

**About the Author**

Tim Prentki is Professor of Theatre for Development at the University of Winchester where he ran the MA in Theatre and Media as Development for many years. He is co-author of *Popular Theatre in Political Culture* (Intellect), co-editor of *The Applied Theatre Reader* (Routledge) and, most recently author of *The Fool in European Theatre* (Palgrave). He is a member of the editorial board of *Research in Drama Education* and of the *Review & Advisory board of Applied Theatre Research*. Prentki has conducted training workshops and given conference papers in many parts of the world over the past twenty years. He has just been commissioned as author/editor of the volume, *Development*, for the forthcoming Methuen series, Applied Theatre.

## Introduction: From Binaries to Dialectics

This article is an exploration of some of the contradictions and paradoxes in the relation between performance and domination. In particular it offers a consideration of some ways in which Applied Theatre succumbs to the dominant despite its rhetoric of resistance and how it might be co-opted into the service of social and political transformation. The article will follow Paulo Freire's dialectical method of "denouncing" and "announcing" in order to pursue its own utopia of performance strategies that might take us beyond the neoliberal impasse. The conceptual framework for these explorations is the classical Marxist analysis of dialectical materialism, revisited in order to supply a critique of current practices of domination. By domination I understand the ubiquitous hegemony of the ideas and aspirations of the ruling class, following Marx's dictum in *The German Ideology* that "the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class" (236).

## Dogs in Office

LEAR: Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar?

GLOUCESTER: Ay, sir.

LEAR: And the creature run from the cur?

There thou mightst behold the great image of authority:  
a dog's obey'd in office.

Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand.

Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thy own back;

Thou hotly lusts to use her in that kind

For which thou whip'st her. The usurer hangs the cozener.

Through tatter'd clothes small vices do appear;

Robes and furr'd gowns hide all. (*King Lear* 4.6.155-65)

An office, that is a social function, bestows power upon the holder. Even a dog is worth more than a person if it has had a function bestowed upon it. All regimes organise themselves according to the functions of the people who have to live within their compass, be they feudal, capitalist or communist. In *King Lear*, Shakespeare charts the longest journey possible between function and beggary, between being and nothingness. Lear goes from being the supreme functionary, the monarch in a feudal state, to a functionless existence:

FOOL: now thou art an O without a figure.

I am better than thou art now:

I am a fool, thou art nothing. (*King Lear* 1.4.192-94)

It is, however, only as a result of stripping himself of his function that he begins the painful process of discovering who he is and what it is to be human in a world governed by function:

LEAR: Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,  
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,  
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you  
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en  
Too little care of this! (*King Lear* 3.4.28-33)

Neoliberal capitalism with its grotesque and accelerating inequalities has, like Lear as king, taken too little care of the misery which its functionaries and institutions have visited upon the hapless majority of the world's people. However, the more extreme its ravages, the more obvious its major contradiction becomes and the more difficult it becomes to negate its negation. The current phase of austerity, the strategy devised to accelerate the transfer of wealth from the poor to the wealthy under the guise of financial responsibility, has resulted in the bulk of the population being unable to fulfill its designated role as consumers and thereby fuel the economic growth which would bring further profits to the captains of industry and their acolytes among the political class. This phase of capitalism has its own demise built in but the contradiction is constantly mitigated by those with a vested interest in holding on to power, whose ideas are constantly trumpeted by their paymasters who control the organs of the mass media which strive to plant false consciousness.

Polish philosopher, Leszek Kolakowski, analyzed the way in which the dominant holds on to power as a type of anti-Utopia in a continual state of denial of the reality of change:

The Right, as a conservative force, needs no utopia; its essence is the affirmation of existing conditions—a fact and not a utopia—or else the desire to revert to a state which was once an accomplished fact. The Right strives to idealize actual conditions, not to change them. What it needs is fraud not utopia. (Freire, *Cultural Action* 41)

When the thesis of capitalism was challenged in the twentieth century by its antithesis, communism, there was, for a period, the possibility that a new synthesis would emerge, based upon an equitable distribution of the wealth unleashed by the productive forces of capital. These hopes were swiftly dashed with the death of Lenin when Stalin outmaneuvered Trotsky to take control of the Politburo. State communism under the tyranny of the Party came to resemble capitalism's shadow system where any gains in material security for the general population came at

the cost of increasing alienation from any political or social processes, destined ultimately to lead to that system's demise. Without threat from its antithesis, the thesis entered a self-aggrandizing period of supposed global domination expressed in the vacuous but ideologically loaded phrase, "the end of history." History will only end when the last person has been wiped off the face of the earth; until then it will be made and remade from moment to moment since social relations are always unfinished and we are always in the process of becoming. In the words of Marx:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please, they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past. (Marx 300)

Any temporary state is always in the process of developing its own negation and its response to that negation in turn determines whether the antithesis is absorbed into the thesis or whether the required adaptation is great enough to produce a new synthesis out of the dialectical combination. The failure of state communism in the last quarter of the twentieth century does not signal the "end of history" nor does the temporary ascendancy of neoliberalism, born out of the fascist violence of Pinochet's military, on September 11th 1973 in Santiago, Chile, mean that the possibility of socialism contributing to a new synthesis has been extinguished. Not only are the current efforts of the dominant in the UK to shrink the state and emasculate the public sphere meeting a growing body of resistance at grassroots level, but those very efforts are also drawing attention to the contradiction at the heart of the neoliberal project whereby money ends up chasing itself in a fantastic spiral devoid of any relation to the production of goods and, ultimately, services. In *The Shock Doctrine* (2007) Naomi Klein charted the rise of neoliberal capitalism through the strategy of "disaster" which preceded the present shock of "austerity." Writing recently of New Yorkers' responses to the effects of Hurricane Sandy she offers readers a stark choice between ramping up the current contradiction or taking the first, tentative steps towards a synthesis that would take us beyond neoliberalism:

Either this crisis will become an opportunity for an evolutionary leap, a holistic readjustment of our relationship with the natural world. Or it will become an opportunity for the biggest disaster capitalism free-for-all in human history, leaving the world even more brutally cleaved between winners and losers. (Klein 6-7).



## A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum

Across the world today, far and away the most popular performance form intended to offer strategies for resisting the domination is Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre. Many theatre companies are devoted solely to its practice and the guidelines and possibilities articulated by Boal:

Forum Theatre consists, in essence, of proposing to a group of spectators, after a first improvisation of a scene, that they replace the protagonist and try to improvise variations on his [*sic*] actions. The real protagonist should, ultimately, improvise the variation that has motivated him the most. (*Rainbow* 184)

Notwithstanding the ambiguities surrounding the identity of the protagonist (is this the person to whom the experience has actually happened, the actor who plays the protagonist in the first instance—in which case, what is the meaning of “real?”—or the spect-actor who made the initial intervention?), these specialist Forum groups have formulated their practices according to so-called rules of Forum Theatre and zealously evangelized for their prescriptive method. Consequently the protagonist in any given circumstance must be the “oppressed” person and only the oppressed person can be replaced in the scene. In other words, the possibility of bringing about social or political change rests solely in the words and actions, mind and body, of the victim of oppression. Inadvertently, out of a desire to turn educational theory into performance practice, Boal was responsible for the creation of a binary which fixed social relations, at odds with the dialectical analyses of his pedagogical mentor, Paulo Freire, who constantly stressed the fluid and unfinished nature of human consciousness: “It is our awareness of being unfinished that makes us educable” (*Pedagogy* 58). Freire's core concept of “conscientization,” the raising of critical consciousness as a prelude to social intervention, does not in itself run counter to the discourses of Forum Theatre but in practice the Forum method tends towards the search for solutions to immediate problems divorced from wider political contexts, rather than a profound transformation in the processing of the deep structures by which we live:

In truth, conscientization is a requirement of our human condition. It is one of the roads we have to follow if we are to deepen our awareness of our world, of facts, of events, of the demands of human consciousness to develop our capacity for epistemological curiosity. (*Pedagogy* 55)

This curiosity, transposed to the theatrical space, may indeed provide the spur to rehearse the revolution or it may inaugurate new ways of seeing to take us beyond the closed circle of revolution and counter-revolution.

Identifying the dialectical relationship of oppressor to oppressed not only avoids setting up a binary system, it also minimizes the tendency of Forum Theatre to locate responsibility for social change solely with those who are the victims of oppressive situations. In the now rigidly orthodox version of Forum Theatre the oppressors escape this responsibility since they are not permitted to change. As antagonists, their positions are as fixed as the characters upon a page of scripted drama. As Boal himself wrote, Forum Theatre is “perhaps the most democratic form of the Theatre of the Oppressed and certainly the best known and most practiced throughout the world” (*Aesthetic* 6). However, the democratic claims of Forum Theatre can often mask the manipulations that, in practice, pervert its intentions and, paradoxically, turn it into an instrument of domestication. Herein lies much of its appeal as the form of choice for many applied theatre practitioners and those who fund their activities. Typically, theatre is applied to a social “problem”: illiteracy, homelessness, drug addiction, domestic violence, etc. etc. The victims of these scars on the social landscape are given access to the theatre process in the hope that its use will somehow alter their situation, their attitudes or their behavior and the efficacy of applied theatre projects is measured in terms of social outcomes. Have instances of teenage pregnancy declined? Are fewer prisoners reoffending? Is knife crime decreasing? In other words, has the application of a dose of theatre caused these problems to lessen? Just as it is the oppressed who need Forum Theatre with the built-in assumption that the spect-actors are all members of a category of victims, so more generally applied theatre carries the assumption that it is society’s victims who will benefit from exposure to it. The process is mostly about behavior modification and the behavior to be modified is that of those who are causing society a problem. This is why, for example, most prison theatre companies are required to operate within the frameworks of cognitive behavioral therapy. In this way, performance becomes another tool of the dominant; a means of manipulating the dominated into adapting to the prevailing social norms. It is never the system or its beneficiaries which are at fault for the oppression (prison, school, parliamentary democracy, monetarism) but always those who willfully refuse to accept the system and adapt their desires to its requirements. Under the guise of resistance most applied theatre in reality becomes a performance of domination.

## Performing Counter-Hegemony

By looking back at a historical moment when a challenge to capitalist hegemony seemed possible we may find some clues to help with the construction of an aesthetic for countering the ubiquitous hegemony of the dominant. Such a process is a vital prerequisite for any performance which seeks to offer participants and audiences an experience of resistance through the awakening or sharpening of critical consciousness. The ways in which satellite technology has enabled mass-media organizations to present each of us with a picture of the world through the

lens of “breaking news,” have resulted in an information overload, often at the expense of knowledge, and an alienation from historical roots that threatens the formation of a coherent sense of identity. These hegemonic forces leave no space for reflection upon the causes of events or on the complex relations between seemingly fragmented, separate occurrences. Before such reflection can take place these events and the language in which they are routinely described need to be rendered unfamiliar so that we consider them with a critical curiosity. For instance, why is it inevitable that modern economies must produce widespread unemployment? Why is the free movement of people around the world destabilizing for nation states and their economies but free movement of capital with the flick of a switch is not?

When Brecht sought to raise curiosity or critical consciousness about the workings of capitalism he set about developing an aesthetic of “defamiliarization” that had at its core the intention to show audiences the historical processes by which “stuff happens” while at the same instant opening up the possibility of alternative ways in which things could have or might still happen:

To transform himself [*sic.*] from general passive acceptance to a corresponding state of suspicious inquiry he would need to develop that detached eye with which the great Galileo observed a swinging chandelier. He was amazed by this pendulum motion, as if he had not expected it and could not understand its occurring, and this enabled him to come on the rules by which it was governed. Here is the outlook, disconcerting but fruitful, which the theatre must provoke with its representations of human social life. It must amaze its public, and this can be achieved by a technique of alienating the familiar. (Willett 192)

Examples abound throughout Brecht’s dramaturgy of the application of *Verfremdungseffekte* to historical or fantastical narratives in order to show this dual process of happening one way as a result of a human decision whilst showing simultaneously that it could have happened a different way. Let one well-known example suffice. The event which launches all the consequences depicted in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is the rescuing of the abandoned royal baby by Grusha the servant girl. Being a parable, Brecht can offer us a story which is a sentimental, melodramatic cliché: the poor girl with the heart of gold who ignores personal danger in order to do the right thing. As an audience we want the empathetic feel-good, and Brecht can rely on such a story producing such an effect. Yet even as this effect is being generated, he also presents the scene in a way which requires us to consider it within the frame of its politico-historical consequences. The moment is announced through the Singer’s statement: “Terrible is the temptation to do good,” immediately alerting us to that process of inverting familiar morality so much loved by fools. Grusha then spends the whole night considering what to do about the child rather than acting with the impetuous instincts of the unthinkingly good



person, "Till towards morning the temptation grew too strong." The taking up of the baby is finally summed up by the Singer: "Like booty she took it for herself/ Like a thief she sneaked away" (Brecht 165). This is how Brecht's method works throughout the play. The story is presented with all the techniques designed to lure us into an emotional involvement in the incidents while still managing to historicize them in a way which requires a reflection upon the dialectic of human agency and historical contingency.

Freire alludes to a parallel process in his pedagogical theory to which he gives the term "codification." By means of codification the learner, Freire's equivalent of the actor in an applied theatre workshop, is enabled to form a critical relationship with her lived experience that sets that experience within the broader discourses of both history and contemporary politics:

Codification, on the one hand, mediates between the concrete and theoretical contexts (of reality). On the other hand, as knowable object, it mediates between the knowing subjects, educators and learners, who seek in dialogue to unveil the "action-object wholes." (*Cultural Action* 32)

It is the process of codification, whether in classroom or theatre workshop, which opens up the space in which critical consciousness can flourish. The torrent of images and words which daily swirl around us in the digital eddies and flows of hegemonized breaking news are held still long enough for us to see and hear in a different way; long enough for us to ask why and could it be otherwise? A key element in this slowing down is the opportunity to explore the relationships between objects; the reality beneath the surface:

By understanding the codification's "deep structure" the learner can then understand the dialectic which exists between the categories presented in the "surface structure," as well as the unity between the "surface" and "deep" structures. (*Cultural Action* 33)

For performance forms trying to resist incorporation by the dominant, it is essential that they build counter-hegemonic aesthetics into their processes. Only through an analysis of "deep structures" can the operations of the dominant be laid bare as with the device of the split character Shen Te/Shui Ta who reveals the contradiction between economics and morality in Brecht's play *The Good Person of Szechuan*. Boal was equally aware of this aesthetic imperative but may have underestimated how much he could have taken from Brecht: "The first problem to be solved consists in the presentation within the same performance, both of the play and its analysis" (*Theatre* 174). Boal developed his Joker system as the means by which this analysis might be undertaken:

It should be noted that the possibility of great variation in form is offered by the simple presence within the system of two completely opposite functions: the protagonic function, which is the most concrete reality, and the "Joker" function, which is the universalizing abstraction of the other. (*Theatre* 177)

Here again the tendency towards binary positions constrains the later practice of Forum Theatre. If the protagonist (the "oppressed") is bound into the concrete frame of the presentation, the antagonist (the "oppressor") unable to alter her position, is doubly fixed into an unassailable reality that guarantees the maintenance of the dominant. The performers and the Joker are set into different planes of reality so that performance and analysis are separated rather than one being produced dialectically from the other. Although Schechter makes the vital connection between Boal's Joker and the aesthetics of Brecht's Epic Theatre: "The Joker is less a conventional clown than a Brechtian epic actor," over the years this separation has allowed the Joker in practice to be little more than a glorified master of ceremonies rather than the source of critical, counter-hegemonic perspective on the action (Schechter 162). As I've shown at greater length in my monograph *The Fool in European Theatre* (Prentki, 2012: Chapter 10), Boal's Joker takes her place in a long line, both within and beyond the theatre, of tricksters and fools whose function has always been to speak truth to power and, when power refuses to listen, truth about power. Dario Fo's whole career has been devoted to tracing the historical origins of these figures and then exploiting their methods in order to make interventions into the contemporary political discourse (Prentki, 2012: Ch. 8). Today he can watch his process bear fruit in the likeness of Beppe Grillo, the *jongleur* who deconstructs the repressive barrier between art and politics:

He is from the tradition of wise storyteller, one who knows how to use surreal fantasy, who can turn situations around, who has the right word for the right moment, who can transfix people when he speaks, even in the rain and the snow. (Klington 27)

The fool is simultaneously of the stage action and of the world of the audience, opening up the fissures between imagination and reality so that each may be exposed to a critical, dialectical scrutiny via the wide-eyed curiosity of the fool. At her best Boal's Joker can operate in this way if she offers a critical challenge to spect-actors and does not merely organize and accept every intervention proposed from the audience in a spirit of democratic but uncritical participation. But if the Joker abides by the "rules" of Forum Theatre, she cannot engage with the contradictions and paradoxes which inhabit the world of the oppressor. That area of the performance is locked safely away from the possibility of change, protected by the hegemony of the dominant.

## Who Let the Dogs Out?

The possibility of using performance as a means by which the dominant are provoked to explore the contradictions inherent in their social positions would come much closer if real education, as opposed to training, became a universal right. As part of such an education the theatre offers infinite opportunities for discovering the dialectical relationships between self and other at the heart of any attempt to build a just society; in the words of Freire: “. . . to teach is *not to transfer knowledge* but to create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge” (*Pedagogy* 30). As he makes clear, this process of knowledge construction is deeply embedded in ideology, thereby making it essential that any performance strategy that allies itself to resistance to the dominant avails itself of all available counter-hegemonic tools:

It is my belief that today the progressive kind of teacher needs to watch out as never before for the clever uses of dominant ideology of our time, especially its insidious capacity for spreading the idea that it is possible for education to be neutral. ( *Pedagogy* 89-90)

Freire's pedagogy is not a relic of the twentieth century but a live conceptual framework for realizing the potential of drama and theatre to reinvigorate the curriculum as is demonstrated by the recent DICE project; an EU funded two year research program into the effects of educational drama. Its “pedagogical credo” might have been taken straight from Freire:

. . . the pupils become actively engaged in exploratory investigation of moral, social or curriculum contents and what it means to be human in a contemporary world. In this way they become enabled and empowered active and thinking citizens. (13)

Having established the positive effects of educational drama and theatre upon five of the eight of the Lisbon Key Competencies,<sup>1</sup> the research team found that they needed to add a sixth of their own, hence the notion of the dice. Number six was labeled “All this and more,” described as follows:

The No6 on our DICE incorporates the first five but adds a new dimension because educational theatre and drama is fundamentally concerned with the universal competence of what it is to be human. An increasing concern about the coherence of our society and developing democratic citizenship requires a moral compass by which to locate ourselves and each other in the world and to begin to re-evaluate and create new values; to imagine, envisage, a society

worth living in, and living with a better sense of where we are going with deep convictions about what kind of people we want to be. (19)

Those who have worked in TIE over the past forty years will easily recognize these aspirations but may be forgiven for feeling that they are even further away from being realized than when they were first articulated. We hold these truths to be self-evident but how are they to be made manifest to a world beyond our own circle of discourse? The gap between Michael Gove, current Minister of Education in the UK Conservative Government, and the first recommendation of the DICE report is an ever widening chasm, each side spinning off into different centuries as the former takes flight back to the nineteenth while the contemporary research looks forward more in hope than expectation to a new educational covenant for the twenty-first:

The school system: All children should have regular access to educational theatre and drama in their schooling, mandated throughout the national curriculum, and taught by well-trained theatre and drama specialists. (8)

If the benefits deriving from this recommendation are obvious and have been known for so long, what are the obstacles to its implementation? Among the “existing obstructive factors” listed by the report are “low motivation of decision-makers,” “low motivation of teachers” and “municipalities not taking drama seriously” (*DICE* 89). In other words, unless a way is found to work with the powerful, the “oppressors,” and to engage them in the dialectics of experiential learning so that they too become part “of what it is to be human,” no amount of research will make the slightest difference to what is done to our young people in the years ahead. For performance to cease being the pawn of domination, access to the wellsprings of humanity must be open to all, especially to the dogs who need to be separated from their office.

## The Fool in the Shadows

Towards the end of Edward Bond's play in which he reworks King Lear, Lear comes to understand the futility, cruelty and injustice of building walls that separate us from our fellows:

What can I do? I left my prison, pulled it down, broke the key, and still I'm a prisoner. I hit my head against a wall all the time. There's a wall everywhere. I'm buried alive in a wall. Does this suffering and misery last for ever? Do we work to build ruins, waste all these lives to make a desert no one could live in? There's no one to explain it to me, no one I can go to for justice. I'm old, I

should know how to live by now, but I know nothing, I can do nothing, I am nothing. (80)

Yet shortly after this dark night of his soul, Lear goes to the wall he was instrumental in building, pickaxe in hand, and begins to demolish it until he is shot dead. Perhaps our efforts, too, are destined to be in vain, but is that any reason not to try to smash the binary separating oppressed from oppressor? Though Lear's action is probably futile, the commitment of his last moments of life to it is evidence that he is properly alive; by Freire's definition, "educable."

In Shakespeare's version, the task of separating the man from the office falls to the Fool, "Lear's shadow," and when it is complete with the office of king in ruins, Lear has absorbed the lessons of foolishness completely. His ascent to humanity is signaled by his taking over of the function of the Fool who "goes to bed at noon" that moment when no shadows are cast. By now Lear has embraced his own shadow; in time to understand the dangers of office but too late to make a better world. Whilst this article constitutes a plea for applied theatre to apply itself to those who have made the world and who might be in a position to change it, it recognizes simultaneously the requirement incumbent upon each one of us to enter into a dialectical relationship with our foolish other.



## Notes

1. "Key competences in the shape of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to each context are fundamental for each individual in a knowledge-based society. They provide added value for the labour market, social cohesion and active citizenship by offering flexibility and adaptability, satisfaction and motivation. Because they should be acquired by everyone, this Recommendation proposes a reference tool for the Member States to ensure that these key competences are fully integrated into their strategies and infrastructures, particularly in the context of lifelong learning." (Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council, of 18 December 2006 [Official Journal L 394 of 30.12.2006])

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