

## **The Power of Play: Community Theatre, Solidarity, and Fighting Oppression**

**Article by Celia Fernández, Péter Tasnádi-Sáhy**

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A disciple of Theatre of the Oppressed founder Augusto Boal, Hungarian theatre director and doctoral student Péter Tasnádi-Sáhy has worked extensively with Ukrainian refugees on forum theatre projects. Interviewed by Celia Fernández, Tasnádi-Sáhy speaks about the use of theatre to bring people together, to (re)learn how to play, to devise creative solutions to daunting systemic abuses, and ultimately to see the Other in ourselves.

### **Celia Fernández: What does a play based on the Theatre of the Oppressed consist of?**

**Péter Tasnádi-Sáhy:** The Theatre of the Oppressed doesn't tend to involve professional actors. Instead, it brings together groups of ordinary people who have experienced oppression to try to better understand their situations. They develop a whole play – or even just a scene – on that conflict and perform it in front of an audience. Unlike in traditional theatre, there isn't usually a moment of catharsis when the story is resolved. We just set out the situation. What is the problem? Who are the participants? Which forces are acting against each other? And which people are without agency in this situation?

Once the performance is over, we ask the audience to offer solutions. They can then go on stage and help us to replay the situation, integrating their suggestions to see if they work. This process raises further questions and issues. It's a great opportunity for participants to have a shared experience and to think and develop solutions together.

What is special about forum theatre – in fact, about community theatre in general – is that it allows people to experience what it means to be involved in conflict, to be conscious of the situation, to think about it, and to be active. It empowers activism.

*Community theatre empowers activism.*

### **How would you describe the concept of the Theatre of the Oppressed?**

The approach was developed by Augusto Boal (1931-2009), a Brazilian Marxist playwright, theatre director, and political activist who was drawn to Brechtian theatre. Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), also a Marxist, was a visionary German playwright and director who wanted to make theatre *for* people and *by* people.

In classical theatre, someone decides what will be performed, how, and by whom. Certain people are allowed to act, while the others can only watch. Both Brecht and Boal found this situation problematic. Why should someone decide who has the right to act and who has the right to watch? The basic idea underpinning Augusto Boal's approach was that people should not be divided; to overcome this duality, he developed the term "spect-actors" for the audience at his events. He said we should use theatre as a forum for shared experiences focusing on situations of oppression and to come up with strategies to fight

this oppression.

Because what is oppression? It is a situation in which a person or a group of people is without agency because they are either prevented from acting or led to believe they are unable to do so by unjust systems. Boal developed the Theatre of the Oppressed to address this form of disempowerment – although he always emphasised he didn't invent the approach but rather brought it together out of preexisting elements.

### **How did you first encounter this method?**

I work in state-financed theatre, but in Oradea [a city in north-west Romania close to the Hungarian border], where I live, I got involved with an organisation that uses theatre in education projects. While looking for ideas on how to work with young people, I stumbled across this method in the library. The more I learned, the more I wanted to know. Shortly afterwards, I had the opportunity to participate in a workshop in Gothenburg organised by the Swedish Forum Theatre Association (FTS) and the University of Gothenburg. It was run by Geo Britto, who was a close colleague of Boal for many years. After Boal's death, Britto became one of the movement's key figures together with Julian Boal, Augusto's son.

This was a formative experience for me. As a theatre director, I already knew how to make theatre: how to build up a scene or how to represent the structure of conflict on stage. But with Geo, I actually understood what this is about, which is having an experience together. If you sit around a table and try to discuss a problem, it will remain a discussion. You can say, "We should do this" or "Oh no, we should do that". But if you build up a structure in which you have the opportunity to experience the situation, you can actually be there.

### **How does this help people embedded in situations of oppression?**

I work with refugees from Ukraine. Many of them come from Mariupol [which was largely destroyed during the Russian siege of spring 2022]. They are in shock, and as people in a situation of oppression, they don't see the structures behind it. Instead, all they see is mess and chaos and the aggression targeted at them. But because they don't see the structures, they struggle to cope with this injustice.

*Theatre is the art of being human, and everyone should have the right to be a conscious actor in society, with control over their actions.*

The focus of my current project is helping refugees find work. Many of them feel unable to get a job, mainly because of the language barrier. Of course, if you want to teach Hungarian literature, it's a real problem, but if you want to be a waiter or a nurse, you only need to know 150 to 500 words and a little grammar. The workshops help them see that if they divide a problem into smaller tasks, it's easier to address. We do scenes where they, for example, act out being interviewed or interviewing others. By doing this, they see that they are capable of participating in a job interview. In the end, this is what we all do in interviews: we perform.

Professional actors are conscious of this duality. They play with the distance between themselves sitting on the toilet or having breakfast in the morning and playing Lady Macbeth in the afternoon. And they can deal with it. When people have experience of performance, they are familiar with this duality and can understand that as human beings we are an abstraction, our personalities are a construction that can be

reconfigured, so we can change.

**When did you first become interested in mixing art and social justice in your work? What came first?**

Theatre came first. But theatre practitioners are very familiar with the feeling of loneliness that comes after a show. The audience leaves, and you're alone. It's also depressing because you often feel like there was a show, but nothing came out of it. There is still a great distance between the actors and the spectators.

For me, the watershed moment came during the workshop in Sweden. I was an actor on display, but after the play, this distance disappeared. The people who had come to watch the show became the actors, and we started to discuss play and performance. Everybody stood there for hours discussing and opening up to each other. It was one of the most important community experiences in my life.

In Eastern Europe, where I live and where I gained most of my acting experience, there is the saying that "theatre is not a democracy". But that doesn't have to be true. Why can't theatre be a democracy?

Augusto Boal said that everyone is an actor. By that, he didn't mean that everyone is a professional who is conscious of their body or their actions, but that everyone has the right to learn. Acting is about being human; theatre is the art of being human. Everyone should have the right to be a conscious actor in society, with control over their actions.

**Should art be political then?**

I don't think art or theatre should be used to spread propaganda. But I do think art has to be political, because politics means dealing with the issues that matter to us all.

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**What can political institutions learn from forum theatre?**

Interestingly, Augusto Boal also developed what he called "legislative theatre". He served on the Rio de Janeiro city council [from 1992 to 1996], and he was interested in how the tools that theatre offers could be used in the making of legislation. He was also keen to get more people involved – with theatre, in decision-making, in the making of the laws that would control their lives.

Art has a lot to do with play. Decision-makers and institutions are often inflexible; they have very strict power structures, within which there is only one way of doing things. Play, which I think is essential in all forms of art, helps you to see that there are many, many ways of dealing with a given situation.

Why do children play? To connect to the world; to connect to events. They say: "What if I do this? What if I'm the king? What if I'm the queen? What if I'm a cowboy?" They know it's play, but somehow they are connecting to these various possibilities. I think this is at the very root of human nature. This open-mindedness is what art can bring.

**Could it also be a tool to build solidarity across Europe?**

In state-financed theatre, the stage director will tell you what – and how – to perform. There is no solidarity in it. But community art and community theatre always increase solidarity, because if you create a scene together with someone, you truly see the other struggling human being beside you. You can put yourself in the place of the Other very easily. Community art, and theatre in particular, really facilitates this type of experience.

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Celia Fernández is PR and outreach associate at the Green European Foundation. She studied international relations, translation, and journalism and has written for various Spanish media outlets, including *El País*.



Tasnádi-Sáhy Péter is a Hungarian theatre director. As the leader of many forum theatre projects, he gained experience in working with Ukrainian refugees. He is a student at the Doctoral School of Theatre and Film, UBB.

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