

Theatre of the Oppressed and Teatro de Arena: In and Out of Context¹

David S. George

The winds of democracy have recently swept through Latin America's Southern Cone. Redemocratization began in Brazil in the late 1970s while a military government was still in place, and was formalized with the establishment of a civilian government in 1984. Yet the impact of the democratic trend on Brazilian theatre has received scant attention by U.S. scholars. Most studies on Brazilian theatre focus on the period of military repression, especially the ten years following the 1964 coup, and deal preponderantly and uncritically with Augusto Boal, who gained notoriety after the coup through his involvement in engagé theatre and subsequently through theoretical works on "popular" modes and "theatre of the oppressed." I intend to demonstrate that his theories correspond not to Brazilian popular-folkloric culture, but to authoritarian populism, on the one hand, and to first-world sources, on the other.²

There is no question that the name Augusto Boal deserves conspicuous standing in the ranks of contributors to the Brazilian stage. He collaborated on two vital projects carried out by São Paulo's Teatro de Arena during its heyday from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s: the *Seminário de Dramaturgia*, which earned the company the sobriquet of home of the Brazilian playwright, and the production entitled *Arena Conta Zumbi*, one of the first theatrical responses to the 1964 coup.³ Boal's name would subsequently be associated with the theoretical writings he published in the 1970s, after the demise of Arena and his exile, in particular *Teatro do Oprimido e Outras Poéticas Políticas* and *Técnicas Latinoamericanas de Teatro Popular*. These books have engendered in the first world a staid critical tradition, as well as a network of social activists and psychotherapists who claim to practice "TO" or theatre of the oppressed. For two decades non-Brazilian scholars have taken these speculative—and sometimes practical—tracts entirely out of context and accepted them uncritically, never asking whether such systems as *coringa* can do what they claim and never examining their concrete results. The simple truth is that much of this theoretical

legacy, particularly as it pertains to Brazil, is a western academic fantasy that has spawned a glut of articles, book chapters, theses, and conference addresses; in short, a critical industry that puts out assembly-line repetition of clichés about "liberating" and "original" techniques, as well as the virtual canonization of Augusto Boal himself.⁴ This practice of taking hypothetical claims at face value and never subjecting them to careful scrutiny has inflated the significance of theatre of the oppressed and blinded scholars to blatant contradictions. Whereas Brazilian critics and theatre artists have long questioned these claims, their promotion elsewhere has shrouded the history of the Brazilian stage in myth. Furthermore, although these techniques may constitute useful tools for the "TO" network, they are essentially middle-class, first-world tools with dubious third-world connections and perpetuated via self-congratulatory accounts.

The problem begins when students of Latin American theatre take Manichean pronouncements about theatre of the oppressed at face value. The most cursory glance beneath the surface would reveal this: if the rationale of one system were applied to another, that other system would be cancelled. Texts and praxis, in other words, tend to deconstruct each other. The theoretical texts pontificate about popular theatre, bringing the people into the theatre, desanctifying the theatrical space, and breaking down the barriers between audience and performers. And yet virtually all of Augusto Boal's thirty five years worth of Brazilian productions—most recently *Phèdre* and *Corsário do Rei*—have been performed in the conventional manner for middle-class audiences.

A larger ideological problem is that critics who take "liberating" systems at face value fail to understand the degree to which those systems are paternalistic. In their self-appointed role as popular liberators through theatre, members of an alien social class would dictate to the people how theatre must be performed and how through it to view reality. One of the tenets of this school of engagé art is that workers and peasants need middle-class heroes to lead them to social enlightenment. The problem is, are these systems popular or are they populist? This question has been carefully examined by Roberto Reis. As he said in his 1991 MMLA address, in reference to Arena and theatre of the oppressed, among other phenomena,

Sabemos ainda que nem o operariado, e muito menos o povo, foi mobilizado por esta arte, que acabava sendo um sermão realizado para aqueles que já estavam catequisados ao credo populista. Porque, afinal, esta arte acabou sendo populista: falava-se pelas classes menos favorecidas, em nome delas e (supunha-se ou se queria acreditar) para elas. O resultado é que estamos diante de um discurso paternalista, não

raro autoritário e, agora percebemos com maior clareza, politicamente equivocado.⁵

Edelcio Mostaço goes even farther when he writes: "No Brasil, o populismo sempre fez ver a Revolução como um dia que virá, o sertão via virar mar, dez vidas eu tivesse dez vidas eu daria. Stalinista por formação, a esquerda sempre se mostrou autoritária, centralizadora. . . . O teatro do oprimido não deixa de pagar tributo às suas fontes de inspiração ideológica, sua *hybris* não dialetizada que o corrompe" ("Opressão" 28).

The fundamental paradox of populism is that it makes popular theatre deficient in the hands of the people: "Esta manifestación poético-teatral debe ser estimulada en sí misma y como camino para la creación de formas populares menos espontáneas y que necesiten más paciencia, dedicación y trabajo." (*Técnicas* 84). The term *artesanía* (*artesanato*, in Portuguese) is utilized for ideologically uncorrected popular art, which is viewed as static. Bakhtin (or a Bakhtian) would counter that the contrary is true, that Stalin in the Soviet Union and Stalinists elsewhere have always tried to tame popular and folk art, *artesanato*, which is by its very nature dynamic and carnivalesque. And there are myriad forms of folk and popular art and *artesanato* in Brazil. But that is a tale for another day. At any rate, *Técnicas* (211) lists only three popular Brazilian theatres: Teatro de Arena, Teatro Ruth Escobar, and Centros Populares de Cultura, all under the control of middle-class leaders.⁶ The greatest irony here is that not only are *formas populares espontáneas* earmarked for correction, they would be replaced with forms borrowed from 1960s US experimental theatre.

The latter point brings us to the question of theatre of the oppressed's innovation and originality, which are cloaked in nationalism and pan-Americanism. This need not be an issue, but it is emphasized at every turn in the writings on theatre of the oppressed. In fact, for every new system theorized a debt is owed to US and European sources:

I. *Coringa*: rarely in theatrical criticism has there been so much ado about nothing. The "joker," or *comodín* in Spanish, is an elaborate set of rules about staging that produced virtually no concrete results. One can attribute its success among academic critics to its theoretical convenience: just add ink and spread on page. The principles for *coringa* were extracted from Bertolt Brecht,⁷ in the wake of the 1965 *Arena Conta Zumbi*. The piece was a collective creation, co-authored by Gianfrancesco Guarnieri and Augusto Boal, directed by the latter, designed by the late Flávio Império, with music by Edu Lobo. Based on *Zumbi*'s success, the director devised the *coringa*, a wholesale borrowing from Brecht's Epic Theatre. The *coringa* was first applied to the 1967 *Arena Conta Tiradentes*, also co-authored by Boal and Guarnieri. If *Zumbi* was bold and innovative, *Tiradentes*

was an ungainly and tedious production. That is, as soon as the attempt was made to distill the essence of *Zumbi* and turn it into a rigid system, it failed. In separate interviews with two of the *Arena Conta* collaborators, Gianfrancesco Guarnieri and Flávio Império, they both expressed serious reservations about the *coringa* system. While Império dismissed it out of hand as a preposterous gimmick,⁸ Guarnieri saw financial advantages in multiple role playing but felt the system led inevitably to mediocre results. Theatre artists today simply ignore it. Antunes Filho:

O Coringa foi interessante na época, mas hoje em dia ninguém reconhece. Há vinte anos que nem se debate o assunto no Brasil. Trata-se de uma peça de museu. Na prática teatral, não importa que seja comercial ou mais experimental, o Coringa não existe. Na realidade, quando você me pergunta sobre isso, é como se estivesse falando da minha avó. Não sou nem a favor nem contra. (Interview)

It continues to amaze that academic critics have for two decades failed to comprehend the *coringa's* awkward attempt to turn the spontaneity of performance into the inflexibility of edict.

II. *Teatro invisível*: Although *Técnicas* issues categorical denials, invisible theatre belongs to a category of 1960s U.S. experiments known as "street theatre" and "guerrilla theatre." After explaining the theory and practice of invisible theatre, the reader encounters an irritated response to the suggestion that this form has its roots in the United States. In a demonological exorcism it is affirmed that Latin American popular theatre, "no tiene nada que ver con el teatro del imperialismo" (*Técnicas* 131). Suggestions of links with the U.S. are brushed off through exorcism of another demon: "El crítico (profesional o no) se maneja con hechos pasados, con técnicas ya conocidas, con formas ya descubiertas. Cuando se enfrenta a una nueva investigación siente la necesidad de referir lo nuevo a lo viejo, al contrario del artista (que es el que crea lo que antes no existía. . .)" (*Técnicas* 131). A Marxist critic might feel queazy seeing the artistic banner of bourgeois individualism fluttering in this context, but to set the record straight: during the 1960s and 1970s theatre artists in the United States embarked on a frenzied search for new forms, trying everything. Some experiments had names—"street works," "public works"—and many others no one ever bothered to classify or codify. Some were even more invisible than those discussed in *Técnicas*, for example a group of actors would case a bank for a hold-up, plan the robbery, infiltrate the bank, but stop short of carrying out the foul deed. This kind of experiment served as both a silent protest and "put-on" against the "establishment" and as a reality exercise for the actors. Finally, regarding

invisible theatre as a technique, the old tv program "Candid Camera" used it exclusively, only becoming visible at the end of each episode. Indeed, Boal did adapt invisible theatre for television in 1986, as he describes to Taussig and Schechner in the TDR interview. One could argue that *Técnicas* puts an ideological spin on street theatre more adapted to Latin American circumstances, although that was not the first attempt to make it popular. As John Lahr wrote in 1970:

When theater goes into the streets of America, its function and its tactic must change. . . . In the open, the theater leaves its own conventional environment—controlled safe, predictable—and faces what the world has created. That moment brings the insight—for to be valued as theater it must be true to the life experience of the people. . . . To acknowledge the people, instead of forgetting them, is to become political. The bourgeois conception of art has nothing to do with the life of a street. (*Fourth Wall* 35-36)

In retrospect one can question the efficacy and ethics of invisible theatre. As Décio Almeida Prado writes (119): "Brecht criticara o realismo por seu ilusionismo, por burlar os espectadores, dando-lhes a falsa impressão de realidade. Boal, partindo do brechtianismo, chega a um engano muito maior, quase a uma cilada. O seu teatro só é invisível para os que não estão dentro do segredo." Whether a consciousness-raising game is conducted in a restaurant in Perú or in a super market in Liège, Belgium, the exercise disrupts the labor of working people, waiters and check-out clerks, who are being manipulated, coerced into "audience participation," if not harassed, without their consent.

III. *Teatro do oprimido*: regarding various theatrical forms of community involvement—*teatro jornal*, *teatro-fotonovela*, *teatro-mito*, and so forth—"imperialist" models are heatedly denied. One case is indisputable: *Teatro jornal* is based on the U.S. depression-era Living Newspaper. That was Boal's immediate source. A more remote origin is elucidated in *Playing With Boal*: Jacob L. Moreno's use of this form in 1922 Vienna.⁹ More arguable prototypes are the Teatro Campesino and its involvement with the cause of Chicano farm workers; "The Free Southern Theatre, formed in Mississippi in 1963, aimed to reflect the cultural and historical experience of blacks. . ." (Shank 243); Enrique Vargas's Gut Theatre, which performed on the streets of East Harlem; The San Francisco Mime Troupe. The list could go on. All these groups turned street theatre into political propaganda and grass-roots community activism in the 1960s. Furthermore, the members of these troupes were not outsiders, quickly in and out, but belonged to the communities they worked with.¹⁰ A more recent

example of the "in and out" phenomenon is described by Boal's "She Made Her Brother Smile: A three-minute forum theatre experience" (*Playing*), in which he describes a workshop he conducted for street children in a Brasília stadium. After the brief workshop's conclusion, the children apparently returned to the street. There is no suggestion of follow-up work. There are individuals and organizations in Brazil working to improve the conditions—indeed to ensure the very survival—of these children. "She Made Her Brother Smile" merely gives the impression of a publicity stunt.

A final note on this matter: Teatro de Arena's principal rival for the title of revolutionary theatre, Teatro Oficina, conducted extensive street theatre and audience participation experiments in 1970, based on its short-lived—and painful—alliance with the Living Theatre. Oficina's director, José Celso, also put a populist spin on those techniques. One can only speculate on why Oficina's experiments and its revolutionary stagings do not appear in *Oprimido* or *Técnicas*. Institutional rivalry? Clash of egos between the two strongmen of Brazilian engagé theatre?

IV. *Audience participation*: Boal codifies several different participation modes, which become popular by means of desecrating the bourgeois concept of theatre with its sharp division between actors and audience. *Teatro-foro* is founded particularly on the notion of involving the audience in the theatrical event, "hacer *auto-actuar* al espectador. Esta auto-actividad es el objetivo esencial del teatro-foro y de todas las otras formas del teatro del opimido." (*Gestos* 169)

Based on their experiences with audience-participation experiments, including those with consciousness-raising goals, most theatre artists eventually reach the conclusion that it is an authoritarian practice. It is a manipulative system in which the actors, who always wield immense power, have control over the "means of production," in spite of the illusion of popular control. Artists in the U.S. who originated those forms of theatre gave them up precisely because they realized they were oppressing rather than liberating audiences.¹¹

As to the idea of profaning the *lugar sagrado* that is the traditional theatre space, this is true only when the director and his actors allow it. To repeat a previous observation, Boal has always maintained the sanctity of the theatre in his regular theatre productions, from the 1950s to the present time. Another point needs to be made here regarding the popular vs populist question: workers and peasants have never made the theatre a sacred space; it is not, in fact, a space in which they have any association. The bourgeoisie has made it a sacred space; the idea of profaning its sanctity is a bourgeois notion. Which of course explains why *teatro-foro* is so widely practiced in Europe and the US by and for middle-class audiences. Nor is it surprising that nearly all of the theatrical forms discussed in this article and touted as popular have their origin in the United States, since Boal

himself received his training in New York and has since maintained close ties there with the now defunct TOLA (Theatre of Latin America), with NYU, with TDR, and with some members of the "TO" network. Furthermore, most of Boal's professional life has been spent in France, not in Brazil, not in Latin America. In recent years Boal has severed the popular Latin American/Brazilian connection with forum theatre. As he stated in regard to his 1989 NYU workshops, "I don't mind working with middle-class people—I'm middle class myself. Why use theatre of the oppressed only with the poorest, the most miserable people[?] In Paris my group works with a feminist group, antiracist groups, a trade union, anti-drug organizations, immigrant groups, etc. Most of my group are middle class. I don't mind working in 'imperialist countries' like most of Europe and the U.S.—there are plenty of oppressed people in these places." ("Boal at NYU" 46) The principle Boal now applies to his current forum theatre exercises he refers to as the "cop in the head," or internalized oppression. In other words, for better or for worse, forum theatre now amounts to politically correct psychodrama (US/European style) for privileged groups (e.g., university students and professors) in the "imperialist" countries, who are offered this comforting illusion: all inequalities are equal. Middle-class Americans suffering from psychological inhibitions ("cop in the head") and third-world victims of socio-economic injustice now belong to the same category, they are all oppressed. Director Antunes Filho views the success of theatre of the oppressed in the first world in this way:

Teatro do oprimido é bom fora do Brasil, bom para Dinamarca, por exemplo. É uma questão de querer apadrinhar manifestações do terceiro mundo, sobre tudo manifestações pobres. Mas no Brasil não tem sentido. Aqui já se foi a época Stalinista quando pequenas elites orientavam de cima para baixo, acabou esse neo-positivismo. Nunca mais os fins vão justificar os meios. Porque, no final de contas, o que é que representa um fenômeno como o teatro invisível? Significa lesar a possibilidade de optar. Trata-se de uma falta de respeito pelo ser humano. O paternalismo e o autoritarismo da coisa são evidentes. Mas fora isso, eu, pessoalmente, não quero ser alvo de vigário, não quero ser paspalho. Quero participar, quero fazer o meu destino. (Interview)

The authors of *Playing Boal* are not unaware of the ideological contradictions inherent in first-world utilization of theatre of the oppressed:

We recognized that as a relatively young body of techniques moving from Latin America (where it originated and flourished) to North

America and Europe (where it is now experiencing its most rapid growth), TO's own culturally specific values were, and still are, colliding with those of other systems, people, movements; the techniques themselves had become the site of intercultural conflict. . . . What does the term "oppression"—galvanizing when used with north Brazilian peasants in a two-class totalitarian regime—signify for middle-class activists in a capitalists democracy? (8)

The answer, as outlined above, is that the techniques did not in fact originate in Brazil but in North America. Even the authors of the *Playing Boal* hint at this answer. Jan Cohen-Cruz, in her essay "Mainstream or Margin? US activist performance and Theatre of the Oppressed," describes the origins of activist theatre in the 1960s and 1970s and its continuation in the more difficult, conservative 1980s and 1990s. Whereas authors of other essays in the book appear to place all activist theatre and socially-oriented psychodrama under the umbrella of "TO," Cohen-Cruz maintains a degree of skepticism: "Although I am not aware of any company in the US that works solely with Boal's techniques, a number of individuals and groups have been influenced by TO." (120) A final word on *Playing Boal*: all the contributors, with the exception of Boal himself, are North American (Canadian and American) and European. Theatre of the oppressed, in other words, has returned to its roots. What Boal has invented is a term, theatre of the oppressed, borrowed from Paulo Freire's "pedagogy of the oppressed," and applied it to techniques with first-world origins. It is the term, with its third-world cachet, which has been appropriated by activists in the first world.

Academic scholars also embrace without second thought, in addition to the mythical origins of theatre of the oppressed, a distorted version of São Paulo theatrical history. Besides Boal, important figures from the period of the dictatorship are relatively unknown outside a narrow circle of Brazilianists.¹² Furthermore, the standard chronicle of one of Brazil's most significant theatrical companies from that period, Teatro de Arena, has conformed to the orthodox account which Augusto Boal originally put together in 1967, and which has subsequently appeared in such venues as the *Latin American Theatre Review*, such books as *Popular Theater for Social Change in Latin America*,¹³ and in *Teatro do Oprimido*, not to mention its 1979 English translation.¹⁴ The most recent and "innocent"—for the editors' lack of knowledge of and failure to consult sources on Brazilian theatre—version appears in the 1994 *Playing with Boal*:

Boal began developing the aesthetic philosophy that led to Theatre of the Oppressed while director of the Arena Theatre in São Paulo (1956-71). While most companies in Brazil in the 1950s modeled themselves on European theatre, Boal and his collaborators wanted to create a theatre founded on local rather than foreign experience and sensibilities. In the most innovative of Arena's stage of development, Boal and his collaborators created a new genre called the "joker system." (2)

The chronicle which appears in *Teatro do Oprimido*—which subsequent accounts parrot—divides Teatro de Arena into stages: "O seu desenvolvimento é feito por etapas que não se cristalizam nunca e que se sucedem no tempo, coordenada e necessariamente. A coordenação é artística e a necessidade é social" (*Teatro do Oprimido* 176). The first problem is that Arena's development was never thought out or planned and it only occasionally obeyed social criteria. On the contrary, the company's trajectory was based on constant improvisation and spontaneous reaction to external and internal circumstances. Second, careless readings of this chronicle have led to a conventional wisdom according to which Augusto Boal himself led Arena in each of these stages. Although minimal inquisitiveness or research would easily give the lie to conventional wisdom, a close reading of the Arena account in *Teatro do Oprimido* would call attention to the simple fact that the author uses *nós* and not *eu*. . . . (*Playing With Boal's* brief account does refer to Boal and "collaborators"). Another simple, inconvenient, and unacknowledged fact is that José Renato, Arena's founder, was its artistic director until 1962. But in a 1975 report on repression against Arena Boal writes, "I was the Artistic Director from 1956 to 1971." (*Estreio* 7). Boal's actual tenure as Arena's leader was 1962-1971. And there are other unfortunate omissions the *Teatro do Oprimido* chronicle of Arena.

Teatro de Arena's first three years (1953-1955) are barely mentioned, a period when founder José Renato's first use of the arena or theatre-in-the-round form in South America was considered revolutionary. But the chronicle begins the company's history in 1956, marking the first *etapa* which is described as "realist." But this is what goes unsaid: José Renato hired Boal, who was recommended by critic Sábado Magaldi, to help him with directing chores. Boal's debut, to be sure, was auspicious for his successful staging of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (*Ratos e Homens*). This production, with its utilization of the New York Actors' Studio Method, represented a new departure for Arena, but what is excluded is the fact that the director pulled it out of the cultural baggage he brought from New York, where he studied at Columbia University under the tutelage of John Gassner. (Denial of "imperialist" influences is a principal tenet

of *Teatro do Oprimido* and *Técnicas*. *Playing With Boal* refers to "local . . . experience and sensibilities.") There was only one other production in this new *etapa*, Boal's 1957 staging of Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* (*Juno e o Pavão*). That was it: two plays. Arena's other offerings during the 1956-57 seasons included one Molière, four boulevard comedies, two contemporary French farces, and two Brazilian comedies.¹⁵ One of the latter was entitled *Marido Magro, Mulher Chata*. The author? Augusto Boal. "*Marido Magro, Mulher Chata* . . . não trilha o caminho de *Ratos e Homens*. Boal ainda está mais próximo do ideal de *playwrighting* norte-americano." (Magaldi, *Palco* 24)

The second Arena phase is defined as a *fotografia*, which other accounts, including Professor Magaldi's, have referred to as Arena's *dramaturgia brasileira* period. Many of the comments in the *Oprimido* chronicle about the period are credible, but again there are important omissions. What actually happened: Arena had been financially strapped since its founding and by 1957 was in a state of crisis. At this juncture, Boal left the company. José Renato—still Arena's artistic director—made a last-ditch effort to avert disaster. He decided to direct a play that seemed an odd choice to provide the kind of box-office receipts necessary to put the company back on its feet, particularly since the play dealt with the labor movement, a first for Brazil. The title of the play, by Arena actor Gianfrancisco Guarnieri, is *Eles Não Usam Black-Tie*. And the rest is history. But not history according to inattentive readings of the *Teatro de Oprimido* chronicle, which has led many scholars careless about context to give its author credit as the father of Arena's Brazilian dramaturgy phase. In fact, Augusto Boal rejoined Arena and opened the *Seminário de Dramaturgia* only after the success of *Black-Tie*. In short, José Renato and Gianfrancesco Guarnieri were responsible for sending the company in its new and most fruitful direction, the latter by writing and the former by directing *Black-Tie*. But the new direction was, like all of Arena's phases, fortuitous, and not the consequence of "coordenação artística" or "necessidade social." *Black-Tie* was followed by three years of exclusively Brazilian plays by Guarnieri, Boal himself, Oduvaldo Vianna Filho, Plínio Marcos, and others. José Renato shared with Boal the directing chores during this *etapa*. In addition to *Black-Tie*, Renato directed what is widely considered Augusto Boal's best play, *Revolução na América do Sul*.

The chronicle correctly asserts that the Brazilian dramaturgy phase wore itself out and that a new phase began in 1962, nationalization of the classics, which supposedly began with Machiavelli's *The Mandrake*—Boal would win a major directing award for this production—but that is only partly true. It was José Renato who broke with the Brazilian dramaturgy formula by staging Brecht's *Señora Carrar's Rifles*. The chronicle does not ascribe credit here because it

assigns Renato's production to Arena's first *etapa*. Another point that does not directly involve Teatro de Arena: in 1963 Boal also directed a play at Teatro Oficina, Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Boal has always condemned Arena's forerunner, the Teatro Brasileiro de Comédia, for being an accomplice to cultural imperialism. And Tennessee Williams was a TBC staple. Orderly categories and ideological purity are once again negated by theatrical praxis.

The chronicle justly expresses pride in Arena's musicals, designated as the fourth *etapa*, although the company actually began staging musical shows in 1960, two years before the beginning of the nationalization of the classics phase. Equal parts satire of the Broadway musical, rebirth of the *revista*, and social protest, variations of the new Brazilian "musical" would be staged by Arena, Oficina, and Rio's Grupo Opinião. Arena's early musicals were called *bossarenas*, because their preferred mode was the bossa nova, that seductive fusion of samba and cool jazz. It was a brilliant stroke on the part of Boal and others—Maria Bethânia, Chico Buarque, José Celso, Oduvaldo Vianna Filho, Fernando Peixoto, Nara Leão—to harness this popular musical form to protest theatre. And it is a stroke of irony—entirely beyond their control—that bossa nova became merely a blip on the pop charts in the U.S. and eventually degenerated into muzak. But that, too, is a tale for another day. Nevertheless, the musical form led to Arena's biggest box-office success, the 1965 *Arena Conta Zumbi*.

To conclude, Augusto Boal, as any participant in significant events would do, focuses them through his own lens. It is, however, the responsibility of those studying events from the outside to go beyond a single report. Such a multifaceted focus would lead to the conclusion that Teatro de Arena was a collective effort, and many other names deserve inclusion on the list of contributors, especially Gianfrancesco Guarnieri, Oduvaldo Vianna Filho, and Flávio Império. But the real unsung hero of the chronicle should be José Renato. Regarding the theoretical issues examined in this article, Augusto Boal's significant contributions, at least in the context of Brazilian theatre, have resulted from his praxis. His skill lies not in his much-touted theoretical originality, but in his ability to adapt, synthesize, and codify. The basic principles of Boal's systems—Brazilian nationalism, pan-Americanism, popular theatre, anti-imperialism, and Boal's own artistic originality—are based on the denial of "imperialist" sources and linkages. Theatre of the oppressed, particularly, is mostly a first-world phenomenon that now has little connection with Brazil. What is most surprising in all of this is that at a time when critics insist on context, especially social and historical, theatre of the oppressed and *coringa* have been studied and/or embraced entirely out of context. As a consequence, Americans

and Europeans who have seized on these theoretical schemes have turned their author into a sacred icon of *teatro popular*. It is time to reexamine the critical canon.¹⁶

Lake Forest College

Notes

1. This article is based in part on a paper given at the 1991 Midwest Modern Language Association Annual Meeting in Chicago, and in part on research conducted during the summer of 1993 under the aegis of a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Stipend.

2. Military dictatorship had multifaceted effects on the Brazilian stage: 1) While the generals' 1964 coup initially galvanized companies and playwrights whose stagings provided a communal focus of protest, repression became intolerable with the 1968 state of siege. Its impact on theatre was devastating. 2) In the post-dictatorship period, even though official censorship has virtually disappeared, there is a widely held perception that theatre suffered irreparable losses during military rule. I suggest another thesis: 1) Theatre in Brazil receives less attention by critics today because it lacks a powerful external enemy—a dictatorship—as well as the cachet of protest. 2) Although redemocratization has left some theatre artists without a voice, it has challenged others to develop new forms of theatre, and themes once forbidden by censorship or pushed aside by the exigencies of protest against military rule are now privileged. Some examples: 1) Brazil has witnessed a revival of the works of Nelson Rodrigues and Jorge Andrade, two of Brazil's greatest playwrights who were neglected during the period of dictatorship. Innovative stagings of Nelson Rodrigues have taken the Brazilian stage by storm. Antunes Filho's Grupo Macunaíma has "rescued" Jorge Andrade with its 1993-94 staging of *Vereda da Salvação*. 2) There have been many retrospective plays about the dictatorship, with a non-partisan focus, such as Marcelo Paiva's 1984 award-winning *Feliz Ano Velho*, which deals with a family whose father was disappeared by the military. The play, adapted from Paiva's memoirs of the same title, addresses another issue rarely explored in Brazil: problems of the disabled. 3) Many playwrights have come to the forefront whose focus is less political and circumstantial than the previous generation's and whose themes are more universal: sexual identity, the painful transition from childhood to adulthood, religion, family life in the provinces. Naum Alves de Souza is prominent among this group. 4) Women playwrights have become major voices and their concerns have been privileged with redemocratization. Two excellent examples are Maria Adelaide Amaral's 1984 *De Braços Abertos* and Edla van Steen's 1989 *O Último Encontro*. Both plays swept all Brazil's major playwriting awards. 5) Comedy, an enduring trend in Brazil but temporarily eclipsed by solemn socially-conscious theatre, has experienced a rebirth. The two most noteworthy phenomena are the 1980s *besteirol*, an absurdist farce representing a playful response to engagé drama, and the more recent development of comedy with social concerns, such as Marcos Caruso's 1993 *Porca Miséria*, about impoverished Italians in São Paulo. Mauro Rasi, *besteirol*'s best-known practitioner, is quoted in note #16. 6) The Shakespeare "boom": the 1960s saw an explosion of Brazilian playwriting and a reaction against foreign theatrical models. Now that Brazilian dramaturgy has come into its own, however, the stigma of cultural imperialism no longer adheres to foreign plays, and the classics once again excite directors' imaginations. 7) Brazilian theatre has witnessed the ascendancy of a new generation of avant-garde directors, auteurs with total control over their productions, including design and occasionally dramaturgy. The most significant names in this group are Bia

Lessa and Gerald Thomas. 8) The Brazilian tradition of great theatre companies, which began in the 1940s with Os Comediantes, continued in the 1950s with Teatro Brasileiro de Comédia, in the 1960s with Teatro Oficina and Teatro de Arena, has been carried on in the 1980s and 1990s with Grupo Macunaima, which has achieved international acclaim as no other Brazilian company before it.

3. The first theatrical response to the coup was Teatro Oficina's 1964 production of Max Frisch's *Andorra*. While both performances cloaked their attacks on the military takeover in historical allegory, Teatro de Arena's 1965 *Zumbi*, situated in Brazilian history, was considered at the time a bolder reaction than Oficina's.

4. Severino João Albuquerque (*Acts 16*) makes reference to an article by Judith Weiss ("Latin American Theatre Today: An Introduction," in *Theatre*, vol. 12, 1980), in which Boal is categorized as one of the three "B's" of Latin American theatre, along with Bertolt Brecht and Enrique Buenaventura.

5. Quoted with permission from the author.

6. Teatro Ruth Escobar is an odd choice indeed, since for its many years of existence it has been a theatre space and not a group.

7. The issue of Brecht's influence on Brazilian theatre also needs revision. A typical example is "Brecht's Reception in Brazil," which goes over the all-too-familiar territory, the impact of Brecht and Boal on Brazilian theatre, a cliché for non-Brazilian critics approaching the subject, especially for the first time. The author of the dissertation, apparently under the sway of Fernando Peixoto, has come up with a reductionist thesis: Brazilians' supposed susceptibility to Brechtian didacticism has historical roots dating back to Anchieta's *autos*. Most knowledgeable scholars of Brazilian theatre would argue that a) Brazilians are no more receptive to didacticism than anyone else, and b) Brecht's influence in Brazil amounted to little more than a *moda*, a fad.

8. In our interview, Império gave a tongue-in-cheek description of Boal's theories: "Boal foi para países um pouco mais esquisitos do que o nosso, em que meia dúzia de frases fazem um livro. Desde que se repitam sempre. Com meia dúzia de frases Boal fez três livros." Império called the *coringa* "o fim, o cheiro do cadáver. O teatro de Arena vivo foi antes da teoria." Império, *diga-se de passagem*, was another victim of military arrest and torture. Furthermore, the police destroyed the archives of his design projects, which he kept in his apartment. He also discussed at length with me Arena's climate of homophobia, although I have no independent confirmation of his allegations. Flávio Império died of Aids in 1986.

9. See Daniel Felhendler's essay "Augusto Boal and Jacob L. Moreno: Theatre and Therapy." In addition to the Living Newspaper, the author suggests a number of other links between Boal and Moreno.

10. As a member of two Minneapolis based collective theatres from 1971 to 1984—Minnesota Ensemble Theatre and Palace Theatre—I participated in a number of street theatre events that might be described as invisible theatre, forum theatre, and so forth. The members of these collectives also performed activist work which we termed "community service," akin to what some now call "TO." For example, we worked on a continuing basis with students in a school for the deaf—and performed for them and for the general public a version of *Everyman*, utilizing both spoken and sign language—, a home for the elderly, a home for the mentally challenged, and so forth. We did not, however, cloak our work in ideologies of the oppressed, nor did we cease performing in-theatre plays on a regular basis. Although our staple were experimental collective productions, we occasionally performed the "classics," from Shakespeare to Tennessee Williams. We viewed ourselves as both theatre artists and useful citizens and assigned equal value to all aspects of our craft.

11. I reached my conclusions on audience participation through my own theatre experience, described in note # 10 above.

12. José Renato, José Celso, Flávio Império, Gianfrancesco Guamieri, Cacilda Becker, Célia Helena, Oduvaldo Vianna Filho, Fernando Peixoto, Renato Borghi, Fausi Arap, are but a few of the names that deserve mention.

13. See Charles B. Driskell's "The Teatro de Arena of São Paulo: An Innovative Professional Theater for the People," in *Popular Theater for Social Change in Latin America*, Gerardo Luzuriaga ed, Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, 1978.

14. There are, fortunately, scholars in the United States specializing in Brazilian theatre who do know the full story of Arena. The most prominent names in this regard are Severino João Albuquerque, Margo Milleret, and Leslie Damasceno.

15. "*Juno e o Pavão* foi um fracasso. . . . Diante do fracasso, José Renato se viu obrigado a voltar para suas comedinhas." (Flávio Império, interview).

16. In July of 1993, Augusto Boal held an international conference on *teatro do oprimido* in Rio, where he is a *vereador*. In our interview, Sábato Magaldi strongly defended Boal and asserted that he has been unjustly ignored in Brazil—the prophet in his own land syndrome, one might say—and offered as evidence that fact of the international conference. Why, Professor Magaldi asked, should a Brazilian man of the theatre who has received so much international recognition be neglected in his homeland? In subsequent communications, Professor Magaldi added further comments, maintaining that: a) *Phèdre* and *O Corsário do Rei* have nothing to do with the theories of theatre of the oppressed, and Boal has always made clear his continuing commitment to the traditional stage; b) accusations of populism have given rise to numerous errors made by frustrated and ill-intentioned critics who use the term to disparage anything that doesn't fit into their scheme of things, and much of their condemnation of Boal is the product of envy over his success abroad; c) it cannot be forgotten that after the disaster of the military coup, *Zumbi* helped many people keep hope alive; d) *Arena Conta Tiradentes* was less effective than *Zumbi* due to the poor quality of the music; e) Boal did not include *Oficina* in his list of popular theatres because he had gone into exile by the time José Celso had begun his own experiments outside the confines of the traditional theatrical space; f) the adaptation of theatre of the oppressed in France withdrew the theory from the narrow boundaries of Marxism and made it applicable to a great variety of human relations. I have considered Sábato's suggestions carefully and they have led me to make several revisions. My thesis, however, still stands. Whether or not Brazilian critics who attack Boal's theories are motivated by envy, theatre artists have more complex motivations: a) even after amnesty, when other exiles such as José Celso had returned, and many people were trying to resurrect Brazilian theatre from the ashes, Boal chose to remain in France and his absence was conspicuous; b) the new generation of artists suffered under the post-dictatorship repression of the *patrulha ideológica*. Naum Alves de Souza: "O teatro que fizemos depois da abertura foi em parte um desafio à patrulha ideológica, contra os Boals da vida. E nós éramos muito cobrados pela patrulha. Eu era chamado de alienado porque não fazia o teatro nitidamente político. No começo eu me identifiquei com o teatro político, claro. A gente participava de uma história, de um desafio contra a repressão. Mas quando a história muda, a arte muda." (Interview) Mauro Rasi: "No início o nosso teatro recebeu críticas marxistas, não tinha coringa. A gente era visto como um bando de alienados, de doidos. Ao mesmo tempo, nosso trabalho era uma reação à rigidez ideológica que dita regras. Foi um desrespeito iconoclasta contra esse tipo de postura." (Interview)

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