# An Interview with Augusto Boal

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C. D. Augusto, what were your activities in the theatre before joining the Teatro de Arena in São Paulo?

A. B. Most of my experience with theatre prior to the Teatro de Arena was with workers' and Black theatre. I started to work in theatre when I became concerned about things that were happening to the Brazilian people. Around 1950 I began to write plays about a place where I was living in Rio de Janeiro, a workers' district. I had come to be well acquainted with their lives, their existence, and I saw that they were struggling to improve their living conditions. My interest in their plight spurred me to contribute to their struggle via theatre. I wrote about the poor who worked in the factories. I also wrote plays about the Blacks in Brazil. At that time I was working with the Black Experimental Theatre and the Blacks started performing some of my plays. The plays I wrote then were about the lives of either Black people *(c.f., O Cavalo e o Santo)* or of the workers.

Another experiment that I carried out had to do with the Nagô mythology, a Black religion from Africa which has survived in Bahia. The Nagôs had their own myths, their own gods, and I attempted to use these in theatre. In some instances, this mythology is very similar to Greek mythology. Take, for example, the myth of Oedipus. In Nagô mythology there is almost the same myth. Two characters in two different mythologies personify the same idea.

This activity takes us to 1953 when I came to the United States. At Columbia University between 1953 and 1955, I studied with John Gassner—playwriting and modern drama—and with Mort Valenci. After finishing at Columbia I returned to Brazil and became part of the Teatro de Arena in 1956, six months after my return.

C. D. What would you consider the major influences on your theatrical orientation? What writers or what types of theatre have influenced your work?

A. B. In my case especially—and in that of other Brazilian authors—there were two tremendous influences. One of them was Bertolt Brecht. He was a great influence because he taught us that our obligation as artists was to shed light on reality, not only to reflect and to interpret reality, but to try to change it. The other big influence on my orientation was the Brazilian circus, the clownish acts performed at the circus. I adore that kind of thing. The reviews too, such as vaudeville. A tradition of political vaudeville existed in Brazil, and that influenced my work as well. So if I may say that there were two major influences on my theatre, they were Bertolt Brecht and the circus.

C. D. Let's go now to your work in the Teatro de Arena. Which works were staged there while you were part of the theatre and what was your contribution?

A. B. I was the artistic director of the theatre. During the fifteen years in which I directed the Teatro de Arena, it went through three important stages. The first one was the realistic one in which we did our best to produce only the first plays written by new Brazilian authors. From 1956 to 1962 we did first plays by Gianfrancesco Guarnieri, Oduvaldo Vianna Filho, Edy Lima, Flávio Migliaccio, and by many other Brazilian playwrights. A second play would be given to other companies so that we could continue to introduce new authors. This phase continued until around 1962. Previously we had gone through a brief period of realism during which we mounted plays by foreign authors.

After this important first stage of producing new Brazilian plays, during which I also produced my own play, *Revolução na América do Sul (Revolution in South America)*, we entered a second phase which consisted of the production of universal or "classical" plays, and inaugurated a reversal of the process. If during the first phase we tried to produce plays concerned with Brazilian reality and to make the public acquire a general understanding of its problems, to universalize the situation, in this second phase we took universal plays and attempted to incorporate them within the scope of our Brazilian reality. We did *Tartuffe* by Molière, *The Best Judge the King* by Lope de Vega, *The Inspector General* by Gogol, and also Brazilian plays, such as *Um Aviso* by Martins Pena.

The third stage was concerned with combining both the first stage, which was too objective (almost Naturalistic), and the second one, which was too abstract. We embarked on the phase of *Zumbi* in which both principles were fused: the extreme objectivity of Naturalism, and the abstraction, subjectivity or universality of the classical plays. We first put on *Zumbi,* afterwards *Tiradentes*, and then *Bolívar.* Following this there was another stage, which was called the "newspaper theatre" *(teatro do jornal).*

C. D. Why did you choose historical figures like Zumbi, Tiradentes, and Bolívar for your plays?

A. B. Precisely because we wanted to unite both principles. We used well-known figures, such as Zumbi, and well-known historical events, such as the resistance of Palmares. In the general plot line, we included current

information. The first play was about Zumbi, whom everyone knew, but which included items taken from the daily newspapers. One of the best parts of *Zumbi* is a speech by Dom Ayres, which is based on a speech by the dictator of Brazil at that moment, Castelo Branco. We extracted the speeches and the facts from the newspaper and inserted them into the text.

C. D. What was the character of your work with Gianfrancesco Guarnieri in the Teatro de Arena? What did each of you contribute to the collaboration?

A. B. It was a very good collaboration, I think, because it didn't always assume a given form. In *Zumbi*, for example, we worked together. Sometimes he would compose at the typewriter and I would tell him things, and other times he would dictate to me. So we wrote together, working also with Edu Lobo who composed the music. I began directing the play before it had been finished. I remember that many times after rehearsal, Guarnieri and I went home, and sometimes Edu Lobo and several actors, and all together we would work on the play. The actors would also provide ideas, so that it turned out to be almost a kind of collective creation.

But with *Tiradentes* it was different. I devised a structure for the whole play and we gathered scenes that we wanted to include. I gave him my scenes for revision and he let me have what he wrote. In phase two of the Teatro de Arena we had worked on another play, *The Best Judge the King* by Lope de Vega, on which we collaborated in the adaptation of the play. It was a very good experience. Another play about peasants called *Trial in Nôvo Sol* was written with four other persons. Because of my experience, I would usually come up with the structure of the play. Since I was also teaching the art of playwriting, I was pretty much aware of the problems involved.

C. D. If you were to return to Brazil, could you work again with Guarnieri?

A. B. Yes, I could and I would like to, but it would be difficult for us to collaborate again because he is going in one direction, forced by circumstances, and I am going in another one, diametrically opposed to his. His last play, *Um Grito Parado no Ar* is too symbolic, to the extent that people who live outside of Brazil, who are not suffering the same kind of repression, cannot even understand what the play is about. I don't know whether we could manage together, but I would like to try.

C. D. Augusto, since your exile from Brazil, while writing plays and theatre manuals during the last two years, you have concurrently been engaged in making what is called "people's theatre." What have you done in Argentina, Peru and other Latin American countries in this respect?

A. B. In Brazil, in Argentina, in Peru and in other countries, our work is not to give the people finished products of art *per se*, like the manufacturer of consumer goods—because even if one were to do this, these "products" (plays and performances) would not be their own production, something originating within and from themselves and their own reality. What you *can* do is provide the means of production in the area of theatre—in other words, teach the people how to make theatre. Everyone can be, in effect, an artist. Everywhere the bourgeoisie tries to make us believe that

only a few people can act, that only a few people at most are good at it. Why? Because they want to use artists as merchandise; they want to sell them. If everyone is an actor, it is more difficult to sell the stars, and if everyone can play baseball, it is harder to sell someone as the only one capable of playing well. What we are doing all over South America is rescuing the theatre and giving it back to the people so that they can use it as a means of communication to discuss their problems. We think theatre can be a means of discussing and "rehearsing" revolutionary acts themselves. Up till now the theatre has been a kind of place where one presents images of the past. Now I think we have to try to focus on the present and the future. We have to create theatre which will not be a reproduction of the past but a rehearsal of the future. It's complicated. I have a Peruvian friend who made a very acute observation. He said that bourgeois theatre is the "finished show." Why? Because the bourgeoisie has finished its society. They are aware of their social fabric, how they wish their society to be. The theatre as a show, as a finished product, is made as the bourgeoisie has come to make its society.

But the theatre of the people cannot be the "finished" show; it has to be the "rehearsal," because the people do not yet know how their world is going to evolve. You have to make the kind of theatre in which everything is tested. This is the kind of thing I have been involved in, creating several ways, to get everyone started making theatre. Not for the sake of going to the theatre. It's a theatre as "language" that can be used by anyone. It isn't that in the Peruvian slums, for example, we try to make the people into actors and induce them to go to the Peruvian Broadway. That's not the idea. They will remain in the slums, but in the slums they will discuss how to free themselves.

C. D. Would you tell us something more about the techniques and the methods you have created in your people's theatre in South America?

A. B. We are generating forms of theatre in which the people can act anyplace. In Argentina, we would board a train and then, once inside the train, the actors would take over the car. No one would know that we were actors performing and the scene would be done as though it were actually happening. We went to a marketplace to discuss problems of inflation. We prepared a scene and there in front of the stands where they were selling goods the scene "exploded." This is what we call "invisible theatre." But we also use other forms of theatre for the purpose of interpreting news from the newspaper. This we call "newspaper theatre." There are lots of techniques in which the reading public can take material from the newspapers and create theatrical scenes.

We have also been making theatre in church, that is, "Bible theatre." In New York a friend of mine, who is a priest, had me prepare a scene from my play *Torquemada.* I wrote the scene while in prison in Brazil. The first scene of *Torquemada* shows my own interrogation, both the questioning and the torture. I wrote a ten-minute scene which describes it exactly. During the Mass the priest invited us to the altar to perform the entire scene. And we did it. The people had gone there not to see

a play, but to pray. They were more than spectators because they had gone to church as believers to worship God. And then this theatre "exploded" with a violent energy; it was electrifying to see the effects of theatre embedded in the ritual of the Mass. It would have been much less dramatic were it made in a theatre.

I am giving examples to show you that we are interested in something more than the regular theatre in which you go and perform the play. I think that if you make any changes within the theatre—a theatre that has a proscenium, a stage, an arena, or a combined version of stages—all this is but reformism; you are not really changing anything. We believe that you can go anyplace and make theatre. The theatre has to be restored to the people, it has to be regained, "reclaimed," from the bourgeoisie which has preserved theatre in its own likeness as a closed system.

C. D. Two years ago you were invited by the Peruvian government to participate in a literacy program via theatre. What was your work in Peru, that is, your rôle in the program, and what were your experiences there in people's theatre?

A. B. It was rather difficult at first for the following reasons: I don't look like a Peruvian and my colleague in charge of the project, Alicia Saco, though Peruvian, didn't "look Peruvian" either. Her Spanish is native, but in my case, my accent in Spanish sounded foreign, so it was quite touchy. In the beginning the people were reluctant to accept us. We started working with them, teaching them how to make physical movements necessary in theatre. An example would be to illustrate theatrically a race in slow motion in which the winner is the one who finishes last. Another example is a boxing match in which two people fight, but cannot touch each other. Each person must react to the blow that he has not actually received. These physical techniques make the participant more aware of how one's body movements are a great means of expression, that is, that theatre is more than verbal language.

We found that the people had to practice the art of portraying animals and even "professions" (lawyers and so forth). Then we would go to forms of theatre in which the audience tells the actors what they have to do, and the actors do nothing unless the audience says, "Do this and do that." So the political solutions to the play's problems are offered by the audience. We go from there to another form of theatre in which the people must use the bodies of the actors much as a sculptor would, to show what they think of reality. This has been done, for example, here in the U.S. Departing from an image of how the situation stands, the audience has to show how they view it, how they can change the situation, what change is. Instead of talking about change, you go onstage and carry it out, rehearsing it with the bodies of the other people who are working with you.

From here we move on to another form of theatre called "forum theatre," in which we present a play no longer than ten, fifteen or twenty minutes in duration. Then we ask the audience whether they agree

with our solution. If they disagree, we reply, "Well, we are going to repeat the scene and when you disagree with how we do it, come onstage, replace the actors, and you do it yourself your own way." Unless the actors are replaced, they remain onstage. But the audience always interrupts, alters the scene, and tries its solution. This way the theatre is used as a rehearsal of the future. If tomorrow you plan to hold a strike, present a play about a strike in which you rehearse how the strike is going to be carried out. If the police come, what are you going to do? The theatre can be and is now being used as a rehearsal of the future, a tool for change, and not as an image of the past.

C. D. Many writers and artists throughout the world are hampered, restrained and sometimes persecuted by government censorship. What has been your experience in South America and how does a writer cope with censorship in order to continue?

A. B. At the present it is very dangerous to live in countries like Brazil, Chile, Bolivia, and Paraguay. Yet the people have to live there and, if they are theatre people, they have to make theatre. Even today in Brazil there are many clandestine groups that perform theatre for the people and with the people, helping them make theatre for themselves. They continue to create, but under stringent conditions. As I said before, the performance is not made public; it is simply put on for small audiences. In the same way that the Brazilian people are now a clandestine people, this is a clandestine theatre. If five people congregate in the street, the police come to investigate. They will not allow you to hold meetings in the street, so the street is off-limits. The political climate in Brazil is unhealthy for theatre, and yet people's theatre survives.

In Brazil if you want to perform a play in a conventional theatre, you have to send the script to Brasilia a month in advance, even if you live in some remote village. In the first place, to do so is very expensive, and secondly, the postal service is sometimes very poor. Either the mail never gets there, or if it does arrive, the government will deny production of your play through censorship. Self-censorship means survival.

There are other countries in which, contrary to what is happening in Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, Chile, and Bolivia, there is now freedom to write and perform. Before May of 1973 censorship did exist in Argentina, but now in both Argentina—though the situation may change soon—and Peru, there is a certain amount of freedom. This means that theatre people can work for the people, with the people and within the people, without the threat of police intervention.

C. D. Are you optimistic about your plays being produced in Argentina or in other countries of Latin America?

A. B. In other countries, yes. For example, *Torquemada* was produced in almost every country in Latin America. My plays have now been produced for television in Portugal. But I don't know what is going to happen in Argentina.

C. D. Do you have any personal goals within theatre? What do you want for yourself and your audience to get out of your theatre?

A. B. I have no personal goals, only collective ones. Well, perhaps I do. I like to write plays and for people to see my plays. I write plays about the problems of the people. One of my last plays, for example, that has been around in Latin America, I would like to have produced here also. It is a play which tries to show how evil the comics are. It dramatizes the story of what has happened in Brazil, told through comic characters—Batman and Robin, Superman, Mandrake and Lothar, and others. Mandrake is portrayed as a landowner who, besides owning land, owns Lothar, who was a king in Africa but who prefers to be the slave of the white man in the comics. The play, then, is a denunciation of this system.

My personal goals are, first of all, to participate in a collective work all over South America, and, secondly, to have my plays produced. I enjoy directing them and I want people to come and see them.

C. D. Augusto, what have you been writing outside of Brazil since your exile in the way of plays, manuals and so forth?

A. B. During the last year and a half in Argentina, I have concentrated on writing. Last year I wrote four books. The first one is called *Teatro del oprimido y otras poéticas políticas (Theatre of the Oppressed and Other Political Poetics)*. It aims at disseminating several poetics, such as those of Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hegel and Brecht, in what we call "the poetics of the oppressed." In this book I try to demonstrate that every artist is necessarily political, even when the author of the poetics, as in the case of Aristotle, expressly states that there is no relationship between politics and art. I try to show that there exists, in fact, a relationship. In this particular essay I attempt an understanding of the poetics of Aristotle from the point of view of his ethics. So if we read his poetics from his ethical point of view, we discover that it contains a very coercive system of domestication of the artist.

The second book is called *Técnicas latinoamericanas de teatro popular (Techniques of Latin American People's Theatre)*, which is a collection of new forms of Latin American theatre, including "newspaper theatre," "Bible theatre," "forum theatre," etcetera. Actually it is a systematization that I did of what I know, have seen, have done, or have heard about. The third book is called *Doscientos ejercicios y juegos para el actor y el no actor con ganas de decir algo a través del teatro (Two Hundred Exercises and Games for the Actor and the Non-Actor Wishing to Say Something Through Theatre)*. It is a collection of exercises, rehearsals, and games—something of more practical value. The last one is called *Popular Theatre Round Tables*, a sort of résumé of round tables in which I have participated since leaving Brazil. In Buenos Aires, Quito, Manizales, New York, San Francisco—all the places where I participated in round tables—I borrowed heavily from tapes of these discussions.

In addition to these books I have also been writing plays. The first one I wrote is *La tempestad (The Tempest)*, an answer to, not an adaptation of, Shakespeare's play. *The Tempest* has always been understood as the drama about the European nobleman who goes to a tropical island, and has the right to settle there, to enslave the inhabitants of that island. *La*

*tempestad* is seen from the point of view of Caliban, who is traditionally maligned as being ugly and offensive, and not from the colonialist point of view of Prospero, who speaks for Shakespeare. I try to show that native is beautiful and that the invaders are the repugnant ones. I am going to write another play based on *Lysistrata.* It will be the Lysistrata play seen from the slaves' point of view. She wanted to have her cake and eat it too, but what did the slaves have to say about that?

C. D. Are those all the plays you have written while in Argentina?

A. B. Since leaving Brazil, I have written a new version of *El gran acuerdo internacional del Tío Patilludo (The Destabilization of Uncle Scrooge MacDuck)* in reference to what President Ford said, that the U.S. had destabilized the Chilean government, claiming the right to do that. I began writing *Torquemada* as well before I left Brazil and finished it outside. I've also finished a new version of a play of mine written in Brazil, *Revolução na América do Sul,* which is now called *Juan Pérez, ¿por quién vota? (Juan Pérez, who are you voting for?).* That's all.

C. D. What are your plans in theatre for the near future?

A. B. I am planning to write. I want to head in the direction of recovering plays like *The Tempest* and *Lysistrata.* I am also going to write another play that I have in mind about a character, a woman in Brazil, about whom I am trying to collect material. I want to write plays about the mass media, for example, television, and I would also like to write about mystery stories in an effort to recover those forms which are so popular, but which, in content, are very reactionary. I would enjoy working with these forms, giving them a progressive content, not creating anything new, but using what already exists.

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