Professional Book Review

Cahnmann-Taylor, M., & Souto-Manning, M. (2010). *Teachers act up!: Creating multicultural learning communities through theatre.* New York, NY: Teachers College. 169 pp., ISBN 978-0-8077-5073-5 (p). $24.95

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Oscar Wilde wrote: “I regard the theatre as the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being.” I agree with Oscar Wilde. As a 6th through 12th grade English teacher, I used theatre performances and techniques to enhance and deepen classroom examinations of literary conflicts and student concerns, and, as the Writer-in-Residence at Stages of Imagination, Inc., a nonprofit, children’s theatre organization, I have used live professional theatre to offer issues-based plays to pre-K through 5th grade children. Our mission has been to bring students and their teachers together, as equals, within the darkened space of the performance, so that they can then return to their classrooms to actively construct and co-construct meaning from their shared experiences.

It was fascinating to discover that Melisa Cahnmann-Taylor and Marina Souto-Manning, two non-theatre teacher educators, have employed the dramatic and performing arts as the essential tools within their professional development programs and undergraduate and graduate courses. In their book, *Teachers Act Up!: Creating Multicultural Learning Communities Through Theatre,* the authors argue, “If teachers want to create positive change in the lives of their students, then teachers must first be able to create positive change in their own lives” (p. 5). Their critical performative approach (p. 7) is grounded in the critical pedagogy of Freire and the theatrical activist work of Boal who created the Theatre of the Oppressed. Suggesting that many new teachers simply look to teacher educators and assigned texts for the “proper” protocol when a conflict arises within their schools, the authors argue that physical and imaginative modalities should play a larger part in this process.

Through narrative vignettes, transcripts of focus groups, instructions for dramatic exercises, and photographs, the authors systematically describe and explain their variations of Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed. Boal wanted his audience to participate and actively generate the script as the performance occurred. He urged spectators to become “spect-actors” (p. 29), a hybrid of spectator and actor. Essential to this process was the Joker (p. 41), a central and neutral player who was responsible for ensuring that fairness, logistical integrity,

and multiple perspectives were offered. The Joker also always asked at the end of each performance: “Is it real?” (p. 31). Is the solution offered feasible and reasonably doable?

Since it is expected that the participants in the authors’ workshops and programs will endeavor to create positive changes in their lives, they must literally move from being spectators to engaging as spect-actors. Chapter 3 presents six theatre warm-up exercises and games, with rules that the Joker must mediate. Variations and reflections from the participants follow each of these. Chapter 4, called Image Theatre, adapts Boal’s interest in having players become human sculptors and sculptees. The emphasis of these exercises is on the visual and kinesthetic – no talking allowed.

Chapter 5, Forum Theatre, is the cornerstone and central focus of the authors’ pre-service and in-service teacher education programs. Here, the real time conflicts and dilemmas that teachers are living within their classrooms and school buildings are examined. The play-centered, warm-up activities in Chapters 3 and 4 are meant to instill a sense of security and trust. Once this is established, deeply felt struggles are revealed through Forum Theatre. The antagonists are administrators, students, colleagues, paraprofessionals, parents, and college professors. Once a problem is selected, it no longer belongs to one person. The spect-actors are encouraged to become the protagonist. The authors call Forum Theatre problem-posing (p. 95), rather than problem solving. More than role playing, this is intended to be a collective, two-to-three scene drama that cultivates possibilities for change.

The authors admit that time is a constant issue when conducting Forum Theatre and that not all student and teacher stories can be told. They also point out that, when offering a limited time or single session workshop, they had to develop vignettes based on generative themes, as well as “trans/scripts” (p. 104) that compress discourses into short plays that could serve as learning cases.

Perhaps the climax of Boal’s techniques used by the authors is called Rainbow of Desire. Where the warm-up games physically and emotionally lead the participants to Forum Theatre, Forum Theatre can lead the spect-actors to the complexities of Rainbow of Desire. Here, the participants are asked to probe for the hidden feelings and needs of the antagonist. Assumptions made about the person triggering the conflict are examined. The teacher may not necessarily be the “good person,” and roles can be reversed so that the protagonist may actually be the one oppressed, when examined within particular contexts.

The last two forms of Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed mentioned are Invisible Theatre and Legislative Theatre. Invisible Theatre is a performance staged in public where the actors attempt to pull unwary bystanders into the dramatic action. Legislative Theatre aims to promote change and desired ends at the legislative level. The authors state that they have not yet engaged in either of these forms of theatre.

So, in following Boal’s protocol, the question the Joker should ask at this point in the review is: “Is it real?” Did the critical performative approach of the

authors within their courses and programs make a difference in the lives of the participants?

Using a triangulation of qualitative data from audio and video tapes, anonymous surveys, and voluntary interviews, the authors conclude that "if people don't open up and convey their real, recursive oppressions, the techniques here are likely not going to result in transformation" (p. 135). They recognize that risk and courage are needed for practicing teachers to admit to their peers that they are struggling. They also acknowledge that "evidence of change must occur over periods of time that extend beyond the length of our programs" (p. 136), and that "not having the answers is a strength, allowing teachers' collective wisdom to come forth and unforeseen challenges to become known" (p. 138). State assessments, as well as curricular planning and paperwork, also often limit pedagogical choices for their participants. A constant mentioned throughout their use of Boal's exercises and techniques was laughter and camaraderie, two healing balms that allow one to face another day.

The player within Boal's techniques that I wish had received more attention in the book is the Joker. The authors state that Boal often played this part himself. I can understand why. The Joker is at the center of all of these exercises and is responsible for facilitating, mediating, negotiating, and criticizing. I am most curious to know how the authors selected and trained their participants to take on this complex and demanding role.

Stella Adler wrote: "The theatre is a spiritual and social x-ray of its time." I applaud the authors and their students for having the courage to look inward at the challenges and hurts within their professional lives and then choosing to Act Up to "push the limits of what's possible in the critical multicultural classroom" (p. 138).