

## **The Politics of Change and Theatrical Interaction: A Critical Investigation of the Theories of Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal**

By  
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The theatre restores us all our dormant conflicts and all their powers, and gives these powers names we hail as symbols: and behold! before our eyes is fought a battle of symbols, one charging against another in an impossible melée; for there can be theatre only from the moment when the impossible really begins and when the poetry which occurs on the stage sustains and superheats the realized symbols. In the true theatre a play disturbs the senses' repose, frees the repressed unconscious, incites a kind of virtual revolution (which moreover can have its full effect only if it remains virtual), and imposes on the assembled collectivity an attitude that is both difficult and heroic.

Antonin Artaud, *Collected Works*

We need a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses within the particular historical field of human relations in which the action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself.

Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*

But the theatre can also be a weapon for liberation. For that, it is necessary to create appropriate theatrical forms. Change is imperative.

Augusto Boal, *The Theatre of the Oppressed*

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Undoubtedly, Artaudian theatre is seen as apolitical, a mystical venue for conjuring up collective emotions in contrast to Brechtian rational and political epic theatre and Boal's political theatre of the oppressed. Importantly, Artaud, Brecht, and Boal diverge in theorizing about the politics of change and theatrical interaction between the actor and the spectator. Hence, the aim of this paper is to explore the politics, mechanisms, workings, and conception of change and theatrical interactivity in Artaud's, Brecht's, and Boal's theories.

### **I. Brecht and Artaud**

First of all, while Brecht believes that man is conditioned by social circumstances and that change, therefore, should be first sought in the social forces (be they economic or ideological), Artaud believes that change should start with the individual. In differentiating between the 'dramatic' and 'epic' theatre, Brecht emphasizes the idea that "social being determines thought" and that man should be perceived as "process" (Brecht 37). He postulates that "human character must be understood as the totality of all social conditions" and that "the epic form is the only one that can comprehend all the processes" (*Studying Bertolt Brecht* 4). Significantly, Brecht thinks that theatre should be an agent for social and political change. To achieve such a goal, Brecht suggests, is to make use of the technique of 'alienation' which enables theatre to utilize its scientific method of 'dialectical materialism'. (Brecht193) This blending of Hegelian and Marxist dialectics can also be realized in "the actor who impersonates the character, yet remains himself; the stage that represents reality, yet remains a stage, the characters who are themselves, yet can be made into something else." (Harrop 218)

Artaud's premise, on the other hand, consists in bringing man back to the state of original purity which he alleges existed

prior to Western civilization. By “furnishing the spectator with the truthful precipitates of dreams, his taste for crime, his erotic obsession, his savagery...even his cannibalism”, the Artaudian theatre becomes an outlet which has a healing effect (Artaud 92). Thus, theatre becomes an outlet, for both the actor and the spectator, for harmful, destructive impulses that humans keep within themselves. (Auslander 23) Unlike Brecht’s aim of transforming the audience by provoking his critical and rational awareness, Artaud’s theatre of cruelty presents a revelation of violent images, which does not necessarily entail physical or spiritual maltreatment, as an artistically transforming and healing force that transforms the spectator by “exteriorizing his latent cruelty, while at the same time forcing him to assume an external attitude corresponding to the state of psychological order which one wishes to restore.” (Innes, *Avant Garde Theatre* 87) The only way to heal, for Artaud, is through the theatre of cruelty which forces the audience to confront and face collective desires and images buried in the subconscious; actors and audience should leave exhausted and transformed. In doing so, Artaud wants us “to recognize and confront our dark impulses so we can be free, or at least in control, of them.” (Auslander 24) Underlining the primitivism in Artaud’s work, Innes outlines Artaud’s basic formula: “Primitivism—Ritual—Cruelty—Spectacle” (Innes 60). This formula can be seen in Artaud’s scenario *The Conquest of Mexico* where “the role of ritual and primitive religious terror as vehicle to return to primal myth and symbol, the transcendence of individual psychology by collective consciousness accessible through the mass spectacle” converge. (Fuchs & Chaudhuri 231)

Thus far, Artaud’s and Brecht’s purposes of theatre seem to contradict each other. But, for Castri, these aims are not contradictory but complementary. In *Per Un Teatro Politico: Piscator, Brecht, and Artaud* (1973), Castri claims that change should be on both levels: the individual and society. Castri’s

“prospective realism” is therefore engendered by a dialectical relationship between Artaudian irrationality, which is concerned with human's soul, and Brechtian rationality, which is concerned with man in society:

Man and the world can not be separated. Only by changing society around him and his innermost personal life can he be liberated and restored to his true self. Only by combining Brecht and Artaud, and their respective ancestors to boot, can a political theatre as conceived by Castri become effective. (Grimm 155)

Nonetheless, both Brecht's and Artaud's functions of theatre could not be utterly actualized. For Derrida, Artaud's theatre of cruelty is “an impossibility” because it “must to some degree involve representation and repetition”; the theatre of cruelty “neither begins nor is completed within the purity of simple presence, but rather is already within representation.” (Puchner 158) Yet, for Shannon Jackson “Derrida read Artaud as advocating theatre that closed down representational systems between signifier and signified into a state of primordial being.” (Jackson 118) Furthermore, many critics, including Martin Esslin and J.L. Styan, point out that Brecht could not achieve what he yearned for. Paradoxically, instead of being aroused to revolutionary fervour or to critical detachment which underlies what is termed the 'V-effect', the audience of, for example, the *Three Penny Opera* and *Mother Courage* acted the opposite. In spite of many alienating techniques (e.g., characters directly address the audience, actors/actresses step out of their character to comment on the action of the play, and the use of disruptive music in the midst of realistic scenes...etc) the irony of the *Three Penny Opera* was missed and the play was perceived as a happy, sentimental musical. Also, the audience of *Mother Courage* saw the character of the mother as a tragic figure and

they “chose to see *Mother Courage* as a story about themselves, the common victims of war” and the crises in the play as “ its own recent condition in war-torn Berlin.” (Styan Vol.3 159)

As a matter of fact, many critics state that the best example that shows Brechtian and Artaudian theories is Peter Brook’s production of *Marat/Sade* (1964). The play’s central argument, which is about change, is clearly associated with the problem of physicality and politics. The conflict is mainly dramatized by Marat, who may represent Brecht’s belief in social revolution, and Sade, who may represent Artaud’s belief in the physicality untouched by social change. The play contains a combination of Artaudian and Brechtian theatrical attitudes and techniques. For example, Coulmier’s address (pp. 11-12) assigns to the spectators a role in the action, as guests watching the production at the asylum in the early nineteenth century and at the same time encourages those guests to remain detached outsiders capable of judging the debate objectively. As for the actors, the task of playing mental patients requires an Artaudian abolition of the personality; yet the play-within-a-play structure also demands a *gestus* display of the patients’ attitudes to the characters they are in turn portraying.

The other difference between Brecht and Artaud can be noticed in their approach to theatre. While Brecht insists on distancing the audience by means of ‘alienation’, Artaud wants to place the audience in a frantic atmosphere. To attain the alienation effect, Brecht uses songs, epic acting style (including alienation techniques), episodic manner, and certain type of lighting and décor, just to block the identification and reduce the sympathy of the audience with the characters on stage. By using such methods, Brecht wants the audience to feel that they are in a theatre and that what they see is a reflection not *of* but *on* reality or rather a “picture of the world”. This kind of tendency may lead the audience to think instead of attaching themselves to

the play's action and characters. Artaud, in contrast to Brecht, demolishes the stage and the auditorium and tries to make the actor and the spectator face each other in direct communication:

THE STAGE -- THE AUDITORIUM: We abolish the stage and the auditorium . . . so direct communication will be re-established between spectator and the spectacle, between the actor and the spectator, from the fact that the spectator, placed in the middle of the action, is engulfed and physically affected by it. This envelopment results, in part, from the very configuration of the room itself. (Artaud 96-97)

Instead of working on 'intellect', Artaud's theatre works on the senses and the nerves. While Brecht uses visible lighting (e.g., boxing ring lighting) to distance the audience from the emotional states created by the naturalistic use of lighting, Artaud's use of lighting heightens the spectator's feeling of terror and anxiety: "light must recover an element of thinness, density, and opaqueness, with a view to producing the sensations of heat, cold, anger, and fear" (Artaud 95)

Moreover, both men differ in adopting different acting styles for their theatres. Brecht, trying to explain his own method of acting, uses the example of the street demonstrator according to which the Brechtian actor should act as an eye witness or a street demonstrator of a street scene where his feelings and opinions should not be merged with the feelings and opinions of the demonstrated:

One essential element of the street scene lies in the natural attitude adopted by the demonstrator, which is two-fold; he is always taking two situations into account. He behaves naturally as a demonstrator, and he lets the subject of the demonstration behave naturally too. He never forgets, nor he allows it to be forgotten, that he is not the subject but the

demonstrator. That is to say, what the audience sees is not a fusion between demonstrator and subject, not some third, independent, uncontradictory entity with isolated features of (a) demonstrator and (b) subject... The feelings and opinions of demonstrator and demonstrated are not merged into one. (Brecht 125)

To implement such an acting style, the actor should therefore make use of the A-effect<sup>1</sup>. Hinging on the Chinese acting method, Brecht illustrates that the A-effect is produced by the actor who should put neither the audience nor himself into a trance. (Ibid 193) This is really the reverse of what Artaud has proposed in his acting theory. For Artaud, the actor, like the shaman, “makes the intangible visible, translates his spiritual ecstasy into practical communication with the audience.” (Harrop 64) Besides, the actor should know “what points of the body to touch” in order to throw “the spectator into magical trances” (Artaud 140). It is worth mentioning that some critics see an evident association between Artaud’s and Stanislavski’s acting theories. J. R. Willis, for instance, argues that the Artaudian actor is similar to the Stanislavskian actor since both “rely on consciousness to release the unconscious” and that “the Artaudian actor needs Stanislavski in order to verify the nature of feeling he is releasing” (166-67). Importantly, the Artaudian actor should be a “physical athlete” who is capable of producing a variety of excessive passions through his body. For example, in

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<sup>1</sup> Contrasting J. Harrop’s interpretation of Brecht’s ‘alienation’, John Willet indicates that Brecht’s alienation is not Marx’s alienation. Brecht’s alienation is closer to Shklovsky’s term *Priem Ostranenniya* [the trick of making strange] (defamiliarization- the Russian Formalists). Thus, Willet prefers “detachment” as a translation of the German word “*Verfremdung*”. (See *Brecht in Context* 218-219)

the production of *The Cenci* by the Odeon National Theatre, the acting style was “flamboyant, physical, and schizophrenic: large, sweeping and often violent movements, frequent and unaccountable mood changes, and dissociation of dialog, gesture and mood.” (Cohen 1)

Unlike the Brechtian spectator who is an observer aroused for action, Artaud wants the spectator to be identified “with the spectacle, breath by breath and beat by beat” (Ibid 140). As such, the spectator participates in the actor’s emotional fits and spiritual trances; s/he participates “in the conflict, agony, death, dismemberment at the deepest possible level” (Harrop 264).

Nevertheless, both men make use of certain techniques used in the Oriental theatre. Whereas Brecht utilizes techniques from the Chinese acting like the artistic act of self-alienation, Artaud uses the ritualistic dances and geometric precision of the Balinese actors. Disagreeing with naturalistic and particularly Stanislavskian acting methods, Brecht prefers the Chinese acting where the actor “never acts as if there were a fourth wall besides the three surrounding him” and also “limits himself from the start to simply quoting the character played.” (Brecht 91-94) Artaud, on the other hand, is fascinated by the Balinese gestures, movements, spiritual and ritualistic signs, and geometric hieroglyphs.<sup>2</sup>

## **II. Brecht and Boal**

Both Brecht and Boal accentuate the idea that the aim of theatre resides in its power of transforming the audience or the spectator. Essentially, both of them draw on Marxist poetics in their hypotheses by showing the dialectical relationship between economics as the base structure. They highlight the ‘facticity’<sup>3</sup> of

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<sup>2</sup> Artaud dedicates a detailed chapter on the Balinese Theatre. (See *The Theatre and Its Double* p. 53-67).

<sup>3</sup> See Judith Butler’s book *Bodies That Matter*.



social bodies where consciousness is determined by material relations and the ideologies of the time. In “Boal, Blau, and Brecht: The Body,” Philip Auslander argues that for “both Brecht and Boal, the material life of the body is expressive of oppression because the body itself, its actions and gestures, are determined by ideological relations.” (Ibid 129) This idea is clearly concretized, Auslander postulates, in Brecht’s ‘Gestus’ where “the attitudes which people adopt towards one another” are “socio-historically significant (typical).” (Brecht 86) To resist or even explore the oppression taking place in the *factic* or ideologically-materialized body is to de-categorize or de-specialize that body by disclosing the mechanisms of that oppression in the body. However, Boal’s statement that “all theatre is political” indicates that theatre “both reflects and affects the way that society is organised, through its dynamic engagement with the value systems underpinning it.” (Babbage 39-40). Though both Boal and Brecht criticize the Aristotelian theatre for its pure cathartic and hypnotic nature, Boal critiques Brecht’s characters as “objects of social forces, not of the values of the superstructure” (Boal, *The Theatre of the Oppressed* xi-x).

Nonetheless, Boal believes that his theatre starts where Brecht’s theatre ends. For Boal, it is not enough to arouse a critical awareness in the spectator’s perception by Brecht’s ‘alienation’ techniques; the spectator must participate in the action that is taking place on stage. Instead of letting the character/actor think and act for the spectator, the latter should not be a passive listener but an active contributor. In fact, Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* seeks to free the spectator and demolish the barriers between the spectator and the actor.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Boal argues that the “theatre of the oppressed is not

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<sup>4</sup> Such an idea can be realized in Boal’s precursor Paulo Freire’s theory of the pedagogy of the oppressed.

revolutionary in itself, but it is surely a rehearsal for revolution. The liberated spectator launched into action.” (Ibid 122) Such a revolutionary rehearsal encapsulates a transitive dialog which “recognizes that each person must determine for himself or herself the identity of the enemy and how, given personal and social circumstances, to best combat this enemy.” (Schutzman & Jan Cohen-Cruz 142)

To be activated and be a dynamic participant in the action on stage, the *spect-actor* therefore should be freed from the fear that keeps him/her afraid of fighting oppression. To achieve such a revolutionary goal, Boal proposes three types of theatrical techniques: the *Forum Theatre*, the *Image Theatre*, and the *Invisible Theatre*.

In the *Forum Theatre*, the protagonist is shown as unable to overcome the oppression thus the joker<sup>5</sup> “invites the spectators to replace the protagonist at any point in the scene that they can imagine an alternative action that could lead to a solution.” (Schutzman & Jan Cohen-Cruz 237) Being a social process, the *Forum Theatre* allows the *spect-actor* to test and develop his/her powers of resistance in a wider sense by, for instance, standing up to a tyrannical boss in a Forum.

In the *Image Theatre*, participants create embodiments of their feelings and experiences through a series of wordless exercises. “Beginning with a selected theme, participants “sculpt” images onto their own and others' bodies. These frozen images are then “dynamized,” or brought to life, through a

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<sup>5</sup>The **joker** is the director/master of ceremonies of a TO workshop or performance. In Forum Theatre, the joker sets up the rules of the event for the audience, facilitates the spectators' replacement of the protagonist, and sums up the essence of each solution proposed in the interventions. See Mady Schutzman and Jan Cohen-Cruz *Playing Boal* (Routledge, 1994) p.237.

sequence of movement-based and interactive exercises.” (Ibid 237) As for the *Invisible Theatre*, it shows a rehearsal of a sequence of events that is performed in a nontheatrical space as in a public; it seizes the attention of people who are uninformed about the fact that they are watching a premeditated performance:

It is at once theatre and real life, for although rehearsed, it happens in real time and space and the "actors" must take responsibility for the consequences of the "show." The goal is to bring attention to a social problem for the purpose of stimulating public dialogue. (Ibid 237)

Ultimately, Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* has somehow succeeded in engendering an awareness of the society’s politicization of gender, class, race, and family by *activating* the spectator and making him/her “act in the face of one’s pain, not to find an easier resignation or solace in passivity.” (Ibid 152)

### Concluding Diagrams

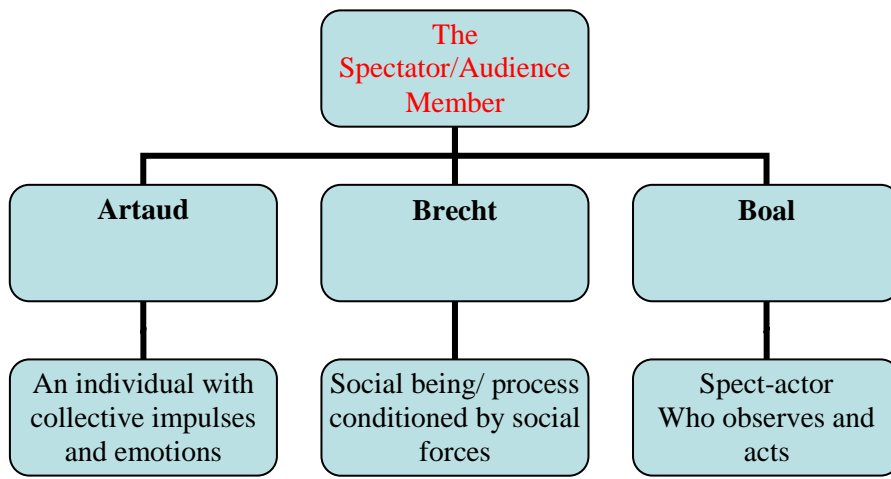


Figure 1

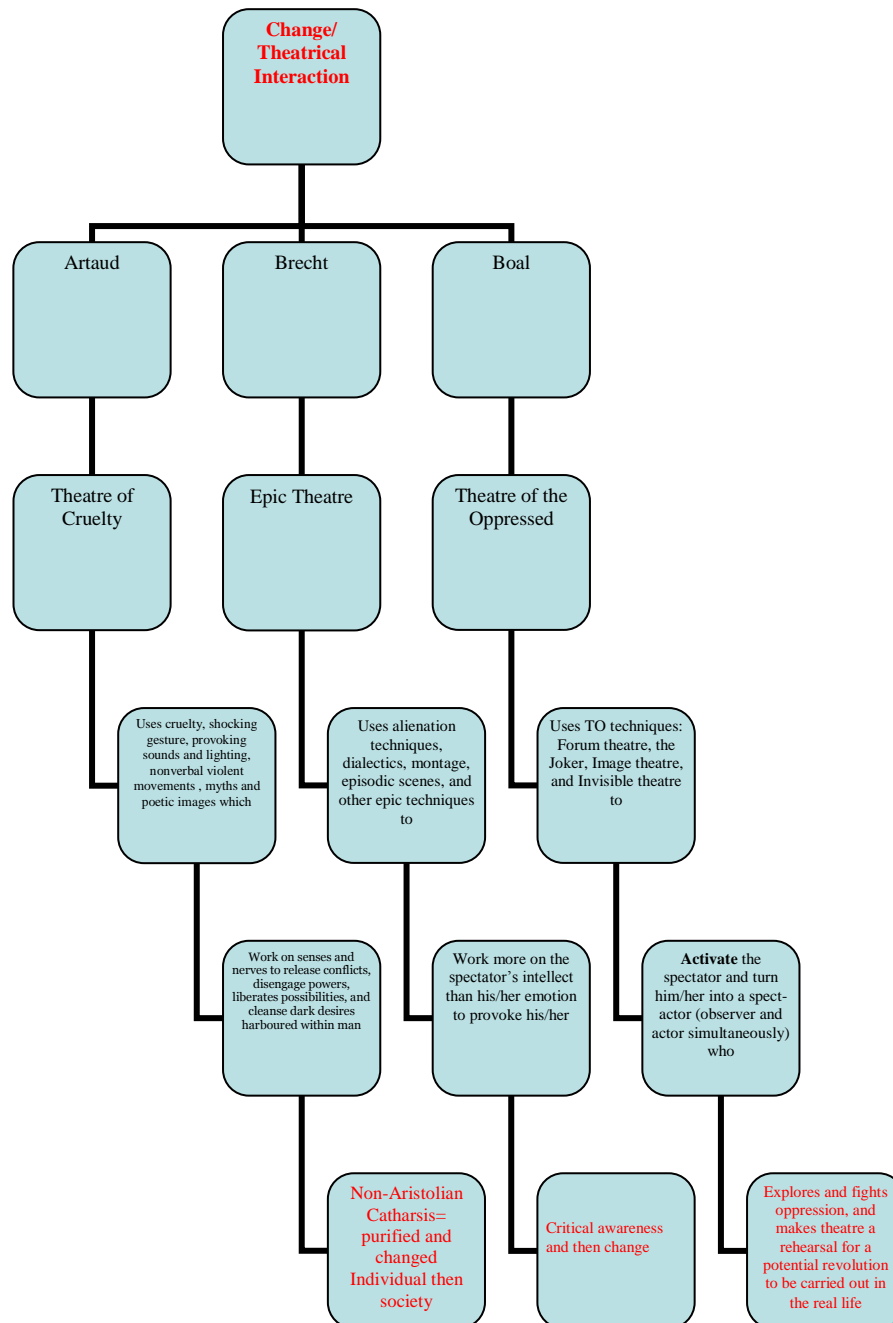


Figure 2

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