

Staging Change: The Use of Theatre in Global Civil Society

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Theatre's symbolic power has long been harnessed by civil society.¹ The sixties, seventies, and eighties saw a rise of popular protest for women's and LGBTQ+ rights, as well as anti-war and anti-nuclear movements. In tandem, there was a rise of political theatre and direct action using theatre or theatrical techniques to achieve civil society actors' goals. This paper examines and assesses the effectiveness of groups who are using theatre to engage with issues in civil society. The definition of theatre that this paper is using is purposefully broad to include civil society groups that are using theatrical techniques in direct action or groups that perform in non-traditional settings. The paper consists of four short case studies: the carnivalesque/anti-capitalist clowning movement, environmental movement's direct action, Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, and *Bread and Puppet Theatre*. The case studies are compared and contrasted, highlighting the diversity of theatrical techniques and goals. Then, the success of these groups is examined. Their effectiveness is assessed by whether or not they meet their self-defined goals. I argue that it is ultimately difficult to assess the success of theatre in global civil society. These groups often work at the local level when many of the issues they present requires trans-national organizing. In addition, it is difficult to understand a particular performance's effect on the audience and whether or not it will spark social change. Moreover, these four case studies illustrate the effectiveness of theatre for justice when trying to engage people at a local level. However, they also highlight the struggles to find a meaningful and transformative space at the international level. This could be due in part to the barriers of culture and language as well as

the high cost of international organizing. What is unclear and difficult to measure is whether or not theatre for social justice can change the minds of those they are trying to reach.

The Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA) is an anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist, left-wing organization that combines the techniques of clowning, direct action, and non-violent civil disobedience. For the purposes of this paper, direct action is defined as "a term for activist methods that directly confront and, perhaps, disrupt or change sociopolitical processes, as opposed to indirect activism that seeks to lobby for change through influencing politicians or swaying public opinion."² CIRCA was founded in 2003 to create a spectacle to welcome "arch-clown George W. Bush on his royal visit to London."³ The group, along with other similar carnivalesque and clowning organizations, improvised performances that were intended to disrupt international summits such as the G8 or World Bank meetings. The organization trains those who want to be involved in the clown protests on the basics of acting and finding your own clown as well as improvisation.

At a protest against the 2005 G8 summit in Edinburgh, police were confronted with a CIRCA organized 'tactical carnival.' This included a gaggle of crazily-dressed clowns wanting to play games with them. The clowns shined the shoes of riot police with feather dusters, kissed their riot shields with lipstick, and did the hokey-pokey. The carnival was performed by local residents as well as international members of CIRCA.⁴ The carnival, which included clowns, theatre performances, and samba bands, is meant to be viewed and experienced as a rejection of authoritarian control and a celebration of the joy

in solidarity and resistance.⁵ The movement is partially inspired by the works of Bakhtin and Rabelais whose theories of the carnivalesque describe how carnivals can be an important tactic in the struggle against global capitalism. They argue that these types of carnivals breakdown barriers between individuals and emphasize collective engagement.⁶ Another goal of CIRCA is to disrupt the hegemonic and nihilistic public perception of protesters as well as upend the clichéd images and interactions between those who do and do not have power.⁷

The carnivalesque or 'Carnival of the Oppressed' movement has been active globally. The Carnival Against Capital at the 1999 G8 summit in London brought together ten thousand people from around the world who recognize capitalism to be "the root of our social and ecological problems."⁸ In the midst of samba band performances, the protesters dressed up in costume and played games in an effort to take the focus and space of the G8 summit from the elite to the people.⁹ A 'Carnival of the Oppressed' was also performed by ten thousand Nigerians during the shutting down of Port Harcourt, an oil port. In response, a laugh parade was being conducted by four hundred Indian farmers and other protesters from the Global South at the G8 summit in Koln.¹⁰

The carnivalesque and anti-capitalist clown movements hope to attract those who may otherwise be put off by the 'seriousness' of social justice and allows people to maintain relative anonymity as everyone paints their faces, dresses in ridiculous costumes, and acts as a group.¹¹ One of the tactical techniques in this group is "using absurdity to undermine the aura of authority."¹² Clowning and carnivals disrupt the dominant narratives created by the State and mainstream media. The technique maintains that ridicule and absurdity are powerful tools to expose those in power. The groups maintain that non-violent clowning makes it very difficult, especially if there are cameras rolling, to be arrested. Clowns and carnivals also reframe how protesters are typically viewed.

CIRCA and the carnivalesque movements have been successful in reaching their goals of reframing protests and creating new non-clichéd images. While a bunch of clowns are not going to shut down the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or end global capitalism, these types of theatrical actions take power back to the collective and refocuses away from state-made and hegemonic narratives. The movements celebrate every day working peo-

ple and aim to engage them. However, I am wary of whether working-class people are deeply embedded in these movements. The organization was started by middle-class artists and academic activists. I remain skeptical whether this ridiculous and highly active and engaged movement does attract those left-out of conventional social movements.

In terms of global partnerships and engagement, the carnivalesque and rebel clown movements are often found to be protesting at World Trade Organization (WTO) and IMF/World Bank meetings as well as G8 summits since. These institutions underscore the reality of the globalized world. The tactics of the protest groups aim to highlight the hypocrisy of these institutions. Furthermore, they look to bring the focus and power back to those who are directly affected by the decisions these institutions are making. Together, these theatrical protest groups only seem to have loose partnerships or affiliations. Despite focusing on international issues, transnational organization does not seem to be an integral method for these groups.¹³ Transnational organizing has the potential to grow and deepen these movements. Whenever a group is protesting a certain practice or occurrence that takes place abroad, say structural adjustment programs by the IMF, it is important to engage with the communities who are being affected by this issue. Theatre in protest has the potential to give space for opposing narratives, and when covered by the media, these oppositional stories can reach a great number of people and begin to enter mainstream discussion.

The environmental movement is known for using dramatic and theatrical techniques to bring media and popular attention to an issue. Theatre can range from a street performance about the effects of Monsanto on a community to a direct action of defiance or civil disobedience.¹⁴ In both theatrical protest and in conventional theatre, there are elements of symbolism, ritual, costume, and props, as well as playing with the ideas of status and power.¹⁵ The North East Forest Alliance (NEFA) has used these techniques to gain legitimacy in politics and power against logging companies.

NEFA started in 1989 in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. They have used theatrical techniques in their civil disobedience actions against the logging industry. In 1990, NEFA staged a four-month blockade of an old growth rainforest which ultimately led to a court injunction against the logging company. After, the group was able to help establish a moratorium on logging one hun-

dred and eighty thousand hectares of old growth forest.¹⁶ The protesters used theatrical techniques to establish a new balance of power. By 'playing' as if they (the protesters) had power and were in control of the blockade, they were able to change the dominant narrative and reverse the power dynamic between the police, the logging company, and the dissenters.¹⁷ These types of protests often face difficulties establishing legitimacy with the public because the actions can become demonized by the media. However, the change in power dynamics can also give the protesters greater legitimacy. Furthermore, they can increase the political stakes of the event.¹⁸

A year later, NEFA staged a direct action where they took over the government forestry offices in NSW and announced that it had decided on new forestry procedures. One of the results of this mediatized action was that the NEFA was labelled by the media as 'terrorists'.¹⁹ However, this led to several changes in a new protocol between the New South Wales police and NEFA. For instance:

the protocol included agreements by police not to target protesters with drug searches or vehicle registration checks, and to allow immunity from trespass charges for properly identified NEFA liaison officers. The agreement effectively gave a kind of diplomatic immunity to identified NEFA personnel.²⁰

The theatrical techniques used by NEFA changed their power dynamic with the police and government. By creating a new story of sustained resistance by staging a series of actions, it allowed NEFA to gain legitimacy as an actor and in the early 2000s, NEFA was formally included in political negotiations regarding forestry in NSW.²¹ Bill Moyer, who describes the life cycles of social movements, would see NEFA's development as typical of a successful social movement. Early confrontational and revolutionary events deliver the group's message to the public. Then, with greater public support, the group, is able to use their legitimacy to achieve a political solution to the problem they presented.²²

It should be noted that gaining political legitimacy is not the only valuable goal or marker of success of a social movement. While NEFA met their goals through negotiations with politicians and the police, some may view this as 'selling out,' or that making concessions means you have ultimately lost. Instead, I argue that the case of NEFA demonstrates the power of social movements to

become powerful, mainstream actors.²³

Greenpeace uses elements of theatre and drama in their direct action. Their first major, theatrical action was going to the nuclear fallout zone in the Aleutians where the United States had been conducting tests.²⁴ In 1971, the group sailed an old boat to the fallout zone resulting in widespread media coverage and public support to stop nuclear testing.²⁵ Their action brought the end to the tests and resulted in the island being made into a bird sanctuary.²⁶ Greenpeace's activism has seen many successes over the years including international reductions in whaling and a ban on disposing nuclear garbage in the Atlantic Ocean.²⁷ On the surface, Greenpeace's actions may seem like 'straightforward agitprop,' however, the dramatic and theatrical narrative Greenpeace creates through its actions bolster its message. Their work often uses strong, emotional symbolism and narratives that show the struggle between protagonists and antagonists with storylines that often lead to a climax and then a denouement.²⁸ As a result, Greenpeace's methods have been influential in how the environmental movement conducts direct action.

There are strong critiques against the way Greenpeace conducts their theatrical direct action, however. There is a grey zone between the work Greenpeace does that wavers between theatre and spectacle. Spectacle can distance the intended audience from the issue and discourage action. It can also take away legitimacy from the actor and garner negative public opinion. Many of the actions of Greenpeace could be viewed as stunts made to attract mainstream television and viral internet cycles that do not ultimately contribute to genuine action and change.

Theatre of the Oppressed is a method created by Brazilian theatre practitioner, Augusto Boal. The method was inspired by personal experiences of institutional oppression that Boal faced (he lived in exile while Brazil was under a military regime for many years) and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. This method of protest and direct action is different from the previous case studies as it specifically sets out to create theatre that inspires dialogue and social change, instead of simply using elements of theatre in direct action. Theatre of the Oppressed is an umbrella term for the many forms Boal used to create discussion and action around oppression. A few of the main forms are forum theatre, legislative theatre, and invisible theatre.²⁹

Forum theatre is one of Boal's most common-

ly used techniques. It involves a trained facilitator, called a joker, bringing those facing oppression together to collectively create a small play that shows the type of everyday oppression that people are facing. The short play is then performed in front of an audience, sometimes in a town square or at a community centre, and the public and stakeholders are invited to attend. The play, usually a series of simple scenes or 'actions,' is performed twice, once in full, and in the second performance, the audience is instructed to become 'spect-actors.' This means that audience members are to yell 'stop!' when they see oppression taking place and have an idea on how to change the situation. The spect-actor goes on stage to replace an actor or to create a new character. The joker's job is to facilitate this and to refuse any 'magic solutions.' Magic solutions are solutions that would be impossible, like an antagonist suddenly and inexplicably changing their opinion or giving up.³⁰ The joker then stimulates discussion with the audience about whether or not the solution was realistic or if it worked.³¹ The method is used to help communities think outside the box when approaching concrete solutions to oppression, to engage and provide agency to those oppressed, and to delve into the complexities of a situation.

Theatre of the Oppressed is used around the world and for a wide variety of situations. One example is from an early forum theatre that Boal facilitated in Sicily in 1977. The village residents identified that they were facing three main, concrete oppressive forces: the mafia, patriarchy, and police.³² The community actors along with Boal created a series of short plays that focused on each of these issues. They went on to perform them in the town square and they invited a number of stakeholders and local politicians.³³ The forum lasted from nine in the evening to three in the morning as people engaged in debate about what solutions could and would not work.³⁴

Augusto Boal's work has mostly been adopted to work at the local level but often the issues discussed are ones that include international actors like multinational corporations coming to towns or international mining businesses taking land. Forum theater and Theatre of the Oppressed can easily slip into being overly idealistic. The joker has a difficult job of facilitating discussion and getting the spect-actors to focus on realistic solutions. There is also the issue that these productions would only be viewed by a self-selecting crowd and that it would

essentially be preaching to the choir. One of Boal's most famous quotes is: "the theatre itself it not revolutionary: it is rehearsal for the revolution."³⁵ Theatre of the Oppressed thrives when everyday people can act from their own agency and use theatre to help stimulate discussions with opposing narratives.

Another popular theatre style coined by Boal that is used by social movements and groups is invisible theatre. It is another type of public theatre but it is where the 'spect-actors' do not know that they are participants.³⁶ It involves a group of actors performing a pre-rehearsed scene that appears as if it is real life. The goal of the technique is to spark a public discussion without sermonizing. The audience can take up any position on the issue that is presented. Theatre of the Oppressed stresses that it should never be "didactic to its audience, it involves a process of learning together rather than one-way teaching; it assumes that there is as much likelihood that the audience knows the answers as the performers."³⁷

One example of invisible theatre that was facilitated by Boal took place in the Paris Métro. The group of actors composed a series of scenes that had to do with sexual harassment on the trains. It involved a woman being sexually harassed on a train and then calling the man out for it. In this performance, none of the passengers came to the woman's defense. There were also several plants on the train other than those directly engaging in the action. Then, at the next station a young man got on and started being sexually harassed by a woman. Several passengers came to his defense. The plants started engaging in debate with the passengers over what was going on.³⁸ The actors never informed the audience that they were watching a rehearsed piece of theatre.

Boal recognizes that simply performing these invisible plays is not enough to change the entire social landscape and eradicate metro sexual harassment.³⁹ The beauty of invisible theatre is that it often brings out people's genuine attitudes and gives strangers the opportunity to debate this issue in the public. Boal maintains that invisible theatre's purpose is for education and liberation. Obviously, there are important ethical considerations with invisible theatre; there are deep critiques of invisible theatre about the level of deception that the audience is faced with and the real possibility of violent conflict with the audience when they observe social injustices. There is also the question of appropri-

ing identities. The actors playing characters that, to everyone else, are real people. The issue here is that the actor may have no personal experience playing the characters, like a homeless or homosexual person. The events also have the potential to traumatize those who have experienced oppression.⁴⁰ The ethics of invisible theatre rest on a teleological understanding, in other words, that the deception and potential for harm is justified in that invisible theatre can create real discussion and the potential for social change. Furthermore, if an action goes wrong and the police get involved and it is revealed that the audience was manipulated through invisible theatre, the important discussions and potential change could be lost. The audience could leave with very negative feelings toward the experience without reflecting on the social problem that was presented. Theatre companies and organizations looking to stage invisible theatre should consider these ethical complexities. This would include making sure the audience will not be scared, putting provisions in place to avert danger, and minimizing deception.⁴¹ Ethics should always come before increasing the dramatic effect.

Like the previous examples, it is difficult to concretely measure the harms and the benefits of invisible theatre and Theatre of the Oppressed, making it hard to assess the effectiveness of this tactic. Like the other examples, it is not meant to, in one sweep, create widespread, sudden social change. Instead, it works on the grassroots level. It can provoke discussion about both global or local issues. This being said, one should not substitute these mediums for work on a broader level. There is also the issue of falling into the notion that “if people only knew the truth then they would change.” I argue that simply being confronted with the truth does not mean that you will automatically make significant change. Furthermore, at the heart of many Theatre of the Oppressed narratives, there is a ‘good guy’ and a ‘bad guy.’ This simplistic rendering of the world and social relations makes the narrative’s message clear but does not adequately capture the complexity of many social issues. With this in mind, I think understanding these complexities is necessary for creating thoughtful change.

The final case study of a group using theatre as a medium of social change is the Vermont-based *Bread and Puppet Theatre* company. Similar to the previous case study, this company uses plays to create dialogue. *Bread and Puppet Theatre* (BnP), since the beginning, has created pieces that oppose

capitalism, reject liberal politics, “the bourgeois state and the view of progress based on technological innovation.”⁴² The group, led by German WWII refugee Peter Schumann, began in New York City in the 1960s. The groups first staged plays and attended anti-Vietnam war protests, where they performed with giant puppets, songs, and costumes. One of the core ideas behind BnP is the idea of ‘cheap art.’ This means making props, puppets, and costumes from easily available, reused and recycled materials, using the skills of local people that are around, and making the performances available to the public. The company has created giant puppet shows and political theatre pieces for over fifty years. For instance, they have protested the Vietnam and Iraq wars, U.S. intervention in Latin America, fracking, and nuclear testing.⁴³ The company now mainly resides in a communal living farm in Glover, Vermont with over twenty acres of farm land and have a full operation of bread-baking, theatre-making, and a puppet museum.⁴⁴

Many of BnP pieces use elements of ancient theatre such as ritual, old folktales, public pageantry, and folk art.⁴⁵ The primary goals of BnP, especially with their pageantry and public theatre displays, is to occupy public space and “influence public opinion by occupying and exploiting the power of these sites.”⁴⁶ Their style of theatre does not conform to realism which can make it easier for the group to explore taboo or fraught subjects. In addition, BnP’s public and anti-capitalist way of creating art and generating dialogue challenges authority and tends to “consolidate a sense of counter-cultural group identity, and reclaim a sense of democratic agency for the people rather than the State.”⁴⁷ BnP mostly works on a local and national level but their productions confront international issues. Unlike some of the other examples, BnP does have an international reach as they tour their shows around the world, however, mostly the stops are in European countries.

Similarly to the other case studies, it is difficult to assess whether or not BnP is meeting their goals. When asked about the company’s influence over politics, Peter Schuman replied: “nothing whatsoever. Very obviously you don’t influence those politics. They go their way and you may be wiggling against them and you may be running and screaming and excite your neighbors to do the same. But that’s about it.”⁴⁸ Schuman then goes on to state that revolutions begin with cultural revolutions, showing his belief that BnP’s productions are

contributing to narratives against the status quo. Schuman hopes that people who come to see the shows will reflect on their lives and start to think about a different way of life.⁴⁹ BnP has existed for many decades and has been highly influential for other political and puppetry theatre companies. While it is almost impossible to gauge the level of impact on their audience, BnP's longevity shows how it has become embedded in the cultural consciousness of political theatre in the United States and abroad. Like the rebel clowning movement, I question BnP's assertion that their art is for everyone. While they do consciously tell stories that subvert dominant narratives and use their cheap art philosophy, people ultimately have to buy a ticket to see their shows or go to their farm in rural Vermont. This limits their audience to a very specific population of civil society that are interested in theatre and would probably already know about the type of messages in BnP's performances.

These four case studies demonstrate the diverse uses of theatre and theatrical techniques for direct action and social change. Most of the groups do include discussion of international issues in their work but few engage in formal international partnerships or organizing. With the exception of rebel clowning, engaging with global civil society does not necessarily seem to be one of their goals and the partnerships between groups seem to be only loose affiliations. I argue that these groups could benefit from more international partnerships. What these groups have in common is that they use theatrical techniques that promote anti-hierarchical and popular engagement with local and global issues. In addition, the groups primarily focus on creating change at local levels. Part of the strength of theatre is that it is a highly emotional and captivates the audience. Now in the era of online activism, theatre used for social change and dialogue has the potential to more directly engage people. The major challenge for some of these groups, such as rebel clowning and BnP, is making sure the process and product is accessible to all. From exploring these case studies, on the surface it appears that theatre for social change is largely conducted by white, middle-class artists. In saying this, I do not want to discount the theatre for social change work

that is being created by the working class and people of colour. What I mean to point out is that the most famous examples of theatre for social change are organized and conducted by middle-class white people. This unfortunately is unsurprising; however, for this type of theatre to have a tangible impact, this needs to change. There is also very little academic research on the effectiveness of theatre used for social change. The medium is diverse and can be highly divisive. For example, Greenpeace's theatrical 'stunts' or NEFA's decision to take over government building. What is clear from the case studies is that theatre's elements of ritual, symbol, and image are powerful tools that can be harnessed by civil society. This tactic has the potential to create images that can be shared online and resonate globally or create a movement, like in invisible theatre, where an honest dialogue can take place. However, it remains difficult to assess the long-term effects of a performance, given that it is a subjective experience.⁵⁰

In conclusion, this paper provides a survey of four case studies of theatre used for social change. The groups that were examined used theatre and theatrical tactics in diverse ways, from creating a play on a specific social issue like *Bread and Puppet* or Theatre of the Oppressed, to using theatrical techniques like reversal of status, raising the stakes, and symbolism in Greenpeace and NEFA's direct actions. The effectiveness of these techniques is difficult to assess and there has been little academic research into the effectiveness of the groups and their methods. The groups explored in this paper are politically left-wing groups and it should be noted that these same techniques are used by groups on the right wing to the same effect. The groups primarily work on a grassroots and local level but often make performances that speak to international issues such as nuclear testing, environmental degradation, or oppression. The essence of theatre is collaborative and holds the potential to bring concerned civil society groups together to discuss local problems and have their voices heard.⁵¹ Despite its unknown effectiveness and ability to create change, theatre in protest and social movements continues to be used internationally and holds the potential to be an immersive and emotional experience.

Notes

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