

Spring 2013

You, Me and Society: Political Theatre and Its Impacts

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You, Me and Society: Political Theatre and Its Impacts



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Abstract

For a period of one month I researched three distinct categories of political theatre: *Theatre of Witness*, *Theatre of the Oppressed* and more traditional theatre –wherein the audience and performers are clearly defined and separated. I was interested in getting an in-depth look at various forms of theatre and their potential effects on both producers and consumers of the art form. To conduct my research I interviewed eight individuals involved in the theatric world, participated in a theatre workshop, studied a variety of theatric literature and attended three politically charged theatre productions. I discovered a litany of things from my diverse subjects. Many themes emerged from my research but I chose to focus on three: personal effects of theatre, interpersonal effects of theatre and societal effects of theatre. Within those three categories my research fell into more subcategories. Intrapersonal effects included empowerment and catharsis; interpersonal effects included relationship building, identity dynamism and the dangers of empathy; societal effects included activism and critique. My findings were certainly not empirical in that they were all derived from the perspectives of individuals intimately tied to the theatric world. But nonetheless I discovered strands of what the apparent impact of theatre can be: empowering, cathartic, relationship building, awareness raising, society critiquing and future imagining, among others. My findings mean that there is, at the very least, a perceived impact in political theatre and that, potentially, theatre can be life-changing for individuals on both sides of the curtain.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank everyone that has helped me in any manner on this project.

I would like to thank Dr. Stephen Ryan for advising me along the way and Ms. Aeveen Kerrisk for her invaluable role in this paper and my experience in Ireland. I would also like to thank John and Kym Dunne-Fleming and Emma Downey for so graciously putting a roof over my head and food on my plate. I also want to thank Eugene and Brighdin Lyttle for their overwhelming hospitality toward my family and I. Furthermore, I would like to thank Eamonn Baker, James King, Dave Duggan, Chris McAlinden, Emma Stuart, Teya Sepinuck, Elaine Forde, Idan Meir and Donal O’Kelly for taking time out of their busy schedules to talk with me. I must also thank the Playhouse in Derry and Magee College, University of Ulster for allowing me to work and learn on their premises and with their resources.

Methodology

I began my project with a focus on sentimental education. Dr. Stephen Ryan introduced the subject to me and this is why I initially asked him to be my academic advisor. I was not sure where I would take this focus; all I knew was that I wanted to research some form of artistic expression and its efficacy in connecting people. Soon after learning of sentimental education I was exposed to Teya Sepinuck's *Theatre of Witness*. I immediately knew I had found, at least, a facet that I would research. From there I began investigating different forms of theatre and slowly my current and final topic, political theatre, emerged. After some research I narrowed my focus into three categories: traditional theatre, Theatre of the Oppressed and Theatre of Witness. I set off to dissect differences, identify common threads and discover what sort of intentions and effects each could have.

To research this project I conducted interviews, studied literature, attended theatre and attended and participated in a workshop. I chose these methods because, aside from interning at playhouse or theatre, they seemed the best way to intimately experience political theatre. I conducted my research between April 1st and April 22nd, 2013.

Location

The majority of my work –both research and interviews–was done in Derry, UK. Three of my interviews –with Teya Sepinuck, Emma Stuart and Chris McAlinden– were conducted in the Playhouse in Derry. Others were done in

various parts of Derry, from cafes and pubs to homes and offices. My first interview, with Donal O’Kelly, was conducted in Dublin and my interview with Idan Meir was done in Letterkenny, Co. Donegal. The majority of my literary research was done at the library Magee College, University of Ulster.

Since the moment my project sprouted in my mind, Derry was always my planned hub of operation. After all it is the home to *Theatre of Witness*, Dr. Ryan and Magee College and a lively theatre scene.

Literature Review

In researching this project I utilized a vast array of literature to provide myself with a broad and solid context. I began by reading the *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* by an American Philosopher Richard Rorty. The book, despite proving difficult to someone with no philosophical background like myself, proved an interesting lens that I utilized throughout my project. In it Rorty, among other things, discusses his views on human solidarity. He does not recognize humans to have an “essential humanity” that bonds us together, rather he sees humans as inclined to sentimentality, which can be honed and strengthened, he argues, through the arts –specifically he believes literature best carries out this task, although Dr. Ryan and myself apply his concept to the broader field of ‘art.’

I then began to acclimate myself with theatric literature. I perused Oscar G. Brockett’s *History of the Theatre* as well as *Aspects of the Irish Theatre* by Jeanne Lezon and Patrick Rafroidi, Tom Maguire’s *Making Theatre in Northern Ireland* and Patrick Tuite’s *Theatre of Crisis*. These readings gave me grounding

in both a global (mostly western) history of theatre as well and the history of Irish theatre. I began to trace the notable roots of political theatre globally —from Aristophanes to Brecht— and here in Ireland —from Smock Alley to Sean O’Casey up to Brian Friel.

I then dove into the literary world of Augusto Boal. I began by reading his autobiography *Hamlet and the Baker's Son*; I then read *Theatre of the Oppressed* and *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed*, both also by Boal. To supplement those three texts I utilized *Augusto Boal* by Frances Babbage and *A Boal Companion* by Jan Cohen-Cruz, Mady Schutzman and Warren Linds. Through these four texts (the latter of which contains a litany of essays) I began to grasp Boal’s journey, projects, impact and legacy: I learned the conceptual framework for *Theatre of the Oppressed* as well as the life that led up to its invention. It was fascinating to combine the autobiography —which was written very casually and friendly— with the essays of *A Boal Companion*. I could glean an academic and dry perspective from the latter as well as a nostalgic and emotional account from Boal.

Alongside the Boal literature I also became acclimated with the Field Day project through two texts: the first being *Acting between the Lines* by Marilynn J. Richtarik and the second *Translations* by Brian Friel (which I, in fact, first read before beginning this project). These two texts gave me an appreciation and understanding, though far from comprehensive, of a recent and notable surge in Irish political theatre.

Interviews

For my project I interviewed eight individuals, including playwrights, theatre directors, performers, community workers, street artists, videographers and theatre managers. Many of these people I met at, or through the Playhouse. For this I have to thank Emma Stuart and Elaine Forde for facilitating these contacts –and in Emma’s case becoming one! Eamonn Baker also provided great contacts. Some of these interviews were recorded using an application on my phone; others were not –by request or mere convenience. During all of my interviews I took notes in my Moleskine handbook.

Eamonn Baker is a managing director at Towards Understanding and Healing, an organization that addresses the importance of personal narratives in Northern Ireland’s post-conflict environment. In addition, he is close friends with James King and has close ties with much of Derry’s rich artistic culture. My interview with Baker started off less than stellar—a bus delay forced me to be 10 minutes late. We met in his office and despite this initial obstacle the interview proceeded swimmingly. Eamonn Baker is an older man and the discussion felt more like one between a professor (him) and a pupil (me) than a typical or casual conversation. From him I learned about how different arts, including theatre, address sociopolitical conflict. Furthermore, he gave me an incredible book, *Moving Pitches*, of James King’s street performance art.

James King is a retired professor, community developer and acclaimed street performer. He has produced a book *Moving Pitches* of his work in street performance. His work addresses pertinent sociopolitical issues –both local and global– as well as internal and external struggles of his own. Though I am not including anything I learned from King in our interview at the Derry bus station café, I did gain a lot from our discussion. Hearing him discuss his vast array of street performances was enthralling and intriguing; what he said gave my perspective a broader context of what performance art can be.

Dave Duggan is a successful and highly regarded playwright, director and novelist from Derry, UK. His plays too vary in their subject matter, though most have strong political backdrops. *AH 6905*, for example, tells the tale of a man in a hospital ward who, the next day, is set to have surgery to remove the ‘truth’ of the years 1969-2005, the truth of all the death and violence, from his body. And *Scenes from an Inquiry* gives a theatric recreation of the Saville Inquiry –the investigation into the 1972 Bloody Sunday Massacre. He has also written scripts for film, of which *Dance Lexie Dance* was nominated for an Oscar in 1998. We

met in *Thyme Out*, Magee College's cafeteria. My interview with Duggan was one of my favorites; the conversation drifted quickly from question-based into natural reflexive conversation. I did not feel as if he was preaching to me but I still absorbed a lot from what he had to say.

Chris McAlinden is a videographer and past participant in *Theatre of Witness*. He took part in the production *We Carried Your Secrets*. McAlinden has also studied theatre and worked with a *Theatre of the Oppressed* troop for two years. We met at the launch of the *BT Portrait of a City* project in Derry. After we hopped in his car and headed over to my homestay to talk over a cup of coffee. Because of our similar ages, the interview proceeded much more conversationally than most of my other interviews. He gave me an insight into what it was like to participate in the *Theatre of Witness* –its effects and limitations as well as his feelings of the experience in hindsight.

Emma Stuart is a program coordinator at the Playhouse in Derry. She has worked in managing and coordinating the *Theatre of Witness* productions and has taken an extensive course in the practice of *Theatre of Witness*. Our interview was at the Playhouse. I had, though, met her a few different times prior, making the interview very comfortable. She gave me another perspective on the *Theatre of Witness* process; one that, though intimate with the project, is not from a vantage as close as a director or participant.

Teya Sepinuck, a trained dancer who had never studied drama, began *Theatre of Witness* in 1985. Her first production was called *Years* and sought to “explore aging” by finding elderly and allowing them to tell and perform the stories. She put an advertisement in her local newspaper and assembled a group of six –two men and four women. She interviewed all of them individually, learned their stories and “brought them together as a group to engage in the creative process” (Sepinuck 19). Group activities included drawing self-portraits, making masks, tracing lifelines and singing songs from their younger days. Through the six months process, and with the help of a playwright, Teya and the group crafted a script of their stories to perform. A composer helped add original music to the production –with vocals sung by the performers, based on their own stories. The audience for *Years*' first performance reacted with tears and a “vociferous standing ovation” (22). “I realized,” Sepinuck writes, “that this new form of performance had more potency than anything I'd been able to make choreographically... I realized that this was the perfect marriage of my interests and skills, and it now felt like a calling” (22).

This, in essence, is still the process to which *Theatre of Witness*, or TW, adheres. For the past 28 years, Sepinuck has been putting on TW productions all over the world. Her topics and locations have varied; from Cambodian immigrants in Philadelphia and life-sentenced prisoners in Chester, Pennsylvania to runaway girls in Poland and, most recently, Troubles-affected individuals in Northern Ireland. Since 2009, Sepinuck has been conducting TW productions at the Playhouse in Derry, Northern Ireland focusing on the aftermath of the Troubles. These include *We Carried Your Secrets* (2009, about fathers on the

front lines of the Troubles), *I Once Knew a Girl* (2010, bringing unheard stories of women in the Troubles) and *Release* (2012, featuring men coming to terms with their roles in the Troubles). This year (2013), Sepinuck plans to produce her final iteration of TW, called *Sanctuary*, which will focus on the concept of a safe haven.

I met Teya Sepinuck in her office at the Playhouse. The interview went well, though I wish I had had a chance to read her book *Theatre of Witness* before talking to her (though I have read it since). Due to her overt spirituality and proclaimed ‘otherness,’ I felt almost as a guru’s disciple during our meeting, absorbing her words and messages.

Idan Meir is an Israeli transplant, playwright and theatre director. Meir had served in the Israeli Defense Force (IDF), as most Israelis do at the age of 18, but Meir’s tour of duty was particularly difficult: he served in Lebanon during the first Lebanon war and there lost his best friend. This horrific experience prompted him to refuse further service and eventually begin studying theatre at the University of Tel-Aviv. Since earning his masters in theatre he has written and directed a variety of plays and has studied and operated Theatre of the Oppressed-style workshops and Forum Theatres around the world --I will delve into this in a later section. Six years ago he ventured to Donegal to work for six months, promptly fell in love (with a girl and the country) and has been here ever since. He now works out of the An Grianan theatre in Letterkenny, out front of which we met for our interview.

We discussed his theatric origins as well as his views on the efficacy of both traditional theatre and *Theatre of the Oppressed*. I had a point of connection with him in that he was Israeli and I had studied Hebrew as a child and had gone to Israel last summer. This common ground, though certainly not a focal point, helped me connect with Meir and helped the interview to proceed comfortably.

Donal O’Kelly has written and performed many politically charged plays. His subjects have varied from Fredrick Douglass’ Irish voyage (*the Cambria*) and Ugandan refugees (*Asylum! Asylum!*) to the Corrib Gas Conflict (*Aillilu Fionnuala*) and the global arms industry (*The Business of Blood*). He got into theatre after dropping out of college, finding a civil service job and spending his extracurricular money differently than his peers: “I would take a night out and, instead of going to the pub, I would go to the theatre. Soon enough I was addicted.”

We met in a pub in Dublin over a beer. My academic director Aeveen Kerrisk scheduled this interview –as my ‘practice interview’– and I had very little time to prepare, though this proved largely irrelevant. I ended up asking O’Kelly only a couple of questions as he responded to each with fervor and (at times tangential) endurance. This made the interview rather one-sided, with which I had no qualms: he is a brilliant and eccentric man to whom I was happy to listen.

Participant-Observation

I was fortunate to attend a *Theatre of Witness* workshop one Thursday night. We engaged in various exercises —from saying our names and what attribute we bring to the group to guided meditation and— and, even in such a brief experience I began to sense how strong relationships could fortify after months of similar group work, albeit I assume much more emotional and unveiling. Teya Sepinuck, later during our interview, mentioned that the particular workshop I was part of was more introductory and did not approach the depth of some of the extended group workshops she often leads. But it was the open and expressive environment in which we operated —people discussed things they would not in casual conversation and people responded to these comments with acceptance and understanding — that lent me to believe the efficacy and power these workshops could have.

Theatre Experiences

I was lucky to attend three starkly different plays, though all certainly had clear political contexts.

Translations was also the first play I saw in Ireland. We saw it at the Gaeity Theatre and I had read the play twice before viewing, and I paid attention to devices and performances more so than plot. I was struck by the clarity of the two ‘languages’ and was struck by the play’s enduring relevance. Though first performed more than thirty years ago, the play still touched on pertinent Irish subjects in memory and language and delivered brilliantly.

The next politically-focused play that I saw was titled *Singin' I'm No a Billy, He's a Tim* which pitted two rival football fans –one a Protestant cheering for his Rangers and the other a Catholic rooting for the Celtic squad—locked in a jail cell on the day of the big rivalry match. The play, performed in the Waterside area of Derry, was comedic and absurd, playing up to every stereotype imaginable and delivered perfectly. Because no stone was left unturned –no side of the divide left un-lampooned—the play got away with criticizing the absurdity of both extremist ends of the dichotomous Protestant-Catholic divide. This effect was allowed greater because the play was situated in Scotland. The driving mechanism of the play, and what made it more than farce, was the slow deterioration of the lead character's antagonism; because the two were stuck together they began to realize one another's humanity and bonded over similarities. Together, and with the help of the third character, a heartsick jail keep, the two manage to get out of jail with certain prejudices rethought.

The third and final politically charged play I saw was *Guerilla Days*, a theatric adaptation of revolutionary IRA leader Tom Barry's autobiography performed at the Millennium Forum in Derry. The play depicted the harrowing, and at-times triumphant, struggle of Tom Barry and his infamous 3rd West Cork Brigade. The play had little sociopolitical criticism, little if any character development and, surprising to me, received a standing ovation – to which I later realized was due to the crowd's nationalistic predilection. *Guerilla Days* was triumphant and dwelled in the past; it held little relevance to those outside of the Catholic-Republican-Nationalist population, such as myself. Though it must be recognized that, to certain members of that demographic, the play held absolute

value, which speaks to sociopolitical characteristics in its own right. As Dave Duggan put it: “It was the adaptation of a book, of a narrative; it was not true theatre in itself.”

Obstacles and Difficulties

The focal difficulty in this study is something that I recognized from the outset: the nature of my subject matter is immune to most empirical analysis. I approached my project with the knowledge that I was not going to produce results with ‘therefore’ or ‘Q.E.D.’ conclusions. I knew that what I would attain would, without fail, be the perspectives of clearly biased and influenced individuals: nothing that anyone was going to tell me about political theatre would —or could— be absolute truth. Just because Donal O’Kelly told me that the global political system is in atrophy does not mean that I am now an ardent atheist; but it is a valuable insight and perspective. In that vain, I also know that the research I did granted me intimate personal accounts and perspectives that should not be taken lightly.

Other, more practical obstacles that I faced included bus delays, thick accents, unpredictable weather, unstable internet access, tired interviewees and occasional misunderstandings. None of these proved insurmountable or notably serious.

My Biases

While my biases are always important to recognize —such as my liberal upbringing, academic predilection and atheistic disposition—I think it was a

pinpointed project focus that proved to be my most influential bias. Early on in my subject I latched onto a theme, dynamic and rounded identities, and pursued it throughout my interviews. It's important to unearth themes and make connections, and to successfully do this requires a certain amount of fruitless questioning, but I might have attached myself to this theme a bit too much. I found myself asking subjects –specifically I think of James King here– about their perspective on identity dynamism when it wasn't entirely relevant. Regardless, I still believe it to be an important and connecting theme, as elaborated in my analysis.

My innate biases, though, also played their roles. My age, and its accompanying biases, certainly played a role in my interviews with older subjects –lending toward a pupil-professor dynamic at times. Also adding to such a dynamic was my relative inexperience in the field of theatre. My academic inclination also led me to certain degrees of incredulity when talking with Teya Sepinuck and researching the *Theatre of Witness*.

Introduction

In this paper I will be focusing on the effects of contemporary political theatre in these categories: intrapersonal, interpersonal and societal.

Furthermore, I have chosen to focus on three forms of political theatre: *Theatre of the Oppressed*, *Theatre of Witness*, and traditional theatre.

By traditional theatre I refer to the style of theatre wherein there is a clear and defined distinction between performers and audience members. To research this form of theatre I talked to playwrights and performers as well as attended a few politically charged productions.

Augusto Boal developed *Theatre of the Oppressed* in the 1960s. It is a response to traditional theatre wherein audiences are ‘oppressed’ subjects forced to empathize with characters on stage. *Theatre of the Oppressed* allows audience members to interject, analyze and transform the performances they witness. In this it allows the people to learn how to transform their realities. Boal writes: “Perhaps the theater is not revolutionary in itself; but have no doubts, it is a rehearsal of revolution!”

Theatre of the Oppressed, or TO, has spread across the world, becoming a true global theatrical phenomenon, with incarnations popping up everywhere from London to Mozambique and from Delhi to Northern Ireland. It has been adapted to address issues as varied as its locales, including immigration reform, sectarianism, disability awareness and civil war among many others (Babbage, 70,72, 88).

Theatre of Witness, created by Teya Sepinuck in the 1980s, is another form of theatric production. Her process involves gathering groups of people that fit into a given theme—for example, women impacted by the Troubles in Northern Ireland—and works with them for six months, doing group building workshops and individual interviews. From this she crafts a script—participants have final say on what is or is not included—and allows the participants to perform their own story. She describes it as a deeply therapeutic process for everyone involved.

For the past 28 years, Sepinuck has been putting on *Theatre of Witness* productions all over the world. Her topics and locations have varied; from Cambodian immigrants in Philadelphia and life-sentenced prisoners in Chester, Pennsylvania to runaway girls in Poland and, most recently, Troubles-affected individuals in Northern Ireland.

Though Sepinuck openly protested to me describing TW as a form of political theatre I could not help but label it so. While Boal is famous for saying, “all theater is necessarily political, because all the activities of man are political and theater is one of them,” I think TW fits the role of political theatre to an even greater extent. Though it deals not with legislation, government or traditional politicking, TW is a public reaction to forms oppression.

Section I: Interpersonal Effects in Political Theatre

The first aspect of theatric efficacy that I am looking at is interpersonal. In this regard I am examining how the three forms of theatre I have studied affect peoples' relationships. In this I will be underscoring much of what I have researched with the philosophical work of Richard Rorty.

Theatre's strongest potential interpersonal impact is empathy. Through various forms of theatre audiences, directors and performers can all experience strong empathetic connections; they can assume others' stories, pains and loves and a sense of solidarity can be established.

Relationship Building

The most explicit interpersonal effect in the three forms of theatre I studied came from *Theatre of Witness*. In our interview Teya Sepinuck continually emphasized the importance of relationship building in *Theatre of Witness*. She said that in essence *Theatre of Witness* “is *all* about relationships.” The duration —roughly 6 months— and intensity of the program allow for the growth of remarkable relationships. Furthermore, being able to “speak the unspeakable” in a group format, wherein everyone shares their stories, allows the group —who often hail from conflicting backgrounds (e.g. prisoner and prison guard)— to “share their pain and grief collectively.”

Emma Stuart, who works at the Playhouse and helps produce *Theatre of Witness*, echoed this sentiment, speaking to how the process bonds the participants together. “When someone bears their soul it takes you down to a deep place, past the superficial,” she said. “We don’t often in life get this opportunity; it’s a privilege. You allow yourself to be vulnerable and naked which leads to strength and connection.” My own experience at the *Theatre of Witness* workshop in which I attended solidifies my perspective on this: divulging personal intimacies in a group format requires extreme trust and, when reciprocated, builds strong relationships.

Theatre of the Oppressed can also have this relationship building effect, though it focuses less on personal divulgements and more on group empowerment. As Idan Meir, who has led Forum Theatre workshops for years, said: “[Participants] dare to speak on things they wouldn’t before. Then there is the audience that sees what’s going on and they love the idea and want to join. There is a movement that is going on.” The movement is not only societally focused –which I will elaborate on in the next section—it is very much relationship based.

Meir also spoke to the group-building possibilities more traditional theatre can have when he discussed his roots in theatre. His first foray into drama came when he was working at a hostel for troubled youths where he helped direct a performance for Purim, a festive Jewish holiday. In this experience he first learned how powerful the theatric process could be:

I found that there was a strong connection between me and the kids while we were creating; it was an incredible process of trust-building. The kids were in

costumes and had to trust me that it would work out and I had to trust them as well. Through this I realized that the stage is such a powerful place.

Theatre of the Oppressed also functions in a similar manner, said Meir.

The process of Forum Theatre, of working together with no overarching authority to address society lends to a strong group collective. He elaborated on the subject:

It is a process of struggling together. It's not just one protagonist alone, isolated and alienated. It creates solidarity, empowering people and communities. Making them believe that they can dream and make that dream. It's much more powerful because it's their work; sharing responsibility, sharing success and sharing failure.

Identity Dynamism

The second interpersonal aspect that I discovered in my research had to do with identity dynamism, the concept that people adhere to multiple identifying labels. For instance, a single person can simultaneously be a father, brother, son, post office worker, pianist, football player, friend, Protestant, Irishmen and immigrant, among many other things. While this seems fairly obvious, it is often overlooked –especially in conflict situations where dichotomous labels differentiate people and blind them from their commonalties. A common thread between all three forms of theatre that I researched, albeit with slightly varied semantics, was an emphasis in raising peoples' awareness of identity dynamism – both in themselves and in others.

This emphasis was explicit in my study of *Theatre of the Oppressed*, most notably in Forum Theatre, where audiences are allowed and encouraged to interject their own opinions and beliefs into staged performances. Boal describes his motivations for this eloquently:

Who is the 'I'? ... It is very easy for us to decide –in fatalistic fashion—that we are the way we are, full stop, end of story. But we can also imagine –in a more creative fashion—that the playing cards can be re-dealt.

In this dance of potentialities, different power stake the floor at different times –potential can become act, occupy the spotlight and then glide back to the sidelines, powers grow and diminish, move in to the foreground and then shrink into the background again – everything is mutable. Our personality is what it is, but also what it is becoming.

(Quoted by Warren Linds in *A Boal Companion*, 116)

Mary Schutzman elaborates on how this is applied in Forum Theatre

(note: the 'joker' plays the role of facilitator in Forum Theatre):

One promise of jokers as pedagogues, as leaders, is that they do not let us forget that we are a composite of characters, ideals and fantasies, of complex emotions about ourselves and the world around us, including our apparent enemies. Without jokers we run the risk of assuming that our identities are our own, and of the attendant trap of self-propriety.

(*A Boal Companion*, 144)

Idan Meir described a method in which this emphasis is practically applied. To do it he utilizes a *Theatre of the Oppressed* workshop by the name of Rainbow of Identities. The process involves placing various sticky notes all over one's body; each note with a different label that a person feels applies to them. For example, someone might place notes on their self saying "father," "son," "Protestant," "lover," "guitarist" and "accountant," among others. The group

members then remove the sticky notes from their bodies and place them on a single wall. Meir said of the activity:

To open the people to this visual understanding that every person you see is not only one thing, they are so many things. It's fantastic to see all of the labels we give ourselves, and how familiar they are to one another. You see that other people are so complex and have so many different faces. But you also see yourself and how you act in different situations. You either like it or learn from it. You can change it. It's a very powerful tool.

Boal elaborates on this: "... the human being is capable of diving into the depths of self and emerging with the undreamed-of characters, hidden potentialities submerged in the recesses of the person" (Boal *Hamlet* 321). It is in the exploration of one's own multiplicity as well as the awareness of that of other's that promotes empathy. Understanding that everyone is simultaneously many 'things' allows for us to connect more strongly and breaks down antagonizing dichotomies.

The promotion of dynamic identities, interestingly enough, echoes the work of the aforementioned Rorty. While his theory of sentimental education stresses means to avoid 'quasi-human' prejudices, he indeed goes further. In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* he states that we should constantly "keep trying to expand our sense of 'us' as far as we can," (Rorty 195). "You do this," he says, "by manipulating their sentiments in such a way that they imagine themselves in the shoes of the despised and oppressed" (Rorty *Human Rights*). Complimenting this claim perfectly, Jan Cohen Cruz, in *A Boal Companion*, writes of the power of *Theatre of the Oppressed*: "The political potential of personal story is grounded not in particular subject matter but rather in

storytelling's capacity to position even the least powerful individual in the proactive, subject position" (103). Between Boal and Rorty we see humanization working in both directions across the power spectrum.

Idan Meir spoke to how this effect can be achieved in more traditional theatre. His most notable production is *Bassam*, the true story of Bassam Aramin, a Palestinian nonviolence activist—and founder of Combatants For Peace—who lost his daughter when she, at just 10 years of age, was struck and killed by a rubber bullet fired by an IDF soldier. The first production of the play touted a prominent Israeli actor as its lone character, the Palestinian Bassam. Intensifying the decision was the fact that the actor chosen to play Bassam's son had been killed while serving in the IDF. I asked Idan what effect this casting had. It, he said:

had a huge effect on the Israeli audience. It was surprising that an Israeli actor brought the story of a Palestinian, but even more surprising that a bereaved Israeli actor brought the story of a bereaved Palestinian. It was a human gesture: an understanding of humanity. It showed that the loss is the same. It doesn't matter what side you're on. It was mutual understanding. It wasn't just theatre. It was an example of how we can reconcile. How we can leave our own pain and share others'... Though the stories are not parallel—and this is something you have to remember—Leo Bashinsky (the actor's son) died as a soldier protecting the border, he was in Gaza and he was not there to give candies to children. Abir (Bassam's daughter) finished school, crossed the road to get a candy and got a rubber bullet in the back of her head. Those are not the same story: but for the families the loss is the same.¹

¹ The parentheticals are my clarifications

This effect, of casting an Israeli in the role of a Palestinian, produced results similar to his Rainbow of Identities workshop: it showed the commonalities across the dichotomy, that an Israeli can be a mourner just as a Palestinian can be a mourner.

Dave Duggan, a playwright in the more traditional sense, recognized imagination as “the universal human device” that connects the whole species. Rorty would agree with this; he touts that human solidarity can be achieved through ‘sentimental education’, which he defines as:

That sort of education [that] sufficiently acquaints people of different kinds with one another so that they are less tempted to think of those different from themselves as only quasi-human. The goal of this manipulation of sentiment is to expand the reference terms ‘our kind of people’ and ‘people like us.’ (Rorty, “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality.”)

“Theatre allows an audience to see the human condition,” said Duggan. This impact though, he said, is “very rare; but when it works it incites empathy.”

Both Duggan and Rorty recognize that imagination—the arts (though Rorty specifies literature as the key mechanism, both Duggan and I expanded that to the arts in general)—is the most effective tool in sentimental education. In theatre specifically, Duggan says, an audience can witness “the great variety of human experience.”

I investigated whether *Theatre of Witness* had a similar emphasis and when I asked Teya Sepinuck whether she saw this to be the case. She responded that *Theatre of Witness* “works beyond all identity... that they work through identity and particularities to reach what is beyond: a place where we –humans—

are all the same.“ She continued on the topic of dynamic identities to say: “We wear all of those identities and can go past them.” While her response reflected her immeasurable spirituality, it also adhered to the theme of identity dynamism –though semantically different.

In the same vein, Rorty would contest Teya’s approach; he argues that the claim “that human solidarity is something within each human –essential humanity—which resonates to the presence of the same in other humans” is no longer viable (*Contingency* 189). While he preaches a need for solidarity, he does not see it as stemming from a ‘universal humanity’ that inherently connects it all and merely needs to be tapped into. Personally, I see the two –perhaps due to a lack of a philosophical background—as semantically different but pragmatically and applicably along the same lines.

Furthermore, the shared pain and healing that defines the *Theatre of Witness* process can be seen as promotion of this identity dynamism; in it people can recognize others as mourners, victims and as impacted individuals.

Dangers of Empathy

The final aspect I will discuss is Boal’s take on the dual nature of empathy in theatre. I do this because his perspective, and the dogma that has since spawned from his work, acts as criticism to traditional theatre and an interesting contrast. Empathy, according to Boal, can be used in two distinct matters in theatre: as a means for oppression and a means for liberation. Of course, the latter is exemplified by the raised awareness of identity diversity and identification of shared labels.

But, Boal argues, empathy can be dangerous, a perspective he shares with Brecht. Frances Babbage puts it:

Both [Boal and Brecht] condemn 'Aristotelian' drama ... for its emphasis upon a cathartic purging of the spectator's emotions by a process of self-identification with those of the character. Brecht suggests this invites a kind of emotional orgy that inevitably wears down the spectator's capacity for action. Boal agrees, adding that the spectator who consistently indulges in such escapist pleasures becomes content to live vicariously: 'Without acting, we feel that we are acting.' Most insidious of all, Boal argues, is that by losing herself in the dramatic action, the spectator adopts its values, as well as its emotions, as hew own. The implication of this is that lessons drawn from a fictitious universe are imposed upon the spectator's social reality, by a process of 'aesthetic osmosis.'"
(Babbage, 43)

Babbage goes on to say, "*Theatre of the Oppressed* has persistently argued against a dramatic tradition that, it is suggested, encourages catharsis, harmony and passivity" (Babbage 61). This remark in particular will become more interesting when looking at *Theatre of Witness* in the next section.

In essence, Boal and *Theatre of the Oppressed* criticize traditional theatre for its therapeutic and stunting tendencies —for its propensity to make an audience feel better without changing anything. Traditional theatre, Boal argues, is a painkiller, a sedative. I find this aspect to be incredibly interesting for Boal did produce theatre of the traditional ilk and many practitioners of *Theatre of the Oppressed*, such as Idan Meir, continue to produce dramatic Aristotelian-style theatre while engaging in *Theatre of the Oppressed*.

Section II: Political Theatre

Addressing Society

I admit that though I use the term ‘political theatre’ quite broadly I do believe that theatre that operates with such explicit and pronounced political contexts fits the mold. But this section in particular would fit any label of political theatre, for this section details how the sociopolitical effects of theatre at a broader level.

I discovered two fairly distinct categories wherein theatre addresses societal ailments: critique and activism.

Critique

Playwrights Donal O’Kelly and Dave Duggan spoke most to the sociopolitical criticism aspect of theatre. Both of their work deals with highly political content -- examples would be Duggan addressing the Saville Report in *Scenes from an Inquiry* and O’Kelly’s *Aillilu Fionnuala* dealing with the Corrib Gas Conflict. Their perspectives on the sociopolitical state of the world, though, did differ. O’Kelly, a bit radical, described global politics as in a state of atrophy, whereas Duggan certainly recognized injustice in many places but did not go to the same extreme.

O’Kelly stated that it is the responsibility of the arts, and in his case theatre, to address the systematic malaise of the world: “The only way to overturn this disorder is through imagination –to imagine a better way. It’s not art if it

doesn't challenge what is perceived as normality." He continued to say that the arts "hold a mirror up more vividly of what can happen in our society that we accept as just day to day activity." Here he mentioned the findings of Ryan Report—a government investigation into widespread child abuse in Ireland—as an example of what can happen when the arts are not acting as the critiquing force they ought to be.

Furthermore, he said that theatre differs from other forms of art in that in theatre "you get more latitude to suggest and say stuff that would be censored in the more mainstream media." He mentioned his play *Aillilu Fionnuala* as a prime example of this:

I'm linking the Shell-Corrib gas conflict to ancient Irish mythology and Latin-American magic realism and finding a way of saying what we're not meant to be allowed to say. Such as the Shell corporation has been involved in serious human rights issues. You can't say that in public. But you can say it in theatre; especially if you have talking swans say it.

Dave Duggan echoed many of O'Kelly's sentiments about theatre—and the arts—in this day and age and in reference to the globalizing world structure. One of his theatric principles, he said, was that his "work is rooted somewhere [often Derry] but can reach *everywhere*." "Act locally," he quoted, "and think globally." His work, he said, "is a response to the alienating globalization process this world is witnessing." As O'Kelly said that the arts must challenge the status-quo, Duggan said it is up to the arts to utilize imagination as the tool to craft futures. "The best response to conflict" said Duggan, "is to imagine otherwise – not to be scared of the past but to treat it with imagination and creativity." And with the

arts it is important to constantly expand and challenge boundaries, he said, for boundaries are inherently stymieing to the imagination.

But, where O’Kelly sees artistic imperative, Duggan sees a selfish interest. I brought up O’Kelly’s statement about the ‘colossal responsibility of the arts’ and Duggan countered that, for him, it is not a case of responsibility but *possibility*. His theatric works are the manifestation of personal and civil intrigue: “Theatre makes me feel good. I get to satisfy my interest.” This was not said in a self-obsessed manner; rather it reflected an innate desire of Duggan’s to address sociopolitical issues. “I follow what interests me,” he said. “The fact that Chinese workers have thrown themselves off of buildings so we can have iPads *interests* me.”

Idan Meir also recognized how theatre can critique society. One of his earlier works, *Follow Me to War*, a tale about a mother losing her son in the first Lebanon war was an allegory to his own experience. “It was the story of Guy [the lead character] but also the story of me,” he said. Its message he said was twofold: firstly, “it was the product of the frustration of my army service” and second, “it was a play showing how ridiculous the system was.” The play, though about the first Lebanon war, acted as a critique to the Israeli government’s rush to war in the second Lebanon war.

Teya Sepinuck’s *Theatre of Witness* does not promote itself as political criticism in any sort but in my research of it, it is clear to me that it acts as a very personal mirror to the effects of a given political environment. It puts a face to the stories that are born from, for example, the Polish government’s inaction in regards to runaway girls.

Activism

Whereas Duggan and O’Kelly’s more traditional theatre can act as a mirror to society and reflect ills and ailments, Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* goes one step further. Boal asserts that the power of theatre must be put back in the hands of the people. In the introduction to *Theatre of the Oppressed*, he states: ““I, Augusto Boal, want the Spectator to take on the role of Actor and invade the Character and the stage.” It is here he presents the idea of a ‘spect-actor,’ one who can occupy both the role of spectator and actor, passive and active. This, he declares, is freedom:

The *poetics of the oppressed* is essentially the poetics of liberation: the spectator no longer delegates power to the characters either to think or to act in his place. The spectator frees himself; he thinks and acts for himself!
Theater is action!
(Boal *Theatre of the Oppressed* 155)

Forum Theatre, Boal argues, “is the beginning of a necessary social transformation and not a moment of equilibrium and repose. *The end is the beginning!*” (Boal *Aesthetics* 6). In Forum Theatre audience members engage in theatre and propose solutions to conflicts that they recognize. This, Boal says, allows them to prepare to engage and ‘fix’ society. As Boal has said, “Perhaps the theater is not revolutionary in itself; but have no doubts, it is a rehearsal of revolution!” (Boal *Oppressed* 155).

Duggan criticized *Theatre of the Oppressed* in this regard, as incendiary while not wholly participatory or responsible. In this Duggan mentioned an

instance (also mentioned in *Hamlet and the Baker's Son*) where Boal and his theatre company so roused a rural South American crowd that, following the performance, they approached Boal and invited him to join their revolt on their mayor later that evening. Boal had to decline, saying that they were 'just' actors. Meir responded to claims that its overly incendiary:

Forum Theatre says to the people, 'This is the reality. We're all under oppression but we are all very creative people. So we can fight against this oppression, without violence. With creativity, with the arts, with theatre and imagination. With our hearts and understanding.'

Meir recognizes that *Theatre of the Oppressed* incites people but, he says, it does so in a creative and imaginative medium. As Eamonn Baker, a past Forum Theatre participant and a coordinator at Towards Understanding and Healing, said:

TO allows audiences to become intelligible and active. It gives us a chance to *unstick* our situation and to exercise our creative thinking muscles. We can stand up and get involved rather than stay passive.

Nonetheless, *Theatre of the Oppressed* does have the potential to affect people differently than the traditional forms of theatre mentioned in the last section; rather than establishing a human connection, *Theatre of the Oppressed* can lead to tangible sociopolitical change, albeit often out of the hands of those running the workshops. In this regard, Idan Meir, who practices *Theatre of the Oppressed*, spoke of Legislative Theatre, which functions just like Forum Theatre except at the end the audience is asked to assess the suppression that they witnessed and suggest laws to fix the problems. Afterward people deliberate and vote on suggested laws. "You can really tackle a law and bring a personal story to

it,” said Meir. “And you can show how this story is affected by this law and ask people to sign the law away.”

Finally, *Theatre of Witness*, which Sepinuck claims is not at all a form of activism, can be seen to have effects in this regard. At one point in *Theatre of Witness*, Sepinuck writes:

...And maybe that is what is fair to ask of Theatre of Witness –that the vehicle of story and testimony opens minds and hearts, passes on the positive qualities of love, forgiveness, redemption and transformation, and in that, becomes a *seed for change*.
(75, emphasis is mine).

In this vein she mentions one production of *Theatre of Witness* focusing on individuals amidst life sentences in jail and the performances motivated many audience members to take action, to campaign for prison reform. Though, it must be mentioned, nothing in terms of prison reform came of it. The motivation, it seemed, was short-lived.

Section III: Political Theatre and the Self

In this section I am analyzing how theatre affects an individual at a core level. I did not collect much information on this subject in terms of traditional theatre, so this section will focus on *Theatre of Witness* and *Theatre of the Oppressed*. The two manners in which I encountered personal effects in these forms of theatre were empowerment and catharsis.

Catharsis

The term that appeared over and over in Sepinuck's book, also titled *Theatre of Witness*, was 'catharsis.' She describes one manifestation of TW by saying: "The ritual of theatre was serving as communal catharsis" (73). Through the six-month process Teya Sepinuck describes that participants can find "the medicine" in their troubled stories.

Emma Stuart described *Theatre of Witness* as "an exchange of energy that provides healing." Chris McAlinden, a participant in *We Carried Your Secrets*, also spoke to the healing process. The six months of group work is healing in that it lets "someone else interpret your story with beauty," he said. Sepinuck, in fact, said that the theatric aspect of *Theatre of Witness* is not the focus, that it is a byproduct of the healing process.

Underscoring the therapeutic aspect of *Theatre of Witness* is an emphasis on spirituality. Sepinuck is a very spiritual person —she writes of her Buddhist, Kabbalistic and meditative practices and “consciousness expanding with LSD”—and this is reflected in her work (*Theatre of Witness*, 16). The workshop I attended included a period of guided meditation and in it I felt the cathartic aspect, albeit only at a minor effect. I can, though, imagine that extended and more in-depth workshops would delve deeper and the effect stronger. Stuart echoed this sentiment, saying, “[*Theatre of Witness*] is spiritual, it has some certain ‘otherness’ to it.”

Contrasting *Theatre of Witness*’s emphasis on therapy, healing and catharsis is Augusto Boal. He quite plainly abhors and disdains theatric catharsis.

Francis Babbage, in *Augusto Boal*, writes:

Theatre of the Oppressed has persistently argued against a dramatic tradition that, it is suggested, encourages catharsis, harmony and passivity. Boal famously asserts that by contrast the poetics of the oppressed is, if not revolutionary in itself, ‘without a doubt a *rehearsal of revolution*.’ its forms produce in the spect-actor not the relief of catharsis but ‘a sort of uneasy sense of incompleteness that seeks fulfillment through real action.’
(61)

Boal, it seems, considers catharsis to be a sedative, numbing what needs to be both felt and changed. Babbage continues:

Boal writes that the sessions never end, ‘since the objective is not to close a cycle, to generate a catharsis, or to end a development. On the contrary, its objective is to encourage autonomous activity, to set a process in motion, to simulate transformative creativity, to change spectators in protagonists.’

Empowerment

While *Theatre of Witness* and *Theatre of the Oppressed* certainly clash on the subject of catharsis, there is an intrapersonal emphasis they share: empowerment. Both processes involve empowering individuals to share, giving people the strength to speak out. Each work to give a voice to the unheard.

“The purpose of [*Theatre of Witness*],” Sepinuck writes, “is to give voice to those who have been marginalized, forgotten or are invisible in the larger society, and to invite audiences to bear witness to issues of suffering, redemption and social justice” (*Theatre of Witness*, 14).

Theatre of Witness, she said, instills ‘confidence and mastery’ in participants and they emerge from the process stronger because of it. One example she mentioned was a woman in Philadelphia who had endured serious hardships. This woman entered the process cripplingly shy yet emerged from it confident, enough so that she later become a minister with ‘strong convictions.’

Idan Meir spoke to similar effects in *Theatre of the Oppressed* participants:

There is a personal growth. The families and friends hear about these people doing this work and they’re not sure what it is... They see changes in the participants: they are more confident, more aware of what’s going on. They dare to speak on things they wouldn’t before. Then there is the audience that sees what’s going on and they love the idea and want to join. There is a movement that is going on.

Eamonn Baker echoed this when he said that Forum Theatre makes people “intelligible and active.”

Further Discussion & Conclusion

As admitted in my methodology, the focal obstacle I had in doing this project was that no empirical conclusion could realistically and reliably be produced. In this vein, Matthew Jennings and Andrea Baldwin (School of Creative Arts, University of Ulster) wrote an extensive report on contemporary community theatre in Northern Ireland. In it they concluded that there is a dearth of infrastructure to properly assess the impact of community theatre in the region.

The literature on political theatre does not, for the most part, cohere with my research for a couple of reasons. For one, my broad definition of ‘political theatre’ would contrast much standard literature. An example would be the analysis of Michael Kirby, who contends that political theatre must be actively and intentionally concerned with matters of the state (Kirby, 129). Secondly, my research’s unique focus —both broad in terms of form and specific in terms of application— causes it to contrast much of the literature on political theatre that I encountered. Emphasizing this is my emphasis on *Theatre of Witness* which has been subject to far less analysis – though there have been academic inquiries into similar productions. An example of this would be the doctoral work of Caroline Wake. She investigated the link between theatric witnesses and theatric testifiers and investigates the roles of both. Its content, though robust and exhaustive, did not seem to apply to the themes and threads that emerged in my own qualitative research.

What I have discovered, though, is that the three forms of political theatre

I have researched are seen to have certain impacts at three distinct levels: personal, interpersonal and societal. These three forms vary in their specific effects and, of course, would vary based on the individuals involved in each production. The lone theme that emerged most strongly for me was that of dynamic identities. I recognize it as something obvious that oft gets overlooked and taken for granted. Constant awareness of dynamic identities leads us to empathy —and not the form that Boal derides. Here, I see theatre, and all art, playing a role in constantly reminding audiences of everyone’s humanity. This, and Rorty’s emphasis on sentiment manipulation —that the arts can best connect people in solidarity— have been the concepts that most stuck with me.

For further reading on political theatre and testimonial theatre I suggest the works of Kirby, Wake and Jennings and Baldwin. For more on Boal read *Augusto Boal* by Frances Babbage, *A Boal Companion* by Jan Cohen-Cruz and Mady Schutzman or any of Boal’s own literature: *Aesthetics of the Oppressed*, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, *Legislative Theatre* and *Hamlet and the Baker's Son: My Life in Theatre and Politics*. To learn more about *Theatre of Witness* read *Theatre of Witness* by Teya Sepinuck. Finally, for more on Irish theatre I would suggest Lezon, Jeanne’s “*Aspects of the Irish Theatre*”, Tom Maguire’s *Making Theatre in Northern Ireland: Through and beyond the Troubles* and *Theatre of Crisis: The Performance of Power in the Kingdom of Ireland* by Patrick Tuite.

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