

Forum Theatre: How to conduct and score it?

David M. Boje
October 10, 2005

What is Forum Theatre? Forum theatre comes from the work of Augusto Boal. I am integrating some Jerzy Grotowski (Poor Theatre) with it. Forum theatre chants the traditional actor-spectator relationship (Grotowski, 2000: 19) into Boal's (1992, 1995) "spect-actor" relationship. A spect-actor is defined as someone who was spectator, but through the Forum, becomes both spectator and actor. Members of the audience volunteer or are selected to become actors on the stage: spect-actors. It is time to unblock the actor-spectator relationship, to tear down the fourth wall of theatre called the Perineum Arch: it separates and divides actors and spectators. The traditional theatre is where the spectators stay seated and enjoy the entertainment of actors on stage. Forum Theatre invades the Fourth Wall, and destroys separation between actor and spectator; only the spect-actor remains. Forum theatre is not about the spectacle of spotlights, comedic action, costuming, scenography; Forum Theatre is **NOT** entertainment! Forum Theatre is **NOT** didactic; there can be training in breaking down walls between actors and spectators, between the mask individuals wear and the inner leader trapped within.

Mission of Forum Theatre

The mission of Forum Theatre is liberation game; it is **NOT** that is didactic, entertainment, or the spectacle. The game is a confrontation between a protagonist leader and a group of antagonists who resist leadership. Act I demonstrate the blocks and obstacles of the game, and give a role model of one way to try to overcome these. Act II the spect-actor takes the stage and gives it a go. The objective is to resist the spect-actor leader, but not demolish their will; to enable them to begin their journey of discovery of the instinctual leader within, to see what lies behind the life-pack of timidity or rigid lack of spontaneity. Act III might show some different strategy and allow more spect-actors to find their inner leader. Insider each person is a vital impulse, an inner leader with will to serve and/or will to power, a voice of a much stronger more dynamic leader.

Who to get as Spect-actor? It is a wimp-out to choose a spect-actor who is already out of the box, already without mask, already someone who leads with spontaneity, flexibility, voice, and power. The purpose is to reach the shyest, the most timid, the most voiceless, the most rigid, and let them start on their journey of discovery. Inside the timid, shy, withdrawn, immobilized spectator is a beast of a leader waiting to explode their mask or pull the stick out... The non-assertive can discover inner source of assertiveness, the voiceless can find their voice, the rigid can find their spontaneity. Choose Liza Doolittle, and do a skit that is a "My Fair Lady"; a skit where the people who did not know they could lead, find their instinctual inner leader.

Purpose of Forum Theatre – The purpose of Boje's Forum Theatre of Leadership is to set up a game in which the spect-actor and discover their inner leader; invite the inner leader to bust through barriers that keep them hidden, shy, withdrawn, and enslaved. I use

it for leader training, to break spect-actors out of the blocks that prevent their inner leader within from coming forth. Inside each person is a leader that is blocked from getting out by fear, lack of experience, and issues like frozen rage and shyness. Forum Theatre is a set of games the team puts on to let the leader within begin their journey of awakening, to take the stage and discover skills they did not realize. Forum Theatre helps people tear off their Mask of Docility and let their inner Ethos be seen, heard, and move about, maybe for the very first time. Break through those layers of timidity, shyness, and plastic pretense; drop the mask. Crack the life-mask and let your instinctual leader shine through.

Examples of Forum Theatre

In the first week of class, we spent a period doing McDonald's theatre. When we swapped out characters to play the role of woman or man being harassed, and the manager trying to regain control over the chaos. There was that exercise of giving commands, where a follower decides if the leader was friend or foe in how the commands were given. Finally, we did "I'm the Tiger; you're not the Tiger" exercise. All of these are examples of Forum Theatre. Here are some new exercises:

1. **Aliveness** - First the demonstration. Pick a teammate to lie down, and to get back their aliveness. Aliveness is an exercise in the release of frozen anger, frozen rage, or perhaps deep-seated unforgiveness. The person is supposed to hit their arms and legs on the floor, to shout out their rage, to be as enraged as they can be at whoever is oppressing, hurting, bullying them, etc. Second, have the entire audience, all the spectators become spect-actors – have them all lie down. Third, enact a skit/game in which the protagonist rage, but standing up, against the antagonists from your team, selected to live out the spect-actor's phantasm.
2. **Facial Mask Training** - Forum Theatre can make the mask more flexible; give it more range of choices. We can hope the mask is lowered altogether. In the meantime, some exercises with the facial muscles; how to concoct various facial masks by using the facial muscles. Provoke the inner leader, behind the usual mask, to come forth. During the game the spect-actors can be invited to change their usual facial mask for another, and gauge the reaction provoked in the antagonists.
3. **Dialogic Mask** - We wear a dialogic mask. Lower the mask and find the inner person hidden there. This can be done by invitation only. People willing to share the story of who they are. It begins by example, like some kind of AA meeting. Hi my name is David, and this is who I am... According to Paulo Freire (1968: 136) "there is no antialogue [e.g. silence, voicelessness] in which the oppressors do not untiringly dedicate themselves to the constant conquest of the oppressed." What is the mask? Answer: the propaganda and slogans of the media; subjugation preservation of the status quo; the way the world is mythologized... "Within an objective situation of oppression, antialogue is necessary to the oppressor as a means of further oppression, not only economic, but cultural: the vanquished are disposed of their word, their expressiveness, their culture" (Freire, p. 134). Take off the mask of repressive culture! Dialog is necessary to liberatory pedagogy!

4. **Breathing** - Most people are shallow breathers; they have not taken deep breaths in years. Breathing can energize the body. Do not do this exercise in a class of religious fundamentalists. Check it out first. In Eastern and many Western spiritualities, there are seven charkas; each charka has a breathing cycle, as well as a sound, and energy. Native Americans focused on four (earth, wind, fire, water). After training, the game would ask the spect-actor to switch charka, to change breathing turning the confrontation, or other journey of discovery.
5. **Voice** - There are voice exercises that teach resonates, projecting the voice from various centers of the body (head, chest, abdomen), placing the voice in different parts of the room (floor, ceiling, front, rear), raising and lowering the pitch of the voice; opening the larynx, etc. During the game, the spect-actor can be coached to switch their range, projection, etc. A training idea is the La-La exercise: laying on the floor and La-La with changes in pitch, resonance, projection, loudness, intensity at ceiling, wall, etc.) Make the La-La, at command of coach, come from head, belly, or chest. Next do the game of Forum in which the spect-actor is coached to change their oral dialog, making their voice shift in register, resonance, projection, etc.
6. **Animals** - A team can demonstrate being the roaring tiger, hissing snake, mooing cow, etc. The spect-actor is coached in developing a more assertive, even aggressive attitude in their animal. A person learns to awaken like a cat, walk like cat or fly like a bird, or rage like a Tiger. Then the Forum team can invite that animal into a realistic confrontation, a time of being animal in body rhythm, in voice, and gesture. The audience can breakdown into their teams, and one member of Forum team can work as coach of each. This way entire audience gets to participate, to experiment, to unleash.
7. **The Committee from Hell.** Have team members play roles such as alcoholic, chocoholic, sexaholic, rage-aholic, etc. Put the spect-actor leader in as leader of the group; give them a concrete task, such as developing an action plan for recycling in the building, etc. Demonstrate some way of getting order; but do not make it too easy of the spect-actor to achieve; nor too difficult, lest they become discouraged.
8. **Prison of Silence** - How to break out of the prison of silence? What are ways that people who live their lives never speaking can be given chances to speak? Develop a Forum Game with such a focus, one that selects (for they do not usually volunteer) the shyest, most timid, to get some lessons on being boisterous, outspoken, provocative in speech acts.
9. **Overcoming Oppression** - a recurring situation of harassment is a living death for the oppressed. There are self-defense courses that teach people dialogue, and Karate moves, and other ways to overcome such oppression. We have seen the face slap in one team skit. We have experimented with ways of resisting unwelcome advances since day one. This Forum Game would take it to the next level with tried and true methods to overcome oppression.

Where do Masks come from? From the oppressors, who socialize the oppressed to wear the mask of the slave! Socialization teaches the individual to wear a mask that blocks

discovery of their inner leaderly impulses. Forum theatre trains use of body and voice to breakout of the prison of submissiveness; it awakens the leader within and discover hidden potential. Forum Theatre eliminates obstacles that prevent the leaderly impulse from emerging in each individual. Behaviors, power, and dialogic voice are unleashed. Forum theatre busts the inhibited out of inhibitions; breaks the shy out of the prison of shyness, busts the rigid out of their rigidity, and ends confusion of the confused babblers. Forum Theatre lets the will spontaneously find its leaderly impulse.

How is Forum Theatre Possible? The team sets up a game, a situation of confrontation, where team members play the role of believable antagonists. Each game is script that has great flexibility and adaptability.

Sample Format

- ◆ Act I – a team member plays role of the protagonists using strategies to resist the antagonists.
- ◆ Act II – Forum team selects members of the audience (by such means as drawing names from hat) to be the next protagonists. The scene is rerun for several protagonists (selected) with coaching after each attempt, so the person learns to overcome the block/obstacles posed by the team of antagonists.
- ◆ Act III – Either do a variation on the game or engage everyone in the room in some ways to practice the strategies you have been focusing upon in your Forum.
- ◆ End Acts and/or whole event with member commentaries connecting to the reading, to what you are doing in Forum, to the inner leader you are unleashing within each of you

When we do Forum Theatre we make a space of theatre for people to lower their mask, to try something new, to let the inner leader out. Clark Kent becomes Superman!

How to Score/Grade Forum Theatre Skits?

- ◆ No cheating – cheating includes picking people from audience who are the most outspoken, the most natural, and gifted performers
- ◆ No entertaining – entertainment theatre aims to keep people laughing, to show them a good time; some is good; but all entertain is not
- ◆ Give highest scores to teams that choose spect-actors who need the training provided
- ◆ Give highest scores to teams that create games of Forum Theatre that help the entire audience, that involve the audience in the event.
- ◆ Look for realistic examples of people finding their inner leader, experimenting with first steps along their journey of discovery

References

Boal, Augusto (1979). *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Translation by Charles A. & Maria-Odillia Leal McBride. Originally published in Spanish as *Teatro de Oprimido* in 1974. NY: Theatre Communications Group.

Boal, Augusto (1992). *Games for Actors and Non-actors*. Translated by Adrian Jackson. A conflation of two books, *Stop C'est Magique* (Paris: Hachette, 1980) and *Jeux pour acteurs et non-acteurs* (Paris: La Découverte, 1989) with additions by Boal. London/NY: Routledge.

Boal, Augusto (1995). *Rainbow of Desire, The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy*. NY: Routledge.

Freire, Paulo. 1968. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. NY: The Seabury Press (A Continuum Book).

Grotowski, Jerzy. 2000. *Towards a Poor Theatre*. NY: Routledge.