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Self-Actualization through Conscientization

Tania Mireles

Theatre of the Oppressed with Asylum Seekers, an Australian Perspective

Global conflict zones trigger consequences beyond the immediacy of borders, time frames and front lines- they create an entire people in Diaspora. These scatterings of people, who flee their homeland due to fear of persecution, and seek protection in a country they have arrived, are considered asylum seekers (ASRC 2009: 7). Asylum seekers however, are not automatically recognized as refugees, they are merely recognized as a person seeking refugee status. In order to obtain such a status, they must first ‘prove’ and meet the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) convention and protocol which states the definition as:

According to the Refugee Convention- article 1A (2) “owing to a well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality or membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country, or who, not having a nationality and being outside the county of his or her habitual residence, is unable, or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.” (UNHCR 1951: 5)

The Australian Federal Government grants visas to asylum seekers who apply for this protection from overseas (offshore scheme) as well as from Australia’s mainland (onshore claims) under what is known as the Humanitarian Program. Seeking the definition of refugee however requires a process that can often take years and involve merits reviews; judicial reviews and sometimes a ministerial intervention (ASRC 2009: 7). The entire process is time consuming, demanding, uncertain and stressful, often affecting the mental health of those involved.

The flow of people in Diaspora is directly correlated with the ever changing geopolitical dynamic of global conflict. According the UNHCR’s 2010 report ‘Asylum Level and Trends in Industrialized Countries’, people seeking asylum in Australia and New Zealand were primarily from: Afghanistan (1,266), China (1,202), Fiji (610) Sri Lanka (608) and Iran (501) (Pazzano, 2011). Through the Humanitarian Program, the Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship granted 14,553 visas in 2010-2011 (Pazzano, 2011). These visas went to those who applied from overseas through the offshore scheme and those who applied after arriving in Australia (Pazzano, 2011). On an international scale however, Australia receives only a tiny fraction of the world’s asylum seekers. Of the 277,160 applications of asylum logged in 2009 to 44 industrialized countries, Australia received 6, 170 which made up 1.6% of the total (UNHCR 2010: 13). This is in stark comparison to the

24,190 and 15,830 received in Sweden and Austria that same year- both countries with populations well under half of Australia's (ASRC, 2010). There wasn't much of an improvement the following year with Australia moving up only one spot to be ranked at 15 in 2010, behind countries such as the US (55,530 applicants), France (47,800 applicants), Sweden (31,800 applicants) and Canada (23, 200 applicants) (Pazzano, 2011). The overwhelming majority of refugees, up to 80% of the entire world refugee population, however are housed within developing countries (UNHCR, 2011). From 2005-2009 Pakistan housed the largest number of refugees at 1.8million, followed by the Islamic Republic of Iran at 1.97 million and the Syrian Arab Republic at 1.05 million (UNHCR 2010: 3). It is important to take note of such statistics in order to frame Australia's position within an international context as asylum seekers have been the subject of immense negative attention within the national discourse. This has come in the form of simplistic slogans; fear generating headlines as well as dehumanizing terms such as 'illegal' and 'queue jumpers'. This has further disassociated asylum seeker debate from international conflict and blurs the line between fact and fiction.

Australia has also been under international scrutiny for its treatment of asylum seekers and refugees in particular for its policy of mandatory detention. Under the Migration Amendment Act of 1992, detention is mandatory for those who have arrived without visas. Australia's privately owned detention centers have dominated the debate, as the site of detainee protests, hunger strikes, self harm and suicide. Australia's treatment of asylum seekers has been denounced by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay. She stated that there existed a 'racial discriminatory element here [Australia] which I see as rather inhumane treatment of people judged by their differences: racial, color and religious' (UN rights chief slams 'racist' Australia, 2011). The policy of locking up asylum seekers, including children, had 'cast a shadow over Australia's human rights record' said Navi (UN rights chief slams 'racist' Australia, 2011). All this despite the fact that seeking asylum is not illegal and Australia is a signatory of the UN Refugee Convention.

This particular article takes a critical look at how Theatre of the Oppressed is assisting the self and social transformation of severely disadvantaged groups that fall into the legal and political gaps. Specifically, it will look at the ideological essence of Freire's conscientization, as prompted through Theatre of the Oppressed workshops run with asylum seekers in Melbourne. It will focus on the early stages of the conscientization process which centers on the notion of 'self' through reflection and contextual orientation. This will encompass an analysis into the old, new and evolving definitions of 'oppressed' and oppressive dynamics with relation to Theatre of the Oppressed poetics. Discussion will then move beyond this notion of recognition of the oppressed self to verbalization as an acknowledgement of oppression. Later it discusses workshops and group dynamics as conscientizing elements that promote transformation of the self.

Methodology

The research draws from the year long theatre initiative by the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC), Australia's largest multi award – winning, independent and non – federal government funded organization. The ASRC ran its first creative project over 2009 – 2010. This project involved a series of weekly drama workshops that were heavily based on Theatre of the Oppressed practice and philosophy. The project invited participants to share their stories regarding the journey of asylum to Australia and was performed as a work-in-progress entitled *The Journey of Asylum – Waiting* at Trades Hall, March 2010.

As both a participant and collaborator I was fortunate enough to intimately engage with the project from first rehearsal right through to performance season. Weekly presence as a participant, rather than outside observer, enabled the research to undertake an ethnographic approach informed by a thorough understanding of process. Becoming an integral part of the group dynamic assisted with a holistic view of the complexities from conception to stage. This subsequently led to a greater understanding of 'local culture' through lived experience and conscientization as whole. The collected primary data serves as an 'instrumental case-study' which will be used as a supplementary theory-building form that contributes to understanding (Stake 1998: 88). Being part of the group on a consistent and regular basis also allowed for the building of trust between the researcher, the group, the Director and the organization. This was a vital consideration when undertaking research of this nature.

The research will primarily draw from an unstructured yet in-depth interview with Journey of Asylum participant Iman (note alias). Iman is a 25 year old Somali asylum seeker who began using the ASRC's other services which later lead to participation in its arts program. The nature of community theatre means many participants drop out or attend on an irregular and sometimes sporadic nature, Iman however was always present, punctual and contributing to workshops. She was one of the few that joined from very early on and stayed committed throughout the entire process. Iman therefore had a superior understanding of the entire workshop process. She was also confident in speaking English which meant she could express herself in an assertive manner. Iman was open, well-spoken and outspoken- qualities valued throughout the workshops as well as interview situation. The interview took place the year after the performance season, in a sit down interview. This was a conscious decision as it was also important to conduct the interview well after the natural elation period after a performance season. It was also important to allow for personal reflection and tangible developments to take place, especially considering the ubiquitous nature of conscientization. The time -lapse catered for critical reflection as well as encouraged a more evaluative sense of the process. Also, by the time of the interview Iman had obtained a Protection Visa which meant that she was found to be a refugee and granted the right to permanently remain in Australia. Those on Protection Visa have the same rights as any Australian, including the right to work, government benefits, and English classes. They are also automatically granted permanent resident status and have

the right to apply for citizenship after 2 years. Therefore, the uncertainty of the asylum legal process was no longer a burden and she could speak freely about her history and experiences without fear. Iman was at a point of her life in which she was making important life decisions as a future Australian Citizen. Thus it was also important to assess how, if at all, Theatre of the Oppressed may have influenced such decisions.

Further supplementary data has also be derived from the personal biography and accounts as written by each participant and published on the Journey of Asylum – Waiting (2010) program. This documentation reveals important data regarding the thoughts, aims and feelings of participants. The performance script will also be referred to as primary evidence which directly communicates the internal aspects of the participant's conscientization process. Despite the program and script having been published, distributed and shared with the public, the identities of the participants, including Iman's, as well as the Jokers, will remain anonymous when referred to within this paper. This is out of respect to those involved.

Theatre of the Oppressed

Theatre of the Oppressed is a cultural movement created and developed by Augusto Boal. The form is characterized by addressing the relationship between the 'oppressor' and 'oppressed'. Through interactive theatrical games, workshops and techniques it sets to empower through speech and democratize the means of theatrical production (Boal 2006). Highly influenced by pedagogical philosophy, Theatre of the Oppressed rejects preconceived visions of the world, opting for the creation of the 'new' directly from the audience. The form allows participants to explore and enact their own truths rather than rely on playwrights and predetermined fictional characters. There are no scripts, actors or spectators- in the conventional definition of the terms. Instead, what is created is a didactic space with a permeable fourth wall. In doing so, Theatre of the Oppressed goes beyond the dualism of human beings separate from theatre, but rather human beings 'as' theatre.

By engaging with concepts such as humanity, being, existence, social structures and reality, Theatre of the Oppressed has the direct aim of ontological liberation. This is facilitated in what Boal describes as the liberation of the body as well as the mind through the invasion of theatrical space (Boal 2000). In essence, the form intends to assist the reclaiming of 'self' through theatre, and in turn reclaim situational power for the transformation of realities. Theatre of the Oppressed liberation poetics is therefore fundamentally driven by the concept of action and transformation, of which cannot be truly realized without conscientization.

Conscientization is a concept developed by Paulo Freire to describe a process of personal and social transformation. Inherent within this process is the capacity to theoretically understand and take action upon self as well as the material world. Freire describes the key

characteristics of this process as one that ‘makes manifest the historical dialect between knowing and doing, between individual growth and community organization, between personal liberation and social transformation’ (Freire 1970: 71). Theory and practice, individual and community as well as the personal and social are thus considered interrelated, each dependant of the other. This makes conscientization simultaneously both a theory and an action. ‘Discovery cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action, nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must include serious reflection’, states Freire (1996: 47). Conscientization thus also goes beyond the restricted notion of consciousness as merely an awareness of sensory associations experienced by the individual. Instead it may be considered a form of critical awareness involving the ability to see a holistic image, elaborate on goals and express reality through creative language.

According to Boal, conscientization relies heavily on the symbiotic relationship between theory and practice known as ‘praxis’. Theatre of the Oppressed praxis is an essential factor in the progression of conscientization towards transformation within self and upon reality. ‘In the act of changing our image we are changing ourselves, and by changing ourselves we in turn change the world’, describes Boal (2006: 62). Praxis is thus an interrelated and complex relationship between theory and practice, of which one cannot be truly realized without the other. According to Freire ‘consciousness of and action upon reality are, therefore, inseparable constitutes of the transforming act’ (Freire 1970: 52).

Transformation of Self through Conscientization

‘The place to start is recognizing the individual’s quality of incompleteness, of being an unfinished product.’

— Ernesto Guevara (1965: 26)

Transformation of the self within, Theater of the Oppressed occurs the moment the audience comprehends that they not only have the right but the responsibility to share ideas with their community. It begins as soon as the audience member yells ‘stop!’, leaving behind the spectator role and transcending that of the actor to become a spect – actor. This act of theatrical trespass becomes synonymous with the transformation of self. Boal states that ‘to free ourselves is to trespass and to transform’ (2000: 45). Conscientization is a crucial element in this transformative process as it allows for the individual to understand their internal and external condition. This dual awareness is what makes conscientization the motor which drives transformation.

Conscientization through Theatre of the Oppressed poetics relies heavily on the discovery of self through creativity. It is a means to expand the expressive palette and thus the perception of the possible. In doing so one creates and develops their own identity, as an act of self – identification rather than a reliance on classifications others have invented. ‘Unless I know who I am, I will be a copy’, states Boal (2006: 39). Iman acknowledges challenging these preconceived ideals, through the Journey of Asylum project. ‘I did end up

fighting with a lot of my community', she admits:

They start telling you 'you can't do this, religion doesn't let. Females not suppose to step out of the house let alone stand in front of thousands of people and speak her mind'. And so was always trying to push me to this ideal of their way of living that had nothing to do with religion but they kept saying its religion way of living which is not at all. It's cultural. And I wasn't going to be a part of that culture. (Iman 2011, personal communication, 5 Oct)

Conscientization is thus a fluid process that may begin well before initial exposure to theatre, as a sense of discontent, struggle, isolation and questioning. What Theatre of the Oppressed does however is encourage, focus and realize this process through creative means. It assists with the recognition of self as is but more importantly the imagining of one as could be – and in imagining what could be we acknowledge that we are yet to be. Therefore we come to recognize the self as 'unfinished' or 'incomplete' and in so doing accept self transformation.

Recognizing the Oppressed Self

'When you discover the potential to struggle, that's an important discovery'

– Augusto Boal (Morelos 2004)

The core to knowing the self as incomplete lies in recognizing the self as oppressed, as a captive within the oppressor-oppressed dynamic. A dynamic described by Paulo Freire as:

Any situation in which 'A' objectively exploits 'B' or hinders his and her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person, is one of oppression... it interferes with the individual's ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human. (Freire 1996: 45)

Identifying oneself within an existing oppressed – oppressor relationship is essential aspect of conscientization. It is through knowing the self as oppressed that one acknowledges injustice, recognizes potential and seeks to improve reality. If one does not know or believe they are oppressed they are less likely to see any need for change and instead accept their current circumstance. Therefore without knowing the oppressed self the very purpose of engaging in Theatre of the Oppressed poetics is lost, reduced to a methodology.

The identification of 'oppressed' was significantly different however within the political dynamics of Brazil's twenty year dictatorship, from which Theatre of the Oppressed first originated. The nation was characterized by strict military rule, heavy censorship, soaring inequality, huge national debt and political orientated disappearances and deaths (Kingstone 2004). Boal himself was viewed as a threat and consequently arrested, tortured and exiled for fifteen years. Thousands more endured imprisonment, torture and deportation. Theatre of the Oppressed developed as a response to the need for democratic space amid these aggressively overt oppressor-oppressed conditions.

Within the contemporary political climate of Australia however, oppression transcends the aggressively overt strategies of a dictatorship instead employing covert yet perhaps equally aggressive means. Herbert Marcuse describes this dynamic as a new form of control in which ‘unfreedom’ prevails within seemingly comfortable, reasonable and democratic industrial nations (Marcuse 1991: 3). This seemingly peaceful existence mutes resistance into pacification- which in itself is an oppressive state. It is a repression starkly different from the preceding conditions of Brazil in the 1950’s but which nonetheless operates from a position of strength. The capabilities (intellectual and material) of contemporary society are immeasurably greater than ever before – which means that the scope of societies domination over the individual is immeasurably greater than ever before (Marcuse 1991: 9). This has lead to the evolution of a sophisticated oppressive circumstance with a greater stranglehold on our internal being, precisely because of its omnipresent state. Boal uses the phrase ‘cops in the head’ to represent this new internal conflict that arises from the overbearing external variables within such societies. He proceeds to further describe what and who is meant by the term ‘oppressed’:

The smallest cells of social organization (the couple, the family, the neighborhood, the school, the office, the factory, ect) and equally the smallest incidents of our social life (an accident at the corner of the street, the checking of identity papers in the metro, a visit to the doctor, etc) contain all the moral and political values of society, all its structures of domination and power, all its mechanisms of oppression. (Boal 1995: 40)

Boal contextualizes all relationships as ecosystems within the greater structures of the oppressed – oppressor dynamic. These relationships may manifest themselves in numerous ways, within many layers. An individual can be oppressed within one situation for example, but be the instigator of oppression within another. The dynamic is thus a complex and constantly evolving one.

The Oppressed Self: as Asylum Seeker

The uncertain state of limbo experienced by an asylum seeker presents a particularly complex combination of these new and old forms of oppression. Having fled their country for fear of persecution they have experienced external oppressors, similar to those of Brazil under dictatorship. Such was the case for members of the Journey of Asylum arts project from Afghanistan, Turkey, Tibet, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Rwanda. These participants had faced oppression as artists, teachers, and political activists; for being of a certain religion or sect as well as for their sexual orientation. Iman escaped the ongoing 21 year Somali Civil War marked by killings, dislocation, mass starvation, lack of security and continued unrest. There has been no stable government since the coup in 1991 and the continuing chaos has been classified by the United Nations (UN) as a humanitarian disaster. Iman, like other members of the arts project fled nations which had relegated them to ‘other’, despised and persecuted (Govan 2006). However they may also experience

being relegated as 'other', despised and untrustworthy, within the very country they seek protection from.

This was reflected in the Journey of Asylum scene 'I don't believe you' where an actor playing the Refugee Review Tribunal judge sat on an elevated seat in the audience. He oversaw the entire performance and occasionally interjected with the same unchanging, monotone statement, 'I don't believe you' (Journey of Asylum – Waiting 2010: 3). The scene was later elaborated near the end of the performance where each member of the cast sat in a line facing the audience. Each stood up to speak about how they have been persecuted for their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, political opinion or sexuality. Each time however the tribunal judge repeated 'I don't believe you'.

An asylum seeker seeks to be recognized as a refugee under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) convention and protocol. It requires a legal process that can often take years and involve merits reviews; judicial reviews and sometimes a ministerial intervention (ASRC 2009: 7). The entire process is time consuming, demanding, uncertain and stressful, often affecting the mental health of those involved. A number of participants were at various stages of this legal process during the one year arts project at the ASRC. I recall a particular occasion in which one of the participants had a Refugee Review Tribunal scheduled in early August, mentioning that if he was rejected he would commit suicide. Iman further describes the volatile state of waiting:

That's what mainly you see with asylum seekers where they just sick of waiting and they overdose themselves. I try to encourage them to do other things, to take them out of their locked up room where they mostly stay in. Because they can't do studies, because they can't do other things and because they can't study and work they think they can't socialize. (Iman 2011, personal communication, 7 Oct) The isolation, legally being unable to work or study, unable to plan the future and thus develop self affirmation, is a detrimental condition of unknowing. It is an un – chosen condition that amplifies the state of powerlessness. Furthermore there is also the experience of guilt for fleeing, homesickness, displacement and loss (Govan 2006).

The oppression felt by asylum seekers is unique in that they experience nationhood firsthand (Myers 2005). The country they flee does not acknowledge their humanity and the country to which they arrive may not do so either. They have birth and citizenship associations with one – entities which distinguish the human being in a nation state – and arrive to a nation in which they have neither. Marc Augé argues that it is a particular experience in which refugees and asylum seekers, 'may live permanently or for an extended period of time in a particular non place' (cited in Myers 2005: 215). The predicament may lead to the feeling that they are objects within a tangle of uncontrollable legal, social and contextual factors. As a participant in the Journey of Asylum project describes:

I had to have a \$20,000 bond in the bank to get out of the detention and then immigration gave me a bridging visa E, which meant no work rights, no study rights, no money, and another five years of community detention, reporting twice a week. What did I do? (Journey of Asylum – Waiting 2010: 56).

He clearly communicates the confusion felt towards his restricted and controlled state of existence. It is the sense of being owned by another, or ‘being for another’ rather than controlling one’s own condition. ‘The oppressed have been destroyed precisely because their situation has reduced them to things’ (Freire 1996: 50).

This develops into what Freire describes as the psychology of the oppressed; a self deprecating , untrusting, voiceless state in which one fatalistically accepts their condition. This sentiment is captured by a scene in the Journey of Asylum (2010 p: 56) which follows two characters recent rejection of asylum by the Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship. The two characters sit on the floor of a bare, dimly lit stage. They discuss their options following the rejection:

A: hey man, I got a good idea we need to go to the beach man you don’t know how to swim. We just go over yellow flag, that’s it.

B: do you know the size of shark’s teeth?

A: I got a better idea, do you know train- its fast and it can’t stop- this is another way. Just jump and we’re finished.

B: do you wanna see my brains out man!

A: okay, look you see my house, it’s got two levels right. We can go upstairs and jump down- splat. Finished.

B: the leg can go in the stomach no no no no. I cant do this man. A: look I got the best idea, you know animal tablets?

B: which one?

A: the one they give horses for races, you just drink and sleep indefinitely. No pain. B: I think that’s a good idea

A: that’s why you’re my friend man, cause if they send us back to Africa we are finished.

In a stark statement representing their quandary, actor ‘a’ ends the scene with the line ‘Australian immigration you are the shark, you are the train, you are that fucking animal tablet’ (Journey of Asylum – Waiting 2010: 56). The scene represents an alienated state where acceptance beyond the frontiers of current conditions seems unimaginable. It is an all encompassing state of isolation and sense of helplessness that often leads to physical and mental exhaustion. This state is further summed up by the eloquent recollections of another member of the ASRC project who explains his time in detention. He recalls how guards insisted he could safely return to Afghanistan now that ‘The Americans were there, everything is fine! We give you a free ticket’. He stares directly at the audience and states,

‘six years of detention, they plucked my feathers and then said fly’ (Journey of Asylum – Waiting 2010: 13).

Verbalizing Oppression

Verbalization plays a vital role in the identification, orientation and proclamation of the oppressed self. Therefore the next step of conscientization lies in the ability to express it though body but also through word. This does not necessarily mean being able to extensively explain socio-political forces at play, at this stage of the conscientization process. Boal asserts the importance of verbalization in conscientization and thus upon transformation of self, ‘we can say we are conscious of something when we are capable of explaining it – however well or badly – totally or in part’ (Boal 1995: 33). The early stages of conscientization therefore involve verbalization associated with the examination of internalized emotions and reflections. It presents the initial steps that confront the oppressive state itself, a strong proclamation of ‘I am oppressed’. As a Journey of Asylum participant describes:

I’ve never had a chance in my country to do something like this. There’s no opportunity because we don’t have freedom of speech. So I like to say things here that I couldn’t have said in my country. (Journey of Asylum – Waiting Program 2010 p: 7)

Verbal expression however goes beyond the initial act of sharing ones individual story. It becomes an act which represents others in a similar oppressed circumstance. In so doing it becomes an act which may assist or encourage others to acknowledge and verbalize their own contexts. Iman describes in the Journey of Asylum program:

I want to be the voice of others who don’t have the same opportunities for free speech or the courage to face these problems. I’ll be the thought that go through their mindset the things they only wish and dream they could say. (Iman 2011, personal communication, 5 Oct)

Furthermore, the creative act allows one to imagine, create and look beyond current state. As another arts project member and asylum seeker explains:

I’ve never really had the chance to say how I felt. There were times when I wanted to speak out, but I couldn’t because of the situation- I just had to comply. Being part of this play has allowed me to offload the weight that was on my chest- not just the bad feelings but also the good feelings. It’s helped me to unlock my mind and be free to think again. (Journey of Asylum- Waiting Program 2010: 7)

Verbalization therefore encompasses two very important values of conscientization, as described by Freire (1970), the first being that human life is worth living or must be made so. The second value is that within any given society lies the possibility for the amelioration of the human condition.

An important aspect of this realization however comes in part from not shying away from the terminology used by Boal, terms such as 'revolution' and 'oppression'. Terminology encourages self – reflection, identification and open discourse which Freire describes as a valuable awareness of the liberating process. 'At all stages of their liberation, the oppressed must see themselves as women and men engaged in the ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human', explains Freire (1996: 48). The very fact that such terms are considered highly charged and even radical within modern day contexts such as Australia, only further evidence of the importance of their continued use. Theatre of the Oppressed must continue to use such terms in a struggle against their perceived radicalization within new contexts. To consider 'oppression' as an extreme term, for example, is only a denial of the seriousness of the contemporary oppressed condition.

During the year long ASRC arts project such terms and even the name of the theatre form itself was not communicated to those involved. It was evident to me as a participant throughout the entire process and further confirmed by Iman's confusion when Theatre of the Oppressed was mentioned in the interview. She asked for my elaboration and then later responded:

One thing throughout the drama I knew what it was and what it was doing and I knew how it was developing to go there after a few weeks. I started realizing it's something we are going to perform; it's something that is going to build up. (Iman 2011, personal communication, 5 Oct)

It was thus became clear that Iman was conscious of the 'theatre' in Theatre of the Oppressed, and even the poetics of transformation without the use of associated terminology. This is due to the particular combination of new and old forms of oppression experienced by asylum seekers as well as the advanced awareness of oneself as 'oppressed'. It also assists with the orientation of self within the entire conscientization process. Members of the project had already identified some form of themselves as oppressed, even if only associated to that which they experienced from the country they fled. Negating the terms was a failure in assisting with the identification of covert versions of oppression within the new context. I am unaware as to why the Joker did not mention this, as the post workshop research only goes to highlight its importance.

Using the terminology outside of these training workshops and within practicing communities is essential in the realisation of Theatre of the Oppressed poetics. Terminology challenges habitually passive dialogue and de-radicalizes terms that promote action. It is in the nature of Theatre of the Oppressed language therefore to be

‘charged with the hopes, desires, needs and life experiences of each citizen’ (Boal 2006 p: 44). Furthermore the title *Theatre of the Oppressed* clearly identifies the process as theatre from the onset thus categorizing any form of experimentation as a declaration of oneself as an artist. Thus not only does it allow for the identification of the oppressed self, but gives permission to reveal the artistic self. This makes *Theatre of the Oppressed* terminology an indispensable companion to conscientization.

The Self as Artist: Workshops and Performance

Embracing this notion of self as oppressed is an empowering, self valuing and liberating process rather than a perception of victimization. It is the very essence that allows *Theatre of the Oppressed* participants to know they have both the right and responsibility to build towards self actualization. In doing so the very poetics of the form begins to take shape as the transformation from narrated to narrator takes place. To change action on stage requires that participants trust themselves, their word and thus their contribution to the theatrical space. This is particularly imperative within theatre which Boal states is often dominated by the dominant class. Therefore the actors leap is a simultaneous leap of self faith promoted through the workshop process. It is an exercise in imagination that encourages a state of mind unbounded by habit and norms. Such a mind lends itself to ambition through the disruption, or more ideally the destruction, of habitus.

As a creative process, workshops act as a license to theatrically play and share through collective art making. It involves practical elements such as theatrical games, voice and body exercises, as well as improvisation. However it may also involve group discussions, evaluations and debates. The first few ASRC workshops for example involved sharing a meal at the ASRC centre and discussing the key issues of asylum. There were numerous brainstorming sessions as members discussed their vision, purpose and the desired effect of the arts project.

Theatre of the Oppressed workshops also entirely embraces elements that other theatrical forms would consider limitations or errors. During one of the early workshop sessions, my partner and I ran out of time to develop our scene. I began to explain this as we walked to the middle of the circle to share what little we did have. Before I could finish my sentence however the Joker waves her hands in an amicable gesture which disregarded my attempts to elucidate the situation. The Joker proceeded to explain that she does not accept apologies for being up on stage as everyone has the right to share regardless. It was further indication of the entire process as being of value. As Boal explains:

We are those who believe that every human being is an artist; that every human being is capable of doing everything that any one human being can do. Perhaps we may not all do it as well as each other, but we are capable of doing it – not better than others but each better than ourselves. And every time we do it, we are more capable and better. I am better

than myself, I am better than I think and I can become better than I have been (Boal 2006: 45).

Every participant or rather every human being is thus essentially an artist and the workshopping process is an embodiment of this notion. Workshopping actively liberates the term 'artist' from the selective privileged few, for the use of all.

The psychology of the oppressed however, presented an initial barrier to embracing the inner artist. During the early stage of the ASRC workshop process for example, a participant I was paired with stated that he would share his story with me but that I would make it 'interesting' for stage. This was a clear denial – and disbelief – in his own ability to create the symbolic language of theatre. The building of artistic self confidence was a slow yet affirmative process, as described by Iman:

At first I didn't even know that we were going to stand in front of the people and perform. It actually started building up when I started putting people on board- that I realized that we were going to perform in front of people. I am not an actor. (Iman 2011, personal communication, 5 Oct)

However she developed confidence with each theatrical task at the weekly workshop sessions stating 'but I realized, if I could do all these other things that I never knew about then maybe I could just do this one thing' (Iman 2011, personal communication, 5 Oct). It is a testimony to the workshop process that by the day of the performance at Trades Hall, all members of the cast performed on stage – an affirmation of the self as artist. Furthermore performers were unapologetic about being on stage, each spoke with confidence, sang and danced.

Journey of Asylum- Waiting was performed at Trades Hall in front of a live audience, under stage lighting and accompanied by a live band (vocals, drums, guitar, soundscape) playing original music. Despite this high professionalism the performance was advertised as a 'work in progress showing' as a testimony to process over product. The performative outcome of the workshop process, though not emphasized in Theatre of the Oppressed, proved particularly important within the ASRC arts project. It allowed for the sense of voice, community and acknowledgement within the act of sharing the moment of theatre with the audience. Iman felt that the close proximity of the audience was important in that their reactions could be directly encountered 'seeing people cry, seeing people outside saying "I didn't know"', she explains. In addition to this the message itself was communicated directly to the audience. A message that Iman felt needed to go out, explaining:

Every Australian that is here that doesn't understand doesn't mean that they are racist or doesn't mean that they hate you. They are just ignorant and we need to lecture them because of their ignorance. If you show them what you've been through or make them see what you've been through it will at least acknowledge (Iman 2011, personal communication, 5 Oct).

The work in progress was in this case a solidification of the entire workshopping processes. Conscientization in this case thus primarily involved workshops however also included the validation felt from performing professionally and sharing with the audience.

The Affirmed Self: Group Dynamics

The shared goals, collaboration and participation within a group environment are another pivotal aspect of conscientization. Groups provide a vital network, support and means to socialize – especially with regards to those in the midst of waiting for asylum. It was 'something I looked forward to', explains Iman (2011, personal communication, 5 Oct). Another Journey of Asylum member expresses this sentiment in the program, 'while we wait, it's good to have a focus to do something, to meet people, to have an activity. This play is a real activity. Not just a distraction from waiting (Journey of Asylum-Waiting Program 2010 p: 14). The importance of this network was reflected at the conclusion of the last Journey of Asylum work in progress performance at Trades Hall:

I realized a lot of people were down and thinking 'what are we going to do here after?' it was like something they have to do. It was like people you know and look forward to seeing. It was something that encourages them to see and be and perform the best. So all these things, getting away for those few hours was a help. (Iman 2011, personal communication, 5 Oct)

The weekly Thursday workshops provided a sense of stability to the unknowing state of their legal status which assisted conscientization. In many cases it was the only definite weekly structure amidst the asylum waiting process. It provided support, dignity and relief within a welcoming space to express and be heard. In addition one begins to identify and know their personal strength through the group dynamic. This is of particular importance when the psychology of the oppressed prevents participants from seeing such traits themselves. Iman explained that as the ASRC project progressed she began to realize her ability in counseling, motivation and public speaking. She asserted that these were things she would do naturally however it wasn't until it was acknowledged verbally that she began to be conscious of these traits as strengths. 'Seeing that feedback of people keep telling me what I was good at. And made me realize I can do', stated Iman (2011, personal communication, 5 Oct). When asked if the Journey of Asylum arts project experience was a significant part of this realization she responds:

Yes, encouraged me – because before that coming back from Africa where all you know is a war torn zone – no one encouraged you that you good at anything. Everyone just tells you what you bad at. So I lived all my life being bad at something but never good at anything. The Journey of Asylum was a life journey to realize who I was and what I was good at. (Iman 2011, personal communication, 5 Oct)

This presents a transformation of the self as it is a distinct awareness of one's capacities, abilities and talents. It is a valuing of the self whilst also identifying ways of improving.

Since the Journey of Asylum arts project Iman has publically spoken at the ASRC volunteer induction nights. She was also personally asked by Kon Karapanagiotidis, CEO of the ASRC, to speak at the centre's ten year anniversary event in front of over 200 people. Prior to this invitation Iman was unaware of the impact of her ability to communicate with an audience, stating 'I didn't know I was doing a big thing until Kon called me – asked me to do a speech' (Iman 2011, personal communication, 5 Oct). Iman goes on to attribute her growing confidence towards advocacy and public speaking as having arisen from the arts project:

Those kinda things grew from being a part of the Journey of Asylum and encouraging myself to public speaking. I never thought I could do that. All these people. And from then on I've been in a dialogue. (Iman 2011, personal communication, 5 Oct)

These developments demonstrate how Iman began to know her abilities though the positive acknowledgment and reinforcement of the arts project group dynamics. The group dynamics of the ASRC arts projects thus allowed for the recognition of personal strength and talent which has allowed Iman to understand her potential.

Beginning to know personal strength also allows for the focus on the development of such traits in the process of self development and thus transformation. Iman continues to demonstrate the power of the theatre project's impact though her continued studies. She has just completed her first year of a community services diploma, attributing this to the Journey of Asylum. 'Doing the drama made me realize I could be counselor; there was some category for what I do. The life that I live in which I help people.' (Iman 2011, personal communication, 5 Oct). This is the very representation of the identification of the incomplete self, but more importantly the seeking of the affirmed self. It is a state of mind that rejects the psychology of the oppressed and victimization by beginning to see beyond the barriers of current context:

I understood that my structure, who I am now after coming here four years ago is by seeing different lines that I can take. Realizing the things I do and why I did it was a big step forward. (Iman 2011, personal communication, 5 Oct)

The ability to see different pathways demonstrates an understanding of one's orientation within time and space. It is the ability to know ones history, present and potential future – a characteristic of the conscientized self. The ability to see different paths is therefore the

product of a liberated and creative mind. Theatre of the Oppressed conscientization thus encompasses' both theoretical awareness and simultaneous action- towards self – affirmation. This action can manifest in numerous ways, in Iman's case she spoke publically at events and is now undertaking more study. Self affirming action can also present itself in the everyday, as explained by Iman:

I've been hiding through I don't know who – for a long time and I realized many things that I've done at the drama that I never used to do. Like look at myself in the mirror. I never used to do that. And so I realized myself more and understood who I was and what I was capable of. It was really big improvement for me. (Iman 2011, personal communication, 5 Oct)

Iman's self affirmation developed through the dynamics of the ASRC arts project to affect the many layers of her life –from small everyday actions to the long term goals. The affirmed self is thus an affirmative action towards the belief of the improved, developed and 'complete' self.

Conclusion

Conscientization through the transformation of self begins with the discovery of one's incompleteness, potential to struggle and ability to transform. Its essence lies in the human ability to create an objective distance by which to critically analyze self and situation. This arises through the acknowledgment of an oppressed state with an understanding of the oppressed dynamic as well as being able to verbalize these. Theatre of the Oppressed instigates, encourages and focuses conscientization through the tools of artistic expression. It allows for the dual claiming of theatrical and social voice, self trust and social responsibility as well as actively combating the psychology of the oppressed through group dynamics.

Self reflection is an invaluable, inseparable part of true conscientization. To deny critical self reflection relegates people to 'no more than activist pawns in the hands of leadership which reserved for itself the right to decision making (Freire 1970: 78) Conscientization therefore develops a theoretical understanding which allows one to reclaim

Their personal yet contextualized history, critically analyze their present as well as imagine and instigate the future. We embrace the oppressed self for the purposes of transform. One cannot attempt to know or transform reality if one does not know the self through social, philosophical, political and creative orientation. The affirmed or complete self only emerges when individuals look upon themselves as agents responsible for expressing and changing the world. Therefore a change in individual subjectivity constitutes only part of the entire conscientization process.

This paper has undertaken an analysis of the key factors that constitute conscientization, from transformation of self and society. It has attempted to operationalize this complex phenomenon through a case-study approach, which does not restrict itself to theatrical outcome. It has thus endeavored to identify both the internal and external factors which contribute to transformation through a triangulation that draws from interviews, script and entire workshop processes. Data derived from such varied sources is an essential ethnographical approach that caters to the holistic view necessary for a complete study of Theatre of Oppressed as a transformative cultural act. It avoids the mistake of isolating and compartmentalizing the inherently interrelated nature of the entire process. This paper does acknowledge however that a considerable amount of scope is covered within the limited time and word frame. Further research is thus recommended in order to develop and consolidate a greater understanding of these aspects.

This paper also acknowledges that a direct causal relationship is difficult to establish and thus one must be wary of proclaiming the definite existence of such. In order to more adequately measure transformation for example, a longitudinal study is necessary as transformation manifests in different ways and timelines- immediate, or years after an event. This is especially the case of the ongoing nature of self and social transformation encouraged through Theatre of the Oppressed. Due to limitations in time and resources this research was unable to extend its study in such a manner however it presents ample opportunity for future directional research. In addition, future study must look to additional Theatre of the Oppressed projects and a larger research sample size in order to attempt to systematize the measurement of what constitutes transformation. Again this can only occur through further longitudinal studies involving a larger sample size.

This paper has identified a number of key critical factors relating to Theatre of the Oppressed transformation. It is the responsibility of future study endeavors however, to develop and contribute through further in – depth research.

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