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## PARTICIPANTS OF THE REVOLUTION

“It starts when we realize that looking also is an action which confirms or modifies that distribution, and that ‘interpreting the world’ is already a means of transforming it, of reconfiguring it. The spectator is active, as the student or the scientist: he observes, he selects, compares, interprets. He ties up what he observes with many other things he has observed on other stages... This is what emancipation means: the blurring of the opposition between they who look and they who act, they who are individuals and they who are members of a collective body.”

Jacques Ranciere<sup>1</sup>

In *The Rainbow of Desire*, Augusto Boal presents his methodology for a type of theatre that aims to induce social change. The text concludes with the assertion that “[t]he real goal of the arsenal of the Theatre of the Oppressed is to contribute to the preparation of the future rather than waiting for it to happen.”<sup>2</sup> Boal’s theorization was influenced by the works of Bertolt Brecht and Paulo Freire, who drew upon the potential of theatre to facilitate transformation in individuals and, in turn, society. This essay explores the relevance of the propositions of Freire and Boal – and those of Brecht in relation to them – to Liam O’Brien’s performance *To Laugh In The Face of Futility*. The theorists’ postulations regarding the nature

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (New York: Verso, 2009), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Augusto Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy*, trans. Adrian Jackson. (London; New York: Routledge, 1995), 185.

of the interaction between a performer and his or her audience in relation to the dichotomy between ethics and aesthetics is a central focus of the analysis of O'Brien's performance.

Brecht revolutionized Western theatre by expanding the method of alienation, which entails the disengagement of an actor from his or her role, and by breaking the "fourth wall" between the audience and the actor. Thereby, Brecht shifted the lights in theatre from the stage to the audience to urge them to reflect upon the performance rather than be absorbed in it as they would in naturalistic theatre. This shift encouraged a prioritization of ethics over aesthetics. His characters are caricaturized versions of characters that exist in the world, and such presentation allows the audience to observe and critically review themselves on stage.<sup>3</sup> As a dedicated Marxist theorist, Brecht believed that liberty from dominant ideologies that oppress individuals and perpetuate inequalities could be achieved only by critically engaging with them. Observing that the absorption of the audience into theatre is not dissimilar to the dissemination of ideologies, which typically occurs through transference, his methodology distanced the audience from the performance and thus provided them with space to think for themselves.

Brecht's methodology is crucial for prompting an audience to engage in intellectual inquiry; however, intellectual inquiry alone is not sufficient to attain true understanding. As Engels has asserted, a belief is not necessarily true just because an individual "independently" arrived at it. Rather, "[i]deology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness. The real motive forces impelling him remain unknown to him; otherwise it simply would not be an ideological process. Hence he imagines false or seeming motive forces."<sup>4</sup> Brecht aimed to dismantle false consciousness. As Althusser has explained, Brecht contended that "if the theatre's sole object were to be even a 'dialectical' commentary [...] eternal self-recognition and non-recognition – then the spectator would already know the tune, it is his own."<sup>5</sup> Brecht attempted to rectify false consciousness also by propagating revolutionary ideas on stage, which led him to be criticized for assuming a vanguard role and disseminating Marxist ideology in a top-down fashion and thus jeopardizing the potential for revolution by being overly didactic. Although Brecht objected ideological moulding, he was criticized for doing so himself, only, by presenting a different ideology.

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<sup>3</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. eds. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 91-98.

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Engels, "Marx and Engels Correspondence", 1893, [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1893/letters/93\\_07\\_14.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1893/letters/93_07_14.htm), accessed 4 July 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Murray ed., *Mimesis, Masochism & Mime: The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 213.

Freire, who shared Brecht's zeal for the revolution, developed *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to overcome the setbacks of monological communication. Freire argued for a dialogical education that is ultimately emancipatory and humanitarian rather than conclusive and depository. He emphasized the need for conscientisation to awaken the consciousness of the oppressed, enabling them to identify the socio-cultural reality that frames their lives, and urging them to recognize their ability to transform it. As Reginal Connolly states, Freire pointed at the root of the failure to unite in solidarity, very accurately, as "the fragmented consciousness suffered by the oppressed [which] denies them access to each other in their collaborative search for a picture of their total situation."<sup>6</sup>

Although Freire did not resort to Brecht's method of alienation, his conceptualization of theatre is similar to Brecht's, as evident in his insistence on conscientisation. Freire sought to make individuals aware of their own role as audience members as well as their role as the oppressed, which they are forced to play off-stage. Furthermore, he asserted a need for praxis; "reflection and action upon the world as the means to transform it."<sup>7</sup> He reasoned that the world is misconstrued as one of limitations, which indeed creates a closed world only when individuals perceive such limitations as insurmountable obstacles. In a dialectical conceptualization, he theorized that the conditions under which we struggle to maintain our unfulfilled existence can be transformed when individuals, driven by hope, comprehend that there are other possibilities of existence in which both they and others are emancipated.<sup>8</sup> Such transformation undoubtedly requires collective action which redresses the base; relations of production, which is the source of oppression, alongside the superstructure; the socio-cultural relationships that are built upon and subsequently impact the base.<sup>9</sup>

Marxism and Marxist revisionism diverge in their prioritization of altering the base versus the superstructure to galvanize social transformation. Where Marx argues that the masses can be liberated by changing material conditions, the latter emphasizes the elements of the superstructure. As Boal noted, Brecht, as a true Marxist, "asserts that the character *is not absolute subject* but the object of economic or social forces to which he responds and in virtue

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<sup>6</sup> Reginald Connolly, "Freire, Praxis and Education," in *Literacy and Revolution: The Pedagogy of Paulo Freire*, ed. Robert Mackie (London: Pluto Press, 1980), 71.

<sup>7</sup> Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1970, [https://selforganizedseminar.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/freire\\_pedagogy\\_oppressed1.pdf](https://selforganizedseminar.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/freire_pedagogy_oppressed1.pdf), accessed 15 July 2018, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Freire, *The Oppressed*, 39.

<sup>9</sup> Franz Jakubowski, *Ideology and Superstructure in Historical Materialism*, 1936, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/jakubowski/1936/Ideology-Superstructure.pdf>, accessed 15 July 2018, 10-28.

of which he acts.”<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, revisionism, which is typified by the philosophy of the Frankfurt School, “attack[s] objectivity itself as an instrument of domination and turn[s] their criticism from the base, the economic sphere, to the superstructure composed of politics, culture, and ideology.”<sup>11</sup>

Deborah Mutnick has claimed that Freire, despite his allegiance with Marxism, produced a theory that was inclined toward that of the Frankfurt School. In particular, it did not define the oppressor as the ruling class, which “tends to obfuscate how the system of capitalist production reduces social relations to commodities and alienates workers from the worker.”<sup>12</sup> However, I believe this criticism is invalid given that theatre is within the domain of the superstructure, and its potential as an instrument for the revolution cannot not focus on the human within the society as both the object and subject of the system of oppression.

It must be clear for anyone who has the briefest understanding of capitalism and has suffered its effects that humanity can proceed toward liberation only by uniting in solidarity against the system, which is built upon relations of production. However, astonishingly, such awareness is absent. I believe that this can be accounted for by analyzing the reactions of some of the audience members of O’Brien’s performance who laugh at a person hurting himself to demonstrate the human condition under the late capitalism. O’Brien’s performance positions the audience against the performer, thereby providing them with the opportunity to inspect their own role as the oppressor of the working class. He represents the oppressed, while the audience, watching the suffering of the Other from a safe space, identifies with the oppressor. Accordingly, their reactions, which are similar to that of the oppressors as well as the oppressed in real life, provide insight into obstacles that hinder the revolution.

Freire asserts that although the effects of oppression cannot be understood by anyone other than the oppressed, they “almost always, during the initial stage of the struggle, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or ‘sub-oppressors.’” The identification of the oppressed with the oppressor stems from the false perception of the world as one of limitations. Its antithesis being the oppressor, the oppressed cannot imagine itself in a third mode of existence; a condition that can begin to be remedied by becoming conscious of the true meaning of “human,” which is Boal’s quest in his theorization of

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<sup>10</sup> Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. Maria-Odilia Leal McBride and A. Charles (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985), 92.

<sup>11</sup> Deborah Mutnick, “Critical Interventions: The Meaning of Praxis,” in *A Boal Companion: Dialogues on Theatre and Cultural Politics*, ed. Jan Cohen-Cruz and Mady Schutzman (New York: Routledge, 2006), 37.

<sup>12</sup> Mutnick, “Critical Interventions: The Meaning of Praxis,” 37.

theatre.<sup>13</sup> His is not one of physical constructions, an aesthetic space, nor even of an audience or a professional actor. Boal posited that theatre, or theatricality, “is the capacity, [the] human property which allows man to observe himself in action, in activity.”<sup>14</sup>

Although he opposed Marxist theatre, agreeing with those who believe it to be elitist, Boal’s aim is the same as Marx’s, who asserted that wealth is none other than “the universality of needs, capacities, enjoyments, productive powers etc. of individuals, produced in universal exchange.”<sup>15</sup> Marx declared that “an absolute elaboration of (the individual’s) creative dispositions, without any preconditions other the antecedent historical evolution” would lead him to “produce his totality, (not remaining) something formed by the past, but is in the absolute movement of becoming.”<sup>16</sup> Boal believed that individuals can actualize their true potential when the actor and the spectator coincide within them, which already occurs in their interactions with others and the world. By prompting the audience to observe the restrictions that are placed on them by agents of the superstructure, which they internalize, manifest, and perpetuate, Boal’s theatre stimulates imagination and creativity.<sup>17</sup>

Boal distinguished theatre that can most efficiently transform an audience into a coalesced entity, namely the spect-actor, which stages conflicts that have a potential for resolution. By formulating an analogy to watching a boxing match in which one opponent is incapacitated, Boal illustrated that performances of struggle that are doomed to fail evokes despair, which is oppositional to theatre’s purposes of igniting imagination, evoking hope, and inducing redemptive action.<sup>18</sup>

Boal’s theory may explain the laughter of O’Brien’s audience. In his performance, O’Brien is desperate in his attempts to run away from an unmovable object to which he tied himself, and his desire to break away is never fulfilled. While O’Brien’s performance does not fit Boal’s depiction of efficient theatre on the surface level, its desperation highly reflects it in demonstrating that the perception of a situation as unresolvable is precisely what makes it unresolvable. Assuming that the audience is able to discern O’Brien’s representation of the

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<sup>13</sup> Augusto Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy*, trans. Adrian Jackson (London; New York: Routledge, 1995), 29-39.

<sup>14</sup> Boal, *Desire*, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Robinson, “Augusto Boal: Brecht and Beyond- The Boal Method,” *Ceasefire*, August 30, 2016, <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/augusto-boal-brecht-boal-method/>, accessed 15 July 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, 1857-1858, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/precapitalist/ch01.htm>, accessed July 4, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Boal, *Desire*, 35.

<sup>18</sup> Boal, *Desire*, 60.

conditions of workers, their reactions must reveal to them whether –and if so, why – the performance is actually futile.

Joke theorist Henri Bergson has established that not all laughter is joyful. The most relevant concept to O'Brien's performance is Schadenfreude, which refers to laughing at other people's misfortune.<sup>19</sup> Building upon Bergson's assertion that "our laughter is always the laughter of the group," Mady Schutzman has argued that laughter "allow[s] us to distinguish an in-group from an out-group. Jokes would cease to exist if we could clearly delineate lines of identity and difference. It is the combined pleasure and discomfort of something being unresolvable that makes us laugh."<sup>20</sup> Thus, shared laughter cultivates a group identity that fortifies the in-group against the hardship of the Other. As they prefer pleasure to the fear that they might be subject to the same hardship, members of the group alienate themselves from those suffering others, which results in the fragmented consciousness that Freire outlined. O'Brien's exhibition of self-harm diagnoses the psychological roots of fragmented consciousness by facilitating a polarization of the audience; not everyone is willing to accept that they, just like O'Brien, are inflicting pain upon themselves by denying the oppression of the capitalist system and failing to act against it. It is precisely their laughter that disables both O'Brien and themselves.

Freire believed that one reason that oppressed people fail to unite is that they are "dominated by the fear of freedom." Just as Plato's prisoners in the cave who resist stepping into the sun, "they prefer the security of conformity with their state of unfreedom to creative communion produced by freedom and even the very pursuit of freedom."<sup>21</sup> Akin to those prisoners who prefer immobility, perhaps threatened with the ominous awareness of the existence of other prisoners who would kill the one who steps out of the cave and "takes it in hand to free them from their chains and to lead them up," the fearing oppressed "refuse to appeal to others, or to listen to the appeals of others, or even to the appeals of their own conscience."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Wilco W. van Dijk and Jaap W. Ouwerkerk, *Schadenfreude: Understanding Pleasure at the Misfortune of Others*, (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 219-221.

<sup>20</sup> Henri Bergson, "Laughter," in *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher. (Baltimore, MD and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), 64.

Mady Schutzman, "Jok(er)ing." in *A Boal Companion: Dialogues on Theatre and Cultural Politics*, ed. Jan Cohen-Cruz and Mady Schutzman (New York; Routledge, 2006), 139.

<sup>21</sup> Freire, *The Oppressed*, 4.

<sup>22</sup> Plato, "Allegory of the Cave", Republic, VII 514 a, 2 to 517 a, 7 trans. Thomas Sheehan.

<https://web.stanford.edu/class/ihum40/cave.pdf>, accessed 10 July 2018, 6.

Freire, *The Oppressed*, 4.

Thus, the laughter of O'Brien's audience can be interpreted as a reaction to fear, which stems from despair. Yet not all members laugh at his performance; it is evident from their reactions that a larger portion would rather not see, or effectively end O'Brien's suffering. While sympathy is preferable to adopting the role of the oppressor, Freire contended that it is not more useful for transformative action, as it maintains the division between the self and the other, and thereby perpetuates a fragmented consciousness. He argued:

“True solidarity with the oppressed means fighting at their side to transform the objective reality which has [makes] them these “beings for another.” The oppressor is in solidarity with the oppressed only when he stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice, cheated in the sale of their labor — when he stops making pious, sentimental, and individualistic gestures and risks an act of love.”<sup>23</sup>

One might question how O'Brien's audience could “risk an act of love” or contribute to remedying his suffering in any way but sympathizing with him, as they are bound by their position to remain mere spectators. In this role, they are unable to take direct action in the moment of the performance, as there is a contract of non-interference between themselves and the performer.

It is notable that not everyone considers the inability of an audience to interfere with an artist's suffering to be an unfavourable matter. In investigating audience demands of performances of pain, James Thompson has explored two opposing camps regarding the responsibility of the audience that witnesses such performances. Although Das, who shared the perspective of Brecht, Freire, and Boal, has argued that the expression of pain, even when unuttered and unacknowledged by its receptors, forms an ethical claim upon them, Thompson has proposed that most performances do not actually “call the observer for an ethical response – or a call to action” but instead request merely a recognition of the existence of pain and the right of the performer to express it.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Freire, *The Oppressed*, 6.

<sup>24</sup> James Thompson, *Performance Affects: Applied Theatre and the End of Effect*, (Basingstoke [England]; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 157.

In agreement with Thompson's assertion, O'Brien stated that in his performance his intention was not to relate the issues of "a generic 'everyman'" to his audience but rather to become aware of his own responses "to the outside world."<sup>25</sup> However, I argue that even if O'Brien did not intend to invoke broader social issues to address in transformative action, his performance as an expression of the despair that arises from witnessing the world does make an ethical call on the audience due to the inextricable nature of the relationship between the individual and society as outlined by the three philosophers and the Marxist tradition.

Despite the social contract between artists and their audiences, some interventions are necessary for the artists' survival. As evidenced in Abramovic's *Rythm 5*, where the artist would have suffocated if she was not carried out of the burning communist star in which she lay, and Chris Burden's *Doomed*, where he lay under a sheet of glass for 45 hours while thinking to himself, "[m]y God ... are they going to leave me here to die?"<sup>26</sup> until a museum employee eventually left a pitcher of water by his side. Rather than detracting from the performance, breaking the social contract can empower an audience by helping them realize their role as perpetrators of violence through inaction. Furthermore, as Boal's theatre attests to, intervening with a performance can encourage an audience to discover other, non-oppressive roles they could potentially play in society.

For instance, if an audience member of O'Brien's performance were to intervene and stop him from running, then he or she would have assumed the role of a unionized worker, or a non-bureaucratized, authentic union leader; given that stopping running equates with stopping working; strike action in resistance to exploitation. As Boal suggested, by standing up, analysing, and providing a solution to oppression, which O'Brien's performance embodies, the audience would advance towards a liberated society. Moreover, it would transform the performance into a dialogical one in which audience members, who had previously assumed the role of the passive student by remaining mere spectators, become

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Veena Das, "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain," *Daedalus*, Vol. 125, No. 1, Social Suffering (Winter, 1996): 88.

<sup>25</sup> Current Projects, "Liam O'Brien Interview," [Currentprjts.blogspot.com.au](http://currentprjts.blogspot.com.au/2012/08/liam-obrien-interview.html), <http://currentprjts.blogspot.com.au/2012/08/liam-obrien-interview.html>, accessed July 12, 2018.

Please note that the name of the interviewer is not available.

<sup>26</sup> Nancy Spector, "Marina Abramović Rhythm 5," *Guggenheim*, <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/5190>, accessed 15 July 2018.

Jerry Saltz, "Saltz: Chris Burden's Big Art of Big Ideas Lives Large at the New Museum," *Vulture*, October 20, 2013, <http://www.vulture.com/2013/10/saltz-on-chris-burden-extreme-measures.html>, accessed 15 July 2018.



active participants in the construction of a new system, one where workers are not held back and harmed by their chains – or, in this case, cords.

Liam O'Brien's *To Laugh In The Face of Futility*, particularly an analysis of the reactions of the audience unveils the roles individuals assume as the oppressed, the sub-oppressor, the incapable, and the desperate. It verifies Freire's thesis that the constrained world is sustained by the self-fulfilling prophecies of the society. By facilitating conscientisation, the performance proves, in accordance with Brecht's, Freire's and Boal's formulations, the need for raising the awareness of an audience by appealing to their intellect; their capacity for deduction, which in fact is inseparable from ethics.

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<sup>i</sup> Please note that the name of the interviewer is not available.