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**Transformation through Play:**

**Examining the Role of Theatre of the Oppressed on Empowerment**

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## **Abstract**

Despite having been established since the 1970s as a school of theatre promoting a method of emancipation through facilitating communication about unequal power structures, Theatre of the Oppressed has not had not yet been comprehensively researched in terms of its emancipatory qualities. This paper examines a plethora of studies describing effective use of Theatre of the Oppressed while highlighting their reference to empowerment. 7 papers published on particular programmes in some regions of Australia, Africa and Asia connected to Theatre of the Oppressed from various journals have been reviewed. In effect, there appears to be some variance in the studies presented and the specific ways in which various organisations seek to employ Theatre of the Oppressed as a method for attaining specific goals.

Key words: Empowerment, Theatre of the Oppressed, Agency, Emancipation, Participation

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Abbreviations:

TO - Theatre of the Oppressed

## **1. Introduction**

This study seeks to examine the connection of Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) to empowerment, first by reviewing practical instances of its usage through the lens of theoretical structure. The first aspect connects to critical pedagogy as presented by Paulo Freire (1970), a theory closely connected to TO at its roots in part due to the acquaintance between the founder of TO, Augusto Boal, and Freire. The second aspect encompasses how this theatrical approach connects to Bourdieu's *habitus*, which will entail an examination of the connection of the particular "role" played by each member of a group and its effects on social cohesion.

The reason for researching the potential connections regarding empowerment and TO is due to the direct connection to Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 10, which are 'gender equality' and 'reduced inequalities' respectively. As connected to Sachs et al. (2019), the discovery and categorisation of clear indicators are important aspects within the development paradigm, which led to a concentration of SDG goals into 6 transformations, of which TO may fit into the 1st and 2nd one due to a potential of examining social tensions in society while promoting civil dialogue and perspectives of mutual learning.

### **1.1. Background**

Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) in particular has emerged as a method of social activism in Brazil with the intention of promoting social change through Forum Theatre where participants get to improvise to showcase their reactions to specific theatrical situations. The point of these partial improvisations is to explore the means of social reaction to what may be perceived as social injustices. Forum theatre is signified by allowing the spectators to intervene and decisively change courses of action in the drama, effectively becoming actors when necessary. A Forum Theatre performance is typically facilitated by a 'Joker', which is a broad function a person performs that effectively functions as facilitator, referee, director and workshop leader (Katsaridou & Vio, 2015).

Within TO, there are subsections of different theatrical methods. One of them is Legislative Theatre, a branch stemming from Forum Theatre which encompasses the same principles as its root, but with the aim of examining legislation democratically. The shortcomings of such

practice lie however in its practical implementation because the policies examined by theatrical aspects require a means of influencing legislation (Saeed, 2019). Overall, the effects of legislative theatre may be an interesting topic of study on its own due to the method of exploring the wider implication of enacted policies not through mere speech, but through a theatrical performance.

Another branch of TO is image theatre, Designed to encourage participants to express and analyse various aspects of their lived experiences. Participants use their bodies and gestures to create static images or 'tableaux' that represent specific situations, emotions, or social dynamics. These images serve as visual representations of complex ideas or feelings. Image Theatre places a strong emphasis on non-verbal communication. Participants convey messages without using spoken words, relying on their body language, facial expressions, and physical positioning within the tableau to communicate ideas. One of the primary goals of Image Theatre, consistent with the broader aims of Theatre of the Oppressed, is to empower participants to express their thoughts and feelings. It also aims to raise awareness about social injustices and provide a platform for dialogue and action (Boal, 2018).

Rainbow of Desire is another branch of TO which focuses more on the internal conflicts of an individual rather than the external conflicts, as is the case with Forum Theatre. It delves into the internal world of participants, allowing them to express and examine their thoughts, desires, fears, and conflicts. The focus is on the individual's inner landscape and the emotions that influence their actions (Boal, 2018).

Improvisation is a fundamental aspect of all forms of TO because it is the measure through which the 'bottom-up' approach can be implemented into theatrical plays. For in Forum Theatre the original actors are only meant to present the caricature of the first part of a play (which is in itself based on cases of injustices created through power structures within the community) and it is the spect-actors who drive the action forward through proposing changes with the aim of resolving the dramaturgical conflict presented. Invisible theatre on the other hand involves the presentation of a play in ordinary situations in public spaces so that the audience doesn't realise that the situation created is part of a public performance. The aim is to generate confusion and disorientation among the observers, who may mistake the performance for a real-life situation. Through this, the performers hope to challenge the preconceived notions and stereotypes while encouraging the audience to question their

assumptions about the world around them and thereby draw attention to issues like discrimination, inequality, and injustice (Boal, 2018: pp. 122-126). The fundamental issue with the use of invisible theatre may be that the audience is tricked into believing the performance is a real situation. Therefore while it may be a powerful technique for the examination of the aforementioned issues it is a self-limiting technique insofar as it distances the audience from active consensual participants which poses serious ethical issues when examined through sociological experimentation.

## **1.2. Connection to Sustainable Development Goals**

The research on Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) as created by Augusto Boal aligns with several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), demonstrating its potential impact on fostering positive social change and addressing key global challenges. Here's an expansion on how TO relates to specific SDGs:

### **Goal 5: Gender Equality:**

- The emancipatory qualities of TO, as mentioned by Augusto Boal, can significantly contribute to achieving gender equality (SDG 5). TO challenges communal perceptions of gender roles and agency, providing a platform for the exploration and transformation of traditional gender norms. Through theatrical performances, TO can address issues related to gender discrimination, empower marginalised groups, and promote a more inclusive and equitable society.

### **Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities:**

- While the direct link between theatrical performances and economic capital might not be evident, TO has the potential to influence cultural and social capital, contributing to the reduction of inequalities (SDG 10). By empowering communities to actively participate in the creation and performance of plays, TO challenges societal norms and prejudices related to wealth, race, and gender. The emphasis on inclusive dialogue and participatory approaches in TO can lead to shifts in communal values, challenging social discrimination and promoting a more just and equal society.

- The reference to Osborn, Cutter & Ullah (2015) suggests that TO's empowerment potential can contribute to addressing discrimination based on various factors, aligning with the goal of reducing inequalities.

In summary, the research suggests that Theatre of the Oppressed, with its focus on empowerment, inclusive dialogue, and challenging societal norms, has the potential to make meaningful contributions to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those related to gender equality and reduced inequalities.

### **1.3. Research question**

The research aims at answering a particular research question, which also functions as a guide for the during this research overview. The choice of this research question is grounded in the academic book written by Robson & McCartan (2016: pp. 59-66), who have provided specific tools to determine the right question to ask in order to be able to conduct the research.

Only one question has been distilled to be encompassed in this desk-based project. This approach has been selected in order to investigate the subject matter thoroughly. The research question has therefore been determined to be:

‘What is the effect of theatre of the oppressed on the emancipatory possibility?’

This research question is unambiguous due to its exploration of specific topics in the scientific literature. The portrayed narratives regarding participation, encouragement of the exploration of possibilities to act and the integration of community spirit could have emancipatory potential, which makes it reasonable to examine these possibilities in existing literature.

This research question also allows for identifying specific gaps in the literature. Through the identification of common themes in the available literature as well as connecting them with the underlying theories connected to the theoretical framework.

Robson & McCartan (2016) indicate that having sufficient background research literature can help identify gaps. In the case of the provided question, it implies the necessity to delve into the existing literature on 'Theatre of the Oppressed' and 'emancipatory possibility' to establish context and identify what is already known. This process aligns with the authors' recommendation to spot gaps based on existing literature.

#### **1.4. Boundaries/Limitations**

The most difficult limitations in conducting this research included finding recent information about the researched organisations as most of them do not keep updated sites with their progress or current status. Another difficulty was finding adequate information to thoroughly examine the application of empowerment principles to all the analysed works. Many research articles were unfortunately unavailable due to the limited institutional online access.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

This section intends to briefly explain the sociological and theatrical concepts relevant to the study of TO, as well as empowerment and the measure through which it may be evaluated. Therefore the section explores the interconnected topics of perceptions and responses within the social world, the concept of habitus and osmosis, the work of Augusto Boal and Paulo Freire in countering dehumanisation, the notion of empowerment, and the measurement of empowerment. By examining these concepts, the section aims to examine the transformative potential of Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) as an emancipatory practice.



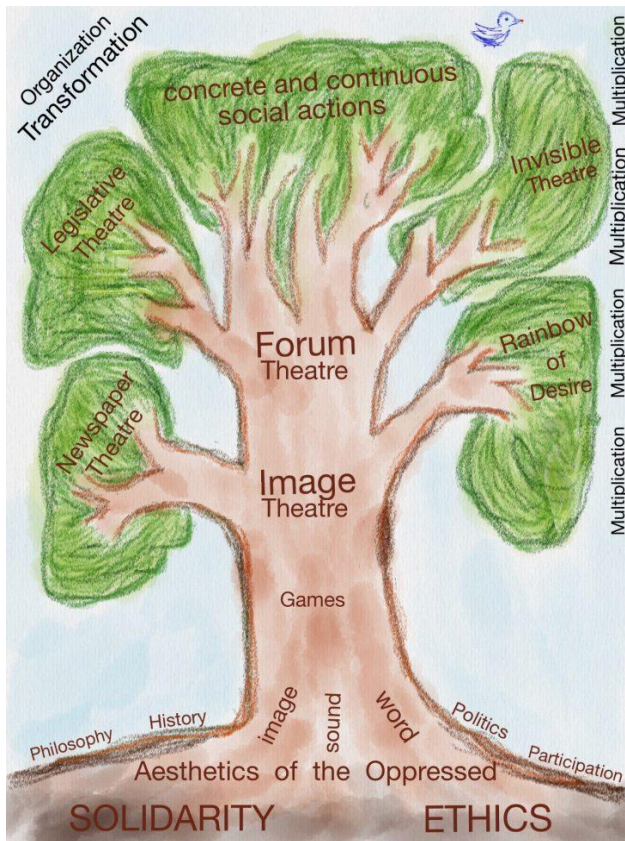


Figure: Representation of Boal's branches of Theatre of the Oppressed

Source: Kuringa, 2023

## 2.1. Perceptions and responses of the inhabited social world - Habitus and Osmosis

Habitus may be defined as a set of dispositions and tastes that each person embodies due to their social background. In this sense, a person's social class which is defined by their family, whom they associate with and what their social history is contributes to their habitus. Yet on a deeper level, this same habitus is formed through the senses because it emerges from shared structures as a process of acclimatisation to the social environment (Dillon, 2014: p. 438). These structures also lead to unspoken sets of rules known as Bourdieu's doxa which are specific to particular surroundings and can at times not be questioned without the risk of the action being viewed as heresy, for that would risk not just the dispositions and specific societal practices, but also the system on which practices incorporated in the habitus ultimately rest (Chopra, 2003).

Osmosis, a concept first presented by Boal assesses the shaping of tastes, ideas and values as socially conditioned in the form of repression or seduction which occurs universally, e.g.

through parental influences, false association of ideas in advertising or the various forms of risks and benefits in employment (Boal & Epstein, 1990). The similarity to Bourdieu's habitus lies in the dynamic nature of dispositions and tastes, which evolve and transform through social experiences and interactions.

In this sense, TO may be viewed as a specific action research method which attempts to work within the system of unspoken rules, so as to make it possible to examine them through a form of a theatrical performance, with the intention of finding non-violent solutions to inequalities emerging from a cultural sphere.

## **2.2. Boal and Freire - two champions against dehumanisation**

Although Boal does not appear to make a direct statement of grounding TO on Pedagogy of the Oppressed, the acquaintance between Boal and Freire results in a similarity of the two works (Boal, 1974; Freire, 1970). It could indeed appear that Boal's work is titled in homage to Freire. Yet Freire emphasised a critique of traditional pedagogical models coined as 'banking model of education'.

In a short summary, the banking model of education describes the development of the conventional Western education system as it had been when Freire coined the term. This model entails that teachers are to perceive themselves as in possession of absolute knowledge which is then granted to the student, who is thus perceived as absolutely ignorant. Freire pointed out how such authority of knowledge can be confused with the teacher's professional authority, which can thus be set in opposition to the freedom of students. If then the capacity of 'banking model of education' is to deafen the creative power of the students and to encourage this educational form of credulity, then the result of this model entails a procurement of the status quo and thus serving the encouragement of accepting passive roles which perpetuate an oppressive cycle (Freire, 2018: pp. 71-86).

In a similar manner to how Freire describes the 'banking model of education', so too Boal (2008: pp. 134-135) points out how the historical standard of theatre includes clearly designated spectators, whose role is to passively watch a performance on stage. The development of Forum Theatre can in this way be viewed as a response to the imposition of

ideas and defining discourses emergent through the presentation of theatrical plays with clearly defined actor and spectator roles.

### **2.3. What is empowerment?**

A crucial aspect of this study involves defining empowerment, which in turn shines a light on the emancipatory possibility of TO. Social empowerment may be described as having a person's or a community's place in society accepted and respected on their own terms, rather than dictated by others. Empowerment is closely linked with capacity for agency, which in turn is the ability for individuals or collectives to determine themselves. This social structure (i.e. empowerment of/within a community) is reinforced by the quality of relationships, assured respect and dignity (Eyben, Kabeer & Cornwall, 2008). There seems to be an implication that these factors can be aided, through adequate implementation of workshops involving adequately conducted TO. The overall aim of discussing and re-evaluating social norms by exploring them with a community participating in TO would then aim to address various social problems and experiment with finding non-violent solutions or at least new perspectives of framing these problems.

Concepts which are relevant to empowerment theory (Wheeler-Brooks, 2009; Dube, 2019) include:

- Direct power block - which encompass the standing societal structures which may lead to disempowerment or oppression of certain groups. These structures can be built on e.g. legislature, with the example of literacy laws in voting practically excluding the illiterate portion of society from participating in voting.
- Indirect power block - consists of an internalisation of societal norms and values which may contribute to an internal form of oppression.
- Collective experience - is a collection of commonalities of shared experience by groups of people in society, which often encompasses some form of oppression. TO may be claimed to facilitate the sharing of these collective experiences, which in effect aims to provide a deeper understanding of the cause of this experience.

- Collective action - consists of the actions taken by a group of people sharing the collective experience to achieve a change in societal structure. TO seems to aim at facilitating collective action of the examination of how it can be achieved without the use of violence, beginning at a micro level, which in turn has the potential to contribute to change on a macro level by shaping the indirect power block.

The concepts above are of crucial utility to understand the TO in light of its function as an emancipatory practice processing collective experience in order to guide possible means of collective action in order to enact change on the structure of the power blocks.

#### **2.4. Dehumanisation and Empowerment**

Dehumanisation refers to the process by which individuals or groups are deprived of their humanity, treated as less than human, and denied the rights, dignity, and respect afforded to others. It involves perceiving others as objects, stereotypes, or threats, rather than as fully realised individuals with inherent worth and agency. Dehumanisation can manifest in various forms, including social, cultural, and institutional practices that marginalise, stigmatise, or oppress certain individuals or groups based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or socioeconomic status (Dube, 2019).

The connection between dehumanisation and empowerment lies in the transformative potential that empowerment holds in countering and overcoming the effects of dehumanisation. When individuals or groups experience dehumanisation, their agency, self-worth, and voice are often undermined, leading to feelings of powerlessness, marginalisation, and subjugation. Empowerment processes aim to reverse these effects by restoring and enhancing individuals' sense of agency, dignity, and self-efficacy. By empowering individuals, marginalised groups, and communities, it becomes possible to challenge the dehumanising narratives, structures, and practices that perpetuate inequality and oppression.

## 2.5. How can Empowerment be Measured?

The guiding principles are derived from empowerment evaluation as described by Fetterman (2005), which involves 10 main principles which guide the evaluation process. These principles are as follows:

**Improvement** – Designed to help people improve program performance with the particular intention of helping people build their successes and reevaluate what should be improved or changed.

**Community ownership** – Meant to value and facilitate community control. Frequently involves having the particular community's members set up goals and strategies to accomplish the objectives set by the community involved in the project.

**Inclusion** – Entails invitation of involvement, participation, and diversity, with a particular goal of incorporating as many stakeholders into the project as feasible. This principle means to maximise the cooperation between the groups involved in the project by emphasising including every group in the discussion so as to ensure a meaningful and authentic consensus, while not excluding any members of the community to not undermine the collective goodwill of the community.

**Democratic participation** – Involves open participation and fair decision-making. This guideline emphasises the focus on facilitating civil interaction between the participants and inclusion of groups which previously may have been left out of the decision-making process.

**Social justice** – Focuses on addressing social inequities in society. This approach is designed to cultivate a just benefit for the community's members. In practice, it serves either assisting people in ameliorating specific social concerns or injustices, usually through social programs. Asserting social justice into the project and its evaluation may also be valuable for the stakeholders, who can make connections with other organisations that focus on similar projects. Fetterman (2005) presents the effects of proper inclusion of social justice as a goal as such:

“Communities that make their social justice agenda explicit are also more likely to make programmatic decisions that are in alignment with their values on a daily basis. For example,

evaluative data might suggest eliminating a social service program because it is not cost-effective. However, the social justice agenda might override that decision or force the organization to find other ways to subsidize that activity.”

**Community knowledge** - Meaning to respect and value community knowledge. Members of the community can hold valuable knowledge which could be of crucial importance for research and the project. This could be achieved by accessing such information as local organisational hiring practices or about various social events and examining their significance. This approach also leads to the possibility of incorporating various bottom-up approaches, e.g. local communities developing their own community knowledge within the organisation.

**Evidence-based strategies** – These are based on both respect and the use of community and scholarly knowledge. A significant aspect of this principle involves not blindly adopting evidence-based interventions into a community, but rather shaping them into the local environment, culture and conditions of the local community.

**Capacity building** – This is based on the intention of enhancing stakeholder ability to evaluate and improve planning and implementation. This guideline principle focuses on ensuring that program staff members and participants learn how to conduct their own evaluations.

**Organisational learning** – Involves the application of the data to evaluate and implement practices and inform decision-making. Adequate communication between the project staff members and the members of the community becomes thus of crucial importance. This can be accomplished through seeking feedback from the community and adjusting accordingly. The communities are also expected to receive help from a facilitator of the project, who facilitates the role of ‘empowerment evaluator’, to get aid in interpreting the data and putting it to good use. The facilitator should therefore put particular care in helping to shape an environment conducive to organisational learning through processes which are simple, transparent and trustworthy.

**Accountability** – This guideline puts an emphasis on outcomes and accountability. While external accountability is possible throughout the course of the project through setting up

requirements and demands, the main focus is set on internal accountability, which entails a sort of mutual accountability in which supervisors have the function of holding the staff members accountable for what they agreed to do as part of agencies effort, while the community and staff members hold each other accountable for their promises towards the project. The funders are also expected to partake in the implementation and evaluation of the project and if an aspect of the project involves increasing the local capacity of the community in decision-making, then they must not suddenly take over the operations (Fetterman, Kaftarian and Wandersman, 2015).

Although the main aim of these principles is to aid the evaluation of participatory action research, even desk studies should benefit from applying this evaluatory technique when analysing the themes and main points of discourse throughout studies relevant to this research overview. Empowerment evaluation has also been used in other studies, even in those relating to the overall influence of theatre (Bosco et al, 2014) but never in examination of the specific phenomenon of TO, or at least such a work has not been found during the writing of this material.

While other principles which could be viewed as capable of evaluating empowerment exist, such as Cieri's & McCauley's (2007: pp. 143) guidelines for participatory action research (PAR) as practised for theatre, yet they are focused on the proper conduct of the PAR as such rather than empowerment and Fetterman's (2005) principles proved more comprehensive. The aforementioned guidelines could however be relevant because they are for the most part included in the principles used in this work. Examples of works of other researchers making use of empowerment evaluation principles include Watts & Hipolito-Delgado (2015), Mohajer & Earnest (2009).

### **3. Methods**

This section aims to encompass the measures used to gather the data. Throughout the gathering process, the priority set forth aimed at incorporating a variety of documentation about practices of TO accessible through the internet. The majority of source material comes from scientific journals, but some information has been gathered through published books providing examples of TO in practice.

The analysis will be conducted using a narrative review. The reason for this choice of method is justified due to the small select sample of research available on the particular topic of TO. The constraints of time and rigorousness of the selected research cannot justify a systematic review or meta-synthesis. An overview of multiple case studies can provide insights into the role TO plays in the area of participative methods, action research and in a more specific sense community empowerment. Therefore providing an honest exploration of the literature available on TO seems to be adequately explained through conducting a narrative review.

Knopf (2006) provides advice on how to properly conduct a narrative review. The provided information suggests that casting the net of data gathering beyond journal-approved articles allows for a review of existing knowledge as opposed to literature *per se*.

In effect, this narrative review serves as a literature review that aims to provide a comprehensive and qualitative overview of existing research on a specific topic. While it offers flexibility in terms of scope and interpretation, it also aims at a careful consideration of the included sources while providing an insightful synthesis of the existing literature.

Due to the scarce amount of precise case studies focusing specifically on the application of TO in development-related settings, qualitative purposive sampling has been applied to include a certain degree of variety in studies selected while still adhering to the relevant point of including TO-based techniques. The sampling therefore entailed selecting only articles explicitly claiming the use of TO methods and excluded those who used different theatrical techniques, such as those not involving direct spectator participation in changing the outcome of the performances (Punch, 2005: pp. 186-192).

#### **4. Literature review**

The data from the literature has been gathered from various research journals with a focus on existing case studies of themes relevant to the study. This review will encompass an examination of key theoretical frameworks that underpin Theatre of the Oppressed, including Freirean pedagogy and critical consciousness. Grounded in Paulo Freire's seminal work, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," Boal's methodology seeks to engage participants in a process of conscientization, raising their awareness of their own oppression and encouraging them to critically analyse their reality. Through interactive theatrical exercises, such as Image



Theatre, Forum Theatre, Invisible Theatre, and Rainbow of Desire individuals are encouraged to deconstruct oppressive narratives and envision alternative paths to social change.

A common connection appears in the particular role of women within the Theatre of the Oppressed communities. The theme of women as capable independent decision makers and less subservient to the customary roles becomes emergent, as well as the transformation enabled through communal dissemination of complex societal issues which appeared to make it possible for individuals within communities to gain the courage to seek out more influence over their own lives. This aspect is presented in the literature as generally true for participants of this form of theatre (Brahma, Pavarala & Belavadi, 2019; Saeed, 2015; Smith, 2005).

Burns et al. (2015) provide an overview of the role of participatory theatre in Kenya and Uganda. Forum theatre has thus been described as facilitating the potential for education about the rights of the participants and how adherence to these rights can be established. The commonly emergent themes appear to be those of gender dynamics, indigenous rights, land reform and election violence. Theatre for Development is a type of theatre project with the intention of promoting civic dialogue and engagement, which involves techniques such as Forum Theatre. Burns et al. describe that although these types of theatre projects are considered to have been a 'net good' for African development, they can be seen as prescriptive, top-down and didactic, which TO as connected to Freire's concepts seems to focus more on approaches involving community engagement, self-determination and grassroots empowerment.

Cieri & McCauley (2007: pp. 141-149) provide an account of the applicability of participatory theatre in entering dialogues against racism and other forms of discrimination. Although the article which became part of a textbook explains a particular group's use of TO methodology, there was a lack of representation of specific cases, which made this particular article excluded from the analysis which aims at including particular cases of using TO methods. The authors, however, outline some primary principles that guide participatory action research (PAR) as grounded in theatre. These principles include:

**Commitment and respect** - Closely tied to 'accountability' and 'community knowledge' empowerment evaluation principles, but with a particular emphasis on a mutual agreement to consider differences and transformation as essential values.

**Humility and connection** - This is directed towards the facilitators or researchers not being too stubbornly tied up to their knowledge but instead to connect with the participants and try to understand their qualitative experience as closely as possible, which thus allows for both promoting ‘democratic participation’ and ‘community knowledge’.

**Subjectivity and objectivity** - Puts an emphasis on the relevance of subjective understandings and perspectives, which are to be considered just as valued as apparent objectivity. ‘Community knowledge’ appears as tied to this principle in so far as the knowledge gained specifically through members of the community becomes valuable in their own right as representatives of said community.

**Listening and hearing** - A method of expressing that attention to the discourse expressed during experimental theatre sessions is of crucial importance to understanding the experiences and ideas of people from communities participating in the projects. Thus such an approach contains the potential of inclusion, democratic participation, social justice and proper organisational learning as related to Fetterman’s empowerment evaluation principles.

**Collaboration and exchange** - Aim at allowing for exploration of charged ideas and topics even outside of the performance. This principle also enables the fulfilment of gathering deep knowledge from the members of the communities participating in the project, thereby allowing for gathering community knowledge and potential improvements to organisational learning.

## **5. Analysis**

The analysis is conducted by processing the data related to studies about TO, which is then contrasted with Fetterman’s (2005) empowerment evaluation principles. The analysis of the narrative will be conducted by examining the particular groups which make use of TO techniques and their potential impact on the perceived empowerment of its participants.

## **5.1. Organisations and Projects Rooted in Theatre of the Oppressed**

### **Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization**

In 2010 a Legislative Theatre project was launched in Afghanistan directly targeting women to allow them to voice the societal concerns that they have faced and to seek to propose solutions and recommendations, with the hope of letting these meetings eventually influence the legislature. Roughly 5000 women have attended the workshops held by the project. The project itself has been funded by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and implemented in five regions: Kabul, Balkh, Bamyan, Nanganhar and Herat. The premise of this project was to engage women in Legislative Theatre and subsequently encourage political empowerment by handing over the proposals summarising the theatrical discussion and summarising it into a legal and policy document titled ‘Afghan Women After the Taliban: Will History Repeat Itself?’, which was thereafter presented to the political representatives of particular provinces in Afghanistan and after legal consultation was submitted to the Gender and Human Rights Committee in the Afghan Parliament. Although several politicians have expressed public support, there has been little follow-up for the policy document (Saeed, 2015).

### **Jana Sanskriti**

This group is a progressive cultural and political theatre that has its roots in West Bengal. The crucial aspect of this movement involves its use of techniques from TO, such as Forum Theatre. The researchers claim its ability to transform people, effectively allowing for increased confidence and collective expression. The community actively seeks to create performances in which open discussion regarding experiences of oppression and actively seeks to incorporate women in their community. The community appears to focus on finding collective voices while maintaining the importance of subjective and individual experience. A quote from the research expresses the approach as such: “The ideal state is where everyone plays a part in the development and shaping of the community, working through dissent towards a collective agreement while acknowledging the voice of the individual. Community participation for Jana Sanskriti can be understood as a conscious, evolving process that focuses on specific people and accommodates their differences.” (Brahma, Pavarala & Belavadi, 2019)

## **Amani People's Theatre**

This group was founded by artist-peacebuilders in Nairobi, Kenya in 1994. Inspired by indigenous East African theatre while employing theories from Augusto Boal and Paulo Freire, this organisation aims at integrating aspects of conflict transformation, performing arts, and peace dialogues. The method this group uses is based on conducting interventions among communities affected by e.g. poverty and historical or ethnic conflicts. The approach taken by this theatre seems to be more pedagogical in many aspects, as had been the case in engaging in discussion regarding constitutional rights in the new 2010 constitution of Kenya or the changes regarding land reform or women's rights in Kenya. The techniques used by them and Presence Center for Applied Theatre Arts consisted of Image Theatre and Rainbow of Desire, two techniques created by Augusto Boal as part of TO. Image Theatre consists of creating a particular image by enacting the participants into frozen sculptures composed of poses. The overall goal of this technique is to restore humanity into dehumanised images, which is often based on viewing the other as a member of a dehumanised group consisting of stereotypes (Burns et al., 2015), (Burns, Beti & Okuto, 2017). A cited example from the case study is presented below as such:

*“A Ugandan brother and his older sister enact a simple domestic scene in which she feels patronized by his instructions on using a charcoal burner. She creates an image of him scoffing at her. He in turn sculpts an image of her turning away, ignoring his concern for her. Ultimately they recognize each other's compassion and competence. Masha Maitha, cofounder of APT, wandering by, observed that this technique could be used with stereotypes and rivalries between the East African countries.”* (Burns, Beti & Okuto, 2017)

Rainbow of Desire is an extension of Image Theatre and thereby TO. The function evolves around unveiling the particularities of a 'white light' which when seen through a prism unveils all the colours showing all the desires of a person, and thereby aspects of their personality. An example of its applicability by this group goes as such:

*“Each human being has an inner diversity of emotions, attitudes, and desires—and a kind of inner governance is necessary to help these coexist. When I experience internal conflict, can't make a decision, or keep making wrong decisions, perhaps I have marginalized facets of myself and overlooked their wisdom. I've driven bits of my humanness into exile: my fears, hurts, competitive impulses, need for love and belonging. Suddenly one emotion, attitude, or*

*desire becomes a monochrome—a rainbow with only one color—as when fear or vengeance sweeps over me and I know nothing else.”* (Burns, Beti & Okuto, 2017)

### **Budondo Intercultural Center**

This organisation of theatrical arts based in Uganda has been presented as putting an emphasis on strengthening family relationships and village health. With its origins in Theatre for Development, the commonly emergent themes are presented to be those of reproductive health, family conflicts, female empowerment and corruption. The cultural centre has facilitated Forum Theatre pieces and also in collaboration with Presence Centre for Applied Theatre Arts which are described further below. However, the recognition of the specific didactic model of Theatre for Development is in some aspects reminiscent of the Freirian concept of the banking model of education. Forum theatre has therefore been presented as a potential solution for promoting discussion in its participative method of exploring underlying community issues while providing a space for searching for alternatives to conflict which are more just and peaceful by active group imagination. Thus there appear to lie connections to opening the possibility for transforming certain aspects emerging through the habitus by allowing for some variance in levels of disposition through the ability to play in a collective setting in which discussion of the various problems in the social sphere can lead to a type of *rehearsal for revolution* in the sense that social capital can lead to collective action against certain forms of oppression, such as the ones created through the belief that it is only through conflict that status quo may be changed (Burns et al., 2015).

### **Presence Center for Applied Theatre Arts**

An applied theatre group based in Charlottesville, Virginia that combines poetry, dance and music to unpack themes related to gender and race. The group was founded in 2002 and has been heavily influenced by Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed. They collaborated with the Budondo Intercultural Center and Amani People’s Theatre in Nairobi, Kenya in 2010. This activity focused on highlighting and helping prevent violence before elections and sexual violence (Burns et al., 2015), (Burns, Beti & Okuto, 2017).

### **Tumbling Towers Programme**

A programme focusing on examining the voices and possibilities of the residents in Waterloo public housing in Sydney, Australia. The approach used in this programme was directly connected to TO and in particular, in order to provide not just stories of the oppressed but

also to create potential solutions and practical interventions which can practically bring change for the betterment of the marginalised or oppressed groups. However, the other side presented by the research seems to suggest that the form of empowerment programs used by the state and third sector seem to focus on putting the responsibility of change on the involved participants and individuals rather than the structures of the institutions which could play a part in reinforcing oppression (Wynne, 2020).

### **Youth Detention Center in Yazd Province, Iran**

This involves a project that has been conducted in Yazd Province in 2017 with 135 prisoners participating in TO-inspired techniques precisely to aid in rehabilitation and resocialization. The scope of this programme seemed to include the examination of what the prisoners deemed as appropriate behaviour in specific situations and methods to increase in sense of social responsibility. In addition, the research has stated that TO facilitates an environment for creating effective human interactions which aid social learning. It is difficult to see how the approach of this particular project was rooted in empowerment other than that through appropriate education of prisoners out of Boal's techniques it becomes possible for them to come out of detention centres with a lower risk of return due to a 'more creative' set of tools that equip them to deal with potential problems they may be faced with. Another aspect of the agency that has been explicitly stated in the research was that it could reduce the risk of falling under peer pressure to commit criminal activities (Jabbari & Dadvar, 2018).

### **High School self-reflective study using the branch of Invisible Theatre, Israel**

A spectacle involving two fabricated events were presented during two separate workshops after which the students were handed a questionnaire where they were asked to reflect upon their experience during these spectacles which were not known to the audience as performances until after the scene was completed. During the first example, one of the teachers played the role in which after coming out as gay he had been asked by the principal to leave as apparently, some parents have asked precisely for that. Another teacher played the role of defending the principal's decision. In the second scene, the students were presented to the teacher talking about how she was 'advised' not to comment on the Arab protest that had happened earlier during the day. The events unfolded with a student not from their class recording the event, presumably to show the 'invisible oppressor'. The student responses were later deemed relatively shallow and thereby mostly dismissed in a presumption that a mistake of not engaging sufficiently in the preparatory stages in which the students could

learn more key concepts related to describing oppression and recognising it. Due to the students not agreeing with facing any sort of oppression or in some cases even denying the possibility of being oppressed, the author started speculating about the chance that there may have been cases of oppression which the students are not ready to admit, perhaps even to themselves. The speculations about the reason for that turn of events may vary but one significant thing is to be noted in relation to this analysis: unlike the other cases which use either Forum Theatre, Image Theatre, Legislative Theatre, or Rainbow of Desire, in which every participant is voluntarily participating in the play, Invisible Theatre utilises a technique in which raising particular social issues to light is the main purpose whilst the observers don't voluntarily engage in the play with the safe knowledge that it is a spectacle. In other words, the students did not exactly consent to being part of the spectacle until they got the questionnaires (Levanon, 2022).

Common themes appearing involve those revolving around communities, political action and structures. A broader connection to empowerment seems to stem mostly from the focus on the inclusion of marginalised voices, such as women, those in threat of experiencing violence, prisoners, victims of abuse, those living in poverty or in threat of poverty and other politically marginalised groups. The techniques employed by groups such as Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization even had the most ambitious intentions of using legislative theatre to influence the legislation. Unfortunately, the possibility of clearly tracking the further progress of these projects becomes impossible due to the change of political regimes which effectively put a halt to open international cooperation for the time being, for instance, due to the government takeover by the Taliban in Afghanistan. The aspects seen in research seem to suggest that TO may in some cases be employed as a tool for providing a space for dialogue in an attempt to achieve intended and pre-selected results, which may in effect deviate from the point of seeking out new solutions in good faith. When TO techniques are used on terms such as prisoner rehabilitation or addressing poverty and homelessness on governmental terms, they risk ending up pushing a narrative in which the participants are led to believe that instead of incorporating tools to help change the systems reinforcing their oppression they are ought to change themselves to better fit the system. Moreover, TO's effectiveness in empowerment is nuanced, as illustrated by the Youth Detention Center project in Iran. While TO-inspired techniques contribute to prisoner rehabilitation and social learning, questions arise about the depth of empowerment achieved. The focus on individual

behavioural change may overshadow systemic issues, potentially limiting the broader societal impact of TO applications.

## **5.2. Connection to Empowerment Evaluation Principles**

Although the connection to Fetterman's empowerment principles is not entirely evident there lie close connections in many articles. The aspects of TO appear in its Forum, Image and Legislative theatre to show clear connections to aspects such as community ownership, where in principle all aspects come out of the community participating in creating the theatrical performance with the goal of imagining solutions to the social issues they themselves have chosen and participate in under every step of the way under the guidance of a 'joker' facilitator. The same aspect holds true in regards to inclusion, which in many cases gets specified towards certain marginalised groups of people, which is not done out of a desire to exclude the majority, but rather to provide a safe space for expression and examination of specific issues of the specific groups of oppressed peoples. The principle of democratic participation is closely tied to community ownership, and as such appears to be also fundamental in TO techniques if conducted in the appropriate manner, meaning if the outcome is not directly guided by facilitators to achieve a specific desired outcome. Social justice seems to be an inherent part of TO and what this form of theatre strives towards, therefore in all the instances of the aforementioned cases it has been at the centre of their participative projects. Following closely is community knowledge, which consists of the building blocks through which TO creates and transforms its plays, which to a degree allows for bottom-up approaches based on the learning process which allows for skills related to dialogue to emerge. The aspect of adopting evidence-based strategies takes a slightly trickier form. On one hand, the theatrical approach works as a single method and in some cases does not showcase desired results or could fail to encourage local engagement (Levanon, 2022), but on the other creates their themes directly out of the experiences that emerge out of the participants, thus holding the potential for interventions grounded directly in the environment, culture and conditions of the participants' communities. Although no direct mention related to capacity building per se exists in the analysed articles, the very act of performing the theatre under the guidance of a facilitator can be a basis for teaching how to select particular issues and what steps can be taken to discuss them openly and with respect. In that manner, it is possible to provide the possibility that the participating communities have some possibility in developing their capacity-building, even though that does not seem to be



one of the main objectives of the analysed studies, which instead opted for describing the particular issues and stories that emerged during the held workshops. All the necessary structures for organisational learning seem to be present in every part of the study with some not being well described but it may be to some degree assumed that if the TO was performed in a similar accordance to the the studies which clearly state how it was performed, then a 'joker' facilitator should be there seeking feedback from the participants, which in a sense performs the function of a 'empowerment evaluator'. The process of performing theatres related to TO has at its very core seeking points of view from the participants and the only prevention from organisational learning would be due to failure to establish an environment of transparency and trustworthiness. Accountability is far more difficult to establish in analysing external papers, which often consist of either field notes or research projects that do not clearly disclose the external stakeholders and what relation they hold to the research. There appear, however, not to be any mentions of events which would create specific doubt about the levels of trust and accountability that emerged during the analysis of the works found in the appendix below. The aspect of seeking improvement appears to be more specifically tied to the very notion of properly conducting TO with particular emphasis on Forum and Legislative Theatre. The improvement is in this sense connected to reevaluating the social problem or situation analysed during performances thereby allowing for the search for solutions, which explores what needs to be changed and how lasting avoidance of oppression may be achieved.

## **6. Conclusions**

In essence, the importance of critically evaluating the motivations and contexts of TO initiatives cannot be underscored if emancipatory results are to be achieved. While TO can be a potent tool for empowering marginalised groups and fostering dialogue, careful consideration must be given to the underlying objectives, the potential for co-option, and the balance between individual and systemic transformation. The findings suggest that successful TO applications align with empowerment principles, but challenges persist in navigating political dynamics and avoiding the unintended reinforcement of existing power structures.

In examining the diverse applications of Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) in various contexts, it becomes evident that TO techniques are woven into the fabric of community-centric initiatives. There also appear clear connections between Empowerment Evaluation Principles

and TO throughout the analysed works. The extent of the applicability of some of the principles is indeed not clear, and can only be assumed if the researchers and facilitators adhered to Boal's description of TO. It can however be stated that there lies a good connection between TO theory and emancipatory possibility which appears to also principally hold true in relation to actual practice of TO techniques.

Although TO appears through external desk studies to show potential for promoting democratic discourse and analysing instances of perceived oppression without inciting violence, thereby encouraging a strive for empowerment and emancipation as well as adherence to Fetterman's (2005) empowerment evaluation principles, it would be beneficial to compare these findings with a study that includes these principles directly in the study while conducting TO. Participatory action research methodologies can thus not be understated and in cases like this deserve more study if empowerment is a cause worth encouraging through promoting bottom-up, grassroots strategies.

Another possibility for further studies would entail conducting a cross-cultural study which would examine the cultural nuances and variations in the application and impact of TO techniques depending on the cultural contexts and its implications for achieving empowerment and emancipation in diverse settings.

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## Appendix

Article number	Author	Article name	Year of publishing	Journal	Location	Themes
1	Huma Saeed	Empowering Unheard Voices through ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’: Reflections on the Legislative Theatre Project for Women in Afghanistan—Notes from the Field	2015	Journal of Human Rights Practice	Afghanistan: Kabul, Bamyan, Herat, Nangarhar, Balkh	Participants, Rights, Communities, Women
2	Sandra Mills	Theatre for transformation and empowerment: a case study of Jana Sanskriti Theatre of the Oppressed	2009	Development in Practice	India: West Bengal	Political, Structures, Process, People
3	Mehrdad Jabbari & Abolghasem Dadvar	The Role of Theater of the Oppressed on Correction and Rehabilitation of Prisoners (Case Study: Yazd Province Prisons)	2018	Journal of History Culture and Art Research	Iran: Yazd	Theatre, Methods, Training
4	Mecca Antonia Burns, Bonface Njeresu Beti, Maxwel Eliakim Okuto, Denis Muwanguzi & Lydia Sanyu	Forum Theatre for Conflict Transformation in East Africa: The Domain of the Possible	2015	African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review	Kenya & Uganda	Family, Change, Members, Conflict
5	Mecca Antonia Burns, Bonface Njeresu Beti & Maxwel Eliakim Okuto	Truth Comes in Many Colors: Theatre of the Oppressed for Conflict Transformation and Trauma Healing in Kenya	2017	Grassroots Leadership and the Arts for Social Change	Kenya	Image, Political, Dialogue, Conflict
6	Maya Levanon	Can a Circle of Oppression Be Broken? An Experiment of an Educator with Theatre of the Oppressed	2022	The Educational Forum	Israel	Teacher, Students, Education
7	Laura Wynne	Empowerment and the individualisation of resistance: A Foucauldian perspective on Theatre of the Oppressed	2020	Critical Social Policy	Australia: Sydney, Waterloo	Community, Agencies, Capacity