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# Rebonding Anomic Communities with Theatre of the Oppressed

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Rebonding Anomic Communities with Theatre of the Oppressed

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
Theatre Pedagogy: Performance at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

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By Amanda Joy Hauman, M.F.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
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Major Director: Noreen C. Barnes, Director of Graduate Studies, Associate Professor,  
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This thesis explores whether Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) can help anomic communities, affected by deindustrialization and globalization, in the U.S. Midwest, specifically looking at Saginaw, MI. After presenting a paper at the American Symposium for Theatre Research (ASTR) conference in 2009, the author attended a Theatre of the Oppressed facilitator training in Port Townsend, WA under the direction of Marc Weinblatt. She then conducted her own Theatre of the Oppressed workshop in Saginaw, MI to analyze the abilities of Theatre of the Oppressed in an anomic community. Each experience is detailed and followed by the author's conclusions and hopes for Theatre of the Oppressed in the Midwest.

## Introduction

To properly frame this paper, it is necessary to talk about the city of Saginaw and my relationship to it. This moderately sized, rustbelt city in Michigan is my hometown. Not only was I born there, but all of my father's family was born there for the last three generations. Often in conversation with someone, I would find out that I was related to them and then we would try to decipher how far removed we were from each other. Besides the near and distant family members, Saginaw was the world I knew growing up and it has several meaningful landmarks for me. Some landmarks are personal to me such as the spruce pine I planted when I was four which now towers over the garage next to which it was planted. Others are historical like the house my grandfather built or the wrought iron railings on the old Mortgage and Loan that my father made. The city has an unfathomable number of ties for me.

During college I moved far away from Saginaw. Being away gave me a perspective I did not have while in high school. As a teen I believed I would leave and never come back to Mid-Michigan. But I learned three important lessons while I was gone. First, it is important to be near family because they are a special blessing in life. Second, even though Saginaw was filled with problems, other cities have problems, too. And third, being a natural problem solver, if I was going to help a city with its issues, it was going to be the one housing my family, friends and childhood community.

I returned to Saginaw to finish my undergraduate degree. It was an opportunity to get to know Saginaw through a different lens. When I was nine, my parents moved the family out of the city to a rural area twenty miles away. Despite the distance, we drove into Saginaw every day for work, school, shopping and church. Even with several family members living in the city, having not lived in it myself, it colored my perception of the city. I saw it through the media that ran stories about the gang shootings and my aunts and uncles who complained about the crime and change in demographics.

My father also complained. After church we would go over to my aunt's house for coffee and doughnuts and Dad would lament about Saginaw. He talked about when he was young and how different it was. Unlike the high unemployment Saginaw has now, jobs were abundant and companies healthy. There were no vacant, decaying homes. All of them were filled with working and middle class families. Homes and yards were kept up and taxes paid to keep the sidewalks and streets fixed. Neighbors cared about each other and it was safe for kids to play in the streets. He hated driving to church Sunday morning and seeing all the empty houses, grown over with weeds, and boarded up to keep out trespassers. You could see his face redden when the news talked about murders happening. Often he would shake his head when he heard that more people were being laid off at the foundries and factories. When the news station announced that Saginaw had lost a quarter of its population he would say they should just bulldoze the city and let it go back to farm fields. He liked the old Saginaw so much that he could not see the potential for the current Saginaw. To him, it was lost.

There was no reason for me to see it any differently than my father. I saw the blight and heard about the crime. It seemed like a hopeless city to me as well. Other than leaving my family behind, it seemed best to leave it for good. But when I moved back I realized that crime and

poverty were not the only things dragging the city down; there was also an attitude that supported abandonment. Everyone had lost hope.

Rather than moving in with my parents when I came back to Michigan, I moved in with my brother who had just bought a house in Saginaw. For the first time in years, I was living in the city and unexpectedly enjoying it. There were pockets of vitality throughout its weathered streets. “Old Town” housed several artists, local coffee shops, restaurants and businesses. Down the street was a community theatre that had been operating for seventy-five years, and not far away from that, a small art museum. Downtown there was a large farmers market, beautiful old homes, and a historic movie palace called the Temple. On the Westside, near where I lived, were cozy neighborhoods, an old community movie theatre, and an ice cream shop. Besides landmarks, several community builders were trying to provide fun community events for the city. One couple started the Lawn Chair Film Festival where anyone could bring their lawn chair and watch an outdoor movie with the community during the summer in Old Town. The Children’s Zoo often had events for children and families. The YMCA also held events for families. The city was not as dead as the news and naysayers made it seem. Dedicated people were helping maintain landmarks, create events and rebuild the city.

Finally, I could see past all the grime coating Saginaw and loved it. I deeply believed that if a major attitude change happened, Saginaw could be restored to some of its former glory. Perhaps the wealth would never return, but my hope was that city blocks might become neighborhoods again rather than just rows of houses. I wished to see citizens investing in their city and then enjoying its newfound safety.

However, the needs of Saginaw were overwhelming. I had no idea how to accomplish any change. Without any real direction, I began to get involved with various community events

and volunteer opportunities. It was this work and my work at the community theatre and university theatre that I saw theatre as a possible building tool. My final project for my undergraduate was creating a local playwriting festival so that local voices could be heard. It was extremely successful and it encouraged me to continue to think about theatre and community.

Before I applied to Virginia Commonwealth University, I was lucky enough to work for the Saginaw YMCA and also helped create and be part of a group called Moving Saginaw Forward. Both organizations focused on helping the community. The YMCA focused more on the individual health of the community, while Moving Saginaw Forward focused on the political and practical matters of the city. I was not able to incorporate theatre specifically into these forums, but had many discussions with people from both organizations of how to use theatre. However, after teaching a few youth-centered acting workshops for another community organization and seeing how much the kids and parents loved it, the idea of using theatre stayed with me.

Teaching workshops made me realize a personal deficit, though. I needed further training in theatre, acting and teaching. Despite their success, the workshops were overwhelming for me since I never felt I knew what or how to teach. If I were going to use theatre as a tool I was going to have to become more experienced with it.

My search for graduate programs took a while. For a long time I looked at MFA acting programs even though I was not qualified to attend them. Acting has never been a strong suit for me, but I hoped if I explained my goal was education and community outreach they may have made an exception. Fortunately, in my search, I was reintroduced to the word pedagogy. Internet searches are much more efficient when you have the proper language. When I began to search

for “acting pedagogy” my options multiplied and VCU was at the top of the list. With the hope of returning to Saginaw and teaching at my *alma mater*, I began the graduate application process.

Saginaw and my desire to help it was my path to this MFA program, and it continually informed my choices while here. I was constantly surprised and excited by my classes. This held especially true for my Modern Drama class. It was in this class I learned about Augusto Boal and Theatre of the Oppressed (TO).

My first interaction with Boal was not a positive one. For Modern Drama we were required to read a portion from the book *Theatre of the Oppressed* from *Theatre/Theory/Theatre*. Boal explains how Aristotle’s system of tragedy is not only the beginning of the end of people’s involvement in theatre but their ultimate oppression. The snippets from the reader make Boal’s argument far more confusing than the argument in its full form. I was confused by Boal and by the time I read *Poetics of the Oppressed*, I was turned off to the message.

Thankfully, Boal was further explained in class. My frustration bloomed into delight. Rather than being another didactic theory, TO was theatre in *action*. Unlike other theorists we had read, Boal made the most sense to me with my community-centric mentality.

As the semester wore on and I thought more about Boal’s brand of theatre, the more I liked it. Even though I can no longer remember the germ of the thought, I began thinking about deglobalizing theatre. I believe the idea came from a discussion with my husband, Nick, about why buying local is important, and from that our conversation flowed into why local theatre is so important. As Boal explains in *Theatre of the Oppressed*, theatre needs to be taken out of the hands of the “*bourgeois*” as Boal, being a Marxist, calls the middle and upper class, and give it back to the “people” or as Marx would call them, the proletariat or lower class. This “revolution” cannot happen through professional theatre because it perpetuates *bourgeois* ideology. It is also

not possible through political theatre activists who only support their own message. It must wholly come from those who are oppressed. They are the only ones who understand their own problems. They are the only ones who can make change or “revolution” happen.

The mantra of community choice and action stayed in my head. In the meantime, Nick, who is also at VCU working on his MS in Sociology, often talked about the neo-Marxist writers like Adorno and Fromm. We also discussed Durkheim and the idea of anomie, which is the “social instability and personal unrest resulting from insufficient normative regulation of individual activities” (Allan 131). Mixed in with these conversations were Brecht’s *verfremdungseffekt* and Boal’s TO. Saginaw was always our example of various phenomena and how the city might be aided through various political and theatrical theories.

In the midst of this dialogue, Dr. Barnes sent out an email regarding the 2009 American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR) conference. Since it is a requirement of the program to attend at least one conference, I looked intently, and somewhat superficially, at ASTR since it was being held in Puerto Rico. A mini-vacation to Puerto Rico sounded like an excellent time, and so I scoured to find a topic to which I could contribute. One sounded perfect to me: “Reassessing Theatrical Paradigms and Imagining Global Rights.”

Feeling fresh in knowledge from Modern Drama, I began to tackle the question of whether the old political paradigms were still valid. My affinity for Brecht and Boal slowly evolved into the paper I submitted to the conference. I worked on it from April to October, constantly struggling with ideas and concepts.

After going to Puerto Rico, the rest of my thesis evolved seamlessly. It seemed sensible to actually invest myself in TO and try it in Saginaw. Over the course of a year, that is exactly

what was accomplished. I attended a TO Facilitator training in Port Townsend, WA with Marc Weinblatt and then facilitated my own TO workshop at the Saginaw YMCA.

Each step of my thesis process has been extremely educational and surprising. In this paper I will explain the experiences themselves and what I learned from each of them. Also, I will conclude with whether my original argument, that TO is an ideal tool for rebuilding community in anomic, or “socially instable,” populations is actually sound. I believe the results are more surprising than not and will inspire a new approach to healing broken American communities.

## Chapter 1: The Development of the ASTR Paper

The development of the ASTR paper happened over several months. Most of the ideas in the paper were completely foreign to me when I began my masters program. I was always looking for ways of incorporating the theatrical knowledge I was gaining into a way of helping my community. Most of the knowledge that specifically aided in this quest came from Modern Drama, one of the core curriculum classes in the program.

Modern Drama focused on the theories and paradigms that have informed and expanded theatre. Many of them were political in nature. Building community is political in and of itself and thus this knowledge lent itself very well to my concerns. Saginaw needed a significant amount of help and, during class discussions, I began to realize the root of crime and poverty in Saginaw. The city itself was not the progenitor of its troubles; they were born out of economic and political systems far larger than Saginaw and its people. In class we discussed Karl Marx's ideas about base and superstructures, means of production, ideology, false consciousness, alienation and class consciousness. When viewed through this lens, Saginaw was just a speck, easily destroyed, in a behemoth economic, political and cultural structure. I had to reassess my idea of what theatre was and its ability to help a community.

I discovered that theatre in its traditional form does not necessarily serve a community since it is supported by upper class ideology which oppresses most of the population. This is especially true of Saginaw since a significant amount of its population is under the poverty line. Additionally, I realized activist and political theatre also have problems when addressing

community. There is a threefold concern. First, those creating political theatre have their own agenda which may not be in sync with the population for whom they are performing. Second, often they are only bolstering a small, already converted part of the population. Third, since they have their own agenda and they already have a following, they are not addressing the needs of the larger population or supporting them with the daily issues that affect them. In my opinion this was a significant flaw for political theatre in Saginaw.

According to the U.S. Census data for both 2000 and 2005-2009, Saginaw has lost 10% of its population in just ten years, while the number of families and individuals under the poverty line increased by 10% (U.S. Census Bureau). The population loss springs from the deindustrialization of the city. Crump and Merrett analyze this problem in “Scales of Struggle: Economic Restructuring in the U.S. Midwest,” and explain, “old industrial regions in the U.S. Midwest face increasing poverty, deteriorating neighborhoods, and bitter labor struggles as communities and workers attempt to cope with rapid economic, social, and political change” (496). The repercussions of deindustrialization are apparent. An article from The Saginaw News, which processed statistics from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, found that while we have lost 10% of our population, there has been a 50% increase in violent crimes. In fact, Saginaw is the most violent city in the U.S. *per capita* as of 2010 (Burns).

Nick and I identified that this rapid movement of people out of Saginaw had created a breakdown in social norms. Through the lens of theorist Emil Durkheim, we saw Saginaw in a state of social decay as social solidarity was lost (Allan 105-112). The lack of organic solidarity that comes from family, friends and community created individual depression and listlessness. It created anomic conditions. With no informal rules to guide the community, it disintegrated and social problems like crime began to dominate the area. Also, poverty worsened as more and

more jobs disappeared. It was further complicated by the spread of food deserts, since the poor had to spend more for less at local convenience stores, and the physical deterioration of the area. What was particularly distressing about this was that no one seemed to understand why it was happening and many did not care.

With this in mind, when the idea of Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt*, or a theatrical moment that breaks the world of the play to disturb the audience, was presented in class, I thought of Saginaw (Brecht 91-99). It struck a cord with me that most of society is oppressed but they are both unaware and content in their situation. They possess what Marx calls "false consciousness." They believe what the ruling class tells them; their oppression is naturalized and taken for granted. Meanwhile, they possess less of both the power and money in the world as they work harder. This resonated especially because General Motors pulled most of their operations out of Saginaw starting in the 70s with the Parks Plant, Nodular Iron in the 80s, Steering Gear 1 & 2 in the 90s and the Malleable Iron plant in the new millennium. GM had approximately 30,000 workers in the city of Saginaw alone in the 60s. Today, GM employs a meager 600 (Ruediger). Obviously this vastly depleted the wealth of the area, but no one blamed the corporation. People blamed each other for the problems in Saginaw. No one could see the structural problems that stole power from the citizens' hands. The poverty and crime were not ultimately the fault of the people.

In brainstorming with Nick, we talked about using *verfremdungseffekt* in productions at the community theatre. The community theatre in Saginaw produced mostly mainstream, classic material enjoyed by the moneyed, older patrons. Since imbedded in those plays is the ideology of the middle class, Nick and I loved to think of denaturalizing those messages and having an audience walk out feeling unsettled. Not unsettled because of any brash or vulgar spectacle, but

rather that the world order seemed usurped somehow. If people became aware of their false consciousness, then it would spark dissention and eventually change. For a short time, we believed that the Marxist model of revolution in theatre form would work. However, time showed us the fault of this plan as many other Marxists have come to know.

First, the theatre practitioner had to find the line between what was socially and culturally accepted, or what people felt was natural, and what was a breach of the acceptable, or not natural. If we did not know where the line lay, we could not properly toe it. Second, a very small part of the population, very few of who belonged to the lower class, would be privy to the feelings of alienation we would try to induce. Last, Brecht did nothing for the greater community, as his theories would not work on a practical community building level. The idea of denaturalization was still exceedingly tantalizing as a theatre practitioner, but it was shelved in consideration of helping Saginaw. Theatre could not help the city in this way.

After a more in depth look at Marx, the class looked at Augusto Boal and Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), which deeply excited me in its potential for helping Saginaw. In its simplest form, TO is bringing people together, helping them find a creative spirit through games and exercises, having them identify problems in their lives or communities, creating a short play that either literally or figuratively depicts the issue(s), and then allowing members of the community to create solutions for the issues the play presents.

What excited me so much about TO was that it was organic to the community. The voice of the oppressed could be expressed in TO unlike any other political theatre since it was literally their voice, their play, their problems, their solutions. Not only that, but on a more fundamental level, TO would work for Saginaw because it called for interaction. One of the largest problems in Saginaw is a lack of connection. TO demands connection. Without face to face interaction TO

is worthless. And when individuals are forced to interact, relationships begin and bonds are created. My hope for TO was that it would restore the collective consciousness and thus restore normative values and rules for the community.

The ATSR paper was created because I needed to attend a conference as a recommended requirement for my program. An email about the ASTR conference came at the right time. After reviewing the various topics the seminar title “Reassessing Theatrical Paradigms and Imagining Global Rights” read as a potential fit. It stated, “Our objective is to explore and reassess paradigms such as Bertolt Brecht’s *verfremdung*, Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, and anthropologist Victor Turner’s social dramas in an emerging global framework” (<http://www.astr.org/Conference/working-sessions>). Scribbled in my notes for class the beginnings of a paper were already framed. On the instructional handout for the Modern Drama final exam, I wrote “Deglobalizing theatre – localization – we want our art to be the same as our economy.” I had already been reassessing Brecht and Boal in view of a global framework, and I wanted to be a part of the dialogue at the ASTR conference because I felt I had something important to share about American communities.

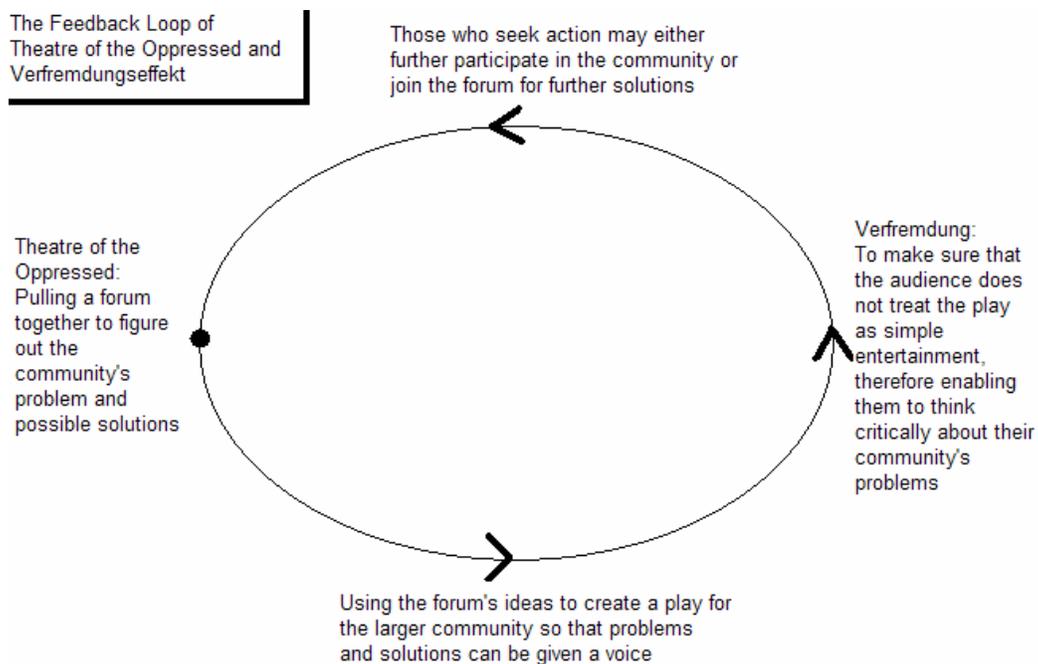
With the help of Dr. Aaron Anderson and Dr. Noreen Barnes I submitted this abstract for the conference:

In my paper, I explore the broken American community, a phenomenon created by neoliberal global capitalism, and a potential path of recovery using Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, and a system of maintenance using Bertolt Brecht’s *verfremdungseffekt*. I use my hometown of Saginaw, Michigan as an illustration of the decaying American community. Due to corporate globalization and the deindustrialization of America, the once buzzing manufacturing town has become a wasted city teetering on the edge of extreme poverty and

both physical and metaphorical structural ruin. Using this example, I investigate Boal and Brecht's paradigms as possible adhesives for American communities. From the standpoint that theatre needs to be a tool for pulling focus back to the community, creating stronger bonds, and creating investment in it, I argue that the future political focus of theatre needs to be the deglobalization and localization of theatre. The unique ability of local theatre to have a real, tangible, political effect has thus far been ignored by most of the theatre community which believes national change is possible. However, by concentrating on localization, theatre may help repair broken communities or may help prevent the fragmentation of other communities in ways that national attempts fail.

Despite a strong abstract and an excitement for the ideas, it was exceptionally difficult pinning all of my ideas down into a cohesive argument for a paper. A particular sticking point for me was the role of *verfremdungseffekt*. Nick and I developed a feedback loop between TO and the use of *verfremdung*. A figure is provided below.

Fig. 1



The more of Boal I read, the less and less the feedback loop made sense. In fact, its very presence confused the whole argument and created anxiety for me as I continued to try and make it work. Eventually, I understood my issue was forcing a process rather than focusing on the theoretical aspects. Essentially, I was getting ahead of myself. When I settled into just arguing my explanation of the problem in Saginaw and how I believed TO and *verfremdungseffekt* could help, most of the pressure to justify my process eased. I was no longer issuing a directive for a specific action, but revealing a potential for Boal and Brecht (please see Appendix A to read the full ASTR paper).

In November of 2009, I attended the conference and was able to discuss my ideas in the working session. In the session, we broke into small groups. My group discussed various types of political action, the use of media, and the rights of individuals in an ever globalizing world. Unfortunately, we were opposed in our ideas. The members of my group believed that media was one of the best means of expression for the voice of the oppressed. Television and the internet were not wholly capable of being controlled by the ruling class and thus were viable political forms. They also believed that globalization was not as dangerous as I believe it is. While they felt immediate community was very important, they also believed that disenfranchised communities were able to gain power and a voice from the global community, and needed to engage in a global dialogue. The conference made me aware of a belief in the possibility of a global grassroots political movement, capable of revolutionizing the current power structure. However, I do not believe this is possible. In a global setting, one must contend with distance, cultural and social difference, and differing regional issues. Global solidarity is a wonderful ideal, but in reality people care the most about their own people and their own issues rather than someone's problems halfway around the world. This is why I believe the focus

should not be global but local. Sympathy from a stranger is not as powerful as action in your neighborhood.

## Chapter 2: The TO Facilitator Training in Port Townsend, WA

Before I knew about the ASTR conference or thought of this thesis, I knew I wanted to go to a TO workshop. Our Modern Drama's TA had recently attended a TO workshop in Costa Rica and she helped with the Boal lecture and shared her experience. After class I asked her more and she gave me the name of the facilitator, Steven Hawkins. The TA told me the workshop consisted of Boal's games and structures which culminated into a collaborative Forum Theatre experience with the local people concerning some local rights issues. However, despite my initial excitement for the workshop, the idea was shelved as a possible future adventure.

After going to the ASTR conference, a design for my thesis began to take shape. Attending a TO workshop felt like a natural next step in that design. Other than class discussion and reading *Theatre of the Oppressed*, I had very little knowledge of the mechanics of TO. Since the best way to learn in theatre is practical application, I looked up the name my classmate had given me six months prior.

Steven's website was very alluring (<http://dramaticproblemsolving.blogspot.com/>). Its main picture was smiling participants standing under a Costa Rican waterfall and below a description of the little villa perched on a mountain, the hand-milked goat's milk for morning coffee, and the celebratory final theatre experience with the locals. Even though Nick was not able to go to Puerto Rico with me, he definitely wanted to go to Costa Rica. However, regardless of our excitement, this workshop had two problems. First, it fell in the middle of the Spring semester. Two graduate students taking off a whole week from school is problematic due to

workload and various obligations. Second, which was more important to me, the workshop was not designed to teach individuals how to use TO. It was more an opportunity to experience TO.

This started a new search for me. My goal was to find a workshop in the summer that focused on teaching the participants how to use TO. Other than a TO conference being held in Toronto over the summer, there were not many options, which was more fortunate than not. It did not take me long to find the Mandala Center for Change and Marc Weinblatt. Marc was the organizer and leader of the TO Facilitator Training: Waging Peace – Designing Justice workshop in Port Townsend, WA held at the end of June. After a conversation with my husband about expenses and travel, I signed up and began to prepare for the workshop.

While preparing to write this section, I began to wonder why there were so few facilitator training programs. I emailed Marc to get his opinion. He had no definite answer but proposed that most of TO is still done in academia. Marc is one of the few to break out of a university setting to work within his community. He also thought that since facilitator training requires significant preparation and work, skilled facilitators do not have the time to take on so much work. I also wonder if people are learning informally, like an informal apprenticeship, from skilled facilitators (Weinblatt, email correspondence). If this is the case, I see it as a curse and a blessing. It is a problem because you have to be in the network of TO practitioners in order to be trained. However, the blessing in this kind of training may be the time with the teacher, seeing the teacher in action, and when the student begins to lead, the teacher being there to help, give constructive criticism and encourage. While I would have loved an informal training like I suspect is happening in the TO network, I was privileged to find a practitioner, Marc, who was providing a formal training.

Going into the workshop, I had one major concern – would Midwesterners be willing to participate in TO? While I have no statistics or psychology journals to back me up, having grown up in Michigan, I have observed certain characteristics in both myself and other Midwesterners. Speaking only from personal experience, I have noticed resistance towards anything that may make one seem childish, anything that may break personal boundary zones, or anything that may seem impractical. TO uses games to restore a childlike sense of play, strives for connection through physical closeness, and makes theatre, something often considered impractical, a tool for change. After reading and thinking about *Theatre of the Oppressed*, I began to realize that the essence of TO was contrary to the nature of those I wanted to help.

My focus at the workshop consisted of two elements. First, I considered whether TO would work with a Midwestern population. Second, I constantly evaluated whether the games and structures (i.e. the series of exercises used to create Image Theatre, Forum Theatre, Rainbow of Desire, and Cop in the Head) of TO would work to rebond a community. Although I enjoyed the entire workshop, particular activities stood out as important to my upcoming workshop in Saginaw and my thesis.

On the first day, after introductions, Marc presented agreements for the group to function under for the week. These statements were a foundation for the workshop, because they established a dialogue of respect for self and others. The eight statements were: 1) “Honor confidentiality / privacy.” 2) “Speak for yourself / your experience (“I” statements).” 3) “Listen for understanding.” 4) “Agree to disagree.” 5) “Give unconditional respect to others and yourself.” 6) “Take care of yourself (right to pass).” 7) “Step up / step back.” 8) “Get what you need and be sensitive to others” (His underline not mine) (Weinblatt, Training Manual 8). The agreements had a significant impact on me. I have a poor habit of assuming everyone

understands respect is a priority and am often disappointed when it is not. A simple reminder at the beginning brings respect to the forefront of participants' minds. As soon as we went through the agreements, I knew I wanted to use them for my workshop in Saginaw. Since I was going to be working with teenagers, I anticipated the need for respect being an important conversation.

Another exercise I knew I wanted to use was Columbian Hypnosis as a lead into Forum Theatre (Boal, Games 50, 242-243). Marc had us find a partner, someone we had not worked with yet, and stand face-to-face. One person would be the hypnotizer and the other the hypnotized. When the hypnotizer put their hand twelve inches from their partner's face, their partner was immediately hypnotized and had to follow the hand where ever it led. Throughout the exercise, the hand should stay twelve inches away from the face and the hypnotizer should respectfully understand and comply with the physical limits of their partner. Marc had the hypnotizer bring the partner back to neutral and then the partners switched places and repeated the exercise. Last, Marc had both partners be hypnotizer and hypnotized at the same time. For the first two-thirds of the exercise the room was fairly quiet, but the struggle of leading and being led created plenty of awkward movements and laughter.

Next, Marc led the group into a semi-circle and had us sit. He asked for one volunteer to be the hypnotizer, and this person had to pretend be the meanest, evilest hypnotizer in the world. The group broke into giggles when the smallest woman, with pig-tails and a huge smile, stood up to volunteer. She was to be the "oppressor." Someone else quickly volunteered to be the "oppressed." Columbian Hypnosis was played again for the audience with the oppressor being cruel and the hypnotized being helpless. Bringing the scene to a stop, Marc told the group we had seen the opening play, which is a scenario presented by actors to show a problem situation, of the forum we were conducting. Before beginning the scene again, he instructed us that if we

came up with a possible solution to the problem we should call “stop,” and we would replace the oppressed person and try our solution. He began the scene again. Thirty seconds into the scene a participant yelled “stop,” and tapped the hypnotized person out of the scene. Assuming her position, the scene began where it left off, but suddenly the hypnotized person ran away from his hypnotizer. Promptly the hypnotizer followed and chased him around the space. Marc called the scene to the end, we applauded, and then discussed the solution presented. The group agreed that running away from a problem does not usually work because the problem follows. The scene repeated again and again with others trying out their ideas; some people collapsed on the floor, others tickled, one hugged, a large teenager slung the hypnotizer over his shoulder and walked out of the room. After each attempt, the group was allowed to debate the usefulness of each contribution.

As a newcomer to TO, I felt this was a perfect introduction to Forum Theatre. *Columbian Hypnosis* is a stark example of oppression. This straightforward story was relevant to all of us. Participation was immediate. The group collectively wanted to find a way out of the hypnosis. In our post-forum discussion, everyone in the group felt Forum Theatre was both lucidly explained and fun using *Columbian Hypnosis*. When I journaled the experience, I expressed my desire to similarly introduce Forum Theatre to the Saginaw workshop participants.

Another exercise that impacted me was *Find the Hand* (Boal, Games 125). The group was instructed to find a partner we had not worked with, which was a request for every game or exercise with a partner since Marc wanted the forty participants to connect, and stand face to face. Having us close our eyes, Marc gave us several minutes to explore our partner’s hands to learn the intricacies so we would know them by touch. Calling our examination to a halt, he instructed us, with eyes still closed, to move away from our partner slowly and carefully. Once

Marc deemed us sufficiently lost in the room, he told us to find our partner's hand. He asked everyone to be respectful and gentle with other participants' hands. Even if you knew it was not your partner, you should allow the other person to discover that fact as well.

This game was exceptionally long, but it was incredibly exciting. It connected the group through its intimacy and vulnerability. Whenever a new hand was found, it would be explored with care, and if it was not your partner a friendly pat would signal farewell. However, when I did find my partner, I was thrilled. I knew the texture of his palm, the temperature of his fingers, and the mole on his thumb. He knew my wedding ring, my short fingernails, and calloused fingertips. Upon finding each other, we were able to open our eyes and help the remaining people stay within a tighter circle increasing their chances of finding each other. Once everyone found their partner and all eyes were open, the group cheered with delight.

We played another trust and community game called Faint by Numbers, or Fainting at Frejus (Boal, Games 158). This game also bonded the group together. Marc assigned each of us a number then had us walk around the room. He asked that we stay fairly close together rather than the normal freedom of the whole space. When Marc called out our number, we were supposed to make a sound and faint to the floor trusting the group would catch us. Number after number was called and each person was caught with warm hands and smiles. Eventually every number was called and then Marc began to call multiple numbers. In the end, he said, "Every number!" All of us fainted at once, helping each other down to the ground, giggling. I knew I wanted to bring this feeling of closeness to the participants in Saginaw.

Finally, other than the group's performance for the town, which I will discuss later, one last exercise really stood out for me. We did a Rainbow of Desire structure (Boal, Rainbow 58-73). We were asked to think of a time in our life when we felt oppressed by someone or

something, then were invited to tell the story if we had a burning desire to share it. As best as I can recall, three people wanted to share their story. They each gave the basic details of the account then the group picked the story which resonated with the majority. We chose a story about a woman, Mimi, whose partner of seventeen years came to visit her in Korea where she was teaching English. A few minutes after he arrived, the phone rang and it was the Mimi's father; her mother was in the hospital and was not going to live long. Distraught by the news, she went to her partner and tried to make plans to fly back to the U.S. However, since her partner had just flown to Korea, he did not want to go with her and he did not want her to leave him alone in Korea. He convinced her to stay with him rather than going to her mother. Once she finished her narrative, her eyes welled up as she admitted how guilty she felt because her mother died a few days later and her sisters told her their mother was asking for her. Mimi and her mother had a troubled relationship and they were never able to repair it before the mother's passing.

Once she was finished, Marc asked for a volunteer to play Mimi's partner, who she was still involved with at that time. A participant named Gary volunteered. Mimi was asked to fill Gary in on any other details about her partner that would help him improvise the scene. When she was done, Marc asked her to recreate her apartment in Korea as the set for the scene. Mimi explained the set to everyone as she put it together, helping us envision the space. With the set ready, Gary and Mimi improvised the original event as best as possible.

When the improvisation concluded, Marc asked Mimi one of the emotions she felt in the moment of conflict when her partner convinced her to stay. Mimi said she felt frustrated. Marc asked Mimi to create an image with her body which she felt captured frustration to her. With her body contorted into her version of frustration, Marc asked her to make a sound to accompany the feeling; she let out a growl. Marc asked her to release the pose and pick someone from the

audience to recreate the pose and sound of frustration. The pose and sound were taught to an audience member and then placed within the scene wherever Mimi wanted that emotion. She placed it near to her and her partner because frustration was a strong emotion for her. More and more emotions were named including love, protection, hate, murder, fear and concern, each with images and sounds and placed within the scene. Once Mimi felt all her emotions in that moment were displayed, Marc announced that she had created the rainbow of her desire in that moment. We extended the structure by having the poses, or images, improvise with the partner, still played by Gary. This showed how all the different parts of Mimi would have interacted with her partner in that moment.

Concluding the structure, Mimi's eyes were welled up again. She told the group she finally felt a sense of peace about the incident. Since it had happened, she has harbored a grudge against her partner, but now felt like she could let it go. She also felt some closure about her mother and decided to call her family that night to talk about it. Both the creation of the rainbow of desire and Mimi's reaction to it were very powerful, and I wanted to bring its healing possibilities to Saginaw.

Rainbow of Desire and the other exercises and structures described above is just a small portion of our work in Port Townsend. There are many more games and exercises I loved and wanted to use, but the four detailed above seemed especially striking to me and important to share in this paper. However, in my consideration of the Midwestern population, there were activities I felt cautious about using in Saginaw.

From the first day to the last of the workshop, whenever Marc used Image Theatre it made me feel uncomfortable. Boal's intention for images was to break past the limitations of words which is "*the word spoken is never the world heard*" (His italics) (Boal, Games 174). The

connotative meaning of a word was more important to Boal since words rarely allowed that meaning to show itself fully. To circumvent this problem, he used the sculpted body as a medium to express “emotions, memories, ideas...” (Boal, Games 174). In Image Theatre, the participant may sculpt their own body or others’ bodies to show the group what words cannot convey. Sometimes the voice, not words, is also included for a more complex expression. There are numerous methods, variations and adaptations of Image Theatre, many of which can be found in *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, and Image Theatre also weaves itself throughout Forum Theatre, Legislative Theatre, Rainbow of Desire, Cop-In-The-Head Theatre, etc.

While I appreciate Image Theatre on the page, it is still a physical and mental struggle to perform it. The abstract nature of it, intermingled with its demand for emotional immediacy and physical proximity to others, felt like a Midwesterner’s nightmare. The first day I wrote in my notes, “If I, a theatre person, am intensely uncomfortable doing this work, how will inner-city Saginaw youth do with this material? Will they shut down before they even start?” Again, this is only my perspective on the group I would be working with, but Image Theatre felt like a doomed project in my mind. For the duration of the workshop, I analyzed my reactions to Image Theatre and at the end of the week, decided not to use it in Saginaw unless the group seemed receptive.

The capstone of the week was the performance and forum with the Port Townsend community Friday night. Our week’s work culminated in seeing Forum Theatre in action and Marc joking a group other than the workshop participants. The first day we brainstormed a list of possible issues to explore at the performance. It was just a starting point since the list had nearly sixty items on it. Throughout the week, we explored issues on the list mostly through Image Theatre work. On Tuesday Marc gave us an opportunity to create a scene from a structure called The Sirens’ Song (Boal, Games 125). In this structure the group is asked, with eyes closed, to

form an archetypal gesture and make a sound that captured their struggle with an oppression they have experienced or continue to experience. The Joker then chooses four distinctively different sounds and leads those participants to one of the four corners of the room. Once in place, they are asked to all make their sound simultaneously and the rest of the participants, still with eyes closed, slowly make their way to the sound which resonates with them the most. After everyone has gathered around a sound, they may open their eyes and share their personal stories of oppression. From this discussion, a short scene is created by that group. My group discussed the tension and anxiety of having to either sever a relationship or giving up part of yourself for conformities sake. We created a musical number with the song I'm a Little Teapot. The groups were given the last two hours of the day to create their scene and, before we ended, the scenes were performed. Because of limited time, we did not forum the scenes, though it was possible.

Thursday and Friday were dedicated to the creation of plays for the final performance and Marc, acting as an artistic director, cleaned up blocking and gave aesthetic suggestions for their improvement. The themes chosen were body image, immigration, adults' need of play, consumption and prisons as retributive action. After choosing these issues, I began to see a flaw in the final stage of the workshop and a limitation of Boal's work. My realization continued to be reinforced as we worked on the plays but became glaring the night of the performance.

My first concern was that since we were such a disparate group, the only thing tying us together being TO, our issues were exceptionally broad. My group dealt with body image, but when we sat down to discuss body image, our reasons for being in the group were vastly different. To make a cohesive play, we significantly compromised our own struggles and relied on generalities. When we started, we wanted to create a realistic scene that would be easy to forum. However, as we melted our experiences down, the scene became abstract and symbolic of

struggles with body image. The play was artistically interesting but not conducive to problem solving. If we had been a homogeneous group who shared a similar version of this struggle, I believe it would have been far more successful to forum.

This could have been solved if we focused on the issue that bound us all – our work in TO. Even though the workshop participants were from around the globe, we had formed our own community during the week. We were TO facilitators-in-training with similar concerns and difficulties regarding our developing craft. Using Forum Theatre to work out the issues we were going to face as facilitators would have been exceptionally satisfying for the group, and would have given us a chance to see Marc work and, perhaps, practice our own joking skills. On Saturday, after the performance, I related this suggestion to the group and Marc as well as my other concern and suggestion regarding the performance for the Port Townsend community.

The second, and more noteworthy issue, revealed itself the night of the performance. We had two strikes against us. First, our topics were vague, but also those topics were formed within the community of the workshop. Port Townsend, which is lovely and has a very pleasant community, was not our community. I think that most of us expected to have a real conversation about the issues and possibly even work toward a solution for the issues. What happened instead was we felt judged by the community. Out of the five plays, the audience chose two to forum – consumption and immigration. They chose consumption because they already felt like they had the answers to the problem. Our audience was mostly composed of retirees who conscientiously lived a low-consumption existence. What should have been an equal and earnest discussion turned into a lecture about giving up modern convinces. In the discussion on Saturday, several of the people who created and performed that play explained how hurt they felt by the audience's

reaction. They felt like the issue was trivialized and most of the audience's solutions were magic outside of Port Townsend, home of eco-villages and farmers markets.

Immigration was far more successful as a forum because it turned out to be an actual issue in the community since many immigrants enter through Canada. The audience attacked the problem with gusto rather than the participants. The evening's best moments came out of this forum. An especially touching moment was when a young boy, around eight years old, tried his solution to the problem. The scene revolved around Juan, a Columbian with permanent resident status in the U.S., having trouble reentering the States after a trip to Columbia. The airport official told him he did not have the right paperwork to enter the country. Juan tried to explain himself, but the official would not listen to him and called security. The young boy, who was white with blonde hair and big blue eyes, stepped into Juan's spot. He tried to explain to the airport official that he had forgotten the other pieces of documentation and what he had was it. When the official said no he pleaded with her to let him in to the country. Again, and more roughly, the official told him no. The little boy, heartbroken, went back to his seat. Upset, he said, "The people at the airport are always really nice to me." It was striking to see the boy realize that his status was privileged and not everyone shares that privilege.

My second suggestion to the group on Saturday was to have Port Townsend citizens join us on Thursday to help us explore topics pertinent to the town. Friday we could create, rehearse, and refine the plays. The forum experience that night would then be community specific and helpful for Port Townsend. As workshop participants, it was more important for us to see Forum Theatre and the joker in action than to solve our own problems. If the plays revolved around Port Townsend, then we could have remained objective observers of the process.

This workshop exposed me to both the power and limitations of TO. The power lies, as I suspected, in its community building and problem-solving capabilities. By the end of the week, even though we were from so many different places, we felt like a cohesive unit of TO practitioners. During our time together we discovered the connotative meanings of each other's words and actions, developed a new language for ourselves to share our trials and offered solutions and hope to each other with that new understanding. Our work together was very therapeutic. However, the limitation exists in what is presented to whom during Forum Theatre and whether change or therapy is desired. I believe that change is only possible if the group, while possibly not culturally or socially identical, share a specific problem even if they are on opposite sides of it and hope for different outcomes. It is unfair to both sides if one does not struggle as the other struggles.

The workshop provided me not only with a clearer understanding of the mechanics of TO, but it also established my perspective of TO. There were many at the workshop who believed TO is universal and can be used indiscriminately. Personally, I do not believe TO, or at least Forum Theatre, is universal. It does not work in every situation with every group as seen at our final performance. I think Forum Theatre is most powerful within homogeneous groups. For real change, not just therapy, this is where TO is most effective, because these people usually are in close proximity, can bond and form a stronger social network, and are able to continue to work together. After the workshop, everyone promised to keep in touch and help each other however they were able, but few have maintained contact. The community created was temporary. Once we drove or flew home, the network dissipated. We no longer had direct, continual influence on each other. Therefore, our experiences and discoveries, other than being educational, were mostly therapeutic. Whatever solutions were presented only held true in that

moment. With the community disbanded, we walked away knowing that others had listened and cared about our troubles, but they would not be with us to help enact change at home.

### Chapter 3: The TO Workshop at the Saginaw YMCA

My Facebook home page has been abuzz lately. Folks from Saginaw are posting their discontent, their worry, and their hope concerning the city. Someone recently created a video using Simon and Garfunkle's song, *America*, which is fitting since it originates in Saginaw when the singers played at the YMCA's Party-A-Go-Go in the 60s, and posted it to the social network site (please see Appendix B for the video and full story). The video features long pans of the deserted city with the song's lyrics spray painted on buildings, railroad tracks, bridge supports. Posted along with the video is this sad comment, "Saginaw, the best worst city in America' I love my town, it sucks watching it slowly die. Only art can save us now!" (Shantz, [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)).

My chest tightens when I think of Saginaw. Sometimes it feels like Saginaw is a ship sinking, and even though I am in Virginia, that I, and all its other citizens, are going down with it. Every atom of me vibrates with a desire to stop the inevitable demise of my hometown. That is one of the main reasons I wanted to try a TO workshop in Saginaw right away. I did not want to wait until I understood TO better, had more experience, and had a clearer plan for executing TO within the community. Urgency led me to hastily organize a workshop with the YMCA.

Let me explain "hasty." It was organized over several months. The folks at the Y and I did not just throw together a workshop in a week. Shortly after signing up for the workshop in Washington, I contacted Steve Meyer at the Y. Steve was my supervisor when I worked there. His title had recently changed from Camp Director to Associate Executive Director - YMCA and

YCamp Programs. With a broader set of responsibilities in the Y, I knew that he was the person to contact first. Steve and I had a very good working relationship, and I knew he would be receptive to community building ideas.

I emailed him and he asked for an explanation of TO, the purpose of the workshop and a general plan for the workshop. The first two requests I easily complied with but told him I needed to attend the training in Washington before I could give him a plan for the workshop. Our communication dropped after a general okay from Steve. We picked back up a month before Nick and I traveled to Port Townsend. Steve guided me to Mindy McNally, the youth director who I had also worked with, to continue planning the workshop.

With Mindy I set up the parameters of the workshop. My hope was to have ten teens ranging in age from fifteen to eighteen. I chose working with youth instead of adults partially out of convenience. The Y is flooded with teens during the summer, and I thought it would be easier to assemble a group of teens. Since I was in Virginia, I would not be able to advertise the workshop and I did not want to burden the Y with my thesis. I also chose this age bracket because the demographic of teens who stay at the Y throughout the summer daily deal with overwhelming problems. They live in poverty stricken areas and have friends dead because of gang violence. My hope was that TO could help them not only actively find solutions to these issues, but also bond them tighter so they had a stronger support network.

We would workshop from noon until four Monday through Thursday with our work culminating into a performance for family and friends Friday night. The workshop would be free since it was geared towards community building; I did not feel right making participants pay. As I had told Steve, I let Mindy know that the rest of the details would be forthcoming after the workshop in Port Townsend.

The facilitator training was amazing. I was filled to the brim with information, so much so I hardly knew how to use it. When I sat down to plan the workshop, my mind would race. “Well, I could do that... or that... or that.” Boal offers innumerable tools; a facilitator must know them well and be able to use them with an improvisational spirit. Anxiety began to prick at me because, despite a week-long training, I did not feel competent to improvise depending on the mood of the group. I was still trying to grasp some of the games and structures. The easy familiarity Marc had during the training was not a skill I had achieved yet. He himself said that becoming a facilitator took time and practice.

So, when I said that the workshop in Saginaw was arranged hastily, I mean it was not completely thought through primarily for two reasons. First, I idealized what my abilities would be after the workshop in Port Townsend. For some reason, I thought that I would be joker extraordinaire, fully comprehending TO, its games, structures and implications. Second, I idealized the age group and their willingness. I knew that teens had the reputation of being difficult, but I had worked with many teens over the years who defied that reputation. Besides, as I mentioned above, several of the teens at the Y had significant problems they were dealing with and I reasoned that that would give them a certain sobriety and dedication.

Heavily leaning on Marc’s model for a TO workshop, which he provided in his training manual, I organized the week. After a pizza lunch, the first day would be mostly getting to know each other intermingled with play to encourage their creative spirit. Tuesday’s focus would be building trust in the group and exploring the ideas of oppression and what that meant to them. Wednesday would be more trust building and finding themes for the play they wanted to perform for their community Friday. Thursday would be some basic physical and mental warm-ups with the rest of the time dedicated to creating their play. Friday the teens would perform their play for

their community and then, using Forum Theatre, their community would be able to engage with the problem presented.

Organizing the week was deceptively simple. When written on paper, a workshop is so clear it teases the facilitator with a promise of simplicity and ease. Despite some general performance fears, I was exceptionally hopeful for the success of the workshop. In my mind I saw the dramatic final night of family and friends huddled in the Y's meeting room, them jumping up to be actors in the teen's play, and everyone leaving with a sense of accomplishment and hope. However, implementation is never as easy as planning.

Nick and I arrived in Michigan late Sunday night, and I was at the Y by 10AM to make sure the first day went smoothly. After catching up with everyone and sharing a fair number of hugs, Mindy and I sat down for a conversation in her office. She informed me ten kids were signed up, but some of them were not in the desired age range. The teen director, not Mindy, had organized the kids. However, she said she knew most of them on the list, with several of them recently attending a YMCA Youth Leadership rally in Ohio, and all were good kids. I was disappointed by the large age disparity, but hoped that the difference would be made up by their participation in the leadership program.

Mindy then informed me my workshop would have to be traveling throughout the day. The summer Day Camp program moved around throughout the day and therefore we had to move as well. This change concerned me for two reasons. First, we would not have our own, comfortable space. TO's work can sometimes lead to vulnerable moments and the teens would need to feel safe in the room. Second, this was a problem because I had to rearrange and rethink the games and structures I had chosen. The facilitator works hard to create moments of creativity

and openness; stopping in the middle of an important moment to change rooms would not be conducive. Feeling a little defeated, I left Mindy's office to order pizza and set up the space.

With a food table and a circle of chairs for the group ready, I paced the room waiting for participants to arrive. The workshop was supposed to start at noon, but no one showed up until ten after twelve. I had already started getting some performance anxiety, so ten extra minutes of an empty room did not help my state of mind. When the first person entered the room, I tried to be as relaxed and welcoming as possible, but was probably a little overbearing. I ushered her to the pizza, told her my name, welcomed her and asked her to sit in the circle when she had her food. Slowly more trickled, many of whom were not signed up for the workshop but came in begging for a piece of pizza. When I told them the food was only for participants, some said they would participate if they could have some food. It was a whirlwind of activity. I hardly knew who was coming or going, participating or not. The confusion, lateness, and lack of private space worried me.

With pizza seekers still popping their heads in now and again and new participants entering, I managed to assemble a group in the chairs. By twelve-forty, I had approximately eleven people seated (this number fluctuated all day). They ranged from eleven years old to sixteen years old. Most of them were blank-faced and disinterested, playing with their cell phones, or talking with each other.

I introduced myself, told them I was working on my masters at Virginia Commonwealth University, and why I was conducting the workshop. Admittedly, being a little rattled, my speech was not as fluent or coherent as practiced. My mind froze when I tried to explain TO and what I hoped to accomplish. It did not help that none of the kids knew what the workshop was. Most only came because they were asked. The teen director did not pass on my description of the

workshop. One kid said, “Oh, I thought this was just drama games and stuff,” then walked out the door. As I went over the plan for the week, no one looked interested and some were completely confused about the Friday night performance. Performing for parents was not on their summer agenda.

Quickly I moved on to group introductions. I asked them to say their name, their involvement at the Y, and what they loved and why (names have been changed in this section to protect the identities of the participants). I was surprised by how difficult it was for them to name something they loved. Even more surprising was that most said they loved objects such as cell phones, cars, and clothes. The youngest person there, Sarah, was the only one to say she loved her family. Another girl said she loved basketball. Most everyone else cared about the material objects they either had or wanted.

Next I presented the agreements, the same used for the workshop in Port Townsend, for the workshop. I had these written down on a large piece of paper before the workshop began and introduced them to the group explaining our work needed some simple parameters to aid in the process. As I spoke about confidentiality, respect, listening and being sensitive the group wiggled in their seats, whispered between themselves, and once, to my dismay, one girl slapped another on the arm. Prompted by the unrest, I decided to shock them to get attention. I told them that in this workshop they were not children, and I was not going to be their mother or their teacher. My role with them was guide and helper. I was not going to yell at them to put away their cell phones, stop talking, or behave. It was their responsibility to be respectful towards others and themselves. They could not anger me because I was a tool for them to utilize. If they chose not to use me then that was their decision.

In my attempt to break down the power dynamics, I lost them completely. I gave them *carte blanche* to test me and their freedom, which inevitably stymied my ability to work with them. Despite my desire to be a friend and guide, I remained, at least in their eyes, an authoritarian forcing them to do work. Three people left after the agreements. It was a harbinger of things to come.

Feeling a large amount of tension sitting in the circle, I got them onto their feet and used Marc's group analysis tool of continuums. Running to one wall, I declared it was the wall for anyone who felt like they loved to interact with others, then I ran to the other and declared that it was the wall for those who hated to interact with others. If someone felt they did not fit into either of those extremes, they were to place themselves somewhere in the line between the two walls with the absolute middle being neutral. I did four continuums; whether they liked to interact, whether they felt they were a leader, whether they saw themselves as a talker, and whether they were interested in the workshop. Looking back, how they viewed themselves in those continuums differed significantly from their actions in the workshop.

Buoyed by their enjoyment of the continuums, I started the physical warm-ups for the workshop. I reasoned the earlier tension sprang from boredom. Sitting too long whittles energy, so it was best to keep them on their feet. I began with the most basic theatre warm-up – walking the space. Perhaps I expected too much, but I was shocked when they were unwilling to walk around the room. They walked listlessly, confused as to why I would have them do something so silly. I assured them there was no trick to the exercise, walking's only purpose was to get their bodies moving, warm their muscles, and increase their energy. My explanation meant nothing to them.

Hoping to provide them with purpose for their movement, I tried playing the game Predator Protector. I told them to continue to walk, but mentally choose someone to be afraid of, making sure they kept that person away from them at all times. One of the teens stopped and told me, “Why would I want to keep away? I don’t dislike anyone in the room?” I replied, “I’m glad you like everyone in the room. We are just pretending to be afraid of someone.” The response was, “That doesn’t make sense.” I never even got to the protector part. The laughter and fun that normally evolves out of Predator Protector was immediately quashed. At that moment, I knew I was going to have to abandon all my plans for the day. If this simple game was too much for them, how was I going to use TO?

I tried two more games, Three Irish Duels and Bippity Bippity Bop, with little success. With nerves frayed, I told them to take a fifteen minute break, which really served as a way for me to regain some composure. I was disoriented from being denied the normal excitement and happiness that usually springs from theatre games. At the facilitator training, a group of us discussed resistance and tried to prepare ourselves for it, but the conversation did nothing to help me. The level of resistance was beyond my worst fears. What made it so frustrating and sad was that they were not resisting just because I was an authority figure. Their resistance seemed to spring from a self-consciousness which entailed doing nothing in front of their peers, and a lack of care or concern for the workshop.

During the break I tried to figure out a way to engage them. Knowing that people want to talk about their lives, I decided to start a Rainbow of Desire. Once everyone reassembled, I asked them about problems they face every day. We wrote the problems down a huge piece of paper. Next we voted on which topics should be discussed. The topics ended up being strangers, rumors, annoying people, racism, and younger siblings. I gave each topic a spot in the room and

the kids had to walk to the topic's location they cared about most. Once they were in groups, no one having assembled at the rumors or younger siblings location, I asked them to share a story of when they dealt with the problem with their small group. The room buzzed with stories and I felt relieved. Even though it was hard getting topics out of them, talking about the topics seemed to be acceptable.

Then I asked the groups to choose a story from each to share with everyone. One of the groups tried to be funny and told us how they had just yelled at a guy smoking outside of the Y, but the other two had real problems to present. The first story was about a school bully and the second about a Middle Eastern girl being called a terrorist in an effort to win the class presidency. I asked everyone which story they wanted to know more about. Since most of them already knew who the school bully was and, offhandedly, commented that someone should beat her, they chose the story about the cruel comment.

Even though I was concerned about their suggestions about the bully, I suddenly had momentum in the group and did not want to stop it. Wanting to create a rainbow of desire around the story of racism, I asked them to create a short play depicting the event, with the stipulation that Kara, who the event had happened to, had to play herself. I gave them fifteen minutes to work and left the room so that they did not feel pressured by my presence. When I came back they were arguing. The play was only half finished. Two girls were not cooperating, sitting on the sidelines, shaking their heads. As soon as I entered the room the girls who were organizing the play complained to me. I told them if someone did not want to participate then work around them. Rather than helping, they switched complaints. No one wanted to play the boy who called Kara a terrorist. The momentum ground to a halt.

Finally, Kara's cousin, Erin, said she would be the boy, so I asked them to improvise the incident for group. With confused looks, they attempted to improvise but never made it all the way through the scene. Erin could not make it through the scene without laughing hysterically, looking at me and asking, "What am I supposed to do?" Improvisation in general did not go well. No one was willing to pretend. The sad part was that Kara really wanted to work on the scene and talk about her feelings, but the endeavor was shut down by everyone else in the room.

Exhausted and disenchanted, I let them go at three o'clock instead of four. Before they left, I asked if anyone was going to come back the next day and all of them raised their hands. The next day Mindy told me that some of the kids came to her office and expressed how much fun they had. While I was happy to hear it, I was completely perplexed. It made me question my own experience. What was I going to do with them the second day? Looking back, I am not sure my decision was a good one.

I began Tuesday with a conversation. With the sheet of agreements in hand, I tried to prompt a conversation about there being no right or wrong answers and respect for each other. It was incredibly awkward. We had some new people in the group that day, others were missing, people were coming in late, and everyone looked disgruntled and unhappy to be there. The room we were in that day was like being in a fishbowl. It is called the teen lounge and it overlooks the teen center, but it has no privacy and I knew it would be useless to play games in there. The groups peers were watching them, which may have been one of the reasons they were so surly. Impromptu, I decided to take them outside so we could play under the trees. Unfortunately, we were stalled by two girls, Lisa and Mary, who wanted to put their belongings in the teen director's office. We uncomfortably waited for their return. The group's energy, what little of it there had been, was completely snuffed by the time they returned.

We trudged outside. The second the summer air touched their skin, they complained about the heat. I was between a rock and a hard place. Inside we could do nothing because of others watching; outside we could do nothing because of summer air. Their negative energy was unbearable. As soon as we stood under the shade, I turned and confronted them. I said, trembling, "You do not have to be here. This is not school. I will not force you to participate. You are welcome to leave. In fact, we can end the workshop now. Go hang out in the Y. Go home and sleep. Hang out with your friends. This workshop is for you, but you don't seem to want it. You have to be interested in order to get anything from this experience."

After a strained silence and a few guilty shrugs, Erin spoke up. With a disgruntled look she said, "We want to do it. We don't want to go home." I did not believe them. "Really? Am I really supposed to believe you want to be here? This has been like pulling teeth, guys. No one seems to want to do anything." A few more shrugs, and then a girl named Janet, one of the cousins, said, "Yeah, we want to be here." I gave them a few more chances to go home, but no one budged. I began the workshop.

To get their bodies warmed up, I began with the Shakes, an exercise where the participant shakes each hand and foot systematically counting from eight to one. After our discussion, I hoped for some positive energy but received none. My past experience with the shakes has always been positive. They were not willing to do the Shakes. So we moved on to some pushing exercises from Boal, continued with Boal's 1-2-3 exercise, and finished with Ninja which two of the boys taught the group. They were finally starting to take part, so going with the flow we played the gold standard of games, Tag.

They were laughing! This was so pleasant after all of the tension. It is difficult seeing kids so unwilling to play, experiment, participate and enjoy. They were finally having fun and it

was a delight. I wished, desperately, that this was the tipping point for the workshop and after this we could begin to work.

The group began to get physically tired. Gathering them under the shade, I started the improv game of Freeze. In this game two people stand up and start to improvise a scene. When an audience member sees the characters in a pose that sparks their imagination for a new scene, the audience member calls out, "Freeze," stopping the actors, taps one of the actors out, takes her place, and begins a new scene. Improv inevitably was not the right choice. They were too inhibited to improvise in front of everyone and kept shooting me looks that asked, "Am I doing this right?" After trying for ten minutes, I called the game to an end and gave them a ten minute break.

During the break, I found out that the teen lounge had been taken over by the Day Camp, and I had to find a new room. I discovered the spinning room, where all the spinning bikes are kept, was free and I ran around the Y trying to notify all the kids of the room change. Despite the hassle, I felt like this was an excellent happenstance. The spinning room was on the opposite end of the Y from the teen center, quiet, secluded, and peaceful. No one would bother us back there and we would finally be able to do some work.

With the break finished, three people decided not to return and another lost her way and could not find the room. The day unraveled from there. I tried to do some more TO, but failed over and over again. We tried Image Theatre, Columbian Hypnosis, and Forum Theatre. I discovered that none of them felt like they had any problems beyond not having a car or not having the newest cell phone. By three o'clock the group and I had run out of energy. Telling them that TO does not work without interest, I let them go early again. I went to Mindy's office and, crying, told her that Wednesday would be the last day of the workshop.

My plan for Wednesday was to explain to them that I was new at facilitating TO and apologize for the awkwardness of the workshop, thank them for their participation, play a few theatre games if they were willing and then call an end to the workshop. Nothing happens like we plan. When I arrived, only three people showed. Around twelve-fifteen I gave my little speech and asked them to tell the others that the workshop was canceled. I left the Y at twelve-thirty with no real closure.

I planned to email Mindy with a follow-up, but it never happened. I also had intentions of writing a letter to the kids thanking them for their participation and giving them a way to contact me if they wanted to know more about TO. This never happened either. My first endeavor as a TO facilitator upset my confidence. I wanted to forget my poor performance and kids' resistance to me.

However, even though the workshop did not happen as planned, it was not a loss by any means. The failure of the workshop inspired many conversations, which led to important discoveries about TO facilitation, TO's usefulness and the oppressed of Saginaw. In the next section I will detail these realizations and discuss my perspective on TO's possible future in Saginaw and other crumbling American cities.

## Chapter 4: Outcomes and Insights

Sometimes disastrous outcomes are the best teachers. While the workshop in Saginaw was a definite blow to my ego and confidence, it was not a worthless experience. In fact, it shed light on issues that I did not perceive before holding the workshop and are possibly essential to the success of TO in Saginaw. In this chapter I will share the realizations I have had concerning the joker, the people of Saginaw, TO and TO's success in places like Saginaw.

As I have said before, I thought that after the facilitator training I would be a fully prepared joker ready to take on any group. My optimism was unfounded and I had wholly misjudged how complicated TO is. The training showed that Forum Theatre alone is a labyrinth of different games, exercises and versions of how to conduct a forum. So, even though I learned a lot at the training, I was shown that it was just the beginning of my education in TO. It was no wonder I was not prepared for the workshop in Saginaw.

A joker not only needs to have a thorough understanding of TO, but more important, he or she needs to be able to improvise seamlessly with the games, exercises and structures. It was a pleasure watching Marc work because he effortlessly, and often unnoticed, changed to fit the mood of the group. He highlighted changes he made afterwards and explained why he chose a different activity so that we could understand his train-of-thought as a facilitator. To be honest, he made it look so easy! He approached everything with a sense of ease, never perturbed by any obstacle, even when his mind was on overtime to compensate for major shifts within the group.

He showed all of us the power of TO, and we were eager to try it ourselves. This is the reason a strong joker/facilitator is crucial to the capabilities of TO.

Equally important, and another area where I failed, the joker needs to be as unbiased as possible. I had my mind set on who the teens would be and what problems they faced. I had also created a hierarchy in my mind as to which problems were important and which were not. My expectations made the work more difficult, and I am sure there were times I shut down conversations because it did not suit my desires. When I really began to listen, they had lost the last vestige of want to communicate with me. However, this is not to say, on their part, I did not have nearly impossible hurdles to jump.

In my ASTR paper, I discuss the anomic population in the Midwest as having regressed into mass media as a means of escape from a system they have no control over. I sincerely wish I had considered my argument more before the workshop in Saginaw, because I may have been more prepared for the mindset of the group. Even though I expected resistance due to the age group and their discomfort of breaking physical boundaries and being childlike, I was not prepared for, not only an obliviousness to, but a rejection of oppression as well as a submersion in technology.

Someone once told me that Karl Marx would go to factories and tell workers they were oppressed by the system. No one believed him and his preaching was in vain. I am not sure if this is a true story, but it highlights a very important Marxist problem – false consciousness. This idea is clearly defined by Christopher Pines in his book *Ideology and False Consciousness: Marx and his Historical Progenitors*:

[...] the more prominent characteristics of the ideological false consciousness include the following: (1) human agents are unaware or ignorant of the motive forces impelling their

thoughts and actions, i.e., false consciousness entails a lack of real knowledge and an obliviousness to causal influences; (2) what people “imagine” to be the case (what agents perceive to be their real motives in action and the grounds of their beliefs) is not really the case, i.e., ideology entails a set of false or illusory beliefs, even self-deceptions; and (3) human agents possess false consciousness because they interpret their own motives and the source of their ideas in an idealistic way [...]. (2)

With crime and poverty being such looming problems in Saginaw, I assumed the teens would know they were oppressed even if they had never heard of the actual word. My assumption was wrong. The teens had no concept of a system holding them down or back. When I asked them about the crime and poverty they shrugged and said, “That’s just the way it is.” Their biggest concerns were television shows, cell phones, and having a car. The ugly troubles of Saginaw were naturalized for them. When I asked them if Saginaw’s issues could be fixed they asked back, “Why?” I was disturbed and disheartened by their answers, but I am sure Marx felt the same way as he spoke to workers. Overcoming ideological false consciousness is a major dilemma, especially for TO. If a group perceives no problems in their community or in themselves, then TO has no purpose, and would be unable to reestablish connection with in a community. It exists as a tool for those who have problems. No problems, no TO.

False consciousness is not the only hurdle I faced. Switching to a postmodern perspective, another significant issue was hyperreality, which is the “state when the distinctions between “reality” and the model or simulation is completely dissolved. In the condition of hyperreality, simulations stand in for – they are more “real” than – reality; the map of the territory is taken for the territory itself” (Appelrouth, Edles 414). As the anomic population of Saginaw regressed into mass media, it was not only a means of escape, but it also eventually

became more real than world around them. My teenage workshop participants were unable to connect with me and each other because they were stuck in a state of hyperreality. Text messaging was more important than the people in the room. The current, hottest rapper or pop star received more respect than the friend sitting beside them who received unfriendly slaps at whim. In my notes for the workshop I wrote, “How do I get them to interact with each other when they are not even willing to interact with this world.” This disconnect from reality should be a tremendous concern for TO facilitators as it becomes a larger issue in the modern world, especially since Boal has recently passed away and can no longer adapt TO himself.

Boal was the ultimate joker. He tailored as needed to fit those with whom he worked. When he developed TO in the 70s, it was for a population who understood they were oppressed and collectively wanted to rehearse a revolution. However, when he went to Europe in the 80s, people’s basic physical needs were satisfied but they struggled with “loneliness’, the ‘impossibility of communicating with others’, ‘fear of emptiness’” (Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire* 8). This was a completely different form of oppression where the oppressors were no longer physically harming people but internally manipulating them. From this realization, Boal created *Rainbow of Desire* and *Cop in the Head* and then wrote *The Rainbow of Desire* which explained the additions and how the structures work in 1995.

Until his death in May of 2009, Boal facilitated TO workshops. In only the last years of his life was there a surge in cell phone use, smart phones, Ipads, and continuous internet access (Tippin). I wonder, if Boal lived longer, if he would have noticed this trend and modified TO again to fit the new needs of the oppressed. How would he deal with the divorce from reality for the hyperreality? Even though I do not know what changes need to be made, especially since I

still need to learn the basics, I hope perhaps Boal's son, Julian, or other important TO facilitators will develop a method to work with this new population.

In light of these concerns, it is important to ask whether TO can even work in cities like Saginaw. Despite my workshop at the YMCA not going well, I still believe in the power of TO, and its ability to connect and strengthen bonds between people. While I do not believe it is as easy as I made it seem in my ASTR paper, it can still be accomplished with a few important considerations. First, I believe that the joker is the most important element of TO. Because of the high level of resistance in these communities, the joker would not only need an impressive grasp of TO but also confidence and persistence. Second, rather than starting with the hardest, most resistant population, I believe it may be best to start with the willing and expand from them. Once you have a network of eager participants, they can bring reluctant friends into a positive working environment. Third, I still maintain from the ASTR paper that the joker needs to be a permanent part of the community. A weekend workshop will generate no significant change because communication is often dropped after a workshop. Problems need to be repeatedly examined and proposed solutions reinforced within the group. A joker-in-residence would allow for the continuity of the work. Finally, change often is slow, and will be especially slow with a population that has found their comfort in a different reality. Jokers in these areas will need to have perseverance and determination to reform bonds in the community. Some may consider my suggestions a tall order, but if helping a dying city were easy as one TO workshop it would already be done. Recovery is difficult work, but I strongly believe TO can be a potent addition to aid that recovery.

## Conclusion

Fig. 2 Picture of burn out house in Saginaw, MI by Eric Shantz



The people of Saginaw daily see the repercussions of deindustrialization and globalization. When you drive through the city houses like the one in the picture are normal. It creates an oppressive feeling with both a yearning to escape and a desire to restore. There are

many who want to help the city. The man who took the photo above has a mission of painting the decaying parts of Saginaw with murals. He believes that art proceeds progress, so if art is there then progress is not far behind (Shantz, <http://shantzcreative.com>). But his focus is only on the buildings of Saginaw and the city's urban decay. I do not agree that paint on a charred building alone motivates change; I believe folks painting the mural together can motivate change. Buildings do not make a community; people do. Inspiring connection with others is the true hope of art in Saginaw.

The focus of my original hypothesis about TO was in its ability to connect. After my experiences in Washington and Saginaw, I still believe that is true. My workshop at the YMCA did not go as planned, but it did not show that TO will be ineffective in Saginaw. Rather, it showed that, like any tool, it must be used correctly and, for maximum results, used by a professional. I did not use TO correctly; I wanted the teens to see the oppression I saw. I violated the basic premise that the Joker should remain neutral, a wildcard. I also was not ready as a Joker to work with that group. My first attempt alone should have been with a more willing crowd. Despite these problems, though, I am not willing to say the teens walked away with nothing. At least they were in a room together and had the chance to interact. That is what I want more than the success of TO's games and structures; I want people to interact.

There are bleak times ahead for Saginaw and the rest of the Midwest. Deindustrialization and globalization are not going to end. Capital will continue to leave the area and go into someone else's pocket. The wealth Saginaw once enjoyed may never return. However, the people left behind do not have to continue suffering the effects of anomic conditions such as crime. Communities can be rebonded and thus reestablish social norms. Rather than retreating into the media, folks can sit on their porches without fear because they know their neighbors and

care about them. TO can help foster these connections, it can be a tool for social recovery.

Someday I hope to show this is possible in Saginaw.

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## Appendix A

The paper submitted by the author for the 2009 American Symposium for Theatre Research (ASTR) Conference.

### The Broken American Community

The “broken” American community is a recent phenomenon, especially in the Midwest and Northeast, where industrialization once pulled people into communities and kept them there with steady work. Folks invested themselves in their neighbors, neighborhoods, and towns. However, as neo-liberal global capitalism surged as a powerful force, companies pulled industry out of American cities for cheaper labor in peripheral nations. American communities began to decay as the middle class took flight from cities and those remaining suffered social strain, making them turn toward retreatism and regression. Now, in the wake of deindustrialization, the politically minded wonder how to help these communities. I suggest using Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed and Bertol Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* as political tools in rebonding communities and keeping them from fragmenting again in the future. I also argue that this can happen only on the local level, and that national, artistic attempts are bound to fail.

My hometown is Saginaw, Michigan. If I were to hold up my right hand and point to it, since Michigan is shaped like a mitten, Saginaw would be in between where the thumb meets the hand and the base of the pointer finger. Other than a few stray fur trappers in the pioneer days, the Eastern half of Michigan has long been industrialized. Before Mr. Ford created his assembly line, the lucrative lumber industry allowed lumber barons to build beautiful mansions in

downtown Saginaw, the home base of operations. Not long after the lumber industry began to run out of its mainstay, the automotive industry swooped in to take its place. General Motors built two large plants that kept most of Saginaw working. With the help of capital from the GM plants, Saginaw was able to maintain an energetic, invested community.

This can not be said of Saginaw today. Saginaw's population has fallen from close to one hundred thousand in the 60s to around fifty thousand today. The lumber barons' mansions, once testaments of prosperity, are now just shells, many burned out, several housing the homeless and substance abusers. Downtown Saginaw has a large collection of empty office and apartment buildings, churches, stores, theaters, bowling alleys, and countless others. The neighborhoods around the downtown feature scorched, skeletal houses, metal fences and iron bars, overgrown lawns and parks, and broken benches and signs. It has become a wasted city teetering on the edge of extreme poverty and both physical and metaphorical structural ruin. This process began in the late sixties when GM began to globalize its operations. Through the seventies to the late nineties, jobs were cut in the factories and the GM plants closed. Along with GM, several other companies closed their doors, too. The final blow came when the last GM plant, Malleable Iron, shut down forever in 2007. Saginaw was effectively deindustrialized.

In the wake of globalization and deindustrialization, two events happen which contribute to the break down of communities like Saginaw. The first is a rapid movement of the working and middle class out of cities. Social scientist W.J. Wilson explores this phenomenon and its effect on Detroit's black, inner-city poor in his book The Truly Disadvantaged. In a follow-up article, *Another Look at The Truly Disadvantaged*, he reiterates that as the working- and middle-class families vacate the inner-city in search of jobs and a desire to move away from the poor, the remaining population suffers significant social structural problems. Wilson states,

“[...]working and middle classes brought stability. They invested economic and social resources [...] reinforced societal norms and values, and made it meaningful for lower-class blacks in these segregated enclaves to envision the possibility of some upward mobility” (641). As these folks left, those in the inner-city were deprived of social solidarity, and as such social norms disintegrated, crime increased and joblessness remained. This created what Wilson calls a permanent underclass. The permanent underclass, a phenomenon occurring in Saginaw and many other Midwestern and Northeastern cities today, continues to suffer because of “[...] growing social isolation” as “outmigration has decreased the contact between groups of different class and racial backgrounds.” (Wilson 641). In other words, members of the underclass are trapped where they are with no hope of improvement. This develops into another problem.

The next contributing factor in the broken community is something called strain or anomie. In 1895, sociologist Emile Durkheim published a book called Suicide: A study in Sociology. In it he studied suicide as a measure of social instability and individual discontentment due to rapid social change. These he found resulted “when norms no longer hold their force to control behavior and regulate the passions of individuals” (Kubrin, Stucky, Krohn 107). So, in relation to what was stated earlier in Wilson’s study, when the stabilizing working class left it created a rift in communal understanding and normative values. With the regulating factors missing from a community “an increase in the feelings of meaninglessness” occurs (Allan, Explanations in... 131). Anomie is the vacuum of normlessness, which leaves individuals of the underclass socially strained and hopeless.

What is the solution? How can we, as artists, have an impact on this phenomenon? Though often not concerned with anomie in particular, many artists believe in the mass media’s ability to rouse critical consciousness in their audience; when Rage Against the Machine yells

into the microphone, “Know your enemy,” people will hear it and fear the ideology taught in the school system; when Kubrick shows women and children being gunned down in *Full Metal Jacket*, people will see it and fear the government and war; or when the characters in *Urinetown* are forced to pay for the use of a urinal by a mega corporation, people will understand that they are being oppressed by the capitalist machine. But when have there been masses, suddenly brought to political consciousness, poring out of concert arenas, movie theaters and Broadway ready to fight for change? While I believe that consciousness is possible in many ways, one being my particular model using Boal and Brecht, there are two reasons why I believe the mass media is incapable of being an agent of political change.

The first reason springs out of a theory by Robert Merton. He narrowed Durkheim’s macro-level explanation of anomie to explain how individuals respond to anomic feelings. Merton argues that anomie occurs when what the society sets as a common goal for the population, like America striving towards economic success, is not able to be met by the individual. One of the responses of being unable to accomplish the societal goal is something called retreatism. “Retreatists reject both the goal of success and following the socially approved means to achieve it” (Kubrin, Stucky, Krohn 108). For the underclass this would mean rejecting that success is even a possibility and using some sort of coping mechanism. In Merton’s opinion, some people that would fall into this category of retreatism would be “vagrants, psychotics, alcoholics, and drug addicts” (Kubrin, Stucky, Krohn 108). But I feel this category can be expanded far beyond what Merton suggests. Absorbing oneself in mass media, especially television and other media forms, can also be used as a method of retreatism.

Some would then say that mass media should be the perfect solution to encourage political change in the underclass. If they are absorbed in mass media then they will get the

political messages and be resolved into action. Theodore Adorno would strongly disagree with this notion. This is the second prong of the problem. Adorno argues that the mass media serves its own political ends and always remains ideology. Appelrouth and Edles, in their social theory compilation, effectively sum up Adorno's argument by saying:

The relationship between mass culture and the individual is one akin to that of seller and buyer [...] Individuals, themselves objects of production, are left to *consume mass-produced, prepackaged ideas that instill an uncritical consensus that strengthens established authority*. Hit songs and movies are [...] marketing campaigns that predetermine what will be heard and seen while excluding potentially “disruptive” alternatives. Because culture is now a product of the machine and not the imagination, it *is incapable of negating the oppressive conformity* by the culture industry. Nor can mass culture critique prevailing patterns of social relations, for they, too, are a reflection of machine production. Culture no longer prods – *it pacifies* [...] While the culture industry claims to be a producer of choice, freedom, and individual identity, it instead provides its customers with a totalitarian, conformist social landscape (102) (italics mine).

Mass media cannot be the solution to pull the underclass in these broken American towns because people do not only retreat through media, they regress into it as well, letting themselves be led by it as a child follows a parent. Not only do they let mass media lead them, they also have allowed themselves to become immune to any contrary idea that may slip through the system. They only hear what they have been taught to hear.

Despite using Adorno's theory regarding the mass media's control, in one regard I do not agree with him. He believes that high art is the only forum in which to break people out of their complacency. While I do not have a qualm with high art and its ability to break beyond political

boundaries, I do not believe that it is able to have any effect on the individuals being regarded in this paper for several reasons. Initially, high art is often not accessible to most individuals in these broken communities. Not only is there a question of spatial accessibility, but also monetary accessibility. However, this is not the foremost issue. What is more problematic is that people will be so outside the artistic dialogue that they will not be able to understand or connect with the art. The theoretical underpinnings of art are so complicated that even a studied individual may not know what is trying (or not) to be communicated. Also, in the vein of writer Pierre Bourdieu, people of different classes have different preferences that are dependent on “education and distance from necessity” (Allan, *Contemporary Social...* 180). People of the lower, working classes would disregard high art, or abstract art, for their own tastes. Even Boal discusses this in *Theatre of the Oppressed*, saying, “It happens many times that well intentioned theatrical groups are unable to communicate with a mass audience because they use symbols that are meaningless for that audience” (Boal 124). If there is not a shared understanding of symbols or shared cultural norms, then high art will mean nothing and be ineffective.

So, where do we go now that we know the phenomenon and understand that mass media is not an effective medium for political change, especially when dealing with anomie? We localize theatre. As we bring theatre back down to the community level, we can directly focus on individual communities’ social, anomic and economic problems. I am proposing a system, incorporating Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* and Bertolt Brecht’s *verfremdungseffekt*, which will effectively deal with community issues, restore community solidarity, and sustain community bonds.

Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) is designed to rouse people in an already established community into action. It is about bringing awareness of oppression to the people and rehearsing

a revolution designed by the people themselves. The professional theatre representative is not the one conceiving the ideas. It is the people designing their own revolution and therefore a revolution that is more likely to work. They develop a sense of communal understanding of the true problem and an agreed upon method of fixing that problem. Outrageous or impractical ideas get worked out in the process of TO. However, TO works in ways beyond rehearsing revolution. It works on a more elementary level than driving people into action. Action is a latent effect of something more powerful. The most important effect of TO, in my opinion, is that it brings individuals together.

American Midwestern communities have become broken because connections within communities have disappeared. In response to deindustrialization, and the fast movement of people out of cities (into the suburbs), rather than seeking out those left in their communities they have gone into social tailspins and retreated. People have become isolated. These fragmented, Midwestern communities have left individuals disconnected from the population at large. And while there are attempts by the city officials to congregate individuals and recreate community, it is often ineffectual.

Problems begin when organizers try to stimulate community interaction on a large, impersonal scale usually asking folks to leave their neighborhoods. First, the venues are so large that people feel uncomfortable going to them because they will not know anyone. Connecting with others becomes the responsibility of the individuals and many are uncomfortable engaging with strangers. Second, most do not have the means to travel far beyond their neighborhoods. Most of the permanent underclass do not have reliable vehicles, which makes people dependent on public transportation (something the Midwest is not known for). What community builders need to do is go directly into neighborhoods, placing importance on neighborhoods rather than

detracting from them. Also, community builders need to take responsibility for connecting people, becoming the primary person individuals know, allowing them to introduce various people. This should be happening on a small scale with groups no larger than ten. With this personal, centralized approach we can do what is most important – create bonds. In creating bonds we create a culture, and in creating culture we create a community language, and a communal dialogue, between individuals.

How to stimulate bonding is the question. What approaches are there? There are many, but theatre is a strong approach because it functions as a language, both creating and using visual and verbal symbols, and it forces interpersonal interaction.

That is why TO is so important and a perfect tool for rebonding. First, bringing TO to a community begs for artists to become personally connected to the community. Knowing community members is very essential when trying to connect them. Second, TO can happen on a very small scale, a workshop of 4 – 10 people is ideal. Third, TO forces people to not only verbally interact with each other but to also physically interact. This is incredibly significant when considering regression into mass media; folks become immobile in both mind and body. Fourth, TO gets the group to critically analyze problems, either community based or personal, and collaborate on solutions. This does several things – It stimulates understanding by turning people into individuals rather than objects (like on a TV screen); it clarifies connotative understandings between individuals (tightening language understanding); it makes people personally invested in other lives; it establishes cultural norms and rules and values; and it enables them to see that the other people in the group are like them and that they are not outsiders like TV would have them believe. Each point is consequential when considering Durkheim and the issue of anomie, because “group life demands that there be some shared link

that motivates people to work for the collective [...]” (Allan, Explanations in... 132). In getting to know their neighbors, they have physical proof of the collective and in sharing the problems they are motivated to help that collective.

Working in this primary way, TO creates action within a community, which is my main purpose. The oppression in the Midwest is the fragmentation of communities which disconnects people from normative values, which range in formality, scale and importance such as holding the door for someone or not cussing in public, and without the steadying hand of norms and rules, it leaves them open to exploitation by a wide range of groups (political, economic, media...). Reestablishing connection is so important to me because I want to build a foundation for communities to act. I do not believe that a violent revolution needs to happen for Midwestern communities to fight their exploitation. Rather, I believe it can be done in a quiet, subtle way – when a community’s own cultural norms and values are placed above the generic, nationalistic, media-enforced norms and values then they are liberated from a false consciousness. At that time, they can critically analyze and evaluate what is trying to be force fed to them and resist it. If several communities could gain this strength of individual community culture, then the hegemonic powers would lose their foothold in the collective’s mind. When the cogs of the machine get sticky the machine does not work as well.

Once bonds are reestablished in a community, TO can continue being used as a social institution. However, for the theatre aficionados who still want full-fledged theatre productions, but still are community-conscious, there is a way to do both at once. Using the element of forums from TO, a forum of community members can be assembled to discuss a local issue, point of cultural interest, local myth, lore or famed story, etc., with a resident playwright who will take

the forum's ideas and create a play. This would be very similar to the work of Joint Stock Theatre and Caryl Churchill in the creation of *Cloud Nine*.

It would be important to use community members as a forum because you want to be able to get a diverse understanding of the issues, interests, myths, and so on, of the community. Everything gets shaded by our own lens and often what we may think is a problem is not for others. Also, one person is unable to understand all the shared symbols and language of a community. By having a diverse panel of community members you would have a well rounded comprehension and representation. Also, viewing the world outside an artistic/theatrical lens, the panel will have practical insights about the community which can later be translated into artistic/theatrical themes. This way those who see the performance will understand what is happening in the production, will connect to it, and it will reinforce their culture.

However, community activists still want to keep their audiences on their toes. Even though we are promoting a communal dialogue in a shared language, we do not want people to do to theatre what they do to mass media. We do not want people retreating into their own culture so far that they are oblivious to powers that want to control them. Yes, we want a healthy pride in community culture, but we do not want blind devotion to that culture, or obliviousness to the fact that hegemonic powers are always lurking to gain the upper hand – the wolf in sheep's clothing, so to speak. As activists, we want our communities in full consciousness of the controlling powers of the world and how they want to dominate individuals through consumption, media, and propaganda. We want to celebrate a community's culture while instilling a healthy sense of awareness of the enemies. This can be done through *verfremdungseffekt*, as we see it in Churchill's *Cloud Nine* through cross-dressing and role doubling.

Here the community forum is also vital. In “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting” Brecht discusses finding the line at which an aesthetic is natural and where it becomes unnatural and therefore uncomfortable (Theatre Theory Theatre ... 454-461). A diverse forum would be able to debate and decide where that line lies for that community. As an individual in a community, what I think would create an alienation effect may either be too weak or too strong. For example, if I was putting on a production of *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, I may think exposed lighting on a realistic set will create a sense of alienation, but for that community exposed lighting has become a convention. In the opposite direction, I may decided the actors should be nude the whole play and rather than create an unsettling, uncomfortable feeling, the audience would be pushed past a weirdening effect into anger. I cannot know the appropriate symbols to use and manipulate in order to bring about consciousness. Boal has a great example of this in Theatre of the Oppressed. In 1973 he worked with the People’s Theatre in Peru trying to improve literacy. They were using different mediums of language and one was photography. The group was given cameras and asked to photograph things in their community that symbolized certain words. One of the words given was “exploitation.” A young boy brought in a picture of a nail in the wall. None of the adults understood how this picture represented exploitation, but all the children knew instantly. The children shared the same experience of working as shoe-shines and being unable to carry back their shoe-shine equipment every night. The owners of shops rented nails to hang the equipment of the children on, taking a portion of the day’s earnings. “Looking at a nail, those children [were] reminded of oppression and their hatred of it; the sight of a crown, Uncle Sam, or Nixon, however, probably [would] mean nothing to them” (Boal 125). Finding out what the middle ground is and what symbols to use is incredibly important for *verfremdung* and having a representative sample (to steal a scientific term) is vital.

This is partially why I discourage using *verfremdung* initially for an anomic community. As a community building tool it does not work. It does not actively pull people together. It does not connect people. It does not encourage a dialogue. Because of this, you do not know where the boundary lies to create optimal alienation. The failure of *verfremdung* can be seen with the opening of Brecht's *Galileo* in 1940s Hollywood. Its politics and its message were lost on most who viewed it. It brought no one together and inspired no action. No one was brought to consciousness because the communal language was not there and the attempts at *verfremdung* went too far beyond audience comfort. They were pulled out so far that they criticized the production rather than critically thought about the ideas presented (Lyon 167-183).

However, for a community already established and communicative, *verfremdung* is a perfect tool for community maintenance, which is equally important. We do not want to sweep into communities, do a few TO workshops, and leave again. What I am suggesting involves a lifelong relationship and involvement in one community. Culture is often viewed as self-sustaining while its social institutions are working properly. We would be going into an anomic community, using the techniques of TO, and establishing ourselves as a social institution. Once that is established, it would make sense to sustain it with TO and *verfremdung* rather than pull out of a community. Our work should be a continuing mission for the next generation. We need to instill the importance of community bonds in our protégés and support them as they continue the work.

In conclusion, theatre can be an important agent in change for the broken communities of America. Even though communities are suffering from neo-liberal capitalists who drive for ultimate wealth by taking jobs from the communities after pilfering its resources, creating an anomic underclass with nowhere to go or turn, they can be helped. It is not through mass media

that the broken can be fixed, because mass media not only has become a drug for people to retreat into, but it is a mechanism of hegemonic control through ideology. Localizing theatre is the best way to help these anomic communities. By gathering community members and creating a communal dialogue with shared social symbols social solidarity can be redeveloped. This is possible through Theatre of the Oppressed and *Verfremdung*. If more theatre artists considered localizing theatre in this way, I believe that many American communities could regain strength and self-sufficiency.

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## Appendix B

### The Story Behind Simon and Garfunkel's Song *America*



When I worked at the Saginaw YMCA, a man named Dave Butts told me the story behind Simon and Garfunkel's song *America*. Dave has been part of the YMCA since the 60s and is exceptionally active to this day. I first met him in 2006 at Camp Timbers. During staff training he provided a history of the camp and, more important, told us the legend of the White Dog, the camp's traditional bonfire story. I had heard fifteen years earlier as a young camper and my eldest brother, Josh, who is ten years my senior, heard it when he was a young camper. To say the least, Dave is an important storyteller at the Y.

After being the drama director at the camp for a summer, I continued working at the Y as a lifeguard and eventually a secretary. Since I was the resident theatre person, for the Saginaw Y's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration I was asked to create vignettes using YMCA history for the evening's entertainment. In doing research, I interviewed Dave. He told me that Saginaw was an important part of music history.

In the 60s, when Saginaw was in its heyday, the YMCA organized dance parties for teens called Party-A-Go-Go. Simon and Garfunkel played at one of these parties. Dave, who was there, said it was a great show and all the girls were in love afterwards. One lucky lady was invited to ride on the tour bus with the band. Unfortunately, she was kicked off the bus in Ann

Arbor, MI because she smoked Simon's last cigarette. Dave said she was furious being left nearly a hundred miles from home. Her father had to drive down and get her. She was teased by her friends at the YMCA for years. To her credit, though, she was immortalized in the song *America* when Simon sings, "Toss me a cigarette/I think there is one in my raincoat/We smoked the last one an hour ago/So I looked at the scenery/She read her magazine."

## Vita

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