
A Tribute to a Brazilian Writer Who Made Theater into a Weapon for the Oppressed

Contributed by Christian
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Brazilian playwright and educator Augusto Boal died in Brazil recently at age 78. Boal created the Theater of the Oppressed, a movement where people, even the most humble ones, use theater to express their political views. In workshops all over the world, Boal told his techniques to empower the oppressed and was an inspirational figure.

He was jailed and tortured by the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964-1985) in 1971. After that he was forced into exile, a period that lasted 15 years. Among the many books he wrote there were Theater of the Oppressed and Games for Actors and Non-Actors, plus The Rainbow of Desire and Legislative Theater.

Below is a tribute by an MST (Landless Rural Workers Movement) member:

Companheiro (pal) Boal,

You always hoped, because you have taught that only those who learn teach. Your struggle, your political conscience, your solidarity with the working class is more than an example for us, companheiro; it is a didactic work, as many that you wrote. We learned with you that the good fighters were forged in the struggle.

When you joined the collective of the Theater de Arena, known to express the combative desire those people wanted to see in Brazil, in the Brazilian people. Without fear, nationalized universal works, educated playwrights and actors and wrote some of the most critical parts of our theater, like Revolution in South America (1961).

You collaborated with the creation and expansion of the Brazilian Center for Popular Culture (CPC) and the actions of the Movement of Popular Culture (MCP), in Pernambuco.

You showed the working class that the theater can be a revolutionary weapon in the service of human emancipation.

You learned, in direct contact with the fighters of the Peasant Leagues, that the theater alone does not make the revolution. How many times, you told us in your books and in our meetings of your learning from Virgil, the peasant leader who did observe that in the class struggle, everyone has to run the same risk.

Generous, always explaining through accounts of your stories, your method of learning: to learn from the obstacles, to grow up in difficulty, without ever stopping the fight.

In the dictatorship, you were arrested, tortured and exiled. In the counter-attack, you developed the Theater of the Oppressed with various tactics to combat oppression and to educate through the theater, which today we use in our farm schools, in our camps and settlements, and the work of political education that developed with the communities in the urban periphery.

Few people in Brazil through decades on end without change of political position, without softening the speech, without making concessions, without playing in the garbage can of history the revolutionary experiment that has been forged in the Brazilian theater, until its crushing by the national bourgeoisie and the military with the military coup of 1964.

We learned that you can have fun and learn at the same time, that policy can be made as we play, and to do politics as theater.

Few artists have managed to avoid the seductive power of the monopolies of the media, even when pressed by financial difficulties. You, companheiro, not bowed, not sold, are not silent.

You learned that a revolutionary must fight against all - absolutely all - forms of oppression. A contemporary of Che Guevara, nobody knew how to multiply the legacy that we must be indignant against any kind of injustice.

Few attacked so radically the criminal laws of tax incentives for the financing of Brazilian culture. You, companheiro, did not let yourself be seduced by the privileges of renowned artists. You taught us to aim at the accurate targets.

Tireless, half a century after your first battle, you proposed to the MST the formation of multiple theaters in our country. In 2001 we created with you, and the other comrades of the Central Theater of the Oppressed, the Brigade of the National Theater of the MST Patativa do Assaré. You learned in the 1960s with Virgílio the theater does not just the theater to tell people what to do, knew that transferring the means of production of theatrical language so that we peasants, can make our own theater, and through it discuss our problems and make collective strategies for social transformation.

We, workers, and landless rural workers throughout Brazil as part of human beings oppressed by the system that you and we both fought, pay homage, and reinforce the commitment to continue fighting in all trenches. As we depend on, your life and your fight will not be forgotten and turned into merchandise.

The theater world lost a master, Brazil lost a fighter, and a fellow MST. In solidarity you're your family in this difficult time, and with all and all practitioners of Theater of the Oppressed in the world.

Interview Excerpt

From a June 2007 interview to Amy Goodman from Democracy Now:

Augusto Boal, the legendary Brazilian political playwright and popular educator, died this weekend at the age of seventy-eight. He was the founder of the Theater of the Oppressed, a popular international movement for a participatory form of theater as a means of promoting knowledge and democratic forms of interaction. Boal conducted workshops all over the world. His techniques of using theater to discuss power and oppression have been widely inspirational and influential.

In 1971, the Brazilian military dictatorship imprisoned and tortured Boal for four months. After his release, he was forced into exile for fifteen years. He's written a number of books, including Theater of the Oppressed and Games for Actors and Non-Actors, as well as The Rainbow of Desire and Legislative Theater. In the '90s, Boal also served as a city council member for Rio de Janeiro.

Boal was tireless till the end of his life. According to a statement from the Center for the Theater of the Oppressed in Rio, Boal left behind a completed new version of his book The Aesthetics of the Oppressed, and he spent the day before his death, May Day, in a solidarity vigil with workers.

I interviewed Augusto Boal here in the firehouse studio in June of 2007. This interview, we never aired before. I began by asking him to describe the Theater of the Oppressed.

Augusto Boal: Theater of Oppressed is theater in what it is more essential. It is not theater in a playhouse, not theater with written script, not theater like - some theater become the cemeterial theater, because theater is what we have inside. We are animals that have the privilege of being actors, because we are acting all of the time. But at the same time, we are spectators of our actions. Most animals or most none of them, only some dolphins, some elephants, some - I don't know what - can do that, can do - can observe themselves in action. So we have theater inside, because we act and we are the observer. We are the spectators.

At the same time, when we get together many people looking at one point, they create a space which is different from the physical space. It's more than a physical space. It is pentadimensional, not three dimensions. It has also memory and imagination. So we create the theatricality.

And third, we use the language that the actors use on stage. So there is no difference. When we are in love with someone, we talk differently than if we hate the person; we don't talk in the same way. So we do exactly what the actor does on stage, but the actor has the conscious of that, and we don't have it in normal life, in daily life.

And talk about what inspired you, Augusto, how you founded the Theater of the Oppressed.

Well, always I was very much preoccupied with that, because I - my father, he was a - had a bakery. And sometimes, when I -

Where?

In Brazil, in Rio de Janeiro, in the working quarters of Rio. And then, every morning that I went to work with my father, when I was twelve, thirteen, fourteen years old, and then I saw all those workers, and I saw how they were oppressed. And always, I was preoccupied with them. I was fascinated by how could they not rebel if they were so oppressed.

And then, my beginning, it was at fifteen years old; I started writing plays about them. And I was in a moment in which I thought that as I was not oppressed as their oppression, I was not in the same circumstance, and I was pretending to be an artist, I was superior in some way. And then I said, "I'm going to teach them what they have to do to fight." So I entered in the line of the political theater of the '50s, of the '60s, in which they had messages to give.

And one day I learned that I did not know more than they did, unless in the theater. In the theater, yes, I knew more. But their lives, they knew more than I. And it happened on a day when I was working for peasants in the northeast of Brazil, and I was doing a play in which the protagonist said, at the end said, "We have to spill our blood to save our land." And then we were all singing, dressed like peasants. We were not peasants; looking like peasants, but we were not peasants, and saying, "You have to spill your blood, our blood, to save our lands, to reconquer."

And then a peasant came to us and says, "Well, you think exactly like we do. So why don't you take your rifles," because we had rifles on stage, very beautiful, colorful rifles, and he said, "Why don't you come with your rifles, and let's go to fight against some landowners that occupied our land. We have to spill our blood."

And then we said, "Forgive us, but our rifles, they are not true. They are fake. They are setting rifles." And he said, "OK, the rifles are not true. They are not real rifles. But you are sincere, so you come, because we have rifles for everybody. Let's fight against them." And then we said, "No, we are truly artists, not truly peasants." And he said, "When truly artists say, 'Let's spill our blood,' you are talking about our true blood of truly peasants and not about yours."

So I understood that we could not give a message to women, because we are men; to blacks, because we are white; to peasants, because we live in the city. But we can help them to find their own ways of fighting.

Describe what has happened since the dictatorship and how things have changed in Brazil under Lula.

Things changed, yes. There is no more censorship. We can do anything in the theater. But during many years, it was more or less the same idea, the same ideas that prevailed from before. It started to change with Lula, when he was elected. And then it really changed. Now Brazil is no longer what it was ten years ago.

What did not change yet and that I regret, but I don't know why it did not, is the agrarian reform. The land is still in the hands of those people who robbed the land, because they did not really buy anything. It's false; their documents are false.

Talk about the MST, the landless people's movement in Brazil.

Yes. I worked before with the Peasants League in 1960 until '64. What they had wrong, it was that they had one person, Francisco Julião, who was the boss, let's say, so - of the Peasants League. He was the leader, and he decided many things, and the peasants obeyed. So this was not good.

The movement of landless peasants now, the MST, knows. They are democratic. They decide. Each group decides. They have general laws, internal law that they have to abide by. But the tactics are decided by each group. So sometimes one group does things that the central direction, which is really democratic, because they have many people there from many parts of Brazil, they would not approve, but they did it. They say, "Don't do that." They discuss. So they are democratic. They never invade lands; they occupy lands. The land that are not productive, they occupy.

How many are part of MST?

How many people? Oh, millions. I don't know. I don't know exactly how many, but several millions, yeah.

And yet, here, with Lula, who was talking agrarian reform before he was in power, and with the power of the landless people's movement, it still hasn't changed.

It still hasn't changed. And it has changed, to tell the truth, yes, but not as much as we need it to change. And this comes also from the politics of Lula. Even when he was a worker and a president of the trade union, he was a negotiator. He has the habit of negotiate. And then, in the parliament, there are many people that represented the landowners, and they have a force, and they can prevent Lula from doing certain things. And I believe that's a negotiation that is there. But I

believe that he still has three years and a half to go, and many things are going to be done in those three years and a half.

Augusto Boal, what do you still hope to accomplish?

I hope so many things. I hope so many things. I always say that we are always looking after a dream. And we know that a dream is a dream. But that's the function of a dream, is to be a dream. It's not to be - not to get there. You have to have always a dream.

And I only have one dream. It's to dream all my life. That's my only dream. I would like to go on dreaming. And if I can dream of things, well, I dream of solidarity among men and women, black and white, solidarity among countries, and solidarity to create ethics.

What we think sometimes, we don't think that there is a difference between moral and ethics. Moral is mores. It's customs. And it was moral in this country, my country - slavery. It was moral. It was moral to buy a human being. So I'm not moralist, because I know that in moral there are horrible things.

But I am ethical. We need to create an ethos. In Greek, it means the tendency to some kind of perfection. And my kind of profession is solidarity, is dialogue, is democracy - real democracy, not one that we see. That's my - I want to - not to accomplish, because to accomplish - not to accomplish, to go on. To go on.

There is a poet, a Spanish poet, Antonio Machado, who says, "The path does not exist. The path, you make by treading on it. By walking, you make the path." So we don't know where the path leads, but we know the direction of the path that we want to take. That's what I want, and not to accomplish, but to follow, until I can't.

Well, thank you for making your path here today.

Thank you very much.