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THEATRE FOR NOTHING

Dan Friedman

Artistic Director, Castillo Theatre, New York City

1.

Let me begin with my punch line: theatre, if it is to be transformative and developmental, needs to be pointless.

I'm well aware that many of you—as theatre educators, youth workers and community organizers—may find this statement nonsensical or even offensive. Most of us, including me for much of my working life, have approached theatre as a tool for education and/or social change. However, my four decades of experience in political, educational and community-based theatre has brought me to a very different understanding of what theatre can achieve and what it can't. I've performed radical political plays on the back of a flatbed truck for working class audiences all over the United States. I've created and directed plays with trade unions and anti-war organizations. I've taught theatre history and playwriting in university classrooms and directed plays on university stages. I've directed, as well, in some of New York City's Off-Off Broadway venues, such as La MaMa and the Nuyorican Poets Café. For the last 27 years, I have helped to build the Castillo Theatre and an array of youth programs associated with it, all of which use performance as a methodology of development and growth. What I, and my colleagues at Castillo, have concluded from all of our work is that theatre is most growthful—for theatre makers as well as spectators—when it is *for* nothing at all.

For many, this conclusion flies in the face of common sense. However, as Antonio Gramsci and others have taught us, common sense is an amalgam of socially generated and historically established prejudices, assumptions, folklore, and fragmented and vulgarized philosophies, most of which, in the final analysis, are in sync with the interests of those in authority (Gramsci, 323-346; 419-425). It therefore behooves artists, particularly those interested in the relationship of their art to education, social change and human development, to question what appears obvious.

2.

For some 500 years now the world has become increasingly instrumentalized, a development not so subtly connected to the rise of capitalism, science and industry. Now not only is science expected to lead to useful technology but a wider and wider range of human activities, in order to be socially supported and funded, must prove themselves to be useful, that is, to be a means toward a concrete end. Over the last few decades this instrumentalism has gained considerable foothold in the theatre, particularly

educational, community-based and youth theatre work. This tendency has had a number of names over the years. At this point, the most commonly accepted label is “Applied Theatre.”

In his Introduction to Philip Taylor’s book *Applied Theatre*, Tom Barone defines applied theatre as theatre that “...defies the distance between the admirable but essentially useless work of art and the substantial problems of life in the trenches.” (Taylor, x) While not every scholar or practitioner of applied theatre would hold to the position, as Barone apparently does, that art is useless unless applied to some specific educational or social purpose, his definition is helpful in exposing some of the underlying pedagogical, philosophical and linguistic premises of the applied theatre movement.

Under the rapidly expanding rubric of applied theatre we now include: Theatre *for* social change, theatre *for* community building, theatre *for* education, theatre *for* development—all contain that very powerful and constraining conjunction “for.” While the makers of all this instrumental theatre differ, to some extent, on what concrete results they hope to achieve using the tool of the theatre, their unspoken, but clearly shared, perspective is that theatre could be and should be the performed equivalent of a hammer or a hand saw or a drill, a tool designed to achieve a certain (in this case social) result.

For most teachers and youth workers (not to mention most political progressives) the common sense starting point of their shared instrumentalist method is that theatre is a means of educating young people or the community or the working class or whoever you see yourself as working with. The common thread in virtually all applied theatre, whether politically motivated or not, is didacticism; everyone in educational and applied theatre seems to agree that theatre is a teaching tool.

Of course, there are different approaches to teaching. In the theatre, there is the traditional monologic approach represented by agit-prop, by Brecht’s “learning plays” and by much of what today is called Theatre for Development. There is also the dialogic pedagogical path pioneered by Paulo Freire that allows for a two-way conversation between teacher and student, and which is primarily represented in the theatre by Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed and by Jonathan Fox’s Playback Theatre in all their variants. Whether monologic or dialogic, however, these theatre practitioners are all, among other things, educators looking for a tool, a teaching tool.

The common sense they all share is built on the foundations of Western logic, which holds that one thing (in this case a tool) leads to another (in this case a result). The tool, as they see it, is the theatre; the result is a more educated, developed, enlightened spectator and/or actor and/or specactor.

I am not arguing against the value of tools for results. Hammers pound nails into wood. Calculators add numbers quickly. A truck can transport sugar cane from the field to the refinery. The challenge, I’ve found, in applying a tool-for-result methodology to the theatre and other human social activities (including teaching and organizing) is that human social development doesn’t work that way—and neither does learning. Unlike

chemicals there is no cause and effect formula when it comes to people. Our development—by which I mean our qualitative transformation—be it on individual, community, national or species levels, can't be engineered as those involved in applied theatre assume (or hope). Human development doesn't move in a straight line, nor does it proceed incrementally. On the contrary, human beings are contradictory and we develop unevenly in leaps and bounds, in twists and turns, in stops and starts.

Human development doesn't proceed according to the rules of Western logic—or any static set of rules, be they generated by science, psychology, religion or political ideology. That is precisely why theatre is so fertile an activity for social development. Theatre is where we are allowed to do the un-doable, to be who we are not, to transgress and transform with others through play.

Theatre is more (or at least other) than a classroom. A better metaphor, I think, has been provided by Fred Newman, the playwright, director and progressive political leader who served as the Castillo Theatre's creative force and artistic director for 16 years. Theatre is, at its best, says Newman, “a playground of the social imagination.”

Play is the important word here. Children grow and develop through play, by socially creating imagined people and worlds. So do grown-ups; we call it theatre. Theatre is a creative activity—that has little or nothing to do with the rules of cause and effect—which is collectively brought into being by an ensemble of artists and a community called the audience. Because it is a creative social activity practiced by contradictory human beings playing with and exploring their contradictory socially created environment, it can be a developmental activity. In this sense, theatre (or more precisely, performance) *is* the development activity. It is not a tool *for* anything. It is simultaneously a tool *and* a result.

Being two things at once—in this case tool and result—is not possible according to the rules of Western logic. Yet it is self-evident, at least to me, that what Aristotle calls contradiction is characteristic of much of human life, not least of all the activity of performance, which involves simultaneously being who you are and who you are not/who you are becoming. Without that contradictoriness we could never go beyond what we are. The creative tension between what is and what is becoming propels us into development individually and as a community and as a species. While cause and effect, tool for result, instrumentalism has worked well in the study of the natural world, that is, for science and technology, its imposition on theatre (and other forms of social creativity) threatens to seriously under cut the power of theatre. The Applied Theatre movement, for all its good intentions, is attempting to force a round (or should I say, more accurately, a constantly shape-changing) peg into a square hole. Play, performance and by extension, theatre are neutered when pressed into being a tool for a result.

3.

All of this matters not only to the future of theatre, but the future of the world.

It matters because if theatre and the other arts are subjugated to particular pragmatic ends, we lose what is special about them—their ability to explore, transgress, transform. If you know the end you're looking for when you start, most likely that's the end you'll find when you finish. Other possibilities can't emerge.

The instrumentalist approach has been gaining on creative developmental activity for a long time, but has accelerated in the wake of the collapse of the revolutionary movements of the 20th Century. These movements despite all their huge mistakes, failures, and crimes, provided a world stage for trying to get the world to a qualitatively different place. The revolutionary movements of the 20th Century generated and embraced (and then often aborted) progressive, creative attempts at development. Their failure has left a void. There are, of course, pockets of resistance and creativity and development being organized all over the world; many of us here are involved with them. That said, on the world stage the momentum for change and development has, for now, waned.

We are living in world where the assumptions of the status quo are questioned less and less. Both on the conceptual and real politic levels, the world is increasingly polarized. On the one hand, is an armed to the teeth, technologically advanced, socially calcified, modernist, scientific, corporatist worldview and politic. Some call it globalization. Some call it neo-liberalism. I prefer the old-fashioned word imperialism. On the other side we find a backward-looking, pre-modernist religiosity with roots in feudal social relations. This religiosity has hardened in response to the arrogance and continuing exploitation of triumphantist corporatism and it is gaining a growing mass base given the absence of any apparent developmental alternative to imperialism. Both sides are convinced of the rightness of their ends and questioning those ends is just not on the political or cultural agenda. Yet, since neither paradigm is working in terms of furthering human development, such questioning is needed more than ever.

From the fundamentalist perspective there is virtually no room for creativity of the type I am addressing—God has taken care of that. The imperialist perspective was most nakedly articulated by Francis Fukuyama in his book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, where he wrote, “What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such... That is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government” (Fukuyama, xi).

With the end/the meaning, unquestioned, everything, including, apparently, theatre, becomes a means. Under such circumstances, the theatre loses the vital role it has often played—along with the other arts, philosophy and at times religion—in the ongoing human endeavor to make meaning. In our quest for usefulness, the *search* for meaning is being neglected. If we lose that quest, we lose the heart and soul of humanism, the progressive, developmental historical tendency to move the world somewhere else.

And that's dangerous not only for the vitality of the theatre but also for the developmental prospects of the species. The search for the end, for meaning, for qualitatively new possibilities beyond what exists is a vital part of the human endeavor.

Art, and, when it comes to social meaning, particularly theatre, has always been one of the most powerful ways this search has been carried on. Developmental exploration is sacrificed when art must have an instrumentalist point. In a sense, the very point of theatre is its pointlessness.

4.

Those of us who pioneered (often without knowing we were doing so) and are building the Applied Theatre movement do so because we want to help people, we want to educate people, we want to empower people. It's not intentionality but methodology that's tripping us up.

Even those with the most progressive or revolutionary politics have hog-tied themselves with an instrumentalist, reformist methodology. Let us take a brief look at the most obvious example of this—the Theatre of the Oppressed. I single out Theatre of the Oppressed not to pick a fight; I have great respect for our colleagues using its techniques around the world. However, because it is the most influential approach to applied theatre—and the most explicitly political—it is important, I feel, to look at how its methodology limits its transformative power.

No doubt everyone here is familiar with Boal's Image Theatre, Forum Theatre, Legislative Theatre and so on. In all of its manifestations, it is generally agreed that the major innovation of the Theatre of the Oppressed is the spec-actor, the involvement of audience members, in various ways, in the action on the stage. Boal called the Theatre of the Oppressed a, "poetics of liberation." Of what does this liberation consist? The spec-actor, Boal writes, "frees himself, he thinks and acts for himself." But does he or she? The spec-actor is brought into a scenario originally conceived and put into motion by the theatre artists and the spec-actors' impulses, reactions, and choices are constantly being moderated and facilitated by the Joker or his equivalent. Boal saw himself going beyond what he called Brecht's "poetics of the enlightened vanguard." However, Boal's "poetics of liberation," in practice, often seems more like a "poetics of the enlightened theatre artists" (Boal, 155). I dare say that in 98% of Theatre of the Oppressed performances the conclusions reached at the end of the performance are in sync with the politics of the theatre troupe.

No doubt I would agree with most of the ideas and values reached in these dialogic learning plays. But that is hardly the point. Boal and his followers, many of whom consider themselves revolutionaries (or at least did so at some point) have never questioned the instrumentalist-tool for result-methodology of traditional Western logic. Boal conceded as much when he wrote, "Perhaps theatre is not revolutionary in itself; but I have no doubt, it is a rehearsal of revolution" (Boal, *ibid.*)

Therein lies the limitations of instrumentalism. First, to my view, theatre is not, at its most developmental, a rehearsal *for* anything, certainly not for revolution, which is a creative improvised social activity on a vast scale that comes with no scenario and no script. Second, once you assume the ending, even if that ending is your imagined

revolution, you are circumscribing the creative process and prescribing the result based on a predetermined ideology.

With all due respect to the intentions and hard work of Theatre of the Oppressed makers around the world, the vast bulk of the performances they have organized are more rehearsals for adaptation to the world-as-it-is than rehearsals of qualitative change. Instrumentalism comes with the assumption that you know the meaning of what you're doing, that you know the result in advance. The search—the activity of creating the unknowable—is over before it begins.

Which brings us back to didacticism. You can only teach what is already known. To create qualitatively new ideas, emotions, and social relations you have to play.

5.

What is hopeful about Applied Theatre is the impulse to involve ordinary people, in various ways, in theatre and performance.

That impulse has also fueled the work of the Castillo Theatre for the last quarter of a century. We, however, have moved in a different direction.

Like most theatre artists, those of us who founded Castillo were trained to make plays, not to be playful or to understand our work as a form of play. And like most on the Left we started with a basically didactic approach to theatre. However, through almost three decades of making plays and other kinds of performances with the communities that we have been organizing and building, we have groped our way out the constraints of institutional theatre and zigzagged through traps of didacticism toward theatre *for* nothing.

Castillo produces a wide range of theatre: dense, poetic post-dramatic scripts by Heiner Müller; some of the most radical of African American playwrights; original plays written by Fred Newman that relate directly to our community and political organizing; devised plays with young people from New York City's poorest communities. After the first few years of our history, not many of these productions were didactic; and almost all of them have been playful. Our productions, which go on virtually all of the time, are not approached as tools for anything. We have found that the very activity of writing/devising, rehearsing, performing, producing, viewing and talking about the productions is what's growthful, not the content or lesson per se. People create meaning by playing together and they can create new meaning (and develop in the process) by building an ensemble and making a play.

Our theatre work is community based, community funded (no government and virtually no foundation funding), all our productions, both on stage and back stage include untrained community people and professional theatre artists. While we have clearly involved poor and working people in the creating of theatre, the point for us, unlike with

Boal, has not been to bring non-actors onto stage (although that happens), the activity, instead, is to liberate performance from the institution of the theatre. All of our theatre work and all of our youth work are designed to encourage play and performance—the activity of being who you are and who you are becoming—in daily life.

Our experience at the Castillo Theatre suggests that there are ways to approach organizing non-theatre people to perform in and/or see theatre that are qualitatively different than the tool-for-result instrumentalism that dominates our field. Castillo's approach as it has evolved suggests the value of dropping the instrumentalist conjunction "for" from our theatre vocabularies and moving beyond the logic that makes it necessary. Organizing open-ended pointless play is its own end. Abandoning the instrumentalism that keeps us tied to the often unspoken assumptions of the world-as-it-is, will be a big step, we believe, toward creating new possibilities for the world-as-it-might be.

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