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REPORT

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Activating allyship: Revisiting Forum Theatre through a study abroad program in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

ABSTRACT

In March 2023, nineteen students, educators and clinicians affiliated with New York University's theatre education, dance education and drama therapy programs travelled to Rio de Janeiro for ten days to learn about the work of Escola de Teatro Popular (ETP) or The Popular Theatre School across social movements.

KEYWORDS

Theatre of the Oppressed
Forum Theatre
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allyship
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Rio de Janeiro
Brazil
study abroad program

Co-founded by Julian Boal and collaborator Geo Britto, ETP has reworked the original contributions of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed and Forum Theatre into a new model of allyship. The co-authors of this article, four drama therapists working across healthcare systems in New York City, seek to examine how ETP's art-infused allyship with communities relates to therapeutic practice in drama therapy and how it can further the World Health Organization's global efforts of using the arts to improve community well-being. The article explains how this evolved approach can be a model to build new strengths and new forms of solidarity to confront the contradictory forces that compel drama therapists to submit and resist inadequacies within managed care systems.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Teatro del Oprimido
Teatro Foro
Dramaterapia
Alianza
Salud Comunitaria
Río de Janeiro
Brasil
Programa de Estudios
en el Extranjero

RESUMEN

En marzo de 2023, diecinueve estudiantes, educadores y médicos afiliados a los programas de Educación Teatral, Educación de Danza y Dramaterapia de la Universidad de Nueva York (NYU) viajaron a Río de Janeiro durante diez días para conocer el trabajo de la Escola de Teatro Popular (ETP) o The Popular Theatre School a través de movimientos sociales. Cofundada por Julian Boal y su colaborador Geo Britto, ETP ha reelaborado las contribuciones originales del Teatro del Oprimido (TO) y el Teatro Foro de Augusto Boal en un nuevo modelo de alianza. Los coautores de este artículo, cuatro dramaterapeutas que trabajan en sistemas de salud en la ciudad de Nueva York, buscan examinar cómo la alianza infundida por el arte de ETP con las comunidades se relaciona con la práctica terapéutica en la dramaterapia y cómo puede promover los esfuerzos globales de la Organización Mundial de la Salud para utilizar las artes para mejorar el bienestar de la comunidad (OMS 2023). El artículo explica cómo este enfoque evolucionado puede ser un modelo para construir nuevas fortalezas y nuevas formas de solidaridad para enfrentar las fuerzas contradictorias que obligan a los dramaterapeutas a someterse y resistir las deficiencias dentro de los sistemas de atención administrada.

MOTS-CLÉS

Théâtre des Opprimés
Théâtre Forum
Dramathérapie
Allyship
Santé Communautaire
Rio de Janeiro
Brésil
Programme d'Études à
l'Étranger

RÉSUMÉ

En mars 2023, dix-neuf étudiants, éducateurs et cliniciens affiliés aux programmes d'éducation théâtrale, d'éducation à la danse et de dramathérapie de l'Université de New York (NYU) se sont rendus à Rio de Janeiro pendant dix jours pour en apprendre davantage sur le travail de l'Escola de Teatro Popular (ETP) ou École de Théâtre Populaire à travers les mouvements sociaux. Co-fondée par Julian Boal et son collaborateur Geo Britto, l'ETP a retravaillé les contributions originales du Théâtre des Opprimés (TO) et du Forum Theatre d'Augusto Boal dans un nouveau modèle d'alliance. Les co-auteurs de cet article, quatre dramathérapeutes travaillant dans les systèmes de santé de la ville de New York, cherchent à examiner comment l'alliance imprégnée d'art de l'ETP avec les communautés est liée à la pratique thérapeutique de la dramathérapie et comment elle peut soutenir les efforts mondiaux de l'Organisation mondiale de la santé visant à utiliser les arts pour améliorer le bien-être des communautés (OMS 2023). L'article explique comment cette approche évoluée peut être un modèle pour construire de nouvelles forces et de nouvelles formes de solidarité pour affronter les forces contradictoires qui obligent les dramathérapeutes à se soumettre et à résister aux insuffisances des systèmes de soins gérés.

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INTRODUCTION: FROM CLASSROOMS TO COMMUNITIES

Arte Para Lutar! Teatro Popular! ('Art to fight! Theatre is for the people!') shouted members of Escola de Teatro Popular (ETP) with their fists in the air at the conclusion of their performance on our first night in Rio de Janeiro. We were part of a group of students affiliated with New York University's (NYU) theatre education, dance education and drama therapy programs who had travelled to Rio de Janeiro for ten days to learn about Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) with members of the ETP. The last time students from our programs travelled to Brazil to study with Augusto Boal, the founder of TO, was in 2008. That trip resulted in a seminal book detailing theatre practice geared towards personal and collective change across the world (Landy and Montgomery 2012). Now fifteen years later, with the support of Dr Nisha Sajani and Dr Nan Smithner from NYU, students returned to Rio, to train with Augusto Boal's son, Julian Boal, and his collaborating team at the ETP.

The ETP is a school for 'militant activists' associated with community organizations and social movements including (but not limited to) the landless worker's movement, social housing projects for Black communities and centres of learning and healthcare in low-income neighbourhoods and favelas across Rio de Janeiro (Boal 2023: 111). With the pandemic, recent changes in Brazil's government and an increase in racial, economic and ecological tensions across the world in the past decade, Julian Boal's praxis of TO with the ETP had evolved significantly from his father's. This more evolved model focuses on the importance of engaging in allyships.

During the trip every morning, we spent the days training in this reworking of TO through workshops, community visits and performances. At night, we danced at samba clubs and sang in protest concerts with the ETP members.



Figure 1: Core members of the ETP concluding their performance 'It is in the struggle that art finds itself', with the chant *Arte Para Lutar! Teatro Popular!* ('Art to fight! Theatre is for the people!').

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Through our trip, we engaged in all the ways in which *Arte Para Lutar! Teatro Popular!* was not only a dialogue at the conclusion of a play but also a spirit that infused every action of the ETP in organizing their communities with the arts.

Our group from NYU, aged 25–45, were students, professors, clinicians, social workers and actors from different countries like France, Taiwan, India, China, Canada and the United States. On our first day of training, Julian Boal sat with us in a circle and invited us to reflect on our positions in the world and the circumstances that have enabled us to arrive where we are and do what we do. Julian Boal identified himself as a ‘foreigner’ to the lived realities of ‘oppressed’ communities in Brazil. When we do not share the same truths as the people we serve, what does it mean to be in allyship with them? As drama therapists, we train to sit in the ‘anxious experience of otherness’ (Sajnani 2013: 382) through our play-based clinical encounters; however, Julian Boal and members of the ETP were inviting us to stand up and actively organize in our anxiety. Moreover, ETP’s efforts to utilize TO as a tool for rallying community support are in accordance with the findings of World Health Organization (WHO)’s (2023) recent report, which underscores the efficacy of artistic interventions in fostering both good health and health equity throughout a community’s lifespan.



Figure 2: ETP’s training centre situated at Armazém do Campo, a store supporting agrarian reform by selling natural foods from the landless workers movement (Movimento Sem Terra [MST]). Words like Luta (‘fight’) and solidariedade (‘solidarity’) are visible on the pillars. Photograph courtesy of the authors.

What did it then mean for us as students of drama therapy to situate ourselves in this intersection of theatre as activism and theatre as therapy with the ETP during this time? What did allyship look like in and beyond our clinical encounters? We will explore this in the next section where we will delve into the evolution of Forum Theatre, tracing its trajectory from the classical to the dialectical model.

EVOLUTION OF FORUM THEATRE: FROM THE CLASSICAL TO THE DIALECTICAL MODEL

TO with Teatro de Arena in São Paulo, 1970s–2000s

Augusto Boal's practice of TO began with the classical Forum Theatre model, originating in the 1970s, which deliberately erased the traditional boundaries that separated actors from the audience (Boal 1979). The political landscape, marked by the military coup of 1964, direct repression of artists and escalating censorship, imposed severe restrictions on key social collectives like peasants, workers and students who were consumers of theatre. As a director, Boal sought a theatrical form capable of transitioning to the streets, engaging with audiences in their familiar surroundings and breaking away from the conventional concept of the theatrical fourth wall (Villas Bôas 2021). Additionally, Boal aimed to establish a discernible dramaturgical structure to facilitate the effective transmission of social justice ideas across diverse audiences (Boal 2023).

In one of his initial productions, Augusto Boal and his theatre company, the Teatro de Arena de São Paulo, embarked on a journey through some of Brazil's most impoverished areas including farmlands, where peasants were actively advocating for agrarian reforms against their landowners. The Forum Theatre which Boal developed during this time was based on Lenin's (1902) 'agitprop theatre'. The scenes mirrored the pressing demands of the peasant and labourer communities for land, food, water and shelter and agitated audiences towards a solution. Each scene featured a distinct protagonist and antagonist, with the inclusion of bystanders who were engaged in the action. The play unfolded twice – initially as a continuous performance and then repeated with an open invitation for community members in the audience, referred to as 'spect-actors', to intervene at any point. The spect-actors could replace the protagonist if they believed an alternative action might lead to a more desired outcome (Sajnani 2009).

Boal (1995) recounted a particular agitprop theatre performance where the scene's culmination depicted a protagonist, portraying a peasant standing up to their oppressive landowners. The intensity of the play resonated so deeply with peasant spect-actors that they passionately urged the actors onstage to join them in taking up arms against their landowners in real life. However, the actors, recognizing the boundaries of their roles as artists, declined, emphasizing that they were not prepared to undertake the same risks as the peasants. In such instances, Boal (1995) observed the profound impact of breaking down the barrier separating actors from spectators and acknowledged the inherent risks associated with such a boundary dissolution especially when the Forum Theatre was created and performed for a community by non-community members.

TO with ETP in Rio de Janeiro, 2016 onwards

After Augusto Boal's death in 2009, his son, Julian Boal, who had accompanied him on his travelling productions, continued to organize with artists and

activists from several countries. During these meetings, Julian Boal learned that activist movements like La Dignidad in Argentina were addressing the concrete needs of their communities by interweaving the arts with a range of cultural and social services. These included cafeterias, schools, day care centres, health centres, a fire department, a network of ambulances, a distributor of bottled gas and other elements of popular infrastructure. A step towards fighting injustices was a kind of community organizing that could generate a 'sociability of practice' (Boal 2023: 111) and distance itself from the relations imposed by the market and the state. Actors and artists emerging from activist groups already present within a community were central in mobilizing these efforts.

These interactions, along with witnessing feminist TO practitioners like Muriel Naessens and Brechtian practitioners like Sergio de Carvalho, encouraged Julian Boal to critically reimagine a dramaturgical frame to Forum Theatre and a method of transmitting the practice that was slightly different from his father (Boal 2023). According to Julian Boal (2023), Forum Theatre needed to demonstrate how various systems of oppression were interlocked with each other, even within a singular concrete demand, as opposed to a specific action consciously performed by the antagonist or oppressor character. For example, a scene about domestic violence could not only show the harmful relationship as existing between a wife and the free will of her antagonist husband, but rather between larger systems of patriarchy that were reinforcing the violence.



Figure 3: Assentamento Roseli Nunes settlement located outside Rio de Janeiro where the MST farmers are currently fighting to retain their lands amongst biofuel expansion. A fence divides the land occupied by private owners and the agricultural land cultivated by MST farmers. Photograph courtesy of the authors.

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A new model of Forum was needed not only to deal with the abuse of power by an individual but also to reveal what forces were behind sustaining that power. Accordingly, interventions suggested by the spect-actors could have them confront and transform these forces through efforts at community-building. Julian Boal thus replaced the idea of a singular antagonist in Forum Theatre with multiple ‘potential allies’ (2023: 126) who represented forces that maintain oppressive powers. These allies were figures who embodied contradictions. Even though they desired to help the protagonist subvert systems of oppression, they usually complied with their more dominant submissive tendencies. According to Julian Boal:

Potential allies help maintain the antagonistic contradictions – they are not antagonistic in and of themselves. [...] They represent the specific contradictions that cross the terrain inhabited by oppressed people in a concrete situation of oppression. The protagonist’s task is then to try to influence these contradictions so that they are resolved in the sense of combating these oppressions.

(2023: 126)

Boal (2023) described the titular character in Brecht’s *Mother Courage* as an example of a potential ally. She is afraid of losing her children in the war, yet she benefits economically by having her children sell paraphernalia to soldiers that facilitate the war. Ultimately, she suffers the loss of her children.



Figure 4: A mural painted by the MST farmers showcasing the interdependent struggles of farmers and enslaved people. The names of forcibly enslaved Black women leaders who fought for the emancipation of their people in Brazil in the mid-eighteenth century are featured on top of a growing tree bearing fruits. Photograph courtesy of the authors.

How would a protagonist who desires to end the war build community with a potential ally like Mother Courage, who is crossed by contradictions?

Influenced by a series of interdependent protests in Brazil, Julian Boal and ETP imagined new ways in which this 'dialectical' Forum Theatre model could be practised more widely in partnership with social movements. ETP, like the Jana Sanskriti activist movement in India, began to create satellite theatre groups with, for and even against social movements, so that the activists of those groups could interact with each other and perform Forum Theatre for their communities (Mills 2009). ETP became a school for activists and artists to train in TO, exchange knowledge with each other around the aesthetics of theatre and the politics of their movements and then create Forum Theatre performances to take to their communities. Activist leaders could return to the ETP centre for workshops, film screenings, book discussions, protests and even parties so that the Forum Theatre model was always adapting to the expanding needs of their interconnected struggles.

With a clearer understanding of the new dialectical TO model of allyship, we will now examine its practice within the context of ETP in the next section.

TO training with ETP, March 2023

When we visited Rio in March 2023, we trained in the dialectical Forum Theatre model with ETP members who were also activist leaders across six social organizations in Rio. These included Cozinha Comunitária Santa Luzia, a community kitchen and women's circle serving pregnant mothers in the Santa Luzia favela; Museu da Maré, a museum in the favela of Maré created to be a safe gathering space and heritage site to preserve the memory and identity of its residents; Grêmio Estudantil Escola de Teatro Martins Penna, a student



Figure 5: Local leaders of Quilombo da Gamboa introduce the history of their social housing project, which was followed by a Forum Theatre play in English and Portuguese with ETP members and NYU students. Photograph courtesy of the authors.



Figure 6: NYU students playing TO games with members of Cozinha Comunitária Santa Luzia. Photograph courtesy of the authors.



Figure 7: The sign at the entrance of Cozinha Comunitária Santa Luzia reads 'Relax, nothing is in your control' in Portuguese. Photograph courtesy of the authors.



Figure 8: ETP members and NYU students standing outside Escola de Teatro Martins Penna, with the student union protesting the demolition of their school building. Photograph courtesy of the authors.



Figure 9: Luís Antônio de Oliveira, the founder and director of Museu da Maré, is standing in front of a mural depicting the resiliency of residents in Maré who resisted threats of eviction and urbanization over the years. The Maré Museum is a part of the CEASM project, which aims to premise social-political empowerment through education by local community members. Photograph courtesy of the authors.



Figure 10: A collection of objects in Museu da Maré preserving the identities and histories of residents of Maré. Photograph courtesy of the authors.

union fighting to retain their theatre building in the face of demolition and financial cutbacks; MST, the landless workers' movement at the Assentamento Roseli Nunes settlement; Centre of Studies and Solidarity Action (CEASM), an educational program located in the favela of Maré, and Quilombo da Gamboa, a social housing project serving primarily Black and low-income families in Rio. ETP members took us into each community and introduced us to local leaders who spoke about all the different ways in which they are fighting for basic rights for their collectives: the right to healthcare, food, education, housing, etc. We also had the opportunity to co-create and participate in Forum Theatre performances with and for the community members. After witnessing the theatre processes of each community deeply, we presented Forum Theatre

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pieces on issues from our varied contexts in the United States (i.e. on issues of racism, healthcare inequities, gender pay gap) while community members offered interventions and commented on how these issues were similar or different to what they were encountering in Rio.

ETP's collaboration with leaders of these social movements was itself a Forum Theatre intervention within the revised dialectical model. ETP members were actively in allyship with protagonists across Rio, who each had very concrete demands for liberation. While ETP members were also susceptible to the capitalistic temptations of greed, money, power and working in isolation, they actively subverted these very systems through organizing efforts. Just as Sir Jeremy Farrar, chief scientist at the WHO (2023), is urging clinicians to not see the science and the arts as separate endeavours, similarly ETP members were not seeing themselves as separate to the efforts of educators and local care workers within favelas in Rio. As spect-actors engaging with the ETP model of practice, each of us returned to the United States inspired to act, contemplating opportunities for arts-based collaborations within our own localities.

FORUM THEATRE, DRAMA THERAPY AND ALLYSHIP: RESONANCES AND REFLECTIONS

Each of us is currently either interning or employed in healthcare facilities across New York City, including inpatient, outpatient and private practice settings where we work as drama therapists with adults and families across the spectrum of serious and persistent mental illnesses. The aim of drama therapy within our clinical spaces, like Forum Theatre within communities in Rio, is to minimize and eradicate daily manifestations of inequity and psychological distress and to promote wellness (Sajnani et al. 2020). According to drama therapist Robert Landy, 'wellness is marked by one's ability to live within the contradictions of dissonant roles' (2008: 110). By inviting spect-actors to dialogue with potential allies who embody contradictions, the dialectical model of Forum Theatre is asking individuals to co-create a healthy society. With each intervention, spect-actors are confronting the potential ally roles within themselves. On one hand, they want to subvert systems of injustice but, on the other, they are tempted to comply with higher demands of power. A Forum Theatre intervention requires the presence of multiple participating 'actors' to commit to their role as potential allies. These allies are mirrors and witnesses, enabling a spect-actor to have new and multiple readings of an oppressive event. Drama therapists similarly are in potential allyship with their patients, facilitating meaning-making in the imaginary realm by creating 'aesthetic distance' (Landy 1996: 13). Through non-verbal or verbal enactments, drama therapists can attune to how much distance patients would like to have from their feelings, thoughts and physical self-image thus stimulating intrapsychic change (Landy 1996: 13). Similarly in Forum Theatre, the permeable boundaries between the audience and the stage allow a spect-actor to optimally confront (both affectively and cognitively) a potential ally. This 'aesthetic space' opens the imagination of spect-actors to enter a scene, collectively brainstorm with the potential ally and transform their everyday reality into a more desired one (Boal 1992: 28).

While the theoretical resonances between drama therapy and the revised Forum Theatre model are many, practising allyship with our patients in a similar manner to ETP's relationship with their communities poses a different

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set of contextual challenges. Much like the politically and socially polarized climate in Rio, the US healthcare system is a complex interplay between traumatized patients, vicariously traumatized staff and stressed organizations that frequently assume conditions harmful to patients (Bloom 2013). Unlike ETP members who belong to the communities they are creating and performing Forum Theatre plays with, drama therapists do not necessarily share the same identities or spaces as the patients we are working with. In Rio, we observed the deep presence of touch and food within the care webs, which was a way to actively subvert boundaries that divided communities. These care practices, culturally specific to Rio, also resonated with the diverse group on our trip; however, an engagement of our senses through sights, sounds, touch, smell, taste and breath also satisfies basic physiological needs in Maslow's (1943) hierarchy and is essential to the endurance of a community in mental health recovery (SAMHSA 2011). These needs, which can be fulfilled through care practices like offering food, sharing a meal and hugging, are restricted and/or surveilled in clinical encounters. When these essential practices of care are absent from healthcare protocols, what is lost? What is lost between patients and clinicians, and among healthcare workers across disciplines? How much more difficult is it to centre community care within these systems when basic human needs remain unmet in clinical encounters? How much harder must drama therapists work to find and maintain community care in hospital settings? In a study at an addiction treatment centre, drama therapist Levanas (2017) noted that in healthcare systems where staff experience burnout, symptoms of vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue, clinicians can conform to clinical boundaries and procedures to such an extent that they disengage from patients altogether. Disengagement can be a more accessible option for clinicians within such traumatized systems of care rather than recognizing and resisting it as a submissive tendency. The small ember of hope then lies in the responsibility of us as drama therapists to be aware of these submissive tendencies and cultivate the subversive ones. To hone in on what the creative arts offer in clinical spaces and advocate for it. To recognize the contradictions and complexities that we, as fellow human beings, face and find small moments to reveal those contradictions in the therapeutic relationship to keep the connection between ourselves and the people we are supporting a mutual and collective one.

Upon returning from Rio, Khanna (2023) completed her senior thesis in drama therapy, inviting clinicians to co-create Forum Theatre scenes with their patients around collective issues they were observing in their unit. By inviting both patients and clinicians to become spect-actors and dialogue with the contradictions in a scene, Khanna was attempting to subvert a system that otherwise limits clinicians to the role of 'doer' and patients to the role of 'done-to' (Benjamin 2004: 5). Similarly, Ta Wei Chen reflects on how the dialectical TO model provided critical insights into creating moments of allyship with the treatment team and patients in his unit. During a drama therapy group, a patient enacted violence towards him in play. Instead of ending the play due to discomfort with being metaphorically 'killed', Chen tolerated the encounter's subversiveness. He even invited nursing staff to witness his metaphorical death which he exaggerated within the play. This moment led to shared intimate laughter among nurses and patients dissolving their power hierarchies, briefly. Afterwards, the patient who enacted the 'killing' on Chen reportedly felt more confident discussing her medication with her treatment team. The team expressed gratitude to Chen for showing them 'another side' of their patients (personal communication). Currently, Khanna co-facilitates a prayer group in

an adult inpatient psychiatric unit with the Imam of the local mosque near the hospital. By being in allyship with the Imam and integrating services of drama therapy with faith-based religious practice, Khanna intends to support a more holistic coping model for the patients (personal communication).

Globally right now there is a growing body of evidence indicating the central role that arts play in promoting good health and preventing and managing illness (Fancourt and Finn 2019). At a time when the WHO has called for governments to take an intersectoral approach to realize the potential of the arts on public health, drama therapists can activate allyship with a range of local care providers like community health workers, nurses, activists, artists, religious leaders, psychiatrists, nurses and educators to promote a creative and vicarious resilience (WHO 2023). Through models like Forum Theatre and by developing partnerships with organizations like ETP, early career drama therapists like us can resist submissive temptations to disengage and instead practice how to find and organize sustainable allyships towards a healthier and more desired co-imagined reality.

ETHICS STATEMENT

All participants featured in the photographs gave the authors written informed consent.

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Kristina Olegario Loy is a Filipino American theatre artist and recent graduate from the drama therapy program at New York University. She centres the collective in care and storytelling and is deeply committed to bringing the

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principles and values found in abolition work, disability justice and mutual aid into her drama therapy practice.

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Ta Wei Chen is a first-generation immigrant from Taiwan and queer creative arts therapist working with adults at an outpatient PROS program in New York. He is also a playback theatre practitioner from numerous companies where he immerses himself in communities through the power of storytelling. He continues to search for playfulness and rebellion in his intersectionalities and hopes to murder Godot one day.

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