

**Dan Boyden**

**Winston Churchill Fellowship 2013/14**

‘How can Forum Theatre and Theatre of the Oppressed techniques engage young people on the margins? Croatia, New York and Brazil.’

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## **Travel Itinerary**

Croatia: Pula International Forum Theatre Festival June 2013

New York: October/November 2013

Brazil (Rio): March/April 2014

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## Introduction and Objectives

*'Absorbing culture is not enough, one must produce it. Enjoying the arts is not enough, one must be an artist. Producing ideas is not enough, one must change them into factual and extended social actions. I dream of a day when in all of Brazil and all of the world, there will be culture, at each city, village and settlement, where citizens may express their art in order to better understand the reality that it must change. Finally on that day democracy will be born. To be a citizen doesn't mean to live in society, but to transform it. With your head held high, your feet on the ground and hands at work.'*<sup>1</sup>

I've always been interested in how we use the Arts for social change, how we can change the lives of marginalized young people through theatre and the performing arts. For more than a decade I have been using theatre as a tool for engaging different marginalized communities in the UK and overseas. I've developed skills and experience in different participatory theatre techniques and most recently managed a forum theatre project in schools in Tower Hamlets, working with 11-16 year olds who were disengaging from school. I've seen how forum theatre can engage young people teachers have written off as 'disruptive' and 'lost causes'. It can offer them a space to look constructively at what they're finding difficult and it provides them with tangible tools and strategies to work through some of these challenges in their lives.

Forum Theatre is born out of Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), a bigger volume of work that Brazilian theatre practitioner and politician Augusto Boal developed during the time of the military dictatorship in the late 1960's. *Forum Theatre is basically the presentation of a problem, with all its conflicts, but where the characters don't know the solution. So we present a play about failure, and...we ask the audience what they'd do in their place'*<sup>2</sup> Boal's work allows the individual to explore what they can do to change their own reality, drawing on elements of Marxist ideology and on the pedagogy of his contemporary, educationalist Paulo Freire. Theatre of the Oppressed practitioners continue to operate within the original vocabulary of Oppressed and Oppressor, something that many feel is too narrow. TO however is now practiced all over the world as an effective way of supporting people who feel powerless and under-represented. Boal's approach encourages young people to look at their own lives, supporting them to see that they can be protagonists in their own lives.

The idea for this Winston Churchill Fellowship was born out of a desire to facilitate a creative dialogue and a sharing of experience and best practice between professionals working with vulnerable or marginalized young people in the UK, learning from good practice internationally. What are the issues facing young people today in Brazil, New York and London and how can forum theatre and other applied theatre practices and techniques support these young people? I was interested in finding out what's working and what isn't and how can we take these learnings into our own work with similar groups of young people in the UK.

The experience I have in this field is in delivering projects with different groups, as opposed to academic theory. What I know best is working with people and this report reflects what I've seen, the people I've met and the impact that has had on me. A lot has been written about Theatre of the Oppressed, and Boal's 'Games for Actors and

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<sup>1</sup> Augusto Boal, taken from 'Playing Boal' DVD, produced by CTO Rio.

<sup>2</sup> Playing Boal

Non Actors' is a staple for all young practitioners interested in how theatre can be used as a tool for social change. I was interested in exploring how these exercises and techniques that were born out of a very particular time can support young people living in 2014.

Objectives:

- To explore how forum theatre techniques are being used effectively as a tool for social and individual change amongst marginalised young people around the world – to understand different techniques and models of working with young people in developed and developing countries and explore how that can be used most effectively in a UK context.
- To inform, strengthen and develop the practice of students and professionals (teachers, social workers, youth and community workers, arts practitioners, academics) working with marginalized young people in the UK.
- To create a network of young people who are using forum theatre techniques to work through some of the challenges in their lives. To encourage and support both intercultural dialogue and global citizenship between young people in UK, Brazil and the US.

The project took me from Brooklyn to the Bronx, from a theatre in Croatia to a favela on the outskirts of Rio. I met people who were doing work that inspired me and reminded me why theatre and the arts can be so powerful. I went to places that welcomed me in and asked questions, I felt able to share who I was and others let me see who they were. I've come back with more questions than I have answers but I believe this to be a positive outcome which will lead to the continuation of my research and the development of my practice. Throughout the project I've met people I can ask questions of, and in the UK I am developing a network of people around me who are also able to feed into the answers and in turn ask more questions. Both Boal and his contemporary, Argentinian educationalist Paulo Friere agree that dialogue must be at the heart of what we do, that we can only really progress by genuinely accepting that we have something to learn from the people we may be teaching.

## Croatia

As the first stage of the fellowship I attended a three-day Theatre of the Oppressed workshop in Croatia. This was part of a ten-day conference called The TOgether Project, a partnership between TO groups in Germany (KURINGA), Croatia (Pula-Forum Festival), Portugal (GTO-Lisbon), Scotland (Active Inquiry) and Spain (Pallapupas), with collaboration of practitioners from Italy (Kriila TDO) and France and externally evaluated by Bologna University. The initiative was born out of the First International Theatre of the Oppressed Conference, held in July 2009, at CTO Rio. There was a sense that there needed to be more collaboration between existing TO community groups and this project was the result.

The project involves training, workshops and seminars, as well as the practical application of work that is then monitored and evaluated. The aim is to use what comes out of the workshops to inform the practical work which then, in turns, feeds back into subsequent workshops. This reflective practice was at the heart of Boal's work, a constant questioning and reshaping. The culmination of the TOgether project had been the creation of 'Hotel Europa', a piece of forum theatre which was performed before prior to my arrival but closely informed the workshop, that tackled some big issues and ideas: the inequality of wealth distribution, consumerism, the banking system, poor working conditions and the recession.

It was useful to make connections with some of the groups working across Europe and spend time looking collaboratively at some of the questions coming out of the work. I left excited about the possibility of developing these connections; I also began to consider how the work I was doing back in the UK, and intend to be doing in the future, could fit in to the wider TO community, be that across Europe or further afield. The more I get to know the TO community the smaller I realize it is. This has benefits but also has its drawbacks. Why isn't the community bigger? More joined up? There seems to be a handful of organisations and practitioners doing some vital work, whether that's in Mozambique, India, New York, but it's a tight knit, arguably quite impenetrable, community. I did however leave the workshop inspired and with a bag full of new games and exercises. I also left full of unanswered questions and ready for NYC.

## New York



### Theatre of the Oppressed NYC (TONYC)

My four weeks in New York were inspiring. I could see clearly what I was getting gaining from the experience and also felt, in a small way, like I was giving something back too. I spent a lot of my time with Theatre of the Oppressed NYC, a relatively young but ambitious organization working across New York, using TO with communities that face discrimination. TONYC's model of working with communities is based largely on the model at CTO Rio: working with community groups of partner organisations to tell the stories of the people accessing these groups. My time with TONYC re-affirmed how powerful TO can be in working towards social change in areas and with people that need it most. I had the opportunity to work with groups of young people from New York's most socially-deprived areas and saw how similar exercises and techniques that I used in schools in Tower Hamlets were being used to engage and provoke young people in the US.

I first met the team of six at their offices underneath Manhattan Bridge on my second day in New York. They were planning their annual fundraiser, which was the reason I started the project when I did, wanting to be part of an event that would show me the whole operation. Over one hundred and twenty people came to the event; some had paid \$30, some \$250. They drank wine donated from local wine shops, ate doughnuts and bid quietly at the silent auction for Punchdrunk tickets and yoga lessons. The groups TONYC work with are as diverse as the city: one group explore issues around homelessness, another is made up of LGBTQ homeless young people living in New York, another group explore the discrimination facing people living with HIV. Actors from these groups, some dressed as clowns with green wigs and big shoes, performed

scenes from their plays, owning their stories in a way that showed me how important this organisation is for them.



Rehearsal with TONYC's Housing Works troupe.

As a practitioner of a similar age and with similar experiences to Katy Rubin, the founder and artistic director of TONYC, I was interested in how this relatively young organization was created. Katy got a grant to go to CTO for three months in 2008, training with Boal just before he died. TONYC's work is similar in style and structure to CTO's, in part because of the Katy's experiences in Rio. *'CTO were really busy when I was there, it was crazy, I sat through five 40 hour trainings that they led with the different groups they were working with, they had big contracts with the Brazilian government, they were working with mental health workers from all across Brazil, it was great because I could sit there and soak it up and learnt a lot.'*<sup>3</sup> Seeing how CTO in Rio worked with legislators and community groups significantly influenced Katy's thinking about TONYC's role in NYC and the impact it could have on marginalized and oppressed communities in the city.

The staff and volunteers at TONYC, most of whom work on a project by project basis at present, seem fully committed to the work. Katy has an acute understanding of the ethics and pedagogy that underpin the work, thus ensuring the organization as a whole lives and breathes what they do. John Leo is a joker<sup>4</sup> with TONYC who felt compelled to do more with the organization after having taken part in one of their early forum pieces as a member of the audience. *'I got up on stage and for the first time I felt part of the solution to a problem that normally I would have walked on by. Part of what I want the audience to walk away with is seeing the problem as being more bite-sized, that these aren't homeless people, they're*

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Katy Rubin, Artistic Director and Founder, TONYC

<sup>4</sup> 'Joker' describes the facilitator of forum theatre, helping shape the actors stories and bridging the gap between actor and audience (spect-actor) in a forum performance. The Joker is impartial, the wild card.

*people affected by homelessness*<sup>5</sup>. He raised some interesting points that as a practitioner I've always examined in my own work. *'Before I got involved in TO I thought it was theatre that activists did, I thought it was done by people who are pissed (off) and depressing. It's fun, and not fun in a frivolous way. I like theatre that tackles intense things but that are also exciting. There was a clown act in the play (concrete justice) which is about the most awful thing you can imagine, but it's biting and funny in just the right way and I think people like that'*. I come back to this idea in the conclusion of this report, that Theatre of the Oppressed shouldn't ever be Theatre of the Depressed.

In May 2013, TONYC put on a festival called 'Save the Drama' which took forum theatre to the next level, by engaging local government. It brought actors and audiences together for a weekend to explore issues effecting LGBT young people, told through the voices and experiences of the young people themselves. In the audience were community members, legal experts and NYC council members who are the very same folk that create the laws that govern these young people. They came together, they saw the performances and heard the ideas of strategies for dealing with some of these issues from the actors and the audience. At the end of the weekend and after much discussion, council member Jimmy Van Bramen took some of these concrete, tangible ideas for change back to the city council and the powers that be.



Workshop with Geo Britto from CTO in New York.

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with John Leo, TONYC.



## Mike and Vincent at TONYC

Vincent is a member of the Ali Forney Centre in northern Manhattan, a shelter for young LGBTQ folk that was set up in the 1980's. Vincent has been part of AFC for two and a half years and joined TONYC after Katy ran a workshop and then subsequently set up the troupe. Coming to the process with relatively limited theatre experience, Vincent quickly realized the principles that underpin TO matched up with his own person ethics. The first workshop, *'was a really welcoming space and that wasn't something that I was experiencing in the shelter I was living in. I was new to New York and felt like an outsider at the time'*.<sup>6</sup> They slowly built their first play as a troupe, a show about a young person getting kicked out of his house, who turns to shoplifting to be able to feed himself. *'Performing those stories was really cool, I knew the people in those stories, I knew the people who were experiencing those things, it was cool to see the community come together around issues that they felt really strongly about, they were important to us'*. Two years later, Vincent is a Joker-in-Training for TONYC, spending time shadowing a number of the troupes, assisting in workshops and supporting the organization as whole. *'I feel like TO fits me really well and I fit it really well, I prefer jokering to acting, it's more fun to me, it's about helping other people tell the stories'*.

The issues being explored in the groups that Vincent works with are similar again to issues facing young people in other parts of the US, the UK and Brazil: *'we see a lot of stories around parental issues, we do a lot of police scenes, people getting arrested for looking homeless, or walking along like a black person, hopping turnstiles because they don't have change for the car fare. TO promotes an ethical and appropriate way of fighting for what needs to be done and listening to these people as they know how it needs to be done... It's saying exactly what is happening and then asking 'what do we do in this situation?'*

Mike is another actor who has progressed to facilitating with TONYC. He started with Yan Huus Church, an organization with an outreach programme for people who were homeless. *'I guess in some way I feel like I'd been acting all my life, whether that be being someone that I'm not, or acting for survival purposes or acting like a tough guy 'cause I was growing up in bad neighbourhoods, the workshop gave me an opportunity to connect with other people out on the streets, there was a bond that was lacking when you're out on the streets, it was a place to get away from the things you were dealing with, ironically enough, it was a place where people were asking to hear about what you were going through and how you felt, which at the time was very uncommon, it was cathartic'*.<sup>7</sup>

The rehearsals that I took part in at the Ali Forney Centre with Mike and with Vincent were similar in lots of ways to TO rehearsals and workshops I'd been part of in the UK. I was struck initially by the energy of the group and the honesty with which they talk about their lives and the experiences they're having. Facilitated in the right way, the games and the exercises create a space that gives permission for people to be vulnerable and helps foster an atmosphere that supports this: *'I think over time you can't help but build a bond, you're working together to create something, sharing your ideas and putting yourself out there. As long as I believe in my heart that this is something that can bring about positive change, I'll still be here; right now it's doing that'*.

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Vincent StVincent, TONYC actor/facilitator.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Mike at TONYC.

## Moon at TONYC

Having now returned to the UK I'm able to reflect on the project as a whole. I'm beginning to see what I've taken from it and ask myself how I'm going to carry the experience with me. As I step away from it, I'm realizing more and more that it's the people I've met along the way who have had the biggest impact. There's something about New Yorkers that makes you suspect that they could be actors, convincingly playing the part of New Yorkers. They're big characters that you feel as if you know, you've seen them on television and in films; there was a familiarity for me that was both comforting and slightly disconcerting. One particular person that embodied this larger than life caricature of a New Yorker is Moon, a young facilitator from TONYC. Over the four weeks, we worked together at a youth organization called The Door, co-facilitating three forum workshops with a group of young people from across the city.

Moon's story is an interesting one and his journey an example of real positive long-term change that's come about, in part, due to TONYC and the work they're doing. Back in 2011, Moon was sleeping rough and went to a TONYC rehearsal because he wanted to see a friend who was taking part in it. He sat on the side waiting for his friend and was asked by Katy if he was able to jump in and take one of the roles as the actor playing it hadn't turned up. Reluctantly he got up and played the part. At the end of the rehearsal they played some games and he agreed to come back the next week. He did, they played some more games and the group started working towards their first performance, a piece called 'It Could Happen to You'. It was also TONYC's first full forum show and the early stages of what is today their longest running troupe. For Moon, that first forum performance was a powerful experience: *'having the audience interacting at the end we saw different ways of approaching situations'*. He sees that the learning isn't only one way though: *'it also helps the audience to jump into our shoes and to feel what we're feeling, the solidarity that comes out of that amongst a bunch of strangers is powerful'*.



Moon, facilitating a forum workshop with young people at The Door Youth Centre in Manhattan.

Moon, like other actors at TONYC, saw something in TO that worked for him; the organization saw an opportunity to support somebody, personally and professionally. *'At first you don't see how theatre and activism are related, you don't see how either can change the world. But by the end, you see that they can be related, and they are, and you can have a great time doing it'*. Katy and the team now run Level One and Two Joker training for actors and members of the community. They have people from all over the States enrolling and it feels like things will only expand over time. The Joker-in-Training programme offers Moon and other actors in the company like Mike and Vincent an opportunity to develop personally and professionally and as a result be in a position to support more members of the community. It's empowering but Moon recognizes it's not without its challenges: *'It's hard sometimes getting people to see the benefits, that I'm getting my story out and your story out and trying to fix whatever problems we're having here in society'*.

### Ashtar Theatre Company

During my third week in NYC I attended a workshop facilitated by Iman Aoun, founder and artistic director of Ashtar, a Palestinian NGO that runs theatre training for young people in Palestine. It was established in 1991 in Jerusalem to *'give voice to the voiceless'*, their mission to work towards a *'creative and developed Palestinian society that embraces theatre as an essential engine for culture and development.'*<sup>8</sup> The organisation produces and tours forum theatre plays and organises a biennial International Youth Theatre festival. The workshop was organized through Chris Vine at CUNY<sup>9</sup> and presented some of the work they were doing in Palestine, including a number of practical TO exercises. Iman talked about the issues the groups of young people they work with are exploring: gender, domestic violence, drug abuse, and mental health. Again, issues also facing the young people I met in Brooklyn and Brazil. Iman talked about a recent project that looked at mental health and the importance of including the carers and health workers in producing the work. For her, TO is routed in its aim to defend human rights: *'it works with people who feel they have had their basic human rights denied'*.<sup>10</sup> This line stuck with me and forms the skeleton of one of the key learnings from the trip.

Iman and the Ashtar Theatre Company were the lead organization in a recent project that gathered international interest. The Gaza Monologues was a project that recorded and dramatized the very personal stories of a group of Palestinian children who lived through the Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip in December 2008. Working in partnership with other theatres and cultural institutions around the world, the pieces were performed simultaneously on October 17<sup>th</sup> 2010 by over 1500 young people in more than 50 cities in 36 countries all over the world. It was clear that for Iman, TO is an effective way of engaging audiences and communities in discussion around important issues. She also acknowledged that TO can sometimes push audiences into uncomfortable positions and that brings with it a number of challenges. Ashtar work in delicate and often very unpredictable contexts, politically, socially and economically. Their work is an example of TO tools and techniques, which provide a group of under-represented and overlooked young people a platform on a national and international level where their voices can be heard.

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<sup>8</sup> Ashtar Theatre Company mission statement. <http://www.ashtar-theatre.org>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.cuny.edu/index.html>

<sup>10</sup> Taken from workshop at CUNY

### Further exploration in NYC

As the trip developed, I wanted to make sure I got a good understanding of the range of tools and techniques being used in the US and Brazil to effectively engage marginalized young people. I wanted to understand how TO and forum theatre could support other methods, and to meet people who weren't solely using TO in their work with young people. I met with Chris Vine, a well-respected English theatre practitioner and academic who developed and launched the US's first Applied Theatre MA at CUNY. To date, there are only two applied theatre programmes in the US, an indication of how this kind of theatre, and academic exploration of it, is still in its early stages. Chris worked with Boal in the 1980's and 90's in the UK, and his partner Helen White runs a successful youth theatre through the Creative Arts Team (CAT)<sup>11</sup>. *'There's not nearly the tradition of alternative theatre work in the States as it has taken root in the UK,'* Chris said. *'Since we've launched a lot of people have come to us and wanted to run similar programmes but after having seen what it involves they say to us that we could never do that, we don't have the people to be able to run it. Our one sister programme in southern California only do TO and for me that's a very narrow perspective on this work, there are so many different things you can do for community engagement and TO has its place, I practice it and I teach it but there's a lot more to this work than just TO. TO is flexible and good for a lot of things but it's not the only theatre approach.'*<sup>12</sup>

Chris's early career was at a time in the UK as Theatre-in-Education was gathering momentum: *'We were always looking at the political and social aspects of whatever art form we were using. When I bumped into Boal's work it was from the perspective of an already engaged and participatory theatre practice that we already had in the UK. I got it because that's what we did, we facilitated work, we had audience participation. What we would call actor-facilitator he would call the Joker, what he was doing with audience intervention we had developed in all sorts of ways, we just called it role play... actors stepping through the fourth wall was something we always did, looking at obstacles and conflicts... all of that we already knew but Boal was doing somewhere else in a slightly different way. We had the skills but needed to learn a new theatrical dynamic, it was a perfect meeting'.*

There's an interesting tension between the TO purists and those who use the techniques as part of an arsenal of techniques in their work. This is something I came back to a lot during the project and examine in more detail in the final chapter of this report.

### Kemi at The Laundromat Project

Katy Rubin at TONYC also introduced me to Kemi Illesanmi, the executive director of The Laundromat Project, an organization now in its eight year that bring art and arts programming into Laundromats (laundrettes) and other community spaces in different areas of the city.<sup>13</sup> Though not solely through theatre, they work directly with artists and community members on socially relevant and engaged projects born out of the artists' knowledge of the communities and the issues affecting them. They anchor their work in three communities in NYC, all neighbourhoods of colour - Harlem, Brooklyn and The Bronx - embedding the work and allowing for stronger depth and partnership working. I was later able to make similar connections in Brazil with other

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.creativeartsteam.org/team/helen-white>

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Chris Vine towards the end of the New York phase.

<sup>13</sup> <http://laundromatproject.org>

organisations working with arts and young people, giving me some valuable additional experience and learnings to bring back from the trip, beyond the forum theatre I'd set out to look at.

Whilst forum theatre and TO often focuses on the problems, Kemi is interested in what the assets are in the community, not just the challenges: *'There is amazing artist, hip-hop, salsa; we owe these communities a lot for things that we get to enjoy culturally, they're really vibrant communities, it's a different story than you're often told'*. The organization is also interested in working with the people who live in those three communities, running drop-in classes at the Laundromats, *'We're calling into question people's creativity. What might it be like to be creative? People feel that creativity is a luxury, something that we'll do after we've eaten. Our feeling here is that creativity is the thing that allows us to work how we get those basic needs met.'* The Laundromat Project is using art as a tool for social change, changing the realities of the people it's working with. They're piloting a project in schools and are hoping to develop more partnerships with schools over the coming months but see this area as a challenging one.

As with successful TO work, Kemi recognizes the importance of building solid relationships with communities: *'getting to the places is easy, getting to the people is more difficult'*. This is something that kept coming back throughout my time in the New York and in Brazil; that work with any lasting impact only really comes through meaningful, trusting, long-term relationships with the people you're working with. Too many projects fly in, and fly out again. Kemi and the team are piloting an arts education programme in Harlem that is shaped around an interesting methodology that encourages the people delivering the projects for young people to tap into their own creativity: *'we're working with a group of ten adults in Harlem who are invested in the livelihoods and the success of young people in the neighbourhood. They'll meet and make art themselves; connecting with their own creativity they'll also help us shape and design our programmes for young people out in the community. They know that community, they're our ears helping us make things relevant'*

As a white, middle class theatre practitioner I often find myself facilitating TO workshops with community groups from very different socio-economic backgrounds. That brings with it an interesting dynamic when talking about power and privilege and one that Kemi sees as being important to be mindful of in this kind of work. *'Privilege lives in many ways, it's skin colour, it's class, it's education, it's the way we talk. Privilege has many shades and artists are often being invited into communities where their privileges are quite apparent, so wanting to do socially engaged work and social practice is becoming more and more prevalent - but how do we do that in a way that is going to be really respectful of these communities?'* What TO does is to create a space that ensures that the people living in the communities are the people that shape the work, that their stories and experiences are what we see. I agree with Vincent from TONYC: *'It's a way of getting those stories heard in a respectful and ethical way, there's dignity there'*.

### The Armory Park Avenue

As a practitioner I've worked at community, grass-roots level and also with larger cultural institutions that operate at a different level, engaging different audiences and often with different objectives. I'm interested in what happens in the space between these two worlds: are they mutually exclusive or is there a way of the two seemingly conflicting worlds supporting each other in a way that goes beyond tokenistic Participation or Community Engagement programmes? During the fellowship I was

exposed to a number of different perspectives on this issue. The Armory on Park Avenue is arguably one of the most exciting and high profile cultural institutions in the US. Now run by Alex Poots who heads up the Manchester International Festival, The Armory prides itself on being *'a groundbreaking cultural institution that blurs the boundaries between high art and pop culture'*.<sup>14</sup> Through a friend and contact at the National Portrait Gallery, I met with Cassidy Jones, The Armory's Education Director. My trip coincided with an opportunity to see English actor Tim Crouch perform his surreal take on A Midsummers Night Dream, 'I Peasbottom', to a group of raucous young people from public schools in the Bronx.

In the heart of Manhattan's affluent upper east side, I asked Cassidy about the kind of young people The Armory looks to engage. *'The students we work with here are the students that need it most, we work with schools that have at least 90% free school lunches and we target schools with a lot of non-English speakers'*. She told me that the relationships they developed with the teaching artists and the schools they work with is key to the success of their youth engagement programme. Although the Armory's super objective isn't social change, the model seemed solid and it appears that the organisation and the individuals working there have a strong commitment to supporting young people's access to and understanding of the work they're doing. *'I work in a place where there's an executive director who believes in arts education. That is not true in too many organisations in New York; my boss is fascinated by exactly what we're talking about right now, puts money into it and believes in it'*. There's a clear progression route for young people: from spectator to participant to potential paid intern. *'We have our productions based programme, we have partnership schools programmes where we make residencies in schools that are year long. We also have our Youth Core programme which is our paid mentored internship programme with participants coming from our partner schools; those are the ones that largely engage with our artists and our work.'*

Some would argue that the kind of art and experience offered to young people that come through the doors of The Armory is inaccessible or far removed from the world of the majority of the people living in NYC. Cassidy recognizes that there's always a danger that the work in more formal cultural institutions can be quite impenetrable for audiences of any age. She feels that getting young people to engage with the work is essential. *'It's refreshing because if the work's bad, kids will say that, they don't try and do the self-censorship thing that we do as adults, they don't care that it was a million dollar project or the reputation of the artists. If they're learning to be consumers of art then they need to learn what they like and what they don't like. It's interesting, when the work in the drill hall'<sup>15</sup> hasn't been of exceptional quality, neither has the work that the young people have done in response to it'*.

What the Armory demonstrates is a large scale-cultural organization that values inclusion and youth engagement. Cassidy believes that large-scale cultural institutions in New York have a responsibility to provide access to all. *'So few students have any sort of engagement with these major cultural institutions which they actually have some ownership over just by being citizens of this city. The arts budgets are getting cut and I think the cultural institutions need to step in'*

The experiences in my four weeks in New York have given me valuable insight into the way that TO and forum theatre practices are being used to engage young people. I saw

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.armoryonpark.org>

<sup>15</sup> The main space in The Armory

first hand this working effectively and also met people who raised concerns about TO's limitations. I left NYC for Rio with a spring in my step and a bag full of questions.



## Brazil



TO project in schools with CTO Rio

### Centro de Teatro do Oprimido (CTO)

Arriving from New York to Rio, I was immediately struck by how different this phase of the fellowship would be. I'd been to Brazil seven years before, as a tourist, and had known that it was a country that I'd come back to. As my interest in TO and forum theatre has developed over the last decade, so too has my desire to spend time in Rio with CTO, the organization that Boal established in 1986 after 15 years of exile.

According to Geo Britto, who has worked with the organization for over twenty years, establishing CTO came from a *'need for everyone to participate in making culture. That culture should come from the people and be democratized and not be imposed from up above on the people'*.<sup>16</sup> I knew that to get as much out of the second phase of the fellowship as possible, I'd need to have at least a basic understanding of the language. I took Portuguese lessons and self-funded two months between the first and second phase of the fellowship. By the time I started the second phase I was able to communicate to a reasonable level and was running workshops through a combination of Portuguese and some key universal arm movements.

Augusto Boal died in May 2009. He was the founding father of the movement and by all accounts a warm and charismatic character who led with humility. Many of the Jokers who are now working with CTO had worked with Boal for years and know the games and exercises inside out. I was keen to learn more about how they're using

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Geo at CTO.



these techniques and how we can learn from the wealth of experiences within the organization. TO is now being used in over 70 countries worldwide and I was excited to be able to spend time with the people that helped shape that. In a talk given by Geo Britto in New York, he talked about GTO Maputo in Mozambique and how Alvim Costa, the director of the company, had come to CTO in 2002. He spent time with Boal and the team and had since gone back to Mozambique to set up the organisation that now has over 150 groups across the country, mainly tackling HIV/AIDS issues affecting rural communities. Katy Rubin at TONYC had spent three months at CTO in 2008 before heading back to New York and setting up the organization there. In the world of TO, all roads lead back to CTO Rio.

What I was reminded of throughout my time at CTO was how hard it is to separate the political from the artistic when exploring TO. At an early stage of his career Geo was excited by the way that TO connects the two. *'I started studying social sciences as a student but was always interested in theatre. When I found out about TO straight away I realized it was exactly this kind of theatre that I wanted to do. It's a technique that is able to be connected with the political and with the artistic. Of course all art has a connection with the political, but TO can make that connection to help change the reality of the people. That's still relevant today'*. This brings with it some challenges that I'll explore in more detail in the conclusion of this report.

During my time with CTO I supported a number of their current projects and took part in a training weekend for facilitators interested in learning TO techniques. It was useful and informative and I took a lot from the interactions I had with practitioners from around the world but at times I felt like I wasn't learning a huge amount that was new to me. The organization was delivering the same methodology that Boal had developed over the past thirty years and at times I found it hard to see new ideas coming through, or much progression. In terms of the fellowship and the original project objectives this encouraged me to think outside the box and really ask myself how TO can develop to best support young people in the UK in 2014 and beyond.



World TO day at CTO Rio

### Mare and Niteroi psychiatric hospital

CTO have recently secured funding for a three-year project working with young people in Mare, a complex web of 17 favelas with over 130,000 inhabitants and home to three of the heaviest drug cartels in the city. There is of course a lot to be celebrated in these socially and economically deprived urban communities, but drugs, crime and violence and the upheaval these things bring are a reality for most young people living here.

CTO will create groups of young people in Mare who in turn will create pieces of forum theatre that explore some of the challenges the groups are experiencing. The project has been shaped by extensive community consultation with the hope of reaching as much of this often fragmented community as possible. At the end of each year of the project, CTO will organize a large-scale community festival that celebrates the achievements of the group, giving the community an opportunity to come together and, through the presentations of the young people's forum theatre pieces, look at some of the challenges they're facing. Whilst I was in Rio in the run up to the FIFA World Cup, the city's military police entered Mare and occupied key areas, forcing the project to be put on hold. As well as the more unique challenges of the occupation of the favela by the military police, CTO have encountered a number of universal challenges when developing projects with and for young people: regular attendance, resistance of young people to travel or leave their own territories, incentive, the hook etc.<sup>17</sup>

Interestingly, the project in Mare is funded by Petrobras, a publically owned, national oil company who invest heavily in different arts and social development projects around the country. According to Geo at CTO, the tender process was challenging as the funders were unsure whether the project should fall under arts and culture or social development categories. It highlighted issues around where to best to place TO in terms of marrying the artistic and the political and the challenges that can come from this. *'It's interesting, when the people from the politics see TO they say 'abb this is art, this is the little theatre', they don't make the connection between the 'serious' things they are talking about and TO. And for the artists, they look at TO and they say 'abb, this is political, it's not art' and the people who make TO are stuck sometimes in the middle between the two'.*

Another challenge is due to the size of the community and the volatility of the current situation. Flavio Sanctum, a joker at CTO for a number of years and one time project participant, recognises the importance of partnership working to maximize the impact of the project. *'Mare is a big favela that has lots of problems, particularly now. But what this project can do is create a link between the different organisations and therefore also with the young people that live there. We're creating three different groups in Mare and this is a big step towards building some bridges in the community'.*

Monique Rodrigues, also a Joker and previous actor within the organization, feels that the project could go a long way to resolving some of the conflicts in the community, primarily by bringing together the different opposing factions within it. NGOs, police, schools, young people – these groups, at present, don't have a platform to engage in constructive conversations about progress and change: *'the project is definitely a constructive force in this situation, we're forming groups that can include the right people in the conversation and that's needed'.* Monique started with CTO as a 13 year-old in a troupe run by Barbara

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<sup>17</sup> Interviews with all project staff at CTO during my time in Rio.

Santos and Geo Britto. She wanted to learn more and shadowed the Jokers at CTO's mental health group, slowly starting to take more responsibility for running games and exercises during the rehearsals. She believes, like many other practitioners I met, that the ethics behind the work are what makes it so important: *'It's the philosophy, it's fundamental, not only as an artistic form but also the civil, the political. It's useful because it helps us problematize the Oppressions, it helps bring about revolution because we're looking at things from a new perspective, there's a new language for the fight'*.

The project in Mare is taking shape and delivery has started since I've returned to the UK. I'm interested in how the project develops and I believe there is scope for potential collaborations with groups I'll be working with in the UK.

As well as this project, I was involved in a number of CTO's workshops at a psychiatric hospital in a community on the outskirts of Rio. Project staff worked with patients at the hospital on a play that looked at the stigma and discrimination around mental health issues face, particularly when it comes to finding work. CTO have been working with the hospital for 15 years. The group, which was set up by Boal, has performed a number of plays over the years and has been a reference point for a lot of CTO's more recent work with other community groups. I was welcomed into the rehearsal and was shown a snapshot of a world very unlike my own. There was a calm within the chaos and a lightness that ran through the rehearsals I attended. The subject was heavy and the situation of the group was delicate but at no point did it feel weighty or upsetting.

The partnership with the hospital is by now, a solid one. However a number of the staff at CTO told me that it's taken this long to really be able to see meaningful long-term change. The project I recently finished in schools in East London was delivered over ten weeks. We ran weekly sessions of an hour and had around twenty hours of contact time with the young people. By the end of those fifteen hours, I needed to prove that 80% of those young people had changed, that their behaviour and their relationships with their teacher and peers had improved. It was a tough gig. The project in Mare sounds more sympathetic to the reality of the impact of the project on the lives of the young people it's supporting; the evaluation tools are focused more on the qualitative rather than the quantitative. The long-lasting relationship with the psychiatric hospital in Niterio shows how important it is, whenever possible, to foster meaningful, long term relationships with partner organisations and community stakeholders.

### The spoken word

During my time with CTO, I saw a lot of forum theatre. Almost without exception, I was struck by how little dialogue there was: many forum pieces contained no dialogue at all. Boal's games and techniques take us through a process of rediscovering our bodies and reconnecting with our sensory experience. This can often be challenging for groups of young people not used to connecting with themselves and each other in this way. Image Theatre, one of Boal's techniques to encourages people to develop the expressive abilities of the body, is key to the work. Boal believes that *'the theatrical experience should begin not with something alien to the people but with the bodies of those who agree to participate in the experiment'*.<sup>18</sup> So much of the arsenal of his work and the methodology

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<sup>18</sup> Theatre of the Oppressed, 1979 – Augusto Boal

we follow as TO practitioners encourages us to perceive things differently and to imagine new realities. Boal wanted us to *'consider theatre as a language, capable of being utilized by any person with or without artistic talent'*.

At the celebration to mark International TO day on the 17<sup>th</sup> March, I saw a performance of a play by the Magdelenas group<sup>19</sup>. The play was entirely non-verbal and made up of a sequence of scenes that told a clear story without any words. The piece used lots of music and movement, it was funny and moving and the audience understood it. Coming from the UK, and having seen a lot of forum theatre in this country, that surprised me. There are countless ways of telling a story and there have been times, as a practitioner and an audience member, where I've felt frustrated by the importance given to the spoken word. Flavio at CTO feels that the spoken word and images are not mutually exclusive: *'The world of words is more usual, we're used to it and especially in England. Words are really important but they're not everything. The brain understands the body, it's a language that speaks to us all and encourages us to use another way of perception. The image compliments the word and the word compliments the image'*. Monique sums it up nicely. *'It's much easier to make a scene when you use words but there are lots of ways of doing things. It's harder to tell the story through image, sound, rhythm, movement but sometimes it's more interesting'*.

In the UK, forum theatre's reliance on naturalism and the spoken word for interventions is naturalistic; people enter the stage to try out an idea and the success or failure of that intervention is down to the words the spect-actor<sup>20</sup> chooses to use; it becomes about an intellectual, analytical response rather than an emotional or physical response to a given oppression. This was an interesting observation for me, and something that I come back to in the final chapter of the report.

### Further exploration

Again, as in New York, I was interested in using the fellowship as an opportunity to get a broad understanding of the different tools used to engage young people on the margins, in order to best develop my own practice and come back with as many ideas as possible.

Peoples Palace Project (PPP), run by Paul Heritage, has been at the heart of cultural exchange between Brazil and the UK for the last twenty years.<sup>21</sup> I met with Paul whilst in Rio and he was able to introduce me to a number of useful contacts who are all using the arts as a tool for social change. Having worked with Boal sporadically since 1986, after having initially been part of a workshop in the UK, he has an interesting perspective on the work and the reason it was initially embraced: *'Brazil loves methodology. People and practitioners were excited by the methodology that Boal brought to the work, before him the last person was probably Grotowski'*<sup>22</sup>. Whilst he still uses some traditional TO exercises in his work, he feels that the real legacy that Boal left behind is Invisible Theatre. This is when actors rehearse and perform scenes out on the streets, and is intended to provoke and engage audiences who are unaware that the drama they are seeing unravel in front of them is staged. Actors leave the street, or café, or restaurant without ever

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<sup>19</sup> A troupe started by Barbara Santos, Boal's Joker for over twenty years at CTO, that look at issues affecting women. There are now all women Magdalena groups in a number of other countries.

<sup>20</sup> Boal's term for the audience of a forum theatre piece, engaged rather than passive spectators.

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.peoplespalaceprojects.org.uk>

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Paul Heritage, Peoples Palace Projects

revealing themselves as actors, the hope being that the conversations continue long after they are gone. Paul feels it *'has a clear purpose, it borrows the power of territory – the space immediately has its own realities and there is power in that, not in a conventional theatre'*. He feels that the reality of the situation is the power of the work, that the identity of the audience and the space is as important as the identity of the performers: *'the reality of the piece of theatre does have the power for revolution'*. I come back to the work PPP are doing in the UK and in Brazil in the final chapter of the report.

He talked about his most powerful experiences with TO being some of the prison work he did in the late 1990's and early 2000's, when the line between fiction and reality was often blurred *'If you go into a room where the issues are real, that's where you get good work. With the prison work, the space is real, the prisoners performing as guards in the space, in the guards' real uniforms, that's where the power of the work comes from; it's going to the danger zone, that's all we want in art, TO has to go to the level of taking it to these places'*.

One of the introductions was with the Agencia de Redes para Juventude programme<sup>23</sup>, one of many examples of vibrant, youth-led organisations in Brazil engaging young people through creative and dynamic interventions. Set up in 2011 by the charismatic artist and theatre practitioner Marcus Faustini, Agencia gives young people living in Rio's favelas the opportunity to design and deliver creative social entrepreneurial projects that positively impact the communities they're living in. Young people pitch their project ideas to a panel of professionals, with successful projects being given an investment of R\$ 10,000 (equivalent to approximately £3,000) to be able to deliver them. Over six hundred young people have participated in the programme since its inception. The Agencia programme is made up of a network of university students, artists and activists who also receive grants to support the young people. Having completed the programme, young people receive a diploma and access to a growing network of post project support. At each cycle, there's an event that brings together Rio's leading thinkers, artists and business people to meet the young people involved and think collectively about ways of developing the work and the support they may need. Through events like this, new partnerships are created and the profile of the organization grows.

In 2012, Peoples Palace Project set up a partnership between the Agencia programme in Brazil, Battersea Arts Centre<sup>24</sup> in London and Contact Theatre<sup>25</sup> in Manchester. Labelled The Agency in the UK and using similar methodologies, the partnership hopes to facilitate a cultural exchange of ideas and experiences between the UK and Brazil groups. Since returning to the UK I've met both the Manchester and the London teams as they embark on the second year of the programme and am interested in developing this connection as the project grows in the UK. Agencia's mission is *'to guarantee the right for 15 – 29 year olds living in Rio's favelas to begin their lives with the experience of being protagonists in their own futures'*.<sup>26</sup> Similar to forum theatre and TO methodologies, the idea of the individual being the protagonist in their own lives is at the heart of the work. The more I learn, the more I realize that successful youth engagement is about instilling this belief in young people: that given appropriate support they can be agents of genuine, long term change.

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<sup>23</sup> Known more colloquially as 'Agencia' – direct translation is the Agency for youth networks. <http://agenciarj.org>

<sup>24</sup> [https://www.bac.org.uk/content/20400/create\\_with\\_us/the\\_agency](https://www.bac.org.uk/content/20400/create_with_us/the_agency)

<sup>25</sup> <http://contactmcr.com/projects/its-your-turn/community/the-agency-makers-of-change/>

<sup>26</sup> <http://agenciarj.org>



Marcus Faustini and the work of Agencia seems to be part of the next generation of groups working with young people in Brazil and the new communities created. Faustini believes that his goal is to ultimately put himself out of a job by investing the money into the young people themselves and not outside facilitators delivering 'to' the young people. He is quite critical of work in the UK as he feels that the money isn't well spent and that the young people aren't given the opportunities to develop the work themselves with any real meaning. He feels that if young people are still being taught how to do things then that needs to change.<sup>27</sup>



Workshop with Nos do Morro

I was also introduced to the project staff at Nos do Morro<sup>28</sup>, an ambitious and high-achieving theatre company for young people set up in by a group of artists and young people in the Vidigal favela during the late 1980's. The now internationally recognized company supports young people from Rio's most deprived areas, using high quality theatre training as their primary tool of engagement. They operate at a high level artistically and today the company's productions are staged in principal theatres in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo. In 2006 their staging of Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona* was presented in Stratford-on-Avon at the invitation of the RSC's 'Complete Works' festival. Towards the end of my time in Rio I ran a theatre workshop with a group of young adults, many of who had been with the company for a number of years and had aspirations to make it as professional actors. I ran the workshop mainly in

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<sup>27</sup> Conversations with project staff at Agencia in Rio gave me an insight into their ways of working and approach to youth engagement.

<sup>28</sup> <http://67.228.166.162/~nosdomor/index.php>

Portuguese which was challenging, but it was good to be forced out of my comfort zone. I used mainly TO exercises and it was interesting to deliver a relatively familiar workshop in a completely new context. The group were receptive to what I was offering and the workshop provided them a space to engage with each other in a way they may not have done before, perhaps moving away from some of the more conventional ‘acting’ exercises they been used to.



I also ran two TO workshops with AfroReggae<sup>29</sup>, another well established and now internationally recognized group that uses music as a tool for engaging young people in particularly violent favelas in the city. Outside the workshop in the Vigario Geral favela were groups of teenagers openly carrying machine guns over their shoulders. You walk through them as you enter the favela and I was struck by how normal this is for these young people. Un-pacified favelas like Vigario Geral are often governed by the drug cartels, made up primarily of young people from these communities. Frequent tension with police and neighbouring drug factions are part of the ongoing challenges. I'd never been to a place where the state has no control and to run a theatre workshop as armed teens watched on from the wings was unlike anything I've experienced before. The workshop, again delivered in Portuguese and seemingly met with positive feedback, was yet another example of the appetite young people have for creativity and play and the positive impact this can have on people in the most challenging of environments.

There are a number of NGO's working in favelas like Mare and Vigario Geral with a primary focus of offering young people an opportunity to engage in something other than the drugs trade, often through the arts but not exclusively. Luta Pela Paz (Fight for Peace)<sup>30</sup> is an organisation that I've worked with in London and was started in Rio by an ex-boxer from England 13 years ago. They work in Mare and other areas of

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<sup>29</sup> <http://www.afroreggae.org>

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.fightforpeace.net>

armed conflict, using boxing and martial arts as their tool for engaging young people. They have a strong education and personal development programme running alongside the sports and now also work internationally training other organisations in how to use and adapt their methodologies. Traditionally young have either been part of the drugs trade or victim to it. What groups like AfroReggae, Nos do Morro and Fight for Peace have done is invent a new identity for the young people that is neither part of the drug trade or victim to it. This new identity is powerful and empowered. Engaging these young people, particularly young men, wasn't happening before. These organisations are giving young people the opportunity to see themselves differently and to begin to define a new identity.

My time in Brazil was fascinating and brought up as many questions as answers. I came back stimulated, energized and ready to act on and share the learnings I had absorbed.



## Conclusion and Recommendations

I set out to understand how forum theatre techniques and models of working with young people, in developed and developing countries, can be used most effectively to fit a UK context. I'm interested in what's next for forum theatre and how students and professionals in the UK working with marginalized young people can benefit from the people I met and the experiences I had. I have come away from the fellowship with wealth of positive experiences and have also gained a greater understanding of some of the limitations and challenges around the practice that I feel need to be considered in order to maximize the support that can be offered to young people in the UK.

In this final chapter I will look at some of these challenges and propose some ideas about how to address them. A lot of these challenges and recommendations overlap and whilst separating them seemed at times problematic, I also felt that for clarity it would be good look at them individually. To build on the recommendations I will also explore how I hope to implement some of them in my work moving forward. I will also revisit the original objectives of the fellowship and examine whether they have been achieved.

## Challenges/Limitations

### TO in 2014 – where does it go from here?

This was the central question that helped me shape the application for the fellowship. I came back to it throughout the project and the same question is shaping my thinking moving forward. What are the nature of the oppressions for young people in the UK today and is TO still a relevant and useful way of engaging with them? Flavio Sanctum at CTO thinks it is: *'TO has always responded to the world around it, the context of society will determine exactly where TO needs to go next, just as it always has done'*. How as practitioners working with young people, in London in 2014, do we adapt to the social and political context we're operating in? How does the form need to change to best support young people today?

### TO's socio - political context

Augusto Boal's work and over-arching ideology is linked closely to Marxist ideas and vocabulary. Boal's fight is a fight for the people. His work challenges the status quo, setting out to provoke, point fingers and ask questions. Born out of the brutal military dictatorship in Brazil in the late 1960's, TO is rooted in change, activism and social action. The methodology supports people to look at themselves, then look at a shared, communal experience, and then ultimately to the wider social and political context. The work is more often than not critical of the 'system' where the oppressor operates in an increasingly capitalist and consumer driven society. For Iman at Ashtar Theatre in Palestine, TO pushes audiences into uncomfortable positions, which brings with it a number of challenges. This can be threatening for audiences, and also for the funders who make it possible to do the work in the first place.

It raises interesting questions around the ethics of funding TO and the dilemma of taking money from the very same people that are often representative of some of the problems. For Geo at CTO there has to be some give: *'You need to have some flexibility,*

*you have to play the game sometimes. If they want to support you, be open to receiving that support, realise that no-one's perfect, especially governments'*

### **The magic can be used against the wizard - anyone can pick up the book**

TO and the arsenal of games, exercises and techniques are now being used all over the world with different, often conflicting objectives. Some argue that it's become a franchise and that the original intention has been lost over the years. Managers are using the techniques to make their work force more productive. Teachers are using the techniques in schools to make their students behave better. Does this matter? Is it still TO if we come in with an agenda and pre-conceived ideas about what we want participants to come away with? For Geo Britto at CTO, *'TO does nothing, it's the people who use it, the people use the technique. Of course we know 1 million people who say they are using TO and just because you say you are using TO doesn't mean you're doing good work. You can get TO and empty the political but it's not true TO, it can do bad things, you need to understand the content and the form'* For Geo this is a fundamental question in understanding what next for TO, *'...you have to be careful because the magic can be used against the wizard...there's lots of people saying 'I make TO' and it's not'*.

### **Managing expectations and quantifying success**

Again, this challenge is linked to points above and the ones below. Throughout the trip, questions came up around how we measure the value of the work and by whose standard. Sophie at TONYC talked about some of the challenges around this. *'Doing something like TO in spaces where the measures of success are measured differently to the pedagogy of TO is challenging and sometimes it's not even the space, it's people outside the space who fund it. A constant with us is that people aren't always attending regularly. It's the people who are signing off the grants who say that increased or regular attendance is a sign of a positive effect and so that's a challenge'*. The challenge around monitoring and evaluating the impact of this kind work to funders is not limited to TO but does have a significant impact. Sophie also finds it difficult to know how best to articulate some of the smaller moments that often occur when creating a piece of forum theatre. *'As a person, I know that one day or one moment I've experienced that occurs in the rehearsal room can make a big difference to me and how I see the world, as it can for the participants. I know that it's likely that we're creating those moments all the time for people but they're so personal they don't fit into a model of measuring it or even communicating it sometimes'*. TO doesn't work with clear outcomes that can be easily measured in a conventional monitoring sense. It operates in the realm of uncertainty and deals in questions more than answers. Barbara Santos in Brazil captured this in her workshop in Croatia: *'Forum theatre presents questions that can't necessarily be written down. Forum also isn't about answering the question, if the audience leaves the play with more questions that's OK. It's important that the forum opens up the question, opens up 'dialogue' rather than 'monologue' and that it doesn't narrow the boundaries. When making forum theatre it's important not to imprison the question of the play.'*

### **Focusing on the problem**

TO looks at what isn't working. We're presented with plays about challenges and failures in order for audiences to collectively brainstorm solutions. This can make it a hard sell for young people who are already showing signs of disengaging and who may not want to look at what's not working for them. It's arguably easier to encourage a young person to bang a drum alongside his or her friends and be taken away from the

troubles, than it is to be asked to focus on the hard bits. TO is asking for something different, the transformation comes from within and for that to happen there has to be a process of self examination and honest reflection that often isn't comfortable. Most people also find it easier to witness a young person making it out of poverty and violence through a sports or music initiative than being confronted with some of the issues that forum theatre presents. There are arguments for and against these approaches and the fellowship has shown me that the two are by no means mutually exclusive: both are hoping to achieve similar goals, transforming the realities of the young people they are working with.

### **Preaching to the converted?**

Another key areas I kept coming back to during the trip was around how best to include 'the oppressor' in the conversation. Boal's critics have suggested that TO's focus on the individual and what they can do to change their reality, doesn't allow space to examine, interrogate and ultimately change the wider social and political structures that individual is operating in. How do we make sure we are including the right people in the conversation? Vincent at TONYC is well aware that *'people coming to our shows have chosen to come, they already want change, they're usually pretty liberal'*. Katy Rubin at TONYC sees the work they do with the actors in the rehearsal room as being a vehicle to opening up the conversation, by showing audiences in New York that the problems they see in the plays TONYC produce are everyone's problems.

### **Valuing the aesthetic**

The UK is the land of Shakespeare and Chaucer, we value the spoken and the written word. Whilst there are countless examples of brilliant theatre in the UK that doesn't rely on the verbal, most of the forum theatre I've seen has been naturalistic and has followed a linear narrative. We're often presented with angry characters and an 'Eastenders' style of acting. There's shouting and stamping of feet and lots of talking and quickly I lose interest. In a workshop once with Cardboard Citizens' Artistic Director and long time collaborator with Boal, Adrian Jackson, he told us that 'Theatre of the Oppressed shouldn't be Theatre of the Depressed'. This has stuck with me.

John Leo at TONYC wants audiences *'to leave the theatre affected not only in a political way but also in an aesthetic way, that they come away thinking 'wow that was a really well put together piece of theatre'*. I've realized that if we value the social or political intent of the work more than the artistic quality, we're in trouble. In Brazil there were whole forum theatre pieces without any dialogue and the story and the oppressions were as clear as any forum piece I've seen in the UK.

For Chris Vine in New York, Theatre is the key word. *'Whether you're saying Theatre of the Oppressed, or Forum Theatre, or Theatre in Education, Applied Theatre, that word theatre is front and centre, it's not just an animated discussion, so where are your theatre sensibilities and what aesthetics are you working to? Why our work is so complex is that you need the theatre skills, you need a theatre sensibility but you also need a pedagogy. Freireian pedagogy is what guides us and if you work through that there are so many ways of looking at oppression and power, and community'*. Talking about the youth theatre at CAT, he says *'it's about community, it's about interrogating the lives of those young people whilst also being wedded to high quality performance, they learn from each other, it's amazingly stimulating'*.

## Fragmentation and communities

Working with different community groups in different parts of the city is can often feel disjointed. Brilliant work is happening in pockets, often behind closed doors and without the recognition and profile it deserves. Both CTO in Rio and TONYC work closely with partner organisations and their members. A day in New York could see me travelling from Brooklyn to the Bronx, back down to Manhattan and then ultimately back to Brooklyn. On one day in Rio I spent over 7 hours on public transport to attend two workshops. As well as the logistical frustrations of navigating big cities, I was struck by how important a physical space is when working with young people. It provides a constant and stable place in an often chaotic and unpredictable world. Sophie at TONYC feels that *'having access to a space, our own space, where we can do our activities, would be a priority. There's something about being anchored, at the moment we're not in control of space or time and rehearsals get pushed around'*.

In the arts, the artistic language of particular groups is closely linked to the geographical places they're born out of. In Brazil this seems particularly apparent: *'The artistic language of particular groups in Brazil is driven by the relationship between the aesthetic world of samba, theatre or circus and the territory of the groups. Organisations like AfroReggae, Circo Crescer e Viver, Nos de Morro, Fight for Peace, Cuña amongst others seem to have got it right. They are all big, high cultural organisations that work at grassroots level with high artistic quality and ambitions'*. Paul Heritage raises interesting points about the relationship between the aesthetic and the geographical and how grassroots, community-led organisations in Brazil are aiming for artistic excellence whilst maintaining the social driver. For him, CTO may be working all over Rio but they've got a voice and a language that is distinct. *'What CTO do brilliantly is get the language right, make sure the forum works. They've played the games a million times, that language is something they've developed over thirty years'*

## How do we hand over work to the young people?

A question that I constantly ask myself as a practitioner is how we hand over ownership of the work to the young people we're working with. When do we step back and how do we genuinely empower young people and give them the space to participate in the decision making process? What I saw throughout the fellowship is examples of organisations doing this effectively and with a big impact on different levels.

## Make a living doing the work you want to do!

For Sophie at TONYC, the dilemma is a delicate one. *'I feel like I run about a lot against the challenges, I probably could get paid teaching TO techniques to college students, or people who had an interest in theatre and its hard to think about who needs the work most but at TONYC we're trying to focus on making the work with people who are experiencing very real, very daily struggles. And that's the space where we're not getting paid, and where nobody has much time, including the participants, and we live in a culture where focusing on art is so not supported and one's personal development through art as a non artist is really not supported.'* Alex Santiago-Jirau at The Forum Project <sup>31</sup> in NYC won't charge people for his workshops, he feels, *'it's not about making a living out of the TO'*. He has a number of other 'hats' that pay the bills including a full time job that isn't to do with TO. This tension was a very real one for a lot of

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<sup>31</sup> <http://theforumproject.org> - met with Alex during my time in NYC.

the practitioners I met during the fellowship – we all need some kind of work to be able to live our lives, but that can often mean doing things that conflict our own ethical goals and ambitions.

## Recommendations

**1) Work with genuine injustice and with real issues** – The trip has shown me that TO is most effective and most powerful when used with people and communities whose rights as human beings are being denied, where the issues are real and highlight genuine injustice. TO's strength comes from a place of commitment to the issues, themes and ideas in the room. What I saw at TONYC was an organization that understood the ethics and pedagogy that drove Boal and inform the work in its purest sense. They are creating powerful and transformative pieces of theatre that tell stories of genuine oppression and injustice straight from the mouths of the people experiencing them. I've seen that Boal's techniques allow people experiencing real injustice a space to explore that.

**2) Include the Oppressor** - The trip has shown me that as practitioners we need to be thinking about how we promote dialogue with those who don't want to be included and who often don't want to stick by the values that dialogue requires. Identify the support already there and work with them as participants in the creative process. TONYC and CTO are both using forum theatre as a pre-cursor to legislative theatre. From what I saw in both phases, this is where TO has real power to effect change on a broader scale. They understand the importance of having advocates of the work in the right places to broaden the reach and impact of the work. Flavio at CTO believes it's vital to include the oppressors as early in the process as possible. *'It's so important to include them in the work right from the start, make sure they are part of the initial conversations right from the start to the end, TO is about the liberation of the Oppressed and for that to happen you need the Oppressors there too.'* For Geo, it's about understanding which approach to use when: *'You have to have different strategies for the different people you're approaching. For the people with the arts, you need to show the aesthetics, the more beautiful the piece is the more political it can be. When the people go to the park and shout and make speeches, people aren't going to listen but when you make a play people listen, that's powerful for the people in politics.'*

**3) Do what you really believe** - I met a number of practitioners during the trip who were also trying to marry the financial question with their own ethical commitment to the work. There seemed to be a tension; they need some kind of work to be able to live their lives but that can often mean doing things that conflict with their own ethical goals. Jan Cohen Cruz, a scholar and former TO practitioner gave me some belief when I met here in a café in Brooklyn: *'The more you do that you really believe is effective the more you'll be able to do the kind of work you want. I've seen people over the years be able to find ways to make the kind of work they want to do that is line with their politics and ethics'.* There was a feeling with the majority of the TO practitioners I met during the fellowship that they woke up and knew exactly why they were doing what they were doing. The challenge of the work was something that people were drawn towards and a desire to not lose the rights their parents and grandparents had fought for over the years.

**4) Respond to what's happening around you** – Boal's work seemed always to respond to the social and political context it was operating in, his aim was to always create a space for dialogue. As a practitioner I feel liberated and excited when I've seen examples of this working in both New York and Brazil. Monique from CTO believes that TO is still as relevant now as it was in the 1970's because people will always need tools to help them reflect on their realities in order to be able to change them. There is however, still a need for it to change, *'Boal's books from the 70's are different from the activities*

*now, his work is changing and adapting and should continue to do so, the work comes as a response to the social and the political'.*

Boal wanted us to use the techniques he created however we saw fit, to play with them, rework them, and make them best fit the world they're being used in, both socially and politically. Use the techniques/games/exercises in your tool box as a practitioner but trust and embrace other art forms and techniques to compliment the TO work. I agree with Flavio when he says that, *'TO isn't going to stop the war in Iraq, or end the famines of Africa. Theatre or Art isn't going to resolve some of the problems in the world and TO may not be the right form for taking on some of the battles. You need to choose what's in your toolbox'.*

**5) Value the aesthetic** - What I saw in both New York and Brazil, in different ways, was forum theatre that valued the aesthetic. If what we're presented with is bad theatre ultimately we switch off. We may empathise with the protagonist and understand the issues but ultimately we lose interest, minimizing potential political or social impact. The work needs to hold its own artistically, audiences need to be engaged and provoked by the stories and the characters but they also need to enjoy the experience of watching these stories unfold. Boal used to work with some of the best musicians in Brazil and realised that how a piece of theatre looks, sounds and feels is important. The forum pieces I saw in Rio pulsed with music and dance and rhythm, tapping in to the rich cultural traditions that Brazil offers. Our reliance in the UK on the spoken and written word brings with it some interesting challenges for practitioners using TO. Done badly it can be heavy and depressing and make you want to run to the hills. If it's done well it can be transformative, creative and ultimately life changing.

I asked Geo at CTO how much he thought TO was defined by the cultural context it's created in and how can we as UK practitioners be encouraging a less naturalistic style of performance? *'TO is part of the culture of the people: Africa, India, it changes massively. Firstly, it doesn't mean that plays with only words are bad and plays with only image are good, that's important, sometimes it's like a trap, you can mix the two, it depends on the situation. It's important not to forbid any of it. In UK, the land of Shakespeare, the word is important, but the challenge for you is how you mix the two, use more image exercises, use many different techniques... ask people to show you their problem only through the image, or sound. Start at the very beginning of the process using the image, from the start, that helps... the Aesthetics of the Oppressed exercises help with this'.*

As well as the lecture at NYU, Geo also ran a couple of workshops on 'The Aesthetics of the Oppressed'. The idea is to bring poetry, art, music and dance together, to be able to approach the work from different angles. It felt refreshing and liberating to be able to tap in to these different art forms and approach the work differently to how I had previously.

**6) Hand over work to the young people** - What I saw in New York and Brazil were models that gave young people the opportunity to develop personally and professionally within a supportive and creative framework. TONYC's Joker In Training programme gives actors in the troupes opportunities to develop their facilitation skills through practical experiential learning. Moon, Mike and Vincent are all now facilitating workshops and there's a clear progression route. This is happening at CTO, Agencia, AfroReggae, Nos de Morro and many organisations I met during the trip and as a result creating genuine, long term change for the people involved. It's not rocket science but the move away from delivery 'to' participants, to delivery 'with' them is only ever going to be a positive development. *'The dream is to be able to train up*

*the actors to be able to deliver their own projects so that they're not reliant on us to come up with the projects'. Sophie at TONYC. For Alex at the Forum Project, there's a similar dream: 'What I hope for, the ideal, is to create a space where young people can access these techniques, not in a top down, academy type way like with other art forms, but access them, train them up not just for a workshop or a weekend or a summer but some substantial training. I'm a core believer that young people should engage in the process but not be set up for failure. They shouldn't just be introduced to the techniques and then waved goodbye to. It's the responsibility of those of us that engage young people in the work on a regular basis to really engage in training them to become facilitators'.*

### **Original Objectives:**

1. To explore how forum theatre techniques are being used effectively as a tool for social and individual change amongst marginalised young people – to understand different techniques and models of working with young people in developed and developing countries and explore how that can be used most effectively in a UK context.

In terms of the first objective, I saw TO and forum theatre techniques being used effectively throughout the fellowship. TONYC and CTO Rio were two great organisations to learn from and absorb some examples of good practice that I can now bring to the work that's happening in the UK. I also saw challenges and limitations, which is as valid as seeing what is working well. I see the fellowship as being a piece of work that can feed into a much bigger conversation. I wanted the experience to be able to support and develop the work that's already happening in the UK, and hopefully provoke more thinking around the subject. As I mentioned at the beginning of the report I've come back with more questions than answers and I think that's a good thing. I hope that practitioners familiar with TO and the techniques will find it useful as well as those who may not be so familiar with Boal or forum theatre.

2. To inform, strengthen and develop the practice of students and professionals (teachers, social workers, youth and community workers, arts practitioners, academics) working with marginalized young people in the UK.

Since returning to the UK the momentum has been growing. I've organized an event where I've been able to share some of my experiences and learnings with a group of professionals - some theatre based, some not – all of whom are interested in the arts, young people and social change. There was a feeling amongst the group that they would like to do more practical and theoretical exploration of some of the ideas and questions raised during the fellowship. We have agreed to meet in the Autumn and I hope that this group will grow and develop over the next few months and beyond, creating work and acting as a space for reflection and development. Again, I hope the fellowship adds to an ongoing dialogue around effective youth engagement and how we use the arts as a tool for social change. I'm in conversation with a number of Universities in London about how the fellowship can support undergraduates and MA students and hope to deliver a two day Laboratory at Queen Marys to share my findings and engage students in some of the issues that have been come out. Goldsmiths and St Marys are also keen to look at ways of developing the project over the next six months.

3. To create a network of young people who are using forum theatre techniques to work through some of the challenges in their lives. To encourage and



support both intercultural dialogue and global citizenship between young people in UK, Brazil and the US.

The third objective I also see as being an ongoing project. The groups of young people I met in the US and Brazil had an energy and commitment to the issues they were engaging with that reminded me of work that I've done in the UK with similar groups. While the context can be very different, the wants and the needs of the young people can be almost identical. Moving forward there are a number of exciting possible collaborations with some of the groups I met: TONYC's groups of young actors, CAT's youth theatre, CTO's group in Mare, Agencia and Nos do Morro in Rio – all international groups that are using similar methods to explore the world around them and understand themselves and each other better. There's a growing number of practitioners and organisations that I'm connected to in the UK that could benefit from this: Contact in Manchester, BAC in London, The British Council, Cardboard Citizens' young company ACT Now. I'm starting projects in the Autumn with groups of young people in Walthamstow, Newham and in schools in Harrow. I'm working with a youth theatre in Palestine and see cross-cultural collaboration being at the centre of my work moving forward whilst building solid foundations in the UK.

I've seen first hand how it's possible to marry artistic quality with social intent and that we shouldn't accept anything less than this. I've been inspired and challenged and made connections with organisations in New York and Brazil whose work has shown me where I want to focus my attention. TO is theatre in its rawest, most brutal form; it can survive with minimal resources and the content will always be there – everybody has a story, everybody has an oppression they can connect with.

I hope that this report conveys concrete, tangible recommendations for how we use the fellowship to develop forum theatre with young people in the UK over the next chapter. We're at a time where the movement and the techniques being used have the potential to change the lives of countless young people in the UK and I feel that the fellowship has shown me how this might be possible. The work has to include the right people at the right stage of the process, and has to be of the highest quality.

I would like to thank the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for the opportunity to explore this in more depth and bring back some valuable experiences which I hope will have a big impact, now and for years to come.