

Performance and Development: Some Reflections on the Relationship Between Theatre, Community and Social Change

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Abstract

A version of this paper was originally written in 2004 to be studied by volunteer teaching artists working with the Youth Onstage! Community Performance School in New York City. Youth Onstage!, which recruits its participants from New York City's poorest neighborhoods, is a youth program of the All Stars Project, Inc. (ASP) and grows out of the Castillo Theatre. It was meant to introduce these teachers to the history and methodology of these organizations. This is essentially a subjective, experiential paper, a reflection, by an active participant, on 30 years of community organizing, theatre making and discovery. It unpacks some of the history and practice—along with the self-study and reflection—that has gone into building the Castillo Theatre and some of its sister organizations in the United States. Although the experience it describes has been informed by theory (in particular, that of Karl Marx, Lev Vygotsky, Fred Newman and Lois Holzman), it is not a theoretical or research paper, and makes no claim to being a scholarly or objective work. To the extent it has been researched, the research consists primarily of what has come to be called “participatory research.” As such, its stance is clearly subjective—and the gaze of that subjective stance is itself somewhat variable. The first person plural “we” that is used throughout sometimes refers to the author, sometimes to the Castillo Theatre where he now serves as artistic director, sometimes to the All Stars Project, and, most often, to the larger network of organizations and activities that calls itself the “development community,” of which Castillo and the All Stars are a part. In the end, the views expressed here are those of the author and are not meant to represent the institutional views of either Castillo or the All Stars.

Keywords

Performance. Community. Development. Alienation. Practical-Critical Activity.

Resumo

Uma versão deste artigo foi originalmente escrita em 2004, para servir na capacitação de professores/artistas voluntários, que trabalhavam junto ao projeto “Youth Onstage!” (Jovens no Palco!) da Escola Comunitária de Performance em Nova Iorque. “Youth Onstage!”, o qual recruta os seus participantes nos bairros mais pobres de Nova Iorque, é um programa para jovens do “All Stars Project, Inc.” (ASP) e nasce da extensa experiência do Castillo Theatre (Teatro Castillo). O artigo foi concebido para introduzir esses professores à história e metodologia dessas organizações.

Trata-se, em sua essência, de uma contribuição experiencial e subjetiva, baseada na reflexão e nas descobertas de um participante ativo de trinta anos de organização de teatro comunitário. Ela revela um pouco da história e da prática, junto com o autoestudo e reflexão, que alimentam a construção do Teatro Castillo e de algumas de suas organizações irmãs nos Estados Unidos. Embora a experiência que ele descreve seja informada pela teoria (em particular, a de Karl Marx, Lev Vygotsky, Fred Newman e Lois Holzman), não é um trabalho teórico e não tem pretensão de ser um trabalho acadêmico ou objetivo. Na medida em que tem sido pesquisado, o que apresentamos consiste basicamente no que veio a ser chamado de “pesquisa participativa”. Como tal, a sua abordagem é claramente subjetiva e os pontos de vista assumidos, dentro dessa abordagem, são também um pouco variáveis. Assim, a primeira pessoa do plural “nós”, que é usada ao longo do texto, pode se referir ao autor, ao Teatro Castillo onde ele agora atua como diretor artístico, ou, por vezes, ao “All Stars Project”; na maioria das vezes, refere-se à maior rede de organizações e atividades que se autodefine de “comunidade de desenvolvimento”, da qual o Castillo e o All Stars Projects são partes. As conclusões tiradas no final pertencem ao autor e não representam a visão institucional do Castillo Theatre ou do All Star Project.

Palavras-chave

Performance. Desenvolvimento. Comunidade. Alienação. Atividade Prático-Crítica.

PERFORMANCE AS EVERYDAY ACTIVITY

While the Castillo Theatre has a 30-year history as a community-based experimental political theatre and recognition in the theatre world, it is also the case that both Castillo and its performance training school, Youth Onstage!, are programs of a larger international non-profit organization, the All Stars Project (ASP). The ASP has sponsored experimental theatre and performance-based development programs for youth and adults for over three decades. All Stars offers a wide range of programs that include hip-hop talent shows, training in theatre and the arts, and programs partnering with the business community to help young people become more worldly. The All Stars approach to human development, as will be unpacked here, utilizes performance and play to help young people, their families

and their communities to create new possibilities.

The All Stars Project takes no government money. Approximately 75% of its operating budget comes from donations from thousands of individuals, who have been joined in recent years by hundreds of corporations and dozens of foundations. The ASP's independent model of private sector funding has emphasized individual giving and the involvement of affluent professionals in program and community building activities that are focused on the development of poor youth and communities. It has allowed ASP to generate artistic and educational innovation and to approach community-building and theatre-making as a unity.

Many of those, including the author, who played significant roles as decades-long builders of the projects that make up the All Stars Project Inc. — the Castillo Theatre, Youth Onstage!, the All Stars Talent Show Network, the Development School for Youth, the Talented Volunteer Program, Operation Conversation: Cops & Kids and UX — came to this work as progressive political organizers, as grassroots activists who believed that, to be effective changers of the world, we also had to change ourselves. Thus, from the beginning, we were as interested in psychology and culture as we were in the traditional activities classified as “political.” We believe that human beings and the world are inseparable and need to be engaged as a unity.

The methodological/theoretical breakthroughs discussed here are, essentially, the work of the late Fred Newman who provided creative, intellectual and political leadership to the building of the “development community.” Newman was born to a poor Jewish working class family in the Bronx, New York City, in 1935. He went on to earn a doctorate in the philosophy of science and the foundations of mathematics from Stanford University, and to teach philosophy in a number of U.S. universities until 1968 when he left the academy to devote himself full-time to grassroots community and political organizing. Over the next four decades, he was involved in welfare organizing, trade union organizing, independent, left-of-center electoral politics, and developed social therapy, a non-psychological, performatory approach to therapy which is practiced at a network of social therapy centers and individual practitioners in a number of cities around the United States (as well as at the Fred Newman Center for Social Therapy in Juarez, Mexico) and has influenced educators, social workers, and other helping professionals all over the world. He also was the artistic director and playwright-in-residence of the Castillo Theatre from 1989 to 2005, during which time he shaped the theatre and the understanding of performance and development discussed here.

From the outset, the major concern of Newman and those who worked with him was, and remains, human development and addressing the impact of economic, social and cultural underdevelopment. We were, and are, working to find ways to empower ordinary people to grow individually and collectively. In this concern, we are of the “Left.” We are also of the Left historically. Most of the All Stars' founders emerged from the mass movements of the 1960s and '70s — the civil rights, anti-war, women's, gay, Black Power and socialist movements. We remain radical in that we think fundamental change is necessary if human

development is to remain possible. On the most basic level, we, in the development community, have come to understand development as the activity of being able to see new possibilities and having the willingness (and support) to act on them. Performance, as we understand it, is what makes it possible to go from here to there. When performing, we are who we are (because we can't help but be who we are) and at the same time, we are who we are not, who we are becoming.

Thus, our efforts to create a more democratic, developmental society, to transform what it means to be human, to develop, have led us to performance. For us, performance is not primarily an artistic category, although it can be done beautifully. It is better understood, we believe, as a sociological or anthropological or (as I hope to demonstrate) revolutionary activity. Performance is not a rarified craft requiring special training (acting), nor is it institutionally limited to the stage (theatre, film, television). It can be done by any of us; it is a day-to-day activity with the potential to be transformative of day-to-day life. We understand performance to be the universal human capacity to be both who we are and who we are not at the same time. It is this ability, we believe, that allows human beings to develop beyond instinctual and patterned behavior.

This understanding of performance, while extremely radical in its implications, is not totally unprecedented. The anthropologists Arnold van Gennep, at the turn of the last century, and building on his work, Victor Turner and Brian Sutton-Smith, working at mid-century, identified performance as an activity that could result in individual and social change. They called it "liminal" activity, that is, activity that passes through (or beyond) the threshold of traditional or conventional behavior.

Van Gennep (1960) first noticed this liminality in the performatory rituals that usually accompany social changes in tribal societies (from peace to war, change of season, etc.), as well as socially recognized transformations in individual lives (from child to adult, single to married, etc.).

Turner expanded the concept of the liminal (he called it liminoid) to explain what he called "social drama," that is, the transformative activities of social groups, whether they be inter-clan disputes in tribes or revolutions in modern nation-states. Turner (1957, 1969, 1974, 1984a, 1984b) identified performance as that activity which allowed social groups to go beyond established relations and old ways of doing things. Sutton-Smith emphasized the inherent subversiveness of performance. He suggested that individuals and groups had much to learn from the "disorderliness" of performance, which he called "the source of new culture" (SUTTON-SMITH, 1972).

Starting in the mid-1970s, this group of anthropologists, particularly Turner, began to have a significant impact on theatre researchers, prompting them to look at performance outside of the theatre. This movement, in which Richard Schechner (1977, 1985) has played a key role, has led to the development of performance studies as an academic discipline distinct from theatre history and dramatic theory. Both anthropology and performance studies continue, however, to view performance as a special category of human life, studying performance in sports, weddings, political rallies, etc. — but not, for the most part, examining it within

day-to-day life or linking it with human development.

The centrality of performance in everyday life was first pointed out by Nicolas Evreinoff (1879-1953), a Russian actor, director, playwright, composer, musician and theorist. Evreinoff was a supporter of the Bolshevik revolution and directed many of the “Mass Spectacles” staged in the early years of the revolution, which involved thousands of ordinary people reenacting recent (and not so recent) historical events. In his book, *The Theatre in Life*, published in 1927, Evreinoff identified performance (which he called “theatricality”) as a human instinct that allowed for transformation.

“Man has one instinct about which, in spite of its inexhaustible vitality, neither history nor psychology nor aesthetics have so far said a single word,” wrote Evreinoff.

I have in mind the instinct of transformation, the instinct of opposing to images received from without images arbitrarily created from within, the instinct of transmuting appearances found in nature into something else, an instinct which clearly reveals its essential character in the conception of what I call theatricality[...]The instinct of theatricalization which I claim the honour to have discovered may be best described as the desire to be ‘different,’ to do something that is ‘different,’ to imagine oneself in surroundings that are ‘different’ from the commonplace surroundings of our everyday life. It is one of the mainsprings of our existence, of that which we call progress, of change, evolution and development in all departments of life. We are all born with this feeling in our soul, we are all essentially theatrical beings (EVREINOFF, 1927).

While Evreinoff implied a connection between performance and development, his writings are anecdotal and romantic. A more systematic look at the role of performance in human development comes not from the theatre, but from the research of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), a contemporary of Evreinoff. Among his many important discoveries, Vygotsky noted that infants and young children develop by performing. They learn language and all the other social skills that constitute being human by creatively imitating the adults and older children around them, in Vygotsky’s words they perform “a head taller than they are.” (VYGOSTSY, 1978, p. 102).

It was Vygotsky’s discovery of the link between performance and development that was the most direct and important influence on Newman’s approach to performance. All of development community’s work — in psychology, culture and electoral politics — taught us that adults could continue to develop if they continued to find ways of performing “a head taller than they are.” We also learned quickly that performance was much more difficult for adults than for babies and small children. Newman noted a dilemma that Vygotsky never directly grappled with — the fact that, although performance was necessary for basic socialization, successful socialization in our society led to the end of performance. As soon as we learn how to perform in ways appropriate to our gender, class and ethnicity we are pressured (by the very caretakers who at first encouraged performance, indeed who performed with us) to stop playing/performing. We are told to “act our age,” to “grow up,” to “act like a young lady,” etc. Except for the tiny handful who become professional actors,

most of us stop performing, and hence stop developing, by early adolescence. (Actors are supposed to only perform on stage; off-stage their behavior is as prescribed as anyone else's.)

“A lot of what we have learned (through performance) becomes routinized and rigidified into behavior,” writes Lois Holzman in a 1997 article in *Special Children*. (It is Holzman, a developmental psychologist, who introduced the work of Vygotsky to Newman and the development community.) “We become so skilled at acting out roles that we no longer keep creating new performances of ourselves. We develop an identity as ‘this kind of person’ — someone who does certain things and feels certain ways” (HOLZMAN, 1977, p. 33).

The kind of people we become are, among other things, alienated individuals within a social framework upon which we apparently have no significant impact—most of us never even question that the world we live in might, in fundamental ways, be changeable. The early 21st century alienated individual has become a passive object (as distinct from an active subject) in our social narrative. S/he behaves (and feels) within the context of a ready-made discursive setting, a setting that by its very nature is in the service of those in power.

This passive behavior is, of course, non-developmental. As long as we “behave ourselves”, we are trapped as atomized individuals in basically unchanging roles, fossilized performances, that have been pre-determined for us over the last 500 years of history, and before.

By passive, I do not necessarily mean non-violent or non-aggressive. The passivity I refer to is relative to the framework of the social structure. Some prescribed social roles, for example, those given to young Black men in America today, are “written” to be aggressive and violent. The aggression however is internally directed — internal to the individual, his immediate community, or others from the broader society — it is not directed at established social relations. Today’s “thug”, unlike the Black revolutionary of 40 years ago, is no threat to the *status quo*.

Given the intense alienation and relative stasis of this moment in history, performance, we are convinced, has become the only way out of the trap of alienated (socialized, dead-in-life) behavior. Here is where the connection between performance and social transformation begins to become evident.

PERFORMANCE AS REVOLUTIONARY ACTIVITY

To understand the connection between human development and performance, it is useful to ask: what/who are we when we perform?

When we perform, we are someone in-between who we are/were and who we are not (yet); we are *becoming*. It is in performance that our existence not as things (fixed, static, self-contained) but as activity (moving, changing, relational) is clearest.

Human life as transformational activity was first clearly articulated in the early writings of Karl Marx. In his “Thesis on Feuerbach” (1846), Marx uses the terms “revolutionary activity” and “practical-critical activity” interchangeably. He calls them “the changing of

circumstances and [...] human [...] self-changing”, which he regards as two aspects of the same activity (MARX, 1974, p. 121).

As people who passionately felt the world needed to change radically (and that to do so people needed to change radically), we asked ourselves: what does this commonplace transformative activity, this “practical-critical activity” consist of? What distinguishes it from other daily activities and behaviors? And how does it relate to qualitative social change?

Our understanding of performance as revolutionary activity, as the method of liberation, grew out of Newman’s and Holzman’s study of Vygotsky and our experience of creating a theatre while, at the same time, building support for it in communities throughout the New York metropolitan area. The long hours we spent on the streets and subway platforms and canvassing door to door, raising money to maintain our financial (and hence creative and political) independence, posed many challenges. Some of us found the work humiliating; asking for money on the street, no matter how much we believed in the cause, *felt*, to some of us, like begging. For others (particularly men), it was difficult not to be reactive when people on the street were dismissive or hurtful. Those involved in this work came with various levels of social skill, and for some of us it was hard to even look a stranger in the eye, never mind engage them in a cultural/political conversation.

It gradually occurred to us, or, more accurately, to Newman, who pointed it out to the rest of us, that what we were doing on the street (“street work” as we called it then) was a performance. On stage, we were doing all sorts of odd things, performing characters wildly different from ourselves. Why couldn’t we do that on the street? Why did we have to “be ourselves,” to be stuck in our already formed social roles, when we were organizing on the street? Couldn’t we create characters that built on our friendliness, humor and passion for what we were trying to build? We could and did. We began to approach this organizing activity as a performance and that is what allowed us to sustain and develop it for so long. This turn towards performance as a method led us toward a more playful and joyous activity in which there were designated “directors” for each performance responsible for leading the creation of an ensemble; the emphasis shifted from each individual’s skill at raising money to the collective creation of a performance of meeting new supporters. Even more importantly, it led us to discover the connection between performance and social (and personal) change — and we gathered more support (and money) than before.

Newman’s grounding in philosophy, along with his study of Vygotsky, his decades of work as an innovative psychotherapist and his experience as a theatre director, playwright (he wrote 44 plays and musicals) and actor at Castillo, combined with the development community’s street fundraising experience, led him to conclude, much as Turner did earlier and in a much different context, that performance was a transformative social activity. For Turner, however, performance always remained an object of study, something to be watched and analyzed. For Newman and those of us who followed him, performance became something to *do*.

“We understand performance very broadly,” Newman (1996, p. 6) said:

From our point of view performance might have nothing to do with being on the stage. We think you can perform at home, at work, in any social setting [...] With the proper kind of support, people discover that they can, that we can, do things through performance that we never thought we could do [...] In a sense, we're trying to broaden each person's notion of 'what you're allowed to do'.

That articulation is both mundane and revolutionary — and it is that contradiction that makes performance so powerful. We have come to regard performance as a common human activity that allows human beings to act and to be self-reflective of our actions at the same time (what Marx called “practical/critical”), whether we are on a stage or on a street corner or at the dinner table. When performing, the activity and the thought about the activity are inseparable. In the process of performance, there is no separation of practice and theory; we are the practical and the critical simultaneously. Given its inherent self-reflective nature, performance consistently transforms its “theory” through the activity of its practice, and theory (self-reflectivity) constantly impacts on practice. (Although those terms, as distinct entities, lose much of their received meaning within the unified activity of performance.)

Performance, we have come to believe, is not only the way out of the alienation of the postmodern world; it is, at one and the same time, the practical-critical activity, the revolutionary activity, of our epoch. It is the practice of dialectics in everyday life. Given the highly developed alienation of contemporary society and the weight of tradition and convention, revolutionary activity has increasingly become performatory.

As early as 1989, just as he was taking on the responsibilities of artistic director at Castillo, Newman (1989) wrote: “In a world so totally alienated as ours doing anything even approaching living requires that we perform. To be natural in bourgeois society is to be dead-in-life. Unnaturalness is required if we are to live at all.”

PERFORMANCE AND COMMUNITY

Implicit in all I have been saying about performance is its social, ensemble, nature.

We are a performing species, and performance is, by its nature, something we do together. We owe this insight first to Marx, the methodologist, who posited that both human activity and human mind are social, not just in their origins, but in their content. As noted earlier, for Marx, the transformation of the world and the transformation of ourselves as human beings is one and the same task. We who founded Castillo have come to understand performance as the ensemble activity that transforms our world and ourselves. For us, revolutionary activity is the creation of environments that maximize the becoming-ness of human life — and human life is social; it is lived/performed together.

An individual does not perform, a group does. Even if you are doing a “one-person show” on stage, you are performing the social processes that have impacted on you, not to mention, that in most cases, you are performing more than one character in collaboration with designers and tech people, as well as the audience. This is just as true off-stage. You may live

alone and do many tasks without others around, but your performance is none-the-less a social activity. That the nature of that social activity may be lonely makes it no less social.

This is where the activity of community building becomes critical. After all, if performance is an ensemble activity, the question of what the ensemble is that we are performing in—and how that ensemble is built—is extremely important. We at Castillo have come to understand our community as ever-evolving; it is creating itself as it performs. For us community is not so much a *thing* as an *activity*, a mass improvisational performance.

Obviously this differs from the more conventional understanding of community as the people who live in a particular geographic area (such as a town or a neighborhood) or the people of a particular ethnic group (as in the “Black community”) or people engaged in a particular profession (as in the “commercial real estate community”). Those understandings of community are inherently conservative because they are based in the past (who we are as shaped by history, i.e. “Black”) or based only on what is (who we are by virtue of where we live or work, i.e., a “New Yorker” or a “real estate broker”). The conventional concept of community provides us, at best, with a pre-scripted performance or, at worst, with dead-in-life behavior.

The broad performance community of which Castillo and the All Stars is a part is, of course, like all communities, a social construct. Being a social species, we human beings have always organized ourselves into social constructs—tribes, religious groups, nation states, classes, etc. These groupings were/are not institutions imposed from the outside, by God, gods or anyone else; we human beings created them.

The difference between the development community and these other social constructs is that they are closed and organized around the past (received identity) and/or the dynamics and needs of that which already exists (such as being “working class” based on the social and economic circumstance you were born into). Our activity of community is, we have become convinced, a breakthrough social construct because, unlike other social constructs, it is not based on the past or simply what exists, what is, but on *what-is-becoming*. It is created and shaped by anyone who chooses to join its performance, and its performance is development. It is therefore dynamic in a way that the older concepts of community cannot be. It is continually transforming itself through its continually changing performance. It is, among other ways of describing it, a performance community.

As with our approach to performance, this concept/practice of community was first articulated by Newman. In a talk called “Community as a Heart in a Havenless World,” delivered in 1990, he said:

I want to introduce a whole new concept of community [...] What I mean by community [...] is a community which takes responsibility for defining what community is. The folks who run this cruel world usually do the defining [...] They do it with big dollars. They do it with major institutions that control the newspapers and television stations; they control the schools [...] We will be an activist community of people and no one, least of all the people who control the heartless institutions, is going to tell us what our community is (NEWMAN, 1991, p. 144-147).

This “activist community” was started by political activists working in the poorest communities of New York City in the 1970s, who have gone on to organize middle class and wealthy people to work with them to support poor people to develop and provide leadership to the process of positive social change, free of government, corporate or university dependence.

Today, this activist community is often talked about as the “development community” and is identified with organizations and programs for which “development” is central to their mission: the All Stars Project and its youth development programs (the All Stars Talent Show Network, the Development School for Youth and Youth Onstage!), a free university-style development school, UX (“U” for university, “X” for the unknown), and the Castillo Theatre; a community based research and training center, the East Side Institute for Group and Short Term Psychotherapy (ESI); the Social Therapy Group in New York City and social therapy affiliates in other cities; independentvoting.org, which co-ordinates the organizing of activists in electoral politics working outside the two historically dominant parties in the U.S.; and the bi-annual Performing the World conferences, co-sponsored by the ESI and the ASP, which bring together performance activists from around the world and from various disciplines and walks of life. These organizations have national and international reach, with the direct participation of tens of thousands who impact on hundreds of thousands. Along with their varied foci is a shared methodology that involves people of all ages in the ongoing collective activity of creating new kinds of environments where they can be active performers of their lives.

People become involved in this development community for many reasons—to get help with their emotional pain, to perform in a talent show, because they want to work with young people, because they want to do theatre, because they are looking to do something meaningful. The reasons are endless; whatever the motivation, their performance of participating/building the community changes not only themselves, it changes the community, which is, after all, not a thing-in-itself, but a work in progress. Participating in the building of this community, therefore, is opting to embrace the unknown, to take risks, to do beyond one’s self, to impact on others, to provide leadership; that is, to perform in an improvisational ensemble.

Becoming a part of this ensemble does not take one out of the complex of communities (static and/or dynamic) that make up the larger world society. The identities of race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, profession, gender and sexual preference obviously assert a tremendous grip on us all. However, for those involved in the All Stars community, these received identities and social constructs are not the end; they are simply the beginning. They are the backstories that we, as performers, as changers of the world-historic play, take as the material we need to work with, not unlike the script of a play is to an actor on stage.

Thus, participating in this community is not an alternative to the larger world; it is not a “counter-culture.” It is a mainstream activity. Those involved in the community still earn livings, raise families, pursue hobbies, etc. Yet, by creating a community without formal membership, we are bringing a new thing into the world, which, of course, impacts on all the established institutions to which it has a relationship.

The establishment of the ASP's youth theatre training program, Youth Onstage!, in 2003 when the organization moved to its 42nd Street youth development and performing arts complex (in New York City's commercial theatre district) is an example. By virtue of the existence of the ASP center, Forty-Second Street is no longer a place where young people come solely to play video games in the arcades or go to films in the movie complexes. It is also a place where young people create politically-engaged theatre, which connects them to the broader cultural community. This fact changes what 42nd Street as a social institution *is*. It also changes the possibilities for youth and for youth theatre.

Our community's performance is thus connected to and transformative of other communities and social activity in the world. This is precisely why the development community has such transformative potential. Our performance and growth impacts on every other social unit (family, school, job, union, class, church) with which we are involved.

PERFORMANCE AND ALIENATION

In positing the development/performance community as the ensemble capable of revolutionary activity and transformation, we are, at the same time, acutely aware of the human capacity to separate that which we create from the activity of creating it.

This tendency, which Marx, called "alienation," is perhaps most obvious in the case of religion and morality, structural frames created by human beings that appear to be universal and imposed from above with a power separate from ours.

However, our capacity to separate our creations from the process of creation, Marx argued, has grown more pronounced as capitalism has developed over the last 500 years. As Holzman (2003, p. 24-25) articulates it:

We have come to see people and things as separate and distinct entities. We tend not to see process or connections. We don't see that we, the people, created and continue to create the stuff of the world, whether that be a box of corn flakes, a CD, a language, a 'drug problem,' a family, a global economy, a political party, the Brooklyn Bridge, a love affair, a war, wealth, poverty or our emotions. Instead, we relate to all these things as having an independent existence, as if they came from nowhere and just 'are.' Seeing and relating to things in this way—torn away from the process of their creation and their creators—is the normal way of seeing things in our society.

Alienation is the result, Marx first pointed out, of the fact that, under capitalist economic relations, the bulk of humanity (the working class) is not directly connected to the product of their labor. Instead of creating for use (or for immediate exchange), workers create products that belong to others. Work is no longer, for the most part, connected to the product it creates or to the life of the producer. In Marx's words, work under capitalism "is not the satisfaction of a need, but only a *means* for satisfying other needs" (MARX, 1966, p. 98). People work to "make a living," that is, they sell their labor power as a commodity

(an item of exchange). Their labor power creates other commodities to which they have no connection, except, perhaps, as consumers, in which case they must buy back what they have (collectively) built, as in the case, for example, of the autoworker who buys a car.

Thus, work — and life in general — becomes, Marx noted, increasingly “alienated.” This alienation applies not only to material things, such as cars, but to social constructs, such as communities, and to the process of creation itself.

Marx’s term “alienation” is most often understood today as a psychological state. Such an understanding, we believe, minimizes its importance and, in fact, *alienates* it from the process of its creation. As Newman (1991, p. 30) puts it:

[...] we don’t take the notion of alienation to be psychological. We take it to be sociological. What we mean by that is that alienation is not simply a state of mind; it’s not how people feel. Rather, it’s how people *are*. And people get to be that way by virtue of how the entire system and activity of production (which influences more than simply the narrow acts of industry, but rather influences the total process of human production and human life in our society) creates a fundamentally alienated society.

How does alienation impact on the creation of community? Profoundly. Despite the best of intentions and despite an attempt to be conscious of the fact that we are creators of our community, as the products of 500 years of capitalist development, we are nonetheless apt to fetishize our activity and become alienated from it. There is always a strong pull to relate to “The Community” as something finite and other than our own activity, something over and above our ongoing creation of it.

This is analogous to what happens when the creative performance of childhood becomes hardened into the behavior of teenagers and adults. We become alienated from the activity of creating new performances and accept the fixed role, the “personality” we have created with others as a given, static reality that we have no power to fundamentally alter.

The same alienation happens to social constructs. The American sociologist Erving Goffman, writing in the 1950s and ’60s, pointed out that although all social constructs are created in response to a social need and begin as activity, once created, they have a tendency to become self-perpetuating institutions, that is, to look out for the security and continuation of the construct as a thing-in-itself (GOFFMAN, 1961). He wrote specifically about mental hospitals and prisons, but the same thing can be seen in everything from marriage to trade unions, from schools to revolutionary parties.

Our community came into being and continues to build in an alienated culture and as such it/we are vulnerable to alienation and fetishization. The challenge is to keep the improvisation going and not fall into the trap of becoming reified and self-perpetuating. Once bureaucracy or “proper procedure” or tradition becomes dominant over creative revolutionary activity, it is time to try a new performance. That is why the history of our community is characterized by the nearly constant reorganization of groups, projects and activities. One of Newman’s many skills as an organizer and leader was to accept failure and,

in fact, to build with it.

How are the decisions to make these reorganizations, these new improvisations, arrived at? Typically, they are not abstract decisions, but emerge from the performance itself. Since performance is both active and reflexive at the same time, it allows for the ongoing reevaluation of itself. Hence, performance is itself the method by which the ensemble can avoid getting stuck in a deadening repetition of itself. Performance, our experience teaches, is the only effective means of engaging/transcending/transforming our society's constant pull toward fetishization and alienation.

Given the community's overriding concern with human development, the question we have asked ourselves as we have performed is: does this activity seem to be fostering/furthering/intensifying development? To borrow a term from Stanislavsky, development is our "super objective."

PERFORMANCE AND DEVELOPMENT

But what is the nature of that super objective? What sort of change are we talking about when we talk of development?

Here we must more deeply examine another fundamental concept—development. Our work is based on the belief that there is a connection between performance and development. Yet development, like performance and community, is a disputed term, a word that is used very differently by different people.

In the world of non-profit organizations, the "development officer" is the person who raises the money; the organization's ability to raise funds is equated with its ability to grow and develop. In the world of political economy, there are "underdeveloped" nations, usually agrarian and poor, and "developed" nations, those that are industrial (or, increasingly, post-industrial) and rich.

In psychology, the dominant understanding of development derives from the work of the Swiss biologist/psychologist Jean Piaget. Piaget shaped what is today called developmental psychology, the discipline that studies the cognitive, social and emotional growth of children. According to Piaget, the child goes through a series of developmental stages that are linked to her or his biological age; what a child can/will learn is determined by her or his age and subsequent developmental stage. In this understanding, development becomes fixed at a certain age and unchanged after that.

Similarly, in the orthodox Marxist theory of history, the human race goes through a series of developmental stages — savagery, barbarism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, socialism, communism. What the species can achieve is determined by what stage of historical development they are in.

Implicit in all of these concepts of development is progress. Hence, in political discourse, "progressives" are those who support continued human development, a label embraced by this

development community. Yet the underlying assumption in conventional understandings of development is that development brings with it a more advanced state — from poor to rich, from agrarian to industrial, from child to adult, from exploitation to harmony. While we share the hope that development brings with it advance (a richer, more fulfilling species life), we don't assume it. More to the point, we don't assume to know what an "advance" is, since our only touchstone for such a concept lies in already existing social constructs.

Our approach to development is far more improvisational. Human development seems to us far less scripted, far less predetermined than Piaget, the biologist/psychologist, or Marx, the political economist, dreamed of in their philosophies.

Like our approach to performance, our understanding of development owes much to Vygotsky, who challenged Piaget's (and Freud's) working assumptions that development was predetermined and internal to the individual. Vygotsky saw human development as a cultural activity that people engage in together, rather than as the external manifestation of an individualized, internal process. Development, according to Vygotsky, is not internal to the individual. It is, instead, something that we create together. The child's development is not primarily based on a biological clock, it grows out of the nature and quality of her/his interaction with other human beings. Nor does development end with the maturity of the body; development, Vygotsky implied (and Newman and Holzman made explicit) is, potentially, an open-ended, life-long activity.

This understanding of development — as social as opposed to individual, created through activity as opposed to biologically determined, and open-ended as opposed to following a prescribed formula — marks a fundamental break with other notions of development. For us, development is not an internal maturation process; it is a community performance activity.

Holzman (1997, p. 98) expresses it this way:

Which picture comes to mind when you hear the phrase 'stages of life'? A stepladder or a theatre? If you're like most people, it's probably the former or some other step-like image. After all, from the late and great experts on human nature — Freud, Piaget and Erikson — to their lesser known contemporaries, researchers have told us that the human life process is best understood as a series of progressively 'higher' stages that people pass through. I prefer the theatre image and here's why. I believe that we human beings create our development — it's not something that happens to us. And we create it by creating stages on which we can perform our growth. So, to me, developmental stages are like performance spaces that we can set up anywhere — at home, school, the workplace, all over.

These performances spaces are ones that we create, just as we create the performances that take place on them. The youth programs of the All Stars Project, for example, are self-consciously built to be just such "performances spaces." Thus, development, as we understand it, is not predetermined by ideology (or religion or science or any other script), but created continuously by our shared improvisational activity

PERFORMANCE INSTEAD OF IDEOLOGY

Since at least the American and French revolutions, political activists have been motivated and guided by ideology. Their ideologies have varied, but they stubbornly held onto a systemized set of ideas (ideology) as a means of understanding/relating to the world. Ideology, no matter how radical its advocates may fancy it, is inherently conservative in that it proceeds not from activity, but from a pre-conceived set of ideas, and where could those ideas come from but from the past?

Here is where the link between performance and development is clearest. You *behave* as an ideology dictates, but performance is, by its nature, non-ideological, and therefore not over-determined by the past. Why? Because when it comes to the qualitative transformations that performance makes possible, we cannot know in advance where we're going (what we're becoming).

If Louis Armstrong had simply followed the rules of New Orleans jazz as he learned it, there would be no swing. If Charlie Parker had only played what was known musically and passed on by Armstrong, there would be no be-bop. If Chuck Berry just played the blues, we wouldn't have rock 'n' roll. If the young people of the Bronx had not begun messing with the funk beats passed on to them by James Brown, we would not have hip-hop. Music, as a creative activity, evolves through performance, not from a set of pre-conceived notions. The same creative process can be seen, our experience indicates, when ordinary people, that is, non-artists, consciously perform the mundane activities of daily life.

Thus, development, and the performance that makes it possible, calls for a certain kind of courage – *the courage to do without knowing*. This is true onstage and, particularly, off.

Certainly it takes courage to fight and die for what you *know* is right. And millions of dedicated revolutionaries (and reactionaries) have done so. A different kind of courage is required if we are to live day-in and day-out not knowing — not knowing where we are going, not knowing what we are doing, not knowing, at any given time, who we are. Yet this state of not knowing (and the rebellion against epistemology which it implies) is necessary for performance, including the mass performance of social transformation. If you know exactly who you are, where you're going, what you are doing, then you are not performing or developing, you are behaving, that is, proceeding as society has conditioned you to proceed.

There are those, particularly those influenced by orthodox politics (of the Left, Right and Center), who fear that social organizing that is not guided by ideology might lead to developments that they don't like, that don't conform to their values.

That's true—and, we feel, it is a necessary and growthful risk. The alternative is stagnation or ideologically imposed change, which, as the communist revolutions of the 20th Century indicate, in the long run, results in further stagnation or worse. This is not to say that those engaged in social activism should (or could) do their work without values, dreams, or ethics. A performer brings who she or he is, including her or his history and values, to the performance.

Many of those of us who launched the development community are supporters of radical, participatory democracy and of collective (as opposed to atomized, alienated, individuated) life. We passionately hope that the human race can find ways of reorganizing the processes of production and distribution to eliminate the obscene disparities of wealth (and opportunities for development) within the various nation-states and between the industrialized north and the rest of the world. It follows from the inclusive nature of this development community that not everyone in it shares the same values or worldviews. However, the values and dreams of the community's most active builders remain an important part of the mix.

No doubt all improvisers (on stage and off) bring with them what Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and other sociologists and anthropologists call "habitus," that is, patterns of thought and behavior, sensibilities and tastes acquired from family, ethnicity, class and the overall culture they grew up in. That may be where the improv starts; the point is that it is not where it has to end. We all bring our baggage to the improv process, and recognizing this baggage as the material we're creating with is a very important part of the process. In Newman's words, it is helpful to "radically accept" where you're starting from, because it allows you to more productively move forward. However, being aware of the habitus you bring to the process is not the same as short-circuiting the process by imposing a solution, a resolution, a conclusion. What is potentially transformative about the created performance "space" is that it provides the people involved with permission to pretend and play beyond who they "are," to move through a liminal process that takes them beyond the ideology and habitus they bring to the performance. If that were not the case, human culture(s) would never change.

The history of 20th century politics teaches that the imposing of "solutions" is a far greater risk than trusting the performance process. In fact, the founders of the development community have come to distrust the very concept of "solution." We trust, instead, in the activity of performance, in the human capacity to create, through improvisation, new scenes, new plays, new worlds. As improvisational performers, we believe in building with everything (including all the "backward" habitus) that is offered. That is how a scene is constructed and a world reconstructed.

Thus, on the most basic level, what differentiates the founders of the development community from orthodox leftists is that we don't believe the answers to the challenges facing humanity can be known in advance. Answers, or perhaps more accurately, *new ways of living* may (or may not) emerge through the social activity of performance. All performance, even when scripted on a stage, is essentially an improvisatory "in the moment" activity that people do together. There is a vast difference between having a moral/political orientation (which the founders and leaders of the development community do) and "knowing the answer" (which they don't). Ideology and performance are very different things; one is a thing (fixed, static, dead), the other, an activity.

For us development is neither inevitable nor imposed from above or from the outside. It is what emerges from the creative process of performance.

THEATRE AND COMMUNITY

What then, is the role of theatre, specifically, in this case, the Castillo Theatre, in a community dedicated to liberating performance from the confines of the institution of Theatre?

The building of a theater — a formal place where the explicit ritualized enactment of social conflict is sanctioned — has played a significant role in the building of this community. The connection to community has a lot to do with the Castillo Theatre being funded from the grassroots instead of from the top down, as is more typical in the U.S. and Europe, with foundation, corporate or government grants. The Castillo fundraising model not only ensures an independent financial base; it also creates an audience that is actively linked with and directly invested in its theatre. People who give money and/or volunteer their time and skills to make the theatre possible are not only motivated to see what they helped to build, they also relate to theatre-going differently, not primarily as a commodity or a diversion, but as a community forum which they have helped to build (FRIEDMAN, 1999, 2007).

Further, if the development community is indeed a self-defining social construct based on what it's becoming, then the very act of giving money or volunteering labor to the theatre becomes a community-building activity. The tens of thousands of people who have made the choice to do something as weird as giving money to strangers on the street or phone and/or coming to see this odd, political theatre have, in a small but significant way, moved beyond their prescribed social roles, and in so doing have become a part of creating the community. The building of the theatre and the building of the community are thus linked, in the Castillo model, from the get-go.

The building of the Castillo Theatre has also helped to consolidate and deepen the development community by providing a socially sanctioned (and hence relatively safe) performatory context for the exploration of the community's social, political, and philosophical questions and issues.

Castillo's earliest experiments, in the 1980s, brought non-actors (activists and people from the city's poor communities) on stage to play with issues directly related to the organizing they were involved in. Among the early experiments, were: *A Demonstration: Common Women, the Uncommon Lives of Ordinary Women* (1986) which brought together non-actors from the community — specifically welfare activists, mostly Black women, and white radical lesbians — for a performed confrontation between two demonstrations that spun off into a montage of scenes, poems, songs and video clips; *From Gold to Platinum* (1986), a political science fiction play about a second American Revolution which was compiled/written through a series of meetings and improvisations with community organizations throughout New York City; *All My Cadre* (1987), a soap opera about a group of young and restless leftists in New York City; and a seven-hour interactive production/conversation/communal meal exploring Heiner Müller's *Description of a Picture/Explosion of a Memory* (1992). While professionally trained actors have been a part of Castillo from the beginning, and in many productions today they make up most of the cast, the mix of trained actors and non-trained community performers on stage remains an important part of what Castillo is.

When Newman began writing plays for Castillo in the late 1980s, his plays broadened the lens and deepened the philosophical depth of Castillo's work while continuing to explore the ethical and political issues of concern to the development community and the larger world. *Sally and Tom (The American Way)* (1995), for example, is a musical that looks at the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and his slave and mistress Sally Hemings, a 35-year-long relationship which embodied the contradiction between democracy and slavery and the legacy of racism that continues to define so much American history and culture. *Lenin's Breakdown* (1994) portrays Lenin, leader of the Russian Revolution, as an old homeless man who checks himself into Bellevue, a mental hospital in New York City, looking to understand the failure of his life (and of 20th Century Communism). In *Sessions With Jesus* (2002), Jesus returns to earth (the Upper West Side of Manhattan to be precise) looking for a therapist. He needs a therapist, because he is hearing the voice of Osama bin Laden asking for forgiveness. Jesus, of course, is all about forgiveness, but he's having a hard time forgiving the mass murderer.

As these examples illustrate, Castillo creates theatre that functions as a social forum. While theatre, at its best, has always done this, in recent times it has done so less and less. As theatre has been commodified over the last few centuries and evolved into a (increasingly minor) branch of "show business", its function as a social forum has decreased. For society as a whole, film and television have taken over this role. Given the vast amount of capital necessary to create and distribute film and television, it is no surprise that, to the extent that serious social, political, ethical and philosophical issues are explored on the large and small screen, they tend to be presented in conventional ways and resolved on terms favorable to the *status quo*.

For social constructs — classes, ethnic groups, communities — with little or no power in American society, there has been no performatory forum, for much of the 20th century, in which social conflict could be explored from their experiential perspective. To the extent that live theatre has a future in the United States beyond the spectacles of Broadway or as an elitist specialty niche, it lies in being connected to a community and providing that community with a performatory means of exploring its conflicts, dreams and values.

As part of a very specific community, one that is constantly redefining itself as it is coming into being, one whose method of growth is based on *not* knowing, our theatre has played a very particular role in helping people in the community grapple with the developmental, political and philosophical issues that arise from the very activity of creating the community. Community members come to our theatres to struggle with these issues. Since we work seeking to disengage from the certainties of ideology, we don't presume to teach through the theatre. Most of the plays produced by Castillo — in particular the 44 plays and musicals written by Newman — entertaining though they are, are exercises in asking questions, not answering them, challenging our audiences, not comforting them.

The conventional concept of good theatre is conditioned by the theatre's two and a half millennium history, and for much of that history, theatre has played the role of resolving, through ritualistic performance on stage, social conflict that had no resolution in society¹.

Unlike earlier theatre (“political” or otherwise), Castillo is not primarily concerned with resolving social conflict on stage. Indeed, we have come to consider theatrical resolution to be conservatizing. This is significantly different from Augusto Boal’s “Theatre of the Oppressed,” the other major trend in political theatre. As its name suggests, Theatre of the Oppressed starts with a pre-defined social category, “the oppressed”, and works to bring members of this category onto the stage to, in Boal’s words, “rehearse the revolution”. Our long-term perspective is not to get more people (oppressed or otherwise) into the theatre, but to bring performance off stage into the daily lives of people from all social strata, to do away with the very distinction between theatre and life, rehearsal and revolution.

Castillo, as the theatre of a community that approaches performance as developmental, has another, very specific function. Theatre is a 2,500-year-old institution deeply embedded in our culture. Theatre gives social legitimacy to what is going on, in different ways, throughout the development community: performance. Because of its societal legitimacy, theatre — in our case, Castillo — is an environment in which the community can experiment with its most radical ideas in the most outrageous ways — it is theatre, after all!

Thus, our theatre has become, in effect, a laboratory, or perhaps more appropriately, a *playground*, in which new performances can be experimented with and where, through performance, we can explore issues and ideas that are taboo or that would be ignored or not taken seriously in other contexts.

The aim of those of us who have built Castillo is to create environments in our city, country and world which can generate hundreds, indeed thousands, of Castillos, all of them playing with new possibilities, including the possibility of liberating performance itself from the confines of the theatre. Community building and theatre building are, for us, inextricable. Our dream has never been to build one or two “great” theatres in New York City; it is to generate hundreds of “mediocre” theatres everywhere.

This statement, made by Fred Newman years ago, is purposely provocative to trained theatre professionals, myself included. “Mediocre” is a difficult term for artists to deal with; after all, artists dedicate years of training and lifetimes of effort to transcending the mediocre and achieving the beautiful. I use the word here not because our community is committed to mediocrity in art, but because we are committed first and foremost to community building. For us, the “beautiful” is not an abstract set of aesthetic criteria, it is what helps performers and audiences develop.

Which brings us back around to development, community and social change. It is Castillo’s conviction that theatre, *qua* theatre, can change very little. Theatre as part of a larger development community that uses performance as a way to grow and transform can play a vital role. In this context, it is neither a commodified entertainment nor a rarified and contained aesthetic activity. It becomes, instead, an environment for doing practical-critical experiments in everyday living. Castillo is at once and the same time a theatre and not a theatre.

NOTA

- 1 For a historical study of the emergence of theatre as an institution of social stabilization, see Thomson (1968).

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