**Theatre and Performance, Community and Development:**

**The Castillo Experience**

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As a playwright, theatre director, community organizer and progressive political activist, it’s my honor to be here today and to participate in this discussion. I welcome the opportunity to share the 35-year experience of the Castillo Theatre [Slide 1] in New York City in building community and generating social learning and development.

That experience is part of a much larger and diverse movement around the world that involves embracing theatre and performance as part of the work of engaging social issues and generating social, political and cultural change. So before looking at Castillo’s particular experience, I think it may be helpful to take a quick overview of theatre concerned with social learning, cultural and political change and with human development. This overview may be useful, I hope, as way of seeing what we all share and in better understanding the ways in which Castillo’s work is different from and, perhaps, helpful to you and others interested in the bringing theatre and performance into your work.

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When most scholars, educators, youth workers and community and political organizers think about theatre, they tend to think of it as a tool. A tool to educate, enlighten or inspire those who see it and, perhaps, also those who create it.

This is an approach to the intersection of social change and theatre that goes back at least to the agit-prop movement of the 1920s and ’30s [Slide 2] when amateur theatre troupes of workers and political organizers first created and performed short, mobile skits agitating and propagandizing for what they understood as their economic and political interests. [Slide 3] It’s a tradition that continues in many part of the world today. The powerful performance we experienced yesterday by “Abnormal Taiwanese” and the “Easy Club House” is solidly in this tradition.

It’s a tradition associated with the political left and it has grown and deepened over the last century. Bertolt Brecht, [Slide 4] the German communist playwright and director who in the 1920s was influenced by agit-prop, invented what he called “learning plays,” scripts that were designed as exercises in learning for both the actors and the audience. Building on Brecht’s learning plays, Brazilian director and political activist Augusto Boal [Slide 5] in the 1960s developed what he called “Theatre of the Oppressed” as a means for involving audience members in the discussion of issues that were being explored onstage, including, most significantly, bringing audience members on stage to perform different possible responses to the social and political issues being engaged.

In addition to explicitly political theatre, sometimes called theatre for social change—such as agit-prop, learning plays and Theatre of the Oppressed—there is, all over the world, another stream of theatre that bares a strong family resemblance. It’s sometimes called Educational Theatre, sometimes Theatre for Development. This tendency includes both theatre that’s used as an educational tool in schools and the use of theatre to educate an audience outside the frame of formal educational institutions. It’s concerned with teaching social skills and knowledge that will allow audience members to function more successfully in society. It’s used to educate communities on subjects ranging from birth control and HIV/AIDS to agricultural techniques to gender violence, etc.

Beyond the lessons their skits and plays teach, the great value of this tradition, particularly its more politically-engaged manifestation, is, I believe, that it empowers ordinary people—as distinct from trained actors—to perform. Through their performances, working and poor people, disabled people, people with so-called “mental illness,” sex workers, all kinds of people who are kept at the bottom, pushed to the margins and told to be quiet are given permission to create their own scripts, to play with their own experiences and concerns, to develop their own meanings. Those of you who saw the performance yesterday and participated in the conversations that followed, have a sense of this power to develop new meanings.

Today most of us, whether in Taipei or New York, live in societies in which culture is primarily controlled from the top down. [Slide 6] That is, large corporations and/or states control the film, television, book and music industries and thus shape our values and the ways in which we see ourselves and the world. Given this dynamic, from the perspective of progressive social change, the importance of ordinary people coming together to perform their own experiences and concerns and developing their own meanings cannot be overstated.

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At the same time, to the extent that such theatre focuses on cognition, on teaching lessons, as, indeed, it overwhelmingly does, it limits its power to impact in transformative ways. Why? Because theatre that assumes to teach the correct lessons constrains the ability of those creating it to make new discoveries and generate new meanings. After all, you can only teach what is already known. Theatre and the other arts are, at their most potent, ways to make new discoveries and to collectively create new possibilities. When we put theatre in an ideological straightjacket, we limit it to preconceived conclusions. To bring into being qualitatively new ideas, emotions, and social relations we have to play the way children play, not teach the way teachers teach. That’s why instead of relating to theatre cognitively as a classroom we at Castillo prefer to relate to it holistically as a “playground of the social imagination.”

As the late Fred Newman, [Slide 7] my predecessor as Castillo’s artistic director and my political and theatrical mentor, put it when discussing the cognitive basis of most theatre for social change, “I don’t think reflections of any kind are what leads people in any way to changing the circumstances of their lives. … I think people *create* revolution, create transformation, create change. I don’t think they go through a rational process of seeing how bad the world is and then deciding to change it.”

If the value of ordinary people creating theatre is not primarily located in the lessons their theatre teaches, wherein lies its value? Castillo’s experience leads us to believe that it lies not primarily in the product (the play), but in the *activity* of performing together.

Castillo was founded in 1983 by a small group of progressive community organizers, including me. [Slide 8] Over its more than three decades, it has produced two to nine plays and other performance events a year. Our productions have been quite varied: experimental plays by Fred Newman that challenge the philosophical underpinnings of psychology and politics; dense, poetic post-dramatic scripts by the East German avant-gardist Heiner Müller; plays by some of the most important African American playwrights; history plays and plays about contemporary life by me and other political playwrights; plays devised with young people from New York City’s poorest communities. We’ve even done some classics of Western dramatic literature by Shakespeare, Brecht and others. [Slide 9]

Castillo started out, like most other progressive political theatres, intent on teaching the “right” political lessons. However, after a few years, we began to discover a more powerful aspect of doing theatre. We found that the process of writing/devising, rehearsing, performing, producing, viewing and talking about the productions is what’s growthful, not the content or lesson per se.

People make meaning by playing together and they can create new meanings (and develop in the process) by working together in groups. In the theatre we call these groups “ensembles.” Theatre ensembles encourage people to pretend to be other-than-who-they-are (or other versions of themselves). Theatre gives us permission to question and play with who we are and with the ideas, the emotions and the social relations we have inherited from society. As one of the performers from Abnormal Taiwan put it yesterday, “Performance allows me to overcome my embarrassment. Through creating these plays, my embarrassment has been transformed into a provocative attitude and pride.” There is no way one can know that in advance, that transformation comes through the performance.

When you focus on this process you shift your understanding/practice of theatre from the realms of aesthetics or education into the sphere of people exercising power from-the-bottom-up. When, and if, you create enough such theatres, enough such performances, their activity has the potential to challenge the hegemony of corporate and/or state controlled culture.

At this point I want to make it clear that I’m not saying that theatre by-itself can change anything. I’m firmly convinced that it can’t. Transforming society is a complex and ongoing process that involves generating all kinds of self-organizing and self-sustaining groups and activities that remain independent of the state and/or corporate control.

That’s why the Castillo Theatre has never been a stand-alone theatre. It’s part of a national and international network of financially and politically independent community-based organizations dedicated to cultural, social and political change. We call this network our “development community.” This dynamic, ever expanding and changing community includes: the All Stars Talent Show Network, active in six U.S. cities, through which young people in poor communities perform in and produce talent shows in their own neighborhoods; Youth Onstage!, a free performance school and youth theatre; the Development School for Youth, a partnership between the business community and poor youth; Operation Conversation: Cops and Kids, which brings together active duty police officers and poor young people of color to play and perform as a means of creating an environment in which they can have a honest conversation; UX, a free school of continuing development for adults, whose student body is drawn primarily from poor working class communities of color; the Social Therapy Group which practices the non-psychological therapy developed by Fred Newman; and the East Side Institute for Group and Short Term Therapy, a grassroots think tank and international training center in the performance-based approach to psychology and social change. We are also linked to similar groups and activities in other cities in the U.S., and, internationally, through the conference and network known as Performing the World.

It is this extended community of organizations dedicated to human development and social change that sustains Castillo and that Castillo helped bring into being. Put another way, the Castillo Theatre is made possible by the active participation of hundreds of people who fund it, who run it, who create its plays and fill its seats. Some 200 volunteers [Slide 10] from neighborhoods all over New York City keep it going and growing. They work on the production team, the tech staff, as house managers and house staff, box office staff, in the costume and set shops, on the sales team, the outreach team (which does street outreach and makes phone calls), and on the stage. Thus Castillo is both a tool for the building the community and, at the same time, a result of that community being built.

As Newman put it, “My understanding of how to make revolutionary theatre is to create the community that creates the theatre. That sets up the dynamic wherein people can have a good look at the human capacity for creativity. They are participating in a creative process and participating in a creative process is what people need in order to see that they can make change and, in practice, to make change.”

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What does it take to “make change” in our daily lives, in our communities, in our countries, in our world? That’s not a question that many of us, even those of us concerned with progressive social change, think much about. We have inherited some deep-seated assumptions relative to bringing about social change. These assumptions usually start with education, with the belief that we need to teach others the right analysis, the right ideology, the right politic. That, as I have pointed out, is where most theatre for social change starts. From there, depending on our politic, we assume that as people learn the right politics we need to engage them in political action, some combination of demonstrations, elections and/or armed struggle.

I think we need to seriously question those assumptions because they haven’t worked very well. When we look back at the last hundred years we see many revolutions that were fueled by these assumptions and we see a tragic string of failures and corruptions. [Slide 11] Some of these revolutions succeeded, for a while, in changing who ran the government, even what strata of society controlled the means of production, and they often brought concrete material improvement to the lives of millions. However, they didn’t last. They either collapsed or gradually transformed into new versions of the old oppressions. [Slide 12] My colleagues and I, those who have led the emergence of our development community, were originally inspired by these revolutions. So we had to ask ourselves why they failed. It became clear to us that they failed because people didn’t grow and develop. You can’t build a new version of the world if your ideologies, your values, your visions, your emotions and ways of understanding and relating are stuck in the past.

How do you free people from these traps? We have found a way forward in this regard to be performance. [Slide 13] It’s through performing and playing that we can create new visions, new emotions, new ways of relating, new possibilities.

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. As we saw yesterday, 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 inherited from the past.

This understanding of performance comes from the intellectual breakthroughs made by two leaders of our development community, Fred Newman and Lois Holzman, articulated in a number of books they wrote together in the 1990s and other later published work. [Slide 14] Newman and Holzman’s understanding of performance as a transformative social activity is built on the research of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934). [Slide 15] Among his many important discoveries, Vygotsky noted that infants and young children develop through play, which allows them to do things beyond their level and be themselves and someone else at the same time. They learn language and all the other social skills that constitute being human by creatively imitatingthe adults and older children around them, in Vygotsky’s words they perform “a head taller than they are.”

Newman and Holzman made use of Vygotsky’s discoveries about early child development and made connections between the play and learning young children do and the performance that adults do on the stage. Combined with the experience of our development community’s work—not only the theatre, but also in psychology, community organizing and electoral politics—we saw that adults could continue to develop if they continued to find ways of performing “a head taller than they are.” We experienced, day-in and day-out, that people creating their own environments to perform beyond what they thought were their limitations allowed them to continue developing, no matter what their age, ethnicity or social class.

“We understand performance very broadly,” Newman said. “From our point of view performance might have nothing to do with being on the stage. [Slide 16] 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.’”

Thus at Castillo we relate not just to what goes on onstage as performance. We relate to all of the activities involved in building and supporting Castillo—indeed we relate to virtually all human activity—as performance. If, indeed, people create new possibilities by playing, by performing “a head taller” than themselves, then isn’t our job, as educators and social activists, to create environments where they’re encouraged to do so, to find ways to spark play and performance off stage, in daily life? 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. If when we are acting onstage we can be who-we-are and who-we-are-not, why can’t we be who-we-are and who-we-are not off-stage with in our families, our schools, our workplaces?

For too long performance—this creative ability that all human beings have—has been locked up by the theatre, including political and educational theatre. Agit-prop, Theatre of the Oppressed and their numerous artistic and political cousins play a valuable role in encouraging more people—working class people, poor people, marginalized people—to perform on stage. However, the primarily effect has been to change the theatre, to make it more inclusive and interactive, while leaving the rest of the world as it is.

At Castillo, we work to do something qualitatively different and, we think, even more growthful—we work to liberate performance from the institutional constraints of the theatre. [Slide 17] We encourage ordinary people of all cultural backgrounds and social strata to create ensembles and perform in their day-to-day lives. This liberation of play and performance has, we feel, a much better chance of helping people, and the world, grow and develop than does teaching a lesson or attempting to impose an ideology. Through play and performance we can discover new possibilities from the bottom-up. Teaching pre-conceived lessons and propagandizing for ideologies can only result in more failed revolutions that impose the same old constraints and limitations that got us in this mess in the first place.

Educators and social activists, we believe, need to approach theatre not primarily as an educational tool nor as an end in itself, but as a terrain they must transverse in order to bring performance to the people. For over 2,000 years both in the West and East, theatre has been the social institution where it has been legitimate for grown-ups to play and pretend. So that’s where we need to go to engage performance and begin to expand the boundaries of where and when it’s allowed to take place.

Thus at the Castillo Theatre we encourage everyone who so desires to participate in building and sustaining their theatre, their “playground of the social imagination.” Castillo is the activity and the place where they and their community can play with their wildest and most radical ideas, their painful and wonderful histories and their most unlikely dreams. At the same time, we approach all this theatre work as a context in which it’s possible to encourage performance outside the theatre—in the lives and communities of everyone involved.

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As I said at the start, the Castillo Theatre is part of a large and diverse movement around the world, which includes many of you, that involves embracing theatre and performance as part of the work of engaging social issues and generating social, political and cultural change. We feel very connected to that larger movement.

At the same time, as I have outlined here, we have, over the years, shifted away from cognitively-based, tool-for-result theatre to focus on the process of ensemble building and on the developmental power performance itself. While we are obviously of-the-theatre (in particular of educational theatre and theatre for social change), we also, I believe, embody a challenge to the theatre as it has existed for two millennium. Castillo’s experience offers what, we believe, is a qualitatively new way to approach the intersection of theatre, performance, development and social change. It is, I believe, a living challenge not only to traditional theatre but to widely held notions of the nature of social transformation.

I’m eager to hear you thoughts, questions and challenges.