**Something New Under the Sun**

*Plenary Talk to Play, Perform, Learn, Grow – April 13, 2018*

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The Book of Ecclesiastes proclaims, “The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.”

With economic and political collapse and seemingly endless violence and cruelty raining down upon the heads of so many, with war following war, with millions fleeing for their lives, and with hundreds of millions more struggling for enough food to feed their families, it is easy to wonder about the possibility of anything new. With the failure of the ideologies, the theologies and the revolutions that gave many of us hope, ways forward seem unclear and doubtful. Indeed, is there a “forward” at all or are we forever trapped in a cycle of destruction and tragedy? In such times, it is tempting to shroud ourselves in mourning and proclaim, “The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.”

However, if there were nothing new under the sun, we wouldn’t be here, would we? There would be no Anatolia College; there would be no jet plane to fly me to Thessaloniki from New York City in less than 24 hours; in fact, there would be no New York City at all. Our species would have remained scant in number, scattered in bands in the forests and on the plains, hunting and gathering to survive.

So there is something new, and there is nothing new. How can we account for this?

New things, new ideas, new activities, new people don’t fall from the sky; they don’t grow full-grown from our heads like Athena from the head of Zeus. Everything, every idea, every activity, every person, indeed, every social movement and every political change, emerges from, and is shaped by, what came before. As the American novelist, William Faulkner, put it, “The past is not dead. It is not even past.”

Yet what Ecclesiastes, and most of our day-to-day thinking, our so-called “common sense,” leaves out, is that everything is what-it-is and what-it-is-not, what-it-is and simultaneously what-it-is-becoming. It is more helpful, I believe, to see human activity and history not as a string or a spiral of discrete unchanging things, as Ecclesiastes does, but as an ongoing, ever emerging process. Human beings, and everything we create and destroy, are in a constant state of becoming. That’s how the new emerges from the old.

And there is, indeed, something new under the sun—and you, we, embody it.

This new thing, or more accurately, this new activity, is the approach to helping each other, engaging social problems, building community and imaging new possibilities that all of us here, and thousands of others around the world, are exploring and developing. It is an approach that forefronts process, in particular the process of play and performance, not cognition and knowing. It leaves the old ideologies, indeed, ideology itself, behind and embraces performance. It is a qualitatively new activistic methodology of ongoing human development.

Of what does this methodology consist? At the risk of over simplifying, it involves bringing groups of people together—often, diverse, sometimes antagonistic, groups of people—to create together, to play and perform. Playing and performing are how we human beings have always allowed ourselves to break out of constricted social roles, fossilized ideas and crippling emotions. While play and performance have been around as long as our species (probably longer), approaching play and performance as a of way healing and changing the world is new. It posits no solutions; instead, it organizes environments that allow us, and those we’re working with, to creatively experiment and innovate. This emerging methodology embodies the becomingness of everything, in that, by playing and performing, what-is can emerge into what-it’s-becoming. Indeed, the playing and performing *is* the becoming. That’s how new ideas, new emotions, new social relations enter our social world.

This new approach did not come from an abstract theory; it emerges from our *activity*. Given that it’s not primarily a cognitive approach, it’s not surprising that it’s origins are not to be found primarily in great thinkers—although, of course, there are great thinkers who have identified and furthered the performance approach—Augusto Boal, Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas, Viola Spolin, Fred Newman and Lois Holzman, Judith Butler and Richard Schechner—to name just a few. However, the activity of playing and performing as a means of engaging social and political issues, building community and generating possibility—what some of us have come to call “performance activism”—is emerging, more or less simultaneously, in various parts of the world, not from pre-formulated ideas but through collective *activity*.

Some of this activity has, of course, been initiated by those for whom performance was already central to their lives: theatre artists, dancers and musicians. However, they are far from alone. Much of this performance activism has also been initiated and led by therapists, by medical doctors, psychologists and social workers; some by teachers and by people who work with young people outside of school; some by community organizers and political activists; some are industrial workers; some are rural peasants; some are students, some are prisoners and some are refugees; some come with academic training, many with no formal training at all.

There are many roads that have brought us to our performative approach to social healing and development, roads that, among other things, have led us here to Anatolia College. My particular journey begins with being a radical young Marxist during the upheavals of the 1960s, doing political street theatre all over the United States, going to graduate school and getting a doctorate in theatre history. I wrote my thesis on the amateur agit-prop workers’ theatre of the 1930s, and, upon receiving my Ph.D., decided not to become a professor. Teaching and researching in the academy can be a fine profession, but what I wanted to do more, and what I thought was more needed, was to find a way to create theatre with and for working class communities. So I returned to my hometown of New York. I knew that New York was where there’d be the most overlap between skilled theatre professionals and progressive activists. After a number of twists and turns, I became involved with an unorthodox group of Marxist community activists who were organizing, under the leadership of the late Fred Newman, in New York City’s poorest communities.

Newman, who had been a philosophy professor and who left the academy for community organizing in 1968, became my philosophical and political mentor. Along with hundreds of others, including Dr. Lois Holzman and Dr. Lenora Fulani, as we organized in the city’s communities, we sought ways out of the political, cultural and emotional dead-ends in which we found ourselves, and the American people in general, trapped.

One of the things that we built in the process was the Castillo Theatre, of which I’m the artistic director. The Castillo Theatre has, for 35 years, been producing progressive political theatre with and for the communities of New York. More significantly, as far as I’m concerned, it has emerged as an environment and an activity through which people are encouraged to liberate performance from the institutional constraints of the theatre, that is, to bring play and performance into their daily lives.

This grouping of progressive radicals were, and are, mass organizers, that is, we work to involve large numbers of people in building organizations that serve their interests and wants, activities and environments in which they can choose to work together to create something new, and in so doing, develop and begin to exercise power. Through our mass organizing, we gradually found that ideology—that is, the meta-narratives and meta-explanations of how people and societies are supposed to function and change (including Marxism)—proved less and less helpful. People most successfully developed, learned and exercised power, we discovered, when they were encouraged to break out of old social roles and play and perform together—and that the more diverse the grouping the more creative the development that emerged.

Our growth as a social and cultural force has been directly linked to our practice of play and performance in daily life. Our embrace and development of this approach has been informed and sustained both by our mass organizing and by the discoveries of the early Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky observed that babies and children develop and learn by play and pretending, by creatively imitating adults and older children, by performing, as he put it, “a head taller than themselves.”

Fred Newman and Lois Holzman, informed by Vygotsky and by our ongoing mass organizing, saw that play and performance were not only key to early childhood development, but to human development in general. As we built after-school youth programs, innovative therapy practices, the Castillo Theatre, community advocacy efforts, independent political parties and campaigns, we viscerally experienced teenagers and adults developing by playing and performing. Thus play and performance has become both our pedagogy and our organizing activity, simultaneously the tool for and the result of social change. As our work spread across the United States and to other nations, we have come to call the totality of what we’re building a development community. It’s a dynamic and ever-evolving transnational community open to anyone, no matter their nationality, ethnicity, class, religion, sexual or political orientation, who wants to participate in building it.

That is just one of the roads that led us here today.

We, and the “we” I mean now is not only the development community from which I’ve emerged—the “we” I’m now talking about includes everyone here, and the thousands we have not yet met. We are all part of a much bigger and widespread “performance turn” in education, therapy, civic affairs and social activism. In a variety of countries and cultures, in a wide range of professions, under extremely different circumstances, this larger “we” is collectively creating, through its practices, a new performance-based approach to human development.

“Play, Perform, Learn, Grow” is a reflection and an embodiment of that performance turn. As such, it is something new under the sun. Together we are recreating what a conference is. We’re bringing into being a new kind of gathering, a gathering of people practicing a new kind of activism in refugee camps, neighborhoods and schools throughout Europe and beyond.

Like everything new, Play, Perform, Learn, Grow is emerging from and builds upon what came before. The reorganizing of what exists to bring into being something new *is* the creative process and that process is built into the performatory method. As they say in the music world, “Everything is a remix.”

One of the many organizing activities, of the development community of which I’m a part is Performing the World. It’s an international gathering of people, like those of us here today, who are experimenting with, studying and researching the use of performance and play as means of social development. Performing the World started in 2001 and convenes every two years in New York City. The last Performing the World in 2016 brought together 400 people from 32 countries and 20 U.S. states. This year, the tenth Performing the World will be held to September 21 - 23. Over the years, it has morphed from one gathering every two years into a professional and social network and an ongoing conversation among performance activists and scholars around the world.

For years, Performing the World participants have said the organizers, “We need to have Performing the World in Europe” or in Latin America or in Asia. Those of us who started and lead Performing the World in New York would say, “That’s a great idea, but we’re not in a position to organize it. If you think, for example, that Europe needs a version of Performing the World, go organize it.”

No one ever took us up on that offer until Elena Boukouvala, who initiated and drove the creation of Play, Perform, Learn and Grow and who has plans to hold such gatherings in Europe on the years that Performing the World isn’t happening in New York. Elena, as everyone here knows, is a tremendous organizer, a tireless worker and an inspirational leader who is the reason we are all here today. Let us show her our appreciation! [Lead the applause.]

Play, Perform, Learn, Grow, is a creative remix. While building with what came before, it is unique. There has never before been a gathering quite like this in Europe or, despite its family resemblance to Performing the World, anywhere else. I’m honored that Elena asked me to be here as a representative of Performing the World and the development community from which it emerged.

There is something else we haven’t touched on yet which is very important about creating something new, and that is that Its existence changes everything else, including what came before. The remix, the reorganization of any one thing reconfigures everything else. As Fred Newman was fond of saying, “We can’t change anything. We can only change everything.” Because of Play, Perform, Learn and Grow, Performing the World will never be the same. It will be influenced by the people here, the work you’re doing, the conversations that go on here and what we create together. Performing the World, however else it changes, will no longer be the only gathering of performance activists; it will be one of what may soon be many gatherings of play and performance activists around the world. What we do here will reverberate throughout the performance movement and the larger world of which we are a part.

I started my comments by presenting a grim overview of the violence and destruction going on around the world. However, along with destruction, a reconstruction of some kind takes place, and there is an approach, a method of creative and positive reconstruction beginning to emerge. Performance. Our impact is still infinitesimal compared to the hunger in so many bellies and the bombs dropping on so many homes. But there is something new under the sun and we are all helping to bring it into being.

The work all of us do is hard. It’s challenging. It’s uncertain. It doesn’t always succeed. However, we need to know, as Elena has put it, that “play is hope.” It may be our only hope at this point. Now that the old religions, the old political ideologies, the old social systems are failing to met our needs, now that the world we grew up in is crumbling around us, what do we human beings have? We have our sociability and our creativity. We can play, perform, lean and grow.