

FORUM THEATRE

An amazing asset to Groupwork

Some thoughts and variations

Much has been written about Forum theatre. Both about the extraordinary usefulness of it as an approach and about some of the significant problems that can be experienced in how it is developed and how it is presented and facilitated. With respect gratitude for all that has gone before, I add my own comments here as a contribution to the ongoing use and development of this very worthwhile creative approach.

Forum theatre has been developed by Augusto Boal and is an interactive form of theatre for the purpose of problem-solving. It can be powerful and very useful. I have been using this method for many years now and have adapted and changed it to suit my own style and the needs of the people I work with. Consequently I encourage you to go to the works of Boal for a fuller and much more original description and explanation of what Forum is all about.

Forum for me works something like this: A short scene (or scenes) based on some issue which affects both actors and audience is acted out. The whole process is facilitated by a person who is not part of the acting but stands outside it and can speak both to the actors and the audience. This person is often called 'The Joker' though I usually use the term 'Facilitator'. The notion of 'spectactors' is central to Forum. That is, that actors and spectators are interchangeable. The play or series of scenes is performed for an audience. It is then replayed and on this second occasion, audience members are invited to call 'stop' at any point when they feel they have an idea they would like to try out to solve the problem being shown. They then replace one of the actors on stage and try the intervention. If something is working out but seems unrealistic, audience members can call 'magic' and offer an alternative intervention. At any time the theatre is stopped it can be 'rewound' to a point where the audience member feels the intervention should take place. It is usually not permitted to replace any player who might be a key person in creating a problem. For example, if a person is acting in a bullying way, it is not permitted to solve the problem by simply replacing this person and turning them into a more friendly, loving human being. The play continues and explores lots of options for sorting out a problem.

The following brief notes are best read with a solid understanding of Boal's intentions and strategies. So please do consult the original sources. These comments are a result of the experiences I have had in my use of this very valuable approach.

Developing a script. Work out:

- What is happening?
- Where it is happening?
- Who is involved?
- When it is happening?
- What does each character want to have happen?

Things to be mindful of

- Forum theatre must be repeatable. That is, it must be rehearsed, so that as it is played and replayed the original situation can still be recognized
- There must be some tension, a problem to be solved
- As the script develops it will become clear who can and who can't be replaced
If character A is replaced and then a second intervention replaces character B, it may be necessary to replace character A with the original player to retain the outline of the original script
- Actors must not give in too easily. At the same time they do need to respond positively to interventions if they think their character would respond in this way
- The phrase 'stop' can be used to stop the show and try something new
- The phrase 'magic' can be used to stop the show if the intervention is working but it is unrealistic
- The audience must be 'warmed up' to the idea of becoming physically involved
- If someone really does not want to replace one of the characters, they can direct that character from the audience, but be careful of this because...
- At the same time, Forum is an action method and it is important it does not collapse into discussion alone
- Sometimes the strategy offered doesn't fit for who *this* character is. It may work however for a different person in the same situation
- Sometimes solutions will lie outside the event we are seeing
- Sometimes two or three scenes across time can be useful
- Sometimes a solution can be found by spontaneously
 - Adding a scene
 - Adding another character
- The role of the facilitator or director is extremely important. Sometimes they might need to stop the performance themselves and ask the audience for comments.

Technical details

- Do **make sure there is dramatic interest** in the piece of theatre. There must be more than issues or topics shown. It must be intriguing theatre
- It helps a lot if actors face the front and speak up
- The piece of theatre, or each scene will need a dramatic 'out' point
- 'Side coach' if necessary. That is, give low-voiced brief comments about how to continue. For example, 'keep going', 'speak up', 'slow it down', 'more movement', 'finish soon'
- If the actors can't be heard/seen, stop it and make adjustments.

Be careful of

- Creating a scene of brutality or ugliness which simply distresses an audience
- Creating a scene which is built on stereotypes
- Creating a scene which can trap characters in their negative view of a situation. (Eg. one which does not suggest difference or alternative)
- Creating a scene that suggests the oppressed person is responsible for changing the behaviour of the oppressor
- Introducing too many inter-related dynamics which though relevant, are not the focus of the piece of Forum; such as gender issues or sexuality or cultural dynamics
- Maintaining balance. There is a fine balance to be attained between a sense of theatre and a sense of reality. Sometimes if people in an audience feel that they are assessed or judged or that their skills are being assessed or judged they will, understandably, be reluctant to become involved.
- The theatre needs to be:
 - Real enough so as to be useful
 - Theatrical enough so as to suggest that there is an element of acting
 - Presented in such a way as to invite participation from the audience.

Possible warm up activities

Think in terms of 'speaking out' and 'physical movement', the two elements needed by audience members to become actively involved in Forum. Choose activities which promote each of these. Boal has many in his numerous books. Here are a couple of very simple ones from me:

Verbal

- Ask the audience to yell out how they are feeling right now
- Ask for a show of hands:
 - Who has eaten well today?
 - Done some exercise?
 - Made a mistake?
 - Made someone happy?
- Ask for one or two people to step on stage and be interviewed for 60 seconds about the topic of the Forum piece
- Ask the audience to practice the two key words
 - Yell out: 'stop'
 - Yell out: 'magic.'

Physical

- Ask people to swap seats with someone close by, then swap back
- Ask the audience to: Stand up, sit down, wave your arms, spread your hands
- Shake hands with the person next to them, behind them, in front of them...
- Invite individuals to come up on stage to just look around, walk about...
- Ask individuals to come on stage, wander about and call out...anything...

Have fun, good luck!

Pete Slattery August 2015

References

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- Pierse Lyn 1993 *Theatresports Down Under A guide for coaches and players* Sydney Improcorp.