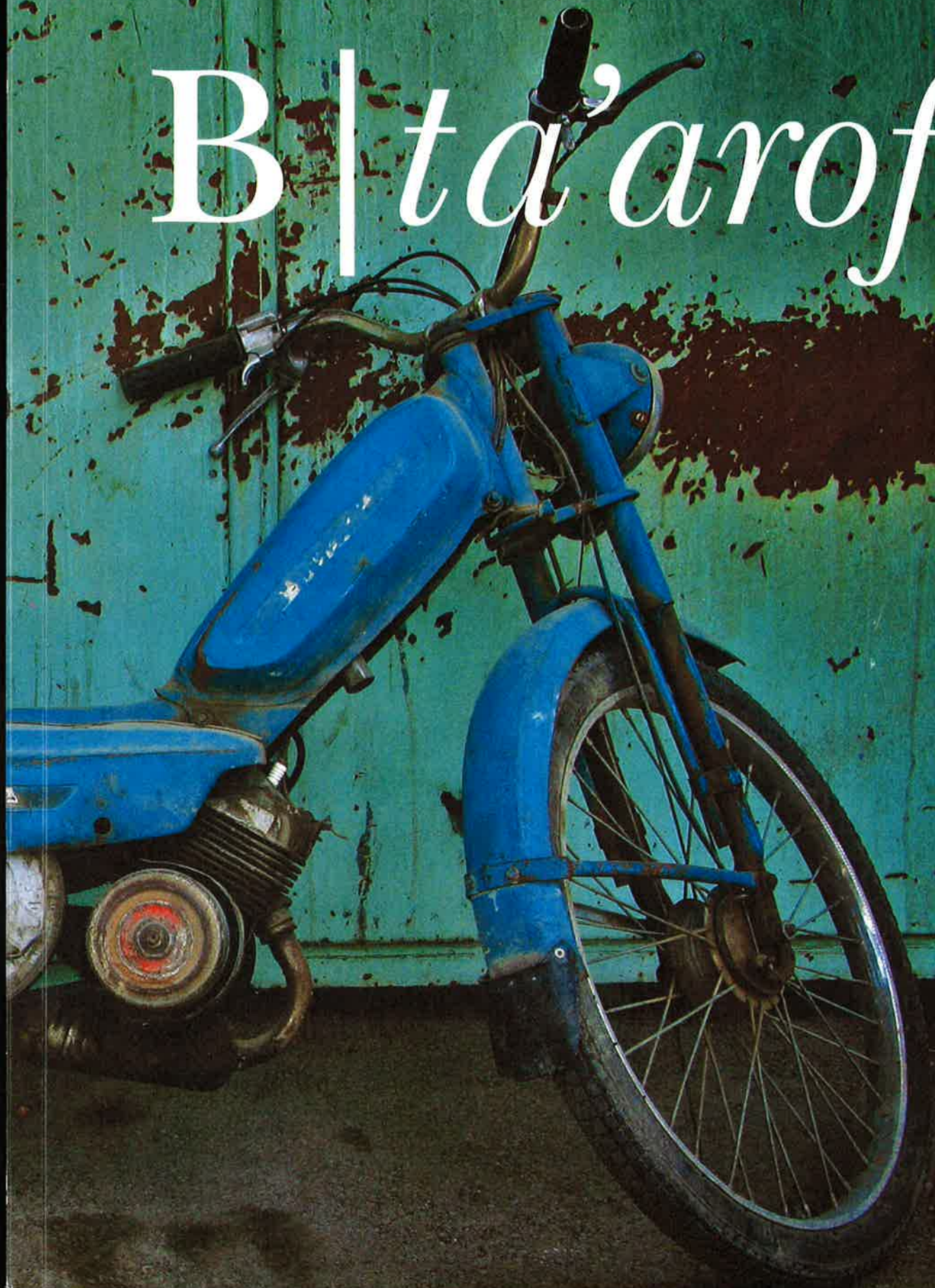


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# BOAL'S CHILDREN

## THEATRE FOR THE PEOPLE

ESSAY

SHIRIN VOSSOUGHİ & MANUEL LUIS ESPINOZA

*"I love to dream, even if I know very well that my dream is impossible. Even so, I dream."*

- Augusto Boal, from *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*

The "theatre of the oppressed" is for the weary, those living close to defeat who refuse to let forces of injustice have the last word in human affairs. It is popular education and struggle by way of serious play. Its makers, generally, are those who travel through alleys, plazas, courtrooms, living rooms, markets, playgrounds, and hospitals with their senses wide open, feeding off the living particles of the social world, salvaging happenings and transforming them into experiences. Gleaners, learners, creators.

As practitioners of theatre of the oppressed and spiritual children of Augusto Boal, the Latin American dramatist credited with midwifing this brand of radical theatre, we are recognizable to one another by the methods and tools we use. Without a doubt, traditional theatre – curtains, stages, three physical walls, the symbolic partition between actor and audience – can be powerful. In Boal's theatre, however, people do not simply attend a performance; they enter into an interpersonal creative process. Theatre in this tradition aims to set people into motion, not through exhortation, but through the persuasive powers of its artistic forms: *dinámicas* (games), invisible theatre, image theatre, and forum theatre. Its practitioners design settings that are intentionally porous. While theatre set in lavish halls prohibits attendance for those struggling to pay the rent, all that is needed in the theatre of the oppressed is the earth under one's soles and the courage to step forward onto the stage (or for everyone else to step backwards), leaving you in the position to pretend you are an actor.

### BEGINNINGS

We (Shirin & Manuel) were first attracted to the theatre of the oppressed by the idea of a political theatre that was something other than the politically motivated use of theatre. As educators, we were working to build environments where young people could envision and realize possibilities. We were also drawn to the challenge of creating a political education that defied ideological rigidity and arched towards the imagination of new futures: moving from *think/do not think this way* towards *let us think and dream together*.

In Boal's words, theatre/teatro is "a system of physical exercises, aesthetic games, image techniques, and special improvisations whose goal is to safeguard, develop, and reshape the human capacity to observe oneself and imagine variations to one's actions, turning the practice of theatre into an effective tool for the comprehension of social and personal problems, and the search for their solutions." As a way of exploring the contours of teatro, we share three sister scenes, vivid examples of people coming together in different times and settings to craft dramatic works that aspire to spill beyond the stage. It is a story that includes the imaginings and creations of young Iranians. However, its path through Iran and the diaspora begins in unexpected places.

### LATINA/O ROOTS

Los Angeles. A summer program for the high school aged children of California's largely Mexican and Central American migrant worker communities. Here, scholarly activity was rooted in the shared analysis of social problems: migration and labor, environmental racism, patriarchy, language, and educational inequity. Teatro helped us to blend academic reading and writing with the artistic and the playful in order to see what might bloom.

One of the forms we experimented with in the program was image theatre. In image theatre, one or two participants craft a pair of images using the other members of the group as "living statues." The statues are not allowed to speak, though this rule is occasionally circumvented depending on the will of the statues. The first image (the world as it is) contrasts with the second (the world as it could be). The images are meant to be interpreted by the remaining members of the group and the ensuing dialogue is the overarching goal of the exercise.

In 2006, one classroom developed several images of social problems taken directly from their existence: two farmworkers struggling with heat and dehydration while their manager demanded greater productivity; an inebriated husband responding angrily to his wife as she asked for money to make dinner for their children; a teacher shutting down a student

for asking what he thought was a “dumb” question; and two students plastering the school bathroom’s ceiling with wet paper towels, disregarding the custodian who must deal with the mess. As educators, we privileged the process through which stories and experiences from students’ lives were refashioned to create these images. Aesthetic dilemmas regarding how to show the exploitation of migrant workers or how to depict the way a teacher’s response could make a student feel small were central. Throughout the process, playful banter and laughter transformed adolescent nervousness into friendship. We cannot overstate the extent to which the silliness of teatro helped safeguard both the vulnerability of performing on stage in front of one’s peers as well as the risky work of wrestling with heavy topics.

Teatro, following Boal, is a forum for questioning. To help students analyze the images and integrate them into a collective scene, we asked: Do the problems have shared roots? What might the antagonists and protagonists of each scene have in common? One young woman suggested that the images could represent a chain of connected events. The worker in the first scene could become the father in the second. The children in the second scene could be expressing their frustration about home life by plastering paper towels on the ceiling. Taken in sum, the images could be construed as a social dynamic that results in more work for the custodian. We encouraged her to direct the scene and create the image she was envisioning. Such moments reflect the malleability of teatro. The stage can, at any point, become a canvas where different ideas are given expression by molding the image this way or that way. At the same time, suggestions made from the sidelines can become developmental openings, opportunities to encourage students to take on expanded roles. Because process is privileged, the theatrical piece itself is never so polished that it can’t be edited. A scene is made to be observed, as well as populated and altered. For Boal, this movement from spectator to spect-actor serves as rehearsal for analyzing and intervening in the scenes of everyday life.

Once the “chain” was represented, students noticed new narrative possibilities, amplifying the implicit social dimensions of the problems depicted. Maybe the worker becomes the father by walking behind a prop and switching actors? Maybe the manager failed to pay the worker on time, so he became angry when his wife asked for money? Maybe the manager was formerly a worker and had been treated in a similar way? For us, the word *maybe* is golden because of its exploratory qualities. The two-

syllable term *may-be* gives rise to complexity and makes room for divergent perspectives, cultivating an openness essential to respectful forms of political education. As the group considered these suggestions, a conversation emerged regarding the limits of language. Collectively, we noticed that protagonists in one scene became antagonists in the next scene, leading us to wonder whether anyone is absolutely one or the other.

## TEATRO AND DIASPORA

Learning is both a social and historical endeavor. Human relationships cradle and nourish emergent capabilities. Even settings and contexts, as embodied and carried across space by their participants, can learn from one another. Following my (Shirin) experiences in the migrant program, I worked with a summer program for youth in the Iranian Diaspora. University and high school-aged youth (the majority Iranian American, as well as a smaller number of students from Canada and Europe) came together to engage in leadership development alongside cultural and artistic education. Sensing that teatro could play a generative role in the curriculum, I set out to experiment with and modify it for a distinct context.

Here, I drew on another form in the teatro toolbox: forum theatre. In forum theatre, participants initiate a dramatic game between actors and audience. As in image theatre, students worked to represent a social problem based on circumstances rooted in everyday life: TSA officials hassling an Iranian family at the airport; a daughter who dreams of being an artist grappling with parental expectations; and a student whose family recently immigrated from Iran being bullied and excluded at school. Each group then crafted a trio of scenes: the first introduced the protagonist, the second presented the antagonist, and the third scene depicted a conflict between the two.

Drawing from our experiences in the migrant program and extending the classic Boalian form, we found that telling the backstory of the protagonist and antagonist served to deepen our collective analysis. We would often develop these histories by interviewing the actor. In addition to the student channeling his or her character, other students would contribute their ideas about who a TSA official or a daughter with artistic inclinations might be. Ideally, this process allows distinct experiences and interpretations to clash in productive ways — *that’s not always true, my parents like that I want to be an artist* — helping generate more specific and complex human representations. In this sense, teatro is made of experiences that we may not yet recognize as stories. Teatro asks: How would you

make this character or this scene based on your experiences at the airport, at school, or in your family? The process of shared reflection allows us to notice and analyze social patterns, but the act of representation itself is also primary. The everyday ways of speaking, relating, and moving through the world that mark the experience of diaspora encounter recognition and, perhaps, dignity as they make their way onto the stage.

One group created a forum theatre scene that tackled gender norms and intergenerational differences. In their initial scene, a woman is at work and her husband is shown taking care of their daughter and doing the housework. In the second scene, the husband's elderly parents are introduced. A second couple arrives at their home for dinner. While the women cook in the kitchen, the men discuss the news of the day. The scene features the affectionate humor students often used to represent their family members as well as the shared experiences many have with elderly Iranian relatives. Because the grandfather is hard of hearing, his friend shouts: "Abolfazl! Have you been following the politics?" and a few seconds later, "How is your art-e-ritis?"

Iranian and American pop music play in the background as the group transitions to the conflict scene. Protagonist and antagonist are brought together as the husband's parents arrive for dinner. The husband is shown wearing an apron while preparing the evening's meal. When the wife's mother-in-law praises her for the delicious aroma of the meal, she responds that it is her husband's cooking. This leads the husband's father to chastise his son for doing woman's work, "When did I raise a vo-man?! I told you: man equals *sare kar* (work) and woman equals kitchen! You learn from me and Mojgan!" (pointing to his wife). The first iteration of the conflict comes to a close as the husband submits and gives his wife the apron so that she may prepare the meal. The spectators — students from all the other groups — are troubled, but in stitches.

Early on, it is crucial that the protagonist "fail" spectacularly. Forum theatre must become an invitation for the audience to intervene and change the outcome of the scene. Protagonists deliver the invitation by failing in one of several ways: submitting to the antagonist, engaging in violence, or becoming so flustered by the circumstances that they are rendered

powerless. The spect-actors then "rewind" the scene and instruct members of the audience to yell "STOP" at the exact point at which any person objects to how the interaction unfolds. Here's the rub: to halt the action is to replace the protagonist and attempt to do something different. In this particular scene, one of the youngest girls in the program replaced the husband, donned his apron, and firmly but lovingly checked the father with her feminist analysis of the situation. During rehearsals, antagonists prepare a "bag of tricks" in order to complicate the situation when protagonists from the audience attempt to introduce their own set of tactics. As protagonists are prohibited from utilizing violence or magic — again, teatro is about using everyday resources to better the world — the scene creates a space to practice creative nonviolent forms of resistance. Winning the game is not about antagonizing back. It is about finding ways to humanize all actors in the scene. It is the joker's, or facilitator's, responsibility to whisper suggestions in the ears of protagonists and antagonists alike, adding layers of complexity to the interaction that mimic real life challenges while pushing participants to imagine previously unconsidered resolutions. In this case, the father seemed genuinely moved by the young protagonist's monologue and the scene was deemed resolved by consensus of the audience.



Teatro leaps beyond the stage by treating the audience as part of the scene. It also outgrows the stage by creating experiences that color our perceptions of reality. Following our experiences with forum theatre, we have both encountered problematic situations in the "real world" (at a work meeting, on the bus, at the dinner table) and found ourselves reading the interaction in slow motion, as if it were a theatrical scene. With this newfound perception comes an imperative: better to act (and possibly make a mistake) than to do nothing. The matter of how to act is hardly ever clear or straightforward. The essential lesson abides, however, prompting us to notice the political dimensions of everyday experience and to treat them as arenas of possibility.

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## TAATRE SHORAEI

In 2011, I (Shirin) had the opportunity to connect with a group of Iranian actors and educators practicing Boalian theatre in Tehran. Through collaborations with youth centers, theatres, and community groups, the "Taatr-e Shoraei" (community theatre) uses an array of theatrical forms to foster critical reflection and public deliberation. I took part in one of the group's forum theatre rehearsals. The problem at the heart of the scene: a student studying for exams is unable to concentrate due to construction noise outside her apartment. This scenario, familiar to denizens of Tehran, was designed to woo the audience into a broader discussion about progress, economic class, and relationships among neighbors.

In another instance, group members used invisible theatre to stage a "happening" on the Tehran subway. Unlike image or forum theatre, invisible theatre masquerades as an unstaged interaction in a public space. By both blending in and standing out, invisible theatre works to draw passersby into the production. In this particular scene, an undercover rock band entered a train with their instruments covered. Another actor, posing as a passenger, initiated a conversation with the rockers about their work. He asked (loudly, so that "real" commuters could hear): "Why is it unusual in Iran to play music in public?" Soon thereafter, because invisible theatre is like cake left out in public, other passengers entered the conversation. Stepping onto the invisible stage, some encouraged the musicians to play (and even offered to pay for it), while others insisted that it was forbidden. Finally, an actor dressed in the uniform of a subway employee informed the group that because of the municipal festival, it was possible to play in one of the approaching subway stations. People remained on the car, de-boarded at the designated station, and were treated to a performance by the band. Members of the Taatr-e Shoraei later recounted what teatro practitioners would recognize as a sign of the scene's success: over an hour after the band left, people were still standing in the station discussing the place of music in public life.

This, too, illustrates the malleability of teatro. It blurs the line between theatre and reality to transform a subway car in Tehran, or a patch of grass on a university campus in California, into a stage where the unexpected may occur. What, if anything, do these disparate contexts hold in common? Most compelling about our experience connecting with the group in Tehran was the ease with which we could speak about teatro, and dig into the specificities of its practice: What approaches

did we use to build trust among participants? How should one address the tension of supporting young people in their efforts to stand up for themselves if the contexts they inhabit are not always safe for such practices? What does it mean to adapt and extend Boal's work for different contexts? How "by the book" should we be? With respect to invisible theatre, for example, our practice in the migrant program was to eventually "break" the scene and let the unsuspecting audience know we were acting. The ensuing discussion would center around what students had just witnessed. This was a surprise to some members of the Taatr-e Shoraei, who asserted that the scene's power and effectiveness lies in its sustained invisibility. Such conversations are typical and, we believe, essential, as people develop scenes and realize that their artistic creations are not separate from "reality."

This is, perhaps, the ever-evolving core of Boal's legacy: the development of a shared vocabulary for interpreting the world as it is and imagining the world as it could be. The scenes we have described are rooted in the stories and questions offered by their actors and reflect the pressing problems of their time and place. Together, they ask: Where and by whom is history made? How might we learn to see social change in the everyday? In treating them as "sister scenes" we have also sought to explore the transnational DNA of teatro. In its Brazilian form, teatro was born under conditions of political repression; Boal himself was persecuted and exiled by the Brazilian military dictatorship of the 1960s and 1970s. It has since been adopted and raised by a wide range of educators, artists, and activists, each invigorating teatro through their own practices and critiques. Our own story is about the creative meeting of the Iranian diaspora and Mexican/Latina/o migration to the U.S. My (Shirin's) connections with the theatre group in Tehran became possible through the opportunity to work with and learn from migrant youth in California. The teatro we have practiced is a product of everyday Iranian and Mexican ways of talking and imagining, coupled with an artistic form that disregards borders and is loyal, above all, to the dreams of the unofficially powerful.